

CHAPTER 9

TRADERS, KINGS AND PILGRIMS



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Jagini at the market

Jagini looked forward to the fair in the village. She loved to see and touch the pots and pans of shiny steel, bright plastic buckets, cloth printed with brilliant floral designs, and clockwork toys, all of which came from the city. The men who spread out their wares came in buses and trucks and went back at the end of the day. Why were they always on the move? She wondered. Her mother explained that they were traders — people who bought things where they were made, and sold them elsewhere.



How to find out about trade and traders

You read about the Northern Black Polished Ware in Chapter 8. This fine pottery, especially bowls and plates, were found from several archaeological sites throughout the subcontinent. How do you think it reached these places? Traders may have carried them from the places where they were made, to sell them at other places.

South India was famous for gold, spices, especially pepper, and precious stones. Pepper was particularly valued in the Roman Empire, so much so that it was known as black gold. So, traders carried many of these goods to Rome in ships, across the sea, and by land in caravans. There must have been quite a lot of trade as many Roman gold coins have been found in south India.

Can you think of how and why these reached India?

A poem about trade

We can find evidence of trade in the Sangam poems.

Here is one which describes the goods brought into Puhar, an important port on the east coast:

“(Here are brought)

Swift, prancing horses by sea in ships,

Bales of black pepper in carts,

Gems and gold born in the Himalayas,

Sandalwood born in the western hills,

The pearls of the southern seas

And corals from the eastern oceans

The yield of the Ganga and the crops from the

Kaveri,

Foodstuffs from Sri Lanka, pottery from

Myanmar,

And other rare and rich imports.”

Make a list of all the things that are mentioned.
What would they be used for?

Traders explored several sea routes. Some of these followed the coasts. There were others across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, where sailors took advantage of the monsoon winds to cross the seas more quickly. So, if they wanted to reach the western coast of the subcontinent from East Africa or Arabia, they chose to sail with the south-west monsoon. And sturdy ships had to be built for these long journeys.

New kingdoms along the coasts

The southern half of the subcontinent is marked by a long coastline, and with hills, plateaus, and river valleys. Amongst the river valleys, that of the Kaveri is the most fertile. Chiefs and kings who controlled the river valleys and the coasts became rich and powerful. Sangam poems mention the *muverndar*. This is a Tamil word meaning three chiefs, used for the heads of three

ruling families, the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas (see Map 7, page 105), who became powerful in south India around 2300 years ago.

Each of the three chiefs had two centres of power: one inland, and one on the coast. Of these six cities, two were very important: Puhar or Kaveripattinam, the port of the Cholas, and Madurai, the capital of the Pandyas.

The chiefs did not collect regular taxes. Instead, they demanded and received gifts from the people. They also went on military expeditions, and collected tribute from neighbouring areas. They kept some of the wealth and distributed the rest amongst their supporters, including members of their family, soldiers, and poets. Many poets whose compositions are found in the Sangam collection composed poems in praise of chiefs who often rewarded them with precious stones, gold, horses, elephants, chariots, and fine cloth.

Around 200 years later a dynasty known as the Satavahanas became powerful in western India (see Map 7, page 105). The most important ruler of the Satavahanas was Gautamiputra Shri Satakarni. We know about him from an inscription composed on behalf of his mother, Gautami Balashri. He and other Satavahana rulers were known as lords of the *dakshinapatha*, literally the route leading to the south, which was also used as a name for the entire southern region. He sent his army to the eastern, western and southern coasts.

Why do you think he wanted to control the coasts?

The story of the Silk Route

The rich, glossy colours of silk, as well as its smooth texture, make it a highly valued fabric in most societies. Making silk is a complicated process. Raw silk has to be extracted from the

cocoons of silk worms, spun into thread and then woven into cloth. Techniques of making silk were first invented in China around 7000 years ago. While the methods remained a closely guarded secret for thousands of years, some people from China who went to distant lands on foot, horseback, and on camels, carried silk with them. The paths they followed came to be known as the Silk Route.

Sometimes, Chinese rulers sent gifts of silk to rulers in Iran and west Asia, and from there, the knowledge of silk spread further west. About 2000 years ago, wearing silk became the fashion amongst rulers and rich people in Rome. It was very expensive, as it had to be brought all the way from China, along dangerous roads, through mountains and deserts. People living along the route often demanded payments for allowing traders to pass through.

Look at Map 6 (pages 76-77) which shows the Silk Route and its branches. Some kings tried to control large portions of the route. This was because they could benefit from taxes, tributes and gifts that were brought by traders travelling along the route. In return, they often protected the traders who passed through their kingdoms from attacks by robbers.

The best-known of the rulers who controlled the Silk Route were the Kushanas, who ruled over central Asia and north-west India around 2000 years ago. Their two major centres of power were Peshawar and Mathura. Taxila was also included in their kingdom. During their rule, a branch of the Silk Route extended from Central Asia down to the seaports at the mouth of the river Indus, from where silk was shipped westwards to the Roman Empire. The Kushanas were amongst the earliest rulers of the subcontinent to issue gold

coins. These were used by traders along the Silk Route.

Why do you think it would have been difficult to use carts along the Silk Route?

Silk was also sent from China by sea. Trace the routes on Map 6 (pages 76-77). What do you think would have been the advantages and problems in transporting silk by sea?

The spread of Buddhism

The most famous Kushana ruler was Kanishka, who ruled around 1900 years ago. He organised a Buddhist council, where scholars met and discussed important matters. Ashvaghosha, a poet who composed a biography of the Buddha, the *Buddhacharita*, lived in his court. Ashvaghosha and other Buddhist scholars now began writing in Sanskrit.

A new form of Buddhism, known as Mahayana Buddhism, now developed. This had two distinct features. Earlier, the Buddha's presence was shown in sculpture by using certain signs. For instance, his attainment of enlightenment was shown by sculptures of the *peepal* tree.

Now, statues of the Buddha were made. Many of these were made in Mathura, while others were made in Taxila.

The second change was a belief in *Bodhisattvas*. These were supposed to be persons who had attained enlightenment. Once they attained enlightenment, they could live in complete

A sculpture from the *stupa* at Sanchi.

Look at the tree and the empty seat below it.

Sculptors carved this to indicate that the Buddha had attained enlightenment while meditating under the tree.



isolation and meditate in peace. However, instead of doing that, they remained in the world to teach and help other people. The worship of Bodhisattvas became very popular, and spread throughout Central Asia, China, and later to Korea and Japan.

Buddhism also spread to western and southern India, where dozens of caves were hollowed out of hills for monks to live in.

Some of these caves were made on the orders of kings and queens, others by merchants and farmers. These were often located near passes through the Western Ghats. Roads connecting prosperous ports on the coast with cities in the Deccan ran through these passes. Traders probably

Below left : An image of the Buddha from Mathura.

Right : An image of the Buddha from Taxila.

Look at these and note the similarities and differences that you may find.



halted in these cave monasteries during their travels.

Buddhism also spread south eastwards, to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and other parts of Southeast Asia including Indonesia. The older form of Buddhism, known as Theravada Buddhism was more popular in these areas.

Read page 100 once more.
Can you think of how Buddhism spread to these lands?



A cave at Karle,
Maharashtra

The quest of the pilgrims

As traders journeyed to distant lands in caravans and ships, *pilgrims* often travelled with them.

Pilgrims

are men and women who undertake journeys to holy places in order to offer worship.

The best-known of these are the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Fa Xian, who came to the subcontinent about 1600 years ago, Xuan Zang (who came around 1400 years ago) and I-Qing, who came about 50 years after Xuan Zang. They came to visit places associated with the life of the Buddha (Chapter 6) as well as famous monasteries.

Each of these pilgrims left an account of his journey. They wrote of the dangers they encountered on their travels, which often took years, of the countries and the monasteries that they visited, and the books they carried back with them.

How Fa Xian returned to China

Fa Xian began his journey back home from Bengal. He boarded a ship belonging to some merchants. They had barely travelled for two days when they were caught in a storm. The merchants began throwing their merchandise overboard so as to lighten the load and save the ship from sinking. Fa Xian threw away his meagre personal belongings, but clung to his books and the statues of the Buddha that he had collected. Finally, the storm subsided after 13 days. This is how he describes the sea:

“The sea itself is boundless in extent — it is impossible to know east or west, except by observing the sun, moon, or stars in their motions. If it is dark, rainy weather, the only plan is to steer by the wind.”

It took him more than 90 days to reach Java, where he halted for five months, before boarding another merchant ship that took him to China.

Try and trace the route Fa Xian took on Map 6 (page 77).

Why do you think he did not want to throw away his books and statues?

Xuan Zang, who took the land route back to China (through the north-west, and Central Asia) carried back with him statues of the Buddha made of gold, silver and sandalwood, and over 600 manuscripts loaded on the backs of 20 horses. Over 50 manuscripts were lost when the boat on which he was crossing the Indus capsized. He spent the rest of his life translating the remaining manuscripts from Sanskrit into Chinese.

Nalanda – A unique centre of Buddhist learning

Xuan Zang, and other pilgrims spent time studying in Nalanda, (Bihar) the most famous Buddhist monastery of the period. This is how he describes it:

“The teachers are men of the highest ability and talent. They follow the teachings of the Buddha in all sincerity. The rules of the monastery are strict, and everyone has to follow them. Discussions are held throughout the day, and the old and the young mutually help one another. Learned men from different cities come here to settle their doubts. The gatekeeper asks new entrants difficult questions. They are allowed to enter only after they have been able to answer these. Seven or eight out of every ten are not able to answer.”

List the reasons why Xuan Zang wanted to study in Nalanda.

The beginning of Bhakti

This was also the time when the worship of certain deities, which became a central feature of later Hinduism, gained in importance. These deities included Shiva, Vishnu, and goddesses such as Durga.

These deities were worshipped through *Bhakti*, an idea that became very popular at this time. *Bhakti* is generally understood as a person's devotion to his or her chosen deity. Anybody, whether rich or poor, belonging to the so-called 'high' or 'low' castes, man or woman, could follow the path of *Bhakti*.

The idea of *Bhakti* is present in the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred book of the Hindus, which is included in the Mahabharata (see Chapter 11). In this Krishna the God, asks Arjuna, his devotee and friend, to abandon all *dharma*s and take refuge in him, as only he can set Arjuna free from every evil. This form of worship gradually spread to different parts of the country.

Those who followed the system of *Bhakti* emphasised devotion and individual worship of a god or goddess, rather than the performance of elaborate sacrifices.

According to this system of belief, if a devotee worships the chosen deity with a pure heart, the deity will appear in the form in which he or she may desire. So, the deity could be thought of as a human being, lion, tree or any other form. Once this idea gained acceptance, artists made beautiful images of these deities.

Vishnu as Varaha — an image from Eran, Madhya Pradesh.

This magnificent statue is of a special form of Vishnu, the *Varaha* or boar. According to the Puranas (see Chapter 11) Vishnu took the shape of a boar in order to rescue the earth, which had sunk into water. Here the earth is shown as a woman.



Bhakti

Comes from the Sanskrit term *bhaj* meaning 'to divide or share.' This suggests an intimate, two-way relationship between the deity and the devotee. Bhakti is directed towards Bhagavat, which is often translated as god, but also means one who possesses and shares *bhaga*, literally good fortune or bliss. The devotee, known as the *bhakta* or the *bhagavata*, shares his or her chosen deity's *bhaga*.

A poem by a bhakta

Most Bhakti literature tells us that riches, learning and high status do not automatically ensure a close relationship with the deity. This is part of a poem composed in Tamil by Appar, a devotee of Shiva, who lived about 1400 years ago. Appar was a *vellala* (Chapter 8).

"The leper with rotting limbs,
The man who is regarded as low by the *brahmin*, even the scavenger
...
Even these men, if they are servants (i.e. devotees)
Of him who shelters the Ganga in his long hair (i.e. Shiva)
I worship them,
They are gods to me."

What does the poet regard as more valuable, social status or devotion?

Because the deities were special, these images of the deity were often placed within special homes, places that we describe as temples. You will learn more about these temples in Chapter 11.

Bhakti inspired some of the best expressions in art — sculpture, poetry and architecture.

Hindu

The word 'Hindu', like the term 'India' is derived from the river Indus. It was used by Arabs and Iranians to refer to people who lived to the east of the river, and to their cultural practices, including religious beliefs.