



Socio- Economic Impact of Maritime Trading Activities on Early Coastal Karnataka Region

Shilpi Shrivastava

Research Scholar, Department of Cultural Studies Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Jain University, Knowledge Campus, Jayanagar 9th Block Bangalore- 560078

Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal

Guide and Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Jain University, Knowledge Campus, Jayanagar 9th Block Bangalore- 560078

ABSTRACT

Seas and Oceans not only contain rich diversity of resources but also a powerful stimulus to technology and skills against the challenges posed by the waters. Its role in uniting widely dispersed economies and cultures and radically different peoples and also transmitting freely different ideas, beliefs and knowledge to different parts of the world is commendable. That is why ports that develop along the littorals often have more resemblance and commonality with the other ports rather than with the place and communities in which they are located. There has been significant intermingling between the people of West Asian world and Western coastal India due to flourishing trade between the Mediterranean world and western coastal India along with Persian and Indian Ocean.

KEYWORDS

Maritime trade, Coastal, Canara, Littoral societies, Ports

Introduction

Coast provides not just high level of biodiversity but also a high level of biological activity which has fascinated and attracted people not just from that region but also outside settlers, travelers for thousand years. Most of them came for trade, for some of them it was the entry point for missionary activities or also an immediate halt for political expansions. Due to vast open sea these regions were open to change from very early period. Constant movement of commodities, ideas, and beliefs gave a unique characteristics to these coastal region to assimilate and absorbed the various cultures. Karnataka having long coastline of nearly 200 miles beginning with the southern tip of Goa in the north to the boarder of Kerala in the south. Such a vast coastline created a ground for tussle amongst various foreign traders for the control and hold of this region.

Maritime communities and their interaction with different cultures reflected in the lives of littoral society which could be called truly cosmopolitan (Alpers: 2007). There has been significant intermingling between the people of West Asian world and Western coastal India due to flourishing trade between the Mediterranean world and western coastal India along with Persian and Indian Ocean which resulted into a diverse culture. Several West Asian communities also settled in the Western coastline and added not just linguistic diversity but also created a mix society where diversity can be seen in almost all the cultural spheres like religion, cuisine, clothing, and custom. India's extensive trade links with the western world made it important hub for the foreign trade. Some of its ports were vital in making the overseas trade at its peak due to their excellent harbor for anchoring ships from different parts of the world. Even rulers of vijayanagara granted equal rights and freedom to travel to all the merchants irrespective of their nationality (Kivudanavar 2013:171). This noble gesture of the ruler attracted traders from all over the world to the west coast.

Geographical and Historical Background

Karavali area that is the coastal Karnataka region also called as 'Kanara' or 'Canara' (Menon, 2001:18-21). Ancient name of this region was 'Kol Kannam' means no man's land in Ta-

mil. But the most popular name was 'Parashuram Srashti' or 'Parashurama Kshetra' means creation of Parashurama (Silva, 1961:74). The name given after the legend Parashurama one of the Avatar of the God Vishnu who recovered the land Kanara from the Sea after throwing his axe into it due to which Sea fell back till his axe fell.



Fig.1 Dr. Shenoy's painting, depicting the story showing Parashurama asking Lord Varuna to recede back to create land for the Konkani people. (Source: Google Images)

The whole coastal Karnataka which is approximately 300 Km stretch also known to Greco Roman writers of the early centuries AD as "Pirate Coast" (Aruni 2005:43) Maximum area of this region is covered with thick forest. Sharavati, Aghanashini, Gangavati and Kali are important rivers which flow in this region.

The rich and affluent coast:

Due to heavy rainfalls this region counts as one of the most fertile land of Indian territories. Hence, high agricultural productivity of the Canara zone gives capacity to generate surplus. Thomas Bowrey in his account highlights the ecological interface between the riverine and coastal region created very

fruitful land affording great plenty. (Temple 1997:132). Countless palm trees and arecas along the coast gave region commercial sustainability. An indication of high food productivity in the Canara region was the considerable export of food and grain from these areas to other regions. Fryer noted that during his voyage to the Canara coast he came across the Portuguese Armado from the south with two hundred paddy boats with their convoy' which was on its way to Goa and to the Portuguese settlement in Gujarat.(Crooke 1992:14). About rice, Pietro Della Valle writes, "their diet for the most part is nothing but rice of which is found in abundance, so that everybody even of mean fortune keeps a great family." (Edward 1892:42).

Soil and climate of Canara is similar to the Malabar. Abundance of commercial crops in this region is due to its specific quality of red soil which supports some of the specific produce to cultivate in this region. Heavy rainfall also helps this region in the cultivation of the rice. Land of this region also support multiple crops due to its varied quality which differs from area to area. For example soil near sea are sandy, coarse, and rough near the valley which sustains its productivity even in heavy rain falls. Vegetation can be divided topographically as north Canara and south Canara. Produce of north Canara or Uttar Canara is dominated by sandalwood, nutmeg, pepper, cinnamon, sugarcane, and teak in abundance. South Canara whom Hindu calls Tuluva mainly dominated by the Brahmans who claim proprietor right over the soil of this region as they consider that this land was created purely for them by Parasurama (Hamilton 1828: 338).

Various trading routes and trading communities:

Indian traders enjoyed better position in all the trading activities in the past. Whether it was sea borne trade or inland trade, Indian traders got upper hand in international commerce. They exercised their trading control not only to West Asia and Africa but also went as far as Europe and other western countries. But this ancient glory of India's overseas trade faded with the time with the arrival of colonial powers who ultimately changed the dimensions of trade and made it just a supplier of specific commodities to the modern western world.

Amongst several determining factors affecting the course of trade like sailing routes and sailing time was the direction of wind. Ships voyaging between Red sea and the coast of India solely depended on the monsoon. The economy of South East Asia that is even today largely dependent on the Monsoon winds and the rain that comes with it. Hence this monsoon winds which not only chief governing factor for the agrarian produce but also a controlling factor for the shipping expedition (Pearson 1976:7). Roman ships usually followed two routes, one either it went to the north-west coast or second it took more direct route across the Indian Ocean to the south west India to the ports of Muziris and Nelkynda (Casson 1989:83).

Amongst well defined international routes in Asia there were important centers like Malacca, Malabar, and Cambay along with feeder ports which were also the life lines of the trading

networks. Asian export to the Western world was dominated by the spice trade and Malabar was the main supplier and also the most desired destination for the foreign travelers. This trade in spice was mainly controlled by the European, Mamluks of Egypt and the Arab merchants.. Medieval prosperity of this region was based on the revenues which were collected through taxes on the transshipment of spices. One of the important Asian trade center of 15th and 16th century maritime trade was Hurmuz which was the important center for the exchange of commodities brought from Persia, the Persia Gulf, Oxus River Valley, and Afghanistan.

The most important item imported to India by the Persian and European merchants was horses. In 15th century Indian rulers desired best quality of horses for the show off and the war. Large quantity of horses brought to Vijayanagara via Kanara ports of Honnavar and Bhatkal and sometimes their numbers increased up to 3000 to 4000 in a year (Pearson 1976:13). Likewise Deccan Sultanates got them through the ports of Goa and Chaul. Hence, before coming of colonial power to Indian coast, territories came in constant contact with the Rome, Greek and Egypt for the trading purposes. Remarkable influences are visible in the Indian Ocean network, for example some Roman influence can be seen in the coastal culture of India. Likewise traces of Indian influence are also visible in the art and architecture and also on Roman works of silver and ivory. Even between the 1st and 2nd Century BC textile from India were in great demand in Egypt and the Mediterranean region and these regions became the center for the overseas market for the Indian goods. Even in medieval times before India went into the clutches of European powers, several foreign travelers have given accounts on Indian trade and its glorious past. Arab traveler Ibn Batuta (1333-1346) gave detailed accounts on Indian rich markets and cities. In another context he compared the magnificent ports of Alexandria in Egypt with the Indian western ports like Quilon and Calicut (Kivudanavar 2013:170). Another Portuguese traveler Domingo Paes gave vivid description of the richness of Vijayanagar city and its heavy traffic and busy market. Its skilled craftsmen and dealers of precious stones were stuck the foreign travelers (Sewell 1985:237). It is appeared from the detailed narrative of Ibn Batuta, western coastal regions had large number of sea ports and excellent harbours and relished highly profitable trade with neighboring regions and overseas trade.

Conclusion:

Coast which served as interface between land and sea should be given a nodal position in the maritime history. Western coastal trade was dominated by the Malabari and Gujarati merchants who controlled the vast overseas trade of India with West Asia and then with the help of Persian merchant. Monsoon gave merchant and seamen not just smooth sailing in the ocean but also appropriate time to utilize for the business and marketing exercises. These merchants had to rely on the locals not just for the shelter and foods but also for the access to the inland trade and articles of imports and exports. Therefore, the role of these indigenous communities cannot be ignored that made the overseas exchange a steady part of their coastal economies.

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