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The "Golden Bird" in History and Literature: Trade Networks and Economic Prosperity in Ancient India

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Abstract

The real agenda of the entire investigation is to know the mechanism of India's emergence as the 'Golden Bird' (*sone ki chidiya*) of the world when many other civilizations were still unorganized in the process of exchange. We have all heard that India was once a country of marvelous riches, but that riches did not fall down from the sky; it was the real income of our fathers' hard work, perseverence and marvellous commercial sagacity. This scholarly research examines the organization of the craftsmen and traders of the ancient world, as well as the nature of the markets and fairs in villages and the customs by which they conducted their business with distant, unknown lands. The paper follows the path from the Indus Valley Civilisation to the 'Golden Age' of Gupta dynasty, analyzing how the world's wealth was attracted to India. In non-technical language, it illustrates the skill of Indians artisans and the bravery of the Indian traders to secure India's sovereignty in the world markets. The final premise is obvious—with that old commercial muscle, there is no one who could stop India from regaining its pre-eminence in the world.

Keywords: *Ancient trade, shreni (guild), Silk Route, 'Golden Bird' (sone ki chidiya), maritime routes (jal marg).*

Introduction

Trade is much more than the exchange of commodities or profits. It is a robust link between two worlds and two societies, a bridge which has been there for thousands of years. What a great way to endorse the memory of our ancestors who came before us, who invented the way we shop, and the way we get things delivered to our doors—before mobile phones were even invented! In that early era, before paved roads, big trucks and planes, the gossamer muslin, aromatic spices and the sparkling gems of India were venerated in the royal palaces of Rome and China.

India's trading history dates back as far as the Ganges River itself and is as venerable. Seals, standardised weights and measures, workshop remains found at the sites of the Indus valley

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are testimony to the precision and intelligence of our ancestors in keeping accounts and transacting business. They knew how to stake and take their claim in the world marketplace thousands of years before modern times. This book leads the reader on a tour of that fantastic time when the rivers and the sea lanes of India were the highways through which the riches flowed to every corner of the country.

Importantly, this paper is not limited to the annals of kings, their wars and their conquered territories. On the contrary, it highlights the role of the great merchants of ancient times called in Sanskrit as "sarthavahas" and "shreshthis" who enriched the treasury of the nation with gold and silver due to their enterprise, courage and intelligence. This introduction in the simplest of terms begins the story of the real wings of India's 'Golden Bird'.

The poet Sir Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the Orient in the Romantic poem, 'Kubla Khan' (1816), as a land of fabulous wealth, almost dream-like, and of exotic produce. The attraction of the East by the Western nations was by no means imaginary, but the result of the reality of Indian commerce in the markets of the old and medieval world. As Romila Thapar, the historian, has pointed out, the image of India as a land of plenty was not a romantic European image, but a true reflection of history that was inscribed in the trading records of many civilizations (Thapar 307). The pages that follow present the academic basis for that reality.

Objective

This paper proposes to demonstrate, based on evidence from historical analysis, that the ancient Indian commercial civilization is not a coincidence or a myth, but is a carefully planned and self-governing economic system. The paper's analysis reveals that the concept of quality of craft, the concept of organized guild structure, and the concept of audacious maritime enterprise, which were the pillars of the greatness of ancient India as a business power, are still relevant models for the twenty first century.

Literature Review

If we look at the scholarship that had already been produced on this topic, the world recognised India's commercial supremacy is crystal clear. This is not a recent statement—a foreign traveller and writer recorded it, page by page, many thousands of years ago.

3.1 The Testimony of Foreign Writers

Pliny the Elder (77 CE) deplored the Roman women's voracious appetite for Indian fine muslin and the perfumes they imported from India, which were costing the imperial treasury up to 50 million sesterces a year (Pliny 12.41). Think about this: The exports from India were so strong that the gold of the whole old world of the west poured into the coffers of India. This is not a simple thing to be done, but a sign of the magic art of Indian craftsman hands and the ability of Indian traders.

In some aspects Pliny's business fears are strikingly similar to mercantilist fears in early modern England. Thomas Mun, a director of the EIC and England's chief mercantilist theorist, made this point in his work England's Treasure by Forraign Trade (c. 1630, published 1664). Mun's plan, formulated to assist the policy of England, was really a delayed acknowledgment of the very policy which had made ancient India rich for centuries: the systematic production of a trade surplus through superior manufactured exports (5).

3.2 The Views of Indian Scholars

In his investigation, the historians R. S. Sharma and A. L. Basham have rightly concluded that the ancient villages and towns of India were closely linked to each other by the " sinews of trade" (Sharma 122; Basham 183). The villages were not self-contained; the commodities manufactured were brought to the big towns by the sarthavahas, communal groups of merchants. In fact, Kautilya, in his Arthashastra, prescribed such severe restrictions on trade that in the marketplace it was virtually impossible to commit fraud—rewards for honesty, penalties for dishonesty, and regulation of weights and measures, and licensing of traders were all part of a commercial code that is very similar to any modern code of commerce (Kautilya 212–14).

A literary parallel is provided in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596–97). The whole dramatic universe is focused on potential hazards and profits of long-distance shipping, on the law of commercial contracts, and on the social rank of the merchant. He has stated it himself in Antonio's words: "My ventures are not in one bottom trusted / Nor to one place" (1.1.42–43), which restate the principle of diversification of portfolios that was practiced long before Venetian merchants established it in European law and practice as ancient Indians. As the merchant guilds of medieval Europe did, the ancient shrenis of India functioned much the same way: reducing risk, sharing capital and setting standards for commerce.

3.3 The Evidence of Ancient Seals and Inscriptions

The word shreni (trading guilds) is found very often in the inscriptions covering the period from the Indus valley to the Gupta period. Scholar R. C. Majumdar has recorded that these guilds were so powerful even kings did not want to interfere in their affairs (52). They had their own internal forms of justice and acted as banking entities: the members placed their money in the treasury of the guild and it lent out to the needy merchants at a fixed rate of interest. This literature survey verifies the fact that India's trade was not an ad hoc business but a system carefully and gracefully designed.

Study Objectives and Research Methodology

4.1 Principal Objectives

The aim of this paper is to achieve four main objectives. First, it aims to gain an in-depth knowledge of the operations of the craftsmen and merchants of the past, of how they built up their businesses in the old world, through guilds (shrenis), and how they developed proto-banking systems to support their trade without the use of any computing technology. Secondly, it maps out the roadways traveled by the Indian trade—along mountain ranges, through forests and on the sea—as well as the valiant spirit of the sarthavahas who made them. Third, it focuses on the role of coins, gold dinars, silver karshapanas and copper coins, in the process of exchange and the standardization of value. Fourthly, it examines the effect of this commercialism on the well-being of the common people: did the wealth avail the royal palaces, or did it also filter through the streets of the common villages?

4.2 Research Method

The present research is a Secondary research which is based on the evidence preserved in historical texts and official records, inscriptions in the caves and coins recovered from excavations. The method is analytical in all parts. The records of ancient foreign travellers have been placed side by side with the rules of Kautilya, and with the help of the latter, the facts have been separated from the legends in the records of the former. Primary sources (the original ancient text) and secondary sources (modern historians scholarship) are used to coordinate and provide a balanced and objective account.

Results and Discussion

The ancient manuscripts, the coins dug up and the accounts of foreigners were brought together and analysed and what came to light was nothing short of amazing. The most basic finding is that trade in ancient India was not disjointed and random, but instead had such a strong framework that it could not be outdone by a modern corporation.

5.1 The Guild System: Ancient India's Corporate Architecture

The makers and tradesmen of the past formed associations (shrenis). These guilds were like modern banks: their members put their collected funds and savings into the bank, while the guild advanced loans to merchants who were in need at reasonable interest rates. More impressively, these guilds had their own statutes, to which even the king dared not interfere. So the commerce of ancient India was completely autonomous and systematic—the primary and supreme mile-stones of its prosperity (Majumdar 54-56; Chakravarti 98-102).

The Wealth of Nations (1776) by Adam Smith stated that the wealth of a nation is created by the specialization and division of labour (individuals and groups doing what they do best and exchanging the surplus (Smith 14-15). This was reflected in the shreni system; weavers, dyers, potters, metal workers and ivory carvers were all specialists who worked in their own guilds, creating items of incomparable quality for sale in the home market and the export market. The system also predicts what Karl Marx, in his very different analysis of history, wrote in Capital (1867): "The social character of labour" is the recognition of production as a collective process of people, and the fact that the value produced is a social value (Marx 164).

5.2 Routes of Trade: Overland and Maritime

The second key finding is the liveliness of India's land and sea routes. Ox-carts and camel caravans were constantly using the great roads of the north (Uttarapatha) and the south (Dakshinapatha) of India day and night (Moti Chandra 58-62). The port cities of Bharuch (Broach), Gujarat and Tamralipti, Bengal, were the New Yorks and Dubaies of their day with ships from far away coming into all of them. India's intrepid sailors were unassailable masters of the monsoon and the big wooden ships, which they sailed across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, much like a man crossing a village stream (Nilakanta Sastri 88-92).

This sea-boldness has a strong expression in the English literary tradition. In Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, "Ulysses" (1842), the restless hero exclaims "I am a part of all that I have met; / Yet all experience is an arch wherethro' / Gleams that untravell'd world" (ll. 18–20). The sarthavaha, the ancient Indian merchant who navigates the uncharted seas with his cargo of

spices and fine cloth, is the very image of this spirit: that the horizon is not a boundary, but an invitation. *The Principal Navigations* (1589-90), by Richard Hakluyt, which recorded the exploits of English maritime enterprise, was in a way a late reaction to one of courageous marine activity that Indians had engaged in for two millennia before the arrival of the English ships at India.

5.3 Coinage, Exchange, and Urban Prosperity

Barter gradually was superseded by a well-developed monetary system as trade increased. The gold dinar of the Gupta period is sufficient evidence of the extraordinary prosperity of the period (Agrawal 45-48). People were not just surviving by work; the profits of commerce provided them opportunities to patronize art, culture and the building of great temples. The growth of cities like Kashi, Mathura, and Pataliputra, can be attributed directly to the commercial prosperity: not only were the rich getting rich from trade, but so were the ordinary people, who found new avenues of employment in the trade.

"There is no wealth but Life" (Ruskin 166) is the famous slogan of John Ruskin, which is also the title of his book *Unto This Last* (1862). He asserted that the wealth of any country would not be determined by the amount of gold in the possession of the privileged minority, but by the standard of living of the common people. The commercial civilization of ancient India passed this test: the wealth of the shrenis and sarthavahas seeped into the economy, supporting the assistant to the sailor's next trip, the chisel of the temple builder, and the workshop of the artisan. (Sharma 135–38; Thapar 315–18).

5.4 Trade as Cultural Ambassador

One of the most significant discoveries is that Indian trade was also a means of cultural exchange. Indian traders brought not only merchandise to Java, Sumatra and Cambodia, but language, religion and art to them. The monuments of this trade and culture expansion are the lasting legacy of the Hindu and Buddhist temples of Southeast Asia like Angkor Wat, Borobudur and many others (Nilakanta Sastri 105-10).

The novel *A Passage to India* (1924) by E. M. Forster, however, was more about the alienation of the colonies, and it is remarkable in its title to admit that India had been holding a strong sway on the Western imagination for ages. Poets and philosophers in the West had been entranced by the spiritual and material riches of India, and long before the British East India Company came to Indian shores to make money, poets and philosophers from the Western

world were drawn to the spiritual and material richness of India. In his poem "Passage to India" (1871), Walt Whitman praised the opening of the Suez Canal as a new bridge to link East and West: "I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every barrier, / … Passage to India!" (ll. 1–4). In historical reality, this was Whitman's vision of what Indian traders already achieved in their wooden boats, before the advent of steam.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The entire long investigation, a direct and straightforward conclusion can be drawn: the true power of ancient India, was not in the sharpness of their sword, but in the precision of their tarazu (scales) and the brilliance of their business intelligence. Based on the successful results of this study, it has been concluded that our ancestors were not just agriculturalists, they were the most skilled manufacturers and international traders. The fine muslin and fragrant spices we exported were not generally available, but were the banners of our prowess that we carried in Rome and China. India's image as 'Golden Bird' was not a myth, it was the reality of our traders' courage and the business organisations they established. The country prospered and gold and silver were plentiful as long as our trade continued. This is indeed the commercial glory that has given birth to our cultural and material wealth.

These results lead to a number of recommendations. First, in schools and colleges, the children should not only be told the stories of the royal wars, but also the 'success principles' of these brave traders and sailors, enabling them to inspire the next generation to be entrepreneurs. Second, like the ancient shrenis that safeguarded their artisans and kept them from being exploited by the money-lenders, similarly today our small artisans and weavers also need to be organized so that they can get proper return on their labour. Thirdly there is need to reawaken the history of the ancient ports and make the old maritime routes compatible with modern technology. Last but not least, like the products of ancient India, every product made under 'Make in India' initiative should be trusted for its quality around the globe. If India's artisanal products are able to once again conquer the global markets, the vision of 'Developed India' by 2047 will be realized.

Epilogue

Summing up all of this historical research, we shall only be able to say of the 'Golden Bird' of our forefathers that it is through their labour and business sagacity that it has blazed. Ancient India's business was no small-time affair; it was an epic of courage, penned on ocean waves,

and mountain paths. We see our sarthavahas embarking out on hundreds of Ox-carts and elephants in the unknown territory, and know that progress has never been for the faint of heart. The fine muslin and fragrant spices in the markets of the world were not just commodities but a sign of India's honour, before which even the rich of Rome and China bent their heads.

The shrenis and the activity in the Indian ports were India's economic backbone. While our workers' hands moved, and our ships' sails waved to the wave of ocean breezes, the Ganges of prosperity, flowed in our land. This is an ancient legacy which has to be remembered as we move forward as a developed India in 'Developed India 2047' now. Real mantra of progress is not external assistance but in selling our hunar (skill) with pride to the markets of the world. The dream of our forefathers about the 'Golden Bird' may be said to be come true for our Tulsipur too when the day comes in India of all the small towns acclaimed globally for the products they make.

The last line of William Blake's prophetic poem, Jerusalem, reads "Jerusalem / in England's green and pleasant land" (Blake 427). As Blake knew, the desire to recreate a golden age – one of justice, beauty and communal well-being – is the most powerful desire of all civilizations that have experienced greatness and lost it. It was a golden age in the ancient Indian commercial civilization. Reconstructing it – at least in part – for a new century is not nostalgia, it is a historical and moral obligation.

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