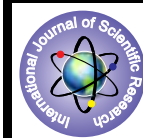


India's Overseas Trade in the Early Medieval Period



History

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Dr. Jagadeesh Kivudanavar

Asst. Professor in History, Karnatak University's Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad-580001
Karnataka-India

ABSTRACT

Ancient Indian merchants, traders and men engrossed in commercial pursuits. Manusmriti refers to sea borne traffic as well as inland and overland commerce. India, according to Chamber's Encyclopedia, "has been celebrated during many ages for its valuable natural productions, its beautiful manufactures and costly merchandise," was, says the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and describes it as seat of commerce. In the early medieval period, India had a rich trade relations with neighbouring and western countries. The exports and imports consisted of precious stones, gold, silver, cloths and commodities.

Introduction

There was a time in the past, when Indians were the masters of the sea borne trade of Europe, Asia and Africa. They built ships, navigated the sea, and held in their hands all the threads of international commerce, whether carried on overland or sea. In Sanskrit books we constantly read of merchants, traders and men engrossed in commercial pursuits. Manu Smriti, the oldest law book in the world, lays down laws to govern commercial disputes having references to sea borne traffic as well as inland and overland commerce. From the earliest time India has an enormous trade links with Asia and western countries. This glory of Indian overseas trade even continued in the medieval and modern period. Many of foreign visitors give accounts on India's trade as follows.

Medieval India's Arab traveller Ibn Batuta (1333-46) found great cities with rich markets in the north and south. In another context the same writer while describing the magnificent port of Alexandria in Egypt, observes that he has not seen its equal in the universe, if exception is made in the case of Quilon and Calicut in Malabar, Sudak in the Crimea, and Zaytun in China. The rich sea ports of Gujarat, Deccan Malabar and Bengal are described by the Portuguese writer Barbosa as handling an extensive trade (inland, coastal and overseas) in the remarkable variety of merchandise. In the city of Vijayanagar, because of its large size and huge population, its rich bazaars (markets), the number of its skilled craftsmen, and dealers in precious stones as well as other articles, impressed profoundly a succession of foreign visitors. One of these, the Portuguese traveller Domingo Paes, describes its heavy traffic and busy markets. (Sewell, 1985, p, 237).

The trade in Indian coastal ports, from the detailed narrative of Ibn Batutah, it appears that the Western coast of India was studied with a large number of sea-ports, excellent harbours and extensive trade. Among these ports Diu, Goa, Calicut, Cochin, and Quilon gained more prominence. The highly profitable direct trade between Gujarat and Malabar was almost completely monopolized by the Malabari merchants. In the fullest list of imports from Malabar are included cocoa-nuts, cardamoms and other spices, emery, wax and iron, sugar from Bhatkal, sandalwood and brazil-wood, silks and other articles (from south-east Asia and China). The exports consisted mainly of cotton, cloth, wheat and other grains, horses, and carnelians. The coastal trade of the Deccan ports appears to have been shared by both Gujarati and Malabari merchants. The former imported silk and cotton cloth, opium and common silk camlets, wheat, and gingelly, horses, and they exported cotton and linen fabrics. The latter imported spices and drugs, areca-nuts and cocoa-nuts, palm-sugar, wax and emery, copper and quicksilver, and they exported cotton goods, wheat, rice, millet, gingelly oil, muslins, and calicoes. In the Tulu region, the Malabar merchants imported cocoa-nuts, spices, palm-sugar, palm-wine, and exported rice, iron, and variety of sugar. The trade of the neighbouring island of Ceylon appears to have been largely controlled by the Indians. Merchants from Coromandel, Malabar and from the Vijayanagara, Deccan, and Gujarat kingdoms are described as visiting the island and Colombo. The imports consisted of very fine

Cambay cotton cloths, saffron, coral, quicksilver, cinnabar, gold and silver. The high profit of this trade is illustrated by the fact that the elephants were sold in Malabar and Coromandel at the rate of 400 or 500 (rising up to 1000 or 1500) Portuguese gold coins, while gold and silver fetched more than their worth elsewhere. The coastal trade of Coromandel and the Vijayanagara kingdom was carried by Hindu and Muslim merchants from Malabar and imports consisting of areca-nuts, cocoa-nuts, horses etc., and the exports comprising rice and cloth. In the case of Coromandel, even children sold into slavery by their parents in times of famine. Muslim ships in large numbers visited Pulicat, the great market for Burmese rubies and musk. The famous muslins of Bengal, along with good white cane-sugar, was exported by the Muslim merchants in their own ships to Malabar, Cambay and other tracts, the price of these goods in Malabar being sufficiently high to be noted carefully by the Portuguese writers. (Sewell, 1985, p, 252)

India's Overseas Trade with the Persian Gulf, Arabia and East Africa

The vast overseas trade of India with Western Asia flowed during this period. The merchandise was carried along the Persian Gulf and thence overland through Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast, and also by the sea-route to the Red Sea ports, and then, Western Europe by the Venetian and other Italian merchants. In the latter part, Ormuz became the grand emporium of the trade by the former route, while Aden and Jiddah were the two great emporia of the trade by the latter route. In the early part of the fourteenth century, as we learn from Ibn Batutah, Ormuz was the entrepot of the trade of Hind and Sind, the merchandise of India being carried thence to the two Iraqs, Fars and Khurasan. From Indian coast her great ships arriving to Aden. (Mahalingam, 1940, p,225). Merchants of Fars and Yemen, as told by Ibn Batutah, disembarked mostly at the port of Mangalore, and Chinese ships bound for India entered only the ports of Ely (Hili), Calicut, and Quilon. In the work of Barbosa we have a valuable report of India's maritime commerce with the Western world in the beginning of the sixteenth century. We learn that an extensive and highly profitable trade was borne between the Indian ports, Diu, Chaul, Dabhol, Goa, Bhatkal, Calicut and so forth, on the one side, and those of Arabia and Persia, such as Jiddah, Aden, Esh-Shihr and Ormuz, on the other. In a comprehensive list of imports from India into Ormuz are included pepper, cloves, ginger and cardamoms, sandal-wood and brazil-wood, saffron, indigo, etc., from Cambay, Chaul and Dabhol, as well as Bengal muslins. The exports carried to India on the return voyage are said to have consisted of Arabian horses (to the number of one thousand to two thousand) and other things. For while ships from Cambay brought to it cotton cloth in 'astonishing quantities' as well as drugs, gems, seed-pearls and carnelians in abundance, and carried back madder, opium, copper, quicksilver, vermilion, gold other things, those from eastern coast of imported commodities etc. The Muslim merchants of Cambay, Chaul, Dabhol, Bhatkal and Malabar imported cotton cloths, inferior gems, rice, sugar, and spices into the neighbouring Arabian port. Ships from Cambay carried to Aden, Mecca and Ormuz cotton and linen cloths, large carpets, coloured cloth as well as spices, and brought back coral, quicksilver, vermilion, lead, gold

and silver, madder, rose-water and saffron, as well as opium of superior quality (Ibn Batutah, II, 1853, pp, 112-117). Merchants from Ormuz brought horses in large numbers to Goa. Rice was exported from Barakur to Ormuz, Aden and Esh-Shihr. The foreign Muslim merchants of Calicut made their great annual voyages (from February down to the middle of August, September and October of the same year), in their fleet; of ten to twelve ships, to Aden as well as the Red Sea ports and back. In the list of India's imports mentioned so far, rose-water and frankincense, and above all horses, are especially stated to be the products of Arabia. Other merchandise like copper, vermilion, woollen and silken cloths etc., found at Jiddah and Aden for the Indian market were doubtless imported from Europe in return for the Indian merchandise, which was carried via Suez and Cairo to Alexandria for distribution by the Italian merchants over the rest of the European world (Ibn Batutah, II, 1853, 130-145).

India's early trade was fostered by the chain of Arab settlements on the African coast like those of Zeila, Makdashau, Mombasa and Kilwa, visited by Ibn Batutah in the beginning of the fourteenth century, and, in part, by the Chinese imperial missions under Cheng-ho, in the early part of the fifteenth century. Barbosa gives detailed account on this trade. Many ships from the kingdom of Cambay (Gujarat), visited Makdashau with plenty of cloths and spices and returned with rich cargoes of gold, ivory and wax. Cambay cloths and beads were exported by Gujarati merchants in large ships. The enormous profit of this trade is illustrated by certain figures. The Cambay cloths were exchanged at the three African ports for gold at a sufficiently attractive price, and when they were carried to Sofala, they were exchanged for gold without weighing. The African ivory was sold in the kingdom of Gujarat at the rate of five or six gold coins in Portuguese currency for about one hundred and twelve pounds in English weight (Barbosa, I, 1921, p,137).

India's Overseas Trade with South-East and East Asia

The direct trade established by the Chinese with India during the twelfth century appears to have been continued and developed during this period. It received a great impetus through the series of maritime expeditions fitted out by the Chinese Em-

peror Yung-Lo (1403-24), culminating in a succession of seven such expeditions led by the eunuch Cheng-ho during and after his lifetime (between A.D. 1405 and 1433). In the early part of the fourteenth century, and regular voyages were made by Chinese ships to the three Malabar ports. The Chinese imports into the Indian ports followed a set pattern, the merchants bringing silks, coloured taffetas and satins, cloves and nutmegs, blue and white porcelain, gold, silver etc., for exchange with the Indian products. Barbosa quoted Malacca, established as an independent Muslim State in the fifteenth century A.D., was the great international port of south-east Asia at that time. It contained a colony of wholesale merchants (Hindu and Muslim) who owned large estates and great ships. The list of its imports (evidently from India) included pepper, incense, saffron, etc., from Bengal, and some goods from Gujarat to South East Asia. Some of these were carried to the islands of Java, Sumatra, the Moluccas, Timor, Banda, and Borneo. The imports brought there every year in Muslim ships, evidently from India. The above account may be supplemented by Barbosa's notice of the east Asiatic trade of individual Indian ports. Merchants sailed as far as Pegu, Martaban, Tenasserim and Sumatra, trading in spices and drugs, silks, musk, benzoin, porcelain, and other merchandise. Merchants from Quilon as well as 'the city of Bengal' likewise sailed in their own ships to Pegu, Malacca, and Sumatra (Barbosa, I, 1921, p,108).

Conclusion-

During the early medieval period India had an extensive trade links with the different parts of the world. Hence she became a hub for foreign trade. Earlier the Muslims had their control on India's trade and later who set aside by the Portuguese. Gujarat, Goa, Calicut, Cochin, Quilon etc., described as important ports and these were very much helpful to India to open her doors for foreigners. In Vijayanagara, the complete freedom of travel and ownership granted by the kings without enquiry whether he was a Christian, Jew, Moor or Heathen, as well as the great equality and justice shown to all by the ruler and his subjects, drew an enormous number of merchants to the city. Thus, India's foreign trade has rich heritage from the early days.

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