Akshardhara Research Journal
Single Blind Peer-Reviewed & Refereed International Research Journal
E ISSN -3048-8095 / SJIF Impact- 5.16 / October 2026/ Special Issue 05 Volume I

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Trade and Religious Patronage in Early India (1st Century BCE – 3rd Century CE)

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DOI- https://doi-ds.org/doilink/10.2026-79769685/ARJ/2026/V1/SI05/101026A017

Abstract

The period between the first century BCE and the third century CE witnessed significant expansion of trade networks across the Indian subcontinent alongside the consolidation of religious institutions. While earlier historiography has often emphasised royal patronage as the primary driver behind the growth of religious establishments, epigraphic evidence suggests that merchants, traders, and guild organisations played a major role in sustaining these institutions. This paper examines the relationship between commercial networks and systems of religious patronage in early historic India. Drawing on epigraphic evidence from sites in the western Deccan and northern India, particularly Mathura, the study argues that monasteries and religious institutions were closely integrated within networks of trade and mobility. Using Karl Polanyi's concept of the embedded economy as a theoretical framework, the paper interprets religious patronage as a mechanism through which economic exchange, social prestige, and religious merit were interconnected. Rather than reflecting economic decline or the emergence of a purely agrarian order, patterns of patronage reveal the continued vitality of commercial activity and the participation of mercantile communities in shaping religious landscapes.

***Keywords**: Trade networks, Merchant guilds, Religious patronage, Early historic India, Buddhist monasteries, Embedded economy*

Introduction

The centuries between the first century BCE and the third century CE constitute a formative phase in the economic and religious history of the Indian subcontinent. This period witnessed the expansion of long-distance trade networks linking inland production zones with maritime ports and international commercial circuits across the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, religious institutions expanded across regions that were increasingly integrated into these commercial networks.

Earlier historical scholarship often interpreted the growth of religious patronage primarily through the actions of rulers and political elites. Royal grants of land, construction of temples, and ritual sponsorship were viewed as instruments through which political authority was legitimised and alliances with religious groups were consolidated (Chattopadhyaya 1994; Thapar 2002). However, inscriptions from early historic sites suggest a more complex picture in which people who were not of noble classes, played an active role in religious endowments, specifically the mercantile class.

Evidence from cave monasteries in western India and urban centres such as Mathura indicates that merchants frequently donated caves, pillars, railings, and monetary endowments to religious institutions (Ray 1986; Mirashi 1981; Smith 2006). Such inscriptions often identify donors through occupational titles such as *vanij* (merchant) or *sarthavaha* suggesting that mercantile groups were significant patrons of religious places.

This paper examines the relationship between trade networks and religious patronage in early India between the first century BCE and the third century CE. It argues that religious institutions developed within the same networks of mobility that facilitated commercial exchange.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on religious patronage in early India has largely interpreted the phenomenon through two dominant frameworks: the political legitimacy model, which views

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patronage as a means through which rulers reinforced authority (Thapar 2002; Chattopadhyaya 1994), and the feudalism model, which explains religious endowments primarily as mechanisms for redistributing resources (Kosambi 1956; Sharma 1980).

However, epigraphic evidence from several early historic sites records a substantial number of donations made by merchants, traders, and guilds. While these mercantile groups appear prominently in inscriptions, their role in systems of religious patronage has received comparatively limited analytical attention in existing historiography.

This creates a gap in understanding how commercial actors and trade networks influenced patterns of religious patronage. The present study addresses this gap.

Research Aim

The study aims to prove that religious patronage in early India was not solely a function of royal authority or agrarian redistribution but was significantly shaped by mercantile communities operating within long-distance trade networks, with religious institutions functioning as embedded nodes within systems of economic and social exchange.

Objectives

- To examine the role of merchants and guilds as patrons of religious institutions in early India.
- To analyse the relationship between major trade routes and religious establishments such as monasteries and temples.
- To interpret the connection between trade networks and religious patronage through economic theories

Theoretical Framework

Early scholarship on religious patronage in India focused largely on documenting epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Surveys conducted by Burgess (1880) and other colonial-era scholars catalogued inscriptions and temple endowments across western India, establishing a foundational corpus of material evidence. These studies primarily emphasised dynastic chronology and royal patronage.

A major shift in interpretation occurred with the emergence of Marxist historiography in the mid-twentieth century. Scholars such as D.D Kosambi (1956) and R S Sharma (1980) argued that religious endowments, particularly land grants to Brahmins and temples, represented mechanisms through which ruling elites redistributed agrarian surplus and extended control over rural regions. In this framework, religious patronage was closely linked with the development of the theory of Indian feudalism. This theory is often draws parallel with western dark ages that connects rise of feudalism and economic stagnation

Later historians introduced more nuanced interpretations that moved beyond strictly economic determinism. Romila Thapar (1984; 2002) emphasised the social and ideological dimensions of patronage, describing it as a form of cultural transaction through which rulers forged alliances with religious institutions and local elites. B D Chattopadhyaya (1994) further argued that such processes facilitated the integration of regional societies into expanding political structures. While these debates have significantly shaped our understanding of patronage, relatively less attention has been given to the role of mercantile communities in sustaining religious establishments during the early historic period (Chakravarti 2002; Chakrabarti 1995).

Economic anthropology provides a useful perspective for examining this relationship. Karl Polanyi's theory of the embedded economy argues that in pre-modern societies economic activity was embedded within social, religious, and political institutions rather than operating as a separate market sphere (Polanyi 1957). Exchange therefore functioned through principles such as reciprocity and redistribution, which were structured by social relationships and institutional frameworks (Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson 1957).

Trade Networks in Early Historic India

Trade played a crucial role in the economic life of early historic India. Long-distance trade routes connected production centres in the interior with ports along the western and eastern coasts, facilitating the movement of commodities such as textiles, spices, precious stones, and luxury goods (Grover and Singh 2022).

Two major inland trade corridors structured these networks of exchange: the Uttarapatha, which

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linked north-western regions such as Taxila with the Gangetic plains, and the Dakshinapatha, which connected the Gangetic basin with the Deccan and peninsular India (Lahiri 1999). These routes enabled the circulation of merchants, goods, and religious ideas across the subcontinent.

Political control over these routes was often a source of conflict between regional powers. According to Moti Chandra (1977), dynasties such as the Satavahanas, Western Kshatrapas, and Kushanas competed for control of key urban centres and trade corridors. Cities such as Ujjain, Pratishthana, and Mathura functioned as major commercial hubs within these networks.

Maritime trade also played an important role in this period. Numismatic evidence suggests the presence of overseas trade connections linking Indian ports with regions across the Indian Ocean (Chandra 1977). Ports such as Sopara and Bharuch were integrated into international trading networks that connected India with the Mediterranean, West Asia, and Southeast Asia (Tomber 2008).

These expanding networks stimulated the growth of urban centres and facilitated the emergence of merchant communities and guild organisations that played an increasingly significant role in economic life (Chakravarti 2002).

Types of Patronage

The evidence suggests that patronage was not a single institutional practice but rather a diverse set of mechanisms through which rulers, elites, and mercantile groups supported religious establishments. These forms ranged from permanent endowments such as land grants (*bhūmi-dāna*), which provided stable revenue bases for temples and monasteries, to more flexible contributions such as monetary donations (*hiranya-dāna*) and sustenance provisions that supported the everyday functioning of religious communities. Other forms, including prashasti inscriptions and monumental construction, served symbolic and ideological functions by linking political authority with acts of religious generosity. Ritual sponsorship further reinforced these relationships by creating public performances of piety that mobilised social participation. Together, these different forms illustrate how patronage operated simultaneously at economic, political, and cultural levels. By sustaining religious institutions through both material resources and symbolic gestures, patronage helped integrate local communities, legitimise ruling authority, and maintain the institutional infrastructure that often developed alongside important networks of mobility and exchange.

Type of Patronage	Form of Donation	Historical Example	Institutional Function
Bhūmi-dāna (Land Grants)	Donation of land or tax-free villages (agrahāras) to Brahmins, temples, or monasteries	Satavahana land grants recorded in inscriptions at Naneghat (Burgess 1880)	Redistribution of agrarian revenue; creation of ritual and administrative intermediaries; long-term support for religious institutions
Hiranya-dāna (Monetary Donations)	Donations of gold, coins, or precious metals for institutional maintenance	Donation of gold coins by Vakataka queen Prabhavatigupta to a Buddhist monastery near Nashik (Mirashi 1981)	Provided liquidity for repairs, festivals, and maintenance of religious establishments
Prashasti Inscriptions	Royal eulogies commemorating donations and victories	Chalukya Pulakeshin II's inscription at Aihole (Narasimhacharya 1907)	Public legitimation of rulers; linking political authority with religious patronage
Construction Patronage	Commissioning temples, caves, monuments, and artistic works	Kailasa temple at Ellora Caves commissioned by the Rashtrakutas (Sastri 1955); murals at Ajanta Caves funded by royal and mercantile donors	Creation of religious infrastructure; demonstration of royal prestige; patronage of art and architecture

		(Schlingloff 1982)	
Ritual Sponsorship	Funding yajnas, assemblies, festivals, and religious ceremonies	Sponsorship of rituals and public religious events by rulers and elites (Chattopadhyaya 1994; Goyal 2001)	Reinforcement of political legitimacy, social cohesion, and religious authority
Sustenance Provisions (Anna-dāna)	Donations of food, oil, lamps, clothing, grains, and daily-use materials	Satavahana and Chalukya donations supporting monks and temple rituals in western Deccan inscriptions	Sustained daily functioning of monasteries and temples; ensured continuity of rituals

Source: Compiled from epigraphic evidence and secondary literature including Burgess (1880), Sharma (1980), Mirashi (1981), Chattopadhyaya (1994), and Goyal (2001).

Epigraphic compilations such as those studied by V. V. Mirashi (1981) further demonstrates that inscriptions from the Satavahana and Western Kshatrapas periods frequently record donations by traders, officials, and lay devotees to Buddhist establishments located along major routes of circulation. These inscriptions provide valuable insight into the social composition of donors and reveal how religious patronage intersected with commercial activity. Together with archaeological evidence, they illustrate how monasteries functioned as important nodes within networks linking ports, urban markets, and inland trade corridors.

Merchant Patronage and Epigraphy

Epigraphic evidence provides important insights into the role of mercantile groups in religious patronage during the early historic period. Inscriptions from cave monasteries and urban centres frequently record donations made by merchants, caravan leaders, and guild organisations.

In Deccan, inscriptions from the Nasik caves record donations by merchant-bankers and guild leaders who financed the excavation of caves and the construction of monastic structures (Mirashi 1981). One inscription records a donation made by Usabhadata, the son-in-law of the Western Kshatrapa ruler Nahapana, illustrating the intersection of political authority and mercantile patronage. Similarly, inscriptions from Karle record donations by merchants and guild representatives who contributed pillars, railings, and architectural elements to the chaitya hall (Ray 1986). The identification of donors as *vanij* (merchant) and *sarthavaha* (caravan leader) suggests that individuals involved in long-distance trade were significant patrons of monastic establishments.

Comparable patterns can be observed in northern India, particularly at Mathura. During the early centuries CE, Mathura emerged as a major centre of trade and religious activity situated along routes linking the Gangetic plains with north-western regions (Thapar 2002). Inscriptions from Mathura record donations by merchants and artisans to Buddhist and Jain religious establishments (Smith 2006).

The widespread presence of such inscriptions indicates that merchant patronage was not confined to a single region but represented a broader phenomenon across early historic India.

Trade and Religious Patronage Intersections

The spatial distribution of religious institutions suggests that monasteries and temples were closely integrated within networks of mobility and exchange. Archaeological studies have shown that many Buddhist monasteries were located near important trade routes, particularly in regions where caravan routes crossed mountain passes or river valleys (Ray 1994; Lahiri 1999).

In the western Deccan, rock-cut monasteries such as Nasik, Karle, Bhaja, and Junnar developed along routes linking the Deccan plateau with coastal ports on the Konkan coast. These locations allowed monasteries to interact with merchants and travellers moving between inland markets and maritime trading centres.

Recent spatial analysis has confirmed that many monastic sites were strategically located along efficient travel corridors linking coastal ports with interior trade centres (Rees 2021). Such positioning suggests that monasteries functioned as part of the broader infrastructure that facilitated long-distance mobility.

Monasteries therefore served not only religious functions but also social and economic roles. They provided lodging for travellers, spaces for ritual activity, and opportunities for social interaction among merchants and pilgrims. Through donations and patronage, merchants supported these institutions while simultaneously reinforcing networks of cooperation and trust within trading communities.

Reinterpreting Patronage through Polanyi

Karl Polanyi's concept of the embedded economy offers a useful framework for analysing the relationship between trade and religious patronage in early India. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi argued that in pre-modern societies economic activities were embedded within social, religious, and political institutions rather than governed by autonomous market mechanisms (Polanyi 1957). Exchange therefore operated through social principles such as reciprocity, redistribution, and householding rather than purely through profit-driven market exchange (Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson 1957).

Viewed through this framework, religious patronage in early India can be interpreted as a form of institutionalised redistribution embedded within religious ideology. Donations to monasteries and temples were not merely acts of piety but mechanisms through which wealth circulated within broader social networks. Merchants and guilds donated wealth in the form of coins, caves, railings, or ritual endowments, while monasteries redistributed these resources through hospitality to travellers, ritual services, charity, and support for monastic communities.

The spatial distribution of Buddhist monasteries reinforces this interpretation. Archaeological studies demonstrate that monasteries were frequently located along major trade routes linking inland production centres with coastal ports (Ray 1986; Lahiri 1999). In the western Deccan, cave monasteries such as Karle, Nasik, Bhaja, and Junnar developed along routes connecting the Deccan plateau with ports on the Konkan coast. These sites functioned as resting points for merchants and caravans travelling between inland markets and maritime trading centres (Ray 1994).

Recent spatial modelling studies further confirm that many monastic sites were located along the most efficient travel corridors linking coastal and inland trade networks (Rees 2021). Such positioning suggests that monasteries formed part of the infrastructure of mobility, facilitating both pilgrimage and commerce.

From a Polanyian perspective, merchant donations can therefore be understood as forms of reciprocal exchange embedded within religious ideology. Through acts of *dāna*, merchants accumulated religious merit and social prestige while simultaneously supporting institutions that provided services to trading communities. Monasteries thus operated as nodal institutions linking trade, religion, and social status, enabling the circulation of wealth and reinforcing networks of commercial cooperation.

This interpretation challenges earlier historiographical models that viewed religious patronage primarily as a mechanism of agrarian redistribution or feudal control (Sharma 1980). Instead, the evidence suggests that religious institutions were deeply integrated within commercial landscapes, reflecting the continued vitality of long-distance trade networks in early historic India.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between trade networks and religious patronage in early India between the first century BCE and the third century CE. Evidence from inscriptions, archaeological remains, and spatial analysis demonstrates that Buddhist monasteries and other religious establishments were frequently located along major trade corridors linking inland production centres with coastal ports.

Epigraphic records indicate that merchants, guild leaders, and trade guilds played a significant role in sustaining these institutions through donations of caves, architectural elements, and monetary endowments. These patterns suggest that religious patronage was supported not only by rulers but also by commercial communities operating within long-distance trade networks.

Interpreting these developments through Karl Polanyi's concept of the embedded economy highlights the institutional role of religious establishments within early historic commercial landscapes. Monasteries functioned not only as centres of religious practice but also as redistributive institutions that facilitated the circulation of resources, hospitality for travellers, and social interaction among merchants and pilgrims.

Religious patronage therefore cannot be understood solely as an expression of political

legitimacy or agrarian redistribution. Instead, it formed part of a broader system in which economic exchange, religious ideology, and social prestige were mutually intertwined. By situating religious institutions within networks of trade and mobility, this study demonstrates that patronage reflected the continued vitality of commercial activity in early historic India rather than a transition toward a purely agrarian economy.

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