

4. Revisiting Kushana Wealth - The Economic Golden Age

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Abstract

We have noticed the major aspects of economic life in the Kushāṇa period. The data available from the inscriptions of this period, particularly from Mathura, and to some extent from those of the Saka Kshatrapas, are supplemented from the account given by the classical writers and also noticed in the literature of this period. It was during this period that India supplied articles of luxury to Rome for which the Romans had to pay handsomely. The Kushana rulers or Kushana administration apparently collected, like the Arsacids, much revenue by levying taxes on articles of commerce.

Key words: *Classical Greek writers, Chinese sources, Guilds, tariff-posts, Mahāvastu*

The classical Greek writers have referred to brisk trade between India and the western world, and the list of commodities imported and exported from the country. India had always a favourable trade balance in the export trade, which was viewed with caution by Pliny. Pliny calls India the sole mother of precious stones, the great producer of the most costly gems.¹ There was no year in which India did not drain the Roman empire of a hundred million sesosteres. Besides the richness in mineral resources, political and cultural relations were, to a great extent, responsible for bringing about commercial harmony between the east and west. From the time of Mark Antony to the time of Justinian, i.e from B.C. 30-A.D. 550, the contact between India and Rome was a matter of highest importance.² On the basis of the study of Roman coins found in South India, Sewell came to the conclusion that the culmination of trade between India and Rome had reached during the time of Augustus, and it continued up to A.D. 65, the time of Nero.³ It was during this period that India supplied articles of luxury to Rome for which the Romans had to pay handsomely. Pliny's note of caution might have caused some change in the minds of the people. Sewell further pointed out that the paucity of finds of Roman coins in Southern India was the consequence of the change of the social conditions of Rome itself rather than to any political reason. This contention of Sewell was challenged by Warmington who pointed out that there was hardly any confirmation of the fact that the Indian

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traffic grew less or, that the upper classes desisted from their extravagant tastes and the use of items of luxuries for a considerable time.⁴ He further stated that there was nothing to doubt that constant activity of Roman's commerce with the East even from the accounts of the writers who had no special occasion to mention about India. According to the Periplus⁵ the articles exported to Rome from India were Indian pepper, ginger, and articles of luxury, of which there was a great demand. These included silk, muslin and cotton fabrics. The precious stones, pearls and minerals were also in great demand. The Indian ports at Barbaricum at the mouth of the Indus and Barygaza (Broach) were the important centres for the import and export trade. The imported things included thin clothing, coral, frankincense, vessels of glass, silver and gold, copper, tin, lead, sweet clover, little ointment, also singing boys and beautiful maidens for the harem, fine wines etc. According to the same author, the exported articles included turquoise, lapis lazuli, skins, cotton cloth, silk, yarn and indigo. Ivory, agate and cornelian, muslin, long pepper, and silk cloth were brought from the different parts of the country and exported from Barygaza.

The information given by the classical writers on the nature and volume of India's trade with the west, is supplemented by the references from the Buddhist literature relating to the commercial voyages overseas, the nature of transactions, and collective responsibility. The commencement of a sea voyage for purposes of trade was indicated by the blowing of the gong (ghantavaghoshanam) inviting others to accompany the merchant initiating, with articles of merchandise, free of cost and exempted from ferry dues or fares (sārdham-aśulkena tarpamyena). The response to such an invitation was great and sometimes as many as five hundred merchants turned up for going overseas (mahāsamudragamaniyaṃ). When Pūraṇa, a merchant, extended his invitation, some merchants came from Śrāvastī.⁶ Balasena of Vasavagrama, accompanied by merchants, covered the inland journey from his hometown, carrying plenty of merchandise in carts (sokataih), loads (bhāraiḥ), bundles and baskets (piṭakaiḥ), and on the backs of camels (uśtraiḥ), oxen (gopaiḥ) and asses (gardabhaiḥ).⁷

There are also some references to trade conventions. The deposit of an earnest money (avadranga)-generally one-sixth, was necessary at the time of entering the deal, after that the buyer put his seal on merchandise involved in the transaction (svamudrālakshitan kritvā).⁸ To avoid the monopoly of an individual trader, bulk deals were discouraged. A disregard of such a resolution (kriyā- kāra) by individual members was taken into account by the merchant guild. The absence of the individual member for want of proper notice could be taken as an act of working against the resolution of the corporate body.⁹ This spirit in commercial enterprises was meant to avoid hoarding of the stocks with anyone who could do that for bringing down prices at the time of purchases, and then

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selling the stock at fabulous price. Another source of income might have been constituted by different kinds of taxes imposed on the subjects. The Junagadh record of A.D. 149-50 referring to Rudradaman I, whose family might have earlier served the Kushanas, stated that his treasury was over- flowed "with an accumulation of gold, silver, diamonds, beryl stones and (other) precious things "right- fully obtained through (collection of taxes like) bali (a kind of compulsory tribute or contribution from the subjects), sulka (ferry dues, tolls, duties on merchandise, etc.) and bhaga (royal share-generally one sixth-of the produce including agricultural products).¹⁰ According to the same inscription, Rudradaman I caused the rebuilding of a dam "without oppressing the inhabitants of the towns and country" by kara (periodical tax or some other kind of tax), vishti (forced labour) and pranaya (benevolence or an emergency tax of non-recurring nature).¹¹ Since Rudradāman's family might have served the Kushanas for a certain period not much earlier than the date referred to in the Junagadh record (i.e., AD. 149-50), and since much of his territory might have been earlier in the Kushāṇa empire, the taxes mentioned in this inscription could have been well-known in the Kushāṇa empire, at least in its Indian provinces. Some of these were admittedly oppressive in nature. But most of them contributed to the fulfilling of the royal treasury. As the Kushanas are known to have minted a large number of coins, it is only natural to presume that taxes were paid in cash. But there are indications of another mode of payment of taxes.¹²

We have noticed the major aspects of economic life in the Kushāṇa period. The data available from the inscriptions of this period, particularly from Mathura, and to some extent from those of the Saka Kshatrapas, are supplemented from the account given by the classical writers and also noticed in the literature of this period. The organisation of professions and vocational interests into corporate bodies was not new to this period, but the list of the traditional eighteen trade guilds, as given in the Mahāvastu, is different from the one in the Jatakas. The earlier works mention this number but not all the names of guilds. In the period under study only the wheat-flour guild is mentioned in an inscription of the time of Huvishka, which also figures in the list given in the Mahāvastu. The others also might have been in existence. A few more are noticed in the inscriptions from Western India of the time of the Saka Kshatrapas. The guilds ensured protection to the profession from external forces, and also looked after the interests of the members. They also accepted deposits and carried out the functions enjoined under the terms of the deposits. The long list of professions, from inland and overseas traders, to dealers in articles of luxuries, provision dealers, the artisan class, wild and low professions, labourers and attendants, professions relating to communication, finally the literates suggest that the economic life was more complicated with a wider range of avocations providing room

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26

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for the display of various interests. Land economy was equally important. The reference to crops, the nature of land and its improvement and irrigation, suggest that agriculturists knew the importance and also the ways and means of improving and increasing the produce. Cattle-rearing was also encouraged. Drought sometimes resulted in impoverishment, and there are references to different types of famines and the efforts to overcome the crisis by equitably distributing the stock in hand.¹³ This was due to the internal resources and production, and the enthusiasm of the enterprising seafaring merchants played no less an important part in export promotion. On the whole, the economic life of this period centred towards intense external trade and internal production. The people seemed to have been happy economically as most of the dedications at Mathura were made by ordinary men and women. The trade guilds enjoyed stability and confidence. It is not certain to what extent Indian traders contributed in the famous silk trade between China and Rome which passed through the extreme north-western part of the Kushāṇa empire. The imitation of the Roman aurei by the Kushāṇa rulers especially Kujula Kadphises in design & weight was very probably for facilitating trade.¹⁴

With the increasing, from the time of Augustus, of the tendencies to avoid the routes through the dominions of the inimical and exacting Parthians¹⁵ and also to use the less arduous and more economic sea route between the Roman empire and India, much of this trade was diverted from Central Asia to the Indian ports. In fact, the Periplus refers to raw silk, silk cloth and silk yarn (serikon) being brought from China, and through Bactria (in the Kushana dominions) to Barygaza and also along the Ganges (and by sea) to Damirica.¹⁶ The silk yarn must have been taken also to the lower Indus country. For the same work mentions silk yarn (serikon) and also seric skin (serikondermata) as being exported from Scythia.¹⁷ Vima might have been allured by the prospects of gain from the annexation of Shen-tu. For such a conquest would empower him to control completely at least one of the routes of the vital silk trade, lying beyond the area of the Chinese influence and up to the sea.¹⁸ Such a complete mastery would also increase the flow of international trade. For in the changed conditions the merchants would face a minimum number of tariff-posts while covering a great part of the Sino-Roman trade route. Moreover, articles of trade would move through a secure road protected by a strong central authority. These reasons might induce the merchants to pay the maximum possible taxes, resulting in the accumulation of great wealth for the Kushāṇas.

The conquest of the lower Indus country also enabled the Kushanas to regulate and thereby to make profit from other commercial transactions carried on through that region between Central Asia and North-Western India on one hand and the Roman empire and other western countries on the other. These observations explain naturally the Hou Han-shu's reference to the Kushāṇas becoming

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extremely rich and powerful as a result of their conquest of T'ien-chu or Shen-tu. Economic considerations seem to have played a vital role in inducing V'ima to invade that territory. It appears that the annexation of the latter served as the key-stone for the economic structure of the Kushana empire. Thus the advent of the Kushanas in Shen-tu or the lower Indus country, which must have been an important political event, appears to have been motivated largely by the prospects of gain offered by its thriving Indo-Roman commerce. The dependence of the Kushana prosperity on the foreign trade is further indicated by the simultaneous beginning of the decline of the empire in the reign of Vasudeva-1¹⁹ and that of the foreign influence on the Kushāna coinage. Ptolemy denoted by the term emporion an oriental market town, lying on or near the sea-coast and beyond Roman empire, in the commerce of which entre port Roman sailors were interested.²⁰ This suggests cessation of or at least serious decline in trade relations between the lower Indus zone and the Roman Orient by the date of Ptolemy's Geographike. With a regular and skilful use of the trade winds the Roman sailors could, by that time, reach easily and regularly the ports of Southern India, where they could procure and sell all kinds of merchandise, including those available in the lower Indus region. Therefore they did not probably feel the necessity of visiting the lower Indus area. This probably caused a serious damage to the economic condition of that territory by about the date of Ptolemy, i.e., about the middle of 2nd century A. D.²¹

The gradual fall in this trade as well as the fact that by c. 150 A.D. the family of Rudradaman I usurped the authority over the lower Indus region²² led to the decline of the Kushano-Roman commerce. Almost simultaneous beginning of the decline of the Kushana empire probably suggests that a vital alteration in its economic structure forced the pace of change in its political arena. The Hou Han-shu refers to the richness of the Great Yueh-chih or Kuei-shuang (Kushana) rulers.²³ It alludes to wealthy Kushana nobles living in luxury. Scholars have tried to find references to Kushana feudal lords in some of the names of owners inscribed in the Kharoshthi script on gold slabs found in excavations at Dalverzin-Tepe in Southern Uzbekistan and datable to the Kushana age.²⁴ The Zeda inscription of the reign of Kanishka(I) describes him as Marjhaka.²⁵ The term Marjhaka may be philologically connected with the Khotanese word Malysaki, which is known to have been used to convey the sense denoted by the Sanskrit term Grihapati. The latter name was considered to denote the sixth ratna – (jewel) of a Chakravartin (universal ruler) who secured hidden treasures for his master. The title in question was attributed to Kanishka I probably to denote, that he was “rich in treasure.”²⁶ “This characterisation” it has been pointed out was “sometimes used about the Roam emperor”.²⁷ Buddhist literature also indicates that the kushana emperor Kanishka (I) was a very wealthy person.

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28

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Booties collected in course of military ventures must have been among the principal sources of wealth collected by the Kushanas. Kanishka (I) acquired the most valuable possessions of the King of Pataliputra when he attacked the latter.²⁸ Tributes received regularly from tributary or feudatory states might have constituted another source yielding wealth to the Kushana emperor or his administration. In the reign of Kanishka I the territory of Pataliputra constituted one such state.

The Hou Han-shu stated that after conquering T-i-en-chu or Shen-tu, i.e., the Lower Indus area, the Yüeh-chih (Kushanas) became "extremely rich and powerful."²⁹ As Shen-tu had regular commercial relations with Ta-ch'in,³⁰ i.e. the Oriental possessions of the Roman empire, this statement of the Hou Han-shu may suggest that the advent of the Kushanas in Shen-tu was motivated mainly by the prospects of gain offered by its thriving Indo-Roman commerce, in which the balance of trade was in favour of India. The Kushana rulers or Kushana administration apparently collected, like the Arsacids,³¹ much revenue by levying taxes on articles of commerce.

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