

Elephants and Ivory Objects in Foreign Trade of India in Ancient Times: From Curios to Commodity.

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ABSTRACT

Foreign trade of India during the ancient period has been subjected to a newer kind of scrutiny in recent times. Nature of trade is probed not only to assess the financial aspect of trade, but more importantly, to evaluate and reevaluate the influence of Indian culture and ideas over its trading partners and people. India has been actively engaged in trade with the Roman Empire and the Central Asian colonies through the silk route network in the early centuries of Christian era. This trade no doubt comprised of exotic goods as imports from India, but did not necessarily imply a trade in luxury items. Products procured from India were used by a large population in various forms and ways. Structure of the trade of India has mostly been defined as 'Luxury trade' and trade in 'Prestige goods', thereby, limiting its scope of impact on the recipient culture.

Indian Elephants and ivory objects found a prominent place among the gifts as well as in commercial exchange; Greek writers from the time of Alexander's expedition of India wrote about Indian Elephants with a sense of awe and interest. Strabo, Arrian, Onesecritus and Pliny give elaborate accounts of elephants, elephant hunting and the elephant products such as ivory. The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, a first century sailor's log book counts ivory and ivory items being exported from Indian ports both from North and South. This study presents an account of archaeological find of ivory objects of Indian origin found along the silk route region. Afterwards, an attempt is made to figure out why Indian Elephants and ivory objects were so coveted, whereas, near home elephants were part of fauna of Africa, and Greek writers seem to be well aware of it. This leads to a discussion of ivory craft and artisans of India. Nature of trade in ivory objects is also dealt with, to ascertain the prevalent assumptions about Indian trade with the western world.

Keywords: *Luxury trade, silk route, ivory craft, prestige goods*

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