Ancient Indian merchants, traders, and men engrossed in commercial pursuits. Manusmriti refers to sea commerce, and the Portuguese writer Barbosa described by the island of Alexandria in Egypt, observes that he has not seen its equal. Medieval India’s Arab traveller Ibn Batuta (1333-46) found great cities with rich markets in the north and south. In another land, overland commerce. From the earliest time India has engaged in extensive 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 foreign trade. One of these, the Portuguese traveller Domingo Paes, describes its heavy traffic and busy markets. (Sewell, 1985, p. 237).

There was a time in the past, when Indians were the masters of sea 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.

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, it appears that the 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 great ships arriving to Aden. (Mahalingam, 1940, p.225).

The trade of Indian coastal ports, from the detailed narrative of Ibn Batutah, it appears that the 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 great ships arriving to Aden. (Mahalingam, 1940, p.225).

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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, vermillion, woolen and silk 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 Zelia, Makkashau, 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 Makkashau 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 and these were very much helpful to India to open her doors 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, both foreign and Indians. Venice, Alexandria for distribution by the Italian merchants over the rest of the European world (Ibn Batutah, II, 1853, pp, 112-117).

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 Empress 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, Marataban, 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 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.

REFERENCE