CULTURAL TRANSACTIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND THE WORLD

B.A.(PROGRAMME) HISTORY

SEMESTER-VII
DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ELECTIVE (DSE)
COURSE CREDIT-4

As per the UGCF - 2022 and National Education Policy 2020

READING NOTES

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Printed at: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. Plot 20/4, Site-IV, Industrial Area Sahibabad, Ghaziabad - 201 010 (130 Copies) October 2026

UNIT I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR EARLY INDIA'S CONTACT WITH GRECO-ROMAN WORLD, EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIA, AND TIBET

1.0 OBJECTIVE

1. This unit will discuss the trading networks that connected India to the Greco-Roman world, East Asia, and Tibet, both by sea and by land. The students are supposed to understand the intricacies of these trading linkages that have been built over the years.
2. To assess the archaeological and literary data of cross-cultural exchange.
3. To determine the most important agents and processes of cultural and religious transmission. The students are to be introduced to the role and contribution of particular individuals and the localities in these interactions.
4. To separate the different geographic and political contexts that affect exchange in the region.
5. The chapter also tries to explain the net outcomes of such transactions in terms of how cultural diversities played out in regions like demographic dynamics, language, literature, and forms of art.

In addition, students need to understand different schools of thought that have developed among historians on cultural exchanges between early India and the world, and this only requires one to grasp some multifaceted relationships between religion, trade, and government.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The unit examines the history of extensive cultural and trade activities of early India in the Greco-Roman world, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Tibet. It provides an essential spatial and temporal ground on which to examine cross-cultural transactions. The beginning of these interactions was through trading systems that were formed of long-distance networks of trade, including both overland and rich maritime markets.

The Greco-Roman world increasingly interacted with eastern nations, especially through sea trade in the western Indian Ocean from 200 B.C. to A.D. 1000. This trade was organized and expanded under Augustus, who utilized seasonal winds like the southwest monsoon, enabling navigation experts such as Hippalus to sail directly across the Arabian Sea to India. The details of this exchange are documented in classical literature: the handbook of the Greek merchant, the Periplus Maris Erythraei (PME), describes Rome's trade with the East; Pliny the Elder criticizes the commerce because of the losses it caused the Romans. Archaeological evidence supports this concern, with Roman gold and silver coins typically in bullion form rather than as currency found in hoards in South India, south of the Vindhyas, confirming their role as key economic agents in trade. South Indian ports, including Arikamedu, identified with the Pōdōukē mentioned in the Periplus, served as vital Indo-Roman trading hubs, where Roman imports like Arretine ware and fragments of amphorae have been uncovered. The most notable luxury goods India exported included fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, and, most notably, pepper.

In the East and Central Asian spheres, contact was primarily facilitated by the vast overland network of the Silk Routes. This network (which saw centuries of silk trade across the Eurasian

continent) served as a critical transit zone for the expansion of Buddhism from India to China. Early Buddhist institutions flourished at commercial hubs, and cross-cultural transmission was actively mediated by non-Indian powers who controlled key routes. The Kuṣānas, whose empire stretched from Bactria to the Ganges, favored policies helpful to cultural exchange and oversaw the development of the Indo-Greek school of Buddhist art. They transmitted the Buddhist faith to Central Asia and China. Later, Central Asian groups like the Kidāra and Alchon Huns migrated to the Indo-Iranian borderlands in the 5th and 6th centuries CE, enhancing overland trade and contributing to a significant phase of Buddhist expansion into Central Asia.

India's relationship with Tibet formally began in the first half of the 7th century A.D., during the reign of Emperor Srong-brtsan-sgam-po (627–649/650 A.D.). He is renowned as the father of Tibetan culture and established Tibet as a unified kingdom. To integrate the cultivation of the Buddha's religion, he sent a court official, Thon-mī Sambhoṭa, to India to study. Thon-mī returned around 647 A.D., having devised an alphabetic script and grammatical rules based on Indian models. It marked the beginning of Tibetan literature, focused on translating Indian Buddhist works. The emperor also used strategic diplomatic marriages, notably with the Chinese princess Wen-cheng (641 A.D.), to facilitate the acquisition of foreign culture. It is believed that the foundation of the first Tibetan monastery, bSam-yas, established around 767 A.D. by Khri Srong-lde-brtsan with the help of Śāntarakṣita from Nālandā University, was explicitly modeled on the Indian educational center of Odantapurī in Bihar.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asia was profoundly influenced by Indian maritime trade in the Bay of Bengal. Merchants and shippers from southern India largely oversaw it. This led to a pattern of "Indianization," visible through the widespread use of Sanskrit inscriptions and Indian alphabets (4th or 5th century A.D.) and the formation of bureaucratic states modeled on peninsular India, such as those that arose on Sumatra and Java. Buddhism spread rapidly through the region; for example, Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished in the Malay Peninsula by the 6th century A.D.. By the 7th to 11th centuries A.D., Indonesia, including Sumatra's Śrī-vijaya kingdom, became a renowned center for Buddhist learning. Even in Kambuja (Cambodia), where other religions were present, devout Buddhist rulers like King Jayavarman VII (1181–1220 A.D.) received the posthumous title of Mahāyāna-paramasaugata.

The scope of this unit spans several centuries, tracing major axes of communication:

1.3 THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD AND THE WESTERN TRADE AXIS

The establishment and operation of the extensive network of trade and cultural exchange (roughly spanning from circa 200 B.C. to A.D. 1000) connected the Mediterranean basin with India. This axis explores the relationship between the Roman Empire and India, which was primarily driven by economic factors.

1.3.1 Development of Trade Routes and Chronology

The development and chronology of the Western Trade Axis (linking the Mediterranean world with early India) is fundamental to understanding the scope of cultural transactions during the Early Historic period. While small trade networks operated within the Indian Ocean realm as early as the fifth millennium BC, regular, long-distance commerce defining this axis broadly spans from circa 200 B.C. to A.D. 1000. The most intense phase of direct Roman activity occurred between the late first century BC and the mid-third century AD.

The shift from sporadic contact to regular long-distance trade was precipitated by geopolitical developments in the Mediterranean. Direct maritime trade between Egyptian seaports on the Red Sea and western Indian ports accelerated notably after the Ptolemaic period ended in 31

BCE. This period marked the beginning of the systematic exploitation of these routes, driven by economic necessity, which commenced with the annexation of Egypt by Augustus. The regularisation and development of the Indian trade was, to a large extent, made possible during the principate of Augustus.

Central to this acceleration was the mastery of natural elements. Although long understood by Indian, Arab, and Persian mariners, the systematic use of the monsoon winds (known in classical texts by the name Hippalus) allowed for a "through trip" from Red Sea ports directly to southern India, enabling direct voyages around 100 B.C. or slightly earlier.

The Red Sea acted as the primary conduit or "funnel" for Eastern goods entering the Roman Empire. The Roman operation relied on major Egyptian ports such as Myos Hormos and Berenike, which were connected to the Nile River via desert roads and ultimately linked to Alexandria. The Greek text 'The *Periplus Maris Erythraei'* (merchant's handbook) provides a comprehensive outline of Rome's commerce with the East. This handbook preserves specific details about these maritime itineraries, seaports, and inland *emporia* during the first century CE. Classical author Pliny the Elder also documented the voyage from the Red Sea to India, albeit with a moralizing tone concerning the financial drain on Rome.

The network extended across the Arabian Sea to various locations in India, which acted as transhipment points:

1. **Barbarikon** was a port near the mouth of the Indus River.
2. **Barygaza** (modern Broach), situated on the Narmada River. It was the most important foreign port mentioned in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. Barygaza's importance stemmed from its connection to internal routes reaching Bactria, the Ganges Valley, and the lower Krishna Valley.
3. **Muziris** (likely Pattanam) was the principal Chera port on the Malabar Coast.
4. **Podukē** (Arikamedu) was situated on the Coromandel Coast. It is a site that yielded Roman ceramics (e.g., Arretine ware and amphorae fragments) and became central to the study of Indo-Roman trade.

This trade system required significant economic support. It also needed political support. Commercial relations were not strictly continuous. However, the trade was generally based on mutual advantage. Western prestige supported this trade. The trade was regulated sufficiently to ensure continuity. Trade routes also involved competition. This rivalry was between the Red Sea and the Persian/Arabian Gulf. Roman involvement increased in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, the Gulf axis remained separate. Arab-Persian merchants often controlled this axis. They channeled goods through ports like Apologos. They also used ports like Omana.

The Roman trade with the Indian Ocean was characterized by vigorous exchange. This trade primarily involved luxury goods. India exported items like pepper, gems, and silk. In return, Rome supplied gold, silver, and manufactured items. This active trade flow ensured Roman interest in the Indian Ocean continued. This continued interest was supported by diplomatic contacts. This activity lasted long after the high point of the Early Roman period. The trade continued up to the early or mid-seventh century.

The Roman demand for Eastern goods was high. Conventionally, these items were considered luxury goods. However, goods like pepper and aromatics became necessities for the Roman way of life. They were required for medicinal and religious purposes. Roman gold and silver coinage flowed eastward in large amounts. Pliny the Elder claimed India absorbed "no less than

fifty million sesterces" annually. These valuable coins were mainly used in South India. They were often used as bullion for exchange by weight.

Although the peak trade is traditionally placed in the Early Roman period (Augustus to Marcus Aurelius), new evidence extends the timeline. The timeframe for Indo-Roman trade continues to the early or mid-seventh century. The fourth century and later saw intense activity at Red Sea ports like Clysma and Aila. Berenike also saw a resurgence of occupation during the mid-fourth century onward. Archaeological evidence shows the continuation of Indian imports, such as pepper and Indo-Pacific beads, into the fifth and early sixth centuries AD. Roman diplomatic contacts were maintained with Ethiopia and South Arabia until the seventh century. Furthermore, Later Roman amphora types were produced into the seventh century. This suggests trade continued well into the Late Roman/Byzantine period.

1.3.2 Textual Evidence and Trade Documentation

The textual documentation regarding the Greco-Roman world is indispensable. It traditionally formed the main evidence for Indo-Roman trade. However, all such sources require rigorous critical evaluation. This is due to their inherent biases and limitations.

Our knowledge rests on a foundation of diverse genres. These genres collectively define the scope and nature of this long-distance commerce. Examples include practical sailing manuals, such as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. We also rely on philosophical treatises. Furthermore, ephemeral administrative records provide evidence. These include ostraca, which are writings on potsherds. Collectively, these sources define the scope and nature of this long-distance commerce.

The Greek merchant's handbook, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (PME), is a uniquely explicit source. The author may have been from Alexandria or Syria. The text dates sometime between A.D. 40 and 70. It is a practical guide intended for mariners and merchants. This book comprehensively outlines Rome's commerce with the East. It is organized into 66 short sections. These sections describe waters, ports, and items exchanged. The PME details the major ports utilized. These include Myos Hormos and Berenike on the Red Sea. It also names major Indian emporia. Examples are Barygaza (Bharukaccha) and Muziris.

The immense value of the PME lies in its specificity. It documents many items no longer visible archaeologically. These perishable items include ghee or sesame oil. It supplements knowledge of existing archaeological finds. The accuracy of the *Periplus* is increasingly upheld. This accuracy applies to describing distances and locating ancient sites. Scholars refer to the PME as *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. Chapter IX of the content mentions *The Periplus*. It describes the text as a handbook known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

In contrast, Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (NH), a 37-book Latin encyclopedia completed around A.D. 77, offers a parallel yet philosophically distinct view. Pliny, a named historical figure, provided key information on lands involved in Indian Ocean commerce in Books 6 and 12-13, including a description of the voyage from the Red Sea to India. However, Pliny famously adopted a moralizing tone, bemoaning the effect of Eastern trade on Roman society and complaining about the drain of currency to the East. He estimated that India absorbed no less than fifty million sesterces of the Empire's wealth annually. Pliny also related the important development of direct voyage, crediting the discovery of the monsoon winds (*Hippalus*) to a Greek mariner of that name, which was crucial for avoiding coastal routes and enabling long-distance travel to India.

Beyond these monumental literary sources, epigraphic and archival texts provide granular economic details. Documents written on papyrus and ostraca (pot sherds) recovered from

Egypt's Eastern Desert confirm operational details of the trade. The Nicanor archive, a collection of 90 linked ostraca from Coptos, contains receipts for a shipping firm operating between the Nile and the Red Sea ports (6 BC–A.D. 68/69), listing foodstuffs and items of trade. Even more significant is the Muziris papyrus, a legal fragment dating to the mid-second century CE. This text documents a maritime loan contract and provides detailed instructions for transporting goods from the Red Sea to Alexandria, itemizing a ship's high-value cargo, including Gangetic nard, ivory, and textiles, while detailing the deduction of the 25% tax levied on imports. The discovery of this papyrus corroborates the type of high-value commerce described in the PME.

Indian literary and epigraphic sources supplement the Western narratives, offering valuable context on the recipients of this trade. Tamil literature, particularly the Sangam poetry, refers to *yavanas* (foreigners from the Roman East), sometimes appreciating them for goods like fragrant wine. Buddhist texts, such as the *Jatakas*, reveal that the local economy employed both monetary transactions and barter depending on the transaction scale, a situation likely mirrored in external trade. Furthermore, inscriptions in the Western Deccan mention *yavanas* as donors to local Buddhist establishments, indicating their integration into local trading networks. This combination of Roman and Indian documentation is essential for fully comprehending the mobility of people, the fluidity of economic exchanges, and the material evidence found at ports across the Indian Ocean.

1.3.3 Goods Exchanged

The commercial exchange between the Greco-Roman world and early India was intense and characterised by the Roman appetite for high-value Eastern goods. This process led to a notable trade imbalance often lamented by classical authors. The total volume of trade, involving dozens of products, moved along both the lucrative maritime routes and the intertwined overland Silk Routes. While items like silk and gems were classified as luxury goods and bore high value due to geographical distance and high demand, archaeological and textual evidence increasingly suggests that many exchanged items, particularly spices and aromatics, became functional necessities for the Roman way of life, required for medicinal, religious, and eventually culinary purposes.

The flow of commodities heavily favored the East, necessitating a massive compensatory export of Roman coinage. India’s main exports traversing the Western Trade Axis included a complex array of high-value items documented in sources like the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (PME). Exports from India primarily consisted of pepper, which Pliny noted had surprisingly come into fashion in Rome. Also frequently exported were fine pearls, ivory, and textiles, including silk cloth (likely transshipped from China/Serica) and cotton cloth and thread, which served as India’s main industrial export. Other Indian goods included aromatics like Gangetic nard and malabathrum (an equivalent of cinnamon leaf), along with valuable natural resources such as transparent stones (including diamonds, sapphires, and beryl), onyx, agate, and tortoiseshell. Imports into the Roman world often generated immense social prestige, reinforcing the idea that geographical distance conferred social value upon commodities.

In return, Roman exports to India comprised manufactured items, including specialized textiles, glassware, copper, tin, and lead. High-quality glassware, a specialization of Syria and Alexandria, was confirmed by finds in Central Asia and China. Luxury imports included coral, primarily supplied by the Mediterranean, which held considerable commercial and religious value in India, contrasting with its semi-precious status in Rome. Roman-manufactured goods are visible archaeologically, particularly at southern Indian trading stations like Arikamedu (near Pondicherry), where fragments of Arretine ware (a red-glazed fine ware) and amphorae were excavated. These amphorae were essential containers for staple Roman products, such as

wine, oil, and *garum*, though the question of whether these contents were consumed by Roman residents or local elites is subject to scholarly debate.

The most significant flow from the Roman side was in precious metal coinage, required to balance the continuous trade deficit. Pliny the Elder famously calculated that India absorbed no less than fifty million sesterces of the Empire's wealth annually, sometimes cited as high as 100 million sesterces. The vast majority of Roman gold and silver coins found in India were Julio-Claudian issues, concentrated in South Indian hoards, where they functioned primarily as bullion (metal exchanged by weight) rather than circulating currency, due to the imperial guarantee of their weight and quality.

The trans-Asian exchange utilised the Silk Routes to move high-value, low-bulk commodities, connecting the trade of the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia and China. During the height of the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries CE), which controlled crucial routes, trade included luxury items such as silk from China, jade from Khotan, and lapis lazuli from northeastern Afghanistan. These valuable commodities often overlapped with the list of the “seven jewels” (*saptaratna*) frequently mentioned in Buddhist texts, demonstrating how the circulation of luxury goods became intertwined with religious significance and patronage networks.

1.3.4 Material Evidence: Roman Coinage

Material evidence in the form of Roman coinage is perhaps the most frequent citation regarding Indo-Roman trade, forming an essential data resource for analysing the economic factor of the Western Trade Axis. Quantitative analysis shows that the vast majority of Roman coins recovered in India. Over 70% of the silver and 90% of the gold Roman coins recovered in India occurred as hoards, concentrated primarily in the South, south of the Vindhyas, and in the Deccan plateau. For instance, the Coimbatore district alone yielded at least eleven 1st-century hoards of gold and silver coins. Most of these precious metal coins are Julio-Claudian in date, with those of Augustus and Tiberius predominating. In contrast, Roman coin finds in Northern India comprised less than a quarter of the quantity found in the South. Moreover, the distribution of gold and silver hoards shifted over time, with second-century coins concentrating more heavily in Andhra Pradesh, supporting the idea of intensified activity on the east coast during that period.

The massive import of Roman currency was noted in classical texts, exemplified by Pliny the Elder's famous lament that India absorbed no less than fifty million sesterces of the Empire’s wealth annually. The consensus among scholars is that the immense quantity of gold and silver imported by the 1st-century Roman trade represented an essentially economic factor. The gold and silver coins, imported in bulk, were employed as bullion rather than circulating as currency in the normal processes of monetary circulation. This function is largely supported by the observation that in peninsular India there was generally no native currency of gold or silver to which the Roman coinage could be approximated. Thus, the coins, guaranteed by the imperial stamp, were weighed out in exchange for goods, and the term 'hoard' often represented a bulk reserve of metal rather than monetary savings.

The chronology of these finds suggests a complex usage pattern: many Julio-Claudian precious coins, despite their early face dates (pre-AD 54/5), reached India during the Flavian period and slightly later, after currency reforms in the Empire had removed them from domestic circulation. The imported coins were often subjected to reuse or defacement; they were liable to be pierced for suspension (likely decorative purposes) or mutilated by a cut across the obverse. This defacement is interpreted as a method to remove the coinage from circulation, preventing its return to the West. Furthermore, the Roman standard was imitated locally, with Indian *bullae* (moulded discs of ceramic or lead) sometimes imitating Roman coinage in the

North and Deccan, suggesting local familiarity with the currency. Imitation coinage also included gold coins struck by the Kushanas, similar to the *aureus*, perhaps to establish them as legal tender in areas familiar with Roman currency. In Western India, the silver coins of the Kshatrapa Nahapana were of such fine quality that they may have been produced by melting down Roman *denarii*.

While silver and gold hoards define the Early Roman period, bronze coinage reveals different chronological and geographical trends. The paucity of 1st and 2nd-century Roman copper coins was noted. However, from the mid-fourth century onward, late Roman bronze coins became more numerous, particularly along the Yamuna and Ganges, and concentrated in South India at Karur and Madurai. This Late Roman influx extended to Sri Lanka, where tens of thousands of bronze and copper Roman coins from various Mediterranean mints (4th and 5th centuries) have been discovered.

1.3.5 Cross-Cultural Interactions

Cross-cultural interactions across the Western Trade Axis involved complex diplomatic, demographic, and cultural flows, extending far beyond mere commercial exchange and leaving evidence across both the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent. On the diplomatic front, the relationship began early; the Buddhist emperor Aśoka (mid-3rd century B.C.) maintained relations with Hellenistic rulers like Antiochos Theos and Ptolemy Philadelphos. During the Roman imperial period, diplomatic ties continued, with Indian embassies reaching Rome under Augustus, Claudius, Trajan (A.D. 107), and Antoninus Pius. Conversely, a diplomatic gesture towards Indian traditions is evidenced by the Hēliodōros Pillar inscription from Vidiśā (late 2nd century BCE), where a Greek ambassador (*yonadūta*) sent from Taxila by the Indo-Greek king Antialkidas, referred to himself as a devotee (*bhāgavata*) of Viṣṇu.

The movement of people facilitated the formation of trade diasporas and commercial settlements. The "Romans" who settled in principal port towns of Southern India were generally descendants of the Hellenized world, including Greek-speaking Egyptians and Levantines. Their presence in India is corroborated by archaeological finds and by Indian texts referring to *yavanas* (foreigners from the West). Critically, Indian traders and sailors were equally active in the West; their presence at Roman Red Sea ports is attested by graffiti in Tamil-Brahmi and Prakrit found on pottery at sites like Myos Hormos and Berenike, often listing personal provisions like oil, meat, and wine. Furthermore, the second-century CE Muziris Papyrus provides detailed documentation of a commercial agreement involving a South Indian merchant and an Egyptian agent for transporting Indian goods, reinforcing the bilateral nature of human mobility.

This contact led to significant cultural hybridisation, particularly in India's northwestern borderlands, which served as a pivotal zone between Indian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian spheres. In the Northwest, this is visible in the synthesis of Greek, Indian, and Iranian elements in language, writing systems, political titles, religious symbols, and artistic styles. This cultural milieu influenced the Gandhāran Buddhist art style, which appropriated and transformed Hellenistic models and motifs. The Roman sphere, in turn, provided stylistic impetus, as evidenced by Indian craftsmen copying Classical themes or techniques (like in lapidary art) or using Hellenistic models for objects, which later influenced sites across the Deccan and South India. The term *Yavana* itself is illustrative of this hybridity, changing in connotation from denoting Greeks to describing any Graeco-Iranian, Hellenized Indian, or simply anyone arriving from the West. From a religious perspective, this interaction was crucial for Buddhism, as Buddhist texts were notably favorable towards *Yavanas*, perhaps because these foreign groups were important patrons and donors to Buddhist establishments.

1.4 EAST ASIA, CENTRAL ASIA, AND THE SILK ROUTES

The historical framework for early India's long-distance, primarily overland contact with East Asia (specifically China) and Central Asia. This relationship was defined by the network of trade routes, cultural transmission, and the mediating role played by powerful regional states.

1.4.1 The Nature of the Silk Routes

The Silk Routes, known academically as the “Silk Road” (*Seidenstraße*), constituted a vast network of transcontinental commercial and cultural conduits linking China to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, primarily across Central Asia and Iran. This network, spanning roughly from circa 200 B.C. to A.D. 1000, was not a single, fixed thoroughfare but a dynamic system of primary arteries and secondary capillaries, which is why "Silk Road" is considered a misnomer that suggests a stable, singular path.

The geographical realities of the Silk Routes defined their nature, as they traversed some of the most desolate and inhospitable terrain on Earth. The routes were fundamentally dictated by geographical features, requiring travellers to skirt mountain chains, utilise the few practical passes, and rely on existing watering places and pastures for animals. A key structural element was the passage through the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang), where the path was guided by strings of oases located along the northern foothills of the Kunlun Shan and the southern foothills of the Tian Shan ranges. These oases provided essential sources of food and water, simultaneously limiting the number of potential raiders in the arid desert environment. Furthermore, capillary routes through high mountain valleys of northern Pakistan (such as the upper Indus region) linked major South Asian arteries (like the Northern Route, *Uttarāpatha*) directly with the Silk Routes in the Tarim Basin, functioning as critical pathways for long-distance travel and trade.

Commercially, the network functioned by moving costly materials of small bulk, which was necessary due to the difficulties and length of overland transport. Although named for silk, the principal Chinese export, which continued to be traded even during periods unfavourable for long-distance commerce, dozens of other products were exchanged. These commodities included precious metals like gold and silver, gems, coral, amber, glass, spices, aromatics, and iron, along with animals like horses and slaves. The sheer difficulty of the journey, however, meant that the trade was highly lucrative, yielding profits that made the risks worthwhile.

Beyond commerce, the Silk Routes served as a powerful engine for cross-cultural transmission, facilitating the global flow of ideas and beliefs, techniques, and works of art. Central Asia functioned as a critical transit zone for the long-distance transmission of Buddhism from India to China, involving the movement of monks, texts, and art. The movement of silks itself became intertwined with religion, being used as precious objects in Buddhist rituals, granted as rewards by emperors to monks, and often serving as a preferred medium of payment in Central Asia over Chinese copper coins.

1.4.2 Historical Development and Key Mediators

The historical development of the Silk Routes, which created a new trade axis between the Mediterranean and China, is marked by periods of escalating commercial activity, geopolitical shifts, and the emergence of powerful mediating states. This long-distance, overland trade became regularised between circa 200 B.C. and the beginning of the Christian era, fundamentally linking previously distinct civilised centres.

The Han Dynasty and the "Opening to the West"

Chinese historians mark the definitive start of diplomatic and economic relations with the West to 138 B.C., known as the "Opening to the West". This initiative was initially a strategic move by the Han Emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE), who sent a diplomatic mission under Zhang Qian to the Oxus Valley to seek an alliance with the Yuezhi against the formidable Xiongnu nomadic confederacy. Although the direct alliance failed, the mission revealed large kingdoms to the west, such as Anxi (Parthia) and Shengdu (India). It underscored the presence of commodities like "fabrics from Shu and bamboos from Qiong" in the markets of Daxia (Bactria), indicating pre-existing, indirect trade links with China. The Han Dynasty extended its control by establishing fortified posts to keep the routes open, founding prefectures like Jiuquan and Dunhuang (in 121 and 111 BCE, respectively), and creating the Western Territories commandery or protectorate in 59 BCE, headed by a Protector-General. By 115 B.C**.**, the Parthian king Mithridates II and Han Emperor Wudi established an alliance designed, at least in part, to facilitate commerce. This commercial expansion led Chinese merchants to travel west across Central Asia, effectively opening the Silk Road as a regular overland route.

Key Mediators: Kushans and Parthians (Circa A.D. 90–130)

A period of unprecedented commercial fluidity occurred between the late first and early second century A.D. (specifically circa A.D. 90–130), when political conditions along the entire Silk Route were more favorable than they would be again until the Mongol Empire. During this time, the overland route from North China to Rome required passage through only four major states: China, the Kushan Kingdom, Parthia, and the Roman Empire.

- **China's Control:** Around **A.D. 90**, the Chinese commander Pan Ch'ao eventually took possession of Turkestan (modern Xinjiang/Tarim Basin), stationing garrisons and settling Chinese traders along the trade routes, ensuring that the route from North China to the Tarim Basin was entirely under Chinese control. His son, Ban Yong, later filed reports that provided basic information on Central Asia in this period to the *History of the Later Han*.
- **The Kushan Empire:** Emerging from a branch of the Yuezhi people, the Kushan Empire controlled territories that included parts of Bactria, Afghanistan, and North-West India. The Silk Route and the primary trade route linking Northern India with Central Asia crossed through the Kushan dominions. The Kushan period (1st to 3rd centuries CE) was marked by policies favorable toward trade and cultural exchange. Their territory, with centers like Begram, likely served as a customs depository, where dues collected from passing caravans were stored. The Kushan state became a political power and catalyst for activity along these routes, facilitating long-distance trade in luxury items like silk from China, jade from Khotan, and lapis lazuli from northeastern Afghanistan.
- **The Parthian Intermediary (Anxi):** The Parthian (Arsacid) kingdom, centred near the Caspian Sea, expanded to control most of what had been Seleucid territory. They played the crucial role of intermediary between the Kushans/Chinese and the Roman Empire. Parthian rulers were careful to reserve their sections of the Silk Road for their own merchants and caravaners, encouraging foreign trade only up to their frontier posts. Chinese merchants, having traveled through Kushan territory, were generally compelled to sell their silk to Parthians at Merv. As the *Hou-han-shu* shrewdly noted, the Parthians intentionally cut off communication between the Chinese and "Ta-ts'in" (the Roman Empire) because they wished to monopolise the lucrative silk trade. The Parthians generated substantial prosperity from this transit trade, often involving deception to maximise profits by selling Roman-made or Indian-sourced goods to the Chinese as "Roman" products.

Later Dynamics and New Intermediaries

The period of A.D. 90–130 did not last; by A.D. 130, China began to lose its control over Turkestan. The mid-first century CE also saw commerce shift, with communications interrupted with the Western Territories for approximately seven or eight decades. This decline in overland stability coincided with the rise of new mediating groups.

- **Kidāra and Alchon Huns:** In the 5th and 6th centuries CE, the Kidāra and Alchon Huns migrated to the Indo-Iranian borderlands, taking control of major routes. The Alchon Huns sought to control the mountainous nexus of trade routes linking Bactria, India, China, and Sogdiana. Despite their reputation, the Alchon Huns aided the development of overland trade and the expansion of Buddhist networks.
- **Sogdians:** The Sogdians, speaking an East-Iranian language, emerged as the dominant mercantile force on the overland route across Central Asia until the mid-sixth century. They operated a vast trade network due to their strategic location and itinerant nature, sustaining smaller kingdoms along the Silk Road. They became known to the Byzantines through the silk trade and served as cross-cultural brokers, reinforcing their position by speaking Sogdian, which became the international language of Central Asia. Sogdian traders were key in transmitting goods and culture, having established branches as far as China.
- **The Turks:** Following the decline of the Hephthalites around 550–560 CE, Turkish chieftains allied with the Sasanians gained control of western Central Asia. The Turks generally levied taxes but encouraged the commercial activities of their vassals, like the Sogdians, contributing to the safety of travelers and ensuring the continued flow of trade.

1.4.3 The Role of the Kushan Empire (1st-3rd Centuries CE)

The Kushan Empire (circa 1st–3rd centuries CE), founded by a branch of the nomadic Yuezhi people, played an indispensable and dynamic role in accelerating cross-cultural exchange and long-distance trade along the overland routes connecting Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and China. The Kushans were a powerful, commercially-minded state that emerged as one of the four major polities through which silk travelled from North China to Rome during the highly favourable trading conditions between circa A.D. 90 and 130.

Geographical and Political Significance

The Kushan kingdom consolidated its power over a vast domain that included parts of Bactria, Afghanistan, and North-West India. The Silk Route crossed Kushan territory, as did the main artery connecting Northern India with Central Asia. By administering a network spanning from the Oxus basin to the Ganges delta (known as the *Uttarāpatha*), the Kushans effectively unified key nodes of commercial and cultural exchanges. Kujūla Kadphises, the founder of the Kushan line, expanded his domain across the Hindu Kush to Swat, Gandhāra, and Taxila by the middle of the first century CE. His grandson, Kaniska (whose reign began around 127 CE according to some chronologies), further claimed to have captured cities as far east as Pātaliputra, signifying an intention to control India down to the Bay of Bengal and unify major nodes of the northern routes.

Economic Role and Trade Facilitation

The Kushan period, spanning the first to third centuries CE, was characterized by policies favorable toward trade and cultural exchange. This stability of overland commercial routes was directly linked to generating material surpluses used to support religious institutions. Kushan power was economically dependent on long-distance trade in high-value, small-bulk luxury items. These commodities included:

• **Silk from China**.

• **Jade from Khotan**.

• **Lapis lazuli** from northeastern Afghanistan.

• **Gold and silver**, which the Chinese highly sought after, suggest a return flow of precious metals across the Kushan territory.

Evidence for Kushan involvement in the transit trade is suggested by an important discovery at Begram (ancient Kapisa), a major town on the route linking Northern India with Central Asia. A large collection of "exotic things of beauty and worth" from the West, the Far East, and India found in two rooms of a large building, probably a palace, suggests they served as a customs depository where dues collected from passing caravans were stored.

Cultural and Religious Patronage

The Kushan Empire was a hybrid culture, resulting from the merging of Iranian, Greek, "Scythian," and Indian influences. This political and cultural climate fostered profound religious tolerance, especially encouraging the spread of Buddhism.

- **Buddhism and Commerce:** The expansion of Buddhism was inextricably tied to the dynamism of trade, with commerce and religion going hand in hand; wealth provided material support for the religion through donations, and donors received spiritual assistance in return. Kushan control over the major routes meant that armed caravans provided missionaries relative **safety** for travel.
- **Patronage:** Kushan emperors like Kaniska and Huviska are credited with constructing *stūpas* and monasteries, such as those in Peshawar and Mathura, and frequently appear in Buddhist narratives as exemplary rulers, sometimes compared to the Mauryan emperor Aśoka. Kaniska's religious policy likely reflected a "catholic religious policy" favoring a variety of groups to address the issue of legitimation on Indian soil. Kushan subordinate officials recorded donations to numerous religious groups in Brāhmī, Kharosthī, and Bactrian inscriptions, sometimes sharing the merit with the Kushan emperor.
- **Art and Coinage:** Kushan art shows a Classical influence, as seen in the Gandharan Buddhist style. Vima Kadphises issued the first Kushan gold coins. Kaniska was the first Kushan ruler to feature the Buddha's image on coinage, representing one of a wide range of deities from Hellenistic, Iranian, Roman, and Indian pantheons intended to convey military triumph, legitimacy, and divine sanction.

In summary, the Kushan Empire’s strategic geopolitical control over the major trans-Asian arteries, coupled with their commercially favorable policies and their assimilation of diverse cultural elements, established them as the most important intermediary for the flow of goods, people, and the long-distance transmission of Buddhism during the first three centuries CE.

1.4.4 Cultural and Religious Transmission: The Spread of Buddhism

The ancient trade routes, especially the trans-Asian Silk Routes and their connecting arteries, functioned as primary conduits for the profound cross-cultural movement of religious ideologies and practices, most notably the expansion of Buddhism from India into Central and East Asia.

The Role of Buddhism in Mobility and Economic Exchange

Buddhism, a universal religion of salvation, was structurally linked to the economic dynamism of trade, with wealth providing material support for the religion through donations, and donors, in turn, receiving spiritual assistance and merit for their gifts. The injunction attributed to the Buddha to "wander the path for the benefit and satisfaction of many people" in order to "teach the dharma" gave canonical warrant for Buddhist mobility. Consequently, Buddhist preachers, pilgrims, and traders were important carriers of both silks and religious ideas across the continent. The circulation of luxury commodities, such as the **"seven jewels"** (*saptaratna*), became intertwined with Buddhist ritual and meaning, increasing their perceived value and expanding their market.

Pathways of Transmission and Key Actors

The expansion of Buddhism was an institutional history of remarkable mobility, following various itineraries including major arteries, minor capillary routes, and "middle paths" that often overlapped and intertwined with those of merchants and traders. The comparative safety provided by trade routes and armed caravans allowed missionaries to travel.

- **Central Asia as a Transit Zone:** Central Asia served as a critical transit zone for the expansion of Buddhism from India to China. Before Islam became dominant, this region witnessed silk transactions among followers of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism, who generally co-existed peacefully.
- **Gandhāra's Pivotal Role:** The northwestern borderlands of South Asia, particularly Gandhāra, functioned as a springboard for transmission, linking South Asia to Central Asia. The cultural environment of Gandhāra, characterised by a synthesis of Indian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian influences, led to the development of Gandhāran Buddhist art and the production of texts written in Gāndhārī. Monks from this region, such as Jinagupta from Peshawar, traveled overland through Afghanistan and the Pamirs to the Tarim Basin and China.
- **The Kushan Period:** During the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries CE), which controlled major arteries, Buddhism spread freely in a climate of religious tolerance, supported by merchant generosity and the ruler himself. The Kushans facilitated cross-cultural contact and the long-distance transmission of Buddhism.

Modes of Transmission: Diffusion vs. Long-Distance

The movement of Buddhism to China, particularly in the initial phases, did not follow a simple pattern of gradual, point-to-point diffusion (contact expansion). Instead, the evidence supports a model of "long-distance transmission".

- **Long-Distance Characteristics:** This model explains the anomalous features of early Chinese Buddhism, such as incidental and intermittent contact, long and difficult routes, lack of feedback, and the unsystematic borrowing of elements detached from their original context. The Tarim Basin (Xinjiang), the intermediate zone between India and China, remained a "Buddhological vacuum" or "mere transit zone" until at least the

middle of the third century CE, despite the presence of foreign Buddhist translators in the Chinese capital, Loyang, much earlier.

- **Early Presence in China (Later Han Period):** The arrival of the new faith in China is linked to royalty, specifically the legendary dream of Han Emperor Mingdi around 64 A.D.. The first Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese by foreign monks (such as the Indian monks Kāśyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna) in the middle of the 1st century AD in Loyang. Subsequently, the work of translators like the Parthian Prince An Shigao accelerated the spread from the second half of the 2nd century A.D. onwards. This early Chinese Buddhism included a hybrid cult associated with court circles, a nucleus of organised monastic Buddhism (the "Church of Loyang"), and a diffuse adoption of Buddhist elements at the sub-élite level.

The Material Culture of Religious Transmission

The act of religious giving was deeply embedded in the transmission process:

- **Silks and Rituals:** Silk textiles were used as gifts, often becoming precious objects in Buddhist rituals. Chinese Buddhist devotees donated their wealth, often in the form of silks, to Buddhist institutions, linking material wealth to the accumulation of Buddhist merits. Furthermore, rulers like Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty sent ritual robes to the Mahabodhi monastery in Bodh Gaya, India, to show devotion.
- **Relics and Stūpas:** The cult of relics was central to all Buddhism, with sites containing the Buddha's relics becoming centres for pilgrimage and ritual. The portability of relics, such as those enshrined in stūpas, served as a tangible means of transporting Buddhist devotional practices and doctrines to new regions. The veneration of the Buddha was localised at stūpas, which served as memorial mounds for bodily relics or objects connected to his life.

1.4.5 Sogdians and Other Traders

The Sogdians, speaking an East-Iranian language, emerged as the most significant and dominant mercantile force on the overland Silk Routes across Central Asia until the mid-sixth century C.E.. This power was derived from their strategic geographical location and their character as an itinerant people without a bounded nation. Sogdiana was structured not as a unified empire, but as a loose confederation of city-states, including Samarkand and Bukhara. The Sogdians' commercial reach was immense, spanning a vast trade network linking India and China. Their linguistic and cultural role was critical, as Sogdian became the international language of Central Asia, reinforcing their position as spreaders of culture, goods, techniques, and religious beliefs. Chinese historical sources often recognised them explicitly as a "merchant race" whose motivation led them "wherever profit was to be made". This cross-cultural role also extended to their function as polyglot brokers and translators.

The ability of Sogdian merchants to thrive was linked to the complex geopolitical environment of Central Asia, where they often operated as vassals under powerful successive overlords, including the Hephthalites and the Turks from the fifth to the seventh centuries. These overlords found it in their interest to permit and support commerce, thus ensuring the safety of caravans and enabling the continued flow of trade, even though they levied taxes. Sogdian merchants established substantial communities and "branches" in Chinese Central Asia and China proper. In North China, particularly during the volatile period of the Northern Dynasties, Sogdian immigrants were crucial. Key positions within these foreign trading communities were often held by the *sabao*, a high-ranking post believed to denote a merchant leader (derived from the term *sarthavaha*) or an aristocratic member of Sogdian society. Their communities were

centers of remarkable religious diversity, accommodating followers of Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism), Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism.

Beyond the Sogdians, other trade diasporas and state actors controlled crucial segments of the trans-Asian axis. The Parthian Empire, which flourished until the third century A.D., intentionally acted as an intermediary, reserving its sections of the Silk Road for its own merchants and caravaners and seeking to monopolise the lucrative silk trade by cutting off direct Roman communication with the Chinese. Later, during the Abbasid-Tang period (7th–9th centuries), the Jewish trade diaspora, known as the Radanites (meaning "those who know the way" in Persian), became the most important single group covering the entire network between Europe and China for a brief period. They developed routes, sometimes bypassing Muslim territories by travelling north of the Caspian Sea through the Khazar kingdom. Finally, the Armenians emerged as highly organised overland carriers in later centuries, particularly from Safavid Persia, utilising the Volga route to carry silk to Russia and Western Europe. The Armenian merchants of New Julfa were skilled in cross-cultural brokerage and often acted as trusted agents for rulers and European companies, demonstrating their continuity in long-distance trade well into the eighteenth century. The role of these various groups, including Syriac-speaking merchants in the Roman era (often encompassing Greeks, Jews, and Palmyrenians), ensured the persistent flow of goods, ideas, and religious beliefs across the Eurasian supercontinent.

1.5 TIBET AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Tibet and Southeast Asia, establishes two geographically and chronologically distinct axes of India's early cultural and commercial transactions. Both regions received profound influence from the Indian subcontinent, largely through the transmission of Buddhism, but via different mechanisms: overland mountainous routes to Tibet and primarily maritime networks to Southeast Asia.

1.5.1 Tibet: The Introduction of Literacy, Religion, and Political Power

The historical narrative of Tibet's transformation begins with the reign of its first great emperor, Srong-brtsan-sgam-po (born in 617 A.D. or reigning 627–649/650 A.D.), who is celebrated as the father of Tibetan culture. During his time, Tibet was welded into a great political power, establishing a vast empire extending from the Gobi deserts to the Himalayas and from Central China to the Pamirs. This political achievement was crucial in creating a climate for cultural and intellectual growth, paving the way for the cultivation of knowledge and the religion of the Buddha.

The introduction of literacy was a deliberate royal initiative aimed specifically at facilitating the advent of knowledge, particularly Buddhism, from India. Recognising the necessity of a written language, Sgam-po took direct action, selecting a brilliant courtier named Thon-mī Sambhoṭa to lead a mission to famous seats of learning in India, such as Magadha, to study epigraphy, phonetics, and grammar. Upon his return around 647 A.D., Thon-mī Sambhoṭa devised an alphabetic script for Tibetan, based on Indic scripts like Siddhamātrkā, established its grammatical structure, and began the first Tibetan translations of Sanskrit Buddhist works, thereby earning recognition as the father of Tibetan literature.

The introduction of Buddhism was reinforced through strategic political alliances. In 641 A.D., Sgam-po married the Chinese Princess Wen-cheng, a Buddhist, and around the same time, married a Nepalese princess. Princess Wen-cheng brought a statue of the Buddha (placed in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa) along with silkworm eggs and Chinese culture. Sgam-po also began the institutionalization of the faith by promulgating laws harmonized with the "Ten Virtues" of

Buddhism and building major temples, including the Ramoche and Jokhang, as well as the Potala Palace.

The establishment of Buddhism faced indigenous opposition, notably from the followers of the Bon religion, but it received sustained imperial support. King Khri Srong-lde-brtsan (r. 754–797 A.D.) invited Śāntarakṣita, a professor from Nālandā University, to Tibet to spread genuine Indic Buddhism and founded the first monastery, bSam-yas, modelled on the monastic centre of Odantapurī in Bihar. When natural calamities intervened, Śāntarakṣita recommended Padmasambhava of Swāt Valley, who was proficient in Tantrism and esoteric methods necessary to appeal to a populace seemingly steeped in "primitive sorcery and charlatanism". This process peaked under Ral-pa-can (r. 815–838 A.D.), the third great royal protector of religion, who gave special privileges to the priesthood and oversaw the climax of translation work. These canonical translation efforts were meticulous, involving Indian scholars (Paṇditas) and Tibetan interpreters (lo-tsa-ba) in a two- or three-tier system to produce word-for-word representations of the Sanskrit texts.

Following the assassination of the anti-Buddhist king Glang-dar-ma in 842 A.D., monarchical rule in Central Tibet collapsed. However, the tradition continued in Western Tibet (Nga-rī), where later successors acted in the dual role of head of state and religion, funding expeditions to India for texts and scholars, which became a distinctive feature of subsequent Tibetan governance. The arrival of the great Indian scholar Atiśa in 1042 A.D. provided the last great spiritual impetus from India, allowing Buddhism to strike deep roots and flourish as an indigenous tradition. This eventually led to the formation of the theocratic state in Central Tibet when the Sa-skya high priest Hphags-pa was conferred sovereignty by the Mongol emperor Khubilai Khan in 1270 A.D., establishing the religious succession of the Dalai Lamas.

1.5.2 Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade, Indianization, and Religious Dominance

The region of Southeast Asia, particularly its maritime components, played a crucial and culturally transformative role in the ancient and early medieval trans-Asian trade network, characterised by robust commercial activity, profound processes of Indianization, and shifting patterns of religious dominance.

Maritime Trade and Commercial Importance

The commercial and strategic importance of ancient maritime exchange hinged upon the vast, interlocking system of the Indian Ocean, characterised by two primary arteries: the Red Sea and the Arabian/Persian Gulf (the Gulf). This maritime network, which reached its zenith in terms of documentation during the Classical period following the Roman annexation of Egypt in 30 BC, relied critically upon the predictability of the monsoon winds for navigation between the Mediterranean world and the Indian subcontinent. The details of this long-distance commerce are richly preserved in literary sources such as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (PME), a practical guide written by a Greco-Egyptian merchant detailing routes, ports, and commodities.

The Red Sea functioned as the crucial funnel for goods from the East to the Roman Empire, necessitating the establishment of major Roman ports like Myos Hormos and Berenike in Egypt. On the Indian coastline, this trade focused on key nodes, including Barygaza (modern Bharukaccha in Gujarat), which served as the most important port for foreigners due to its linkage to the Indian hinterland via cities like Ozéné (Ujjayinī). Further south, the Chera port of Muziris (Kerala) was significant for receiving both regional shipping and Greek shipping. Archaeological evidence, such as the discoveries of imported Roman Arretine ware and amphorae at sites like Arikamedu near Pondicherry (Podukê), confirms sustained economic and cultural contact. This exchange was driven by the Roman demand for both luxury items

(gems, silks) and exotic foodstuffs and aromatics which became perceived necessities (pepper). The intense nature of this trade led classical authors like Pliny to lament the enormous drain of Roman currency, suggesting an adverse balance of trade favoring India.

Further east, maritime trade in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea flourished at least as early as in the Arabian Sea. Indian merchants and shippers dominated shipping across the Bay of Bengal, often part of a southern Indian trade diaspora from Dravidian kingdoms. The Straits of Melaka and the Kra isthmus were vital commercial contact points, facilitating the flow of goods to the Indonesian archipelago or north towards Canton (Guangzhou), a major Chinese port. By the 15th century, these interconnected regions evolved into a zone of ecumenical trade, a network of port towns that provided security and facilities and integrated various Asian, African, and European traders. This commerce required sophisticated institutional structures, often relying on trade diasporas, merchant specialists settling as aliens to serve as cross-cultural brokers, and complex contractual arrangements, as evidenced by the second-century CE Muziris Papyrus detailing the arrangements for transporting Indian cargo.

Indianization and Societal Development

The concept of "Indianization" refers to the profound cultural influence exerted by India on Southeast Asia, a phenomenon so substantial that some historians utilised the term "Greater India" to describe the region, particularly during its peak around the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.. This process was instrumental in the region's societal development, shaping fundamental aspects of political and cultural life, notably in Sumatra, Java, and the mainland river valleys.

Critically, Indian influence led to the rise of bureaucratic states in Southeast Asia, which were often modeled on those found in peninsular India. The mechanism for this widespread cultural transfer was primarily through a trade diaspora of Indian settlements established at principal commercial contact points, rather than large-scale military conquest or mass migration. These trade diasporas consisted largely of Indian merchants and settlers who, in their role as **cross-**cultural brokers, brought with them aspects of Indian secular culture and religious beliefs.

Epigraphic evidence, such as Sanskrit inscriptions from this period, tracks the progress of this transformation, indicating a succession of local rulers whose names and titles became progressively Indianized with each passing generation. The Indian trade diaspora often included Brahman immigrants who were frequently also merchant entrepreneurs. Their dual role was significant: they provided both goods (merchandise) and priestly functions, which were highly sought after by local elites. Many of these Brahmans intermarried with local women, subsequently founding local Brahmanic families.

The establishment of these new bureaucratic states and the associated cultural milieu highlight how trade networks served as powerful engines for cultural transformation and the diffusion of ideas and societal structures, illustrating a pattern where economic processes were embedded in social relationships and religious values. This interaction ensured that the cultural transformation of Southeast Asia was less about replacing local cultures entirely and more about local rulers and societies selectively appropriating and transforming outside influences from India.

Religious Dominance and Transmission

The transmission of religious traditions across maritime and overland networks in Southeast Asia illustrates a historical pattern wherein trade diasporas acted as key intermediaries, leading to subsequent phases of religious dominance and transmission of Indian and later, Islamic faiths.

The Dynamics of Religious Diffusion via Trade Diasporas

The Dynamics of Religious Diffusion via Trade Diasporas describe the process by which commercial networks and the communities that sustained them served as the primary vectors for the long-distance transmission and subsequent establishment of religious faiths across Eurasia. This model posits that religions often spread first to a local commercial class before diffusing into society at large.

Trade diasporas, which consisted of specialised merchants living as aliens in host communities, functioned as cross-cultural brokers, facilitating not only economic exchange but also the movement of people, ideas, and religious beliefs. These diasporas were united by solidarity built upon shared religion, language, or kinship, even when lacking formal organisational ties.

The symbiotic relationship between commerce and religion is crucial:

- **Material Support and Merit:** Wealth generated by trade provided essential material support for religious institutions through donations. For traditions like Buddhism, the dynamism of trade was intrinsically linked to its expansion; wealth allowed for the construction of monasteries and the funding of missions. In return for these material gifts (*dāna*), donors received spiritual assistance or the accumulation of religious merit. This exchange provided a strong structural incentive for merchants to accumulate wealth and tied the religious community (*sangha*) directly to commercial networks. The religious economy, in this sense, was embedded in social relationships and religious values.
- **The Mobility of Agents:** Trade routes, including major arteries, minor capillary routes, and maritime links, provided the paths and necessary relative safety for missionaries, monks, and pilgrims to travel. For instance, Buddhist mobility was granted canonical justification by the Buddha's instruction to "wander the path" to teach the *dharma*.
- **Religious Intermediaries:** Brahman immigrants, often functioning as merchant entrepreneurs, served a priestly role alongside their commercial activities in Southeast Asia. Later, the conversion of Malaya, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines to **Islam** was similarly attributed to the arrival of a Muslim trade diaspora. Similarly, the community of Islam often brought commercial advantages to its members, and the pattern of Islam spreading first to a local commercial class and then generally can be found historically from Senegal to the Philippines.

This process of cultural transfer, seen in the Indianization of Southeast Asia and the spread of Buddhism along Central Asian silk routes, was achieved not through mass migration but largely by these trade diasporas establishing settlements at principal commercial contact points, transforming cultural traditions, and introducing new religious ideologies.

Phases of Religious Dominance

The concept of Religious Dominance and Transmission in Southeast Asia and across Eurasian networks can be delineated into successive phases, largely corresponding to the historical trajectories of global religions utilising commercial networks for their expansion. This transmission typically followed a pattern where faiths spread first to the local commercial **class** before achieving broader societal acceptance.

Phase 1: Hinduism (Early Establishment)

The influence of India on Southeast Asia, sometimes conceptualised as "Greater India," was substantial, peaking around the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.. This period was marked by the

rise of bureaucratic states in Sumatra, Java, and mainland river valleys, which adopted political models from peninsular India. As part of this process, the ruling class widely converted to Hinduism. This conversion was facilitated by a trade diaspora of Indian settlements at major commercial points, including Brahman immigrants who were often merchant entrepreneurs. Their priestly functions were sought after alongside their merchandise. Despite this initial broad acceptance among the elite, the long-term survival of Hinduism in the region was limited, persisting mainly on the island of Bali and in a few minor centres.

Phase 2: Buddhism (Widespread Diffusion)

Buddhism expanded along the trade routes, becoming a dominant force in parts of Southeast Asia. Hīnayāna Buddhism (referred to as a major school of Buddhism alongside Mahāyāna) primarily spread from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to become the prevailing religion in Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam. Archaeological evidence from Kambuja (Cambodia) indicates that Buddhism flourished from the end of the fifth century A.D., though it initially did not achieve dominance over other Brahmanical religions, such as Śaivism. However, its prominence grew, exemplified by King Jayavarman VII (1181–1220 A.D.) who was a devout Buddhist and established institutions like the *Saugatāśrama* for monks. The enduring success of the Buddhist *sangha* in these regions and transit zones stemmed from its ability to adapt to shifting economic conditions and appeal to a wide spectrum of potential patrons. Globally, this expansion coincided with the movement of Mahāyāna Buddhism along the Central Asian trade routes from India to China and Japan.

Phase 3: Islam (Later Maritime Conversion)

The conversion of certain maritime regions of Southeast Asia to Islam represents a later phase of religious transmission driven by commercial activity. The religious change of Malaya, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines was primarily the work of people who arrived as part of a Muslim trade diaspora. This pattern—where Islam spreads first to a local commercial class and then gradually to society at large—is observable historically across the frontiers of Islam, from Senegal to the Philippines. Islam was particularly friendly to trade and traders, contributing to the commercial success of its adherents. The rise of the Abbasid caliphate and the subsequent strength of the Muslim world made Islam the central civilisation for the Old World from about 750 A.D. to 1500, acting as the principal agency for contact and transmission across continents.

This historical sequence demonstrates that the expansion of religious networks, often parallel to and interwoven with commercial networks, served as a crucial catalyst for the long-distance transmission of religious beliefs, where groups like merchants were compensated for their material support with religious merit.

- **Shipping and Dominance:** Shipping across the Bay of Bengal was historically dominated by merchants and shippers from southern India, emanating from Dravidian kingdoms like the Chola. Indian merchants established commercial settlements, initially on the Kra Isthmus (between Malaysia and Thailand), which served as a crucial transhipment point before goods were sent further north to Canton, or across to the Indonesian archipelago.
- **Cultural Influence** (Indianization): The cultural influence of India on Southeast Asia was immense, leading to a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "Greater India". This cultural transaction resulted in the adoption of bureaucratic states modeled on those of peninsular India which "sprang up on Sumatra, Java, and other of the islands, as well in the primary river valleys of the mainland". The spread of this influence is archaeologically visible in Sanskrit inscriptions and the Indianization of local rulers'

names and titles over generations, suggesting a cultural assimilation led by trade diaspora settlements rather than a mass migration.

- **Spread of Buddhism** (Theravāda and Mahāyāna): Southeast Asia became a major center for Buddhist traditions. The Buddhist countries of Southern Asia, excluding Viet-Nam, generally adopted the principles of the Theravāda school. However, archaeological finds, Chinese Chronicles, and inscriptions prove the spread of Buddhism in various forms across the mainland and islands:
    - **Malay Peninsula and Java:** Inscriptions using Sanskrit and Indian alphabets date back to the 4th or 5th century A.D., proving the presence of Buddhism, with Mahāyāna Buddhism flourishing in the Malay Peninsula by the 6th century A.D.. Indonesia, including Sumatra's Śrī-vijaya kingdom, became a great center of Buddhist learning between the 7th and 11th centuries A.D..
    - **Kambuja (Cambodia):** Buddhism flourished there, though Brahmanical traditions were also strong. King Jayavarman VII (1181–1220 A.D.) was a devout Buddhist and received the posthumous title *Mahāyāna-paramasaugata*.
    - **Siam (Thailand):** Buddhism thrived from a very early period, perhaps the 1st or 2nd century A.D..
    - **Viet-Nam (Campā):** Buddhism gained footing before the 3rd century A.D. and the Mahāyāna tradition continued until the 15th century A.D..

1.6 SUMMARY

In summary, while Tibet entered a relationship with India later and primarily received religious and literary technology via challenging overland routes, Southeast Asia was deeply and consistently woven into India's commercial and cultural fabric through long-standing, powerful maritime trade networks, leading to widespread cultural and religious transformation.

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UNIT II

TRADE NETWORKS BETWEEN INDIA AND THE WORLD: MARITIME AND LAND ROUTES

2.0 OBJECTIVE

1. To map and analyse the geographical extent of interregional and trans-Eurasian trade networks
2. To evaluate the archaeological and textual evidence used to reconstruct long-distance exchange and the commodities traded.
3. To understand the integral relationship between commercial networks and cultural/religious transmission.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is designed to explore the trading networks that connected India closely to the Greco-Roman world, East Asia, and Tibet via both land and maritime spheres. The objective is to familiarise students with the intricacies of these trading linkages that evolved over time and examine the foundational structures of cross-cultural movement. The most common organisational framework for sustaining this long-distance exchange, particularly after the emergence of city life, was the trade diaspora, defined as an interrelated net of commercial communities where specialised merchants lived as aliens in host towns. These merchants acted as cross-cultural brokers and were bound by solidarity based on shared culture, language, or religion, facilitating the transfer of not only commodities but also ideas and beliefs across vast distances.

The land routes, most notably the Silk Road (or "silk routes"), constituted a network of transcontinental arteries leading from China through Central Asia and Iran to the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean. This formidable system lasted over a millennium, traversing vast, often desolate, terrain and facilitating commercial exchanges even during periods of geopolitical instability. Roman interaction with the East, documented archaeologically and textually, confirms the movement of Roman goods into regions beyond the imperial frontiers, such as silver and bronze vessels, glass, and pottery circulating into "Free Germany" and other remote areas. Critically, this land commerce was shaped by political actors like the Parthians, who strategically reserved portions of the route for their own merchants and sought to block direct Roman communication with the Chinese to maintain control over the lucrative silk trade.

In parallel, the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean provided essential pathways, relying on the two main arteries of the Arabian/Persian Gulf (the Gulf) and the Red Sea. Following the Roman annexation of Egypt in 30 BC, the Red Sea intensified its role as the primary funnel for goods destined for the Roman Empire, a process made viable by the mastery of the seasonal monsoon winds. Detailed itineraries, ports, and commodities are preserved in essential primary sources like the Greek merchant handbook, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (PME). This text documents crucial nodes such as the Roman Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike, as well as Indian commercial centers like Muziris in South-west India and Barygaza (Gujarat), which linked sea trade with overland routes across northern India and Kashmir to Central Asia. The flourishing nature of this exchange led to substantial imports of Roman currency into South India and the continuous flow of key commodities like pepper and spices.

Furthermore, these commercial networks were intrinsically linked to the spread of religious traditions, most significantly Buddhism. The Buddhist *sangha* benefited directly from the material donations (*dāna*) of prosperous patrons, particularly merchants. This symbiotic relationship provided material support for the establishment of monasteries and shrines, many of which were intentionally clustered near trade routes and commercial hubs in regions like the Western Ghats or on the Northern Route (*Uttarāpatha*). The movement of Buddhist missionaries, given canonical warrant by the Buddha's instruction to "wander the path", frequently utilised the same arteries and capillaries that served itinerant traders, illustrating how economic and religious goals often overlapped in the vast trans-Asian network.

2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

The conceptual framework for understanding the complex trans-regional commerce between India and the world mainly relies on analysing cross-cultural trade and its fundamental institutional structure, the trade diaspora, seeing commerce as part of broader socio-religious and political contexts.

2.2.1 The Trade Diaspora as the Core Institutional Structure

The most common institutional structure for managing cross-cultural trade, especially following the rise of urban societies, was the trade diaspora. This mechanism involves commercial experts physically separating themselves from their home communities to live as outsiders in host towns, which were strategically important centres rather than fringe settlements. The resulting network, or "trade diaspora," is an interconnected web of commercial communities spread across regions (derived from the Greek word for scattering or sowing of grain). These dispersed settlements sometimes lacked formal organisational control, being united only by the solidarity of a shared religion, language, or distant kinship. The main role of these diaspora merchants was to act as cross-cultural brokers, mediating and facilitating trade between the host society and merchants from their own origins travelling along trade routes. The need for this mediation arose because people with different ways of life were often seen as strangers, perceived as unpredictable and potentially dangerous, requiring special institutional arrangements to ensure mutual security.

Historically, trade diasporas have varied widely in their relationship with the host society, sometimes being treated as a pariah caste to exploit, and at other times establishing themselves as autonomous, self-governing communities through policies of neutrality and pacifism.

2.2.2 Theoretical Models for Exchange and Networks

Understanding the movement of goods and ideas requires engaging with various theoretical models of exchange. The sources highlight debates surrounding the nature of ancient economic transactions:

1. Exchange Systems (Substantivist vs. Formalist): Karl Polanyi and the substantivist school argued that economic activities in premodern societies were "embedded" within noneconomic institutions. They highlighted non-market exchange types: reciprocity (mutual gift giving), redistribution (where authorities centralise goods and then distribute), and market exchange (where value is set by supply and demand). Nonetheless, sources indicate that literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence from Buddhist contexts shows that all three transactions, i.e, reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange, were used simultaneously in South Asia. Applying modern economic concepts to ancient, non-Western societies remains challenging due to the scarcity of sufficient economic data to test quantitatively hypotheses.

2. The Networks Approach: This approach regards economic and religious mobility as dynamic processes that enable the movement or "flow" of material and cultural goods through "conduits" linking various "nodes" of economic, political, and religious power. Religious networks, especially Buddhist ones, often overlapped and intertwined with trade networks. This perspective recognises that rulers, merchants, and religious specialists actively construct their own networks for interaction.

2.2.3 The Symbiosis of Religion and Commerce (The Religious Economy)

A key aspect of the conceptual framework is the interconnected relationship between religious and economic spheres, sometimes called the "religious economy".

Buddhist Patronage: The growth of the Buddhist sangha (community) was directly connected to the generation of surplus resources from trade. Merchants and wealthy figures played vital roles as patrons, making material donations (dāna) to monastic institutions, which earned them religious merit. This system of exchange ensured that material gifts were rewarded with spiritual aid. Monastic writers actively promoted this patronage by using commercial epithets (such as the Buddha being called a "caravan-leader" or sārthavāha) and including merchants as characters in stories like the Jātakas.

Mobility: Religious mobility was closely connected to trade, as missionaries and monks followed routes, including major arteries and smaller pathways, which often overlapped with those of merchants and traders. This enabled the exchange of ideas and practices alongside commercial goods.

This framework highlights that ancient trade was not merely about exchanging goods for profit but involved the intricate movement of commodities across cultural, political, and religious boundaries, driven and maintained by specialised social institutions like trade diasporas.

2.3 LAND ROUTES: TRANS-EURASIAN AND SUBCONTINENTAL NETWORKS

The vast array of overland commercial linkages connecting India with Eurasia and Africa facilitated a continuous movement of commodities, ideas, and people, fundamentally defining the Trans-Eurasian and Subcontinental networks.

2.3.1 The Trans-Eurasian Axis: The Silk Routes

The network, retrospectively called the Silk Route or "silk routes," was a transcontinental system of commercial arteries and capillaries linking China to the eastern Mediterranean coasts through Central Asia and Iran. This trade, lasting over a millennium from the second century B.C., crossed some of the most barren and difficult terrains on Earth. During its peak period, circa A.D. 90–130, the entire route from North China to Rome passed through just four powerful states: China, the Kushan kingdom, Parthia, and the Roman Empire. The flow of goods westward focused on valuable commodities, especially silk, but many products were exchanged. In return, Chinese merchants mainly sought Roman gold and silver, as well as expensive, low-bulk items like precious stones, coral, amber, and glass. The transit hub of Merv (Antiochia in Margiana) in Parthia marked the traditional western boundary for Chinese traders. The Parthian Empire (Anxi) served as a strong intermediary, thriving by controlling this transit trade and holding a monopoly on selling eastern products. The Parthians actively prevented direct contact between Rome and China, even misleading Roman envoys about the journey's difficulty to ensure the profits from the silk trade stayed with them. Their commercial deception included purchasing heavy Chinese silk, reweaving it into lighter gauze in Syrian

cities, and then selling this finished product back to the Chinese, claiming it was a Roman creation.

2.3.2 Subcontinental Networks: India's *Uttarāpatha* and *Daksināpatha*

Within the Indian subcontinent, two major arterial networks facilitated interregional trade and cultural diffusion. The Northern Route (Uttarāpatha) served as the main axis of commercial and cultural exchange, running from the northwestern borderlands (including Bactria/Central Asia) to the Ganga-Yamuna doāb in northeastern India. This network consisted of multiple shifting itineraries, connecting major nodes. Mathura was a key nexus, linking the east-west routes of the Uttarāpatha to the north-south feeder routes of the Daksināpatha. The metropolis of Taxila in northern Punjab was a pivotal strategic hub, connecting routes from Gandhāra, Central Asia, Kashmir, and northern India, and functioning as a commercial entrepot. Archaeological findings, such as Northern Black Polished (NBP) ware and nonlocal materials like lapis lazuli from Badakhshan, confirm the sustained transport of goods along this network. Classical geographers like Pliny the Elder and Strabo also provided descriptions of the main road, noting markers and key stations between Puskalāvatī and Pātaliputra.

The Southern Route (Daksināpatha) was the southern counterpart, connecting the Ganga-Yamuna valley to the Deccan plateau and the western coast. This network facilitated the transportation of raw materials, such as iron, copper, and precious stones, from the Deccan northwards and provided access to seaports on the Indian Ocean. Ujjayinī (the capital of Avanti) served as an important hub on the Southern Route, acting as an intermediary for goods like nard and costus transported from the Northwest to the port of Bharukaccha (Broach). Significantly, the Daksināpatha is evidenced by the clustering of Buddhist rock-cut shrines (caityas) and monasteries, particularly in the Western Ghats (e.g., Kārle, Nāsik), illustrating the close connection between mercantile patronage and religious transmission along lucrative trade routes.

2.3.3 Roman Trade Beyond Imperial Frontiers

Roman influence extended significantly through land routes beyond the empire's formal political boundaries (*limes*), notably in Europe and Africa. In "Free Germany" (non-Roman Europe), the movement of "Roman things" relied on natural arteries like the Danube River. A major artery was the "amber route," which ran from Roman Carnuntum and penetrated northward toward the Baltic. Roman imports, primarily from Italy, reached these regions in abundance during the first two centuries A.D., including quantities of Roman coins (suggesting circulation as currency), silver and gold vessels, bronze ware (with over 850 vessels found in Jutland and the Baltic islands), glass, and *Terra sigillata* pottery.

In Africa, Roman contact and trade extended across the Sahara and along the East African coast. Trade routes linked the Mediterranean coast (for example, Sabratha and Lepcis Magna) southwards to the Fezzan region. Archaeological finds near the Germa mausoleum include imported amphorae, glass, lamps, and terra sigillata. Regular external trade contact began early on the East African coast, around the first century B.C., enabling the movement of goods like ivory northward into the broader Indian Ocean network.

The intricate network of land routes, stretching from the Silk Routes in the East to the Danube and the Sahara in the West, functions like a complex tapestry, with specialised merchant groups and political powers directing the flow of goods, supporting both luxury trade and religious expansion across continents.

2.4 MARITIME ROUTES: THE INDIAN OCEAN AND RED SEA

The maritime routes across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea formed a vital axis of long-distance trade, connecting the Mediterranean world, especially the Roman Empire, with India and the Far East. This commerce primarily depended on two main routes: the Arabian/Persian Gulf (the Gulf) and the Red Sea.

2.4.1 The Red Sea and Roman-Indian Trade

The Red Sea acted as the conduit for goods from the East to the Roman Empire. The increase in this route's importance coincided with Augustus's annexation of Egypt in 30 BC, which led to the systematic commercial exploitation of Eastern trade. The main Roman ports along the Egyptian Red Sea coast included Myos Hormos (possibly corresponding to Quseir al-Qadim) and Berenike. These ports were linked to the Nile River, and eventually to Alexandria, by organised caravan routes across the desert.

The successful development of deep-sea navigation depended on the seasonal and predictable monsoon winds. While locals were aware of these winds, Roman ethnocentric accounts sometimes credited a Greek sailor named Hippalus with their "discovery" or popularisation around the middle of the first century A.D. This mastery of the monsoon allowed for shorter, direct voyages between the Red Sea and India, a significant shift from earlier coastal routes. However, the Red Sea itself presented navigational challenges, particularly the northerly winds, which sometimes influenced the choice of more southerly ports like Berenike.

2.4.2 Evidence, Ports, and Commodities

A primary source describing first-century CE maritime trade is the Greek merchant manual, the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (PME). Written by a Greco-Egyptian merchant, the Periplus offers a detailed account of the ports, routes, and goods traded from the Red Sea to India.

On the Indian side, key ports included:

Barygaza (modern Broach, Gujarat), identified as the most important foreign port mentioned in the *Periplus*.

Muziris (probably Pattanam in Kerala) on the Malabar Coast was renowned for its prosperity due to trade with both the Barygaza region and Greek shipping. The discovery of the Muziris papyrus provides additional evidence of a maritime loan contract for a voyage between Alexandria and Muziris, describing the transportation of goods such as Gangetic nard, ivory, and textiles.

Podukê (identified with the ancient port of Arikamedu near Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast). Excavations at Arikamedu yielded evidence such as Roman Arretine ware and amphorae, confirming sustained contact.

The flow of goods was significant, driven by Roman demand for commodities such as pepper (sometimes called *yavanapriya*, or "loved by the foreigner"), spices, gems, and silks. In return, Roman gold and silver coins were imported in vast quantities, leading Roman authors like Pliny the Elder to lament the drain of wealth from the empire, a sentiment supported by the large number of Roman coin hoards found in South India, where they were generally used as bullion.

2.4.3 Alternative Maritime Routes and Later Developments

While the Red Sea was crucial during the Early Roman period, the Gulf also functioned as a vital route for Oriental trade. Trade through the Gulf mainly involved Arab-Persian merchants, and goods often moved through intermediaries to Roman territory, sometimes via Palmyra.

Roman engagement in the Gulf was geographically and politically distinct, exemplified by sites like Ed Dur.

Later, the island of Sri Lanka (Taprobane) became strategically significant as a commercial hub, especially during the Late Roman/Byzantine period (fourth to mid-seventh century AD), linking the Indian subcontinent, the Mediterranean, Persia, and China. This late phase saw continued movement of goods and the dominance of the Red Sea route over the Persian Gulf for trade with the West, aided by intermediaries like the Aksumites. By the rise of Islam, commerce in the western Indian Ocean had shifted, with Muslim trade diasporas controlling and further developing the sea routes to China, often making round trips every two years using the monsoons.

2.5 CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION

The domain of Cross-Cultural Exchange and Religious Transmission emphasises the significant interconnection between long-distance trade networks and the worldwide spread of major religious traditions, which in turn reflects considerable cultural diversities in areas such as language, literature, and art forms.

2.5.1 The Symbiotic Religious Economy and Merit

A central mechanism driving this transmission was the symbiotic structural exchange between religious institutions and commercial agents, often referred to as the religious economy. For faiths like Buddhism, the dynamism of trade was inexorably linked to its spread, as wealth generated by commerce provided material support for the religion through donations. The growth of the Buddhist sangha was thus directly connected to the surplus resources generated by patrons. In return for these material gifts (dāna), the donors, often wealthy merchants, received spiritual assistance or religious merit (punya). This act of generous giving simultaneously encouraged the renunciation of material wealth while acting as an economic stimulus for its acquisition, since additional donations yielded greater merit. This merit could be transferred to relatives and "all beings". Buddhist literary traditions actively promoted this nexus, portraying the Buddha with commercial epithets such as the "caravan-leader" (sārthavāha) and featuring merchants as protagonists in narratives like the jātakas. This valuation stood in contrast to perspectives in the Roman, Christian, and Hindu worlds where merchants were often looked down upon. Furthermore, precious commodities known as the seven jewels (saptaratna), including gold, silver, crystal, beryl, coral, and pearls, held immense symbolic significance and were frequently found in Buddhist reliquary deposits, underscoring the intertwining of commercial value and religious meaning.

2.5.2 Models of Mobility and Transmission

The mobility of religious agents was given canonical justification by the Buddha’s instruction to "wander the path" to "teach the dharma," which ensured the spread of teachings by monks and nuns who moved along the same routes as merchants and traders. Instead of sticking solely to a model of "gradual diffusion" (contact expansion) from closely connected centres, the movement of Buddhism across Central Asia into China showed patterns of "long-distance transmission." This model explains the irregular travel routes and the arrival of texts and ideas via overland and maritime routes "from many centres simultaneously." This transmission was not always carried out by elite scholar monks; anonymous foreign monks (huseng) acted as key agents at sub-elite levels, serving as magicians, miracle workers, and authenticators of relics.

2.5.3 Material and Cultural Manifestations

The convergence of cultures along these routes is visible in material artifacts, political titles, and religious practices. In the northwestern Indian subcontinent, long-standing interactions with migrating groups—such as Indo-Iranians, Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Kusānas, and Huns—led to synthesises of Indian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and local features in art and architecture. The Sogdian immigrants in North China, whose ancestry lay along the Silk Road, present a strong example of exchange; their stone funerary furniture shows a variety of artistic elements that combine Zoroastrian-inspired motifs (like the fire altar) with local Chinese burial traditions (e.g., the use of stone coffins and mythical Chinese animals). These diverse elements, which include depictions of Central Asian peoples and clothing, suggest that these individuals were actively shaping an identity that existed in a "space between paradigmatic 'cultures'". Moreover, the term Yavana (linked to Western visitors) appears in the cave inscriptions of the western Deccan, identifying them as donors to local Buddhist establishments, indicating that cross-cultural acceptance played a key role in expanding religious networks. Beyond Buddhism, other faiths spread similarly, such as Christianity, which reached the East through traders from the Red Sea and Mesopotamia, and Islam, whose spread across maritime Southeast Asia was supported by a Muslim trade diaspora. The Christian world also saw the emergence of the cult of saints, initiating a flow of holy relics echoed in the worship of Buddhist relics across Asia.

2.6 THE ANCIENT TRADE INFRASTRUCTURE AND CROSS-CULTURAL DYNAMICS

The ancient trade infrastructure and cross-cultural dynamics encompass the regulatory environment of major routes, the specific nature of material exchanges, and the profound influence of regional political power and specialised mobility on trans-Asian transmission.

2.6.1 Political Control and Route Regulation

The success of long-distance overland trade heavily depended on political stability and regulatory controls imposed by powerful empires. Around A.D. 90–130, the overland Silk Road from North China to Rome required passage through only four major polities: China, the Kushan Kingdom, Parthia, and the Roman Empire. Roman authority established firm control over all the overland trade routes west of the Euphrates by A.D. 106. Within the Roman frontier, trade passing through "Free Germany" was initially unregulated, but this freedom was curtailed when Marcus Aurelius set fixed trading locations in A.D. 173. Conversely, on the maritime axis, Roman customs regulations were strict: the state levied a 25% tax on imports from the East. Although foreign traders in Indian ports were sometimes granted privileges guaranteed by local rulers, Roman authority—possibly a Roman garrison—often retained the power to impose customs duties or revoke concessions. This regulatory environment extended to specific ports; the Periplus Maris Erythraei (PME) describes the disruption of trade at the port of Kalliena after Sandanes occupied it, leading to Greek ships being forcibly diverted to Barygaza.

2.6.2 Specifics of Material Exchange and Finds

Beyond the well-known trade in pepper and silk, material exchanges reveal complex systems of supply and demand across cultural boundaries. Roman authors like Pliny the Elder lamented the large trade deficit, noting that India absorbed no less than fifty million sesterces of the Roman Empire's wealth each year for merchandise sold back at a hundred times its cost. Imports into the East sought by the Chinese included costly, small-bulk items such as gold, silver, rare precious stones, coral, amber, and glass. Many of these rare stones were ultimately sourced from India, polished and cut in Alexandria, possibly leading the Chinese to mistakenly

believe Rome was their origin. Conversely, Roman imported objects into "Free Germany" included bronze paterae bearing the stamp of L. Ansius Diodorus, showing that trade items included worn and patched vessels that were antiques or decayed heirlooms by the time of burial. Archaeological finds from the African side of the Red Sea also indicate specific local trade. Excavations in the Fezzan region of Africa yield Roman amphorae, glass, lamps, and terra sigillata, suggesting trade that transported commodities like ivory northward across the Sahara. The Indian ivory statuette found at Pompeii exemplifies the movement of high-value Indian manufactures to the Mediterranean.

2.6.3 Dynamics of Transmission and Mobility

Trade networks provided pathways for religious expansion, demonstrated through specialised organisational models and archaeological materials along transit zones.

1. Sogdian Commercial Networks and Identity: The Sogdians were the group chiefly responsible for trade along the Silk Road's many settlements and were characterised as itinerants without a fixed nation. Their complex identity and mobility are reflected in their funerary art found in North China, which shows a combination of foreign and local Chinese elements, indicating that they actively occupied a "space between paradigmatic 'cultures'.

2. Capillary Routes and Documentation: In the northwestern borderlands of South Asia, capillary routes through the upper Indus region were vital, linking the Uttarāpatha with the Silk Routes in the Tarim Basin. These routes served as important transit zones, evidenced by multilingual graffiti and petroglyphs in scripts such as Brāhmī, Kharosthī, Sogdian, Bactrian, Chinese, and Tibetan, recording the presence of diverse travellers including itinerant monks and long-distance traders. Further along the southern Silk Route, nearly a thousand Kharosthī documents in the Niya Prakrit dialect offer valuable insights into commercial relationships involving administrative officials, local merchants, and Buddhist monks during the third and fourth centuries CE.

3. Literary and Epigraphic Contexts: The Mauryan Emperor Aśoka's rock edicts (mid-third century BCE) provide the earliest definite inscriptions of the Brāhmī and Kharosthī scripts and are valued as primary sources over later literary accounts when reconstructing the historical background of early Buddhism. The Mahābhārata, whose original Parvan list shows no signs of later interpolations like the Anuśāsanaparvan, reflects ideological tensions that some scholars suggest were a response to policies of Buddhist rulers like Aśoka, who had promoted world-denying movements.

These new points highlight that ancient trans-regional trade involved not only large-scale material transfer but also intricate legal frameworks, specialised merchant communities operating across extensive geographical barriers, and a constant interaction between political control and cultural blending.

2.7 SUMMARY

The above lesson examines the trading networks that connected South Asia with the Greco-Roman world, Central Asia, and East Asia, emphasising the trade diaspora as the primary institutional mechanism where foreign merchants acted as cross-cultural brokers. The unit details both land routes, including the Uttarāpatha and the Daksināpatha (North and South Routes), and trans-Eurasian Silk Routes, along with maritime routes through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Maritime commerce was supported by the mastery of the monsoon winds and is documented in texts like the Periplus Maris Erythraei. The spread of Buddhism was closely linked to this commerce, as monastic institutions received patronage and merit (dāna) from

wealthy merchants, creating a mutually supportive religious economy. Archaeological evidence—including Roman coins used as bullion, fine pottery, and multilingual inscriptions in key contact zones such as Gandhāra and the Upper Indus—confirms the deep cultural and material integration resulting from these extensive, multi-directional interactions. The unit concludes that trade, regulated by imperial powers like Rome, Parthia, and the Kushanas, established lasting pathways for the exchange of ideas and goods, although its volume and precise nature continue to be subjects of ongoing archaeological re-evaluation.

The relationship between trade and cultural dissemination can be seen as a complex geographical and political puzzle: controlling a single part (such as a key port or mountain pass) held significant influence over the entire flow of commerce, ideas, and cultural change that crossed continents.

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UNIT III

CROSS-CULTURAL IMPACT OF TRADE AND COMMERCE

3.0 OBJECTIVE

Unit III aims to familiarise students with various aspects of the cross-cultural impacts of trade and commerce. The main focus is on how material exchange, trade routes, and mobility led to significant changes in social identity, literature, art, and political ideas across Eurasia and Africa, analysing both archaeological and textual evidence of these transactions.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is dedicated to exploring the complex and varied forms of cultural interactions that emerged as a direct consequence of the extensive trade and commercial networks established between India and the Greco-Roman world, East Asia, and Tibet in early times. The focus is on demonstrating how the movement of goods, people, and capital created cultural diversities that profoundly manifested across spheres such as demographic dynamics, language, literature, and art forms. The pervasive reach of commerce is demonstrated geographically by the long, acquisitive arm of imperial Rome extending far beyond the Imperial Frontiers, with evidence detailing contact in three major geographical zones: Europe, particularly "Free Germany" (including Scandinavia, Latvia, and Poland), Africa (subdivided into the Sahara and the East Coast), and Asia (including the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and Afghanistan, and the Far East).

Through specialised readings, students will analyse how material exchanges stimulated cultural synthesis, addressing complex exchanges through a framework that views artists and patrons as occupying a "space between paradigmatic 'cultures'" during moments of heightened interaction. Material evidence of this cultural flow includes the significant circulation of silk, which coincided with three major spheres of religious movements across Eurasia in late antiquity and the post-classical era, linking the movement of monks, warriors, and merchants. Furthermore, the unit explores how ideological frameworks were impacted, as demonstrated by the study of texts like the Mahābhārata, where analysis of the oldest extant Parvan list reveals the Anuśāsana Parvan is missing, suggesting that its later addition, known for vindicating "the claims of the Brahmans to supremacy", was a later fabrication or interpolation into the epic. By examining these material and intellectual changes, the unit clarifies the profound and mutually transforming impact that trade and commerce had on the societies connected by these global arteries.

3.2 THE NATURE OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND HYBRID IDENTITY

The conceptual framework for understanding cross-cultural exchange and the resulting hybrid identities indicates that cultural interaction is inherently complex. It involves transferring a thing, idea, or belief system across geographical and cultural boundaries, often with a temporal delay. In commercial exchanges, this interaction typically requires specialised institutional arrangements, as strangers from different backgrounds can seem unpredictable and potentially threatening. While centuries of mediation by institutions such as the trade diaspora aimed to reduce cultural differences, some diaspora groups actively created complex systems of social control to prevent their travelling merchants from "going native" and to preserve the integrity of their original culture. However, a more insightful approach is to view identity not as a fixed model but as something that develops through innovative constructions during intense

moments of cross-cultural contact. This process suggests that individuals often inhabit a "space between paradigmatic 'cultures'". In this context, exchange involves not just a tangible object or a misunderstood narrative, but often an intangible cultural idea or belief interpreted by an individual patron or an anonymous artisan.

Understanding the mobility of religious and cultural elements requires a shift in paradigms beyond the usual view of spread through gradual diffusion or contact expansion. Scholars propose that a model of "long-distance transmission" better explains the movement of traditions like Buddhism, especially across transit zones between South Asia and China. This model is important because movement over large distances inevitably involves significant transformation of Buddhist ideas, symbols, and institutions as they encounter and adapt to local cultures. This process is often examined through a network approach, which traces the "flow" of material and cultural goods via interconnected "conduits" and "nodes" of economic, political, or religious power. These religious networks frequently overlap with the routes and hubs established for commercial exchange.

A compelling example of this dynamic creation of hybrid identity is seen in the late sixth-century stone funerary furniture excavated in North China, belonging to Sogdian immigrants. The Sogdians were the main group involved in trade along the Silk Road and were often described as nomads without a fixed nation. Their tomb furnishings—which include enclosed coffins, open platform couches, and house-shaped sarcophagi—were locally made but featured a confusing variety of imagery drawing from Chinese, Zoroastrian, and Central Asian traditions. For example, Sogdian structures were decorated with Zoroastrian-inspired motifs such as the fire altar, sometimes attended by a half-man, half-bird magus whose mouth was covered with a padām. Yet, these elements were incorporated into Chinese tomb structures. The depiction of long-distance aristocratic activities, like hunting, feasting, and the use of ox-drawn carts and horses—symbols of elite status in North China—created a shared social connection with local elites. This merging of Sogdian ancestral links, Zoroastrian ritual references, and Chinese elite material culture exemplifies a deliberate and active construction of identity that did not depend on strict regional allegiance, thus accurately reflecting the occupants' position within a "space between" conflicting cultural networks.

This examines the theoretical models and material evidence for how continuous cross-cultural interaction led to the formation of hybrid identities, rather than the simple adoption of one culture over another.

3.2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ARTISTIC EXCHANGE

The theoretical framework for artistic exchange, championed by scholars like Bonnie Cheng, views cross-cultural interaction as an inherently challenging subject that necessarily involves the transfer of a thing, an idea, or a belief system across different spaces and places. This process fundamentally includes a temporal aspect, or delay, during which an object or concept moves through various individuals who then transmit or reinterpret it. Objects involved in this process can be tangible results of exchange, such as Roman glassware or Bactrian silver, which are foreign imports taken directly from one location to another. Alternatively, they can serve as catalysts for subsequent adaptation, being transformed or reimagined through formal, iconographic, or technical means. The transmission of an exotic motif can generally be traced through stages: insertion, adaptation, and integration.

However, the framework critiques traditional methods of analysis, especially when applied to complex artefacts that resist simple classification. When examining a locally crafted object, the exchange may involve an intangible cultural idea or belief interpreted by an individual patron or an anonymous artisan, rather than just a misunderstood story or form. Tracing such

transformation routes is often hampered by a lack of evidence or the difficulty of knowing whether the imagery was inspired by direct contact, a portable depiction, or a purely imaginative creation or misinterpretation. Traditional studies often try to link complex objects to specific cultures, judging their iconography against visual standards from distant regions. This approach risks missing the creativity involved in the process of exchange.

Therefore, Cheng suggests that the most effective theoretical approach is to concentrate not on following static models, but on viewing artifacts as innovative creations formed during moments of intense interaction. This perspective shifts analysis away from isolated fragments and towards the broader view of complex identities. The observed diversity of artistic elements and burial practices in transitional geographical spaces indicates that these individuals actively crafted an identity that exists between paradigmatic "cultures". This method highlights that identity is relational and dynamically constructed from a network of existing traditions, leading to the reimagining of traditions as acts of originality within culturally complex environments.

3.2.2 Case Study: Sogdian Funerary Art in North China

The Sogdian funerary art of North China offers a vital example of hybrid identity, demonstrating the complex merging of cultures facilitated by the Silk Road trade during a time of political unrest in the late sixth century. The individuals buried in these large tombs were often Sogdian immigrants, seen as itinerants without a fixed nation, mainly engaged in trade activities and holding senior administrative or religious roles such as sabao.

These funerary pieces generally take the form of locally crafted stone furniture, including enclosed coffins, open platform-like couches (e.g., Kang Ye, An Jia), and house-shaped sarcophagi (e.g., Wirkak, Yu Hong), often found near Chang'an (modern Xi'an), the eastern end of the Silk Road. This funerary furniture acted as a canvas for a diverse and sometimes conflicting array of iconography, implying that the occupants actively constructed identities that existed in a "space between paradigmatic 'cultures'."

3.2.3 Hybridity in Iconography and Ritual

The most explicit references to the Sogdian homeland and their Zoroastrian-inspired beliefs include representations of the fire altar, often the most frequently recurring motif. This altar is sometimes depicted being tended by a half-man, half-bird magus wearing a padām (mouth cover) to prevent the pollution of the sacred fire, as seen on Wirkak's sarcophagus. Other overtly Sogdian scenes include depictions of the soul's journey, such as the Cinwad Bridge, and representations of Zoroastrian funerary rituals. Furthermore, these objects frequently portray Sogdian characters, identifiable by their Central Asian features (long hair, large noses) and attire, engaged in activities such as hunting, banqueting, and encamping in domed yurts, emphasising their origins and itinerant lifestyle.

Despite their Central Asian roots, the Sogdians intentionally incorporated elements that connected them with local Chinese elites, demonstrating a process of acculturation. They adopted Chinese burial practices, particularly inhumation (using large stone sarcophagi), contrasting with the traditional aristocratic Sogdian practice of depositing bones in small clay or stone ossuaries (astōdān). Imagery also featured typical Chinese motifs, such as the four directional animals (dragon, tiger, phoenix, black warrior) on Li Dan’s coffin. More importantly, the Sogdians displayed scenes of aristocratic pursuits (dynamic hunt scenes and lavish feasts) that fostered a shared social bond with the Chinese elite. This commonality is clearly shown by the presence of the ox-drawn cart and caparisoned horse, recognised markers of elevated status and elite transport in North China, appearing on several Sogdian couches.

The resulting art often reflects a creative synthesis where local artisans reinterpreted foreign influences. For example, the frequently depicted domed pavilion is described as characteristic of Sogdian architecture, "according to the Chinese imagination," often incorporating Buddhist elements in its details. Importantly, while the Sogdians embraced Chinese structures and aristocratic themes, they also selectively rejected other local customs, such as burying the body with large quantities of ceramic figurines, maintaining an ambiguous identity that existed between cultural boundaries. This complex funerary art shows how material culture served not merely to display wealth but also as a means of actively constructing an identity suited to the dynamic, multi-cultural environment of sixth-century North China.

3.2.4 Constructed Identity

The diverse relationships of the Sogdian inhabitants with Central Asia and local communities, along with the wide range of artistic and burial customs (such as Chinese tomb traditions combined with Central Asian motifs), exemplify an active process of identity formation that goes beyond strict regional ties. The Sogdians served as essential intermediaries, transferring not only goods but also ideas, services, and traditions, reflecting their connected role within the trade network.

3.3 MATERIAL CULTURE AND REGIONAL IMPACTS

The impact of ancient commerce is vividly documented in the Material Culture and Regional Impacts across three geographically distinct spheres (Europe beyond the limes, Africa (Sahara and East Coast), and Asia), highlighting the diversity of Roman influence and the mutual exchange of luxury and essential goods.

3.3.1 Roman Imports in "Free Germany" (Europe)

In Europe, Roman commercial influence extended into "Free Germany," covering areas such as Scandinavia, Latvia, Poland, and South Russia. The main trade routes included the Amber route, which linked the Danube frontier (at Carnuntum) with the Baltic. Although early trade was unregulated, after A.D. 173, Marcus Aurelius established fixed trading locations. The majority of Roman imports consisted of bronze vessels, wares, and glass. Archaeological evidence supports this, revealing over 850 bronze vessels in 'Free Germany,' with about half concentrated in Jutland and the Baltic islands. These include types such as the 'Hemmoor' buckets and 'Westland' bronze vessels. Glassware was less common initially, with only fourteen pieces attributed to the first or early second century A.D., although types like the ribbed or pillared bowl were plentiful. The most significant evidence comes from the "Chieftains' Graves of the Lübsow group" in Pomerania. Burials in this group yielded Roman luxury imports, notably banqueting sets comprised of silver or glass cups, bronze wine-buckets, dishes, jugs, and strainers—items whose exotic nature helped define the social hierarchy of the deceased. Roman coinage also circulated extensively, with gold eventually replacing silver as the primary currency or treasure. Hoards of third and fourth-century coins discovered here likely resulted from military victories or successful raids against the empire.

3.3.2 Roman Contact in Africa (Sahara and East Coast)

Roman trade also extended into two major African regions: the Sahara and the East Coast. In the Sahara, Roman influence facilitated the movement of goods, especially the trade that transported ivory northwards across the desert to coastal cities. Excavations in the Fezzan area have revealed Roman-imported items, including amphorae, glassware, lamps, and terra sigillata. For instance, a Roman lamp was found in the 'palace' of Tin Hinan in the Hoggar. On the East Coast and in the Red Sea region, the port of Adulis functioned as a hub for African and Eastern commerce. Adulis, which enjoyed special legal privileges, received imports such

as gold and silver plate, iron, and muslin from India. Although early excavations suggest activity around the time of the Periplus (c. 10 BC to AD 360), archaeological evidence at Adulis and Aksum is biased towards the later Roman/Byzantine period (c. fifth to seventh century). It is dominated by Aksumite wares, reflecting the ascendancy of that kingdom.

3.3.3 Cross-Cultural Material Impact in Asia

In Asia, trade was marked by a significant adverse balance against Rome, as noted by sources like Pliny the Elder, who estimated that India absorbed "no less than fifty million sesterces" of Rome's wealth each year, selling merchandise at "a hundred times its prime cost". The main imports from Rome consisted of large quantities of gold and silver coins, mainly used in South India as bullion. Also imported were Roman fine wares, although many amphorae previously thought to be Roman are now believed to be of Mesopotamian origin, such as the Torpedo jars, which may have carried Persian wine. Indian exports to the West were highly prized, including pepper, pearls, ivory, silk cloth, and precious stones. The westward movement of luxury goods is famously demonstrated by an ivory statuette of the goddess Lakshmi, produced in the Deccan and archaeologically recovered at Pompeii. Local Indian craftsmen also mimicked Western artistic themes; an example is the intaglio of an Indian woman carved on a pottery shard from Arikamedu. Additionally, Sri Lanka (Taprobane), known to the Romans since the time of Claudius, became a major centre, amassing tens of thousands of Late Roman bronze and copper coins from the 4th and 5th centuries, alongside Sassanian and Byzantine coinage later on. The Chinese received Roman luxury goods such as gold, silver, coral, amber, and glass in exchange for silk and lacquerware, with the Hou-han-shu noting that these imported products of Da Qin (the Roman Empire) were "the various and rare objects from foreign states".

3.4 IDEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY TRANSFORMATIONS

The dynamic trade networks across Eurasia served as channels for essential Ideological and Literary Transformations, driven by the mingling of goods, people, and belief systems among varied cultural regions.

3.4.1 Religious Diffusion and Institutional Transformation

The silk trade itself coincided with and spurred three major areas of religious movements in late antiquity and the post-classical era: the movement between China and India, the expansion between the Byzantine Empire and Western Europe, and the proliferation within the Islamic world. Central Asia acted as a crucial crossroads where silk exchanges occurred among followers of multiple faiths, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. This trade infrastructure granted religious agents high mobility, allowing Buddhist preachers, pilgrims, and traders to become key carriers of silks into India. The influence was not limited to Buddhism; in the Christian world, the rise of the cult of saints initiated a trade in relics of saints, pieces of the Cross, and other sacred items, reflecting devotional practices found in Asian regions. As a result, European Christians eagerly sought luxury silks from the East, with textiles of Sassanian, Central Asian, and Islamic origin often ending up in church treasuries across Europe.

The creation of new silk markets in the expanding Islamic world, enabled by geopolitical changes like the Latin occupation of Antioch, further ensured that Islamic silks reached European churches. The process of religious transmission required significant adaptation; moving beyond the idea of gradual diffusion, the long-distance transmission model suggests that the spread of faiths like Buddhism across vast distances and transit zones involved a high level of transformation and re-contextualisation of ideas, symbols, and institutions. The endurance of Buddhist institutions outside the subcontinent is credited to their capacity to

operate as adaptable systems capable of responding to shifting circumstances and engaging diverse local audiences. Internally, the monastic community faced early schismatic tensions, such as doctrinal and disciplinary disputes over "The Ten Points" (or Indulgences) at the Second Council held at Vaiśālī, which ultimately contributed to divisions and the rise of philosophical schools like the Mahāsānghikas, precursors to Mahāyāna philosophy.

3.4.2 Literary Reconfiguration and Political Ideology

The dynamic political and religious setting of the early centuries C.E. drove major ideological changes in key religious texts. An analysis of the oldest surviving Parvan list of the epic Mahābhārata (found in the Ms. Spitzer fragments written in Kushāna script) shows that the epic was in an earlier phase of development compared to later versions. Importantly, this list leaves out the Anuśāsana Parvan (Book XIII). Scholars think this section was added later or was a fabrication because it strongly and exaggeratedly defends "the claims of the Brahmans to supremacy over all other strata of society." This extreme ideological stance is seen as a possible Brahmanical response to the policies of powerful rulers who challenged the traditional Vedic social hierarchy. Chief among these rulers was the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka, who, as early as the mid-third century B.C., maintained diplomatic relations with Hellenistic kings such as Antiochus Theos and Ptolemy Philadelphos, suggesting a high level of economic interaction rooted in trade. Although Aśoka identified himself as a lay Buddhist (upāsaka) and visited Buddhist sites, his public inscriptions promoted a broadly conceived Dharma—a moral code. He supported generosity among all sects and made donations to both Śramanas and Brahmins, providing institutional backing to spiritual movements that competed with Brahmanical authority. Therefore, the literary development of the Mahābhārata mirrors the ideological conflicts generated by the vast social and political support stemming from trans-regional trade networks.

3.5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND TEXTUAL MANIFESTATIONS

archaeological and textual manifestations of this cross-cultural exchange, particularly detailing the material flow of goods across Europe, Africa, and Asia, and the documentary evidence that illuminates the nature of these transactions.

3.5.1 Material Culture and Regional Impacts

Roman Exports and Frontier Commerce in Europe and Africa

The study of material culture shows that Roman commercial influence spread widely, often bypassing or extending beyond the established imperial borders. In Europe, the region called "Free Germany" (stretching north and east into Norway, Sweden, Latvia, Poland, and South Russia) was penetrated by Roman trade through various routes. The most accessible route was the "amber route," which began at Carnuntum on the Danube and traversed the tributary valley of the March towards the German plain and the Baltic. Trade along these northern routes was initially unrestrained, as demonstrated by Nero’s agent, Julius, who travelled to the Baltic coast to trade for amber. However, this openness was later restricted: after the defeat of the Marcomanni in A.D. 173, Emperor Marcus Aurelius established fixed trading sites. Archaeological finds from this region are most notable in burial remains, notably the "Chieftains' Graves of the Lübsow group" in Pomerania. These graves display a striking uniformity in burial customs, featuring Roman imports such as specialised banqueting vessels- cups of silver or glass, bronze wine-buckets, dishes, jugs, strainers, and 'saucepans'- as well as toilet objects like mirrors and combs. Importantly, these imports often included worn and patched vessels, antique or decayed heirlooms by the time of burial, such as a patera bearing the stamp of L. Ansius Diodorus.

Similarly, Roman influence spread into Africa, where the occupation of Algeria and Libya led to the development of a more definitive system of frontier control based on intermittent artificial barriers, or limes. Roman expansion into the Sahara, particularly the Fezzan region, is evidenced by graves and cemeteries containing various imports, including amphorae, glass, lamps, and terra sigillata from the first century. Along the East African coast, ports such as Adulis served as vital hubs for Oriental trade, receiving imports like gold and silver plate, iron, and muslin from India. During the Early Roman period, connections between the Roman world and Adulis and Aksum were relatively undeveloped, but from the fourth century onwards, there was an increase in Aksumite products at Late Roman Berenike.

3.5.2 The Maritime Axis and the Indian Exchange

The maritime trade between the Roman world and Asia is richly documented through both classical texts and archaeological finds, revealing a reciprocal exchange with India that resulted in a considerable drain of Roman wealth.

Textual and Regulatory Framework: The Greek merchant's handbook, The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (PME), offers a detailed outline of Rome's eastern trade. It emphasises the importance of understanding the seasonal and predictable monsoon winds for direct, long-distance voyages across the Arabian Sea. Pliny the Elder even estimated that India absorbed no less than fifty million sesterces of the Roman Empire’s wealth each year. To oversee this profitable yet challenging trade, Roman commerce was tightly regulated, including a mandatory 25% state tax on imports. The text mentions Red Sea trading ports, such as Myos Hormos and Berenike, and notes other ports "designated" for particular functions or types of goods, with Western traders sometimes granted special privileges that might include a Roman customs levy or garrison.

Commodity Flows and Imbalance: India’s exports consisted mainly of high-value, low-bulk luxury items from the Malabar coast, such as fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, cinnamon, transparent stones of various kinds, diamonds, sapphires, and tortoiseshell. Pepper was a key export, often purchased by Rome at a hundred times its prime cost. In exchange, the chief imports from the West included coinage (mainly gold and silver), as well as topaz, fine textiles, figured linens, antimony, coral, crude glass, and copper.

Numismatic and Ceramic Evidence: The concentration of Roman coins, particularly gold solidi from the fourth and fifth centuries, in hoards across India, especially in Coimbatore, linked to the gem trade, and the Krishna River region in Andhra Pradesh, confirms a trade imbalance. These valuable coins were mostly used as bullion rather than systematically reused as currency. Reciprocal exchange is evidenced by the distribution of Indian pottery in the Red Sea region. Distinctive Indian Fine Wares, such as Rouletted Ware (RW) and Organic Black Ware (OBW)—which analysis suggests originated from North India and the Chandraketugarh region—have been found at Roman Red Sea ports like Myos Hormos and Berenike. Conversely, Western imports included amphorae (for wine, oil, and garum), which have been uncovered in the Deccan alongside Roman fine wares like sigillata and glass, confirming the extensive material footprint of the Greco-Roman world.

3.6 SUMMARY

This unit examines how material exchange fostered widespread cultural syntheses across Eurasia and Africa. Theoretically, cross-cultural interaction is seen not merely as diffusion but as the creation of innovative constructs in a "space between paradigmatic 'cultures'".

This process is exemplified by Sogdian funerary art in North China, where late sixth-century stone furniture (coffins and couches) blended Sogdian, Zoroastrian, and Chinese imagery.

Sogdian immigrants, often holding the high commercial rank of sabao, actively constructed this hybrid identity by adopting local practices like inhumation while incorporating Central Asian elements such as the fire altar.

The movement of goods vividly shows the extensive imperial influence beyond the Imperial Frontiers. Roman imports such as silver cups, bronze wine-buckets, and glassware reached "Free Germany" (including Pomerania) via routes like the Amber Road, indicating social stratification in the Lübsow group burials. Along the maritime route to Asia, trade was heavily regulated, including a mandatory 25% state tax on imports. Ancient sources, such as Pliny, expressed concern over the large trade deficit favouring India, which took in significant amounts of Roman gold and silver coinage. Archaeological finds, such as Indian Rouletted Ware found at Roman Red Sea ports and Italian wares uncovered at Indian sites like Arikamedu, confirm this extensive and regulated global exchange.

Ideologically, trade networks enabled significant religious and political change. The movement of valuable goods like silk coincided with key areas of religious activity. The dissemination of Buddhism depended on a model of long-distance transmission, which required considerable adaptation to local cultures. The Buddhist Sangha gained support from merchant patrons, whose donations of material gifts were exchanged for religious merit, leading to the growth of monasteries along major trade routes. Additionally, diplomatic exchanges, such as those recorded between Emperor Aśoka and Hellenistic rulers (Antiochus Theos, Ptolemy Philadelphos), underscore the political significance of these connections. Literary developments, such as the suggested later interpolation of the Anuśāsana Parvan in the Mahābhārata, also reflect ideological disputes driven by changing patronage.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT IV

AGENTS OF TRADE AND CULTURAL TRANSACTIONS: PEOPLE AND LOCALITIES

4.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon successful completion of this unit, students will be able to:

1. Analyze the significant role and contribution of specific individuals (agents), including rulers, religious figures, and merchants, in initiating and sustaining cross-cultural interactions.
2. Examine how specific localities and regional nodes along land and maritime routes served as centers for cultural production, political power, and trade, thereby shaping patterns of transmission.
3. Evaluate the nature of cultural change and hybridity (as observed in art, literature, and religious traditions) by linking it directly to the mobility and patronage provided by these key agents and locations.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the diverse peoples and localities that acted as dynamic agents in the broad trade and cultural exchanges connecting India with the Greco-Roman world, East Asia, and Tibet during early times. Instead of viewing exchange as an abstract process, this unit emphasises the important role and contribution of specific individuals and key geographical locations that shaped the transmission of ideas, materials, and belief systems across different cultural horizons.

The human agents involved in cross-cultural exchanges fall into several categories, including influential imperial patrons, religious missionaries, and mobile traders. Rulers such as the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka established long-distance networks, utilising his high-level diplomatic relations with Hellenistic monarchs like Antiochus Theos and Ptolemy Philadelphos, providing a tangible foundation for cultural exchange. Aśoka also helped spread Saddhamma by sending missionaries to various countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and by promoting infrastructure maintenance, such as digging wells and building rest houses along routes to ease travel. Later, the Kuṣāṇa Emperor Kaniṣka is similarly respected, with his reign credited with fostering the greatest development of the Indo-Greek school of Buddhist art and overseeing a vast territory that connected India, Central Asia, and Iran.

Religious and commercial agents often exploited overlapping networks. Buddhist monks and missionaries, such as Kāśyapa Mātanga (a native of central India who travelled to China to translate the Sūtra, Forty-two Sections in the first century A.D.), and the Tibetan courtier Thon-mī Sambhoṭa (who studied in Magadha, India, to develop an alphabetic script for Tibet), were the main agents in the long-distance transmission of ideological material. Commercial exchange was driven by specialised groups, notably Sogdian merchants, described as itinerants without a fixed nation, who conducted mercantile activities along trans-Asian routes. Merchants feature prominently in canonical literature as benefactors who generated the wealth necessary to establish religious shrines and monasteries, highlighting the symbiosis between commerce and the Buddhist Sangha.

These agents depended on key localities and nodes that served as hubs for trade and translation.

- **Land Routes:** In the Northwest, Gandhāra was a crucial border region for contact between Indian, Hellenistic, and Iranian cultures. Taxila functioned as a major commercial hub for long-distance trade with Central Asia. Additionally, specific high-altitude routes, sometimes called capillary routes (such as those in the Upper Indus area), were marked with thousands of graffiti and petroglyphs left by monks and lay devotees earning spiritual merit during their journeys.
- **Maritime Routes:** In South India, the city of Arikamedu served as a vital Indo-Roman trading station (emporia). Its excavations revealed Roman imports such as Italian red-glazed 'Arretine ware' and amphorae, confirming an overseas contact period from the late first century B.C. to the third century A.D. The Roman world's activity mainly focused on the Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike, which were essential hubs for trade connecting to the East, including exports like pepper and aromatics.

Collectively, studying these specific individuals and geographical locations enables an in-depth analysis of the trade diaspora model, where specialised commercial communities settled as aliens in host towns, forming interconnected networks that crossed cultural boundaries and contributed to the complex cultural blends visible in the archaeological and literary records.

4.2 AGENTS OF RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

This section focuses on powerful figures who served as crucial catalysts in cross-cultural exchange. These individuals include both secular rulers (imperial patrons) and spiritual leaders (monks and missionaries). They actively sponsored, directed, and sometimes controlled the flow of religious ideas and material culture. Their actions established or maintained networks necessary for the transmission of ideas, materials, and belief systems across diverse cultural horizons.

4.2.1 Rulers and Imperial Patrons

Royal patronage played a decisive role in the expansion and consolidation of religious networks. Emperors used their political and material resources to facilitate mobility and provide resources for monastic growth.

Aśoka and Mauryan Networks

The Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (c. 273–236 BCE) stands as a monumental figure in the history of religious patronage. He is rightly looked upon as the first great royal patron of Buddhism. It was through his systematic efforts that Buddhism attained a prominent position both in India and abroad. Aśoka's reign began around 270 BCE, following a period of disputed succession. Pāli chronicles suggest a four-year hiatus between the death of his father, Bindusāra, and Aśoka's consecration. Buddhist literary sources paint Aśoka in his youth as a man of fierce temperament. They even referred to him as *Caṇḍāśoka* (fierce Aśoka).

The Transformation and *Dhammavijaya*

A major turning point in Aśoka's life was the invasion of Kalinga (modern Orissa). His thirteenth rock-edict confirms this invasion occurred eight years after his reign began. In this invasion, many thousands of men were killed. Thousands were carried off into captivity. Aśoka repented this tremendous loss of life. He decided to abandon all future military campaigns. Instead, he began pursuing religious conquests (*dhammavijaya*). He sought to spread among his subjects and people outside his kingdom a new life. This life focused on inculcating among them a love of piety and religion.

Aśoka defined *Dharma* in broad terms. This definition encompassed personal morality, social ethics, and religious piety. His core principles included compassion, generosity, truthfulness, and purity. These moral concepts were drawn from a wide range of values. These included orthodox Brahmanical perspectives and heterodox Buddhist, Jain, and possibly Ājīvika values. He wanted people to cultivate moral virtues such as the observance of truth, restraint, kindness, charity, purity, gentleness, respect, and obedience to elders and teachers. His Major Rock Edict defined the "gift of Dharma" (*Dhammadāna*) as good behavior towards slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, and generosity towards friends, acquaintances, relatives, *śramanas*, and Brahmins.

Religious Patronage and Tolerance

Aśoka was a committed Buddhist. He explicitly identified himself as a Buddhist lay follower (*upāsaka*) in fourteen versions of his Minor Rock Edicts. In his Bhabra edict, he paid reverence to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the *Sangha*. He undertook pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places. At twenty years into his reign, he visited the Lumbinī garden, where the Buddha was born. He erected a pillar bearing an inscription to commemorate this visit. Furthermore, he exempted the local people from paying taxes to his government. He also visited Bodh Gaya and Sarnath. These sites marked where the Buddha attained enlightenment and preached his first sermon.

However, Aśoka's patronage was not exclusive to the Buddhist *Sangha*. He advocated tolerance for all religious sects and denominations. He encouraged generosity towards all pious men, such as the *Śramaṇas*, Brahmins, Ājīvikas, and Jainas. His inscriptions recorded donations of caves to the Ājīvikas at Barabar. He encouraged his subjects to perform Dharma ceremonies which promoted donations to *śramanas* and Brahmins. His admonition against sectarian polemics likely reflected the intensive competition between *śramanas* and Brahmins for imperial patronage. He appears to have maintained a distinction between the official Dharma (general morality) and his personal commitment as a Buddhist devotee.

Diplomatic and Infrastructural Networks

Aśoka's political network provided a crucial impetus for the expansion of Buddhist institutions. The growth of Buddhism during his period is attributed to the relatively stable political and economic conditions, rather than solely to state patronage.

1. **Imperial Infrastructure:** Aśoka actively maintained and improved the communication networks of the Mauryan empire. He ordered the planting of trees for shade and the excavation of wells along long-distance routes for both animals and men. He commissioned the building of rest houses every nine miles. His edicts were carved on rocks and pillars, mostly at the periphery of his vast empire. These locations were typically on high roads or at places of pilgrimage. The distribution of his rock edicts at junctions of trade routes and in border areas demonstrates an extensive administrative system.
2. **Diplomatic Outreach:** Aśoka's diplomatic efforts further extended the networks of contact. In the Major Rock Edict (issued after his regnal year), he refers to five contemporary Hellenistic rulers. This formidable list includes:
    - **Antiochus II Theos**, King of Syria.
    - **Ptolemy II Philadelphus** (Tulamaya), King of Egypt.
    - **Antigonos Gonatas** (Antikini), King of Macedonia.
    - **Magas**, King of Cyrene (Maka), in North Africa.

◦ **Alexander of Epirus** (Alikasudara), King of Epirus.

Even without archaeological proof, it is reasonable to suspect that this "high-level neighbourliness" had a material basis in trade. This diplomatic contact established a firm synchronism between the Mauryan period and Hellenistic kings, forming the "bedrock of the chronology of Indian history".

Buddhist literary sources claim that Aśoka sent religious missions to various countries. These included missions to the land of the Yavanas (Ionian Greeks), Gandhāra, and Kashmir. They also mention regions as far south as Ceylon and *Suvarṇa-bhūmi* (Land of Gold, possibly Malaya and Sumatra). The Pāli chronicles, such as the *Mahāvamsa*, specifically record the mission to Ceylon. This mission was organized under the leadership of Thera Mahinda (Aśoka's son) and his daughter, Saṅghamitrā. The Ceylonese king, Devānaṃpiya Tissa, was deeply impressed and accepted Buddhism. This led to the establishment of the *Sangha* and the transplantation of a branch of the Bodhi tree.

The foundations of *Dharmarājika stūpas* at Taxila and Butkara I in the Swat valley are often dated to the Mauryan period. Although direct Aśokan inscriptions are not found at these monuments, the firm attestation of a Mauryan imperial presence in the Northwest, shown by his Kharosthī edicts at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi, supports the consensus view of their early foundations. These political and religious dynamics provided the crucial impetus for the eventual expansion of Buddhist institutions, which survived the downfall of the Mauryan dynasty.

Kuṣāṇa Rulers and Trade Unity

The Kuṣāṇa Empire served as a major force in Eurasian history. It was critical in accelerating cross-cultural exchange and religious transmission. The Kuṣāṇas belonged to a branch of the Yuezhi. The Yuezhi had migrated from eastern Central Asia to Bactria. This movement resulted from pressure from other nomadic groups during the second century BCE. The Kuṣāṇas, known as the Guishuang tribe in Chinese sources, subsequently subdued four other Yuezhi tribes. They then formed an empire through territorial expansion, following an age-old cyclical process common in Inner Asia.

Early Expansion and Imperial Control

The early Kuṣāṇas followed migration routes similar to those of the Indo-Greeks and Śakas into South Asia's northwestern borderlands. Kujūla Kadphises established the Kuṣāṇa line of emperors. He expanded his domain across the Hindu Kush to Gandhāra, Swat, and Taxila. This expansion occurred by the middle of the first century CE. During this time, his power overlapped with the Gondopharid rulers. Kujūla Kadphises lived past eighty years of age. He conquered territories of the Indo-Parthians, the Kabul valley, Puskalāvatī, and Gandhāra. He acquired significant titles, including "Kusana Yabgu steadfast in dharma" and "Great King, King of Kings". His coins were patterned after those of Hermaios, the last Indo-Greek ruler of the Kabul valley.

The empire reached its greatest extent under Kaniska. Kaniska's reign likely began in the second century CE. His realm extended from the Oxus basin to northern India. The Kuṣāṇa Empire effectively unified major nodes of the northern routes (*Uttarāpatha*). This unified network extended from Bactria to the Ganges delta. This control of the main artery facilitated the long-distance movement of merchants and missionaries. They traveled between South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia.

The Rabatak inscription (northern Afghanistan) claims that Kaniska captured the cities of Sāketa, Kauśāmbī, Pātaliputra, and Śrī Campā. By administering a network from the Oxus

basin to the Ganges delta, the Kuṣāṇas effectively unified the major nodes of the Northern Route. Chinese historians referred to the Kuṣāṇa dynasty as a "very powerful house". Chinese generals who fought them in Central Asia did not always emerge victorious.

Trade and Economic Prosperity

The Kuṣāṇa period (1st to 3rd centuries CE) was marked by a general policy favorable towards trade and cultural exchange. The stability of the overland commercial routes generated material surpluses. These surpluses provided resources used to support religious institutions. The Kuṣāṇa power was deeply linked to long-distance trade in luxury items. These luxury goods included silk from China, jade from Khotan, and lapis lazuli from northeastern Afghanistan. These commodities appeared in lists of the "seven jewels" (*saptaratna*) mentioned in Buddhist texts.

The Kuṣāṇas controlled a chain of cities important for trade. This chain included Termez in the Oxus valley, Begram in the Hindu Kush, Peshawar in Gandhāra, Taxila in the Punjab, and Mathura on the Yamuna River. This alignment linked the multicultural empire to the *Uttarāpatha*.

A major discovery at Begram (ancient Kapiśa) casts light on the organization of trade within Kuṣāṇa frontiers. Begram was an important town on the trade route linking Northern India with Central Asia. Two rooms in a large building, likely a palace, contained a large collection of "exotic things of beauty and worth". These included items from the West, the Far East, and India. These rooms probably served as a customs depository. Dues collected from passing caravans were stored here. This suggests that Chinese merchants on the silk route likely paid similar dues to pass through Kuṣāṇa territory.

The Kuṣāṇas were not just beneficiaries of trade. They facilitated it through their control. They were able to act as intermediaries between trans-Asian overland and maritime networks. This occurred despite not directly administering western Indian ports or the silk routes in the Tarim Basin.

Religious Patronage and Cultural Synthesis

Kaniska is a highly esteemed figure in Northern Buddhist traditions. He is often compared to a second Aśoka. He is credited with constructing the monumental Shāh-jī-kī Dherī *stūpa* in Purusapura (Peshawar). He is also linked to a major monastery in Peshawar.

However, Kaniska's religious policy was broad. His coins reflect support for a wide range of deities. These deities included Iranian, Hellenistic, and Indian figures. The Buddha's image was not used on Kuṣāṇa coins before Kaniska, nor after him. This suggests that the Buddha was one among many deities selected to express the king's concern for prosperity, military triumph, and legitimacy. Kaniska's support for Buddhism might have been a political strategy. This strategy aimed to promote his status as a *cakravartin* (universal ruler) by making donations to diverse groups across his empire.

The Kuṣāṇa Empire was the result of a merging of various Iranian and Greek influences. This led to hybrid cultural expressions. Conditions under Kuṣāṇa rule fostered an increase in the production of Buddhist art and literature. Buddhist traditions like Mahāyāna began to emerge during this time. The time of Huviska (Kaniska's successor) was a pivotal time for the development of the Mahāyāna tradition.

The later Kuṣāṇas showed a trend towards greater Indianization. Vāsudeva's name is Vaisnava. His coins feature images of Śiva (Ooesho) standing in front of Nandin (his bull *vāhana*).

The Kuṣāṇas facilitated commercial exchanges and cross-cultural contact. This was a significant catalyst for the expansion of Buddhist networks during the first three centuries CE. The longevity of the Kuṣāṇa legacy is evident in later dynasties like the Guptas. The Guptas emulated the Kuṣāṇas by adopting the imperial title *Mahārājādhirāja*. They also struck coins based on Kuṣāṇa models.

The Kuṣāṇa Empire, by controlling the central nodes of the *Uttarāpatha*, functioned like a colossal toll bridge spanning the Eurasian continent. This stability guaranteed smooth transit for goods (like Chinese silk and Indian gems) and for people (like Buddhist monks and missionaries), transforming the empire into a massive engine for not only economic profit but also profound ideological and artistic synthesis.

Monks and Missionaries: Directing Ideological Flow

Religious specialists, including monks, nuns, pilgrims, and missionaries, acted as essential agents for the long-distance transmission of Buddhist ideology, literature, and material culture. Their mobility, which often overlapped with commercial and political itineraries, was sanctioned by the Buddha's purported injunction to "wander the path for the benefit and satisfaction of many people" in order to "teach the dharma". These individuals directed the flow of Buddhist traditions, adapting them to new environments and host cultures through translation and teaching.

Transmission to China and Central Asia

The earliest expansion of Buddhism to China and Central Asia was heavily reliant on foreign monks and translators. Scholars often characterize this initial movement as "long-distance transmission," rather than gradual diffusion. This early phase featured incidental and intermittent contact, long routes, and the unsystematic borrowing of elements detached from their original contexts.

The first introduction of Buddhism to China is traditionally linked to the legendary dream of Emperor Mingdi of the Han dynasty (58–76 AD). In this dream, which occurred around 64 AD, the emperor saw a tall man, all golden, whom ministers identified as the divinity Fo (Buddha) in the West. The emperor sent a mission to India and present-day Afghanistan. The envoys returned with texts and statues from the Kuṣāṇa land, along with the first two translators of Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Chinese. These were two Indian religious men, She Moteng (Kāśyapa Mātanga) and Zhu Falan (Dharmaratna). They settled in the capital, Luoyang, where the emperor built them the Temple of the White Horse (*Baimasi*).

The rapid growth of the new religion in China began in the middle of the century AD. This was largely due to the work of translators and, in some cases, imperial protection. The origins of these early translators reflected the geographical patterns of long-distance transmission from northwestern South Asia and western Central Asia.

- **An Shigao**, a Parthian prince, arrived in Luoyang around 148 AD. He translated thirty-five texts, having renounced his right to the throne.
- **An Xuan**, an Iranian merchant, arrived in Luoyang around 181 AD. He began translating and teaching there.
- **Lokakshema** (Zhiloujiachen), a Yuezhi monk, translated numerous Mahāyāna texts in the second half of the century.

The most famous translator of the century was Dharmaraksha (Zhu Fahu in Chinese). He was descended from a Yuezhi family that had lived in the Dunhuang military post for generations.

Dharmaraksha traveled widely with his master to acquire texts. He encountered thirty-six different languages, written in a variety of scripts. He returned to China and devoted his life to translating 149 texts. These foreign masters were often assisted by international translation committees that included Parthians, Sogdians, Khotanese, Kashmiris, and Yuezhi.

Later, the monk Kumārajīva (344–413 CE) was considered one of the four greatest Chinese translators. Born in Kucha (Qiuci), he became renowned for his understanding of the sacred texts. He studied under masters of Jibin (Kashmir/Gandhāra). Kumārajīva and his collaborators developed a highly standardized, homogenous scriptural language for Chinese translations.

Chinese pilgrims also undertook immense journeys to acquire canonical texts and venerate holy sites. Faxian (who traveled 399–414 AD) was one of the first to fulfill these goals. He found masters in India able to transmit texts orally, but the written texts themselves were scarce. He finally obtained a copy of the Vinayapiṭaka at Pātaliputra. Later, Xuanzang (603–664) and Yijing (c. 670) followed the land and sea routes to India to study in monasteries and find texts.

Monks were often voluntary or involuntary carriers of silk or agents in silk transactions. The famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang was equipped with many silks and other gifts by the king of Gaochang during his journey in the early century. Other pilgrims, such as Yijing, received silk donations from lay devotees in China. Both Chinese and Indian monks residing in Tang China received silks or silk ritual robes as rewards from the Tang emperors for their religious services and translations. The purple robe was established as the highest badge of honor a monk could receive during the mid-Tang dynasty.

Transmission to Southern Countries

Buddhist monks also pioneered transmission via maritime routes to the South. Gunavarman, an Indian monk, demonstrated missionary zeal. Thanks to him, Buddhism was introduced into Java and the island of Śrī-vijaya. By the last quarter of the century AD, Śrī-vijaya was a very important center of Buddhist learning in the Southern Asia islands. The Buddhist priests in Śrī-vijaya numbered more than a thousand. They studied the Buddhist subjects found in Madyadeśa (India).

The Mahāvamsa, one of the Ceylonese traditions, records that Emperor Aśoka (c. 273–236 BCE) organized a network of missions to preach Buddhism inside and outside India. He sent his son, Thera Mahinda, and his daughter, Saṅghamitrā, to Laṅkā or Ceylon. The king, Devānaṃpiyatissa (247–207 BCE), was deeply impressed and accepted Buddhism. Thousands of men and women embraced the new faith. Monasteries were erected, and Queen Anulā desired the *pabbajjā* ordination. As women were not allowed to be ordained without permission, Aśoka sent distinguished nuns, including Saṅghamitrā, to Ceylon. The transplantation of a branch of the Bodhi tree also served as a source of pious enthusiasm.

Establishment in Tibet

The development of Buddhism in Tibet began during the reign of its first great emperor, Srong-brtsan-sgam-po (627–649/650 AD). He decided to introduce literacy to facilitate the coming of Knowledge, especially Buddhism, from India. The emperor selected a brilliant courtier, Thon-mī Sambhoṭa, to go to the famous seats of learning in southern India to study epigraphy, phonetics, and grammar. Thon-mī returned around 647 AD. He devised an alphabetic script for the Tibetan language and prepared the first Tibetan translations of Sanskrit Buddhist works. He is thus recognized as the father of Tibetan literature.

Later, King Khri Srong-lde-brtsan (c. 754–797 AD) invited Śāntarakṣita, a professor from Nālandā University, to Tibet to spread the genuine teachings of Indic Buddhism. Śāntarakṣita helped found the first great Tibetan monastery, the bSam-yas monastery, modeling it on the

monastic educational center of Odantapurī in Bihar. He also established the foundation for translation activities and helped prepare the first catalogue of translated Buddhist works. Śāntarakṣita's master plan aimed to introduce the academic tradition of Nālandā to Tibet, including subjects like lyrics, drama, rhetorics, and mathematics.

Following a period of calamity, Śāntarakṣita recommended Padmasambhava of the Swāt Valley. Padmasambhava was invited because he was highly versed in the esoteric methods and beliefs of Tantrism. He was considered the powerful apostle of Tantrism. He was uniquely suited to impress a populace steeped in primitive sorcery and charlatanism. His efforts completed the mission of re-establishing faith in the enlightened teachings of Buddhism.

The translation work begun in the century reached its climax during the reign of Ral-pa-can (815–838 AD). He issued orders to maintain uniformity in technical terms and modes of expression in translations. The Tibetan Tripitaka, comprising the Kanjur and Tanjur, contains about 4,500 titles and texts. The Tibetan translations are known for their great fidelity. By the century, the coming of **Atiśa** (982–1054 AD) brought the last great spiritual impetus from India. His arrival helped reorganize the existing Buddhism and discouraged magical practices, emphasizing moral virtues and compassion.

4.3 AGENTS OF COMMERCIAL EXCHANGE AND HYBRID IDENTITY

This section examines how merchants, trade groups, and the commodities they transported acted as fundamental agents for the flow of material and cultural goods, driving both religious patronage and artistic synthesis across Eurasia.

4.3.1 Merchants and the Trade Diaspora Model

The study of cross-cultural trade networks necessitates focusing on merchants and organized trade groups. These groups acted as primary agents for the flow of material goods and cultural exchange. The earliest and most common institutional structure for cross-cultural trade, particularly after the emergence of city life, was the trade diaspora. This term comes from the Greek word for "scattering". It describes an interrelated network of commercial communities. Commercial specialists would relocate physically from their home communities. They lived as aliens in a distant town. These alien merchants learned the local language, customs, and commercial practices of their hosts. They then served as cross-cultural brokers. They encouraged trade between the host society and traveling people of their own origin.

Characteristics of Trade Diasporas

Trade diasporas have existed across every continent since the beginning of urban life. They were especially important during the period between the invention of agriculture and the rise of the industrial age. The longevity of trade diasporas depends on mediation needs. Over time, centuries of mediation often reduced cross-cultural differences. This eventually reduced the need for specialized cross-cultural brokers.

A key characteristic of these settlements was physical and social separation from the host community. This segregation was vital for preserving the cultural integrity of the trade community. Without cultural barriers, the alien traders risked assimilation into the host society within a single generation. Their ability to act as brokers would then cease. In spite of their brokerage role, diaspora merchants often developed intricate systems of social control. These systems aimed to prevent their traveling merchants from "going native". Conversely, the host society often tolerated alien merchants only because their presence was profitable. However, locals often regarded merchants, especially foreigners, with suspicion. Thus, a relationship characterized by slightly distant contact was often mutually preferred.

The Sogdian Model of Commercial Agency

The Sogdian Model of Commercial Agency exemplifies the institution of the trade diaspora in action. This model describes an interconnected network of commercial communities. Commercial specialists would relocate physically from their original home. They lived as aliens in a distant town. These alien merchants learned the host society's customs, language, and commercial ways. Their purpose was to serve as cross-cultural brokers. They actively encouraged trade between the host society and people of their own origin.

The Sogdians were the primary group responsible for mercantile activities along the expansive Silk Road network. Sogdians originated from Bactria, belonging to the Yuezhi branch. They are consistently characterized as itinerants without a bounded nation. The Chinese knew the Sogdians as a "merchant race". Sogdians went "wherever profit was to be made". This itinerant nature led them to dominate the overland trade route across Central Asia until the mid-sixth century CE. The movement of goods, ideas, and techniques across continental Asia relied heavily on Sogdian merchants acting as middlemen.

Their trade network was vast, extending from Sogdiana (near Samarkand) across Central Asian oases, reaching as far as China. The network essentially formed a triangle with India, China, and Sogdiana at its corners. Sogdian became the primary language used along the Silk Road. This linguistic dominance reinforced the Sogdian role as cultural spreaders. These merchants facilitated exchanges of high-value goods like silk. Silk transactions occurred in Central Asia among followers of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism.

A central element of this model was the formalized organization of commerce. Sogdian trade caravans traversing the Silk Road could be enormous. Official Chinese histories recorded entourages that sometimes exceeded two hundred merchants. These groups often traveled with six hundred camels, carrying thousands of bolts of silk. These massive expeditions were led by officials known as the *sabao*. The term *sabao* is derived from the Sanskrit or Sogdian word for merchant leader (*sārthavāha* or *sārthavāk*). The *sabao* was a high-ranking post reserved for foreigners. The government of the Northern Dynasties accorded this high office special status during periods of tolerance. The *sabao* functioned as a civic or religious leader for the foreign community. Though the precise scope of the role is debated, scholars agree that the person holding the *sabao* post was a member of the Sogdian aristocracy. Examples include Wirkak, *sabao* of Liangzhou, and An Jia, *sabao* of Tongzhou.

The Sogdian commercial network left a substantial physical imprint. Approximately 600 Sogdian inscriptions, along with Bactrian and Iranian ones, survive in the Upper Indus valley. These artifacts provide strong evidence for the use of long-distance routes through this area between the third and seventh centuries. These Sogdian travelers were integral to the trade between Sogdiana, northern Pakistan, the Tarim Basin, and China. One inscription mentions a traveler requesting to reach Kharvandan (Tashkurgan) quickly and safely. Commercial and religious nodes often overlapped. The site of Shatial served both as a commercial node and as a wayside shrine for travelers.

The Sogdians were a multireligious community. Their religion was a synthesis of ancient Iranian traditions, influenced by Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Buddhism. This synthesis provided a unifying cultural factor. In North China, settled elite Sogdians employed distinctive funerary architecture, including large stone sarcophagi and couches. The use of such structures was a radical departure from the small ossuaries typical of their homeland. The iconography on these furnishings was an active construction of identity. It blended Sogdian, Chinese, and Zoroastrian imagery. The fire altar motif frequently appeared on these structures, alluding directly to Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Other tombs, like that

of Kang Ye, showed strong affinities with local Chinese practices. The funerary furnishings thus reveal a range of affiliations with both Sogdiana and China. They highlight the varying degrees of acculturation among elite Sogdians in North China.

The ability of the Sogdians to maintain their commercial networks despite successive domination by the Hephthalites and Turks underscores their importance. These overlords found it beneficial to ensure the safety of travelers and encourage commercial activities. This sustained activity confirms the Sogdian Model of Commercial Agency as a critical engine for economic and cultural transfer across pre-modern Eurasia.

Merchants and Institutional Power

The institution of organized merchant activity provided a crucial link between economic prosperity, political stability, and religious expansion in the pre-modern world. Merchants were recognized as primary agents for the flow of material goods, cultural items, and ideas across regions. The earliest and most common structure enabling this cross-cultural flow was the trade diaspora. These communities consisted of commercial specialists who relocated as aliens in distant towns. They became indispensable cross-cultural brokers, facilitating trade between the host society and travelers of their own origin.

I. Organized Commercial Identity and Elite Status

A fundamental characteristic of the trade diaspora was the need for physical and social separation from the host community to maintain the cultural integrity necessary for brokerage. Without these cultural barriers, assimilation would occur within a single generation, ending their brokerage function.

The Sogdians, who were the principal group engaged in mercantile activities along the Silk Road, offer a profound example of organized commercial agency translating into institutional power. Sogdian merchants were characterized in sources as itinerants without a bounded nation. They were known for going “wherever profit was to be made”. This mobility enabled them to dominate overland trade and resulted in Sogdian becoming the primary language along the Silk Road, reinforcing their role as transmitters of culture.

Settled, elite Sogdian merchants in North China often held the official post of *sabao*. The *sabao* was a high-ranking post for foreigners. It typically denoted a religious or civic leader of the foreign community. Since the term *sabao* itself derived from a word for merchant leader (*sārthavāha*), the office acknowledged that the person holding the post was a member of the Sogdian aristocracy. This institutional recognition of commercial elite status, granted by the Northern Dynasties, demonstrated a period of relative tolerance towards successful foreign merchants. The elite status of merchants like Wirkak and An Jia, both *sabaos* in North China, was linked to their families' cultural and artistic production. Their adoption of large stone sarcophagi in Chinese-style graves, decorated with blended Sogdian, Chinese, and Zoroastrian imagery, showcased a complex and adaptive construction of identity.

II. Merchants and Secular Governing Structures

In various ancient economies, merchant groups developed formal organizational structures that rivaled state authority. In ancient Mesopotamia (20th century B.C.), the city-state of Ashur was partly governed by the *karum*. The *karum* was the Akkadian word for quay or market, but in this context, it meant the body of merchants who administered the city’s commercial center. This body levied taxes on the copper trade and acted as a clearinghouse, a bank of deposit, and a center for export and import. While the *karum* represented the collective interests of the merchants, it typically did not trade on its own corporate account.

In the Roman world, high-capital ventures necessitated powerful organization by private citizens. The enormous cost and complexity of the Indo-Roman trade meant that small merchants could not undertake these risks alone. Instead, extremely wealthy merchants or consortia of merchants were required to finance these commercial undertakings. The Muziris papyrus supports this model, suggesting a hierarchy in which a wealthy financier recruited merchants to undertake the long-distance trips.

The relationship between merchants and the state was often asymmetrical. Governments required revenue, and merchants were an obvious class to tax, especially since they often lacked strong links to local elites. While trade helped local economies, the presence of foreign traders was tolerated primarily because it was profitable. Imperial powers regulated this commerce heavily. Private individuals conducted the Roman component of trade, but the state derived profit from the imposition of a 25% state importation tax on goods arriving through the Red Sea. The presence of a Roman centurion and a customs officer at ports like Leuke Kome ensured this duty was collected.

In contrast to the reliance on private enterprises in the Roman East, some states utilized coercion and militarization for commercial ends. The Italian city-states of Venice and Genoa organized militarized trade diasporas in the Christian Mediterranean, where commerce and coercion were closely linked. Venice was a commercial republic that systematically used state power to increase the income of Venetian merchants. Conversely, in the Muslim Mediterranean, traders and rulers were distinct groups with separate interests, and commerce was an honorable profession with comparatively high status.

III. Merchants, Patronage, and Religious Institutions

The power of merchant communities was deeply intertwined with religious networks. The acquisition of wealth by merchants allowed them to become indispensable patrons of religious institutions, such as the Buddhist *Sangha*. The symbiotic relationship involved merchants donating wealth (*dāna*) and materials, and receiving religious merit (*punya*) in exchange.

Buddhist inscriptions provide tangible evidence of this patronage network. Donative inscriptions at Buddhist sites reveal that many lay donors clearly belonged to merchant groups or families. Common mercantile titles found in these inscriptions include *śresthin* (defined as a banker, merchant, or guild foreman) and *sārthavāha* (perhaps denoting a merchant involved in long-distance trade).

Furthermore, Buddhist literary traditions elevated the status of merchants to encourage further patronage. The commercial term caravan leader (*sārthavāha*) was applied as an epithet to the Buddha himself. The concentration of monasteries and *stūpas* near long-distance and regional routes demonstrates the structural link between religious institutions and commercial centers.

Despite ascetic ideals, the *Sangha* itself engaged in the economic sphere to manage its resources. Monastic codes (*Vinaya*) contained myriad exceptions to the prohibition against monks handling gold and silver. The corporate *Sangha* was permitted to accept money, invest endowments, lend and borrow on interest, and own property. This economic engagement, along with the consistent exchange of material donations for religious merit, ensured the generation of surplus resources required for the formation and institutional expansion of the *Sangha*. The involvement of the *Sangha* in managing endowments and property clearly indicates that monks and nuns participated in a range of economic activities.

The power wielded by merchants derived not only from their control over commodities and wealth but also from their sophisticated organizational structures (like the Sogdian *sabao* or

the Mesopotamian *karum*) and their critical position as financiers and patrons of the state and religious institutions alike.

The Symbiosis with Religious Institutions

The intersection of commerce and faith formed a symbiotic structural exchange critical to the vitality and expansion of religious institutions across Eurasia. This relationship meant that religious networks and trade networks frequently overlapped. Centers of political and economic power often functioned simultaneously as vital hubs for religious veneration and cultural production. Successful religious expansion, particularly for the Buddhist *Sangha*, depended fundamentally on the generation of surplus resources provided by lay patrons, including affluent merchants and rulers.

I. Merchant Diasporas as Religious and Cultural Brokers

The organizational model of the trade diaspora proved highly effective in establishing communities of commercial specialists who served as crucial cross-cultural brokers. These alien merchants, living amongst hosts, ensured continuous trade flows. Their commercial identity was often deeply intertwined with their religious or cultural identity. The Sogdians exemplify this dynamic. They were characterized as a "merchant race" known for their itinerancy and dominance over the Silk Road network.

Sogdiana was a multireligious region, synthesizing Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Buddhism. This diverse religious landscape provided a unifying cultural factor among the scattered Sogdian communities. Sogdians who settled in North China demonstrated their cultural and religious synthesis through funerary practices. Their elite used large stone sarcophagi, a departure from traditional, smaller ossuaries. The iconography on these furnishings actively blended Sogdian, Chinese, and Zoroastrian imagery, indicating a complex process of cultural adaptation while maintaining core religious references, such as the fire altar motif.

Furthermore, the institutional power of settled Sogdian merchants was often formally recognized through the official title of *sabao*. This high-ranking post for foreigners derived from a term for merchant leader (*sārthavāha*). Although scholars debate whether the *sabao* was strictly a secular or religious post, there is consensus that the office concentrated power in the hands of the Sogdian aristocracy and involved matters of trade. This overlap formalized the link between commercial success and institutional authority within the foreign community.

II. The Buddhist Economy of Merit and Patronage

The establishment and growth of the Buddhist *Sangha* relied upon an “economic stimulus” rooted in the religious practice of giving. Buddhist monks and nuns, as ascetic renouncers (*śramanas*), were dependent on material donations (*āmisadāna*) from the laity. In return, the monastics offered the "gift of the law" (*dharmadāna*), which conferred religious merit (*punya*) upon the donors. This merit was a transferable substance that generated future rewards, potentially resulting in birth into a powerful family. The practice encouraged the wealthy to acquire resources, as greater donations resulted in greater spiritual returns.

Buddhist literary traditions actively sought to appeal to the commercial audience. The Buddha himself was frequently given the commercial epithet of “caravan leader” (*sārthavāha*). This epithet portrayed him as a guide leading followers across the "desert of rebirths" (*saṃsāra*) to *Nirvāṇa*. Narratives concerning the Buddha's previous lives (*Jātakas* and *Avadānas*) often featured him as an overland trader or maritime merchant, directly reflecting an effort to resonate with and attract merchant audiences.

Specific religious figures and sites were also linked to commerce. For example, the merchants Trapusa and Bhallika were cited as the first lay devotees who gave gifts to the Buddha and received his hair and nail relics to enshrine in *stūpas*. The popular Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was invoked as a protector of merchants in distress who were traveling dangerous roads or experiencing maritime perils. The veneration of such protectors along trade routes highlights the deep connections between mobility, commerce, and religious devotion.

III. Sacred Commodities and Wealth Accumulation

The movement of precious commodities was central to the religious economy. The standardization of the concept of the "seven jewels" (*saptaratna*), which included items like gold, silver, pearls, and silk, was stimulated by the circulation of luxury goods. The ritual meaning that Buddhism assigned to these goods subsequently increased their market value.

Silk, a primary commodity in trans-Eurasian trade, was deeply interwoven with Buddhist rituals and economic transactions. It became a sacred and precious object used in Buddhist rites. Monks and pilgrims often acted as carriers or agents in silk transactions. When the pilgrim Xuanzang traveled to India, the King of Gaochang equipped him with many silks and other gifts. Other pilgrims, such as Yijing, used donated silk to make ritual robes for the Buddha statue at the Mahabodhi monastery, generating merit for their patrons.

Silks were also integral to the formal structure of patronage and honor. Tang emperors rewarded Chinese and Indian monks residing in China with silks or silk ritual robes for their religious services and translations. The purple robe was the highest badge of honor a monk could receive during the mid-Tang dynasty. Large quantities of silk thus flowed into the treasuries of Buddhist institutions. This established an equation between material wealth, particularly silks, and the Buddhist merits carried into the afterlife. Emperors even sent thousands of bolts of silk to India to obtain relics or ritual robes for the Buddha at major monastic centers. Furthermore, the cult of relics attracted immense wealth to monasteries in China and India. Inscriptions record donations of thousands of bolts of silk to be used for bathing relics and covering sacred sites.

IV. Monastic Economic Participation

Despite idealized normative rules (*Vinaya*) that prevented individual monks and nuns from handling gold and silver or engaging in "buying and selling," the corporate *Sangha* operated within the social economy. Monastic codes contained numerous exceptions permitting the community to accept money, invest endowments, and own property. This allowed monasteries to receive unlimited donations and manage substantial resources. Monasteries engaged in various commercial activities, such as buying and selling grain, demonstrating that they needed to engage in other businesses to run their affairs.

Monks were explicitly allowed to travel with trade caravans during the rainy season retreat (*vassavāsa*). This permission suggests that itinerant monks frequently followed the same routes as long-distance traders and solicited donations from them. Permanent endowments and the corporate ownership of property, including tax-free landholdings, enabled Buddhist institutions to function as significant economic institutions and reduced their reliance on daily donations from individual donors. This active economic involvement ensured the necessary material stability for the institutional growth and expansion of the *Sangha* across Asia.

4.3.2 Merchants, Merit, and the Buddhist *Sangha*

The establishment, maintenance, and expansion of Buddhist monastic institutions were directly linked to networks of commercial activity and the concept of religious merit (*punya*). As ascetic renouncers (*śramanas*), monks and nuns depended on donations (*dāna*) from lay supporters for their material sustenance. Since the monastic code (*Vinaya*) generally prohibited direct

participation in economic activities and the accumulation of personal wealth, the flow of material support from the laity was crucial.

The Symbiotic Relationship of Merit and Wealth

The rise of Buddhist monastic institutions was closely connected to commercial networks and the theological idea of religious merit (punya). This relationship formed a deep mutual exchange. As ascetic renouncers (śramanas), monks and nuns relied entirely on donations (dāna) from lay supporters to meet their material needs. This relationship was formalized through a system of spiritual repayment. In exchange for material gifts (āmisadāna), the monastic community (Sangha) provided the "gift of the law" (dharmadāna). This exchange brought great religious merit to the donor. Merit was believed to be a transferable substance that could be directed toward relatives, teachers, and "all beings." The act of giving created an "economic stimulus" for further acquisition. Since selfless donations led to significant future rewards, including a favorable rebirth, this system encouraged patrons to save resources for future giving. Ultimately, this process created a link between material wealth, especially in the form of silks, and the Buddhist merits earned for the afterlife.

Buddhist literary traditions actively sought to integrate and celebrate the commercial class. Merchants were promoted as exemplary figures for other potential patrons to emulate. This validation was evident even in the epithets applied to the founder of the religion. The commercial term caravan-leader (*sārthavāha*) was applied to the Buddha himself. This portrayal cast the Buddha as a benevolent guide leading followers across the daunting "desert of rebirths" (*saṃsāra*) toward *Nirvāṇa*. Stories recounting the Buddha's previous births (*Jātakas* and *Avadānas*) frequently featured him as an overland trader or maritime merchant. This literary pattern displayed an "unmistakable commercial ethos" intended to appeal directly to the powerful merchant donor group. Famous patrons solidified this connection. The wealthy merchant Anāthapindada was a key early donor. He donated the vast Jetavana monastery in Śrāvastī, famously acquiring the land by covering it with coins. Furthermore, the merchants Trapusa and Bhallika are cited as the first lay devotees. They offered sustenance to the Buddha immediately after his awakening and received hair and nail relics to establish *stūpas* in their home regions, promoting relic veneration among traders.

The flow of precious commodities directly energized this religion. Items identified as the "seven jewels" (*saptaratna*), which often included materials such as gold, silver, pearls, lapis lazuli, and silk, were highly valued in both commercial exchange and Buddhist ritual contexts. The consistent circulation of these luxury commodities stimulated the standardization of the concept of the *saptaratna*. Crucially, the ritual meaning imbued by Buddhism enhanced the market value and demand for these goods. Silk, a central commodity in trans-Eurasian trade, provides the clearest example of this symbiosis. The silk trade coincided with the three major spheres of religious movements across Eurasia. With the spread of Buddhism, silk transitioned into a "sacred and precious object in Buddhist rituals".

Silk played a key role in merit-based transactions and political rewards. Monks, pilgrims, and missionaries often acted as carriers of silk, whether willingly or not, across Asia. The renowned Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang received numerous silks and gifts from the king of Gaochang to support his journey. Xuanzang later donated all these silks to Buddhist stūpas and monasteries along his route. By receiving silk donations from China and using them on their travels, pilgrims like Xuanzang and Yijing earned merits for themselves and their benefactors. For example, Yijing used donated silk to make a ritual robe for the Buddha statue at the Mahabodhi monastery. Tang emperors formalized this religious economy by rewarding Indian and Chinese monks, such as the Tantric teacher Amoghvajra, with silks and purple robes—considered the

highest honor a monk could receive—for their translations and religious services. As a major form of wealth, large amounts of silk flowed into the treasuries of Buddhist institutions.

The connection between material wealth and religious reward extended beyond terrestrial transactions into the afterlife economy. In Chinese Central Asia, funerary practices cemented the equation between material wealth and merits to be carried into the “unfathomable beyond”. Tombs, particularly in Turpan, contained written inventories listing items like clothing and silk textiles as wealth for the afterlife. These written lists, which sometimes included millions of coins and thousands of bolts of silk, often exceeded the actual burial goods. This suggests the inventories served a ritual purpose. These documents explicitly itemized accumulated merits (from reciting *sutras* or donating silk banners) alongside silks and silver coins as property providing enjoyment in the other world. One inventory dated 548 listed an immense amount of textiles, including “silk yarn for climbing to heaven”.

Despite the core ascetic ideals of withdrawal, the Buddhist *Sangha* developed into a sophisticated economic institution. The monastic code (*Vinaya*) generally prohibited individual monks and nuns from handling gold and silver or engaging in "buying and selling". However, the *Vinaya* contained "myriad exceptions" to these general rules. The corporate *Sangha* was legally permitted to accept money, own property, and invest perpetual endowments (*aksayanīvī*). This allowed monasteries to lend money on interest and manage substantial wealth. Monks were explicitly permitted to travel with trade caravans during the rainy season retreat (*vassavāsa*). This structural allowance ensured that itinerant monks followed the same routes as long-distance traders, soliciting donations from them. Furthermore, monasteries engaged in commercial activities necessary for administration. They acquired commodities, such as rice, by buying and selling grain, demonstrating that running a monastery required engaging in businesses beyond mere subsistence farming. The economic and religious nexus created a “moral economy” of merit. This sustained the necessary surplus resources for the institutional growth and expansion of the Buddhist *Sangha* across Asia.

Merchants as Exemplary Patrons

Buddhist literary traditions actively promoted merchants as exemplary figures to be emulated by donors. The commercial term caravan-leader (*sārthavāha* or *satthavāha*) was even applied to the Buddha himself. The Buddha, in this epithet, was portrayed as a guide leading followers across the "desert of rebirths" (*saṃsāra*) to *Nirvāṇa*. Stories of the Buddha's previous lives (*Jātakas* and *Avadānas*) frequently featured him as a maritime merchant or overland trader. This reflects an effort to appeal specifically to this powerful donor group.

In contemporary accounts, Anāthapindada, a rich merchant, was a key early donor. He donated the Jetavana monastery in Śrāvastī, the ground of which was famously paved with coins. The story of the two merchants, Trapusa and Bhallika, is also highly significant. They offered gruel and honey in bowls to the Buddha immediately after his awakening. They are cited as the first lay devotees. They purportedly received relics of the Buddha’s hair and nails to enshrine in *stūpas* in their home countries. These narratives promoted relic veneration and the material support of traders.

The commercial ethos is unmistakable in literature such as the *Divyāvadāna*, where a sizeable proportion of narratives involve merchant caravans or maritime journeys. Furthermore, Bodhisattvas, like Avalokiteśvara, were invoked as protectors of merchants in distress. Merchants would chant Avalokiteśvara's name when ships were blown off course or when traveling on dangerous roads infested with robbers.

Commodities and Religious Value

The movement of precious commodities directly fueled this religious economy. Items categorized as the "seven jewels" (*saptaratna*), which could include gold, silver, pearls, lapis lazuli, and silk, were highly valued in both commercial trade and Buddhist ritual. The circulation of luxury commodities stimulated the standardization of the concept of the *saptaratna*. The ritual meaning brought by Buddhism increased the market value of these goods.

Silk, a crucial commodity in trans-Eurasian trade, was closely associated with religious transactions. The silk trade coincided with the three major spheres of religious movements across Eurasia. Chinese rulers often used silks as economic inducements in diplomacy. With the spread of Buddhism, silk became one of the sacred and precious objects in Buddhist rituals. Monks, missionaries, and pilgrims acted as voluntary or involuntary carriers of silk. When the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang traveled to India in the early seventh century, the king of Gaochang equipped him with many silks and other gifts. Other pilgrims, such as Yijing, received silk donations from lay devotees in China. By donating silks, patrons earned merits. By spending silks on their routes, pilgrims earned merits for both themselves and their patrons. Silks were also used as ritual robes given to Chinese and Indian monks by Tang emperors as rewards for religious services and translations. Purple robes were established as the highest badge of honor a monk could receive during the mid-Tang dynasty. Large quantities of silk thus flowed into the treasuries of Buddhist institutions. Furthermore, silks were often included in funerary inventories in Central Asia and China, illustrating an equation between material wealth and merits to be carried into the afterlife. Emperors also sent large quantities of silk, such as 4,000 bolts of silk, to India to obtain relics or ritual robes for the Buddha at sites like the Mahabodhi monastery.

Roman trade with India involved a large flow of gold and silver coins moving eastward. Pliny the Elder noted that India took in "no less than fifty million sesterces" each year. These valuable coins, especially those from the Julio-Claudian period, were mainly used in South India as bullion for exchange by weight. The coins were often pierced for hanging or cut across the obverse, indicating they were not regularly reused as currency. The significant amount of gold and silver imported into Rome during the first century mainly reflects economic activity. In return, India exported high-value, low-bulk goods such as pepper, fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, and gemstones. These items played a key role in the transfer of wealth and aesthetic ideas between cultures.

Monastic Economic Adaptation

Despite rules against handling money, Buddhist monasteries were deeply involved in the social economy. The corporate *Sangha* was permitted to accept money, invest endowments, and own property. *Vinaya* codes provide myriad exceptions to the general prohibition against monks and nuns handling gold and silver. Monks were also allowed to travel with trade caravans during the rainy season retreat (*vassavāsa*). This suggests that itinerant monks followed the same routes as long-distance traders. They also solicited them for donations. Monasteries even acquired commodities, like rice, by engaging in buying and selling grain, demonstrating that running a monastery required engaging in other businesses.

The economic and religious nexus created a “moral economy” of merit. This symbiotic exchange of material donations for religious reward was a key factor. It stimulated the necessary generation of surplus resources required for the expansion of Buddhist monastic institutions.

Analogy: The relationship between merchants and the Buddhist *Sangha* was like a thriving ecosystem in a river valley. The merchants, bringing in valuable water (wealth and goods), were able to divert small amounts to nourish their own crops (merit). The monastery, acting as the valley itself, ensured the river kept flowing and that the merchants remained prosperous enough to keep donating, benefiting everyone along the entire trade route.

4.4 LOCALITIES AND NODES OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

This approach employs the "networks approach." This model suggests that material and cultural items "flow" through "conduits" connecting specific "nodes." These nodes concentrate economic, political, or religious power.

4.4.1 Overland Arteries and Northwestern Hubs

The primary overland route was the Northern Route (Uttarāpatha). It was not a single highway but a network of pathways. This expansive system connected the Gangetic plains to the northwestern borderlands of South Asia. Evidence for this route network dates back to the grammarian Pāṇini. The Mauryan Emperor Aśoka actively used and maintained this imperial road system. He ordered wells dug and trees planted for shade for both animals and people along these long-distance routes. He also required the construction of rest houses every nine miles. These facilities ensured safe passage for administrative officials, armies, merchants, and Buddhist monks.

The Northwestern Borderlands served as a crucial contact zone. This region was enriched through ongoing cross-cultural exchange. It combined elements from Indian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian spheres. Taxila was a major northern city and an essential hub. Its strategic position made it a key commercial center. It linked major trade routes leading to Central Asia, Kashmir, and Punjab.

Adjacent to Taxila was Gandhāra, a remarkable hub of cultural activity. The area's wealth, coming from farming and commerce, supported large Buddhist sites. Monasteries and stūpas were often situated along winding paths or near main passes. This strategic location provided access to farmland and close proximity to trade routes. Successive foreign rulers, including the Indo-Greeks, Sakas, and Kuṣāṇas, controlled these pathways. During the Kuṣāṇas period (1st to 3rd centuries CE), control over these routes boosted long-distance trade. They managed a series of urban centers connecting Bactria with the Indian core. Mathura was an important center along this network, linking the east-west Northern Route with north-south routes to the Daksināpatha.

Beyond the main arteries, smaller routes and capillaries connected the upper Indus region directly to the Silk Routes leading into the Tarim Basin. These paths served as transit zones for monks and lay followers. Travelers often left graffiti and petroglyphs on rocks. These carvings were visual religious offerings meant to earn spiritual merit. The Tarim Basin, with places like Kucha and Khotan, was vital for transmitting Buddhism to China over long distances. However, formal Buddhist institutions appeared late in this Central Asian transit zone. This suggests that the earliest ideological flow often bypassed these intermediate locations.

4.4.2 Maritime Networks and Coastal Hubs

The maritime network played a crucial role in long-distance cultural and commercial exchanges, complementing land-based routes. Coastal hubs acted as key connection points, linking South Asian overland networks with maritime routes across the Indian Ocean. These ports enabled the export of goods from the subcontinent and also created opportunities for long-distance cross-cultural interactions.

The Greek merchant handbook 'Periplus Maris Erythraei '(PME) details specific maritime routes. The PME describes the waters and ports from the Red Sea to India. It lists the traded commodities. This text is considered reliable for locating ancient sites and measuring distances.

4.4.3 The Roman Red Sea Ports: Funnels for Eastern Goods

The Red Sea served as a key route for goods moving from the East to the Roman Empire. This region featured two main channels. The western route linked six ports to the Nile through a series of desert stations. These paths eventually led to Alexandria. The eastern route directed goods toward Gaza. Commercial use of these routes began after Augustus annexed Egypt in 30 BC. This activity depended heavily on understanding the monsoon cycles.

Two ports, Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim) and Berenike, are frequently mentioned in the PME. Myos Hormos was located farther north than Berenike. Strabo described it as the more important of the two in the first century BC. Myos Hormos was also the closest to the Nile port of Coptos. Excavations uncovered a jetty built by reusing hundreds of complete to nearly complete amphorae.

Berenike, located about 300 km farther south, was founded around the same time as Myos Hormos. It had a continuous occupation from the mid-third century BC to the early sixth century AD. Berenike was a sizable community that included a purpose-built church from the fifth or sixth century, indicating a Christian presence. The coexistence of these two ports is puzzling, given their closeness. Some scholars suggest that Berenike's southern position helped counteract the notorious northerly winds of the Red Sea. Others believe that Indian ships crewed by sailors familiar with the waters might have preferred Berenike because of their unfamiliarity with those winds.

Graffiti discovered at these Red Sea sites strongly implies the presence of Indian residents. Three Tamil-Brahmi graffiti of personal names were recovered: two from Myos Hormos and one from Berenike. These graffiti connect the sites to the far south of India. The Berenike graffiti was etched on a Roman Dressel 2-4 amphora. This indicates that Indians had access to Roman vessels. Archaeological finds also include Indian pottery, such as Rouletted Ware (RW) and Organic Black Ware. This material culture suggests consumption by Indian communities.

4.4.4 South Arabian and East African Nodes

The eastern side of the Red Sea also had important ports. Leuke Kome was connected by caravan to Petra and eventually to the Mediterranean port of Gaza. The PME describes Leuke Kome as a harbor for small Arab ships. It had a customs officer and a centurion on site to ensure that the 25% government tax on imports was collected.

Further south, the African port of Adulis (near Massawa) served as the main port for the Aksumite kingdom, with its capital at Axum in Ethiopia. The PME clearly highlights the importance of Adulis. It was vital for exporting goods like ivory and tortoiseshell. These goods were sent to the Roman world and India. By the mid-third to the seventh century AD, Aksum had become a powerful international force. They are considered to have acted as intermediaries for the Romans. The presence of Christian sites in Berenike and Aila shows their role in the Red Sea interaction zone. This shared Christian faith may have strengthened trading groups.

4.4.5 Indian Coastal Hubs

On the Indian coast, the trade network branched out. The coastal areas provided numerous entry points for maritime contacts.

1. **Muziris (Pattanam):** On the Malabar Coast (Limyrike), Muziris was the most important Chera port described in the PME. It gained its prosperity through shipping from both Barygaza and Greek traders. Finds at Pattanam, aligning with ancient descriptions of Muziris, established an overseas contact period. This period ranged from the late first century BC to the third century AD. The site yielded an Early Roman amphora, glazed ware, and torpedo jars. Muziris served as an entrepôt for all of India, collecting and redistributing goods.

2. **Arikamedu (Podukê):** Located near Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast, Arikamedu was an important Indo-Roman trading hub. The PME briefly mentioned Podukê as a site for local boats from North and West India. Excavations uncovered imported Roman goods, including pieces of Italian red-glazed Arretine ware, amphorae, and glass. The concentration of Roman artifacts initially led archaeologists to believe that Arikamedu was a foreign city colonized by Roman traders. However, new discoveries, such as amphora sherds reused by locals, indicate that Roman trade integrated with local systems. Additionally, a sigillata sherd from Arikamedu features a Tamil-Brāhmī graffito.

3. **Barygaza:** Located near the mouth of the Narmada River (modern Broach), Barygaza (Sanskrit Bhrgukaccha) was a port and manufacturing hub. It had trade connections with the Persian Gulf. The PME shows that the area around Barygaza was controlled by the Western Ksatrapas (Ksaharāta line of Nahapāna) in the mid-first century CE. Barygaza imported Roman gold and silver coins and wine. It exported ivory, onyx, agate, cotton cloth, and long pepper.

4. **Sri Lanka (Taprobane):** The island of Sri Lanka served as a key trading hub. Cosmas Indicopleustes described it as a port that received ships from India, Persia, and Ethiopia. From the 4th century onward, Sri Lanka grew to become the largest maritime trade center in the Indian Ocean. It was naturally wealthy, trading in precious stones such as hyacinth stones. Mantai was likely the main harbor, where imported artifacts included Mesopotamian Torpedo jars and Glazed Ware. The presence of these vessels highlights the increasing importance of trade through the Gulf and the influence of the Sasanian Empire.

4.5 SUMMARY

The unit focuses on the agents and locations that facilitated trade and cultural transactions between India and the world. Key agents included imperial patrons, religious missionaries, and mobile traders.

Rulers like Emperor Aśoka utilized their political authority to establish long-distance networks. Aśoka promoted *dhammavijaya* (religious conquests) and ethical principles like compassion and generosity, and he maintained high-level diplomatic relations with Hellenistic monarchs which had a material basis in trade. He also supported travel by building rest houses and digging wells along major routes. Later, Kuṣāṇa rulers, particularly Kaniska, unified major nodes of the Northern Route (*Uttarāpatha*), which accelerated cross-cultural exchange and generated surpluses used to support religious institutions.

Religious specialists acted as the main agents for transmitting ideological material. This included Indian monks like Kāśyapa Mātanga (who traveled to China) and the Tibetan courtier Thon-mī Sambhoṭa (who devised the Tibetan script after studying in India).

Merchants were recognized as primary agents of exchange, utilizing the trade diaspora model. Sogdian merchants, described as itinerants without a bounded nation, dominated the overland

Silk Road as cross-cultural brokers. This commercial class was essential to the Buddhist *Sangha*, serving as benefactors who provided wealth (*dāna*) in exchange for religious merit (*punya*). Monasteries, in turn, developed into sophisticated economic institutions by accepting money and investing endowments through "myriad exceptions" in the *Vinaya* codes.

These agents relied on key localities and nodes. Overland hubs included Gandhāra, a crucial cultural border region, and Taxila, a major commercial center. Maritime routes centered on Red Sea ports like Myos Hormos and Berenike, which served as funnels for Roman trade, and Indian ports like Arikamedu (an Indo-Roman trading station).

4.6 ESSENTIAL/RECOMMENDED READINGS

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