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Indian Merchant Communities And Maritime Trade In Seventeenth Century Coromandel

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Abstract: By the seventeenth century usage, the region Coromandel embraced the coastlines of the modern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and the southern tip of Orissa. During the 17th century at Coromandel the activities of the Europeans helped Indian merchants in expanding the trading relations of India with the West and other parts of the world. But, it was the community of the merchants which played a very significant role in monitoring the nature of commodities and other essential goods in the markets. With the growth of European port-settlements, we find a fundamental shift in the relations between merchants and political power and between merchants of the coast and their hinterland. Earlier the merchants operated freely in both segments. This was hampered due to several political, administrative and economic factors. The merchants became intermediaries for the companies with local powers.

Index Terms - Coromandel, Merchant Communities, Ports, Maritime trade, textile trade, south-east Asian nations.

I. INTRODUCTION

The expression Coromandel Coast refers to the eastern coast of India that incorporates an extensive geographical region. In seventeenth century, the Coromandel Coast was the large area of India's eastern coast from Point Calimere in south to the port of Ganjam in north. It was divided into two parts, the north and the south, with the Godavari point being the dividing line between the two. In later times the Coromandel Coast proper was held to be to the south of this Godavari point and the north was known as the Gingelly coast or Golconda coast. By the seventeenth century usage, the term included the coastlines of the modern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and the southern tip of Orissa.¹ During the 17th century at Coromandel the activities of the Europeans helped Indian merchants in expanding the trading relations of India with the West and other parts of the world. But it was the community of the merchants which played a very significant role in monitoring the nature of commodities and other essential goods in the markets

II. MERCHANTS IN COROMANDEL REGION

The social composition of the merchants of Coromandel reflects the confusion prevalent in Indian society over the ages between caste-based occupational divisions and more flexible social structures with occupations pursued across castes by the sheer force of economic necessity. Among the Hindu merchants Telugu speaking people dominated north of the Palar River as far south as Nagapatnam. Kommatties, Chettiers, Naidus and some other communities were the main merchant classes in the south.² They moved

1. Arasaratnam, S., *Merchants, Companies And Commerce On The Coromandel Coast 1650-1740*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p.7.

2. W.H. Moreland, "Relations of Golconda in the early seventeenth century", New Delhi, 1931. pp14-16.

far and wide from Andhra to southwards up to Nagapatnam and the Tanjore kingdom.³ Beri-Chettis were another important Telugu mercantile community who were wealthy and large-scale shippers, brokers and whole-sellers.⁴ The Baliyas of different types such as Gazula Baliyas who were large sellers, Pericavar Baliyas-cloth and salt sellers, Kaveri-Chettis, the Tamilized Baliyas, were among the others.

There were other individuals from a variety of other castes. The Telugu agricultural nobility, with Reddy and Naidu as suffixes to their names, also participated in the trade. Small-scale boatmen who came from fishing and related maritime communities dominated much of the coastal trade, along the Coast north of Madras up to Srikakulam. And we have other major Telugu weaving communities namely Devangas and sales in this trade. The European records mention Coromandal merchants as Moors.⁵ The merchants to the North of Pennar River were Golconda Muslims, predominantly Persian. The Golconda Muslims were mainly overseas shippers, who settled in Masulipatnam, Vizagapatnam and Bhimilipatnam. The Muslim merchants south of Madras were a blend of Arabs, and Indo-Arabs who were the products of mixed marriages.⁶ The coastal Muslims, Chullas (Chulias), called by foreign observers, interacted socially on the basis of equality. Marakkayar were the wealthiest group that dominated the South-East Asia, coastal trade east and west of the sub-continent.

III. SOME POWERFUL MERCHANTS OF SOUTHERN COROMANDEL

The merchants had their own means of influence and access to centers of political power.⁷ There were many powerful merchants who enjoyed a considerable power during this period. Among the first merchants of influence in Madras were Seshadra, Beri Timanna, a Perike balija, etc. The Perike, a subdivision of the balija, were weavers of gunnies (sack-cloth for packing) as well as itinerant traders in salt. Timanna seems to have appeared from the Godavari delta and begun his career as dubash (interpreter/translator) to one of the English factors. His activities were not confined to the Madras alone can be seen from the caul granted to him by Neknam Khan, the Golconda general, who allowed his goods to pass through the whole kingdom paying half customs.⁸ Timanna's long-time partner and successor to the positions held by him was Kasi Viranna, who in some respects surpassed his senior partner.

Viranna, of the Komati caste, was one of the most colourful personalities among Coromandel merchants and feature frequently in contemporary European records. He supplied both the Dutch and the French besides English. When the French took possession of San Thome (from Portuguese) he gave them all assistance. The Abbe Carre, a French priest who was then resident in Madras, reported how Viranna sent his servant to him secretly by night with information about supplies.⁹ Immediately after the years of dominance of Beri Timanna and Kasi Viranna came the emergence of Timanna's two younger brothers, PeddaVenkatadari and ChennaVenkatadari.¹⁰

Malava, alias Astrappa Chetty, one of the most outstanding merchants of his time, was a major ship-owner and overseas trader to South-East Asia and Ceylon, a supplier of textiles to the companies and a wholesale merchant in important goods. He controlled the customs on imports and exports. He purchased the revenue farm of Devanampatam. He collected customs in these ports besides being an importer and exporter. He and his family members were involved in political activities of coastal Karnataka.¹¹ It would be wrong to think of these merchants as in any sense creatures of the English company.¹²

Moreover there were also numbers of political merchants like Mohmad Said, popularly called Mir Jumla, Governor of Golconda, who was a ship-owner and exporter to many regions of Indian Ocean and had used his political influence to enforce a monopoly on the Dutch company's imports in Masulipatnam¹³. We have

3. Arasaratnam S., "*Merchants and Companies and Commerce in CoromandalCoast*", Oxford, 1986. p216.

4 Thurston, "*Castes and Tribes of South-India*", Madras, 1909. p32.

5 Foster and Fawcett, '17th Century and despatches from England.' 20, September, Oxford, 1682. p 13

6 Arasaratnam S., "*Merchants and Companies and Commerce in CoromandalCoast*", Oxford, 1986. p219.

7 W.H. Moreland, "*Relations of Golconda in Early Seventeenth Century*", London, 1931. p27.

8 Foster William, "*English Factories in India, 1661-1664*". Oxford. pp. 167, 365.

9 Abbe Carre, '*Travels of Abbe Carre*', Vol. II, London, 1948. pp.605,610.

10 Arasaratnam S., '*Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the CoromandalCoast 1650-1740*', Oxford, 1986. p232.

11 Arasaratnam S., '*Indiantaders and their trading methods circa, 1700*', IESHR, 1966. p88.

12 Charles Fawcett, '*English Factories in India 1678-1684*', Oxford, 1951-52. p6.

13 TapanRaychaudhary, "*Jan Company in India, 1605-1690*", S.Gravenhage-MartinusNijhoff, 1962. p42.

other political merchant, Khan-i-Khan the Bijapur general, who was involved extensively in overseas trade, owning ships. All these merchants politically strengthened their position to further their commercial activities. They took control over the produce of weaving villages in areas under their jurisdiction. Rich and influential merchants wielded their power and sometimes led to the volatile and uncertain political situation.¹⁴

IV. MERCHANTS CONTACT WITH EUROPEAN COMPANIES

With the growth of European port-settlements, we find a fundamental shift in the relations between merchants and political power and between merchants of the coast and their hinterland. Earlier the merchants operated freely in both segments. This was hampered due to several political, administrative and economic factors. The merchants became intermediaries for the companies with local powers. Both in Indian ports and in the European enclaves south of Masulipatnam, Indian merchants had dealings with the companies and continued their coastal and inland activities.¹⁵ Coromandal merchants, traded on their own as well as with companies. There were significantly a number of merchants who continued to operate independently of the companies in many Indian ports of the coast, of which were the Golconda Muslims centred in Masulipatnam and northern ports and Chulia merchants south of Madras.¹⁶ Indian merchants' relationships with Europeans on Coromandel become institutionalized in the subsequent periods.¹⁷ In all the European enclaves there evolved an office of Chief Merchants held by one or two of the most prominent merchants of the settlements.

In fact it was not a European innovation. The merchant community all over India had heads who exercised some control over others. The Chief merchants were the sole agents for the supply of large textile order every year besides other important items such as indigo, saltpetre, and redwood. They shared some privileges enjoyed by the company.¹⁸ They were given some concessions on taxes within the settlement. The Dutch exempted them from poll tax. The English allowed them to carry on their own export and import trade from their settlements at half duty. They were also given some judicial power over Indians of the settlements.¹⁹ As European exports of the Indian textiles increased in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Europeans instituted partnership among Indian merchants. Dutch were the first in this regard. Many merchants wanted to come into the supply trade with English.²⁰

V. RELEVANCE OF COROMANDEL REGION IN EUROPEAN COMPANY TRADE

The primary objective for any merchant or company to establish itself at Coromandel Coast for maritime trade was that the countries to be visited farther east bought very little except cotton clothing, and the artisans on the Coast had for long specialized in the supply of these markets.²¹ The cloth to be purchased may be classified as piece-goods and apparel. The form consisted of plain cotton cloth, usually bleached, but sometimes dyed red or blue, and sold either by the 'piece' of conventional size, or by the 'corge', that is, the score of pieces. Cloth of this kind had a large regular sale, but in the markets which the Company was to serve the chief demand was for goods which could be brought into wear at once, and which may be called apparel, no elaborate tailoring was involved in their preparation. The most important article was the skirt, then known in commerce as tape, which consisted simply of a piece of cloth of correct size and pattern, worn by both sexes wrapped round the waist. There were also shawls or wraps for the shoulders, of the same general type, turbans for the head, and sashes or girdles for the waist.²²

For skirts and wraps in particular, the most important features were the style and pattern. In these matters the consuming markets were intensely conservative, each locality required its own familiar types, and even a slight divergence from the accepted standards might suffice to render the goods unsaleable. In some cases the patterns were produced by the use of coloured yarns, but for the markets concerned they were usually

¹⁴ Syed Ayub Ali, "Relations between Golconda rulers and officials as learned from Waqaaia", A.P. History Congress, 1978. p63.

¹⁵ Hamilton C. G, 'Trading relation between England and India, 1600-1896', Calcutta, 1919. p27.

¹⁶ Gupta A.D & Pearson, "India and Indian Ocean", Oxford, 1987. p146.

¹⁷ Brenning JJ., "Chief Merchants and European Enclaves of 17th Century Coromandal", M.A.S, 1977. p324.

¹⁸ Chaudhary K.N, 'The Trading World of Asia and East India Company 1660-1760', Cambridge 1978. p293.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Satish Chandra, "Some aspects of Growth of Money Economy in India during the 17th Century", IESHR Vol. 3, New York, 1966. p323.

²¹ Moreland W. H.(ed), 'Peter Floris: His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe 1611-1615', London, 1934. p. xix.

²² Moreland W. H. (ed), 'Peter Floris: His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe 1611-1615', London, 1934. p. xix.

either printed or 'painted', to use the contemporary term. Printing with wooden blocks applied by hand was practiced in many parts of India, and the product was known by the name of chint, now familiar in its English form as chintz; Gujarat, on the west coast, was the principal exporter of these goods.²³ On the Coromandel Coast the pattern was more usually produced, not with a block, but with an instrument described sometimes as a pen, and sometimes as a brush; and cloth which had been treated by this process was called by the Portuguese pintado, that is, 'painted'. English merchants followed this Portuguese usage, and described the goods as 'painted' cloth, or sometimes 'pintadoes', while the craftsmen who made them became 'painters'.

VI. MERCHANTS SPECIALIZATION AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ROLE

Merchants had thus to be familiar with the precise forms and patterns of the goods demanded by the markets which they proposed to visit. They had also to know where to buy the goods they wanted, for there was a certain amount of specialization in the commercial production of the Coast: weaving and bleaching, dyeing and 'painting', were practiced in all centres, but some of them were more important than others for particular specialties. Thus the dye obtainable in the northern centres, Masulipatam and Petapoli, were superior to those found farther south, and dyed pieces were ordinarily bought in them. On the other hand, some of the southern centres had specialized in the patterned cloths in demand for export, and Pulicat in particular had an old-established reputation for 'painted' goods for the markets farther east.²⁴

It may well be the case that the 'painted' products of the north were superior in artistic quality, but the export trade was not interested in such exquisite designs as, later in the century, were to become the rage in England. Novelty and originality were ruled out by the conditions prevailing in the eastern markets, which insisted on meticulous reproduction of cheap, stereotyped designs; and in 'painting', as in other Indian crafts, the production of work of the finest quality must have depended mainly on the patronage of wealthy amateurs. A precise account of the position at this period has been compiled by Dr Terpstra from the Dutch commercial records. The Dutch merchants, he tells us, looked primarily to the northern centres, Masulipatam and Petapoli, for bleached and dyed piece-goods, while Pulicat, in the South, was by far the most important source of the 'painted' cloth which they required; and, before they succeeded in establishing themselves in the town, they had arranged to import its products to Masulipatam for re-export thence.²⁵

The artisans, who worked as individuals, were not provided with capital, and were thus unable to manufacture for stock; the first thing for a buyer to do was to place orders, and give advances in cash; and, this having been done, the ship must wait until the goods ordered were delivered. One branch of the equipment required by a successful merchant was ability to manage this business, so that the goods should be made promptly, of the right quality, and at a reasonable price; a not less important qualification was ability to deal with the local authorities.²⁶

It may be said, not merely of Golconda, but of almost the whole Indian seaboard, that at this period foreign merchants were welcomed if they came prepared to pay cash for what they wanted, or provided with goods for which there was a demand; and the rulers of the various countries were anxious, broadly speaking, to foster sea-borne commerce. Customs duties were low, and complaints usually received a favourable hearing at the Courts; the difficulties which arose were created by the local, not the central administration. In Golconda, the chief executive posts were held on the farming system, and fell usually to the highest bidder at an annual auction. The Governor, as he was called by Europeans, when he had once secured the farm, had in practice very wide powers, while any default in his payments to the treasury might involve the bastinado. The business of administration was thus highly speculative, and a Governor had the strongest possible motives for collecting every penny he could, without regard to the future of a region with which his connection might be merely temporary.²⁷ The troubles of foreign merchants usually centered either in heavy local duties which were claimed in addition to the customs, or in demands for presents and forced loans to the governor as a condition of his favour.²⁸

²³ Moreland W. H. (ed), *Peter Floris: His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe 1611-1615*, London, 1934, pxix-xx.

²⁴ Dames Mansel Longworth, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (Hakluyt Society, 1921), Vol. II. p132. The translation speaks of 'printed cotton cloths'; the phrase in the text is '*panos pintados dalgodam*' (painted cloths of cotton).

²⁵ Moreland W. H. (ed), *Peter Floris: His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe 1611-1615*, London, 1934. p xxi.

²⁶ Ibid., p. xxii.

²⁷ Moreland W. H. (ed), *Peter Floris: His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe 1611-1615*, London, 1934, p. xxii.

²⁸ Moreland W. H. (ed), *Peter Floris: His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe 1611-1615*, London, 1934, p. xxii.

Various kinds of other services were offered by the Indian merchants. One of the important services rendered to the Company by the local merchant consisted in supplying commodities on credit. Apart from supplying commodities on credit, the local merchants advanced loans to the Company officials in charge of the Indian affairs. Some of the local merchants went so far as to defend the Company against their enemies. Also most of the local merchants acted as contractors to the Company and contacted the cultivators directly by going from one place to another; giving rice, cloth and cash with a view to collect commodities available at various places. The local merchants, especially the resourceful ones, did not confine themselves to supplying commodities only to the Company but they also conducted trade with other parts of the world with the knowledge of the Company.²⁹

The privileges of Chief Merchants were considerable. They were the sole agents for the supply of the large textile order every year as well as of other export commodities required, such as indigo, saltpetre and redwood. They had first call on the European imports, including bullion. But on most of the occasions it was the company which was insisting on purchasing of their imports on account of absence of the demand of European products in Indian markets. It can be cited from Fort St. George factory records wherein Agents & Council requesting and had convinced Kasi Viranna in accepting their export of 'English manufactures' despite great quantities thereof lying upon his hand of the three former years.³⁰

1. CONCLUSION:

From above discussion it is clear that merchant communities in Coromandel were invariably engaged in trade at ports as well as in hinterland but with the arrival of European companies their role changed drastically. Apart from these mercantile activities now their role as intermediaries for European companies assumed considerable importance. These Companies although had presence both at Coromandel Coast as well in south-east Asian ports but owing to the specific requirement of this trade as well as due to the administrative and political complexities of the Coromandel region merchant's role became indispensable. It is not only in handling the local politics through their personal relations and experience but also in performing various services like dubashes for company official, purchasers of their import, arranging loans for them in time of need, procuring textiles and other commodities according to company's need and desire, etc that they emerged as front-runners. It is the assistance and association of these merchants which helped the European Companies and especially English in not only establishing themselves on Coromandel Coast but also in promoting their trade to the acme especially in last decades of the Seventeenth Century.

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²⁹ Mathew K.S., 'Indian Merchants and the Portuguese Trade on the Malabar Coast during the Sixteenth Century' in 'Indo-Portuguese History: Old Issues, New Questions', ed. by Teotonio R de Souza, New Delhi, 1985. pp 3-6.

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