



Ruins of the ancient Buddhist monastery Mahavihara, Nalanda during the Gupta Period

A SNEAK PEEK INTO INDIA'S MARITIME HISTORY UNDER THE GUPTA DYNASTY

Referred to as “The Golden Age” by many historians, the Gupta Empire built a solid foundation on strong trade ties through the sea route. Estimated to have been founded or existing from the mid-to-late 3rd century CE to 543 CE, the Gupta rulers laid a lot of focus on establishing trade relations with other states and foreign nations. Most of the trade plied through the sea as extensive knowledge of sea winds helped them gain entry and establish their foothold into foreign markets across the Arabian Sea. Though there is much speculation and debate regarding the Gupta ancestry, records and inscriptions indicate that extending influence far beyond the kingdom's borders through increased commerce enabled the Gupta rulers to amass enormous wealth, thus, adding to the kingdom's prosperity.

Trade under Gupta rulers

The influence of foreign trade had its influence on the kingdom's industries too. Prosperity marked both industry and trade as the balance of trade continued to be in India's favour.

The focus was on organised trade, thus, explaining the Gupta rulers' achievements in the fields of navigation, shipbuilding and maritime trade. One can find mention of the same in ancient literary records as scholars during those days detailed how

there were mainly two kinds of merchants, called Sresthi and Sarthavaha, under the Gupta rule. The former, understood as bankers and money lenders in today's time extended money and gave loans for trade purposes. The latter also called the caravan trader assumed a distinct position in city life.

References to sea trade

Accounts by an ancient Chinese monk called Fa-Hien who had been in India during that period (405 CE-411 CE) refers to the



prevalence of the sea trade during those times. In his account of India titled "A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms", Fa-Hien writes about the perils marking the Central Asian route from China to India. However, the increasing volume of Indo-Chinese sea trade had an augmenting effect on the prosperity of both the countries as both continued their trade relations via sea and land. The Buddhist scholar also mentioned about the ports dotting the country's geography and about the regular trade with many countries including Sri Lanka, Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia, the Byzantine Empire, China and the islands in the Indian Ocean. Roman coins from the first to the fourth century CE unearthed in various parts of Western and Southern India point to the flourishing maritime trade between India and the Byzantine empire in the West. Famous sixth-century traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes informs about the Indian ports on its East and West Coasts were linked together via Sri Lanka. The major seaports, for both import and exports, that served as important trade stations include the Sindhu, Calliana, Sibor and the Malabar on the West Coast.

Another Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang, in his records, mentioned how the Tamralipti at the head of the Ganga delta flourished during this period due to its excellent geographical position. That the people living in and around the Ganga delta flourished from the share in the trade from Tamralipti can be found in the recollections and anecdotes about maritime activities compiled in the Raghuvamsam and the Dasakumaracharita. Other famous seaports called Charitra in Odra and Kongoda in modern Ganjam district occupied greater importance due to increasing maritime trade.

Cosmas' records of trade under the Gupta rulers highlight how agricultural products were exported from the country's East Coast to Western, Persian and even Ethiopian ports en route Sri Lanka. References to brisk trade with the Chinese and Western worlds have been found in Chinese records maintained during

those times. Since most of the vessels from the Arabian countries and Persia towards China passed through the Indian ports, these ports gained considerably due to their strategic economic value.

The Amarakosa written in Sanskrit by the eminent Indian scholar Amarasimha details about trade in mineral products, especially, copper that was obtained from the Western Mediterranean (referred to as mlechchha countries). While India procured sapphire from Sri Lanka, emerald stones were exported to the Ethiopians. Trade operations in areas surrounding Bihar and Uttar Pradesh ensured them a material advantage as iron ores were mined in huge quantities from Central India and south Bihar, thus, enabling exports of huge quantities of Indian iron. Similarly, diamonds and cotton fabrics featured in the list of exports as found in the Annals of the T'ang Dynasty.

Nature of trade

Foreign trade consisting principally of luxury goods were carried out through both the sea and land routes, while internal trade between the various states was primarily considered via roads and rivers. Chinese silk also called the chinasunka found a good market in India. The goods sold and bought through internal trade mainly consisted of commodities for everyday use that were sold in village community fairs and town markets. Cordial relations with the Byzantine emperors helped revive the trade relations with the West that had declined with the fall of the Roman Empire. As a result, silk and spices continued to be exported in large quantities by the Guptas to the Byzantine kings. Trade in animals grew as the Gupta rulers imported some of the best breeds of horses from Arabia, Persia and modern Afghanistan. Other products like corals, pearls and ivory were imported in huge quantities as the records of those period points to the extensive use of pearls during the Gupta period.

