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Dynamics of Trade in Coastal Karnataka (A.D. 1000 to 1700)

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Biography of the author

The author, Nagendra Rao, at present works as Associate Professor in Goa University, India. He has published various books and articles. His books are, *Brahmanas of South India*, *Craft Production and Trade in South Kanara*, and *Globalization: Pre Modern India*. Dr. Nagendra Rao has interest in social and economic history of the western coast of India. The author has worked on themes such as role of brahmanas, caste *puranas*, craft production, land grants in Goa, and temples in South Kanara. His articles and book reviews have been published in national and international journals.

Abstract

Coastal Karnataka, in the early medieval period, was known for the role of indigenous traders apart from the Arab traders. The pre-European or non-European trade can be divided into pre-Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara periods. In the pre-Vijayanagara period, the region experienced the role of the traders and trade guilds. The Arab and Jewish traders are mentioned in the context of this region. Inter-regional and International trade network emerged. In the post Vijayanagara period, there was emergence of interaction with the Europeans such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and the English. There was continuity and change between pre-European and European trade. Indian traders continued to play important role in the pre-colonial period.

Keywords: trade, Arabs, Jews, *Hanjamana*, English, Portuguese, Dutch

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Introduction

A few scholars have worked on the political history of coastal Karnataka, but they have not discussed economic history of the region. In this paper, an attempt is made to fill this gap in historiography. The paper has the objective of comparing the role of Indian and foreign traders in the inter-regional and international trade network. Indian ports maintained contact with West Asian and African ports. It will be showed that the coming of the Europeans allowed Indian traders to extend their trade contacts with different parts of the world. An attempt will be made to show the role of various factors that influenced trade in coastal Karnataka. It will be showed that trade during the study period was dynamic.

Background

Coastal Karnataka is a part of the western coast. It maintained economic relationship with other regions of the western coast namely, Gujarat, Konkan, and Malabar. The Geniza records belonging to 12th century give references to cotton trade in Mangalore, thereby showing prominence of this port. The Arabs were the important traders that visited the ports of the western coast including coastal Karnataka. In the ancient times, monsoon winds were used to travel from west coast to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Historiography:

The scholars such as K.V. Ramesh, P. Gururaja Bhat, K.G. Vasanthamadhava, N. Shyam Bhat, and Malathi Moorthy have analysed economic history of coastal Karnataka during the study period [Ramesh: 1970 ;P. G. Bhat: 1975; Vasanthamadhava: 1991; S. Bhat: 1998]. The studies can be considered as empirical. Most of these studies have not attempted to align the data pertaining to the region with the pan-Indian trade. Nevertheless, the scholars such as A.R. Disney, M.N. Pearson, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Sinnappah Arasaratnam, and Om Prakash have realized the importance of this region [Disney: 1978; Pearson: 1981; Subrahmanyam: 1990; Arasaratnam: 1997]. However, these scholars considered coastal Karnataka as a part of the larger study area, that is, India. The studies of these scholars are useful to contextualize and situate trade in coastal Karnataka. A few studies depended on Portuguese sources. At the same time, in the

context of other regions of peninsular India, one can find reference to trade in coastal Karnataka. The study of historiography exhibits the significance of this topic. This shows that there is need for studies that synthesise relationship of trade between coastal Karnataka with other regions of the western coast and Asia. There is a need to analyse the role of coastal Karnataka in inter-regional trade and the Asia trade.

The region and setting

The study region is known for its natural resources. In the coastal and interior regions, one can note rivers such as Netravati, Kalyanapura, Mabukala and Gangolli [Murthy: 1991]. The availability of water, through rainfall and irrigation, facilitated agricultural production. The main economic activity of the region was agricultural production. Trade is closely related to commodity production. Surplus goods produced in the region allowed the emergence of traders. It is possible that the *setti* agriculturists diversified to trade. There was trade in agricultural produce, which was commercialized. For example, there was commercialization of rice production. This was done to meet the needs of urban centres within India and west Asia. Goods were imported from the up-Ghat regions for export. This implies that ports became transshipment trade centres. Thus, goods were imported not for consumption but for export to major and minor trade centres.

Significance of the study

The period 1000 to 1700 is important on different counts. For one thing, during this period there were significant political and economic changes. In north India, there was emergence of the Muslim dynasties. Even though it did not have direct bearing on trade in south India, it influenced the region in an indirect manner. This is because in the South, there was emergence of Muslim dynasties [Vasanthamadhava: 1991].

Second, during the period 1000 to 1700 one can note availability of large numbers of documents in the form of inscriptions, account books, folklore, foreign traveler accounts, and numismatics. After 1500, one can refer to large numbers of Portuguese documents that give information concerning trade in the Kanara region. This period is significant due to the rise of various dynasties such as the Vijayanagara and the Keladi kingdom. Another important development was the emergence of the Europeans such as the Portuguese, English, and the Dutch [Arasaratnam: 1997]. The Portuguese were

influential in most part of this study period. It is only in the late 17th and early 18th century that one can note decline in role of the Portuguese in trade in coastal Karnataka.

Nevertheless, the Portuguese were not the only factor that determined the trade pattern in coastal Karnataka. The local traders were important, even though they had to take permission from the Portuguese authorities to sail to the international ports of the Middle East [Prakash: 1998].

Overall, the period can be divided into three sections: 1. the pre-Vijayanagara period and 2. the Vijayanagara period and 3. The post-Vijayanagara period. Trade existed even in the pre-Vijayanagara period. Inscriptions of this period refer to trade, traders, commercial centres, and trade guilds. In the Vijayanagara period, the kings determined the state policies. In the post Vijayanagara period, both local dynasties and the European powers played significant role in trade. It is in the post-Vijayanagara period that one notes significant role of the European traders. Nevertheless, the Indian traders continued to dominate trade in the region in the pre-colonial period.

Inter-regional trade

Traders

Traders of coastal Karnataka played important role in the economy of South India. One can find interior trade and urban centres such as Barkur, Karkala, and Mudabidre. The interior trade centres were known for propagation of Jainism. This is because considerable numbers of inscriptions refer to the construction of Jaina *basadis* [Aiyar: 1986]. It is possible that there was emergence of landowning and trading communities called *settis* or *settikara*. Large numbers of inscriptions stating donation to Jaina *basadis* belong to the Hoysala (pre-Vijayanagara) and the Vijayanagara periods. It is possible that the state realized the need to patronize Jainism to obtain the support of the traders. Even today, Jainism is a major faith that is practiced in Karkala, Dharmasthala, and Mudabidre. These regions were different from the urban centres of coastal regions.

Trade network

The interior regions maintained trade contact with the Ghats. It is possible that some of the local principalities, in actuality, belonged to the Ghats. For example, the kings of Karkala had their origins in the Ghat region. The petty chieftains showed respect to larger empires such as the Hoysalas and the Vijayanagara. During the period of the

Vijayanagara, the control over the local people was almost complete. This is proved by the fact that in Managalore and Barakur the Vijayanagara kings appointed governors. The inscriptions issued by the governors of Mangalore and Barakuru refer to the Vijayanagara kings. It is possible that local principalities and the Vijayanagara governors enjoyed considerable autonomy. This is proved by the fact that many decisions such as temple grants and grants to brahmanas were taken by the governors. However, there were situations wherein the traders would approach the imperial authority. In one instance, the Muslim traders of Honnavar had approached the Vijayanagara kings for justice. They were given the royal protection [Ramesh: 1970: 196].

An important part of the inter-regional trade was the reference to customhouses. In the regions such as Sullia, there were custom stations or *sunka thanes* where custom duties were collected. Some inscriptions refer to the collection of custom duties on rice, areca nut, cotton, and other goods that were imported from the Ghat region [Vasanthamadhava: 1991:200].

Trade in rice

Rice was an important item that was produced in the region. Coastal Karnataka was known for the production of high quality rice. Nevertheless, in the early 16th century the foreign traveler Duarte Barbosa speaks of two varieties of rice: fine and coarse [Longworth: 1989:195-196]. It is possible that fine variety of rice was consumed by rich sections. This is because finer variety of rice was expensive. The poor people used coarse variety of rice. This pattern can be found with the fine and coarse variety textiles that were produced in the textile producing centres of the eastern coast. Both varieties of textiles in the eastern coast were exported to the markets of west Asia and Southeast Asia. Similarly, there were evidences to suggest that finer variety of rice was sent to regional and international trade centres.

Rice was sold in the local markets. There is reference to markets for *santhes* and periodic fares called *jathres*. It is possible that traders visited *santhes* and *jathres* and exchanged their goods [Murthy: 1991:104-107]. During the study period, there was monetization of economy. Inscriptions refer to gold, silver, and copper coins. The inscriptions refer to the temples that were granted the right to collect custom duties. There are evidences to suggest that the grants given to temples were deposited with traders and

trade guilds. It is possible that trade guilds gave a particular return to the depositor. The money was invested in productive purposes.

Trade pattern

The deposits were handy to the traders as they always looked for capital. Traders would purchase goods and sell them in regional and international markets [Aiyar: 1986]. There are evidences to suggest that there were traditional banking institutions. Perhaps trade guilds also acted as the bankers. They accepted deposits and advanced loans to the traders. At the same time, sources do not reveal the use of *hundis* or the bills of exchange. On the other hand, in the case of north India we can find this instrument, which could be used to carry goods from one place to another.

Transport system

In the region, there was the use of both river and land transport. The latter was preferred in regions where navigation was not possible. As in other parts of India, there was the use of bullock carts. There is no reference to the use of horses for transportation. In the Ghat regions, there was the use of packed animals. In actuality, sources refer to import of bulls and cows to coastal Karnataka [Aiyar: 1986]. The region needs large numbers of animals for the purpose of cultivation and transportation. There were rest houses that provided shelter to travelers. Traders obtained water and food in these rest houses. The sources refer to protection that was given to the traders. European sources tend to substantiate this. There is reference to the use of different varieties of boats for river transport [Rajamanickam and Swamy: 1997: 59-60]. The goods can be transported from one place to another with the help of ferries. There were professional navigators who provide ferry service for a price. The sources do not give much information concerning the boat building technology. However, folklores refer to construction of boats, which could be used for navigation.

International trade

Pre-European and Non European trade

Coastal Karnataka can be considered as the door to the land locked regions of Karnataka. This door could be used by the traders of other parts of Karnataka to export commodities to other parts of the world. There was the export of rice to west Asia. The Arab traders before 10th century had showed interest in trade centres of coastal Karnataka.

An important item of import was horse, which could be used in wars. The Pandyas of south India had showed interest in the warhorses. The Vijayanagara kings were not behind in demanding for warhorses [Shastry: 1969: 68-69].

The *hanjamana* trade guild is mentioned in large numbers of inscriptions. It is possible that *hanjamana* was the trade guild of foreign traders including Jews and Arabs. This trade guild obtained support from the local population and the local dynasties by giving grants to Jaina *basadis* and brahmanical temples [Ramesh: 1970]. In the medieval times, the *hanjamana* became a trade guild exclusively representing the Muslim traders – both foreign and Indian. In the study period, it is possible that Arabs were indigenized due the need for permanent settlements. Due to the monsoon season, the Arabs had to settle in the port towns. Even today, one can find their settlements in the regions such as Mangalore, Basrur and Bhatkal.

The Arab traders played important role in international trade, thereby linking coastal Karnataka with the world trade. In this way, coastal Karnataka was similar to other parts of the western coast. This shows that even before the coming of the Europeans, the coastal Karnataka traders dealt in rice, pepper, and textiles, as there was demand for these goods in west Asia. It is possible that the goods that were imported from the Ghat region and locally produced rice and pepper were exported to west Asia [Ramesh: 1970].

The European traders visited the west Asian ports and purchased goods that were sent from the western coast. There is reference to the Jewish traders coming to the region. A trader named Abraham Yiju played an important role in the trade between Mangalore and Aden. There is also reference to emergence of trade in betel nuts, iron, brass, and copper. In the 12th century, there is reference to the bronze factory in the southern part of the western coast [Goitien: 1972:62].

Apart from Muslims, there was the role of the Saraswats. After 1500, the role of the Gowda Saraswats in coastal Karnataka became more prominent. This is due to the migration of many Saraswat families to the region. Many Keladi records show the role of these traders. The Portuguese record *Livros do Cartazes* also show important role played by Saraswats [HAG: n.d.]. Nevertheless, one can suggest that Muslim traders played important role in the international trade. It is also possible that there was import of

bullion from west Asia. There was establishment of mint houses in Mangalore and Barkur. It is possible that the coin *gadyana* was minted in Mangalore and Barkur. There was regionalization of minting activity. This also indicates the importance of coastal Karnataka.

Nature of European trade

In the early 16th century, the Portuguese began to play important role in coastal Karnataka. It is true that there was demand for more commodities. This is because the Portuguese looked for spices, which were available in the region. In the early period, there are evidences available to suggest that the Portuguese procured goods from the Malabar region. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Portuguese showed interest in attacking the forts of coastal Karnataka [Shastry: 1969:68].

The Portuguese attempted to control maritime trade with the assistance of passport (*cartaz*) system. One should admit that this system to some extent was effective in coastal Karnataka. The Mappilla traders who opposed the *cartazes* system in Malabar were not very prominent in coastal Karnataka, even though some sources refer to alliance between the traders of Calicut and Mangalore. The Portuguese obtained tribute of rice from the traders of Basrur and Mangalore. The traders were not pleased with this development. Nevertheless, Portuguese could not enforce their rule on the land. This is due to important position of the Vijayanagara and Keladi kings. In actuality, the latter compelled the Portuguese to introduce series of measures to allow the traders of Keladi to trade with west Asia and Goa. In actuality, the Keladi kings were responsible for the fall of the Portuguese in coastal Karnataka. In the late 17th century, the Portuguese had already lost control of their possessions in the Malabar. They could not continue to control possessions in coastal Karnataka [Shastry: 1969]. In Mangalore, the Portuguese faced the hostile forces of the Queen Abbakka, who is hailed as the liberator, even though one cannot envisage nationalism in those days. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the fact that Queen Abbakka and her army showed resistance to the Portuguese [Grey: 1991:320].

Trade was dynamic

One cannot accept the arguments of Van Leur and Neils Steengaard that the Asian trade was static. There were significant changes to the Asian trade. There were large numbers of petty traders who controlled the fortunes of trade. Petty traders could change

the course of trade depending on the demand for particular commodities [Prakash: 1998:13]. At the same time, they were also influenced by the vagaries of trade. Political factors played important role in determining the course of trade. The fall of the Keladi dynasty and the Maratha attack on these regions, for example, had significant impact on the trade in the region. In actuality, there were different periods wherein the ports like Mangalore prospered and declined. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it is reported that Mangalore had lost its prominent position [Hamilton: 1995: 283].

Conclusion

Trade during the period 1000 to 1700 AD was dynamic. This is because one can note significant changes emerging during this period. The study period can be conveniently divided into pre-Vijayanagara and the Vijayanagara. The pre-Vijayanagara period can be considered as a combination of ancient and medieval. During this period, a transition was taking place from the ancient to the medieval. A few ancient institutions such as temples continued their dominant position in the medieval period as well. The establishment of the Vijayanagara was a significant development. Coastal Karnataka became a part of the Vijayanagara Empire. The construction and maintenance of the highway between Bhatkal and Vijayanagara capital proves this assertion. The state became interested in not only agricultural activities but also commerce. The coming of the Europeans forms another phase of the trade dynamics of this region. Nevertheless, the rise and fall of Vijayanagara can be considered as a defining moment rather than the coming of Europeans particularly in the pre-colonial phase. This is because in the pre-colonial period, the traders were in a position to give competition to the Europeans who became part of the Asian trading network. As the Europeans lacked political cleavage, they could not control the trade pattern. There was the use of violence as deterrence against the local chieftains and traders. Nevertheless, such deterrence did not become permanent feature of trade. Changes in the relationship between Europeans and Indian kings and traders added dynamic element to the trade. Positive and negative political and economic developments show the dynamic element of trade in coastal Karnataka.

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