

“Agents of Commerce in Pre-Colonial Canara”



History

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ABSTRACT

The Western coast of India had very early trans-oceanic trade even before the second millennium BC. From archeological points, there are several indications about the antiquity of the trade between India and Egypt for numerous products but there is dearth of evidence and proof that exchange were taken place through the ports of West coast. British named the region Canara which was mainly comprised of maritime countries of Tuluva, Haiga and Hindu Konkan and also neighboring areas of Malabar. Written sources concerning the maritime history of the Canara for this period are rare but several Greek and Roman writers have referred quite a few ports of West coast of India which have suggested vital trading links with the Mediterranean countries.

Trading Scenario in early India:

To understand the traditional maritime trading activities of early India, it is important to comprehend several factors and their functions in governing the commerce. Indo-Roman trade was not just solely dependent on the direction and duration of the wind but also on the types of vessels used for the sailing; excellent ports for harboring ships, rich markets of spices and other exotic commodities together with proficient merchant communities. All these had its positive impacts on the coastal trade and it can be safely said that the ports of the coastal Karnataka have their own share of direct trade contact with the large emporia and the west by its several means of commerce.

Earliest representation of sailing boat appeared in one of the Mohenjodaro artifacts which shows earliest patterns of boat making. This bears a testimony to the fact that India had great maritime activity along with flourishing shipbuilding industry which played significant role in shaping the trading nexus with the foreign countries. Seals, potsherd paintings, foreign coins give direct indication towards existence of trade and navigation both oceanic and riverine in Harappan times. Hence only iconographic records have depicted boats on seals, amulets, coins, pots and also as reliefs on religious buildings that have survived and gives us some clues about the trading vessels shapes, designs and size. (Blue 2009:5).



Fig. 1: Sailing Boat (Mohenjodaro Polished painting, 3000 B.C.) National Museum, New Delhi

Trading Vessels:

Textual records are very limited to give description about the vessels involved in the trade. Sailing vessels appeared on the seals and coins are not easy to identify whether they were seagoing vessels or only river vessels. A graffito on pot of 1st and 2nd

century AD in Tamil Nadu gives information about Roman trading vessel with twin steering paddles and two or three masts (Sridhar 2005:67-73). Similar patterns of 'two masted' ship building also appear in 2nd century AD Satavana coin and also in 6th century AD Pallava coin. (see fig. 3). It is possible that exchange of techniques and methods of building vessels with the foreigners might have taken place. There is also a possibility that ship operating in the Indian Ocean during Roman Imperial period were constructed in Grecco Roman style but there is also a chance when they sailed to india, wear and tear were repaired by the local population (Casson 1989:73,81). Indian teak and cotton mast for sail were in use (Blue, 2009:9).

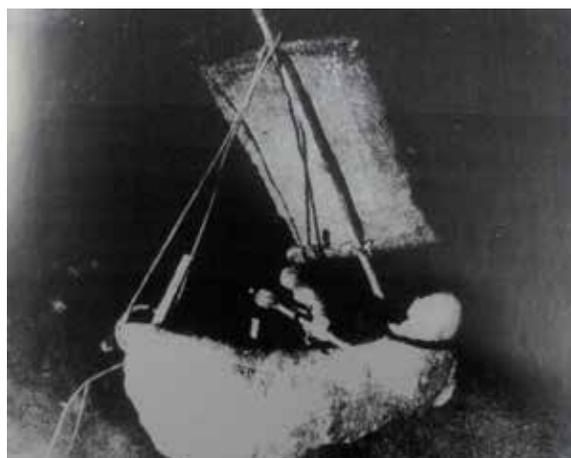


Fig. 2: A terracotta model of a boat from Lothal with provision for fixing sail and sailor (Source: 'Arts and Crafts of Indus Civilization' by Choodamani Nandagopal)

Size of the ships mostly depended upon the the requirements or quantity of goods exported and imported and also on the size of the ports. For small ports usually small crafts and rafts were used. Local boats were used for transporting goods from small ports to the main sea coasts (Blue 2009:5). The most dominating ship in the Western Indian water was Muslim Ships and these were mostly single masted with a large wheels held by two cords on either side of the boat. In capacity and size the largest ship can compete with the contemporary Portuguese ships. The early 16th century records give details of the size of Muslim ships between 375 to 800 tons capacity. Size of the ships kept on increasing and larger vessels increasingly came in use (Qaiser 1972:195-220).



Fig. 3: Two Masted Ship from Satavahana (2nd C AD) and Palava (6th C AD) coins, National Museum, New Delhi

Affluent and powerful Merchants:

Merchants in precolonial era enjoyed a pure neutral environment from the political front. They did not face any regulation or control in their domain and that really worked for the trade to expand. Later colonial and post colonial period merchant who enjoyed a very powerful position and joined their hands with the ruler to expand the trade in their collaboration. Hence a collaborative efforts no doubt profited merchants but equally benefitted the ruler as well. But this collaboration made them extremely influential and powerful. Coastal trade was also dominated by the shipowners and operators and mostly it belonged to major Islamic expatriates like Arabs, Persian and Turks. No doubt the trade was controlled by the Muslim merchants like 'Moors of Arabia'. However, the Konkani speaking 'Navayats' were the chief merchants of the place. Another category of merchants were the Kings, prince, nobles and the members of Royal family. Some of them were also the financiers. Hindu merchants like 'Komatties' and 'Kannada Chetties' were mainly engaged in small boat coastal trade. Mappillas from Malabar too came to Canara coast for commercial benefits (Arasanatnam 1994: 199). With the increase in opportunities, there is also evidence of entry of non commercial communities like 'Saraswat Brahman' and 'Pandidars' into the seaborne commerce.

Excellent ports:

The earliest textual reference of these western coast are mentioned in Pliny who calls the ports between Muziris and Nitrias were dominated by pirates. The name Nitrias according to some scholars can be a North Kanara districts. But Dr. B A Saletore has the opinion that there is also close similarity between Nitrias and Netravati too and he says further that pliny's Barace is undoubtedly Basrur the Barcelore of later times. (Appendix to South Kanara District Manual 1938:172).



Fig. 4: Roman trade in the subcontinent according to Periplus Maris Erythraei 1st century CE. (Source : Google image)

Archeological sources have proved that Lothal had reached the zenith of its prosperity by 2000 BC, which is indicated by the establishment of new factories and workshops of coppersmiths, beads makers, and shell workers (Nandagopal 2006: 61). Pros-

perity and commercial activities of early Indian port can be reflected in the following words, "the industrial and luxury articles of Lothal reached the Arabian and Sumerian ports so much so Sargon II boasted that Dilmun and Meluhha ships were landed in the port of Akkad" (Nandagopal 2006: 62).



Fig 5: Lothal Dockyard (Photograph: Prof. Choodamani Nandagopal)

Travelers, especially from the Islamic countries in their accounts refer to some of the prominent ports of that time and those were Bhatkal, Basrur, Coondapur, Karwar, Kasargod, Honnavar, Barakur, Mangalore Malpe, and Mirjan (Barbosa 1921: 185-92). All the Arab travelers have mentioned in their accounts Basrur as one of the important trading places. About Honnavar they mentioned that it was one of the major ports of western India where bigger ships could enter. Mangalore regarded as great commercial center and biggest town to Arab travelers (EC V: Bl. 75). Barkur being the great center of sugar where port was well connected with the river which helped tremendously in collecting sugar from interior ghat regions (SII VII: 340). One of the most important port during the Vijayanagara Empire was Bhatkal. Importance of this port has been explained by Paes in the following words, "So much merchandise flows to Batkal that every year there come five to six thousand packed oxen (Sewell 1962: 230). Sirur was also significant in this trading nexus as it allowed larger ships from Basrur to pass. Accessibility to these ports through navigable river helped tremendously in transporting goods (Sewell 1962: 229).

Commodities of exchange:

Several lists of products which were exported from Egypt to India in exchange of commodities like spices, gems, silk, pepper, ivory, cotton, betel (Karnataka State Gazetteer 1973:35) were given by the author of Periplus. If we look these products, most of them are available only in the coastline of Karnataka. So probably some of these products might have been exported to them as well. Canara region was famous for its special quality of rice and various spices. About fertility of the Kannada coast, Ibn Batuta has mentioned in his account that, "along the road there is not a single span of land uncultivated" (Batuta 1953: 182). Amongst spices, apart from black gold (pepper), cardamom, cinnamon, turmeric and areca had great demand in Europe and Middle East. One of the Portugueses Viceroy has pointed out about the prosperity of this region that the King of Canara was more rich than powerful (Danver 1894:423) and the reason for this prosperity was inflow of cash in the trading network of rice with the Malabar and Muscut. Horse remained the chief item of imports since ages even before the arrival of Europeans. Salt, silk, coral, lead, saffron, pearls and copper were the major items of imports (Kamath 1980: 171). It is important to note that despite the aforesaid lists of imports these ports mainly generated bullions. Gold and cash were used for the exchange of goods. Ports mainly of Mirjan, Ankola and Honnavar were significant in exchange network of certain commodities. For exam-

ple black coarse rice of Mirjaan was exchanged with the coconut oil and jaggery from Malabar (Kamath 1980: 172). Likewise, Ankola remained an important centre for cloth (Heras 1927:62) and Barkur was famous for its splendid quality of sugarcane which was cultivated there in abundance (Batuta 1953: 184). Many ships from Ormuz came to Bhatkal for the white rice for which the place is also known as 'store house' also combined with the powdered sugar and pepper which were available in plenty (Barbosa 1921: 189).

Rich Markets:

A large number of early visitors have described about the rich markets of India which they compared with the glorious and excellent port of Alexandria. This comparison itself explains the remarkably organized port cities of India handling an extensive trade with variety of commodities. Wealth of Vijayanagar which attracted several travelers, has number of accounts describing its grand markets, traders of precious stones, excellent craftsmen, and also details of sea ports. Domingo Paes, the Portuguese traveler, highlights the heavy traffic and busy streets of Vijayanagara (Sewell 1985:237). Arab trader Ibn Batutah, in his account has provided list of important sea ports controlling vast overseas trade. Due to Chinese presence in the west coast of India trade flourished and items were exchanged between these two countries (Appadorai 1936:257). Canara coasts were also crowded with the Chinese ships and Chinese traders who opted this region for their settlement too (Batuta 1921: 185-191). All these created a mix market.

Conclusion:

On pre-colonial commerce it is generally believed that there was a separation between politics and commerce and rulers seldom interfered in commercial activities. Due to religious belief and sentiments, Hindu and Muslim rulers did not look at trading activities with regard and respect. But later on this notion was challenged by the historians in the light of available evidences which suggest that trade and commerce did flourish during pre-colonial period. Rich markets of India attracted several foreign traders for exchange of specific commodities. Merchants enjoyed total freedom in the sea and also in the port areas. Hence, southern part of India was not only blessed with long coastline but also with excellent harbor and active enterprising groups of merchant communities who extended the Karnataka's commercial frontier across the sea and touched the shores of the western world and beyond.

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