

# Contemporary Trade and the Guild System during the Mauryan Empire: A Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

The political unity and internal peace prevalent during the Mauryan Empire encouraged the expansion of trade in India. Under the aegis of the Indo-Greek relations, developed during the reign of Ashoka, the Mauryan network of trade saw tremendous expansion at the international level. Both, regional and long distance trade system grew under the rule of the ancient kingdoms of India. The Mauryan Empire established single currency throughout India, a network of regional governors and administrators, and a civil body to provide justice and security for farmers and merchants. Peasants were no longer burdened with taxes or crop collection from the regional kings though they paid through the centrally-administered tax system. The present study will highlight the positive governance that led to this expansion. This paper will explore the role of Ashoka's reign, the government-built major roadways, and an international network of trade which resulted in exports of silk, textiles, and spices to other places like Bactria and Persia.

**Key Words :** Trade, Guild, Taxes, Route, Mauryan Empire, Regional, International

## INTRODUCTION

For the first time in South Asia, per Indian history, political unity and military security allowed increased trade and commerce with a common economic system and increased agricultural productivity. Hundreds of kingdoms, many small armies, powerful regional chieftains and a past situation involving internal warfare gave way to a disciplined central authority. Peasants were freed from the burden of tax and crop collection from regional kings and instead had to pay for a nationally administered and strict-but-fair taxation system advised by principles in the Arthashastra. Chandragupta Maurya established a single currency throughout India, and a network of regional governors and administrators and a civil service body to offer justice and protection to merchants and farmers. The Mauryan army eliminated many gangs of bandits, regional private armies and powerful chieftains who sought to establish their supremacy in small areas. Although regimental in revenue collection, the Mauryas

sponsored many public works and waterways to increase productivity, while the expansion of internal trade across India led to a new -found political unity and inner peace.

International trade in the Mauryan Empire:

Under the Indo-Greek Friendship Treaty, and during the reign of Ashoka, an international network of trade was established. Khyber Pass, located on the modern border of Pakistan and Afghanistan became a strategically important point of trade and interaction with the outside world. The Greek states and the Greek empires became trading partners in West Asia. Trade also expanded through the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. India's exports included silk, textiles, spices and exotic foods. The outside world gained new scientific knowledge and technology through this expanded trade with the Maurya Empire. Ashoka also sponsored the construction of thousands of roads, waterways, canals, hospitals, rest houses and other public works. The easing of many highly stringent administrative practices regarding taxation and

crop collection helped increase productivity and economic activity throughout the empire.

In many ways, the economic condition of the Maurya Empire is similar to that of the Roman Empire which came many centuries later. Both had extensive business ties and both had organizations similar to corporations. While Rome had organizational entities that were largely used for public state-run projects, Mauryan empire in India had several private commercial entities. These existed purely for private commerce and were developed even before the Mauryan Empire. The references to Kautilya's Arthashastra speak of an advanced trade. The state is said to give active encouragement to businesses. The construction of wide roads leading to market towns is mentioned. The Arthashastra gives us a valuable, though far from exhaustive, list of imports carried along clear routes to the Ganges valley. Elephants, horses, perfumery products, teeth, hides, expensive goods made of gold and silver were abundant in the Himalayas. The products exported included textiles from Bengal, Assam, Banaras, Konkan and Pandya, silk from China, woolen textiles from Nepal, skins from the Himalayan regions, aromatic wood from Assam and the Himalayas.

The Mauryan rule helped in improving India's inland and foreign trade. Chandragupta Maurya had complete control over the prestigious north-west route. With the conquest of the Deccan by Chandragupta Maurya, the capture of valuable western and southern routes was ensured for the Mauryas. When Ashoka conquered Kalinga the only potential rival to the mastery of eastern trade was destroyed. The Mauryas brought all the great inland trade routes under the control of a highly centralized and efficient administration. His rule fueled the growth of trade in other ways.

The Mauryas had a special department for the construction of roads which is depicted by Megasthenes with reference to the duties of officials called agoranomoi. The wise policy of acquaintance with the Hellenistic powers initiated by Chandragupta Maurya after the repulsion of Seleucus, favored the expansion of Indian trade with West Asia and Egypt. The main trade between the early Seleucid Empire and India was carried out by land (the northern one passed through Bactria and the southern Gedrosia and Garmania, Persis and Susiana) and the sea route (via Gerha on the Persian west coast bay). In the light of this extensive commerce with western lands, Ashoka attempted to pass on the benefits of his

religious and humanitarian propaganda to the Hellenistic kingdoms. The non-agricultural economy of the Magadha Empire circled around two inter-related developments: first the expansion of trade and commerce, and the second Establishment of new towns and markets. The expansion of agrarian economy had given a solid economic base to the Mauryan Empire especially in the Ganges Valley. However, this growth was of the commercial economy, which enabled it to expand its resource base to other parts of the country.

### **Structure of business organizations:**

There was no sudden development in trade during this period it was part of a larger process. Economic change started long before the Mauryan period. The stories repeatedly mention caravan traders carrying large quantities of goods in different parts of the country. The security provided by the Maurya regime enabled to flourish internal business. Major trade routes of West Asia and Central Asia passed through north-west India. The Ganges River and the foothills of the Himalayas. Major centers like Rajgriha in Magadha and Kaushambi, near present day Allahabad, were thus connected. Patna was the capital of the Mauryas, it was a particularly strategic location and was associated with river and road in all four directions. The northern route to such places Shravasti and Kapilvastu were connected through the city of Vaishali from Kapilvastu. This route was connected to Kalsi, Hazara and eventually went to Peshawar. Megasthenes also talks about the land route connecting the north-west with Pataliputra. In the south, it connected to Kalinga in central India and south-east. It then, finally turned south to reach Andhra and Karnataka.

The eastern route continued from the Ganges delta to Tamralipti which served as an exit point to the south and southeast. Moving west from Kaushambi the route went towards Ujjain. It continued either further west to the coast of Gujarat or west to the south of the Narmada and was considered as Dakshinapatha (Southern Way). The land route to the countries of the West passed through Taxila near Islamabad, opening of communication in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. Direct result or expansion of settlements facilitated movement from the second place. This naturally promoted trade. Internal trade was sufficiently benefited because river transport was improved when the surrounding forest of the valleys were cleared as part of the state initiative. State policy, in particular given to Bindusara and Ashoka to have

peaceful and friendly relations with the Greeks also propelled trade and business systems. Foreign trade also encouraged and trade was conducted in different ways. It was intrinsically linked to the methods of production and its organization. Craft production was mainly in North India held on guild (sreni) lines. It was the same in the pre-Maurya period as well.

When Mauryas saw an increase in number of artisan groups various guilds were organized in different cities, dwelling in particular sections and who generally worked and lived in a close relationship together. Megasthenes also mentions artisans as one of them. During his stay in India, he noticed seven castes/classes and famous guilds of various types of metalworkers, carpenters, potters, tanners; painters, textile workers, etc. Akin to the Northern Black Polish artisans, merchants were also organized along guild lines. Certain kinds were associated with specialized artisan groups of merchants who distributed widely. Thus, it is important to note that the state administration under the Mauryas also took the organization of business on them. This administrative control over production and distribution made it more efficient, but it did not mean that it directly interfered with trade routes running all over India.

Inland routes were marked by convenient steps and connected the most distant parts of the country with each other. Some of the important routes were:-

(1)	East route to West Route	This route mainly ran along the great rivers. Boats ply from Champa to Varanasi. Banaras was a great industrial and trading center of that time. From there they went till Sahajati till river Ganges and Kaushambi till Jamna.
(2)	North route to South-West route	This route extended from Saraswati, the capital of Kosala, to Pratishtan on the Godavari River and the stations on the opposite side included Ujjayini, Vidisha and Kaushambi.
(3)	The North route to South-East route	North-West route extends along the land of the Five Rivers to the great highways of Central and Western Asia. Roads especially those that passed through forests infested with plunderers, against whom merchants defended themselves by hiring the services of forest guards. However, the desert had to be crossed at night, with the help of land-pilots guiding the caravan by the stars. Some roads were regarded as 'royal' or 'noble' roads. In the absence of bridges, rivers had to be crossed through ghats. The land and sea trade attracted the attention of Indian traders.

**Intra-regional trade route:**

Intra-regional trade played an important role in the Mauryan Empire. The political unity and military security that was growing in the empire at that time helped to develop a common economic system, increase agricultural productivity, and increase trade and commerce. The Mauryan Empire benefited from expanded contacts with different regions of the world as a result of trade throughout West Asia and the Roman Empire. Trade relied on ports, the Silk Road and the Khyber Pass, which were all important main routes of exchange. Trade benefited the people of the empire as they would exchange their abundant resources for supplies that were in high demand. The resources that were often traded were ivory, cotton, silk and spices for the resources needed, including lead and wine, and other new products for the empire that were found useful. The Mauryas used camel labor as it was a useful and effective tool to trade with their distant neighbors across the Silk Road in China. Trade as a whole influenced the culture of both empires to change within themselves and spread their culture across the globe.

The increase in India’s trade led to the rise of bankers and financiers among the citizens of the empire. This is because the bankers and financiers supported the monarchy and the landlords lacked cash. Families in banking and commerce expanded their enterprises to urban centers in India and beyond. This increase in trade led to an increase in intellectual activity among the people of the Mauryan Empire, as was trade between the Greeks, Romans, and countless other empires around the world. Science and art also developed. Buddhism, a religion born in the empire, spread around the world. Overall, trade had transcended the original roots of the exchange of goods. People, technology, religion, crops, and animals all evolved into a successful network of communication and exchange. The Mauryan economy was overall empowered due to trade.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, we analyzed that the Indo-Greek Friendship Treaty was a key development in the empires for successful trade operations. Sea routes along the Silk Road provided a way to bring their goods to other regions, and the Khyber Pass, located on the modern border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, developed into a strategically important place of trade with which the rest of the world came into contact. There was also exchange of ideas of

technology and science with the world, Europe, and West Asia. As a result of this sustained peaceful governance that the Maurya dynasty experienced, internal trade within the empire also flourished, as did faith and religion. Political unity allowed people from different regions of Maurya India to travel and sell their wares in the markets around their region. There was also an immigration of people from the Maurya Empire, which helped in the spread of culture across the world. The trade and economy of the Maurya dynasty was one of the most impressive achievements of the empire.

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