

How did the Indo-Roman trade expand in the Kushan Age? 10 marks

The emergence of the Roman empire as the dominant power in the Western world gave a fillip to India's trade from the first century BC onwards; the eastern part of the empire became the chief market of Indian luxury goods. *The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea*, written by an anonymous Greek navigator (first century AD), gives details of Indian exports to the Roman empire. The main exports were: pepper, pearls, ivory, silk, spikenard, malabathrum, diamonds, saffron, precious stones, and tortoise shell. Pepper was so important an export item that the early Tamil sources refer to it being exchanged for gold and Pliny mentions its price in *dinarii*. As a result of the Indian export of a variety of spices, especially pepper, Roman cuisine and gastronomy

underwent striking changes; this is evident from the celebrated Roman gourmet Apicius' cookbook of the first century. Indian spices, often used as cures in certain fields of medicine, influenced the development of Roman pharmacopeia. According to Pliny, pearls came into general use in Rome after the capture of Alexandria by Augustus. Roman women not only wore Indian pearls on their fingers and ears but also put them on their shoes. No less was the Roman demand for Indian muslin. Women decked out in seven folds of Indian muslin and paraded the streets of Rome. We are told they became a menace to the city's morals. Silk which was brought from China was also supplied by Indian merchants to the Roman empire. It was considered so precious that the Roman emperor Aurelian declared it to be worth its weight in gold. The frenetic pursuit of luxury in the Roman world aroused the indignation of a section of the ruling class and was a subject of animated debate in the Roman Senate. Pliny not only condemned 'the insatiable women's craving for luxuries' but also lamented that this led to a drain of 100 million sesterces of gold from Rome each year, half of it to India alone. Despite an element of exaggeration in Pliny's account, there is little doubt that the Romans sent to India a large quantity of gold and silver coins. No less than 129 finds of Roman coins have been reported so far in India, most of them from the peninsula.

In return for her exports India imported from the Roman empire such commodities as topaz, thin cloth, linen, antimony, glassware, copper, tin, lead, wine, realgar, orpiment, and wheat. The *Periplus* also tells us of the import of dainty damsels for purposes of concubinage in Indian royal establishments. The Roman world exported to India wine amphorae and red glazed Arretine ware, which have been found at Arikamedu (near Pondicherry) and several other places. An important pottery type called the Red Polished Ware found in western India is also believed to have Mediterranean origin. But it is likely that much of the ceramic types found in India were local imitations. The evidence from Ter and Kolhapur (Maharashtra) attests to the import of bronze objects from the West. Similarly, archaeology testifies to the import of Roman glass. The Romans also sent to India a large number of gold and silver coins which, as stated earlier, may have been the cause of Pliny's indignation. India was certainly a gainer in its trade with the West. But compared to the Roman or eastern Mediterranean objects

found in India, the tangible archaeological evidence of Indian commodities in the West is lacking. Ivory objects of Indian origin have been found in Afghanistan and further west. In Rome itself, however, nothing more than an ivory statuette from Pompeii has been found.)

(The list of commodities exchanged between India and the Mediterranean world is interesting. But not all Indian export items were available in sufficient quantity within the country to meet the Roman demand, the most important being spices. This scarcity inevitably encouraged trade between India, on the one hand, and Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, on the other. Ivory, tortoise shell, and other merchandise, Strabo (63 BC-AD 21) tells us, were brought in abundance to the Indian markets from Sri Lanka. Sandalwood was obtained from eastern Indonesia, cinnamon and cassia from mainland South-East Asia, and camphor from the Malay peninsula, Sumatra, and Borneo. All this implies that the commerce between India and South-East Asia supported trading activities in the western Indian Ocean.)

(Connected with the phenomenon of trade was the growth of a money economy in the early centuries before and after the Christian era. The imported coins were mostly used as bullion; they may have circulated only in large transactions, if at all. But evidence to prove the development of an indigenous currency is not wanting. In the north the Indo-Greeks issued a few gold coins; but the Kushanas minted gold coins in considerable numbers. For day-to-day transactions gold and silver coins could not serve as a medium of exchange; the Satavahanas, however, issued coins in metals of low value such as lead or potin. This indicates that the use of money became prevalent in the Deccan and the coastal areas. In north and north-western India the Kushanas minted copper coins in large numbers, which may have circulated in ordinary transactions.) Copper coins were also issued by the Naga rulers and several other indigenous dynasties. No other period of ancient Indian history is known for so many varieties of coins as this period. This indicates that the money economy had penetrated deep into the economic life of the common people.

(Trade and coinage were inextricably linked with the process of urbanization. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* makes direct reference to quite a few coastal towns. Archaeological evidence, however,

indicates the existence of a large number of towns in different parts of the country. In the north-west Taxila was the most important urban centre; its peak of prosperity is very well documented for the period 200 BC-AD 200.)