A Glimpse of The Socio-Economic Conditions of the Port-Towns of Coastal Karnataka in The Sixteenth and the Seventeenth Centuries as Described in Some Condemporary Portuguese Sources

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The Portuguese were familiar with the ports and port-towns of coastal Karnataka (Kanara) during the 16th and the 17th centuries. Many a Portuguese traveller, chronicler, administrator, captain, merchant and missionary came to the port-towns and left behind them their accounts and

other records of these places.

The Portuguese had a three-fold contact with coastal Karnataka-political, commercial and religious. As a result they could and did influence to some extent the socioeconomic life of the port-towns, particularly during the 16th century. Their influence was wrought mainly through their more or less effective control over the sea trade of the region and through their mis-

sionary activities in the area.

It may be mentioned here that the Portuguese had a factory or trading centre at Bhatkal in the 1540's and 1550's which was probably given up with the acquisition of forts at Honavar, Basrur (Kundapur) and Mangalore in 1568-9. These forts were the centres of political, commercial and missionary activities of the Portuguese. Each fort was a naval and military base; and a factory as well as a chapel were attached to it. Referring to these forts in 1582 or thereabout a Portuguese record¹ says that they "are on the mouths of three grand rivers with very good ports capable of accommodating many large ships. The forts are important and necessary for defending the ports which, if they fall into the hands of the enemies, would be of great loss and danger to the Portuguese state of India, because many vessels are loaded at these ports every year for the Red Sea and many other places as there was a large quantity of pepper, ginger, iron, choir, wood, saltpetre and many other things in the region of Kanara, above all an abundance of provisions (food grains) of all sorts, of which all parts of India. particularly Malabar, are supplied."

In 1630 the Portuguese captured Gangolli and built their fourth Kanarese fortress there by 1633. However, all the four forts were conquered from them by Shivappa

Navaka of Keladi in 1652-4.

We may divide the Kanarese port-towns discussed in Portuguese sources into two categories, namely, major and minor, depending upon their commercial importance. Accordingly, the major ones were Honavar, Bhatkal, Basrur (Kundapur) and Mangalore. The minor ones were Sadashivagad, Anjediya, Mirjan, Ankola, Baindur, Barkur, Gangolli, Brahmawara, Malpe, Udupi, Kalyanpur, Kapu and Mulki. Karwar does not figure in the Portuguese sources of the 16th century; but some references to it do occur in the 17th century, particularly when the English began to show interest in that port.

First we shall discuss the socio-economic life of the major port-towns, followed by

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that of the minor ones. Some general observations and concluding remarks will be made at the end.

Honavar

The main export of Honavar was black or brown rice. It was purchased in huge quantities by the merchants of Malabar who came there by small and large vessels. In exchange the Malabarese sold at Honavar coconuts, coconnt oil, palm wine, and palm jaggery. There were two powerful men at Honavar whom the Portuguese regarded pirates. They were Timmayya2 and Raoji. They looted all vessels sailing by, except these from Malabar. They enriched themselves this way, though they had to give a share of their loot to the chief of Gersoppa within whose jurisdiction Honavar lay and who permitted them to carry on 'piracy'3.

In 1505 Timmayya developed friendly relations with the Portuguese which he maintained, more or less, until his death in 1512. He used to supply them a number of commodities, particularly rice, from Honavar. On one occasion he offered to sell them cloves, camphor and black wood

also.4

It seems that ships from Aden (Red Sea) and Sofala (East Africa) used to come to Honavar for rice supplies. We also learn that much cloth was sold at Honavar procured from the hinterland, including Vijayanagara. Other articles sold at the port were copper, tin, vermilion and quick-silver in exchange for the silk from China and Ormuz, and other articles from abroad brought by the Portugese in the middle of the 16th century.

The weight used at Honavar for weighing rice, etc., was equal to 3 quintals, 1 arroba and 24 arrateis? (pounds, ratal). This comes to a little over 205 kgs (1 quintal has 4 arrobas; 1 arroba, about 15 kgs; and 1

arratel, about 459 grams).

Honavar was attacked by the Portuguese in 1502, 1505, 1538 and 1569. In 1502 the attacker was Vasco da Gama who chased Timmayya up the river at Honavar because he was regarded a pirate. He escaped, but da Gama wrecked his vengeance on the local ships and the town which were located ad set on fire. In the 1505 attack the

dispute was over the right of possession of some Arab steeds rescued from the wreck of a ship from Ormuz. The ship wrecked at the shores of Honavar and the local chief claimed the horses because the wreck was within his jurisdiction. The Portuguese claim was that the animals were actually saved by them and had been handed over to some one in Honavar with the condition that they would be taken later on, as there was a storm raging then. The Portuguese attach resulted in the burning of local ships and surrender of the local chief who had to agree to pay an annual tribute to them.9 In 1538 the Portuguese attacked because some enemy vessels were found trading at the port¹⁰. The attack of 1569 ended in the establishment of a Portuguese fortress at the place.

By the time the fort was established the trade at the port of Honavar seems to have dwindled down to almost a zero point. The Financial Statements and other Portuguese documents of the times pertaining to the fort of Honavar indicate that there was no income but only expenses in maintaining the military, civil and religious establishments at the fort. Thus, the Financial Statement of 157411 specifically states that there was no income at the fort but expenses to the tune of 2,984,980 reis (1 Re. was equal to about 70 reis then). This is confirmed by a report of 1582 or so¹² which speaks only of expenses. It is obvious that Honavar had lost much of its commercial importance after the defeat of Vijayanagara

in the battle of 1565.

By 1635 there was a settlement of some Portuguese national at Honavar who had married native women at Goa and other Portuguese possessions. These Portuguese were known as the casados (married ones). The settlement was within the fort. At this stage also the trade at the port was poor. The rice supplies there were much less than that of other Kanarese ports. Some timber for masts, etc., were purchased by the Portuguese there. So also some quantities of arecanuts, certain kinds of fruit and white cloth. However, much pepper could be procured at Honavar. It was the best pepper in India and the Portuguese purchased it from the king of Keladi by a contract. This king allowed them to

obtain from his lands whatever provisions they required for their fort, free of taxes. There was no church in Honavar and rarely any conversion of Hindus to Christianity.¹⁸

Bhatkal

Bhatkal was perhaps the most important among the Kanarese ports during the 16th century. Speaking of the port Duarte Barbosa says¹⁴ that it was a good port of grand commerce of many articles of trade. Every year many ships came from Ormuz for white rice and powdered sugar. The latter commodity cost only about 240 reis (about Rs. 3.5) a pound. Iron was another major article supplied by Bhatkal, followed by pepper and *miramulanos*. In addition copper, saltpetre, vermilion, aluminium and ivory were sold at the port. The Ormuz ships sold Arab steeds and pearls here. However, the Ormuz ships were diverted to Goa when the latter place fell into Portuguese hands in 1510. Some ships from Aden and many from Malabar also came to Bhatkal for trade. The Malabarese supplied coconuts, coconut oil, palm wine, pepper, etc., for iron and sugar of Bhatkal. The port town was very rich and paid much revenue to the local governor named Dama Shetty who was very wealthy.

Challenges to a duel on even filmsy grounds were common at Bhatkal according to Barbosa¹⁵. The chief used to permit them. fixing the day and providing godfathers (? seconds) to the competitors. Weapons of prescribed specifications alone were used. The combatants prayed and then began the fight. Only the godfathers could approach them or speak to them during the combat. The duels were so common that many were killed this way every day. This was a dangerous sport, but a part of the social life of the people

Tome Pires adds¹⁶ that ships came to Bhatkal from Malacca also for rice of three qualities available at the port—girasal the best, chambasal the better, and parcharil

the good.

Different weights and measures were used at Bhatkal for different commodities. Copper, iron, cinnoman and choir were weighed by a weight equivalent to about

217.5 kgs. Coral was weighed in terms of a weight of about 11 kgs, and sugar in terms of that of about 197 kgs. 17

The currency of Bhatkal was varied. The most common was the gold pardao (pratapa, varaha, pagoda) equivalent to 360 reis or about Rs. 5 of those days. Besides, the silver pardao 300 reis or about Rs. 4), the sultani (the dinar or Egypt, 420 reis), and xerafim (ashrafi of 360 or 300 reis) were in use. 18

Duarte Barbosa's account¹⁹ of the currency and weights differs slightly. There seems to have prevailed a uniform weight of about 240 kgs. and a common currency of the pardao of 320 reis (about Rs. 4.5).

The Portuguese developed trade contacts with Bhatkal from 1501. That year they sold there quicksilver, copper, vermilion and coral at a great profit. The following year Vasco da Gama was there. He demanded from the local chief that the latter should not trade with the enemies of Portugal such as the Samudri of Calicut and that the chief should not send out merchantmen without a Portuguese sailing permit and paying them an annual tribute. The chief obliged and paid a yearly tribute of 1000 bags of ordinary rice and 500 bags of good rice. 20

Realizing the commercial importance of Bhatkal, Viceroy Francisco de Almeida (1505-9) and Governor Afonso de Albuquerque (1509-15) sought permission from the emperor of Vijayanagara to erect a fort there so that the commerce of the port town would be under Pertuguese control. However, no permission was given, though the Portuguese promised to supply all the imported Persian steeds to Vijayanagara.

After capturing Goa in 1510 Albuquerque does not seem to have been interested in building a fort at Bhatkal, but he was bent upon depriving it of its commerce and divert all ships coming from Ormuz, etc., to the port of Goa. He also made it a point to attack ships from Malabar trading with Bhatkal.

In 1516 an unfortunate incident took place at Bhatkal. 24 Portuguese nationals were killed when a quarrel arose between them and the local merchants. The Portuguese had gone there that year to purchase rice, sugar and iron to be taken to Ormuz.

of Bhatka 1.

During the quarrel the Portuguese were robbed also of their good worth 10,000 pardaos (about Rs. 40,000). Robbery seems to have been taking place at Bhatkal now and then. In 1501, 1516 and again in 1547 the Portuguese were robbed. But they were able to recover the goods by pressurising the local chief.²¹

Bhatkal was subject to Portuguese attacks as other Kanarese ports were. In 1502, 1513, 1517, 1518-9, 1542 and 1547 such attacks took place. The damages in the hostility of 1542 were inhuman. The town was looted for a couple of days; many residents were killed in cold blood irrespective of age and sex; houses were set ablaze; palm trees were cut down; and

farms were destorved. 22

In the meantime in 1540 or thereabout a factory seems to have been established by the Portuguese at Bhatkal. But it did not thrive owing to frequent differences and hostilities between them and the lo al chief. To a large extent the Portuguese themselves were to blame. As Gaspar Correa points out, while describing the incident of 1542 in his own way,23 that the Portuguese used to indulge in malpractices of all sorts while trading at the ports so much that the local merchants used to seek armed protection from the local chief as soon as the Portuguese approached. The hostility of 1542 was the result of such malpractices and the retaliation by the local protective forces.

With the decline of the Vijayanagara empire after 1565 Bhatkal began to lose its commercial importance, like Honavar, and the Portuguese also did not seem interested in the place after establishing their forts at Honavar, Kundapur and Manga-

lore.

Basrur (Kundapur)

Much rice of various qualities was expoted from Basrur to Cannanor, Calicut, Ormuz, Aden and Shaher in exchange for copper, coconuts, coconut oil and jaggery. Rice was packed into bales of dry paddy straw as it is today. Each bale of rice fetched 150 to 200 reis (Ra. 2.15 to Rs. 2.85). Surprisingly the Portuguese did not harm Basrur until 1569, but carried on peaceful trade at the port. In 1569 they attacked

the place and captured its fort on the river bank a cannon shot from its mouth, The fort was found unsatisfactory and therefore they built a new one which has been located by Henry Heras at Kundapur. 35

There was hardly any peace for the people of Basrur after the establishment of the Portuguese fort, though the Viceregal ordinance of 1570 required that the local people should be treated well and that no offence should be committed against them. The Viceroy pointed out in the ordinance that it was the surest way of maintaining peace there and carrying on a gainful trade at the port from which he expected a considerable income not only to maintain the fortress but also to supplement remittances to Portugal.26 However, the captains and other officials sent to Basrur indulged in malpractices. As a resu-It foreign merchants stopped trading with the port. One of the malpractices was to summon to the fortress those merchants who entered the river and compel them to sell their goods at a very low price. Many a time the merchants fought back to free themselves from this kind of oppression. In 1583 Francisco de Mello de Sampayo was the captain of the fortress and he, like his predecessors, worked to enrich himself so much that the native merchants of Basrur, who stood to lose their trade and income by his proceedings, decided to take the fortress by treachery, but in vain. They tried to drive the Portuguese away with the help of the Tolahara chiefs and others, but failed again. Every time the Portuguese inflicted severe damages on Basrur and its people. On one occasion a temple, probably that of God Kodandeshwara, was set on fire and destroyed. It was rebuilt by the local people later on at a great cost.27

Some Portuguese casados (married ones) came to Basrur and settled down there. By 1635 there were 36 such families living in an enclosed settlement a little away from the fort. The enclosure was a wail of earth and plaster, 3.3 metres high, with watch towers in the form of bulwarks. Each casado had a servant to carry his arms. Most of the casados possessed rice fields outside the settlement. They enjoyed the yield without any problem as long as there

was peace with the local chief and his

people.48

The casades owned 7 or 8 gallivats of 300 khandis each. Loaded with merchandize these gallivats used to sail amidst the convey of a Portuguese armed fleet for security. The casados recruited the required number of mariners from among the local people.²⁰

The merchants of Upper Basrur, whom the Portuguese called the Shettys' (Chatins), had a republican form of government and paid an annual tribute to the emperor of Vijayanagara. They paid another annual tribute of 500 bales of rice to the Portuguese for allowing their merchandize to

pass by the fortress.81

The climate of Basrur was salutory. The soil was fertile. There was an abundance of rice produced. Basrur, along with Mangalore, constituted the granary with which Goa, Malacca, Mascate, Mozambique and Mombasa were sustained by the Portuguese.³²

By 1574 the Portuguese had an income of 2,100,000 reis (about Rs. 30,000) in the form of customs duties on horses brought from Ormuz (5,000 pardaos of silver or 1,800,000 reis), and on rice exports (1000 pardaos of silver, or 300,000 reis). In addition there was the annual rice tribute from the merchants and profits from the actual trade. The expenses of the fort at 3,032,200 reis was probably more than the income. The expenses were in the form of salaries and allowances of the military, naval, civil and religious personnel and their establishments.²³

By 1635 the trade at Basrur had improved considerably. Several thousand bales of rice and packs of other commodities were exported every year and the Portuguese collected substantial amount of taxes from the outgoing and incoming articles.³⁴ Together with the rice tribute and profits from direct trade, the Fortuguese income might have been more than their expenses at Basrur by then.

Apart from the rice of various qualities, Basrur exported several other articles of trade like saltpetre, iron and cloth. The Portuguese purchased saltpetre in large quantities for manufacturing ammunition. They regarded the iron of Basrur the best

in India and sent much of it to Portugal. They sold pearls, rubis, coral, fine cloth, etc., procured by them at Goa; horses from Ormuz, etc., and elephants from Ceylon. These animals were sold to the king of Keladi for his army. The Portuguese procured pepper, ginger and choir also from Basrur. In fact no pepper was allowed by them to be sold to others. They procured all the ginger available there. 30

It is interesting to note what Antonio Bocarre says in 1635 about the failure of missionary activities while speaking of Basrur. According to him the Kannadigas disliked Christianity so much that hardly any was converted. He thought that the main cause of this was the failure of the missionaries to learn the local language. and write and preach Christian doctrines in that language. Nevertheless, there were two churches at Basrur where routine sacraments were performed. One was inside the fort and the other in the settlement of the casados. 37 Obviously these churches were meant only for the Portuguese nationals at the fort and the casados settlement.

Mangalore

Barbosa was impressed by the grandeur of Mangalore "with sumptuous edifices and many grand and rich Hindu temples." There were several mosques also. The beauty of Mangalore was enhanced further by enchanting river sides and groves of coconut palms. Large quantities of black or brown rice, but of good quality, were supplied from Mangalore to Malabar and Aden. The place produced some pepper which was better than that of Malabar. Some butter was also exported to Ormuz in jars from Mangalore. 39

The port-town suffered most at the hands of the Portuguese. Not only was its freedom of trade hindered, but it was also attacked and damaged several times. In 1513 its trade was hindered until some ships from Calicut which had anchored at the port were made over to the Portuguese. On 1525 the port was blockaded and some ships from Malabar were chased up the river and destroyed. In 1530 the Portuguese caused great destruction to

Mangalore. That year they learnt that a rich Hindu merchant of Mangalore, a Shetty, had clandestine commercial dealings with the Zamorin (Samndri) of Calicut, an enemy of the Portuguese, which caused considerable damage to the Portuguese trade interests. The Shetty was the richest merchant on the whole of the Western Coast of India from Goa to the Cape of Comorin. He was also a friend of the Portuguese who allowed his merchant ships ply about freely. The Zamorin, finding it impossible to export his spices from his ports to the Strait of the Red Sea on account of the Portuguese vigilance, sent the spices to Mangalore, probably by land, with an understanding between himself and the Shetty. From Mangalore those spices were exported to the Red Sea Strait on board the ships of the muslim merchants of Mecca who were allowed by the Portuguese to load at Mangalore, the port of a friend. The merchants paid the Zamorin for the spices. The Portuguese were not aware that the spices actually belonged to the Zamorin, until they discovered the fact in 1530. The Zamorin had such great profits that he aided the Shetty to fortify Mangalore, supplied him with artillery, and at his own cost maintained a garrison to defend the city and the fort. Nuno da Cunha, the Portuguese Viceroy, decided to punish the Shetty for his league with the Zamorin and sent a fleet against him. The Shetty was forewarned of the attack. He could therefore prepare himself well.42 However, he was no match to the Portuguese. His soldiers were killed; the fortification was partly pulled down and partly burnt. 70 guns, a lot of copper, coral, mercury, grains, velvet and many other articles of trade from Mecca, quantities of explosives and sacks of provisions fell into Portuguese hands. A major part of these spoils was burnt as they did not have sufficient space in their ships to carry all the spoils. The city was also burnt. Thirteen ships, which were anchored at the port, were sunk. The gardens were ruined and reduced to ashes. All these were done in such a manner that it appeared that there was never a habitation in Mangalore. A temple and a mosque were also destroyed.42

The attack of 1538 anded by killing many residents and burning some of their ships because they helped some Calicut vessels to defend against the Portuguese at the port.44

Mangalore experienced another devastating fury of the Portuguese in 1555. The town was burnt and many residents were killed. A rich temple with its idols was also destroyed. The cause of this wanton cruelty however is not indicated.

Again in 1558 the Portuguese exhibited their brutality to the people of Mangalore. The Portuguese learnt that a ship belonging to the Muslims of Cannanor was anchored at Mangalore. While they attempted to capture the ship it was aided by some local people. Furious, the Portuguese entered the town and put to sword all those whom they confronted, without discriminating between men and women, old and young. In all these proceedings they were akin to blood thirsty hounds and they thought that these atrocities were necessary to terrorise the enemies. The town was set on fire. Those who tried to escape from being burnt were put to sword. A grand and beautiful temple was also burnt. The brass and copper that covered the roof and the tower of the temple, and fine works of gold that were inside, were embarked by the Portuguese, The muslim ship which was the cause of the whole trouble was burnt along with some others laying at the port.46

It is interesting to note that, in spite of these attacks, the Portuguese were allowed to erect a fort at Mangalore peacefully. The Bangar chief, within whose jurisdiction the port lay, invited them to do so, ceding them a site for the purpose and supplying the material needed for the construction. A Portuguese source gives a curious explanation for this event. There was a market at the site dominated by muslims who did not obey the chief. They insulted him in several ways. For instance, they insisted that he should walk, and not be carried in a palanquin, whenever he passed by the market. This, of course, he did not do; but he decided to set the Portuguese on them by giving the site to the former, for he knew that there was

little love lost between the Portuguese and the Muslims.*

There was a Hindu temple on the site where the Portuguese fort was built. It was allowed to stand until 1620 when it was destroyed by the Portuguese. Until then they paid a rental to the Bangar chief for the lands belonging to the temple. They also extracted iron from the lands.

The Portuguese were conceded the right to collect customs duties on rice and other articles at the fort which guarded the mouth of the river Netravati. The right fetched them 2500 to 3000 xerafins (about Rs. 10,000 to 12,000) a year by 1635, if there was peace in the region.⁴⁹

There was a settlement of about 35 families of Portuguese casados close by the fort. The habitation consisted of houses built of stone and lime and having tiled roofs. It was surrounded by a wall, 4.4/c metres high, with many watch towers and bulwarks of circular shape. The wall was a little higher on the side of the mainland and had a small moat.⁵⁰

Minor Ports and Port-Towns

Among the minor ports the one on the Anjediva islands of Karwar, is mentioned frequently in Portuguese documents. The climate of the islands was not good, nor was its soil fertile. Hardly any one lived there on a permanent basis. The islands were virtually a no man's land and the Portuguese made it their own by building a fort there in 1505 and again in 1682. The islands were located in the middle of the Western Coast of India; strategically its location was significant; ships could be anchored there safely for repairs, even in the monsoon, and for procuring potable water. The muslim merchants used the Anjediva port for similar purposes before the Portuguese. There was a temple on the islands which was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1505. Its stone was used for the walls of their fortress. There were two tanks of fresh water nearby.51

Mirjan is mentioned as a port which supplied large quantities of black or brown rice to the traders from Malabar who sold in return for coconuts, coconut oil, and

iaggery.53

Baindur is called by a Portuguese document as Majandur. It grow much rice and most of this was exported from Bhatkal where it was sent first. Girasal was the best variety of rice produced at Baindur, followed by other inferior qualifies.³³

Gangolli which the Portuguese sources mention as Cambolini, came under their control in 1630. They built a fort there by 1633 as already indicated. Their attempt to convert the peninsula into an island by digging a canal on the northern side proved a failure. The peninsula was expected to yield 30,000 bags of rice a year with which all their four fortresses in Kanara could be sustained. A settlement of some casados was established there soon after its acquisition.⁵⁴

Barkur supplied much rice of a good variety to Cannanor, Calicut, Ormuz, Aden and Shaher in exchange for copper, horses, coconut, coconut oil and jaggery. 56

There are some Portuguese sources which mention Brahmawara (Baira Vera, Barraverrao). It had trade contacts with Gujarat, Goa, the Decean, and Ormuz. It supplied betel leaves, arecanuts and vice. All kinds' of Brahmins lived there. This probably refers to the Brahmins of various religious denominations. Women performed sati there.⁵⁴

Sadashivagad, Ankola, Malpe, Udupi, Kapu, Karnad, Kalyanpur, Mulki are also mentioned, but hardly with any further details regarding the socio-economic life at these places.

Concluding Remarks

We have noted above that the Portuguese used to attack frequently the various ports and port-towns along coastal Karna. taka during the 16th and the 17th centuries. During such attacks the residents there used to be killed; ships belonging to the local merchants and others used to be looted, burnt or sunk; houses and gardens used to be looted and burnt or destroyed; temples and mosques were also not spared. The usual causes of such attacks were the conflicting commercial interests of the local traders and the Portuguese. The latter's aim was to monopolies and control the sea trade of the ports. The former wished to purchase and sell freely

at maximum profits and thus trade with any, including the Portuguese. During such attacks and for some time thereafter the socio-economic life of the ports and towns used to be upset. However, it is difficult to guage the extent of the disturbance to socio-economic life, It is obvious that the Portuguese sources supply us a lot of information regarding the ports and port-lowns of coastal Karnataka. Much of this information is hardly known from other sources, local or others. An exhaustive study of the Portuguese sources will be highly rewarding.

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