

CC-5:HISTORY OF INDIA(CE 750-1206)

IV. TRADE AND COMMERCE

(B). MARITIME TRADE

Indian, particularly south Indian, merchants had participated in international trade since ancient times. But sources of information about these ancient times are restricted to archaeological finds and occasional references in literary texts which tell little about the activities of merchants. A distinction was made between merchants operating locally and internationally. The merchants had their own settlements (nagara) with autonomous institutions of local government. The great ports (pattinam) also had their guilds and autonomous institutions, but they were much more under the control of royal officers, who, of course, had to try to get along with the local people.

Many trade routes intersected at ports on the eastern coast of South India. Mamallapuram developed under the Pallavas, and Nagapattinam became prominent in the Chola period. Kaveripattinam too was important, but less so compared to Nagapattinam from the 11th century onwards. Tiruppalaivanam and Mayilarpill were coastal towns that served the area to the north of Kanchipuram. Kovalam and Tiruvadandai were located to the north of Mamallapuram, while Sadras and Pudupattinam were located to its south. Other important coastal towns included Pallavapattinam, Cuddalore, and Tiuvendipuram. Corporate organizations of merchants played a leading role in fixing customs duties on goods in such port towns. Quilon (Kollam) was an important port town on the western coast, and there is inscriptional evidence of an agreement between the Manigramam guild, foreign traders, and the king regarding various issues such as taxes, warehouses and the protection of merchants and their merchandise at this port.

The ports and market towns of South India were involved in a flourishing transit trade as well as direct trade with far-flung areas. The goods involved included both staples and luxury goods. Eleventh century inscriptions mention several commodities involved in trade transactions within the subcontinent—rice, pulses, sesame, salt, pepper, oil, cloth, betel leaf, areca nut, and metals. Twelfth century inscriptions mention a larger range of commodities including wheat and other food grains, pulses, ground nut, sesamum, jaggery, sugar, cotton, cumin, mustard, coriander, ginger, turmeric, elephants, and gems. A 12th century inscription found at Shikarpur (in Shimoga district, Karnataka) mentions merchants travelling along land and water routes with cargoes consisting of elephants, horses, sandalwood, camphor, musk, saffron, and precious and semi-precious gems such as moonstones, rubies, diamonds, pearls, lapis lazuli, onyx, topaz, and carbuncles. Inscriptions at Piranmalai (Ramanathapuram district, Tamil Nadu) mention imports such as aloeswood, sandalwood, silk, rose water, camphor, oil, perfume, elephants, and horses. Many of these items were imported from Southeast Asia. Horses came from Arabia, silk from China, elephants from Myanmar, and rose water from West Asia.

The chief Indian port for sailing to Java, Sumatra, etc., was Tamralipti (Tamluk) in Bengal. In most of the stories of the period, merchants start for Suvarnavdipa (modern Indonesia) or to Kataha (Kedah in Malaya) from Tamralipti. A fourteenth century writer in Java speaks of people from Jambudvīpa (India), Karnataka (south India), and Gaud (Bengal) coming unceasingly in big numbers in large ships. Traders from Gujarat also took part in this trade.

On account of its prosperity, China had become a main focus of trade in the Indian Ocean. The Chinese consumed enormous quantities of spices, which were imported from Southeast Asia and India. They also imported ivory, the best of which came from Africa, and glassware which came from West Asia. To these were added medicinal herbs, lac, incense, and all types of rare

commodities. Generally, products from Africa and West Asia did not go beyond Malabar in South India. Nor did many Chinese ships go beyond the Moluccas in Southeast Asia. Thus, both India and Southeast Asia were important staging centres for trade between China and the countries of West Asia and Africa. Indian traders - especially from the Tamil country and Kalinga (modern Orissa and Bengal) - played an active role in this trade, along with Persians, and at a later stage, the Arabs. Much of the trade to China was carried in Indian ships, the teakwood of Malabar, Bengal and Burma providing the basis of a strong tradition of ship building. The weather conditions were also such that it was not possible for a ship to sail straight from the Middle East to China. The ships would have to wait for a long period in ports in between for favourable winds which blew from the west to the east before the monsoon, and from east to west after the monsoon. Indian and Southeast Asian ports were preferred by the merchants for the purpose.

Indian rulers, particularly the Pala and Sena rulers of Bengal, and the Pallava and Chola rulers of south India, tried to encourage this trade by sending a series of embassies to the Chinese emperors. The Chola ruler, Rajendra I, sent a naval expedition against Malaya and the neighbouring countries to overcome their interference in the trade with China. The embassy sent to China by Rajendra I travelled in an Indian ship. There is evidence to show that there were many shipyards which were located on the west coast, including Gujarat. Thus, growth of India's foreign trade in the area was based on a strong maritime tradition, including ship building, and the skill and enterprise of its traders. Thus, India's trade with the western areas and with Southeast Asia and China grew steadily. The lead in this trade was taken by south India, Bengal and Gujarat. This was an important factor the wealth and prosperity of these areas.

REFERENCE

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