



THE TRADE ROUTES & TRADE CENTRES IN THE 16TH & 17TH CENTURY

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Abstract

Nothing can be said in a definite manner regarding when and how trade began in India. Just because the beginning of trade is associated with the development of civilization, we cannot expect the man of prehistoric or Paleolithic Age to have started trade, because in this period man was uncivilized. He lived in jungles and mountain caves. But gradually, a feeling of settlement grew in man and he started doing agriculture. With the development of civilization, man started depending other villages, cities and regions for the fulfillment of his needs. In this way, internal trade was born. Very clear information about trade is obtained from the Harappa Civilization which is the ancient civilization of India. During this period, man progressed in the field of trade to such an extent that foundation was laid not only for internal trade, but also for foreign trade. The need for the fulfillment of his needs and the ambition to acquire new things motivated man to progress in many fields which led to the development of new trade routes across sea and land.

Key Words: India, Trade, Trade Routes, Trade Centres, Sea Trade, Land Trade

Introduction

India is a vast country and its history dates back to thousands of years. India is among those countries of the world where early civilizations were born. Since the progress of any country depends on its trade, from this view, India has progressed immensely in the field of trade from ancient times itself. So India became a prominent centre of trade in the world. India's fertile land, favorable climate and abundance of natural resources contributed to this progress and Indians flourished in their trade not only in India but also extended it to other countries of the world.¹



Nothing can be said in a definite manner regarding when and how trade began in India. Just because the beginning of trade is associated with the development of civilization, we cannot expect the man of prehistoric or Paleolithic Age to have started trade, because in this period man was uncivilized. He lived in jungles and mountain caves. But gradually, a feeling of settlement grew in man and he started doing agriculture. With the development of civilization, man started depending other villages, cities and regions for the fulfillment of his needs. In this way, internal trade was born. Very clear information about trade is obtained from the Harappa Civilization which is the ancient civilization of India. During this period, man progressed in the field of trade to such an extent that foundation was laid not only for internal trade, but also for foreign trade. The need for the fulfillment of his needs and the ambition to acquire new things motivated man to progress in many fields which led to the development of new trade routes across sea and land.

Marine or Sea Trade Routes

By the end of the 15th century, when Vasco da Gama circled the Cape of Good Hope and reached India, he found that the Indian Ocean from Madagaskar to Malakka Strait was almost totally under the control of Muslim traders. The proprietorship and management of most of the ships was in the hands of these Muslim traders and they also dominated upon a large part of the trade on land. It is clear from the descriptions of Barbosa and Varathema also that all the ships which ferried from the Malabar Coast and most of the ships of Bay of Cambay and the Koromandala Coast and the oceanic territory of Bengal were under the control of these Muslim traders. That is why their hold on the Indian sea trade was very strong till the end of the 15th century. So the Portuguese made the ports of the Western coasts, especially the Malabar Coast among which Calicut was the leading port, as the centre of their business and launched their ships coming from Pengu and Malakka at Calicut and its neighboring ports. They started deporting the commodities brought from the Red Sea on Malabar Coast and sending them in various directions. Thus Malabar became the most significant market and trade centre of Indian sea trade.²

In 1500 AD, the longest sea trade route was from Aden to Malakka. Malakaa was a big centre of import and export from which imported textiles from India and precious metals from the red Sea and exported black pepper, mace and cloves Chinese commodities like silk fabrics to



Indonesia.³ The other major sea route was dominated by the Gujaratis and from this route ebony, slaves, ivory and gold was brought to India.⁴ Another sea trade route was from Hdjramaut and Gulf of Persia to Hormuz. Horses, pearls, Persian silk and carpets, paints, etc were brought by this route.⁵ Bengal exported textiles and food items through the trade route of the Bay of Bengal territory and exported textiles and yarn through the sea route of Koromandal. Barbosa states that occasionally, the ships coming from Malakka turned towards the Koromandal Coast and the ships going towards the West deviated from the coast and went from the outer side of the Maldives islands.⁶

In the mid 16th century, trade through the sea route was clearly very extensive and small boats in large numbers were used to re-export the local commodities to the larger centres of import and export.⁷ The 17th century is called as the golden period of the sea trade of India along with trade of textiles.⁸ During this period, the trade of India extended till South-East Asia, West Asia and Africa. The traders of Gujarat and Baniyas of Kathiyawad had settled in the cities of yaman. Mostly, cinnamon was brought to Calicut through the sea route from Sri Lanka. The black pepper of Malabar was also imported and exported to Calicut through sea route. The black pepper of Sumatra was brought to Malakka. Similarly the leading commodities of China and Indonesia were brought to India through the sea route.⁹

The textiles of Gujarat and Koromandal were taken to the ports of Western and Eastern Coast and to the coast of Pengu. The trade of food grains was very extensive in the 17th century, so Canada exported rice to the Western Coast of India through sea route, while it exported rice to Malakka via the sea route of Java, Syam and Pengu. The Lehari port was at the mouth of the Sindhu River. From here, one could directly reach Tatta, Multan and Lahore via sea route. From this sea route commodities made of cotton, indigo and other products were exported.¹⁰ The commodities to be exported were sent from the West to Persia and Arab by sea route. Black pepper from Sumatra and Java, cloves from Molukkas, mace and nutmeg from Bandadveep were sent for the whole of Europe and Asia by sea route. The Portuguese sent their ships to other places also to do trade with the islands of Malakka and Makhal. Poirord has described these travels in detail. "These ships filled the cargo from Goa, sold it in the Port of Macau Canton, loaded the Chinese commodities and reached Japan by sea route."¹¹



Land Trade Routes

In the 16th and 17th century, trade by land also developed along with trade by sea routes. Trade between the Asian Civilizations had been established by land routes from ancient times itself and through these routes only trade was carried on till the 16th and 17th centuries. All these routes converged at Baghdad.¹² Baghdad was the meeting place of the caravans coming from Iran, India, Central Asia and China. Baghdad was connected to the sea via the Shiraj route which was connected to the Siraf port situated in the Persian Gulf. The main route got divided into two other routes at Nishapur. One land trade route went via Merv and Bukhara to China and the other land route went via Herat and Kandhar to Multan. The main commodities of trade on this land route were horses, Emerald, silk, China clay pottery, etc.¹³ the land route to the South of this route went to India which, according to Kirti Chaudhry, was called as the Cotton Textile route, because the Indian Cotton fabric was sent to Western and Central Asia and Russia by this route only.

Black pepper was supplied to Calicut by the land route of Malabar. It can be estimated by the contemporary descriptions that in this period, the significance of the commodities going across the land borders of India was less, the number of land trade routes was also less and the time gap between one trade caravan and the next was very big. There was a land route in the North East of India which went to China.¹⁴ According to Sir Thomas Roe, from 1615 AD onwards, one trading caravan went from Agra to China every year by this land route. Father Harronimus Jevian went for religious purpose to China from the Kabul land route because the traders went by this route regularly. Thus it is clear that there was trade between India and China by land route.

Abul Fazal is also of the opinion that in the North, a lot of commodities reached India by land route. Finch states that there was no land route from Karagar to Kashmir, but the sequence of carrying a few commodities of trade definitely existed. In this way, there were two regular land routes on the entire border – from Lahore to Kabul and from Multan to Kandhar. Kabul was a great trade centre of this century and it was the meeting point of the traders of India, Persia and Northern countries. Kandhar functioned as the entrance gate which joined India with most of the parts of Persia.¹⁵ Trade was carried out on a large scale on these two land routes.



In the 16th and 17th centuries, the means of transportation were beasts of burden because the condition of the roads was very bad. The danger of theft and robbery on these routes was so great that people did not dare to travel alone with their cargo. They waited for traders to gather in a large number and then started on their journey in the form of a caravan. These caravans were so large that they could face the attacks made by the robbers in the way. This is the reason that they had to wait for a long period of time and there was no set time for the travel on the land routes. Manerick states that he could not join the caravan which was going to Multan. As a result he had to wait for six months for the next caravan. It is also clear from the description of a missionary named Benedict Goiz that he travelled from Lahore to China. He started with a caravan of almost 500 people. While crossing the Kabul pass, they had to face danger as they were attacked by robbers. After some years, the traders of East India Company travelled by the land route which went up to Multan.

Leading Trade Centres

(1) Cochin

In the 16th and 17th century, Cochin was a leading trade centre. Products from a large part of India and some neighboring countries were sent here. From here, they were loaded on ships and sent to far off countries and the Western Coast. Similarly, things imported from foreign countries were exported to the entire coastal region of Western India from here.¹⁶

(2) Goa

In the 16th and 17th century, Goa was the leading centre of most items of luxury. Goa was also important from the commercial and political perspective. Horses were exported in large numbers to all the states of South from Goa. The foreign trade of Goa and Cochin took place mostly in four places – Persia, Arab, Africa and Europe. The first stop of the ships going to the East was Malakka.¹⁷

(3) Hormuz

The centre for trade with Persia and Arab was Hormuz, which was under the Portuguese. The entire cargo from larger ships was unloaded here and then loaded in small ships which could reach the Persian Gulf. The main items brought to India from this part of Asia were silver, molded in the form of lacin, pearls, horses and silk. The main item of export was cotton fabric.¹⁸



(4) Malakka

Malakka, situated in the strait between the Sumatra and Malaya islands, was a leading trading centre in the 16th and 17th century. The credit of its development went to the Muslim traders. Before the advent of the Portuguese, it was a complete commercial market of trade by sea route between India and China. According to Barbosa, “This is a flourishing trade centre. Big traders live here. The *Jahajrani* is very vast and transportation at such a large scale cannot be seen anywhere else in the world.”¹⁹

(5) Bantum and Achin

Bantum was a large centre for the purchase of Chinese items and Achin situated in the North Western corner of Sumatra also was a very important trading centre. Spices and Chinese items were imported and exported in large quantities from Achin. The traders brought gold, silver, precious stones, metals and other items to this place.²⁰

(6) Sofala and Mozambik

The Portuguese made Sofala as their trading centre for trade with Africa. Cloth, spices and other food items manufactured in India were imported from this trading centre and ivory, ebony, amber, slaves and gold were exported.

Mozambik was also a leading trading centre. It was one of the most profitable centres of the time of the Portuguese rule. A lot of export was done from here, particularly gold was exported in large quantities.²¹

In this way, on the basis of the description of the trade by sea and land routes, it can be said that in the 16th and 17th century, it was necessary for the traders to own huge boats and marine ships for trade with remote and far off countries. It can be understood from contemporary literature and paintings also that huge ships were manufactured in the 16th and 17th century. But there were many hindrances on these routes. While the sea routes depended on the monsoon winds for direction and time limit, the land routes were endangered by theft, robbery, etc. Trade in the 16th century was far less in comparison to the trade of the present days. W.H. Moreland states that the total trade of India in the 16th century was equivalent to the monthly cargo of a modern loading ship of average size.²²



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