
HISTORY OF PORTUGUESE TRADE IN TAMILNADU

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The Portuguese on the coast of Malabar during the last decade of the fifteenth century was one of the rarest events in the Economic History of South India.(1) Their presence on the coast had its impact on the economic history of Tamilnadu. For nearly a century the Portuguese enjoyed the monopoly of Indian seas.(2)

The divisions of the country into Nayaks also had a role to play in the sixteenth century economic history of Tamilnadu. Every Nayak had shown interests towards the Portuguese. The Madras Coast was under the control of the Chandragiri Nayak.(3) The Pearl fishery coast was under the Madurai Nayaks. Madurai region was rich in the resources of Potassium Nitrate. Tanjore was principally rich in paddy harvest. It also had the textile producing hinterlands. Senji Nayaks were at the entry point of the foreign invaders. They held many of the ports .The Centres such as Cuddalore and Devanampattinam were rich in textile products and indigo plant cultivation.

These Nayaks were not only holding the sources of trade but also were the sources of conflicts and contradictions. Every Nayak aimed at suppressing the other weak Nayak. Each one wanted to hold the importance. This resulted in local wars and conflicts. So their military objective was a politically necessary one. For that, the Nayaks began to have access with the Portuguese trading powers in order to mount their army with the animal powers like horses and elephants.(4) They demanded them from the Portuguese. It encouraged the Portuguese to demand from the Nayaks their rich resources. Both of them found their goods in exchange. Thus the military objective dominated the trade with the foreign merchants.

The geography of Tamilnadu also played a dominant role in internal as well external trade. Many of the trading centers were in the mid -point of Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal linking the shores of Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. The Ports served as the centres for trade. All the ports of Coromandal coast were located on the banks of small rivers or inlets. Goods of all proportions produced and consumed within its environment were imported and exported. The coastal trade could serve as distributor for the overseas trade. Coromandal coast had become very prominent due to the availability of its many products of export value such as pearls, corals and textiles. The familiarity of trade goods and its high commanding foreign markets led the Portuguese to capture a valuable internal and external trade.

Well before the advent of the European Era, there was lucrative overseas trade in the then Tamilnadu. Trade and commerce was flourishing to a large extent attracting buyer from all over the world. Cotton, spices, jewels and perfumes were carried from Tamil country up to Red sea, to the court of Solomon and up to the empire of Caesar. During the

medieval period, many of the country's choicest products were transported by the Venetian merchants from the ports of Egypt to the court of European kings. We come to learn a wide variety of the imports of south India from Periplus of Erythrean Sea. The imported goods consisted of coins, topaz, and coral, thin clothing; figured linens, copper, tin lead and other items. There were also export qualities of fine pearls, ivory, silk, cloth, diamonds, sapphires, transparent stones of all kinds.(5) In Uraiur, export quality muslins were available. The Chinese had trading contact with the Pallavas of Kanchi. With the succession of Imperial Cholas trade links with South East Asian countries and China improved. South East Asia and Indian islands were very much familiar with those of the mercantile goods procured from Tamilnadu.

The Tamil traders were skillful in trading with the rest of the world with a very fine variety of native products. The Chettis of Cholamandalam in Malaysia in Indian islands, dealing with precious stones, pearls and corals and other valuable item is noteworthy. The Tamil Muslim trading community known by the name Marakkayars also traded at Malaysia with the Chetty merchants. The Tamil merchants held a lucrative business in South East Asia. They also knew the ways and means to procure the coastal goods in demand, to get access to the trading foreign markets and the seasons to carry as cargoes. They owned big ships. When the Portuguese came as traders to Tamilnadu, there was hardly any necessity for them to find goods and items to import and export. There was already a demand in Malaysia for coastal textiles. It became easier for the Portuguese to procure those particular items and to sell them away at Malaysia. When Malaysia was captured in A.D. 1511, it enriched the Portuguese to have a link from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Thus they captured the Indian Ocean Commerce that started from Indian islands and China, the Indian west coast. The Coromandal coastal textiles were sold out and they bought the spices from the Eastern islands. These spices were in great demand at the European markets. The coastal goods were exchanged for the goods which were in demand at European market. Thus the Portuguese commanded the Indian Ocean and having a monopolizing trade without any European competitors to grab the trade of the sixteenth century Tamilnadu.(6)

In the early decades of the sixteenth century AD, the Portuguese had a trade with native merchants. In the meanwhile they began to monopolize the valuable goods like textiles and pepper and began to build large cargo ships to carry on their own trade. They had made the native merchants to loose their traditional maritime trade.

The Portuguese were the powerful seafarers and had a great naval power. The naval supremacy led the Portuguese to win over the coast and coastal trade. The Nayak powers in Tamilnadu did not possess a naval force. The ships and cargoes were owned by the merchant communities. The rulers had collected customs and goods from the trading merchants. There were records that registered the information about Nayaks who were entrusted with the job of collecting the revenue from the coastal towns. But with their naval supremacy, the Portuguese overruled them and took off the trading centres. The Nayaks promoted overall growth of commerce through cancellation of taxes and granting

special privileges to artisans and weavers.(7) It registered a cancellation of taxes on the perfumery articles like Camphor, Saampirani, rose water, saffron flower, Punugu, and silk which were purchased for the daily offerings of the Lord Ekambaranathar and the goddess Kamatchi at Kanchipuram Temple in 1548 A.D. There were tax concessions on commodities sold in local markets and fairs and on articles brought in for use in temples. The Nayaks drew the artisans and merchants into the frame work of their rule. They gave encouragement and protection to them. Their support towards them activated the trade during the sixteenth century.

The Tirukkalukkundram Temple inscription mentions three kinds of traders as local merchants, foreign merchants and the mercantile guilds of Sadurangapattinam. Another temple inscription at Tirukkalukkundram refers that the Kaikkola weaving community were asked to pay taxes worth of 70 panams per annum of the clothes they had taken out to Pattinam for sale and for the goods they brought from there.

Thus it is understood that even before the arrival of the Portuguese, there were many ports and centres of trade which played a predominant role in the trading activities of Tamilnadu. Pazhaverkadu, Rajanarayananpattinam, Cuddalore and Tranquebar were medieval ports of Tamilnadu.(8) In sixteenth century new ports in the Coromandal Coast gained importance. The ruler of Senji, Muthukrishnappa Nayak (1597-1624 AD) built a port at Krishnapattinam.(9) The port had mixed mercantile community with the Portuguese, Tamil Chettis and Tamil Muslim Marakkayars. It had become a major country trading port of Coromandel in the last quarter of the 17th century.

The sixteenth century Tamilnadu saw a new venture of the Christian missionaries. The main mission of the missionaries at that time was to win over the Non-Christians. They started converting the coastal inhabitants. The trade was an essential feature for the 16th century Europeans. The Christian Missionaries were not excluded from this. Pepper trade was so dear to them. Even the Christian Missionaries were trading at that time. The Portuguese knew the availability of pearls in Tamil coast. Gaining the experiences of marketing operations from the Tamil Chettis and Muslim Marakkayars, they began to settle in Tamil Coastal areas and from there they maintained direct contact with the Tamils. They settled first at Pulicat which was under the domain of the Chandragiri Nayak under the Vijayanagar Empire. They began to exploit the potentialities of the pearl fishery. When they were in Malaysia they came to learn about the imported rice from the Tamil coast. Pearl fishing and selling was going on during the sixteenth century. Kilakkrai being situated on the pearl fishery coast might be a prominent pearl market. They might have a custom of giving donations in the form of pearls. But it had been changed to give cash instead of pearls. While the Portuguese took over the coastal trade, they monopolized the pearl trade too.

Pazhaverkadu which distributed cotton fabric of Coromandel was a prosperous port and a major centre of overseas trade from Coromandel to Malaysia and Peru.(10) There was a direct land route from the Port Pazhaverkadu to Vijayanagar. Horses and elephants imported at Pazhaverkadu were taken first to the city Vijayanagar and from there the goods will be sold out. When Vijayanagar declined in AD 1565, the trade at Pazhaverkadu had lost its importance. The Muslim merchants of Pazhaverkadu exported rice from Pazhaverkadu to Malaysia.

The Chettys dominated the Malaysia trade. The Chettys were friendly with the Portuguese. In 1511, the Portuguese took Malaysia by force. The Portuguese excluded the Gujarathi traders to trade at Malaysia. The Chetty merchants were also preferred and protected by the Portuguese. They were allowed to pay less as customs duty. The Portuguese trade in Malaysia was linked with trade at Pazhaverkadu. The agreement signed between the king and the Portuguese viceroy in 1541, specifically stated that all the textiles in the kingdom of Vijayanagaram from the Coromandal region should be sold to the Portuguese only. Gaining favourable monopoly of the mercantile article, they began to activate the trade in Tamilnadu as well as South East Asian trade.

The Portuguese began to settle in Mylapore in the year 1522. It had many weaving villages and the Portuguese won an overseas trade in textiles. When they started the trade venture in Tamilnadu, they were not having adequate cargo ships. They were joined with the native traders preferably the Chetty merchants. Soon they began to possess cargo ships. They prohibited the ship owners to trade enroute from Mylapore to Malaysia.

Thus the Portuguese, the sea borne traders with formidable maritime valour, began to exercise control over the native merchant ships and sailors. They began to achieve the monopolization of Asian trade. Every ship had to buy a passport from the Viceroy of Goa. As a result of the Portuguese naval watch at the end of the sixteenth century few Indian ships could venture into East Africa, the Spice Islands and to China and Japan. The natives had to enter into direct partnership with the Portuguese officials or merchants. No ship could go and come without getting the passport from the Portuguese. Undoubtedly the Portuguese proved their supremacy in trade. They began to oversee the exports and imports of the mercantile goods. It avoided the misappropriations of their monopolized goods. It was also to check the lucrative trade of the native merchants. Therefore the native merchants began to trade under the protection of the Portuguese. They paid taxes in advance and ensured their return voyages in the same ship. Private Portuguese traders also independently made contact with the Coromandal trade. Thus the crown monopoly was replaced by a new system of granting privilege of trade voyages for a fee. This was given to the Portuguese traders and to the members of noble and elite and not to the native merchants.

In the last decade of the sixteenth century Malaysia Trade began to decline. It was mainly due to the rise of the entry duty collected from native merchants and also an additional tax levied on goods and other spices. In a survey done from 1591 to 93, there were only 4 ships carried on its cargo from Mylapore to Malaysia. The native merchants

began to withdraw from trade at Malaysia. When the coastal goods were not found at Malaysia, the Javanese traders, the consumers of Coromandal good in bulk stopped their purchase. This development was noticed and the Portuguese began to change their trade policy. But the circumstances went against them since these markets began to be shared by the new competitors such as the Dutch the English and the French. In these circumstances, the native merchants turned their attention towards other areas in the South East, especially in Sumathra.

Besides Pazhaverkadu, Nagapattinam distributed cotton fabric of Coramandel. The Portuguese traders had begun to settle probably in 1502 at Nagapattinam. But they could not get permission to settle. This port was already under the influence of Tamil Muslim mercantile Marakkayar community. They had a lucrative trade in rice at Malabar and at Srilanka. It attracted the attention of the Portuguese and they had come to understand that there was a demand of rice in Calicut and Cannanore. All the more, it was four times cheaper in Tamilnadu. Thus the Portuguese took off rice trade under its monopoly and exchanged it for pepper. The military need also made the Portuguese to venture upon this rice trade since they provided half of their salary in the form of rice to the soldiers in Malabar.

During the administration of the Nayak chief, Sevappa Nayak of Tanjore, the Portuguese settled in Nagapattinam in A.D.1525. In the beginning this was a small and insignificant place but due to the ever increasing trade it grew in size and importance. They began to procure rice on their own. In collecting the custom they showed disparity towards the native merchants. The Muslims had to pay more while the Hindu merchants had to pay less. The Muslim merchants could not withstand the oppressive attitude of the Portuguese. They left Nagapattinam and began to settle at Nagore.

The rise of Nagapattinam led to the decline of the medieval port Tirumalairayanpattinam. The Portuguese befriended the Nayaks and influenced them. Sevappa Nayak, the Nayak ruler of Tanjore (AD 1541) was friendly with the Portuguese. They were greatly favoured by him. Thus the Portuguese influenced the Nayaks and got privileges. Soon they began to occupy Pazhaverkadu, Mylapore, Nagapattinam, Devanampattinam and coastal lands.

The ruler of Senji, Muthukrishnappa gave the Portuguese a new port called Devanampattinam. Long cloth and Morins were the prominent textiles woven from this region. The Portuguese occupied Devanampattinam. It was granted by Vaiyappa Krishnappa Nayak (1580-'93) the ruler of Senji. Sevappa Nayak of Tanjore was in need of elephants. The Senji Nayaks needed the horses. The Portuguese monopolized the horse trade and imported to Cochin. And from there the horses were sent to the horse market at Kanyakumari. From there they were dispatched to the places of demand. So Kanyakumari might be a prominent market place for horse trading.

Besides the major items like pearls, textiles, there was a trade on Potassium nitrate, which was a major item of priority in trade. This mineral was found at Devanampattinam and in all the mines at Madurai region. Before 1524 the Portuguese blocked the Muslims and Hindus from dealing with Potassium nitrate trade. On 19th Sep 1547, the king of Vijayanagar made favors to the Portuguese to sell Potassium nitrate only to them and not to the Sultans of Bijapur. Pepper, textiles and precious metals became the major mercantile articles of trade in the sixteenth century economic history of Tamilnadu. The trade centres, the articles of trade, markets and foreign demand on Coromandal, all these factors, opened the way to attract the fellow European traders and their Governments to occupy the trading position in the forthcoming centuries.

End Notes:

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4. H.Heras, Vol II, p.444. Porto Novo was Parangipettai to the Tamils, Franks to the Portuguese, and Mohammed Bander to Muslims.
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