

Trade Through Ages In Ancient India (C. 200 Bce Up To 1st Century Ce)

ANSHUMI CHOWDHURY

PhD Research Scholar Department of History Gauhati
University Email: - anshumi2291995@gmail.com

Abstract

The critical examination of a society might bring into light many elements contributing to its development. One such element which is very crucial in its economic development is trade and commerce. The wealth of a society can be measured by the trade they conduct. In simple terms, trade is a basic economic concept, which involves buying and selling of goods and services, between individual or different parties. The concept of trade started hand in hand with the evolution of humans and development of human intellect. It existed from the prehistoric times, even though in a crude form without many complexities. It originated with human communications. They bartered goods from each other. This is evident from the fact that, obsidian and flint were exchanged during the Stone Age. Trade in obsidian is believed to have taken place in Guinea from 17000B.C.E.

INTRODUCTION

However, with first urbanization taking place in the Harappan civilization (2500-1700B.C), many innovations came into forth, which changed the course of trade. Excavations of large granaries both at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, shows that, there was surplus production, mainly due to the invention of more new crops, apart from ragi and horse-gram during Neolithic times and the use of castration. As agriculture was already practiced during Neolithic revolution, it only was now in a developing phase during the Harappan civilization. However, with the invention of the spindle and the loom, potter's wheel, bow-drill, cast-wheel, smelting of iron, and so on, it witnessed now the diversification of arts and craft. The craftsmen as their means of subsistence now have to barter his products with agriculturalists. Slowly inland trade started within Harappan civilization. These types of developments were also witnessed among other contemporary civilizations. By this time, the art of making boat was already known (Neolithic revolution) and carts and caravans were used for trade via lands. Thus, these developments together led to trade between Harappan civilization and far-off civilizations like-Mesopotamia, Central Asia, Persia, Afghanistan and Bahrain. The

presence of different types of seals during this period might indicate that these were used in long distance foreign trade, different from the barter system used in home-front.

With the decline of Harappan Civilization, ushered into a new civilization which did not witness international trade or any flourishing economy because of it. This new civilization was the Vedic Civilization (1500-600B.C) which had pastoral economy and focused more on Agriculture. Cows were the standard unit of exchange. But sometimes gold coins or gold ornaments called Nishka were also used. As new occupational groups emerged- fishermen, washer men, dyers, door-keepers, footmen, arrow-maker, and elephant-keeper and so on, therefore the necessity of using precious metals as medium of exchange might have felt. The Nishka might be used here, apart from the barter in cows which began to acquire the form in which gifts of value might be given. But, no trade and commerce on an extensive scale was witnessed during this period.

Immediately after this, the sixth century B.C.E, saw the second urbanization phase, due to which many Mahajanapadas sprung-up in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The use of iron had cleared-up settlements and further increase in agricultural production and development in crafts and industries was witnessed. Guilds (srenis) were formed. However, the foreign invasions during this time, which included-Iranian and Macedonian invasions, gave impetus to Indo-Iranian trade and Alexander's invasion in the 4th century B.C.E, led to the opening of new trade-routes between north-west India and western Asia.

The Mauryas however, greatly improved internal communications. Even though trade and commerce was initially started with the neighbouring countries like Ceylon and Burma, which was not on a large scale. The most important period that witnessed a boom in trade and commerce on large-scale and between far-off geographical expressions like Central Asia, West-Asia, South-east Asia and the Roman Empire was the post Mauryan period, which witnessed the coming of many foreign ruling dynasties from Central Asia to North-West India. This led to intermingling of many cultures, their ideas and policies with that of Indian culture. India's economy was at the peak point during this time.

Therefore, it is of great importance to trace the growth of trade and commerce and the trade routes in the early Indian society from c. 200B.C.E up to 1st century C.E.

GROWTH OF TRADE AND COMMERCE IN EARLY INDIA (c.200 B.C.E UPTO 1ST CENTURY C.E.):-

The initial impetus to the growth of trade was given by the Mauryas, who are attributed for greatly improving the internal communications [Jha:

2016: 123]. “The Mauryas had built a Royal-Highway from Taxila to Patliputra” [Thapar: 2003:236]. “Patliputra was connected by road to Tamralipti (Tamluk) in the Gangetic Delta, the chief port for ships sailing to Burma and Ceylon” [Jha: 2016: 123]. “J-Przyluski maintains that from the Mauryan time onwards Patliputra was connected with Nepal by Vaisali and Sravasti” [Barpujari: 2014: 256]. However, land-routes to Deccan and South India were mostly built during the post-Mauryan period. This now resulted in different parts of the country are connected to each other via trade-routes, some of which even connects to Western and Central Asia. “Taxila was connected by a highway with Kabul, from where roads went in different directions” [Jha: 2016: 123]. The fact that Mauryas had a lively interest in trade and commerce can be proved by the passages from Arthasastra, which shows, the effort they put to facilitate trade and commerce. “In Arthasastra scheme of things, management of commerce is assigned to the director of trade (panyadhyaksa) and director of market place (samsthadyaksa). The panyadhyaksa arranges for the sale of commodities produced in royal farms and factories, and devises suitable policies to control distribution of commodities in the market” [Chakravarti: 2007: 49]. “This officer is also in charge of trade abroad and is advised to send trade missions to foreign countries” [Chakravarti: 2007: 49]. “The Arthasastra shows that in Mauryan times prices were regulated by market officials” [Basham: 2004: 219]. Thus, the Mauryas laid the roads to trade and commerce, which are yet to be explored in much diverse ways, which led to trade on a much bigger scale.

The most important phase, for the development of trade and commerce of the Indian-Subcontinent as a whole was after the decline of Mauryas, which witnessed decentralization and further allowed various groups like the; Indo-Greeks, the Shakas (Scythians), the Parthians and the Kushans to migrate to North-western India. “The coming of these groups of people, established an intimate contact and relationship between Central-Asia and India” [Sharma: 2015: 196]. Kharosthi-Brahmi inscriptions on terracotta seals reveals that at first they came as traders and later became owners of vast agricultural lands. [Chakravarti: 2005: 203,204]. This however resulted in exchange of ideas and materials between them and the outside world, which led to the development of various trade networks that reached up to the Roman Empire. Thus, developing and strengthening the Indian Economy.

Earlier, items or crafts and products were manufactured close to the areas from where raw-materials were found or where a tradition of particular craft existed and the artisans and craftsmen would gather around these places. [Thapar: 2003: 235]. Now, with the growth of towns and markets and an increase in the number of craftsmen, many of them now gathered in centres where there were markets [Thapar: 2003:235].

With this, many industries sprung-up and old ones modified in different parts of the subcontinent. Textile industries might have been the most important industries of the time. "The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea speaks of two active textile centres in Central Deccan, namely Tagara (Ter) and Paithan" [Chakravarti: 2007: 52]. Iron was available in mines in many places. Copper was found mostly in the Rajasthan mines. [Thapar: 2003:235]. " Epigraphic and Literary materials, when studied along with the Geographike Huphegesis of Claudius Ptolemy (c. AD 150), may indicate that the Kushans took initiative to work-out diamond mines in eastern Malwa" [Chakravarti:2007:52]. Also, other industries such as; semi precious stones were mostly found in the hilly and forested regions, musk and saffron were found mostly on the Himalayan slopes. South India mostly produced spices, gold, precious stones, pearls, sandalwood and ebony. Also Punjab was famous for its Salt Range. [Thapar: 2003:235]. " The Naturalis Historia of Pliny contains a significant passage in this connection: referring to the practice of salt quarrying in Mt. Oromenus (salt range in Pakistan), the author says that political authorities derived greater revenue from Salt mines than from even those of gold and pearls" [Chakravarti: 2007:53]. Now with the surplus products from these industries coupled with the Central Asian dynasties controlling the North-western part of Indian subcontinent, a link was to be made, which further facilitated trade. "Chinese traders imported fur and horses, and the horse trade was also of interest to Indian traders" [Thapar: 2003:235].

By this time many land-routes were discovered and connected. However, one of the most important discoveries that helped in the development of communications was the discovery of 'monsoon winds' [Jha: 2016:123]. Coastal routes were known from the very beginning, which also helped in local trade, but the mid-ocean trade was much faster. It was thought that the Monsoon winds was discovered by the Greek sailor Hippalus (AD 46-7) which greatly helped in the mid-ocean navigation of the Arabian Sea, thus, reducing a great deal of distance between Indian and West Asian ports. However, "Hippalus was thought to be the person who discovered the winds, but it is now being suggested that Hippalus was actually the name given to the wind" [Thapar: 2003:240]. "Following the discovery of Hippalus there seems to have been a sudden and enormous increase in the Roman trade with India and particularly in the importation of Indian products" [Schoff: 1974:13]. Now instead of going through the southern coast of Arabia, western sailors came directly to the Gulf of Cambay or the Deccan [Jha:2016:124].

The proliferation of crafts had already started trade bloom from 1st century B.C.E onwards. "The Roman Empire had definite interests in commerce with the east which at the outset took the form of trade links

with China” [Chakravarti: 2007:54]. The most important item of export from China was the Chinese silk though the famous overland Silk-Route [Chakravarti: 2007: 54]. However the Parthians of Iran stood as a commercial and political intermediary between china in the east and Rome in the west, created obstacles for the free flow of merchandise [Chakravarti:2007:54]. Thus, an alternate route was much needed to counteract the problem, and that was fulfilled by the foundation of Central Asiatic Empire by the Kushans, who ruled over vast territories of North India including the Indus Delta and Kathiawad peninsula [Chakravarti:2007:54]. Thus, Indo-Roman trade became a chief characteristic feature during 1st century C.E.

However, with the increase in the Indo-Roman trade, the pressure for production and manufacture of items exported to Roman Empire increased [Jha: 2016:126]. Thus, alternatively, trade between India and South-east Asia started mainly through sea routes to Suvarnadvipa and Golden Isles (Java, Sumatra, Bali)[Thapar:2002:243].

As a result of Indian exports of various types of spices, pearls, precious stones etc, Pliny complained of trade with the east as serious ‘drain of wealth’ [Thapar:2002:242]. Thus, it must be noted that trade was conducted through a variety of routes and various items of exchange were used as commodities, the details of which shall be discussed in the next chapter.

AN OUTLINE OF THE TRADE-ROUTES AND ITEMS OF EXCHANGE: -

As Mauryas had already started the construction of trade routes, many of them which became prominent trade-routes in the 1st century C.E., but more new routes were created by the 1st century CE, which served as trade links between India and not only the neighbouring countries but also distant places. Trade was conducted both by land (through caravans, carts etc.) and Sea routes (through boats, ships etc.).

Land-routes: - “In the north the most widely used highway westward was from Taxila to Begram, where roads branched off in various directions. The Northern route was via Bactria, the Oxus, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus to the Black Sea. A more southerly route went from Kandahar and Herat to Ecbatana, after which it was linked to the ports on the eastern Mediterranean. Another important Highway connected Kandahar with Persepolis and Susa.” [Thapar: 2003:238]. “Margiana, adjoining Bactria, was a transit point for silk coming from the east that was intended for the Mediterranean” [Thapar: 2003:238]. “Gandhara also became a nodal point in tapping the Silk-route and the eastern Byzantine trading centres” [Thapar: 2003:238].

However, the most important was the trade through the silk route. "The Taklamakan desert was ringed round with oases which became staging-points on the route. From Loyang and Chang'an in China the route came to Dunhuang, where it bifurcated: the northern route went through Turfan, Qarashahr, and Kucha to Kashgar; and the southern route through Niya and Khotan to Kashgar. From Kashgar it went to the town of Bactra/Balkh and from there either to Iran and the eastern Mediterranean or southwards to India." [Thapar: 2003:238]. [Refer to Appendix A].

Thus, Indian traders acted as intermediaries in Chinese silk trade. [Jha: 2016:124]. They established trading stations at far-off places, as it attracted lucrative trade, such as: Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, Miran, Kuchi, Qarashahr and Turfan etc. [Thapar: 2002:238]. Also, the Parthian problem, which was a block in the Roman-Chinese trade, Chinese merchandise was sometimes diverted to the further south of Taxila and Bhrigukachchha, thus helping boosting the prosperity of north-western India. [Thapar:2003:239]. "The Arab merchants, apparently tolerated the presence of Indian traders in Africa, but reserved for themselves the commerce within the Red Sea" [Schoff: 1974:03]. Thus, Indian vessels were not allowed to go to the red sea ports. [Thapar: 2003:239].

Sea-Trade: - Coastal trade was common which also promoted local trade. [Thapar:2003:236]. However, with the discovery of monsoon winds, mid-ocean trade was mostly used as it was much faster. "Among ports, Barbaricum on the Indus Delta served as a port for North-west [Thapar: 2003:236]. "Bhrigukachchha/Bharukachchha or Barygaza in Greek sources, the modern Bharuch, continued to be major port of western sea trade" [Thapar: 2003:236]. "The Gulf of Cambay remained the destination for shipping from the Arabian Gulf, even up to recent times. But a large amount of trade was handled by other ports further down the western coast, such as Sopara and Kalyana, serving the western Deccan, and Muziris, linked to the centres in the south. Ports along the east coast were initially close to the estuaries, with the largest being the Ganges Delta, for example, Tamralipti/Tamluk [Thapar: 2003:236]. Arikamedu was another important port in the eastern coast of peninsula (Padouke in Periplus) for the Indo-Roman trades. It is believed that at Arikamedu, certain types of textiles are made according to Roman demands and specifications and were then shipped to Rome. [Thapar: 2003:242]. [Refer to Appendix B]

Trade items: - During the Harappan times export was mainly in: ivory products, copper, cotton, textiles, pottery, terracotta figurines etc. [Habib: 2016:47]. But from 200 B.C.E onwards we saw an addition of some new items that were exported: silk yarn, indigo, long pepper,

muslins, pearls etc. And imports on; topaz, dates, wine, flint-glass etc. [refer to Appendix C].

Medium of Exchange: - With the growth of trade during the period of study, we saw an increase in money economy. "The imported coins were mostly used as bullions" [Jha: 2016:126]. As for the indigenous coins that were issued, Indo-Greeks issued few gold coins, both the Kushans issued large number of gold coins, Satavahanas issued coins in metals of low value, this indicates that as for regular day to day transactions gold and silver cannot be used, so coins of low metallic value were used instead, also the Naga rulers issued Copper coins. [Jha: 2016:126]. Thus, the trade and commerce of the 1st century C.E had left a deep impact on the Indian society and economy, which shall be highlighted in the next chapter.

IMPACT OF THE GROWTH OF TRADE AND COMMERCE IN EARLY INDIA (c. 200 B.C.E UPTO 1st CENTURY C.E): -

As already known that the trade and commerce was in a developing form prior to the period of study, but from c. 200 B.C.E to 1st century C.E, India's foreign trade reached new heights. It was only during the Harappan civilization that India traded with far-off geographical units witnessing a prosperous economy, but after its decline, trade and commerce could not revive to that stage. The Mauryas initially gave an impetus to trade but after the coming of the Central Asian dynasties to India, it experienced a foreign exposure. They not only minted large amount of gold and silver, especially the Kushanas, but also conducted extensive trade and commerce with far-off areas. Thus, the influx of gold and silver the economy was strengthened.

Secondly, Indian spices were in great demand in Rome, especially pepper, which came mainly from the south. This led to a striking change in Roman cuisine and gastronomy, "evident from the celebrated roman gourmet Apicius cookbook of 1st century" [Jha: 2016:124]. Also, silk and cotton from India was in great demand in Roman markets. This shows the growing importance of Indian products in the Roman market.

Thirdly, the western trade resulted in a cultural contact with the west, which in turn led to the development of a new lifestyle. The traders who were involved in commercial activities were not basically Romans from Rome but were Egyptian Jews and Greeks from Alexandria and the eastern Mediterranean, all of them who were part of the greater Roman empire. The local Indian traders may have come in contact with them in due course of time and these connections had fostered the assimilation of different cultures. These connections, in later period may have developed different legends and stories as for instance, the coming of St.

Thomas, the disciple of Christ, to India. [Thapar: 2003:243]. The new population that had migrated into the Indian peninsula may have been descendants of the Indo-Greeks and Shakas of the North-west. This acculturation had led to the development of diverse societies which may have been gradually possible due to the flourishing trade and commerce of the 1st century CE.

Fourthly, money economy had penetrated deep into the economic life of the people. Earlier in the Vedic and post-Vedic times, even though trade was not in a full fledged form but, they used some kind of punched-marked coins like Nishka. But yet, barter in cows and other items prevailed. But with the coming of the Mauryan dynasty, gold and silver coins were minted and were used in large number for all transactions, as the Mauryan government had now control over the gold mines and other industries. Along with gold and silver coins, copper coins were also found in large number. This development took a definite form by the 1st century C.E, where metallic coins were used in large numbers and an impact of monetization was felt even on the daily life of common people.

Fifthly, another important feature of the period of study is that, guild system developed in a more powerful way. Increase in trade required an organization which could manage production and distribution, which now became very difficult to be done single handedly. Thus, individual merchants and artisans grouped together to form guilds, which increased considerably within no time. However, with the profit from the over-seas and over-land trades, these guilds gradually became powerful economically and thus, with the course of time they even acted as trustees and bankers [Jha: 2016:129]. However, the money deposited to the guilds were sometimes used for religious purpose, such as, Buddhist devotees sometimes deposited money to certain guild for the purpose of providing economic benefits and helping with basic necessities to the monks [Jha:2016:129]. Not only this, they also issued coins in several cities (example- Taxila excavations shows pre Indo-Greek coins), which is generally issued by a ruling dynasty or particular sovereign powers [Jha: 2016:129]. Thus, guild system emerged as one of the most powerful organizations of the time.

Sixthly, the period also witnessed brisk participation of Indian merchants and traders in international exchange networks, both over-land and maritime trade, mostly involved in the Roman trade which was extremely profitable. Roman merchants were already by this time very much interested in Chinese Silk, but the Parthians stood as a great obstacle in their way to the east. Thus, the Indian merchants saw the opportunity to use this to their own benefit and thus, acted as intermediaries, which was made possible by the huge Kushana Empire,

which extended their sway to vast territories of north India, which also included Indus delta and Kathiawad peninsula.

Seventhly, another important feature is the increasing contact of India with South-east Asia. Even after the decline of the Roman trade and the Kushana Empire, it did not hamper trade of India with South-east Asia. In fact, the loss of the Indian traders in the Roman market was compensated in the South-east Asian trade [Thapar: 2003:243].

Lastly, the period under study saw the emergence of South India as an important hub for foreign trade. Earlier trade facilitated mostly within the northern part of the Indian-subcontinent, but with the growing towns and cities in south India and emergence of various industries paved the way for the foreign merchants to directly deal with this region and thus, trade spread to the southern tip of peninsula and south became an important centre for foreign trade, from where most of the spices, musk, sandalwood etc, were exported to different parts of the world.

CONCLUSION: -

Trade and commerce are two important faces of the same coin that lead to the development and diversification of economy. The growth of trading activities heralded a new era in the history of early India. Various new trading towns and centres had emerged that harboured the goods and commodities of exchange. Later on, these new centres emerged as commercial hubs that controlled the economic activities. However, extensive trade could flourish only towards the last quarter of the first century C.E. The rise of the Guptas had witnessed the final stage of extensive trade and commerce in early India. As the decline of Gupta rule became evident, we find the decay of a centralised empire and their towns and cities. The cultural contact with the outside world was also lost in due course of time due to the decline of Roman Empire. Therefore, the paucity of silver struck a heavy blow to the development of trade during the post Gupta era. The nature of trade had also undergone a variety of changes as well. The rise of the Arab merchants had led to the shift of trade in the hands of the Arabs. They acted as middlemen and began extracting profits in large scale. The Indian trade was seen to have slowly declined as the contact with the west was virtually lost. The political centres that controlled trade had also declined considerably and the geographical territories began facing foreign intrusion and invasion. Therefore, the early Indian trade and commerce gradually ceased to exist, the nature of which was destined to face changes in the subsequent centuries.

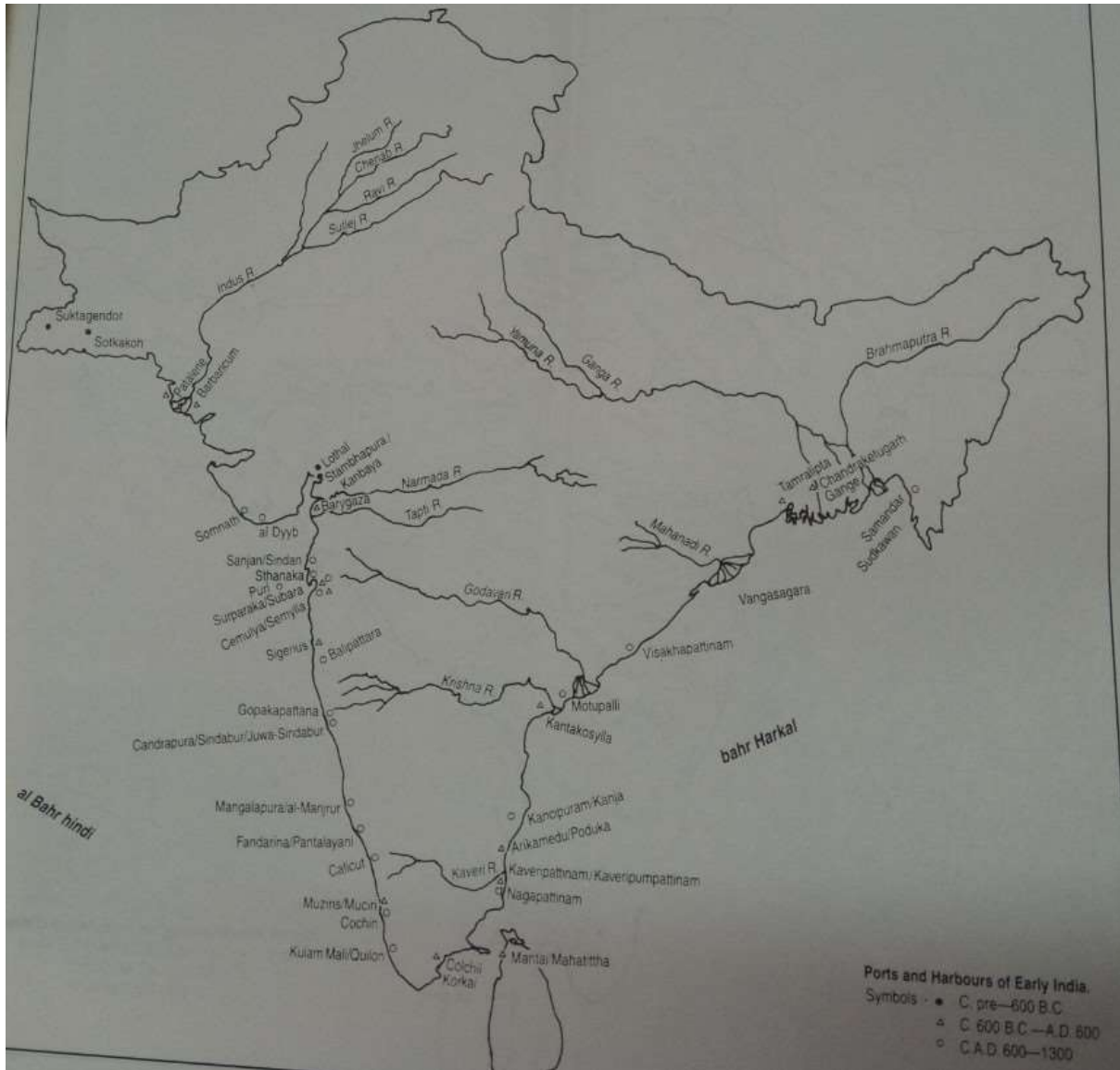
APPENDICES: -

Appendix A-



Source: - Thapar. Romila, Early India from the origins to AD 1300, New Delhi: Penguin books, 2003

Appendix- B



Source: - Chakravarti. Ranabir, Trade in Early India, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005

Appendix C-

“Makran Coast.

ORAEA.

Wheat, wine, rice, dates, bdellium.

Indo-Scythia.

BARBARICUM (at the mouth of Indus River)

(Imports)

Thin clothing in large quantity, some spurious, figured linens, topaz, coral, storax, frankincense, vessel of glass, silver and gold plate, wine, a little.

(Exports)

Costus, bdellium, lyceum, nard, turquoise, lapis lazuli, seric skins, cotton cloth, silk yarn, indigo.

India (East coast)

CAMARA, PODUCA AND SOPATMA (where ships come from the west coast, also from the Ganges and Chryse).

(Imports)

Everything made in Damarica and the neighbouring countries and most of what comes from Egypt.

India (east coast, further north)

MASALIA.

(Exports)

Muslins, in great quantity.

DOSARENE.

(Exports)

Ivory

India (Ganges delta)

GANGES

(Exports)

Malabathrum, Gangetic spikenard, pearls, muslin of the finest sort, called Gangetic. (The place has a gold coin called caltis)"

Source: - Schoff.W.H, The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt.Ltd, 1974

REFERENCE: -

- Barpujari. H.K, The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol I, India: Publication Board Assam, 2014
- Basham.A.L, The Wonder that was India, India: Picador, 2004

- Chakravarti. Ranabir, Trade and Traders in early Indian Society, New Delhi; Manohar publishers and distributors, 2007
- Chakravarti.Ranabir,Trade in early India, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2005
- Habib.Irfan, The Indus Civilization, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016
- Jha,D.N, Ancient India in Historical Outline, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2016
- Schoff.W.H, The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt.Ltd, 1972
- Sharma.R.S, India's Ancient Past, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015
- Thapar. Romila, Early India from the origins to AD 1300, New Delhi :Penguin books, 2003