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FOREIGN TRADE IN ANCIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Foreign trade in ancient India developed through linked land and maritime networks rather than a single route or period. This paper examines the early historic era, especially c. 300 BCE–500 CE, through the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, archaeological evidence from port sites, and recent historical scholarship. Indian textiles, pepper, pearls, precious stones, and other products moved through Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal circuits, while metals, wine, and other goods entered Indian markets. Monsoon navigation, inland production networks, coastal intermediaries, and merchants from several regions made this exchange possible. The surviving evidence is uneven: a Mediterranean account describes selected ports in detail, whereas material finds reveal more complex and longer lived local histories. Foreign commerce contributed to port growth and cultural contact, but cannot alone explain ancient India's economy.

***KEYWORDS**: ancient India; foreign trade; Indian Ocean; Periplus; Arikamedu; monsoon*

INTRODUCTION

India's position between the western Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal gave its producers and merchants access to western Asia, northeast Africa, the Mediterranean world, and Southeast Asia. The coast was connected to agricultural and craft producing hinterlands by rivers and roads. This paper asks how these links operated and what the available evidence permits us to conclude. Its emphasis is the early historic period, when written descriptions and excavated imports can be read together. References to earlier contacts are necessarily more cautious because evidence for their scale and organization differs substantially.

SOURCES AND METHOD

This is a qualitative historical review of textual and archaeological evidence, not a quantitative reconstruction of trade volume. The anonymous Periplus, commonly dated to the mid first century CE, was a practical guide to Red

Sea and Indian Ocean ports. It names destinations and commodities, but reflects the concerns and geographical knowledge of a merchant writing in Greek [1]. Archaeological work at Arikamedu documents Mediterranean amphorae and fine wares within a longer local sequence [2, 3]. These sources are read alongside scholarship that emphasizes South Asian merchants and wider Indian Ocean connections [4]. A coin or imported pot demonstrates movement of an object; by itself it does not identify the ethnicity of a merchant or the annual value of trade.

ROUTES PORTS AND NAVIGATION

Western routes linked Indian ports to Arabian and Persian Gulf entrepôts and to Egyptian Red Sea ports such as Berenice. The Periplus describes Barygaza, generally identified with Bharuch, as an important outlet for products from the western Indian hinterland. It also records trade along the southwest coast, including the pepper producing region associated with Muziris [1]. Eastern coastal routes connected peninsular ports with Sri Lanka and the Bay of Bengal, while inland roads carried goods between production areas and the seaboard [3, 4]. Thus a port was a point of collection and redistribution as much as a place where foreign ships arrived.

Seasonal winds shaped the timing of voyages. Southwest monsoon winds aided crossings towards India; northeast winds supported return journeys towards the Red Sea. This predictable cycle shortened some sea passages and helped merchants plan cargo, finance, and departures [1]. Direct crossings did not eliminate coastal shipping or intermediary markets. Nor should the older claim that one Greek sailor “discovered” the monsoon be treated as proof that Indian Ocean sailors lacked prior knowledge of its rhythms.

COMMODITIES AND COMMERCIAL ORGANIZATION

The Periplus lists textiles, pepper, gemstones, aromatics, and other commodities among goods available at Indian ports, and describes imports such as metals and wine at Barygaza [1]. The pattern varied by region: pepper had particular importance on the southwest coast, whereas textile production drew on multiple inland centers. Trade therefore depended on growers, spinners, weavers, transport workers, brokers, ship crews, and local rulers as well as long distance merchants. Surviving sources do not justify reducing commerce to an exchange of Roman gold for Indian luxury goods.

Commercial organization was diverse. Ports operated within political territories and required arrangements for storage, exchange, and collection of dues, but the surviving record does not establish one uniform customs system for all ancient Indian states. Recent research cautions against depicting South Asian participants as passive suppliers to Mediterranean demand. Merchants and sailors from the subcontinent took part in movement across the ocean, alongside Arabian, African, and Mediterranean participants [4]. This matters because the network’s direction and initiative cannot be inferred solely from Greco Roman texts.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND ITS LIMITS

Arikamedu, near present day Puducherry, offers material evidence of Mediterranean connected commerce through amphora fragments and imported fine pottery. Later reassessment of its stratigraphy shows activity extending beyond the narrow Roman trading station model proposed in early excavations [2, 3]. Imported objects testify to exchange, yet they may have passed through several hands. The chronology of individual layers and the purpose of individual buildings require care. Similar caution applies to Roman coin finds: coins could circulate, be stored, or be converted into metal. Their presence does not directly measure a balance of payments.

ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL EFFECTS

External demand could stimulate production and support settlements associated with ports and routes. Connections also carried techniques, objects, languages, and religious ideas, although a particular cultural change cannot automatically be assigned to commercial contact alone. The benefits were distributed unevenly across regions and social groups. Agricultural production and internal exchange remained central to livelihoods, while overseas trade formed an important and variable part of the wider economy. The strongest conclusion is one of interdependence: maritime commerce rested on inland labor and markets, and those inland networks gained additional outlets through the ports.

CONCLUSION

Foreign trade in ancient India was a set of connected regional systems shaped by geography, seasonal winds, production, political authority, and merchant initiative. The Periplus identifies key western routes and commodities; archaeology demonstrates exchange and the longer histories of Indian ports. Read together, the sources reveal active Indian participation in an interconnected ocean, while leaving trade volumes and many institutional details uncertain. Future work that combines securely dated excavation contexts, inscriptions, and comparative port studies can clarify how exchange changed across places and centuries.

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