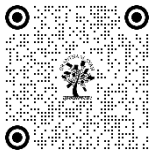


# AN ANALYSIS OF SILK ROUTE AS A CONDUIT OF CULTURE AND COMMERCE IN POST-MAURYAN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The Silk Route, renowned for connecting the East and the West, served as a vital channel for trade and cultural exchange between ancient civilizations. During the Post-Mauryan period in India (approximately 2nd century BCE to 3rd century CE), the significance of this transcontinental network expanded substantially. This research undertakes a comprehensive analysis of how the Silk Route functioned as both an economic lifeline and a cultural bridge during this transformative phase of Indian history.

Following the decline of the Mauryan Empire, various regional powers such as the Indo-Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas, and Satavahanas emerged, each playing a crucial role in facilitating long-distance trade and cultural diplomacy. These polities not only encouraged commercial activity by securing trade routes and minting coinage but also acted as patrons of art, religion, and architecture that were influenced by and contributed to broader Silk Route exchanges. Commodities like silk, spices, ivory, textiles, and precious stones were exported from India, while imports included gold, horses, glassware, and fine ceramics from Central Asia, China, and the Mediterranean world. Beyond the exchange of goods, the Silk Route enabled the transmission of religious ideas—most notably Buddhism. The movement of Buddhist monks, pilgrims, and texts along these routes contributed to the spread of Indian philosophical and spiritual thought to regions such as Central Asia, China, and beyond. Artistic styles such as Gandhara and Mathura reflect a unique syncretism born from Indo-Greek and Central Asian influences, showcasing how trade catalyzed cultural fusion.

This study draws upon archaeological findings, inscriptions, literary sources, and numismatic evidence to present a holistic picture of the era. It highlights the Silk Route's role in transforming India into a cultural and economic powerhouse, linking it intricately with global historical processes. The paper argues that Post-Mauryan India's participation in the Silk Route laid foundational stones for early globalization, making it a key contributor to the ancient world economy and intercultural dialogue.

**Keywords:** Silk Route, Post-Mauryan, Indo-Greek, Kushana Rule, Gandhara and Mathura Art

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Silk Route, often regarded as one of the greatest trade networks in human history, was not just a means of commercial exchange but a powerful instrument of cultural and intellectual diffusion. Originating in the Han dynasty of China, this extensive network of overland and maritime routes facilitated the movement of goods, people, and ideas across vast distances from East Asia through Central Asia to the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> For ancient India, the Silk Route held immense strategic and economic importance, particularly during the Post-Mauryan period, which witnessed significant political fragmentation, yet remarkable regional prosperity and cultural fluorescence.<sup>2</sup>

Following the fall of the Mauryan Empire around 185 BCE, India entered a phase characterized by the rise of regional powers such as the Indo-Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas, and Satavahanas.<sup>3</sup> These entities, despite their diverse origins and

political agendas, recognized the immense value of long-distance trade and sought to control and benefit from the Silk Route. India was strategically located at the crossroads of important trade arteries connecting China with the Mediterranean, and its resources were in high demand: spices, textiles, ivory, gemstones, and other luxury goods found eager buyers in distant lands.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, trade was not the only byproduct of the Silk Route. Along with merchants came monks, pilgrims, scholars, and artisans who contributed to the vibrant cross-cultural interactions that defined this period. The dissemination of Buddhism, especially from India to Central Asia and China, is one of the most profound examples of this intercultural exchange.<sup>5</sup> Art and architecture flourished under the influence of Hellenistic, Persian, and Central Asian styles, giving rise to unique schools like Gandhara and Mathura.

This research seeks to delve into the multifaceted nature of the Silk Route's influence on Post-Mauryan India. By exploring political support for trade, economic structures, artistic and religious exchanges, and the development of urban centers, this study aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between commerce and culture in ancient India.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on a wide array of archaeological, numismatic, and literary sources, the paper demonstrates how the Silk Route served as a crucial conduit that connected India to the broader currents of ancient globalization.

The Silk Route, also known as the Silk Road, was an ancient network of trade routes that linked the East and West and played a pivotal role in the economic, cultural, and political interactions between regions for centuries. It originated during the Han Dynasty of China around the 2nd century BCE and gradually expanded to connect China with Central Asia, India, Persia, and ultimately the Mediterranean world. Although silk was a primary commodity traded along the route—hence the name—it also facilitated the exchange of other goods such as spices, precious stones, ceramics, paper, and glassware.<sup>7</sup>

The Silk Route consisted of both overland and maritime branches. The overland routes passed through key Central Asian cities like Samarkand, Bactria, and Merv, before branching into northern India through mountain passes such as the Khyber and Karakoram. Once inside the Indian subcontinent, the route linked urban centers like Taxila, Mathura, Varanasi, and Pataliputra. The maritime routes, collectively called the Maritime Silk Route, linked Indian ports such as Bharuch, Muziris, and Tamralipti with Southeast Asia, Arabia, and the Roman Empire through the Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup>

India's involvement in the Silk Route was both active and integral. The Mauryan Empire had earlier established trade connections and road infrastructure, which facilitated expansion under subsequent dynasties. In the Post-Mauryan period, particularly during the Kushana reign, India emerged as a central hub in transcontinental commerce. The Kushanas controlled territories from Central Asia to northern India, making them crucial intermediaries in East-West trade. They also promoted Buddhism, which spread through monastic institutions along the route, strengthening India's religious and cultural influence across Asia.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to trade, the Silk Route served as a medium of cultural transmission. Ideas, technologies, languages, and religious beliefs moved along with caravans and ships. The movement of Buddhist monks, Greek philosophers, and Indian scholars created a rich tapestry of multiculturalism along the Silk Route. In turn, this facilitated the development of unique artistic styles such as Gandhara, which synthesized Indian and Hellenistic elements.<sup>10</sup> In conclusion, the historical background of the Silk Route highlights its role as a bridge between civilizations, with India playing a significant part not only in terms of trade but also as a source of philosophical and artistic innovations. The route was not static; it evolved over centuries, adapting to political changes, new technologies, and shifting economic priorities, thus cementing its legacy as one of the most enduring achievements of ancient human connectivity.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. POLITICAL ENTITIES AND THEIR ROLE IN TRADE

The Indo-Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas, and Satavahanas were key political entities that played significant roles in the functioning and expansion of the Silk Route, particularly in India. The Indo-Greeks, who controlled parts of northwestern India, were crucial in establishing trade links between India, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup> Their strategic location facilitated the exchange of goods such as silk, spices, and precious stones, while their introduction of Greek coinage and influence on Indian art, particularly in the Gandhara style, created a lasting impact on the region's economy and culture.<sup>13</sup> The Shakas and Kushanas further bolstered trade by providing political stability, developing infrastructure, and issuing coinage that promoted economic activity. The Kushanas, in particular, played a central role in fostering urban centers like Taxila and Mathura, which became major hubs along the trade routes.<sup>14</sup> Their support for Buddhism and the establishment of Buddhist monasteries along the Silk Route also facilitated the spread of religious and

cultural ideas. Additionally, the Satavahanas, who ruled over the Deccan region, controlled vital maritime trade routes that connected India to Southeast Asia and the Roman Empire. Their strategic control of coastal cities like Bharuch allowed them to serve as intermediaries in the exchange of goods such as textiles, spices, and luxury items. The Satavahanas also contributed to the development of internal and external trade by linking inland routes with maritime pathways, promoting economic integration. Their patronage of Buddhism and support for the arts further enhanced the cultural exchanges along the route.<sup>15</sup> Together, these empires fostered an environment of trade, cultural transmission, and religious spread, ensuring the enduring legacy of the Silk Route as a bridge between East and West.

The economic exchanges through the Silk Route played a crucial role in shaping the prosperity of India and its integration into global trade networks. India was a key exporter of **textiles, spices, ivory, and gemstones**, with these goods highly sought after by regions across Asia, the Mediterranean, and beyond.<sup>16</sup> Indian textiles, including cotton and silk, were particularly prized for their quality, while spices like pepper and cinnamon were in high demand for culinary and medicinal purposes. Ivory and gemstones such as diamonds and pearls added to India's reputation as a supplier of luxury goods.<sup>17</sup> In return, India imported valuable commodities, including **horses, gold, glassware, and fine ceramics**. Horses, especially from Central Asia and Arabia, were essential for military and transport needs, while gold, used in coinage and jewelry, was a critical resource. Glassware and ceramics, primarily from the Roman Empire, were valued for their craftsmanship and added to India's material culture. Key trade hubs such as **Bharuch, Ujjain, and Taxila** facilitated these exchanges. Bharuch, located on India's western coast, was an important maritime port connecting India to the Persian Gulf and the Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup> Ujjain served as a commercial center linking northern and southern India, while Taxila acted as a major crossroads between Central Asia, India, and the Mediterranean. Numismatic evidence, including Roman coins found in southern India, highlights the deep Indo-Roman trade connections, with Roman merchants seeking luxury goods from India in exchange for coins, further emphasizing the volume and significance of the trade. This exchange not only contributed to India's economic wealth but also facilitated the spread of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices across regions, cementing the Silk Route as a vital artery of ancient commerce and cultural interaction.<sup>19</sup>

The Silk Route played a pivotal role in the spread of **Buddhism** across Asia, facilitating the movement of **Buddhist monks, pilgrims, and religious texts** between regions. One of the key contributions was the development of **Gandhara art**, a syncretic style that blended **Hellenistic** and **Indian** artistic elements.<sup>20</sup> This style emerged in the Gandhara region, influenced by Greek culture following Alexander the Great's conquests, and was used to depict the **Buddha** in a realistic, human-like form. This unique blend of Greek and Indian iconography became a significant vehicle for the spread of Buddhist teachings, with Buddhist monasteries along the Silk Route displaying Gandhara sculptures and murals that communicated the Buddha's life and teachings. Additionally, the missionary efforts initiated by **Ashoka**, the Mauryan emperor, laid the foundation for Buddhism's expansion beyond India.<sup>21</sup> Ashoka sent missionaries to Central Asia and other regions, promoting the spread of Buddhist values. This momentum was continued during the **Kushana Empire**, particularly under **Emperor Kanishka**, who was a great patron of Buddhism. Kanishka's reign saw the convening of the **Fourth Buddhist Council** and the establishment of Buddhist monasteries along the Silk Route, which helped disseminate Buddhist teachings to Central Asia, China, and beyond. The Silk Route became a vital conduit for Buddhist ideas, and over time, Buddhism spread to China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, facilitated by monks and scholars who traveled along the route.<sup>22</sup> Through these cultural exchanges, Buddhism not only spread but also adapted to various local cultures, becoming a unifying spiritual force across Asia.

Cities like **Taxila** and **Mathura** flourished as major urban centers due to their strategic locations along the Silk Route, becoming hubs of trade, culture, and religion. These cities were not only significant for their economic activity but also for the sophisticated infrastructure they developed, which supported the thriving trade networks across Asia. **Taxila**, situated at the crossroads of trade routes connecting Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent, was a vital commercial and intellectual center. It boasted a network of well-maintained **roads**, facilitating the movement of goods and people.<sup>23</sup> The presence of **caravanserais**, which were roadside inns offering lodging and provisions for traders and travelers, played a crucial role in facilitating long-distance trade. Additionally, **storage facilities** were constructed to house goods like spices, textiles, and gemstones, ensuring the smooth flow of trade and goods between regions. Similarly, **Mathura**, located in northern India, became a thriving urban hub due to its proximity to major trade routes.<sup>24</sup> The city's development was supported by a robust infrastructure of roads, storage warehouses, and marketplaces that catered to a cosmopolitan population. Archaeological evidence, such as inscriptions and the discovery of diverse material culture, indicates that these cities hosted a wide array of communities, including **Indian, Central Asian, and Greco-Roman** traders, scholars, and artisans. The mix of cultures in these urban centers led to the exchange of ideas, art, and religious

practices, contributing to their dynamic and cosmopolitan character. Taxila and Mathura became models of urban development during this period, with infrastructure that not only facilitated commerce but also allowed cultural and intellectual exchange to flourish. This cosmopolitan atmosphere was key in establishing these cities as prominent nodes in the Silk Route network.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. ART, ARCHITECTURE, AND INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE

The **Silk Route** was a vital conduit for the exchange of **art**, **architecture**, and **intellectual ideas**. As trade goods traveled along the route, so did artistic styles, architectural influences, and philosophical concepts. In regions like **Gandhara**, a unique form of **Buddhist art** emerged, blending **Greek** and **Indian** styles. Greek realism, such as detailed human figures and drapery, was integrated with Buddhist iconography, creating a distinctive hybrid art form.<sup>26</sup>

**Buddhist architecture** also spread along the Silk Route, with **stupas** and **monasteries** constructed in places like **India**, **Central Asia**, and **China**, reflecting a mix of local and foreign architectural styles. These structures, along with **cave temples** like those at **Ajanta and Ellora**, are examples of the Silk Route's architectural legacy, blending various cultural influences.<sup>27</sup>

Intellectually, the Silk Route facilitated the spread of **Buddhism**, **Greek philosophy**, and **scientific knowledge**. **Greek rationalism** merged with Buddhist teachings, particularly in Central Asia, while **Indian** contributions to **mathematics** and **medicine** spread westward. The exchange of religious, philosophical, and scientific ideas enriched the intellectual traditions of the regions along the route, contributing to the development of cultures in Asia and beyond.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, the Silk Route was a crucial conduit for both **culture** and **commerce** in Post-Mauryan India, driving economic growth through the exchange of goods such as silk, spices, and gemstones. Urban centers like **Taxila** and **Mathura** thrived due to their strategic positions along the route, becoming cosmopolitan hubs where diverse cultures and ideas converged. The spread of **Buddhism** and the development of **Gandhara art**, which fused **Greek** and **Indian** influences, exemplified the cultural syncretism fostered by these trade networks. The Silk Route not only facilitated the exchange of material goods but also promoted the diffusion of intellectual and religious ideas, contributing to the interconnectedness of Asia and beyond. Its legacy underscores the lasting impact of cultural and economic exchanges on shaping the development of civilizations.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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