

The Development of Art, Religion, and Culture in the Cities of Ancient North India: The Role of Trade Routes

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Abstract: Ancient north India witnessed the rise of important cities as hubs of economic, political, religious, artistic and cultural activities. Trade routes were an important part of this process because they linked cities to their rural hinterlands and to far off regions of the Indian sub-continent and Central, West and South East Asia. Overland and riverine networks that facilitated the spread of culture gave rise to cities at key nodes like Taxila, Mathura, Varanasi, Kaushambi, Pataliputra, Shravasti, and Ujjain. These routes were not only used for trade in commodities but also to travel with merchants, monks, artisans, pilgrims, artistic skills, religious beliefs, languages, and social practices. The rise of urban commercial communities favoured the spread of Buddhism and Jainism, and Brahmanical traditions had developed to respond to the new urban landscape. The artistic centres of Mathura and Gandhara depict the interconnectedness of the business, cultural exchange, patronage and artistic growth. The aim of this paper is to explore the importance of the trade routes for the creation of art, religion and cultural life in the ancient cities of North India. It suggests that one should think of trade networks not just as 'channels of economic exchange', but also 'channels of cultural transmission'.

Keywords: Ancient North India, trade routes, urbanisation, art, Buddhism, Jainism, Mathura, Taxila, cultural exchange

I. INTRODUCTION

Urban centres, economic growth, political unification and cultural change are a feature of ancient North India. Many towns and cities came into existence as foci of religious, craft, commercial, and administrative activity, especially in the middle of the first millennium BCE. These cities were closely linked with the expansion of agriculture, technological innovation, monetary economy, specialized crafts, and regional and long-distance trade networks.

The most significant of these forces were trade routes, which linked the various urban centres. There were well known routes to the north, known as Uttarapatha, which ran from the north west to the Gangetic valley and other routes from the Gangetic valley to central, western and peninsular India. Rivers like the Ganga and the Yamuna were significant means of transport. The land and river routes were linked, allowing for the transport of textiles, metals, precious stones, spices, ivory, pottery and luxury and everyday items.

But the value of trade routes was not limited to economic trade. Monks, pilgrims, craftsmen, scholars, officials, and the merchants were on the journey. This led to the establishment of commercial networks, which facilitated the dissemination of religious ideas, art forms, symbols, languages, technologies, and cultural practices.

The rise of Buddhism and Jainism, the shift in the Brahmanical traditions, the creation of religious monuments, the development of important schools of sculpture were thus linked in different ways to the spread of urbanisation and



exchange. The aim of this paper is to investigate these relationships in detail, focusing on the major cities of ancient North India.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major goals of the study are:

- To examine the relationship between ancient trade routes and the development of cities in North India.
- To analyse the contribution of trade and merchant communities to the development of religious institutions.
- To study the influence of commercial and cultural interaction on ancient Indian art and architecture.
- To examine the role of major urban centres such as Taxila, Mathura, Varanasi, Kaushambi, Shravasti, and Pataliputra.
- To understand trade routes as channels for the exchange of ideas, beliefs, artistic practices, and cultural traditions.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Copland (2026)¹ explored the geographical, travel, and business link between the ancient Indian Ocean during the Iron Age. The study showed that travel time and the conditions of the monsoons strongly affected the pattern of maritime exchange using ancient textual information and geographical and wind-speed data. The study further linked size of the product diversity to the degree of urban development. While it is primarily an examination of maritime trade, the study is applicable to ancient North Indian studies as inland trade centres were linked to the wider trading networks along river and land routes. It reinforces the thesis that trade, in addition to development, facilitated the interregional flow of people and commodities and urban connectivity.

Kumar (2025)² studied the contribution of Buddhism in the second phase of Urbanisation and revival of commercial activity in ancient India. The study highlighted the close connection between the Buddhist monasteries and merchants, pilgrims, urban settlements and significant trade routes. It suggested that monasteries could be focal points in networks through which goods, persons, capital, and ideas flowed. The writer also pointed out the linkages among Buddhist centres and beyond the Indian sub-continent to the Central and East Asian routes. This study is directly relevant to the present research since it illustrates the possible evolution of religion and commerce in mutually dependent geographical areas. It also provides evidence for the merchant mobility and the role of Buddhist institutions in wider urbanisation and cultural dissemination processes.

Abraham (2023)³ examined archaeological evidence on long-distance contacts between the period of c. 500 BCE and 1000 CE, in the area of the ancient Indian Ocean. It highlighted the archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic, art-historical, and materials-science evidence of the transfer of objects, persons and ideas between various regions. Abraham's work suggests that cultural items and technologies were also circulated within networks of ancient exchange, so that the transport of commercial goods should not be treated as the only component of exchange. The study has relevance for the current research as the urban centres in the North were both directly and indirectly linked with broader networks of overland, riverine and maritime exchange. It thus offers a more general archaeological context for the understanding of trade routes as mechanisms of economic integration and cultural transmission.

¹ Copeland, C. (2026). Riding the monsoon: Geography and Iron Age trade in the Indian Ocean. *The Economic History Review*, 79(1), 312–341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.70016> (Wiley Online Library)

² Kumar, A. (2025). Role of Buddhism in the revival of 2nd phase of urbanisation and trade in ancient India. *Idealistic Journal of Advanced Research in Progressive Spectrums*, 4(3), 41–49.

³ Abraham, S. A. (2023). Recent developments in the archaeology of long-distance connections across the ancient Indian Ocean. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 52, 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110124> (Annual Reviews)



Saxena (2021)⁴ explored the multi-religious context of ancient Mathura with the help of inscriptional and historical sources. The study examined religious donations by tradition, and social backgrounds, professions and identities of donors. The rise of Mathura as an important urban centre is noteworthy one, where all major religions came in contact and shared the same cultural and social environment. This research is significant for the present paper as Mathura was in the middle of vital communication and commercial circuits. Its religious diversity shows that commercial cities of antiquity were able to host multiple systems of worship and patronage at the same time. It also sheds light on the factors responsible for the cultural identity of ancient urban centers in North India, including urban prosperity, donor communities, religious institutions, and artistic production.

Rees (2021)⁵ examined the connection between Buddhism and trade through analysing the geographical distribution of the rock-cut Buddhist monasteries in Western Ghats. The research used GIS based cost surface analysis and LCP analysis along with archaeological and inscriptional evidence to examine the relationship between monasteries, urban centers, ports and routes. Rees concluded that monastic development was not solely due to merchants, but rather the result of the efforts of other groups such as craftsmen, rulers, and members of monastic communities. The study is about the western region instead of the northern part of India, but it has methodological and historical implications which are applicable to the present study. It illustrates the importance of the study of the religious sites in a broader context of mobility and allows to better understand the interaction between trade, Buddhism, patron and settlement development.⁶

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses historical, descriptive and analytical method. It is mainly derived from secondary sources like books, journal papers, archaeological research, historical studies, published research on ancient Indian urbanisation, trade, religion, art and cultural history.

The relationship between commercial activity and cultural development is interpreted with the help of archaeological evidence (coins, inscriptions, pottery, sculptures, monuments and settlement pattern). Buddhist literature and Jaina literature as well as the relevant ancient Indian literature can also help in reconstructing networks of important cities.⁷

It is a study that takes a multi-disciplinary approach, including economic, archaeological, religious and art history. It does not consider trade, religion and culture as independent processes, but rather as occurring together in dynamic urban settings.⁸

Result

Table 1 Proposed Distribution of Sources and Evidence Used in the Study

Source/Evidence Category	Proposed Weight (%)
Books and Historical Studies	25

⁴ Saxena, K. K. (2021). *Before Kṛṣṇa: Religious diversity in ancient Mathura*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190127909.001.0001> (OUP Academic)

⁵ Rees, G. (2021). Buddhism and trade: Interpreting the distribution of rock-cut monasteries in the Western Ghats mountains, India using least-cost paths. *Archaeological Research in Asia*, 28, 100307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ara.2021.100307> (ScienceDirect)

⁶ Stewart, P. (2023). *Gandharan art and the classical world: A short introduction*. Archaeopress. <https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803276946> (Archaeopress)

⁷ Smith, M. L. (2016). Historical and medieval period archaeology. In G. R. Schug & S. R. Walimbe (Eds.), *A companion to South Asia in the past*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119055280.ch21> (Wiley Online Library)

⁸ Schug, G. R., & Walimbe, S. R. (Eds.). (2016). *A companion to South Asia in the past*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119055280> (Wiley Online Library)



Journal Articles and Published Research	20
Archaeological Evidence	20
Inscriptions and Coins	15
Buddhist and Jain Literary Sources	10
Ancient Indian Textual Sources	10
Total	100

Interpretation:

The distribution of the sources and evidence used in this study are summarized in Table 1. Historical studies and books have the highest weightage (25%) because they are very important to establish historical background of the ancient Indian cities, trade route, religion, art and culture. Scholarly interpretations and material evidence are equally represented with 20% each from journal articles and published research, as well as archaeological evidence. Inscriptions and coins make up 15%, providing details on trade, patronage, political and economic activity. The reconstruction of the religious, social and cultural developments is supplemented with 10% each from the Buddhist and Jain literary sources as well as the ancient Indian textual sources.⁹

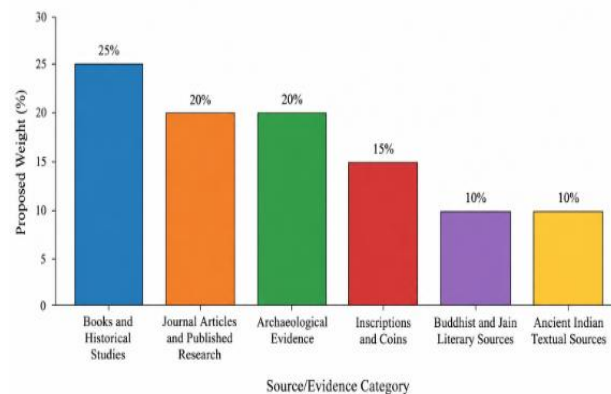


Figure 1 Proposed Distribution of Sources and Evidence Used in the Study

V. URBANISATION AND TRADE IN ANCIENT NORTH INDIA

The second urbanisation is linked to the growth of cities in ancient North India, and is especially apparent from around 600 BCE. During this time, major changes occurred in the Gangetic plains such as expansion of agriculture, production of surplus food, specialisation of crafts, development of political-states and growing regional and long-distance trade. The results of these developments were favorable for the development and growth of the towns and cities as centers of administrative, production, exchange, and religious life.

Politically and commercially important major towns developed, like Rajagriha, Pataliputra, Vaishali, Varanasi, Kaushambi, Shravasti, and Mathura. Some served as the seat of a kingdom or mahajanapada, and some prospered due to their strategic position along roads, rivers, and market networks. The dynamic of their growth will show the close relationship between political power, economic resources, and geographical accessibility.

⁹ Sawant, R., & Shete, G. (2016). A review of early historic urbanization in India. In G. R. Schug & S. R. Walimbe (Eds.), *A companion to South Asia in the past*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119055280.ch20> (Wiley Online Library)



There is also archaeological evidence for the growing economic contact during this time. Punch-marked coins and the ubiquity of Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) imply increasing significance of monetised transactions and a network of production, consumption and interregional connections. The urban populations relied on the surrounding rural areas for food production, and they gained access to metals, timber, stone, textiles, luxury items, and other materials via wider exchange networks.¹⁰

Trade thus played an important role in urban growth as a link between agricultural settlements, craft-production centres, resource zones, markets and political capitals. These trade corridors also facilitated the circulation of merchants, artisans, monks, pilgrims and ideas, and played a key role in making ancient North Indian cities important centres of economic and cultural interaction.¹¹

VI. MAJOR TRADE ROUTES AND URBAN CENTRES

The land of ancient North India was linked together by a vast network of roads and rivers which facilitated trade, political communication, pilgrimage and cultural interaction. Of these, the Uttarapatha is important as it linked the northwest of the Indian subcontinent to the Gangetic plains. Taxila was very strategically located on these routes and served as an important transit town between northern India and Central Asia and further west. It was situated in a way that facilitated trade, as well as the spread of religious and cultural ideas.

Another significant commercial and cultural hub was Mathura which lay on the intersection of the routes from the northwest, the Gangetic valley, Rajasthan and central India. Its commercial significance led to it becoming a significant Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical religious and artistic hub. Kaushambi near the river Yamuna, was also well-provided with riverine transportation as well as significant land routes.

Varanasi, which is located on the Ganga, became a significant trade, craft, religious and pilgrimage centre. Strategically situated next to the important river systems, Pataliputra emerged into the political and administrative center, especially under the Mauryan Empire. Overland routes were supplemented by the Ganga, Yamuna and their tributaries that would allow the transportation of people and bulk goods. These mutually dependent routes are what connected North Indian cities to become significant centres of economic and cultural activity and spread religious ideas, cultural practices, technologies and art forms regionally.¹²

VII. TRADE ROUTES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGION

7.1 Buddhism

Buddhism developed in parallel with the rise and expansion of urban centres, trade and commerce within ancient North India. Buddhist monasteries were frequently located close to prominent urban centers and trade routes for monks to meet merchants, travelers, pilgrims, and locals. Buddhist Sangha began to gain in importance and influence among merchants, who helped in building and maintaining monasteries, stupas, sculptures, gateways and other religious structures. Patronage enabled the commercially viable organizations to acquire religious merits and improve the Buddhist institutions as well. Shravasti, Kaushambi, Varanasi-Sarnath, Mathura and Taxila were important sites of Buddhist activity. The mobility of the monks and the spread of Buddhist teachings, manuscripts, symbols and art traditions were also made possible through the trade routes. As a result, commercial networks played a key role in

¹⁰ Rienjang, W., & Stewart, P. (Eds.). (2023). *Gandhāran art in its Buddhist context: Papers from the Fifth International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 21st–23rd March, 2022*. Archaeopress. <https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803274737> (Archaeopress)

¹¹ Cobb, M. A. (2023). Indian merchants abroad: Integrating the Indian Ocean world during the early first millennium CE. *Journal of Global History*, 18, 365–383. (Cambridge University Press)

¹² Rienjang, W., & Stewart, P. (Eds.). (2019). *The geography of Gandhāran art: Proceedings of the Second International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 22nd–23rd March, 2018*. Archaeopress. <https://doi.org/10.32028/9781789691863> (Archaeopress)



developing the nature of Buddhism from a local religious tradition into a broader transregional cultural and religious movement.¹³

7.2 Jainism

Jainism also established significant links with the growing urban and commercial society of ancient North India. Its ideas of non-violence, moral behavior, self-discipline, and lay involvement were embraced by segments of city life, such as merchants and traders. With commercial success, people and organizations were able to contribute to the financial and material needs of Jain monks, religious institutions, sculptures, and other sacred items. Mathura became an important Jain centre and offers valuable archaeological and inscriptional evidence of the religious activity and patronage of Jainism. The flow of trade merchants along regional/trade routes also created contacts among the Jain communities in various urban centres. Religious teachers might use the same communication channels as markets and cities, and spread teaching and practices around different areas. The trade routes thus played an indirect role in the geographical spread, institutional growth, artistic expression and ongoing survival of Jainism in the culturally complex city-states of ancient India.

7.3 Brahmanical Traditions

As cities, kingdoms, commercial networks and patron-client relationships flourished in ancient North India, Brahmanical traditions also changed significantly. While Brahmanical religion remained closely allied to Vedic religion and developed some social customs, religion became more and more dominated by image worship, pilgrim/image worship, devotional worship, sacred sites and worship of deities like Vishnu and Shiva. All that religious buildings could be built, and some sculptures and other religious objects could be produced, depended on the prosperity of cities and patronization from the political sphere. It is especially important to note that the artistic workshops of Mathura created Brahmanical images and Buddhist and Jain sculptures. Religious symbols and practices spread, as did merchants, artisans, pilgrims, rulers and religious specialists, between cities. As such, trade trails helped to facilitate the spread of Brahmanical traditions indirectly and played a role in the development of religiously heterogeneous urban contexts in ancient North India.¹⁴

VIII. DISCUSSION

There is significant evidence for the interconnectedness of trade, urbanisation, religion, art and cultural contact. But this correlation can not be shortened to an exclusive argument focused on "trade and cultural development.

Other factors were political stability, agricultural production, royal patronage, technological development, craft organisation, religious institutions and local social structures. The trade routes were especially important as a way for these forces to be linked together.

They have a cultural significance on three levels. An economic concentration of resources was created through trade, for monuments, institutions and particular artistic production. Secondly, trade routes provided the means to physically transport people, goods, and objects, including monks, artisans, merchants, pilgrims, and objects. Third, repeated interaction facilitated the development of new religious, artistic and cultural forms.

¹³ Rienjang, W., & Stewart, P. (Eds.). (2018). *Problems of chronology in Gandhāran art: Proceedings of the First International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 23rd–24th March, 2017*. Archaeopress. <https://doi.org/10.32028/9781784918552> (Archaeopress)

¹⁴ Rienjang, W., & Stewart, P. (Eds.). (2020). *The global connections of Gandhāran art: Proceedings of the Third International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 18th–19th March, 2019*. Archaeopress. <https://doi.org/10.32028/9781789696950> (Archaeopress)



Mathura illustrates the link between market significance, religious diversity and art production. The importance of cross-cultural interaction is shown in the city of Taxila and Gandhara. Varanasi, Kaushambi and Shravasti demonstrate the possibility of a commercial-sacred nexus.

Trade routes must then be seen as a social infrastructure of the changes in the ancient culture.¹⁵

IX. CONCLUSION

Based on the present study, it can be said that the trade routes were important for the economic, artistic, religious and cultural development of the cities of ancient North India. The Uttarapatha together with a network of riverine navigations of the Ganga and Yamuna linked the significant urban centres and promoted the flow of commodities, merchants, artisans, monks, traders, pilgrims and ideas. Cities like Mathura, Taxila, Varanasi, Kaushambi, Shravasti and Pataliputra were thus built as trading, religious, artistic and cultural hubs.

Commercial prosperity and religious development were of special interest. Monasteries and other religious monuments were built by merchant and other urban groups with their donations and patronage of the Buddhist and Jain institutions. The Brahmanical traditions also grew as pilgrimages increased, devotional practices flourished, images were worshipped, and religious patronage was provided in these shifting urban settings. Art forms, techniques, symbols, and cultural practices were also exchanged among regions, through trade networks.

It also indicates that cities in premodern India were not just isolated settlements, but nodes of regional and transregional networks. Their development was fostered by political power, agriculture, craft specialisation, religious patronage and trade. Trade routes are thus rightly called the “corridors of civilisation”, as their role in the past went beyond the exchange of goods. They were responsible for cultural transmission, religious interaction, artistic innovation and social contact, and thus an important part of a cultural history of ancient North India without which mobility and commerce would have been understood as an integral part of this cultural landscape.

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¹⁵ Rienjang, W., & Stewart, P. (Eds.). (2022). *The rediscovery and reception of Gandhāran art: Proceedings of the Fourth International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 24th–26th March, 2021*. Archaeopress. <https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803272337> (Archaeopress)



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