

# The Economy and Society in the Post-Mauryan Period

**\*Dr. Ashish Vyas**

## Abstract

*The period following the decline of the Mauryan Empire (circa 185 BCE) marked a phase of significant transformation in Indian society and economy. This era, characterized by political fragmentation and the rise of various regional and foreign dynasties, such as the Shungas, Satavahanas, Kushans, and Indo-Greeks, witnessed a shift in the socio-political landscape, which had enduring impacts on the cultural and economic fabric of India.*

*Socially, the post-Mauryan period saw the further entrenchment of the **varna (caste) system** and the emergence of more rigid social hierarchies, especially under Brahmanical influence. The merchant and artisan classes gained prominence, and there was a marked increase in social mobility due to expanding trade and the rise of urban centers. Foreign rulers, including the Kushans and Indo-Greeks, integrated into the Indian social framework, often assuming the status of Kshatriyas.*

*Economically, India experienced a phase of substantial growth, primarily driven by agriculture, trade, and urbanization. Agriculture continued to form the backbone of the economy, supported by advancements in irrigation and surplus production. **Long-distance trade** flourished, with Indian merchants engaging in trade with regions such as Central Asia, the Roman Empire, and Southeast Asia. Maritime trade through key ports like Bharuch, Arikamedu, and Tamralipti thrived, while the Silk Road enabled cultural and economic exchanges. Coinage, particularly the striking of **die-cast coins** by Indo-Greek and Kushan rulers, facilitated economic transactions.*

*This period also witnessed a rise in **religious diversity**, with **Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism** coexisting and competing for influence. While Buddhism continued to spread under Kushan patronage, **Brahmanical traditions** experienced a revival, marked by the rise of **Bhakti** and the composition of important religious texts like the **Manusmriti**.*

*In sum, the post-Mauryan period laid the foundations for later developments in Indian society and economy, setting the stage for the cultural and intellectual flourishing that characterized the **Gupta period**. Despite political fragmentation, the era was marked by dynamic changes in social structures, economic practices, and religious landscapes, contributing to the rich tapestry of India's historical evolution.*

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Key Words: Economy, Agriculture, Trade and Commerce Guilds (Shrenis), Coinage, Urbanization, Silk Road, Maritime, Trade Barter System, Deccan and South India Trade, Precious Commodities, Agrarian Surplus, Caste, System Brahmanism Buddhism Jainism Social Stratification Women's Status Urban Middle Class, Cultural Syncretism, Religious Diversity, Foreign Rulers, Brahmanical Revival, Patronage, Urbanization and Cities

The **Post-Mauryan period** in ancient India, stretching roughly from 185 BCE to around 300 CE, marks a phase of significant political, economic, and cultural change. After the decline of the Maurya Empire, the subcontinent saw the emergence of various regional kingdoms, with the political landscape being fragmented. Despite this political disintegration, the economy in the post-Mauryan period was marked by certain continuities and changes that were pivotal in shaping the trajectory of ancient Indian history.

This article examines the key aspects of the economy during the Post-Mauryan period, including agriculture, trade, urbanization, craft production, coinage, and the role of the state in economic life.

### **1. Agriculture in the Post-Mauryan Period**

Agriculture remained the backbone of the economy during the Post-Mauryan period, as it had been during the Mauryan era. Most of the population continued to rely on farming for their livelihood, cultivating crops like rice, wheat, barley, millet, pulses, and sugarcane.

#### **a. Techniques and Tools**

During this period, agricultural techniques remained largely traditional, though there is evidence of incremental improvements. Iron tools were widely used, with iron plows becoming common in northern and central India. However, the major agricultural improvements came not in technology but in the development of irrigation systems, particularly in the regions where kingdoms encouraged agriculture.

#### **b. Land Ownership**

The control of land remained crucial in the Post-Mauryan period. It is believed that during the period following the Mauryas, land grants became more common. These grants were often given to Brahmins, religious institutions, or military leaders, leading to a concentration of land in the hands of a few elites.

#### **c. Crops and Specialization**

Specialized crops like cotton, sugarcane, and indigo began to gain importance, especially in the southern and western regions. The development of agro-pastoral practices also saw the growth of animal husbandry, particularly in the Deccan region.

### **2. Trade and Commerce**

Trade continued to flourish during the Post-Mauryan period, albeit in a more regional and localized context compared to the large-scale Mauryan Empire.

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### a. Internal Trade

Internal trade saw an expansion due to the demand for various goods between regions. Goods like salt, iron, pottery, textiles, and spices were traded. The **guilds**, or **srenis**, continued to play a vital role in regulating trade, ensuring the quality of goods, and managing business practices.

The development of road infrastructure, although not as extensive as during the Mauryan period, still contributed to internal trade. The ancient trade routes like the **Ujjain-Kashmir** route and **Taxila-Pataliputra** route continued to be used.

### b. External Trade

Externally, India maintained its robust trade relations with regions such as Central Asia, the Mediterranean world, Southeast Asia, and the Far East. The **Indo-Roman trade** was particularly significant, with goods such as spices, textiles, and pearls flowing from India to the Roman Empire in exchange for wine, olive oil, and glassware.

The **Silk Road**, which passed through northwestern India, continued to be a major artery for trade. Indian merchants also played a significant role in maritime trade across the Indian Ocean. Ports like **Arikamedu** (on the southeastern coast) and **Barygaza** (on the western coast) saw increased activity during this time.

### c. Trade Goods

The key exports included **textiles** (particularly cotton and silk), **spices**, **indigo**, **pepper**, **jewelry**, and **ivory**. The imports were mainly **wine**, **olive oil**, **glassware**, **gold**, and **bronze** items. Indian goods were highly sought after in foreign markets, contributing to economic growth in coastal and trading cities.

## 3. Urbanization and Crafts

Urbanization during the Post-Mauryan period witnessed significant developments, although not on the grand scale of the Mauryan period. Many towns and smaller cities continued to thrive, serving as centers for trade, culture, and administration.

### a. Craft Production

Craft production flourished during this period. Weaving, metalworking, pottery, and sculpture became important economic activities. The cities of **Ujjain**, **Pataliputra**, **Taxila**, and **Mathura** were major centers for urban crafts, producing fine goods such as **pottery**, **stone sculptures**, and **terracotta figurines**.

The textile industry was particularly noteworthy, as India had long been renowned for its high-quality cotton and silk fabrics. The **fine muslin** and **calico** produced in regions like Bengal were highly valued both domestically and in international markets.

### b. Urban Growth

Although the number of large cities declined compared to the Mauryan period, smaller towns and regional centers grew in importance. These urban centers served as hubs for trade, administration, and the arts. The urban economy was also boosted by the role of **craftsmen** and **traders**, with some

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cities specializing in particular goods, such as iron and metal tools in places like **Taxila**.

#### 4. Coinage and Economic System

The use of coins continued to be widespread in the Post-Mauryan period, but there were notable shifts in their circulation.

##### a. Coinage

The Mauryas had issued a variety of coins made of copper, silver, and gold. In the Post-Mauryan period, coinage became more diversified, with regional kingdoms issuing their own currencies. The **Kshatrapas**, the **Satavahanas**, and the **Indo-Greeks** issued coins, and each of these empires had their own monetary systems.

These coins were often **punch-marked** and depicted various deities, kings, and symbolic motifs, offering valuable insights into the religious and political atmosphere of the time. In some regions, the economy was based on the barter system, but coinage, especially in urban areas, played an increasingly significant role.

##### b. Currency and Trade

The widespread use of coinage facilitated both internal and external trade. Coins helped in creating a more sophisticated system of economic exchanges, both for commodities and in terms of payment for land and labor.

#### 5. Role of the State in Economic Affairs

The Post-Mauryan period saw a decline in the centralized control of the economy, which had been a feature of the Mauryan state. However, regional kingdoms such as the **Shunga**, **Kanva**, **Satavahana**, and **Indo-Greek** rulers continued to exert control over trade routes and markets.

##### a. Taxation

Taxation was the primary means through which the state gained revenue. Evidence suggests that agricultural taxes, trade taxes, and possibly tolls on roads were used to generate income for the state. The economic management of the state was heavily influenced by local elites and rulers who controlled key agricultural lands and trade routes.

##### b. Royal Patronage

In terms of infrastructure, the state continued to invest in the construction of roads, irrigation systems, and cities. Rulers often patronized religious and cultural institutions, which, in turn, helped sustain economic growth through the accumulation of land and wealth by these institutions.

Post-Mauryan Society in India (185 BCE – 300 CE)

The fall of the Mauryan Empire in 185 BCE marked the beginning of a new chapter in Indian history. This era, often referred to as the **Post-Mauryan Period**, witnessed significant political

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fragmentation, economic transformation, religious diversification, and cultural synthesis. While centralized Mauryan control disintegrated, the vacuum led to the rise of several regional and foreign powers that shaped the course of Indian society.

### **Social Structure**

The post-Mauryan period saw important social developments:

#### A. Varna and Caste System

The **varna system** became more rigid with increasing Brahmanical dominance, especially under the Shungas and Satavahanas. **Jati (sub-castes)** emerged due to occupational diversification. Foreign rulers (e.g., Indo-Greeks and Kushans) were often assimilated into the **Kshatriya** class.

#### B. Urbanization and Social Mobility

Rise of trade and commerce led to the emergence of a wealthy **merchant class (Vaishyas)**. **Guilds (Shrenis)** became important socio-economic units and provided some upward mobility. Women continued to have limited rights, though inscriptions show their participation in religious donations.

### **3. Economy**

The post-Mauryan economy was vibrant, with advancements in trade, agriculture, and industry.

#### A. Agriculture

Remained the backbone of the economy.

Irrigation systems improved, and surplus production supported urbanization.

#### B. Trade and Commerce

India engaged in **long-distance trade** with Central Asia, the Roman Empire, and Southeast Asia.

Ports like **Bharuch, Arikamedu, and Tamralipti** were major centers of maritime trade.

**Silk Road** trade flourished under the Kushans. Indian spices, textiles, and precious stones were in high demand abroad.

#### C. Coinage

**D. Introduction of punch-marked coins by Mauryans continued.**

**E. Indo-Greeks introduced die-struck coins with Greek inscriptions and realistic portraits.**

**F. Kushan coinage included Greek, Bactrian, and Indian deities, reflecting cultural syncretism.**

### **4. Religion and Philosophy**

The Post-Mauryan period was marked by significant religious developments:

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**A. Buddhism**

Continued to flourish under the patronage of Indo-Greeks, Shakas, and Kushans.

Development of **Mahayana Buddhism** during the Kushan period, emphasizing Bodhisattvas and salvation for all. Establishment of stupas and monasteries across India (e.g., **Sanchi, Amaravati**).

**B. Jainism**

**C. Gained traction among merchant classes due to its emphasis on non-violence and ethics.**

**D. Spread in western India and the Deccan.**

**C. Brahmanism**

Revival under Shungas and Satavahanas.

Rise of **Bhakti elements** in Brahmanical worship, especially devotion to **Vishnu** and **Shiva**.

Composition of **Dharmashastras** like the **Manusmriti**, which codified caste and social laws.

**5. Art and Culture****A. Art and Architecture**

Transition from **Mauryan** to more **ornamental** styles.

Development of **stupa architecture**, as seen in **Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati**.

**Gandhara School of Art:** Fusion of Greek and Indian styles; realistic depictions of Buddha.

**Mathura School of Art:** Indigenous style emphasizing spiritual expression and symbolic motifs.**B. Literature**

Composition of **early Sanskrit works**, including parts of the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**.

Development of **Prakrit** and **Pali** literature, especially in Buddhist texts

Tamil Sangam literature flourished in the south, reflecting early Dravidian culture.

**6. Legacy and Conclusion**

The Post-Mauryan period was an age of **transformation and transition**. Despite political fragmentation, the era saw:

Consolidation of cultural and religious identities.

Expansion of trade networks.

Flourishing of art, especially Buddhist sculpture and architecture.

Fusion of indigenous and foreign elements, laying the groundwork for the **Gupta Golden Age** that followed.

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It was a dynamic period where **India became a cultural and economic crossroads**, influencing and being influenced by the wider world.

### Conclusion

The economy of the Post-Mauryan period represents a transitional phase between the centralized control of the Mauryan Empire and the fragmented political landscape of subsequent centuries. While the political unity of the Mauryas was replaced by regional kingdoms, the economic structures of agriculture, trade, crafts, and coinage continued to develop.

Agriculture remained the foundation of the economy, but it was the burgeoning trade—both internal and external—that played a crucial role in linking India with the wider world. The post-Mauryan economy laid the foundation for the rise of further economic prosperity in the Gupta period, with urbanization, technological advancements, and a thriving trade network continuing to shape the Indian economy for centuries to come.

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### Books and Scholarly Articles

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  - Romila Thapar provides an in-depth overview of ancient Indian history, including the economic structures during and after the Mauryan period. This book covers key aspects of the post-Mauryan period, with particular focus on trade, agriculture, and urbanization.
2. **Chakrabarti, D.K.** *The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology: The Archaeological Foundations of South Asian Civilisation.* Oxford University Press, 2006.
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    - This comprehensive book covers various historical aspects of ancient India, including economic conditions in the Post-Mauryan period, providing a detailed account of agriculture, trade, and political shifts.
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    - Although this book primarily focuses on the cultural and intellectual history of ancient India, Basham provides valuable insights into the economic activities of the time, particularly trade and urbanization.
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