



Trade and Commerce in Ancient Karnataka (India)

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ABSTRACT

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

Karnataka maintained inter-regional and intra-regional commercial contacts, for which there is abundant evidence as also international trade relations with other parts of the World. Among the factors which favoured the promotion of commerce were the frequent pilgrim-tours to holy places such as Sravanabelgola, car festivals and jatras which gave opportunities for the merchants who were also devotees to sell their wares to the local inhabitants and carry back goods demanded in their own lands. The present paper throws light on the trade and commerce in ancient Karnataka.

KEYWORDS

Centres of Trade, Merchants and Guilds, Transportation, Karnataka's Trans-Oceanic Contacts

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 in general and Karnataka in particular 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.

Karnataka maintained inter-regional and intra-regional commercial contacts, for which there is abundant evidence as also international trade relations with other parts of the World. For the latter, there is a very little evidence, but this should not be little its importance. Among the factors which favoured the promotion of commerce were the frequent pilgrim-tours to holy places such as Sravanabelgola, which gave opportunities for the merchants who were also devotees to sell their wares to the local inhabitants and carry back goods demanded in their own lands. Similarly, car festivals and jatras provided an opportunity for merchants to do their business. The existence of innumerable royal families, amongst whom luxury articles had a good market, proved to be a fertile source of exploitation for the mercantile community. A standard currency, a uniform system of weights and measures, the guild system and an excellent means of transport system, the sociable qualities of the merchants and their rigid adherence to customary rules, and regulations in executing transactions and the full protection ensured by the rulers, were helpful factors. The monsoon seasons sometime made the roads impassable in certain parts as also the High-Way robberies hindered the smooth and secure transport of goods and men across frontiers.

Centres of Trade

In ancient Karnataka, there were a number of centres of trade referred in the records. The capital cities are worth men-

tioned here. Of the various capitals and capital-towns which participated in commerce, Banavasi-12000, Badami, Kalyana and Dorasamudra, a cosmopolitan centre gathered around by merchants from all over the country,¹ dealing in goods of all categories such as rice, cotton and grocers-wares.² Arasiyakere, also in Hassan district, besides being a rajadhdni and treasury-town was an equally famous trading centre dealing in innumerable articles, of which, the most popularly grown and traded commodity was areca-nut. The other articles in which they traded including cloth, turmeric, camphor, silk and sandal.³ There were godowns of Palmyra called sitale malige⁴ for the storage of goods. Balligamve, a capital-town in Shimoga district was an important export and import centre. Some of the items imported included elephants, horses, pearls, white-clothes, musk and sandal from Gandhara, Turushka, Simhala, Chola, Magadha and Maleyala respectively. They traded in silk, betel-leaves, areca and metals, which probably they exported.⁵ There were shops of jewellers, clothiers and grocers selling to the public essential and luxury articles, who renewed their stock from time to time. Balligamve was equally well-known centre of guild organisation, families and individuals following various occupations and callings.⁶

Konavatti in Hirekerur taluka, Haveri district, regarded as an important town, according to an inscription of Yadava Simhana dated 1241 A.D., was the main mercantile place of Banavasi 12000. Hulugur, called anadibanajuvattana was an important market- centre trading in betel-leaves and cotton which probably was manufactured and exported.⁷ Ingalesvar in Bijapur district, described as the foremost banajuvattana of Tarddavadi 1000 could boast of shops and dealers in many articles like jaggery, turmeric, sugar, betel-leaves, oil, pepper and arecanut. Kattageri is for the first time referred to as banajuvattana in one of the inscriptions. Teridala was a place where merchants of several categories and guilds assembled. Tilivalli, a trade-emporium and thaneya in Hanagal taluka, Haveri District, imported a number of articles from outside.⁸

Venugrama or Belgaum, chief town in Kundi 3000 with 4000 burgesses and well-planned streets and bazaars was an important cosmopolitan centre. It was a place of imports and exports. An inscription of 1204 A.D. makes detailed referenc-

es to the mummuridandas of the place, to the merchants of Kundi 3000 with sameya chakravarti Jugapati Sethi at their head, and also to merchants from Chola, Maleyala and other places. Besides shops selling perfumes, jewels and gold ornaments, cloth, oil and etc., brisk trade was carried on in articles of daily requirements by other dealers. Sedambal, a commercial town and a meeting-place of merchants of all categories, could boast of a Syndicate of merchants. A weekly fair usually held on Fridays was not merely meant for trading in articles,⁹ but one in which some important decisions was taken. Such fairs attracted also sellers of leather-goods, basket-makers, cobblers and perfumers. One of the important centres of the region was Telsanga, which could boast of thirty-six residential merchants, indigenous merchants and nakharas. There were importers of paddy on whole-sale or retail, street-vendors, tent-shops and privileged shops. There was also a vegetable market as well as shops selling salt, besides those dealing in luxury articles such as jewels, sari and perfumes. A number of noble vaisya families such as that of Barma and his wife Akkamabbe and their sons, mentioned as most respectable, lived there. Sirisingi (old Hirisingi) attracted merchants from Tamil, Telugu, Andhra countries as also from Lata and Maleyala, who traded in a number of articles. Banavar in Hassan district, served as an entrepot for the Hoysala capital Dorasamudra and goods were received and unloaded there to be sent to the capital. A number of foreign merchants particularly from Maleyala resided there.¹⁰ Of the indigenous merchants like Dasi Seti and his brother Chatti Setti, the former, specialised in transporting goods from east to west and vice versa as also from north to south. Chatti Setti imported horses, elephants and pearls by sea for the king.¹¹ Banavar handled innumerable articles of trade.

The other trading centres mentioned in the inscriptions are; Kukkanur, Chinmali, Saleya Simala and Hiriya Gobbur. Bellary district: Tumbula, Kuruvatti, Ayyavole, Mulugund, Sudi, Lakkundi, Hirekerur, Lakshmesvar, Saunsi, Dharwad, Bellalige, Hirebevinur, Buyyar, Minajgi, Muttage, Managoli, Heggere, Nittur, Harihara, Belagula¹² etc.

Merchants and Guilds

Merchants whether they sold articles of luxury or necessity, fell into different categories, depending upon the nature of work done. There were first the retail merchants dealing in grain, jewels or clothes, who catered directly to the interests of consumers. They involved temporary as well as permanent shops. Some of them were privileged (manyadangadi), temple-shops (devarangadi) while yet others were karadangadi.¹³ There were wholesalers as well because references to angadi- mane or malige where articles in bulk were stocked are mentioned in inscriptions.¹⁴ Among the wholesalers there were import-exporters or heruva settiyaru, whose main function lay in importing grain and rubies and selling them locally and loading them in the locality itself, obviously for export. There were indigenous merchants or talada banajiga settiyaru who bought and sold locally.¹⁵ The classes of which we have very little information included residential merchants (muvatta rumbidina settiyaru). These merchants had perhaps their permanent residence in one place or town and collected and sold articles from surrounding rural areas, camping at different places.

In the local market, the producers sold the goods by themselves. But in cases where the goods had to be transported over long distances and involved much capital expenditure, there was a special class of merchants to handle them. The merchants or vendors went from place to place to collect the produce from the growers and to sell them at places where there was demand either in weekly fairs or regular shops or markets, the former being more usual. Weekly fairs were established as an act of generosity or dharma either by the ruler or by the collective efforts of the farmers out of the properties of those dying sonless.¹⁶ The fairs were normally established in towns and the pattanasvami had the right to levy the customs-duties on the fairs. The fairs attracted many articles of sale such as grain, betel-leaves, pepper, cardamom, areca etc. These articles were purchased directly by the consumers

or collected by the agents to be re exported.¹⁷ The fairs were generally large gatherings of merchants of different categories as in the case of the Friday fair of Sedambal and it was on those days that they met and made grants to their gods as well. The fairs were well-provisioned as one can gather from reference to aravattige or water-sheds.¹⁸

The second mode of sale was through shops of which some were set up temporarily by merchants who brought the articles in pouches and sold them in the streets irrespective of whether they were privileged (manyadangadi) or temple-shops (devarangadi).¹⁹ There were shops specialised in the sale of particular goods or articles, obviously of a more permanent nature-uppinangadi, retail and small jewel-shops (chinnag-ey), sari shops (dusiga), perfume-sellers (gandhigarangadi) and retail dealers in saris (sireya kondu maruva pavanigaruru).²⁰ Apart from those of clothiers and dealers of rice, paddy, fruits, grains and vegetables (badinasante) there were separate oil-merchants. But cotton shops are often included in angadi bidi (streets).²¹

The merchant guilds mentioned in the various inscriptions, such as Nanadesis, Bananjus, Settiguttas, Nakharas, Ayyahole Ainurvar (500 merchants) etc. they were the merchants of various countries and represented a body of merchants traded in other regions.²² Ayyahole 500 was the most celebrated and affluence merchant guild of ancient Karnataka. It worked as the present day Chamber of Commerce. It was the five hundred svamis.²³

Transportation

The usual means of transporting goods, perishable or otherwise, was by means of carts, normally drawn by bullocks. There were separate carts for grains (davasda bhandi),²⁴ carried either in bags or loose, jaggery (bellada bhandi) in cubes or plantains (badukai bhandi)²⁵. Alternatively, pack-animals such as bullocks, he-buffaloes, horses and asses were used with goods made into convenient bundles strapped on to the backs of animals. Grains or salt were put in shoulder bags, oil in pots or tins and loaded on the back of animals. But, normally, for sales in the local fairs and when long distances were not involved especially in the case of delicate and perishable goods like oil, betel-leaves, they were all carried over the head and in some cases over the shoulders in pouches or bags by using poles, goods being suspended to both ends.²⁶ Some of the small and delicate articles like asafoetida were carried in boxes or pettice, perfumes preserved in containers or battalu carried in parcels, grass in bundles and bananas as jelle.²⁷ Though no rules or regulations are found mentioned for full-filling package requirements, the stipulations regarding levy of taxes or dues make one suspect their existence.

Karnataka's Trans-Oceanic Contacts

A number of inland towns of Karnataka played an important part in inter-national trade by attracting foreign travellers, mentioned in their accounts.²⁸ the most important among them are; Paithana, Tagara, Kalyana, Nandgad, Valaipatna, Pandiyur, Kuduregundi (Hassan district), Vijayantipura, etc.

The long coast-line on the West Coast with its excellent harbours and the active role of enterprising sections of virabana community extended the Karnataka's commercial frontier across the sea and such commercial activities continued from the centuries. The accounts of Muslim travellers from Arabia and other Muslim countries refer to some of the following ports situated within the confines of Karnataka: Bhatkal, Basrur, Barakur, Karwar, Honnavar, Kasargod, Kumbala, Mangalore, Sirur, Sadasivgad, Malpe, Ankola, Mirjan. Of these ports, only coasters and not vessels could visit Bhatkal, which however proved to be quite useful, in view of lack of communications with Mysore and the country above the Sahyadri. Basrur is mentioned as an important trading place by all the Arab geographers. Barakur, according to Ibn Batuta, was one of the centres of pirates who robbed the merchants. They also harassed the merchants around Karwar and along the coast-line. Honnavar was one of the major ports of Western India and

even bigger ships entered this port, excepting in monsoons. Kasargod was visited by Muslim merchants while Kumbala was not known as an important centre. Mangalore, regarded by the Arab travellers as the biggest town, was a great commercial centre and according to Ptolemy, the southern-most stronghold of pirates. Sirur was an important place through which larger ships from Basrur passed by. Sadasivgad is mentioned by all Arab travellers as a place where ships cast anchor but it was an area infested by crocodiles.²⁹

The 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.³⁰

The trade in Indian coastal ports, from the detailed narrative of Ibn Batutah, it appears that the Western coast of India was studded 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, sandal-wood 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, cinnamon, 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.³¹

Money-lending operations did not find much favour with the people and therefore rarely practised, though receiving of deposits and the utilisation of interest for meeting expenses of worship was quite common. We find that banking, a highly complicated system, had not developed in all its aspects but was only in a rudimentary stage. The priests of the temples received deposits³² and made advances of which practice there are some specific instances. Loans were advanced sometimes in kind with stipulations and the interest was also made payable in kind to be measured out in paddy. All deposits received on behalf of the temple were credited to God's treasury.³³ The Mahajanams also acted as trustees of deposits, and were entrusted with the work of carrying out the instructions of the depositors in so far as the utilization of interest was concerned, sometimes they acted as witnesses and transactions took place in their presence. Sometimes the citizens acted as Bankers as also merchants.³⁴

Conclusion-

We can easily understand that our predecessors were very comfortable with traditional agriculture and their economic condition was more prosperous. The people enjoyed an era of prosperity without exception. In general, cheap living was assured by low prices, customs and conventions and absence of speculation. Though a feeling of contentment or satisfaction was in evidence, it cannot be maintained with certainty that all classes shared the benefits of cheap living alike. However one cannot deny the fact that there was an all-round progress in the field of industry, commerce, building activity, town-planning, transport and communication and over all material progress of the area. Special mention needs to be made of improvements in agriculture, irrigation-works and trade and commerce to which much attention was paid.

From the early period the people had a trade contacts with neighbouring and some of the foreign countries. From the period of the Satavahanas, we had contacts with Rome, which revealed by the Roman coins discovered recently in Karnataka. 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 in general and Karnataka's in particular, foreign trade has rich heritage from the early days.

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