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Of Politics and Trade c.200 BC – AD 300

Shungas, Kharavela, Oligarchies

Political events in India became diffuse after the Mauryan period, involving a variety of kings, eras and people. Evidence is gleaned from yet more diverse sources than in earlier times, and texts are consulted from as far afield as the history of contemporary China by Ssu-ma-chien/Sima Qian. Whereas the people of the peninsula and south India were seeking to define their polities and experiencing the reach of maritime trade, northern India was caught up in the turmoil of happenings in central Asia. The Mauryas had begun to explore the potential for activities, not only in various parts of the subcontinent but also in areas beyond, particularly looking westwards. The need to extend the horizon and consider participation in new ventures was recognized by the successor states. The many new states with their growth and interrelations can be confusing, unlike the relatively uncomplicated picture of the Mauryan period.

There is a tendency to give primacy to events of the north-west since there is a range of evidence, including much from Hellenistic and Roman sources, but events in other parts of the subcontinent were equally consequential. The focus of politics did not shift to the north-west, as there were multiple centres of political ambition. This was a recurring pattern with the disintegration of large kingdoms. That which followed the break-up of the Mauryan Empire anticipated and shaped the emergence of regional states in the next few centuries. From a superficial view, there appears to have been no connecting theme in the post-Mauryan period. Yet there was a theme, even though it was less immediately apparent in political events.

Coins and inscriptions provide primary evidence but both are different in form from their predecessors, the punch-marked coins and the Ashokan edicts. Indo-Greek coins in particular are miniatures of aesthetic excellence, of precise economic value, providing information on centres of exchange and on emerging religious sects and cults that were prominent in north-western India and its vicinity. Inscriptions from this time on tended to record donations and grants, or else were royal eulogies and annals. The King's attempt to 'speak' to his subjects through inscriptions, as was Ashoka's intention, was not to be repeated. Either the problems were less pressing than affairs of state, or, as is more likely, kings were not inspired to do so.

The immediate heirs of what remained of the Mauryan Empire were the Shungas, a brahman family, who were officials under the Mauryas. The founder of the dynasty, Pushyamitra, assassinated the last of the Mauryas while commanding the Mauryan army, and usurped the throne. Kalidasa's romantic play, *Malavika-agnimitram,* presents an image of Shunga rule which differs from that of the Buddhist narrative text, the *Divyavadana.* Buddhist sources claim that they persecuted the Buddhists and destroyed their monasteries and places of worship. This could have been an exaggeration, but

archaeological evidence reveals that Buddhist monuments in the Shunga domain were at this time in disrepair and being renovated. However, if the chronology of these monuments shifts forward as is now being suggested, then this would make them post-Shunga renovations. Nevertheless, even if some renovations were of a later date, the damage to the *stupa* at Sanchi and to the monastery at Kaushambi dates to Shunga times. Added emphasis is given to this from Pushyamitra having performed *ashvamedhas,* or horse sacrifices. This is sometimes viewed as indicating support of Vedic Brahmanism and a disapproval of the heterodox sects. The sacrifices are also linked to his having held back Yavana forays from the north-west.

The Shungas were occupied with wars: they campaigned against their southern neighbours in the Deccan, against the Hellenistic Greek inroads from the north-west and against Kalinga to the south-east. Intense competition in the creation of kingdoms followed the decline of the Mauryan Empire. The Shunga kingdom may have originally comprised a large part of the Ganges Plain, although some of the more distant regions were probably not directly under their control and merely owed them political allegiance. Within a hundred years, however, the kingdom had dwindled to the boundaries of Magadha and its fringes, and even here the Shunga hold was precarious: a situation that continued for a half-century under another brahman dynasty, the Kanvas, whose founder usurped the Shunga throne, and its kings reigned uneventfully until the late first century BC.

One striking feature of this period is the reappearance of what are sometimes called the tribal or the clan-based polities in Punjab and Haryana -especially clustered around the watershed – and in Ra jasthan. Their presence is established largely through their coins and we know of the Arjunayanas, Kunindas, Audambaras, Trigartas, Agastyas, Shibis and Yaudheyas. Some among them migrated to adjoining areas, as and when local politics required it. Thus the Abhiras are found in the northern Deccan. The Malavas moved to southern Rajasthan and may have been later associated with the era of 58-57 BC, perhaps because of their connection with Ujjain.

Many of these clans claimed *kshatriya* status; implicit in this claim was descent from the *kshatriya* heroes of epic and legend. Some of their rajas took tides that implied an approximation to kingship, but their coins were more often minted in the name of the *gana* or the *janapada,* revealing a structure similar to the *gana-sangha* as in the case of the Yaudheyas. The repeated reference to kings attacking the *kshatriyas* was possibly a reference to such polities, which would indirectly underline their continuing political significance as an alternative to kingship.

Monarchical systems, however, were more widespread by now. Kalinga in Orissa was an independent kingdom in the mid-first century BC under Kharavela. This was an example of secondary-state formation, as it had been a core area in the Mauryan system and had been imprinted with the structure of a state through being under Mauryan administration. The Mauryan centre at Tosali developed into a Buddhist site, but Kalinga was also associated with Jaina monasteries, encouraged no doubt by the initial patronage of Kharavela. A long inscription that includes an almost year-by-year biographical sketch of Kharavela survives at Hathigumpha – the Elephant's Cave. The inscription is tantalizing as it is damaged, and permits of alternative readings. Kharavela was of the Meghavahana lineage associated with the Chedis. (Curiously, Ravana is said to be of the same lineage in the *Paumachariyam,* a Jaina version of the *Ramayana* that was probably composed in the third century AD.) Despite his support for Jainism, Kharavela protected the independence of Kalinga through raids against neighbours. Kharavela refers to irrigation canals built by the Nandas, but proudly mentions his own efforts in this direction. There is no reference to the Mauryas, unless it was included in the sections of the inscription that are now illegible, yet there are a few hints of ideas that seem to echo those of Ashoka, such as his veneration for all sects. He also lays claim to investing

much wealth in the welfare of his subjects, although this could be the predictable rhetoric of royalty.

The inscription is among the early biographical sketches of a king and deserves a more detailed summary as it represents the beginnings of a style of royal eulogy. An adaptation of the lengthy inscription would read:

Salutation to the Arhats (Jinas)… by illustrious Kharavela, the Aira, the great king, the descendant of Mahameghavahana, increasing the glory of the Chedi dynasty, endowed with excellent and auspicious marks and features, possessed of virtues that have reached the four quarters, overlord of Kalinga.

Fifteen years were spent in youthful sports with a body ruddy and handsome.

Administration as an heir apparent lasted for nine years and he mastered correspondence, currency, finance, civil and religious law and was well-versed in all branches of learning.

On attaining manhood he was crowned king in the dynasty of Kalinga. In his first year he repaired the gates, walls and buildings of the city damaged in a storm; built embankments on the lake, and tanks and cisterns in the city; and restored the gardens.

This was done at the cost of thirty-five thousand and pleased the people.

In the second year his strong army of the four-fold units of cavalry, elephants, infantry and chariots was sent against the western regions controlled by Satakarni [the Satavahana king], and also threatened the city of the Mushika peoples.

The third year was given to dance performances and music at festivals and assemblies.

In the fourth year the Rathikas and Bhojakas were attacked and they submitted to him.

In the fifth year he extended the canal originally built by the Nanda king.

Since he was performing the *rajasuya* sacrifice he remitted taxes and cesses and bestowed many hundreds of thousands on the institutions of the city and the realm.

In the seventh year his wife became a mother.

In the eighth year he threatened the capital of Magadha which led to the king Dimita [Demetrius, the Indo-Greek king], retreating to Mathura.

More gifts follow – golden trees, elephants, chariots, residences and rest-houses as well as the declaration that brahmans were exempt from tax.

A royal residence was built at the cost of thiry-eight hundred thousand.

In the tenth year he sent an expedition to conquer Bharatavarsha.

Another expedition went south towards the Krishna river and attacked the town of Pithunda which was ploughed with a plough yoked to asses. He broke up the confederacy of the Tramira [Tamil countries] which had been a threat to Kalinga.

In the twelfth year his armies turned northwards causing panic among the people of Magadha. He retrieved the image of the Jina which had been taken away from Kalinga by the Nandas and brought back the riches of Magadha and Anga.

He settled a hundred builders, giving them exemption from land revenue, to build towers and carved interiors and stockades for elephants and horses.

Precious stones were brought to his court and pearls from the Pandya realm in the south.

In the thirteenth year he offered maintenance and gifts to the monks of a Jaina monastery.

An assembly was held of ascetics and sages and monks and the depository of the relic of the Arhat was embellished. He caused Jaina texts to be compiled.

He is the king of peace, of prosperity, of the monks and of the teaching.

He is accomplished in extraordinary virtues, respects every sect and repairs all shrines. His armies cannot be vanquished and he protects the realm. He is descended from the family of the royal sage, Vasu.

Adapted from *Epigraphia Indica,* XX, pp. 71-89,

K. P. Jayaswal and R. D. Banerji, 'The Hathigumpha Inscription of Kharavela'

The attributes of royalty such as conquest, patronage and the welfare of subjects are accentuated, with royalty being emphasized in the sculptures and reliefs in the surrounding caves. Such an assertion would have been necessary if Kalinga was still supporting some chiefdoms. The Rathika and Bhojaka peoples are mentioned in the Ashokan inscriptions and in later Satavahana inscriptions they refer to designations – Maharathi and Maha-bhoja – implying they were chiefs who had been given administrative functions. Shishupalgarh, a Mauryan administrative centre, was also an exchange centre. But Kharavela did not issue coins and the use of punch-marked coins continued. It is possible that, despite the vast sums mentioned in connection with the development of the town, the Kalingan economy was not yet ready for its own coinage. Descent from Vasu refers to the Vasu who was the raja of the Chedis, believed to be the recipient of a gift from the gods – a chariot that could fly. The claim to a connection with Vasu links Kharavela to epic and Puranic genealogies, and the flying chariot would have linked him to Havana in the *Ramayana.* On Kharavela's death, Kalinga relapsed into quiescence.

Indo-Greeks and Shakas

The end of Achaemenid rule in Iran and the death of Alexander gave rise to kingdoms ruled by Alexander's erstwhile generals, for instance the Seleucid kingdom that was contiguous with the Mauryan. The mingling of Hellenistic Greeks and Indians in the second century BC came about through the Hellenistic kings, who ruled in the north-west as successors to those who had succeeded Alexander. Some differentiate between the Greco-Bactrians who ruled over Bactria and the Indo-Greeks who included north-west India in their domain; others refer to them as Indo-Bactrian Greeks or use Indo-Greek in a more general sense. Indian sources refer to them as Yavanas. This term makes no distinction between what some would call the Hellenic Greeks, living on the mainland of the peninsula of Greece, and the Hellenistic Greeks. The latter were those of Greek descent or of mixed descent, but broadly conforming to Greek culture and living in the eastern Mediterranean and west Asia. Hellenistic Greek culture drew on Greco-Roman culture of the eastern Mediterranean, as well as Iranian sources and some central Asian influences, and can be regarded initially as Greco-Roman colonial culture. The political ambitions of these Hellenistic kings, who ruled between the third and first centuries BC, were torn between asserting themselves in the eastern Mediterranean and intensifying their hold on the gainful trading activities in west and central Asia. Indians would have been more familiar with Hellenistic Greeks than with the Greeks of the peninsula. The term Yavana continued to be used in later times for all those who came from west Asia.

The rulers of Bactria and of Parthia made the most of the decline of Seleucid power by breaking

away from Seleucid control, acting as virtually independent kingdoms by the second century BC. At first, Bactria was the more forceful of the two. It lay between the Hindu Kush and the Oxus, a fertile region well provided with natural resources and controlling the main northern routes from Gandhara to the Black Sea, to central Asia and to the eastern Mediterranean. The Greek settlements in Bactria traced their origin to the Achaemenid period (c. fifth century BC) when the Persian kings settled Greek exiles in the region. These were reinforced by Greek artisans settling in the cities of Bactria.

Diodotus, the governor of Bactria, rebelled against Antiochus, the Seleucid King. Antiochus was unable to suppress the revolt because his primary interest lay in the eastern Mediterranean, and consequently Diodotus achieved independent rule. Nevertheless, in 206 BC Antiochus made an alliance with Subhagasena, an obscure Indian king, largely to replenish his supply of elephants. The alliance revealed that the north-west of India was vulnerable to annexation. Demetrius, the son of Euthydemus (who had also defeated the Seleucid king), took his armies to the south-east of the Hindu Kush where he successfully acquired territory. Eventually, a Demetrius who was probably the second king of this name, came to rule a large area in southern Afghanistan, the Punjab and the Indus Valley, thus establishing Indo-Greek power in north-western India. Forays were made into the Ganges heartland, but the power base remained the north-west and possibly the Punjab. This is corroborated in an indirect manner in Patanjali's grammar, the *Mahabhashya,* dating to the second century BC. In giving examples of the use of a particular grammatical form he refers to Yavana raids in the western Ganges Plain and in Rajasthan.

The best remembered of the Indo-Greek kings was undoubtedly Menander, who, as Milinda, attained fame in the Buddhist text *Milinda-panha* – the Questions of King Milinda – a catechismal discussion on Buddhism. Supposedly conducted by Menander and the Buddhist philosopher Naga-sena, it is claimed to have resulted in Menander's conversion to Buddhism. This was a period when Greeks were interested in Buddhism, so such a manual would have been extremely useful to the propagation of the religion. Menander, ruling from *c.* 150 to 135 BC, stabilized Indo-Greek power, in addition to extending its frontiers in India. He is known to have held the Swat Valley and the Hazara district in the north-west, as well as the Punjab. His coins have been found as far north as Kabul, and to the south in the Mathura region. He is thought to have conquered territory in the Ganges Plain, but failed to retain it. He may well have attacked the Shungas in the Yamuna region, if not closer to Pataliputra itself. His popularity gave rise to a legend that various cities of the north-west vied with each other for his ashes after his cremation, then built monuments over the relics. But perhaps the Roman writer Plutarch, who narrates this story, was confusing the legend of the Buddha's death with that of Menander.

Following Menander, there appears to have been a regency, after which came the reign of Strato. Meanwhile, Bactria was ruled by the line of Eucrattdes, which had broken away from that of Euthydemus and from which the first Demetrius seems to have split off. The Bactrian king cast longing eyes at Gandhara and, advancing beyond Kabul, he annexed the kingdom of Taxila. But the Bactrians did not hold Taxila for long.

The Hellenistic Greeks marked their presence by monumental buildings and by small, finely crafted objects. Excavation of the cities of Ai-Khanoum, on the confluence of the Oxus and the Kokcha, of Bactra (modern Balkh), of Antioch in Margiana and of Sirkap at Taxila, reveals a characteristic talent for urban planning. Ai-Khanoum was built on the usual city-plan, the citadel differentiated from the lower city with predictable features such as temples, theatres, buildings embellished with pillars and patterned mosaic floors, and promenades. Its location and its function as an evolved Hellenistic city indicate it was a successor to the Achaemenid presence in central Asia. Scattered throughout the area

of Hellenistic activities are their coins -excellent examples of minting, with portraiture of a high aesthetic quality. Curiously, portraits on coins never became fashionable in India.

The history of the Indo-Greeks has been reconstructed mainly on the evidence of their coins. Some of the coinage of Bactria was based on the Attic standard and comparable to the Athenian 'owl' coins, suggesting close ties with the eastern Mediterranean. The silver Athenian owl coin, so called because it had the head of Athena – the goddess associated with Athens -on one side, and the bird associated with her – the owl – on the other, was legal tender virtually throughout the Mediterranean. Indo-Greek coins, based on the Attic standard with legends in Greek, circulated in Bactria. Coins with a reduced weight of silver often had bilingual legends in Greek and *kharoshthi* or *brahmi,* and these circulated in the north-west of India. Coinage was therefore adjusted to region and requirement.

Indo-Greek coins introduced innovations in Indian numismatics, such as die-striking, the use of legends, portraits of rulers, monograms and the representation of deities. These features help in identifying coins, and some sequence of rulers can be reconstructed even where they carry identical names. Portraits did not become the norm in coinage elsewhere in India. Even where kings are depicted in some specific activity, these depictions are not portraits. The rejection of portraiture on coins is curious, considering that there are sculptures with a limited depiction of kings and literary portraiture in the form of biographies occurs in inscriptions. Deities could be depicted iconographically or as symbols and were generally of the Shaiva or Bhagavata sects, or Buddhist, Jaina or Zoroastrian, or of the cults of Greco-Roman origin that were worshipped in the area at that time. This is another indication of the need for rulers of south Asian regions to be patrons of multiple religions. The depiction of deities familiar to the local people doubtless strengthened the acceptance of this coinage in diverse places linked by trade. Such depictions help to date the rise of sects, such as the worship of Krishna Vasudeva and Balarama, both depicted on Indo-Greek coins. In the choice of motifs, those on the more widely used copper coins were generally more eclectic and specific to the region.

The coins are symbolic of an intermingling of Hellenistic with Indian or Iranian cultures. Depictions of *yakshi* figures and Indian goddesses sometimes replace the Hellenistic deities, although Herakles remained popular. At Takht-i-Sangin in southern Tajikistan the Iranian fire-temple carries the imprint of Greek decoration. A striking instance of this mingling is the inscription at Besnagar in western India, on a pillar erected by a certain Heliodorus, envoy of King Antialkidas of Taxila to the King of Besnagar, perhaps one of the later Shungas. Heliodorus professes to be a follower of Vasudeva (the incarnation of Vishnu as Krishna), and obviously, though Greek, had become a Vaishnava. The remains of what might be the earliest temple dedicated to Hindu worship have been located through excavations at Besnagar. It is thought to have been associated with the newly emerging Bhagavata sect, whose beliefs and practices facilitated the process of acculturation. These trends isolated Vedic Brahmanism as a recipient of royal patronage, all the more so because it had no use for those who worshipped images.

As a contrast to the Heliodorus inscription, the brahman author of the Yugapurana section of the *Gargi Samhita* was hostile to the Yavanas, who were said to behave in a brutal and inhuman manner. This demonizing of the Yavanas is curious, since they were familiar from Mauryan times. Possibly the source of irritation was that much of the patronage of these rulers went to the Buddhists and less to the brahmans, even if the newly emerging Shaiva and Bhagavata sects were also receiving patronage. But this was not die same as patronage to Vedic Brahmanism which, by the very nature of its belief and practice, would have been closed to the Yavanas and the *mlechchhas,* who were regarded as outside the boundaries of caste. The Bhagavata sect was open to accepting persons who came from

societies without caste, such as the Hellenistic Greeks, and sometimes even allotted them a caste status. These cults flourished in the growing urban ambience, but the city was not a site conducive to the practices of Vedic Brahmanism.

Shakas, Parthians, Kushanas and Kshatrapas

The decline of the Greek kingdoms in the north-west coincided with an attack on Bactria itself by nomadic peoples from central Asia. From this point on the complicated migrations and movements of peoples in central Asia became a backdrop to events in northern India. Those who initially attacked Bactria in the late second century BC included the Parthians and the Scythians – referred to as the Pahlavas and Shakas in Indian sources -and were primarily responsible for weakening Bactrian power. Scytho-Parthian rule was established in north-western India around the Christian era. The Scythians inhabited the region around Lake Issykkul and the river Jaxartes in central Asia. They were attacked by the Yueh-chih/Yuezhi and forced to migrate, some going south and some west. The Yueh-chih were originally pastoralists whose herds were pastured in the plains to the west of China.

Such nomadic pastoralists were unlikely people to found large kingdoms, but in the interaction with existing kingdoms a pattern evolved in which the nomads came to dominate sedentary societies, and this eventually gave rise to kingdoms. In the process, the pastoralists themselves underwent mutations that permitted them to emerge as competent rulers. Raids, once the normal practice among nomads to obtain livestock – sheep and horses – as well as control over grazing grounds, changed to control over and administration of resources. The origins of such a change frequently lay in the pastoralists obtaining tribute from the sedentary society in return for protection. The extraction of tribute strengthened the heads of clans among the pastoralists and they came to form an aristocracy. Pastoralists could become cultivators but more often they preferred to rule over cultivators. Because of their circuits of herding, and the possibility of using the animals to transport goods, they emerged as important to transactions involving the exchange of produce and became effective as mediators between sedentary societies. Horses were traded eastwards, while in exchange silk travelled westwards to be sold in the markets of central Asia and further.

Although essentially pastoralists, the Shakas of central Asia acquired a sophistication that was reflected in their burial chambers. These vast graves constructed of timber have an almost architectural quality, with the variations of size and content reflecting a society conscious of social differentiation. Alongside the chiefs and the horses buried with them, grave goods consisted of weaponry, horse trappings and items of common use that were heavily decorated, often using gold. The horse was central to the activities of the Shakas, providing them with rapid mobility and enabling them to use various equestrian improvements in the shape of saddles and bridles, and the compound bow, to improve their military technology. It is thought that a primitive stirrup was also in use.

The geography of central Asia assisted them in their role of expanding pastoralism and as intermediaries of trade. Scattered across the deserts were fertile oases, some of which became the nucleus of towns and of states, especially those settled as a result of both the earlier Achaemenid enterprise to irrigate the oases and Hellenistic encouragement to trade. The Tarim Basin was a meeting point of Indian and Chinese commerce. Dunhuang had earlier been a garrison town but gradually incorporated commercial activities. Therefore the pastoralists also had to negotiate the nature of their relations with the oases, if they wished to exert power.

Gradually, as their pastures began to dry up, the pastoralists made intermittent raids into Chinese territory searching not only for new pastures, but also for the wealth of those Chinese who were sedentary. The later movement of these tribes westwards can be traced back to the activities of the Chinese Emperor Shi Huang Ti, who built the Great Wall in the last half of the third century BC to defend China's frontiers against the nomadic Hsiungnu/Xiongnu, Wu-sun and Yueh-chih. The Hsiungnu suffered famines in the first century BC, brought about by excessive snow and the continuing raids of their neighbours. This led to their migrating and displacing the Yueh-chih, which started a chain reaction of population movements in central Asia. These in turn had an impact on northern India.

The Yueh-chih were driven from the best lands and had to migrate to distant places. They split into two hordes – the Little Yueh-chih, who settled in northern Tibet, and the Great Yueh-chih, who wandered further west to the shores of the Aral Sea. Here they stopped for a while, displacing the inhabitants of the region, the Scythians, or the Shakas, as they were called in Iranian and Indian sources. The Shakas advanced into Bactria and Parthia. A Chinese visitor in about 128 BC records that the land surrounding the Aral Sea had been cleared of the Scythians, and instead he had found the Yueh-chih settled there. Parthia failed to hold back the Shakas, except for a brief period, and was overrun. The Shakas however did not pause there, but swept down into the Indus Plain, eventually becoming established in western India, with their control reaching as far as Mathura. To the west their base was in Seistan in Iran. Horsemen herders had the potential of becoming a good cavalry and this was used to advantage in campaigns.

The Parthians, the Shakas and the Yueh-chih arrived in India turn by turn. This maelstrom of peoples was yet another occasion when the aridity of the deserts of central Asia transmuted the history of China and India. Pastoral nomadism also acted as an avenue for the intermittent exchange of goods, some exchanged directly for profit and some as gifts. Chinese silk, for example, found its way via central Asia to India and the eastern Mediterranean, some of it moving through a series of gift exchanges in the first area and some as an item of trade in the latter area. The people who came from central Asia were familiar with the rough passage of high mountains and deserts, relieved only by intermittent oases. The passes of the north-west mountains of India may have been inhospitable in themselves, but the fertility and wealth of the Indian plains were glimpses of a richer future. The attraction of India lay not just in the fertility of the land, but also in the profits of trade from the items it produced. The nexus between Roman trade and central Asia was seen as an avenue to prosperity and the same image was taking shape in the trade between the eastern Mediterranean, as part of the Roman Empire and western India. If itinerant trade was a subsidiary activity of the pastoralists, this was gradually overtaking other activities. The pastoralists were emerging as traders and, with the backing of their herding horses, became newly converted to cavalry.

With the entry of the Shakas on the Indian historical scene, Chinese texts referring to events in central Asia become relevant to Indian history as well, apart from Shaka coins and inscriptions. The Shaka King Maues or Moga (*c.* 80 BC) established Shaka power in Gandhara. A successor, Azes, annexed the territory of the last of the Indo-Greek kings in northern India, Hippostratos. Azes is now being associated with the creation of the era of 58 BC that was to be known through the centuries as the Krita, Malava or Vikramaditya, *samvat,* era. Possibly the era was also calculated for use in astronomy as the term krita, created, would suggest, but was given status by association with royalty. The link with Vikramditya is later, and evidently mythological, since a ruler by this name important enough to start an era is not known in the first century BC.

Mithradates II established a Parthian presence in India, also in the first century BC, as did Vonones

a little later. Gondophares, or Gundophemes, achieved fame through the association of his name with that of St Thomas – doubting Thomas – the disciple of Christ. Tradition maintains that St Thomas travelled from the eastern Mediterranean to the court of Gondophares, and the mission eventually took him to south India. This would place Gondophares in the first half of the first century AD. Historical evidence of the arrival of Christianity in south India is, however, of a later period.

Shaka administration continued largely along the lines of the Achaemenid and Seleucid systems in Iran. The kingdom was divided into provinces, each under a military governor called *mahakshatrapa* (great satrap). Each of these provinces was further subdivided into units under the control of lesser governors or *satraps,* who not only issued their own inscriptions in whatever era they wished to observe, but were also permitted to mint their own coins, thereby indicating a more independent status than was normal for an administrative governor. They carry a mixture of Indian and non-Indian names and some were local people of status. Another official title was that of *meridarch,* used for an officer in charge of a designated area. The minting of some coins in the joint names of two rulers has been interpreted to mean that the king associated himself with a ruler of lesser status. This marks a curious contrast to those Shaka kings who took exalted titles, such as 'great king' or 'king of kings', derived from Hellenistic and Achaemenid usage. This attempt to take on the nomenclature of an imperial structure must nevertheless have been bewildering to the recently nomadic Shakas.

The Shakas were driven southwards by the Yueh-chih. A Chinese source records that one of their chiefs, Kujula Kadphises, united the five tribes of the Yueh-chih and led them over the northern mountains into north-western India, establishing himself in Bactria and extending his control to Kabul and Kashmir, thus initiating the Kushana kingdom. This is confirmed by Greek and Latin sources complaining of attacks on Bactria from northern nomads. Indian sources do not refer to the Kushanas as such, but references to the Tukhara, or Tushara, are thought to refer to them. The Begram-Kabul area, a core area of this kingdom, was once the hub of the Paropamisadae under the Seleucids and Mauryas. The Indo-Iranian borderlands again became a contested region between northern India and powers further west. On his death, in the mid-first century AD, Kujula was succeeded by Wema Kadphises. Kushana coinage included some issues in gold that appear to be imitations of the Roman *denarius aureus* coins that were circulating in central Asia in the wake of Roman trade. A copper series of *tetradrachms* were also issued with an image of Shiva.

The Kushana dynasty was in the ascendant in central Asia under Kanishka, whose relationship to the earlier kings has been confirmed by the recent discovery of an inscription in Afghanistan. In this he claims that he conquered *hindo*/India, i.e., the better-known north-west of India, and proclaimed his conquest in all the cities as far as Champa (in the middle Ganges Plain). He also says that he issued an edict in Greek and then put it into Aryan – incidentally, a correct use of the term to indicate a language, in this case most likely Prakrit. His central Asian identity is imprinted on a statue, unfortunately headless, found near Mathura but identified by an inscription and representing the king as an impressive figure in boots and coat. The accession of Kanishka has been dated anywhere between AD 78 and 144. An era based on AD 78 has come to be called the Shaka era, but is also thought by some to be linked to the accession of Kanishka. The Kushana kingdom may have reached to the middle Ganges Plain, where Kushana inscriptions have been found. However, their most important cities were Purushapura, near modern Peshawar, and Mathura. Kushana artefacts are found at places such as Chirand, but this does not necessarily indicate the conquest of the area by the Kushanas. Artefacts and coins can travel with trade and are not necessarily proof of conquest or control.

The inclusion of parts of central Asia in the Kushana kingdom, as far as Kashgar, converted it into

an extensive state that had the makings of an empire. India and China were brought closer through the interlinking oases and through Kushana territory bordering on both. Recently found inscriptions and coins along these frontiers indicate many interconnections within the region. The larger part of the empire was in central Asia, with its hub in Bactria, hence the frequency of Kushana Bactrian inscriptions. There are inscriptions in Prakrit in Bactria, but none in Bactrian in the Indian north-west. An early Kushana settlement at Khalchayan in central Asia has coins with legends inscribed in *brahmi,* although *kharoshthi* was also used. This might have a bearing on cultural and commercial emphases and point to Prakrit-speaking groups beyond the subcontinent.

The construction of a road – the Karakorum Highway – a few years back, linking the north-west to central Asia, and connecting the upper Indus route with Gilgit, Chitral and Skardu, revealed the existence of a much earlier route following approximately similar directions. Going along the Indus and into the Hunza Valley, it eventually branched off towards Samarkand, Tashkurgan and Yarkand, and was evidently a branch of the Silk Route. The location of the Ashokan edicts at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi in the north-west marked a logical area for the start of such a route. Inscriptions in *kharoshthi, brahmi* and Bactrian, and engravings of Buddhist images and themes along the way, date the earlier route to the start of the Christian era. Inscriptions in an early form of *sharada* (a script used later in northern India), in Sogdian and in Chinese indicate its continued use into later times. The occasional depiction of horses would suggest an early horse trade with central Asia, the horses of that area being highly prized. The route seems to have been used extensively and possibly also became another entry-point into India for central Asian armies. The proximity to central Asia through such routes encouraged exchange. It also influenced aspects of Indian technology, such as an improvement in horse trappings and equipment, already familiar to central Asia and now improving the efficiency of the cavalry in India.

Given the territorial span of the contact, and the intermingling of peoples, royal patronage had to be extended to a variety of religions – Buddhism, Jainism, the Bhagavata and Shaiva sects, Zoroastrianism and the Hellenistic cults. The northern Buddhists claimed Kanishka as a royal patron, associating him with the Fourth Buddhist Council held to clarify Buddhist doctrine. This was a parallel to the claim of the Theravada Buddhists that Ashoka presided over the Third Council at Patalipurra. The most significant outcome of the Fourth Council was the recognition of various new Buddhist sects and their attempts at missionary activity in central Asia. For the Kushanas, an oven association with divinity may be seen as part of the propaganda of royalty. The Kushana title of *daivaputra* – son of heaven – may have been derived from Chinese usage, although it could also have been influenced by the claims to divine status among Roman emperors and their cult, who also took a similar title, *diva filius.* Even stronger associations with divinity lay in the sanctuaries built to deify the king after his death – the *devakula.* These are rare in India, and the Kushanas may have thought this an appropriate form of acquiring respect as rulers in an area where they were migrants.

The Indo-Greek kings and the Kushanas took exalted titles. The Indo-Greeks used *basileos basilei* (king of kings) and the Kushanas borrowed titles from the Persians, Chinese and Romans, rendering them as *maharajati-raja* (king of kings), *daivaputra* (son of heaven), *soter* (Saviour) and *kaisara* (Caesar). The halo that occasionally adorns a Kushana ruler may well have been derived from the Mediterranean practice. Such tides nourished notions of empire. The stature of the ruler was enhanced by past kings being raised to the status of gods, with temples dedicated to them. The Kushana portrait galleries of their kings, at Surkh Kotal and Mat in Mathura, parallel temples to deities. This was ironic in a way, since despite their extensive territories they were not governing as an imperial system. The nature of control varied from region to region. Some areas were directly

administered, in others greater power lay with the local satraps, and in still others control was exercised through existing rulers who had accepted Kushana suzerainty. The office of *mahakshatrapa* was frequently the precursor to independent kingship.

Kushana governance gradually diminished, weakened by the confrontations with the rising power of the Iranian Sassanids, and nibbled at by the assertive *gana-sanghas* of the Punjab and Rajasthan. The distinctiveness of the Kushana presence was slowly being eroded as is symbolized in the name of a late ruler, Vasudeva, reminiscent of the association of Heliodorus with the Bhagavata cult. At the same time, events in Iran were to intervene again in the history of north-western India. In AD 226 Ardashir overthrew the Parthians and established Sassanian ascendancy. His successor conquered Peshawar and Taxila in the mid-third century, and the Kushana kings were subordinated to the Sassanians.

The turn of the millennium had been a period of central Asian intervention in the history of northern India that took the form of conquests, migrations and commerce. Those who came were initially alien in custom and belief, but the mutations that had occurred among them and among the host societies expanded the cultural experience of both. If Greeks were converted to Vaishnavism or came to accept the presence of Bhagavata and Shaiva deities, Indians began to worship deities from across the borders, some of which entered the Indian pantheon, such as the goddess Ardochsho in the form of Shri. Kushana coins sometimes carried images of Zoroastrian deities.

The coming of the Kushanas had pushed the Shakas south into the region of Kutch, Kathiawar and Malwa in western India. Here they were to remain and to rule until the late fourth century AD. The rule of Rudradaman the Kshatrapa in the mid-second century stands out largely for the cultural change that he patronized. At Junagarh, in Saurashtra, a lengthy inscription – the earliest of any importance in Sanskrit – provides evidence of his activities. The language is the commonly used Sanskrit that had formed the basis of Panini's grammar. He may have chosen it in preference to the currently used Prakrits of inscriptions in order to project himself as supported by the conventions of the orthodox, despite their grading such rulers technically as low-status *kshatriyas*. Was Rudradaman deliberately aligning himself with Brahmanism as a stand against the prevailing patronage of Buddhism, Bhagavatism and other new sects in the north-west? This was not merely an act of patronage towards a religion, but also identification with an ideology. It is ironic that the use of Sanskrit in inscriptions should have begun with a person whose *varna* status could be questioned. Was he attempting to win the support of the orthodox in establishing his legitimacy as a ruler? Or was he reflecting the parallel patronage and language that was gradually to become predominant in court circles? Apart from listing conquests, as is common in such inscriptions, he is described as a man of literary sensibilities well able to use Sanskrit in the cultural idioms of the time. This was to become a regular accomplishment associated with kings in the eulogies and became increasingly popular, as did the issuing of inscriptions in Sanskrit.

Dated to AD 150, the inscription is engraved on the same rock as a set of the Major Rock Edicts of Ashoka. The Sanskrit text of Rudradaman is a contrast to the Prakrit text of Ashoka, effectively conveying the spirit of the historical change. It is primarily a record of the repairing of the Mauryan period dam on the Sudarshana lake, still in use but having been badly breached by a violent storm. The minister who carried out the repair is described as able, patient, not arrogant, upright and not to be bribed! The inscription also refers in eulogistic terms to Rudradaman's conquest in the Narmada valley, his campaigns against the Satavahana king (south of the Narmada) and his victory over the Yaudheya *gana-sangha* in Rajasthan. Rudradaman is described thus in the inscription:

(He) who by the right raising of his hand has caused the strong attachment of *Dharma,* who has attained wide fame by studying and remembering, by the knowledge and practice of grammar, music, logic, and other great sciences, who (is proficient in) the management of horses, elephants, and chariots, the wielding of sword and shield, pugilistic combat,… in acts of quickness and skill in opposing forces, who day by day is in the habit of bestowing presents and honours and eschewing disrespectful treatment, who is bountiful, whose treasury by the tribute, tolls, and shares rightfully obtained overflows with an accumulation of gold, silver, diamonds, beryl stones, and precious things; who (composes) prose and verse which are clear, agreeable, sweet, charming, beautiful, excelling by the proper use of words, and adorned; whose beautiful frame owns the most excellent marks and signs, such as auspicious height and dimension, voice, gait, colour, vigour, and strength, who himself has acquired the name ofmahakshatrapa, who has been wreathed with many garlands at the *svayamvara* [the ceremony of a princess chosing her husband among assembled suitors] of the daughters of kings.

Epigraphia Indica VIII, pp. 36 ff., tr. F. Kielhorn,

'Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman'

The inscription is an early example of what was to become the prashasti – eulogy – a style characteristic of royal biographies, not only in its use of Sanskrit but also in its adhering to the description of a conventional *kshatriya* king. The *prashasti* as a literary style was evolving, as can be seen in these inscriptions that eulogize rulers. It is even more apparent in Ashvaghosha's famous biography of the Buddha, the *Buddhacharita.* This style marks the entrenching of monarchy in areas where it had been less familiar and sets the tone for describing the ideal king. As a form of legitimation the *prashasti* could project even chiefs and governors as ideal *kshatriya* rulers, irrespective of their origins.

The compositions of such eulogistic inscriptions were also seminal to the later royal biographies written as pan of courtly literature. Comparisons with deities had begun, but not in an excessive manner. The association with divinity became more outspoken, ironically, when the power of the ruler was not so exalted, except in the case of the Kushana title of *daivaputra.* Dynasties of central Asian origin had a choice of investment in local identities and ideologies – Buddhist, Jaina, Bhagavata – and it is of interest to see who chose what. Legitimation was also being sought by grants of land to Buddhist monasteries and to brahmans. This was as yet a marginal activity, but was later to take on a dimension that affected the structure of the political economy.

Satavahanas

In the first century BC the Satavahana dynasty was established in the western Deccan. The Satavahanas were also sometimes called the Andhra dynasty. This led to the assumption that they originated in the Andhra region, the deltas of the Krishna and Godavari Rivers on the east coast, from where they moved westwards up the Godavari River, finally establishing their power in the western Deccan. The break-up of the Mauryan Empire was thought to have assisted in this process. Ashoka specifically mentions the Andhras among the peoples in his domain, and not as a conquered kingdom.

The generally held opinion now is that the family originated in the west and later extended its control to the eastern coast, associated with the name Andhra.

The rise of the Satavahanas follows the pattern of the transition from chiefdom to kingdom, with the newly established kings performing Vedic sacrifices as an act of legitimation. Their administration can also be seen as reflecting some continuation from chiefdoms in the designations of administrators. It is thought that they developed political ambitions because they held administrative positions under the Mauryas and, like many others, saw the potentialities of independent kingship on the disintegration of the empire.

The earliest of the Satavahana kings to receive wide recognition was Satakarni, because of his policy of military expansion. He was described as ruling in the west and being the king against whom Kharavela of Kalinga campaigned. He was also said to be the 'Lord of Pratishthana' (modern Paithan in the Deccan), the capital of the Satavahanas. Numismatic evidence suggests that he ruled around 50 BC. His conquests took him north of the Narmada into eastern Malwa, which at the time was being threatened by the Shakas. An inscription at Sanchi in central India refers to him as *Rajan Shri Shatakarni*. This is a surprisingly simple title for an aspirant to kingship over a large domain. His next move was in the southerly direction and, on conquering the Godavari Valley, he felt entitled to call himself 'Lord of the Southern Regions'. Satakarni performed the ritual of a horse sacrifice to put a stamp on his rulership. He also claimed to have destroyed the *khatiyas,* often interpreted as the Khatriaioi peoples mentioned by Ptolemy, but it could also be a reference to the *kshatriya* ruling clans of the oligarchic polities of western and central India. The continuing presence of these polities and their resilience in the face of opposition from monarchical polities has not received the attention it deserves.

The western possessions of the Satavahanas were, however, annexed by the very people whom Satakarni had feared – the Shakas – who were by now powerful in western India, north of the River Narmada. Coins struck by the Shaka satrap, Nahapana, have been found in the Nasik area, which could mean that by the first century AD the Shakas controlled this region. But the Satavahanas appear to have regained their western possessions soon after this, for the coins of Nahapana are often found overstruck by the name Gautamiputra Satakarni, who was responsible for re-establishing Satavahana power in western India. Judging by the references to ports and politics in the *Periplus,* the west coast was becoming a contested area, the contest being aggravated by the trade from Roman Egypt.

Vasishthiputra, the son of Gautamiputra, ruling in the early second century, had the additional name of Shri Pulumavi which led to his being identified with the Siro Polemaios ruling at Baithana (Paithan), mentioned by Ptolemy in his geography of India written in the second century AD. The Deccan was now the connecting link between north and south, not only in terms of politics, but more significantly in trade and in the spread of Buddhism and Jainism. Vasishthiputra states that Gautamiputra had uprooted the Shakas and had destroyed the pride of the *kshatriyas:* that he had stopped the contamination of the four *varnas,* and had furthered the interests of the twice-born. In brahmanical social codes the Shakas were ranked as being of low caste, and the Yavanas as degenerate *kshatriyas,* the same terms being used for the Shakas, Yavanas and Parthians in a royal Satavahana inscription.

In an effort to ease the relations between the Satavahanas and the Shakas, a matrimonial alliance brought together the daughter of Rudradaman and the Satavahana king. It is interesting that the Satavahanas, who boasted of having stopped the contamination of the four *varnas,* were nevertheless anxious to take a bride from a Shaka family. The discrepancy between theory and practice was subordinated to the primacy of political expediency. That this effort at an alliance was not entirely

successful is clear from Rudradaman's statement that he twice defeated the Satavahana king in battle, but refrained from annihilating him because of a close relationship. After the death of Rudradaman, the Satavahanas were more successful in their attacks on Shaka territory. Towards the end of the second century the Satavahana domain stretched from western India to the Krishna delta and northern Tamil-nadu, but this extensive domain was not to survive long. The next century saw the weakening of the Satavahanas, with a corresponding increase in the power of local governors claiming independent status.

The Satavahanas refrained from taking imperial titles, perhaps because they recognized that their control over local chiefs and kings was not of a nature to justify such titles. This fact was conceded even in their administrative system, where power was distributed throughout the hierarchy of officials and not concentrated at the centre. Satavahana territory was divided into small provinces, each under civil and military officers (*amatya, maha-bhoja, mahasenapati, mahatalavara, maharathi*). Some were permitted to marry into the royal family, suggestive of their being chiefs of the area, presumably in the hope that this would fortify their loyalty to the dynasty. Some were even allowed to mint their own coins. When the Satavahana power collapsed these governors followed the usual pattern of setting themselves up as independent rulers. Administration was left largely in local hands, though subject to the general control of royal officers, with the village remaining the administrative unit. There was some continuity from Mauryan times, as in the use of terms such as *mahamatra* for an officer or *ahara* for an administrative division. This was unchanged while the village was the source of taxes. There might also have been some obligation to provide soldiers in case of a war and this would tie down the village still further. Changes in political relationships were restricted to the higher level among provincial governors and their officers.

Some Satavahana kings use matronymics, which has led to the controversy as to whether this was a method of identifying the ruler more precisely or the influence of a local matrilineal custom. The adoption of caste society in new areas would not have required the discarding of all local practices. Even practices that were alien to the *Dharma-shastras* would have been permitted if they were necessary to local custom. Such texts may not have been quite as authoritative as is thought.

The Abhiras and the Traikutakas of western India made the declining Satavahana power their target. The Vakatakas were the next to dominate the northern Deccan. The Kalachuri-Chedi dynasty asserted control over the northern part of the peninsula. They were among the earlier dynasties to establish an era, in AD 248-49, no doubt as one aspect of staking a claim to power. A number of small kingdoms came alive in the Ganges Plain. Their most important role was to restrain the powers of the north-west from overrunning the plain, but they have left few traces. Some kings have been identified as belonging to the dynasties of the Maghas, Bodhis and Nagas, while others have names ending in the suffix 'mitra', although this does not link them to the Shungas.

Further south in the peninsula the kingdoms of the Shalankayanas, Brihat-palayanas and Ikshvakus arose in about the third-fourth centuries AD. The first two ruled in the west Godavari district and in the Masulipatam area. The Ikshvakus were located further south in the Krishna valley and were doubtless a local clan who took a lineage name from the Suryavamsha, the solar line, on coming to power. They built the magnificent city of Nagarjunakonda and are also remembered for their gender division of patronage: the kings performed Vedic sacrifices, while the women of the royal family were generous donors to the Buddhist Sangha. The two kinds of patronage would have had different functions. Setting apart the belief in either or both religions, the Vedic rituals were new to the area and were performed to claim legitimation as kings superseding earlier chiefships, whereas the Buddhist Sangha had a wide network that could perhaps be a more effective support to its royal

patrons. The adoption of Vedic rituals sharply separated the chiefly families from the clansmen and others in an erstwhile clan society. On the conversion of the first generation to *kshatriya* status, other chiefs, such as the *mahatalavara,* also claimed gotra identity.

South India

Towards the end of the first millennium BC south India moved from prehistory into history, and literary records reflecting contemporary events are available. Ashoka in his inscriptions refers to the peoples of south India as the Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas and Satiyaputras – the crucible of the culture of Tamilakam – called thus from the predominant language of the Dravidian group at the time, Tamil. The use of the suffix *putra* in some of these names would suggest a system of clans and chiefs. The first three chiefdoms became almost generic to societies based on clans and lineages in the area and acquired the status of kingdoms in a later period. The Cholas and the Pandyas were located in the eastern area, with a Chola concentration in the lower Kaveri. Korkai and Alagankulam are recently excavated sites, thought to have been exchange centres in Pandyan territory. The first is linked to pearl fisheries and the second developed as a port. Karur on the banks of the Kaveri was an important inland centre, as was Kodumanal, with excavated evidence of working semi-precious stones. Gradually, over time, the Cheras were associated with the western coast. The Satiyaputras, with a more limited history, have been identified through being mentioned in a local inscription in Tamil-nadu.

The history of this area of south India has been reconstructed from diverse sources: megalithic burials, inscriptions in Tamil *brahmi* (where the *brahmi* script was the earliest script used for writing Tamil) and the Tamil poems of the *Shangam* literature. Some comparative data comes from sources in Greek – the *Periplus Maris Erythraei/The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea,* and Ptolemy's *Geography* (in both of which, parts of south India are described) – as well as in Pliny's *Natural History* in Latin. Megalithic burials are scattered across the peninsula as far north as the Vindhyas, with variations of frequency and form. Those of Tamilakam include menhirs, dolmens, urn burials and stone circles, while Kerala also has rock-cut chambers. A stone chamber, constructed from slabs of stone in a pit in the ground, was used for placing relics and grave goods; the chamber was then covered with earth and the small area demarcated by a circle of stones. Terracotta urns and legged sarcophagi also occur in the burials. Rock-cut chambers or passages occur in the hilly areas and urn burials in riverine areas. Societies using these forms of burials were not identical and were culturally heterogeneous. Yet there are some strands in their cultures, such as demarcating burial locations, that link them and make the cultures of the peninsula distinctive.

Burials accompanied by grave goods point not only to respect for ancestors, but also to beliefs in life after death. The burials include complete or partial skeleton remains; some horse and cattle bones; metal objects, largely of iron, but some of copper, gold and silver; ornaments of chank and ivory; beads; charred rice or millet; and Black-and-Red pottery. It is likely that these were the burials of chiefly families.

These burials date to the first millennium ac and, in a few cases, their terminal levels contain artefacts that date to the turn of the millennium, for example Roman Imperial coins. The structures are not arbitrary and required the quarrying of large blocks of stone laid in specific patterns. In all probability these were societies capable of organizing kinsmen as labour. Pottery placed in the

burials is mainly the Black-and-Red Ware, which could have been made locally, suggesting craft specialization. Some of the potsherds have graffiti designs scratched on them, a few of which resemble the signs on Harappan seals. Iron artefacts – hoes, horse-trappings and implements – could have been obtained either from itinerant smiths working at the sites or through a network of exchange. A furnace for smelting metal has been excavated in the Deccan, and the site of Kodumanal in the south was a centre for the production of iron artefacts. Beads would also have been part of such an exchange. If these objects were not produced locally by craftsmen the networks of exchange must have been extensive.

Despite the diversity in burial forms, grave goods tend to be fairly uniform. Few settlement sites have been found in the vicinity of the burials, one theory being that this was due to the nomadic lifestyle of the society, but this explanation seems inadequate. Agricultural implements, such as hoes, could have been used either in shifting cultivation or in settled agriculture. However, a burial site is sacred and needs to be tended, so it is unlikely that a group identified with such a site would wander far from it. Memorial menhirs, constituting what is called a *sarna* among certain central Indian tribes today, frequently form the focus of community and religious activities, as a symbol of identity.

Other than the evidence of the megaliths, the earliest reasonably accurate sources for the history of this region are the short dedicatory inscriptions, dating to the period from about the second century BC to the mid-first millennium AD. The dedication is often a votive inscription to record the donation of a cave by a chief, or later by an artisan or merchant or even a Buddhist or Jaina monk. References to brahman settlements begin around the middle of the millennium. The language of the inscriptions is Tamil, although some Prakrit words are included. This provides clues to the process of the adaptation of the Ashokan *brahmi* script that was increasingly used, with emendations for Tamil. It is likely that the influence of Mauryan administration, together with the arrival in the south of itinerant Buddhist and Jaina monks, led to this adaptation. Such label inscriptions also occur as graffiti on potsherds, where names were inscribed on large pots. Where they are votive inscriptions, the later ones mention the occupations of the donors, many of whom were merchants dealing in cloth, toddy, grain and salt, or else craftsmen such as goldsmiths and lapidaries. The locations of the inscriptions provide evidence on links between routes. The inscriptions are invaluable, both in themselves for purposes of establishing chronology, and for providing cross-references to names of chiefs and clans mentioned in the *Shangam* literature, the earliest literary source.

The *Shangam* corpus is a collection of anthologies of poetry on themes popular among these early societies. Tradition has it that many centuries ago three successive assemblies (*shangams*) were held, the last at Madurai, and the compositions of the poets and bards are included in the anthologies of the *Shangam* literature. The latter mainly consist of the earliest stratum, the Ettutogai, and the somewhat later Pattupattu dating to between 200 BC and AD 300. To these are added the Tamil grammar, the *Tolkappiyam,* and the somewhat later didactic text, the *Tirukkural*. The precise dating of these compositions is problematic, which complicates their use as historical sources.

Many of the poems narrate episodes relating to raids and plunder. Some describe the capturing of brides. These are themes common to all heroic literature and there are close parallels with epic literature in other Indian languages. What is particularly remarkable in these poems is the awareness of the environment and the correlation of activities to ecological perceptions. Five ecological zones are listed, referred to as *tinai,* each supporting in turn hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, marauders, fishermen and rice cultivators. Because these were not sharply demarcated there were some overlaps. The gradual spread of agriculture can be observed through the association of wealth with cultivated land.

Among the clans the heads of households were important, but a higher status was given to the *velir,* the chiefs, who might have been associated with the megalithic burials. A still higher status was that of the powerful chiefdoms of the *ventar,* a term used for the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas. Exchange and the redistribution of produce would have interlocked the three levels. Some elements are similar to the earlier janapadas of the north, many of which retained a *gana-sangha* polity, although others evolved into kingdoms. The change from chiefdoms to kingdoms takes place in the subsequent period.

The evolving of kingdoms may have been slower because the minimal craftsmanship did not require a concentration of craftsmen in towns, therefore the demand for agricultural produce to sustain such groups was limited. This in turn could have been related to items of exchange, probably raw materials and the produce from horticulture, with the exchange being carried out by itinerant traders. Initially, the major item bringing in wealth was pepper, a horticultural product intended for exchange. The exchange of pepper for items brought by the Roman trade – gold and silver coins, coral and wine – first took place in centres that only gradually developed into commercial towns. The cultivation of rice was sufficient for the society of the chiefdoms and the motivation to extend this cultivation is not apparent. Iron technology in the megalithic settlements was not the marker of full-fledged sedentary peasant farming, as has been argued for north India. Neither was the iron ploughshare necessary for a substantially increased yield, given that the lighter soil conditions of much of the south were different from the Ganges Plain. In this situation, the initial thrust towards urbanization and the formation of states may have resulted from the increasing demands of trade. The emergence of kingdoms was a gradual process.

As in all heroic societies, the poet or bard was held in high esteem even if his authority was not tangible. He composed and communicated the poems in praise of the hero, thus bestowing on him fame and immortality. Depending on the wealth of his patron his reward could be anything from a meal to a golden lotus. Gift-giving was taken for granted in such societies and the economy was tied into kinship. Lesser kinsmen provided for the chiefs who carried out raids, and the booty from these was distributed to the kinsmen as reward. The use of non-kin labour is again a later development. Where labour is regulated by kinship, customary practices tend to be observed. On the other hand, non-kin labour, the source of which is frequently coercion based on enslavement or impoverishment, is more impersonal. The *Shangam* poems refer to various occupations, but not directly to the social ordering of *varna.*

The settlement of the chief as the hub of the redistribution of wealth would gradually grow into an administrative centre and this, together with the coming of trade, prepared it for a move towards urbanism, as was the case in Uraiyur, Madurai and Karur. Items of daily necessity, such as salt and paddy, would have been available at more local levels and subject to barter. The shift to luxuries, as with the Roman trade, where pepper, semi-precious stones (particularly beryl) and textiles were exchanged for gold and silver coins, wine and coral, could take place at port settlements where the traders gathered: hence the importance of Muziris, Arikamedu and Puhar (Kaveripattinam). Puhar was later to become the focus of trade from many directions.

The Roman conquest of Egypt linked Alexandria to Rome and this probably spurred Egyptian interest into exploration of the Arabian Sea, their former interest having been hesitant. The range of ports increased from those linked to the Indus delta, and began to include ports further south. By the time that the Yavana traders became active in south India, at the turn of the Christian era, the votive inscriptions mention various craft specialists and merchants such as those handling gold, semi-precious stones, textiles, iron and suchlike. This would have marked a change in the chiefdoms.

There was frequent conflict between the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas, which gave ample scope for

compositions on war and love by the poets. Some chiefs are even said to have participated in the battle at Kurukshetra, described in the *Mahabharata,* an obvious attempt to give them antiquity and underline their claims to the status of heroes. The Tamils, under Elara, attacked and occupied a part of northern Sri Lanka, but only for a short while. They were expelled by King Dutthugamini, which has made of the latter something of a Sinhala hero in later times. Pottery pieces with graffiti in Sinhala *brahmi,* surfacing at subcontinental coastal sites, point to early contacts. The Chera chief, Neduncheral Adan, is said to have conquered all the land as far as the Himalaya, clearly a poetic conceit. He is also said to have defeated a Yavana fleet, which may have been an attack on Roman trading ships since Yavana initially referred to those coming with the maritime trade from the west. Among the early Chola heroes Karikala, the 'man with the charred leg', is credited with having fought and defeated the combined forces of the Pandyas, the Cheras and eleven minor chieftains.

For the far south, this was the period of transition from chiefdoms to kingdoms, with the formation of states. The catalysts in this region were not the same as those of the Ganges Plain. There is little evidence of the clearing of forests for cultivation although the cultivation of wet rice associated with the megalithic settlements would have provided some surplus. The use of iron extends over a long period yet it does not seem to have been a crucial factor in the change to urbanisrn. The ending of the chiefdoms is attributed to hostilities with the Kalabhras, who had upset the existing system. But other changes may have been more effective.

Migrants such as Buddhist and Jaina monks used the avenues opened by Mauryan administration. Somewhat later, further pointers to trade and the introduction of new agricultural settlements are provided by the brahman settlers, who probably came from the Deccan. The monks would have sought the patronage of the chiefs to establish monasteries, and later the patronage of merchants and wealthy craftsmen when towns were established. Some megalithic networks of exchange were doubtless extended by involvement in the trade with the eastern Mediterranean, which stimulated the accumulation of wealth. There were many likely reasons for change: the mutation of barter into trade; or clan-based agriculture becoming peasant cultivation, which was taxed; the use of non-kin labour organized by the chiefs; and the chiefs acquiring wealth through means other than raids.

The establishment of brahman settlements in the south, probably coinciding with the rise of kingdoms, gradually introduced Sanskrit into the local language. But it also meant that Sanskrit speakers had to learn Tamil and use it professionally, which some did. That it was a two-way process is seldom commented upon, yet this is central to analysing acculturation. More was involved than language change and the incorporation of deities and rituals, and it should therefore be seen as an ongoing process, similar to that occurring in many other parts of the subcontinent.

Networks of Routes and Trading Centres

The subcontinent presents a mosaic of political identities during this period. Each mosaic varies in size. Some are small but the patterns of others give an impression of large states, however loosely they might have been pulled together. The pattern is further variegated by the inclusion of distinct kinds of political systems – kingdoms, oligarchies and chiefships. It is therefore rather difficult to make historical generalizations about the subcontinent as a whole. But the one feature that threaded its way through all this variation was exchange and trade. Again this was not of a uniform pattern, but nevertheless it is striking how activities and political identities in many pans of the subcontinent were

involved. This was done through the evolving of trading centres of various kinds, linked by far-reaching routes.

Earlier, items had been manufactured close to the sources of raw material or where a tradition of a particular craft existed, and artisans would gather there from surrounding areas. Now there was a greater dispersal of craftsmen, with many gathering in centres where there were markets. The proximity of sources or of distribution possibilities often determined the location of smaller exchange centres, whereas the larger markets were in towns. The dispersal was also occasioned by the raw material having to be transported long distances. The spinning and weaving of cotton and silk involved various regional techniques. It was said that cotton had to be as fine as the slough of a snake, so that the yarn could not be seen. The use of the cotton carder's bow – an implement which is still in use in many places – improved the quality of cotton. Iron was available in mines scattered in various places, or from the iron-bearing soils of some areas. Copper was mined in Rajasthan, the Deccan and the foothills of the Himalaya. Semi-precious stones were available in many hilly and forested regions of the peninsula. The Himalayan slopes provided the much-used musk and saffron. The Salt Range of the Punjab remained the major source of salt. South India provided spices, gold, precious stones and pearls, together with sandalwood and ebony.

Numerous routes now traversed the subcontinent, some continuing further into central and western Asia. The political control of the Shakas and Kushanas linked central Asia to India. Once the connections had been made trade would continue, provided there were goods to exchange. Chinese traders imported fur and horses, and the horse trade was also of interest to Indian traders. The decline of the Kushanas was contemporary with the decrease in Roman commercial interests in central Asia. This affected commercial interests in north-western India, but not for an extensive period. Elsewhere, for example along the coasts of the peninsula, the trade with the eastern Mediterranean flourished, the eastern trade with south-east Asia becoming more profitable.

Routes tended to follow the highways and the river valleys. Rivers were not bridged, but ferries were common. Travel was restricted to the dry summers and winters, the rainy season being a period of rest. Caravans were large, and often several banded together for greater safety. Oxen and mules were the caravan animals, although in the desert camels were used. More nimble-footed asses were the pack animal in rough hill terrain. Kautilya advised that in the south roads running through the mining areas should be taken, as these traversed the heavily populated regions and were therefore safer than the more isolated routes. Mining activities seem to have expanded, especially the mining of gold and semi-precious stones. Buddhist sources refer to long-distance routes being regularly frequented, such as the north to south-west route from Shravasti to Pratishthana, and those that followed the river valleys of the north. Deserts tended to be avoided where possible except for short distances.

Coastal shipping was common, water routes being many times cheaper than land routes. But the former were not without drawbacks. There is an interesting passage in the *Arthashastra* comparing the advantages of land and water routes. At one point it says that although sea travel is cheaper the danger of pirates and the cost of losing ships to them makes it expensive. Pirates, throughout history, were to be the bane of coastal areas involved in maritime trade, and were no less of a nuisance than brigands on land. A coastal route is obviously safer than a mid-ocean route and it also affords greater opportunities for local trade. But where profits were guaranteed and time was of the essence, mid-ocean routes were faster. Goods were transported by light coastal vessels, larger ships constructed from single logs tied together, and yet larger ones for long-distance voyages to the Red Sea or to south-east Asia. According to Pliny, the largest Indian ship was 75 tons but other sources estimate

ships that could hold up to 700 passengers.

Among potts, Barbaricum on the Indus Delta served as a port for the north-west, but the silting up of the estuary led to a relocating of its ports and its eventual decline. Its hinterland went as far north as Gandhara. Bhrigukachchha/Bharukachchha or Barygaza in Greek sources, the modern Bharuch, continued to be a major port for the western sea trade, as in earlier centuries, with its hinterland reaching the Ganges Plain. Ships arriving at Bhrigukachchha were conducted to their berths by pilot boats. At least one *Jataka* story refers to communication with Baveru (Babylon). The Gulf of Cambay remained the destination for much shipping from the Arabian Gulf, even up to recent times. But a large amount of trade was handled by other ports further down the western coast, such as Sopara and Kalyana, serving the western Deccan, and Muziris, linked to the centres in the south. Ports along the east coast were initially close to river estuaries, with the largest being in the Ganges Delta, for example, Tamralipti/Tamluk. The latter had access to the river trade along the Ganges, as well as the trade routes coming from the north-west through the Ganges Plain. Sherds with *kharoshthi* inscriptions which surface at sites in the Ganges Delta are an indication of these connections, as well as those with graffiti in Sinhala *brahmi,* found both here and as far afield as the island of Bali.

The Mauryas had built a Royal Highway from Taxila to Pataliputra, a road that was almost continuously rebuilt in some approximation to the original during the period of Sher Shah, the Mughals and the British. The British referred to it as the Grand Trunk Road and its current revival is in the National Highway No. 1. Pataliputra was connected by both road and river with Tamluk, which was also linked by sea to Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Routes to the south developed rapidly in post-Mauryan times due to intensified trade demands. Land routes followed river valleys where possible, the elevations in the Deccan plateau discouraging direct north-south communication, but allowing for some east-west routes along valleys such as those of the Godavari and the Krishna. As with the Ganges Plain, the plateau was thickly wooded and therefore unsafe compared with the clearings and settlements along the valleys.

Nevertheless the Deccan was a hive of market centres, production centres and Buddhist monasteries at places such as Ter, Bhokardan, Karad, Kondapur, Dharanikota and Amaravati, not to mention the more northerly centres in Vidarbha and the north-western Deccan. Ujjain was linked via Bhokardan, Kotalingala, Dhulikatta and Peddabunkur to Amaravati, some of which had megaliths or *stupas* or were fortified settlements. Buddhist sites were sometimes close to megalithk sites. The arrival of Buddhist monks in these areas would have required the support of settlements that could provide alms. The sanctity of a megalithk burial site would bestow sanctity on a *stupa* as well – both being essentially burials or symbolic of burials, even if of a different kind. Another route linked Bhrigukachchha, Nasik, Kondapur, Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati. The archaeology of such sites suggests that they were not isolated staging-points along a route but had connections with cultivators, pastoralists and hunter-gatherers in the neighbourhood. This encouraged their function as markets.

Gaps and breaks in mountains were always utilized, as in the peninsula where a major line of communication was the route from the Malabar coast on the west, through the Palghat Gap, along the Kaveri Valley to the east-coast settlements, traversing sites such as Kodumanal and Karur, before arriving at Arikamedu, Korkai or Alagankulam. Sites on the east coast had contact with settlements in Sri Lanka. Coastal routes developed faster and became the basis of north-south links along each coast, sometimes preferred over land routes. It was earlier thought that the cargo from Roman ships was offloaded at the western ports to be transported overland to the east coast, where places such as Arikamedu became trading stations. Incoming cargo was received for further distribution and exports were specially packed for transmission to Red Sea ports. It is now thought that perhaps ships sailed

to the ports of the east coast despite the dangers of the seas between south India and Sri Lanka.

Routes within India were actively used, and this activity increased through contacts with more distant places in west and central Asia that were linked to the Hellenistic world. In the north the most widely used highway westwards was from Taxila to Begram, where roads branched off in various directions. The northern route was via Bactria, the Oxus, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus to the Black Sea. A more southerly route went from Kandahar and Herat to Ecbatana, after which it was linked to the ports on the eastern Mediterranean. Another important highway connected Kandahar with Persepolis and Susa. These routes brought a vast variety of goods to towns such as Begram, where the merchandise included delicately carved ivory from India and Chinese silk. Margiana, adjoining Bactria, was a transit point for silk coming from the east that was intended for the Mediterranean. Not unexpectedly, it has a number of Buddhist monasteries. Gandhara also became a nodal point for overland trade tapping the Silk Route and the eastern Byzantine trading centres. Its links to the Ganges Plain extended its hinterland to the delta. Gandhara was an old hand at surviving empires -that of the Achaemenids and the Mauryans, and even as part of the many diverse kingdoms of the north-west – yet it retained its cultural presence. Its array of items included some from India such as pepper, textiles of various kinds, metals, rhinoceroses and elephants, and some such as tortoise-shell from the west.

Although activity in central Asia was politically directed by the raids and migrations of the nomads, this was paralleled in the historically more significant emergence of the Silk Route and the trade that it carried. The Taklamakan desert was ringed round with oases which became staging-points on the route. From Loyang and Chang'an in China the route came to Dunhuang, where it bifurcated: the northern route went through Turfan, Qarashahr, Kucha to Kashgar; and the southern route through Niya and Khotan to Kashgar. From Kashgar it went to the town of Bactra/Balkh and from there either to Iran and the eastern Mediterranean or southwards to India.

This was not a single linear route for it incorporated a number of branches that led off from oasis towns. The politics of the Silk Route were determined by those who controlled its various segments. The oases were the places where animals for the caravans could be replaced or replenished, and armed escorts recruited. The roads were rough, traversing mountains and deserts, and travelling in the area involved having to face bandits as well as severe climatic conditions.

Indian traders were establishing trading stations and merchant colonies in places such as Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, Miran, Kuchi, Qarashahr and Turfan, remote regions which were soon to be opened up not only by Indian merchants but also by Buddhist missionaries. The attraction of profits kept the traders going, while the propagation of Buddhism galvanized the monks. As a result of this activity in central Asia communication with China further improved. In a sense Kushana rule was a link between India and China, and Buddhist missionary activities made the connections even closer. Traders from Roman territories occasionally ventured as far as the Gobi Desert, but Indian traders were quick to see the advantage of being middlemen in a luxury trade between the Chinese and the centres of the eastern Mediterranean and Byzantium.

Because of the Roman conflict with the Parthians, Chinese merchandise was sometimes diverted to Taxila and Bhrigukachchha, thus adding to the prosperity of north-western India. Overland trade with the Yavanas and central Asia went through the mountain passes of the north, with the cities involved in this trade, such as Taxila or Ai-Khanoum, acquiring enormous wealth, as is evident from the high standard of living revealed by their excavation.

A southerly route to west Asia went through the Persian Gulf to Seleucia, with ships travelling up

the coast towards Babylon and the Tigris-Euphrates Delta. The inland towns of Palmyra in Syria and Petra in Jordan linked the west Asian routes with the ports of the eastern Mediterranean. Alternatively ships could cross the Arabian Sea to Aden or to Dioscurides – the island of Socotra – and from there the voyage was continued up the Red Sea. Indian vessels brought rice, wheat and textiles to Socotra and carried back tortoise-shell, among other items. There appears to have been an embargo on their going to the Red Sea ports. Goods brought back from India by Alexandrian sea-captains were offloaded at ports on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea, such as Berenice or Myos Hormus, then sent overland to the Nile where they were taken downstream to Alexandria, which was an entrepot of the Mediterranean world.

The southern areas of Arabia boasted of agricultural wealth due to careful irrigation, as well as gaining an income from trade. The Indian merchandise was copper, sandalwood, teak and ebony, and exports to India included pearls, dyes, wine, dates, gold and specially trained slaves. Some of these ports may well have been used prior to this period. On the Indian side Barbaricum was much frequented, importing linen, topaz, coral, storax (a fragrant gum resin used for incense), frankincense, glass, silver, gold-plate and wine; and exporting a variety of spices, turquoise, lapis-lazuli, muslin, silk yarn and indigo. The Barygaza of Greek sources – Bhrigukachchha – was among the largest entrepots on the western coast and handled the bulk of the maritime trade with west Asia. It imported an assortment of cargo, including wine, tin, lead, coral, topaz, gauze, storax, sweet clover, glass, realgar (red arsenic), antimony, medicinal ointments and gold and silver coin. Presents received by local rulers included gold and silver trinkets, singing boys, maidens, wines and textiles of a superior quality. Exports from Barygaza consisted of the usual variety of spices, spikenard, mala-bathrum (used in preparing ointments), diamonds, sapphires and precious stones. It appears from these items that there was a regular exchange of medical information.

The coastal route from India to western Asia was tedious and was retained for a looping trade in essential commodities. Mid-ocean routes across the Arabian Sea were facilitated by the use of the monsoon winds that blew from the south-west across the Arabian Sea in summer. These winds made mid-ocean travelling speedier than the coastal route. The Arabs were probably the first to use the winds for this purpose. In the mid-first century BC other traders from the Mediterranean world realized their usefulness. Greek sources mention that the discovery of Hippalus introduced a radical change in navigation as ships could use the monsoon winds for a mid-ocean crossing. Hippalus was thought to be the person who discovered the winds, but it is now being suggested that Hippalus was actually the name given to the wind. Ships sailing from the southern end of the Red Sea would wait for the south-west monsoon to pass its peak before they set sail, using the now less ferocious wind. The returning north-east monsoon from across India in the winter would bring the ships back. The use of the winds for navigation may have made it necessary for seamen and traders from Egypt to stay a short while on the Indian coast before returning to their Red Sea ports, increasing contact between local Indians and the visiting Yavanas.

It was once argued that the initiative for the Roman trade with India came from the west and that this continued. At the time when the trade was first noticed the sources referring to it were in Greek and Latin, which gave the impression of an overly major participation by the Roman Empire. Since then the economic map of peninsular India, particularly the evidence on trade, has been filled in. The earlier statement has now been replaced by evidence of a substantial Indian participation. Given the pre-existing exchange networks in the peninsula, trade with west Asia and Egypt would not have been a radical innovation. Potsherds with the names of Indians inscribed on them, some in Tamil *brahmi* and some in Prakrit, have been found in recent excavations of the ports on the Red Sea, providing

evidence of their activity in the trade. The discovery of hoards of Roman Imperial coins, the evidence of Indian products and their exchange, and of Yavana donors at some of the Buddhist sites in the Oeccan, all go towards underlining a qualitative difference in the Indian presence in this trade. The centres and peripheries of trading circuits are not permanent. If initially the thrust towards an eastward trade came from the markets of Alexandria, the Indian networks were not slow to take advantage of these interests and control the Indian side of the trade.

A Greek maritime geography of the mid-first century AD, the *Periplus,* is a compendium of ports and routes along the Red Sea and the Indian coast, their hinterlands and the commodities exchanged in trade. There is some indirect reference to political conditions as well. Of the items traded, textiles, pepper, semi-precious stones and ivory were exchanged in the peninsula for high-value Roman coins, as the main import, together with coral and wine. Sherds of amphorae bases with wine sedimentation have been found in excavations. Elsewhere, the discovery of a distilling mechanism points to the consumption of wine and alcohol by both the local people and the vistors. Early Tamil literature describes Yavana ships arriving with their cargoes at ports such as Muziris, and is enthusiastic about the quality of the wine that they bring, not to mention the profitable exchange of the local black pepper for Roman gold coin.

Inland in the Deccan there were not only the capitals of kingdoms but also centres of production involved in this trade, such as Ter, Nevasa, Bhokardan, Kondapur, Sattanikota and Sannathi. Some, such as Pauni, Paunar and Sannathi, were also the location of Buddhist monasteries. The eastern Deccan saw the growth of trade, together with the establishing of Buddhist centres at Thotlakonda, Bhartiprolu, Dharanikota, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, among others. The towns along the east coast were linked to places further inland, such as Kondapur and Peddabankur, which were in turn linked to routes going to northern and western India. Some centres were situated in the proximity of gold-mining areas further along the Krishna Valley. These were important foci for Buddhist and Jaina monks migrating south from the cities of the Ganges Plain and central India.

Muchiri or Muziris, located perhaps in the vicinity of Kodangallur/Cranganore (near Kochi), was linked to the trade in pepper, spices and beryl. A recently discovered Greek papyrus of the second century AD, documents a contract involving an Alexandrian merchant importer and a financier that concerns cargoes, especially of pepper and spices from Muziris, which provides evidence of the large volume of this trade. References to the rich pepper trade with Malabar continue for centuries, up to the time of the Portuguese. Locations of coin hoards suggest a link from Muziris via the Palghat Gap – tapping the beryl mines – and along the Kaveri Valley to the east coast.

The route in the *Periplus* proceeds round the southern tip of the peninsula and up the eastern coast, where of all the ports mentioned there is fairly detailed knowledge of one – Arikamedu (known to the *Periplus* as Padouke). Excavations at this site have uncovered a large settlement that provides evidence of contact with traders from the eastern Mediterranean. Arikamedu was more than just a port of call in south-eastern India: not only were locally available goods shipped from here, but certain kinds of textiles are thought to have been locally manufactured, presumably to Roman specification, and shipped west to eventually reach Rome. Judging from the characteristic Roman pottery, such as *terra sigillata,* Arretine ware and amphorae sherds, as well as beads, glass and terracotta finds, it would seem that the settlement was active from at least the first century BC. It was initially tied into the local exchange networks and later into the more extensive maritime trade. A black pottery with a rouletted design became popular and its imitations had a wide distribution. Amphorae sherds have provided evidence not only of the import of wine in some quantity but of other items more specific to Yavana consumption, such as olive oil and garum (a fish sauce). Such sherds

often carry the stamp of Mediterranean manufacturers and the wine seems to have been that from southern Italy and the Greek islands. Coastal sites such as Korkai and Alangankulam, and the inland site of Kodumanal, suggest similar contacts.

Imitations were made of Roman objects in bronze and clay. Bronze statuettes, such as the ones of Neptune and Poseidon, have been found in excavations in the peninsula. They would tend to authenticate the argument that Yavana traders were resident in India, although such objects could also be souvenirs brought back by Indian traders. Clay bullae with impressions of Roman coins are commonly found. In recent years a few coins have surfaced that have been labelled as Shangam Pandya, Chera and Chola coins, carrying symbols possibly derived from punch-marked coins. But more striking is the attempt on some to imitate the portraiture of Roman coins with substandard portraits of local rulers. The minting of these points to a more sophisticated form of exchange than simple barter.

Products that were in demand in Roman markets were exchanged mainly for Roman coins. The frequency of hoards of such coins in the Deccan and south India point to its being a trade of some substance. Most of the coins are of the earlier Roman Emperors, such as Augustus and Tiberius, the debased coins of Nero not being thought worthy of hoarding. Some coins are struck with a bar or nicked, which perhaps prevented their being put into circulation. The Roman historian Pliny complained of the trade with the east being a serious drain on the income of Rome, to the extent of 550 million sesterces each year, of which at least a fifth went to India. Imports from India were largely luxury articles – spices, jewels, textiles, ivories and animals (apes, parrots and peacocks) for the amusement of the Roman patrician and his family. It was therefore thought that the balance of trade was in favour of India. But recently it has been argued that even if Pliny's figure is correct, customs dues and taxes on the imports from the east into Roman Egypt were high enough to compensate for the drain of money in the initial outlay for this trade. It has also been argued that Tiberius and later Pliny, both of whom complained about the drain of Roman wealth to India, may have been more concerned about making a moral judgement on Roman patrician society with its display of wealth, and therefore used the trade to underline the point. Nevertheless, it was a profitable trade for the merchants and chiefs of the Indian peninsula. The profits from pepper were to be unceasing, even in later times, as it was used in Europe both as a preservative and in medicines. There is greater interest now in the varying nature of contacts between Indian and Yavana merchants, as well as in the existing networks of exchange in India and how these were drawn into the larger trade. The discussion of centres and peripheries in trading networks with their changing status provides yet another dimension to the understanding of this trade.

Yavana merchants from the eastern Mediterranean traded in both the Satavahana kingdom and further south, their presence being registered in the votive inscriptions at Buddhist centres in the Deccan. Traders from the west were not Romans from Rome, but were Egyptian Jews and Greeks from Alexandria and the eastern Mediterranean, as well as some from north Africa – all part of the Roman Empire. These connections may have fostered the legend in later centuries of the coming of St Thomas, the disciple of Christ, to India. Some may also have been descendants of the Indo-Greeks and Shakas of the north-west.

The tapping of south-east Asia by Indian traders for items of exchange was in part spurred by the Roman trade. The items sought were largely spices, especially those not easily available in India. Although the easiest route was by sea the risks were great, evidenced by stories found in anthologies of tales relating to the adventures of merchants in Suvarnadvipa, the Golden Isles (Java, Sumatra and Bali). But the immense profits on the spices sold to the Alexandrian merchants compensated for the

hazards, and when the Roman trade took a downward turn the Indian trade with south-east Asia expanded, becoming independent of the western connection.

South-east Asian contacts with China and India date to the early centuries AD. Items such as an ivory comb, carnelian ring stones and a seal with *brahmi* letters all suggest the presence of Indian merchants. The presence was even stronger in places closer to India such as Shrikshetra (near Prome), in Myanmar, and at ports such as Oc-eo, situated between India and China near the Gulf of Siam. Recent excavations in south-east Asia indicate impressive pre-existing cultures with which Indian traders would have interacted. At Ban Chiang, there is evidence of the cultivation of rice with livestock such as water buffalo supplementing agriculture, while in some places there are mortuary complexes with burial urns and, in others, megaliths. The Dong Son culture of decorated bronze drums and other bronze artefacts points to sophisticated chalcolithic societies. The distribution of small settlements around a large one has been interpreted as the existence of chiefdoms, with some degree of exchange prevailing among them. This would have encouraged the initial exchange with visiting traders and possibly also drew upon inland networks, at least in mainland south-east Asia. The pattern has some similarities with that of south India, with exchange evolving into trade and incipient urbanism.

Perhaps the most striking feature of all these connections is that there is no single strand responsible for the creation of cultures. Each is dependent on another and the other can spread great distances. Nor can any of these cultures be isolated since the connectivity is essential to what they are. The connotation of the region also gets broadened with all this activity. Where one speaks of north-western India, there is inevitably the inclusion of the horizon towards Afghanistan and central Asia. The two coastal areas to the west and the east of the peninsula were also beginning to actively participate in trade with the Mediterranean and south-eastern Asia. It could be said that India, both because of its geographical position and because of its economic enterprise, participated effectively in what was probably viewed in those times as almost a global trade of the early first millennium AD.