

THE BRITISH SETTLEMENTS ON THE COROMANDEL COAST AND THEIR TRADING PORTS

S.Shenbagavalli¹

¹(Dept of History, Sri GVG Visalakshi College for Women, Tirupur Tamilnadu, shenbagavalligvvc@gmail.com)

Abstract— The maritime regions of India were of four zones namely Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal. The name Coromandel was formerly applied to the east coast of the Madras Presidency, extending northward from Pont Calimere to the mouth of the Kistna River, or even further. The name is a corruption of Choromandala or Chola-mandala, ie the kingdom of the Cholas, who in the tenth century, had their capital at Tanjore. The coming of the Europeans to the Coromandel Coast constitutes an epoch in the history. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the three European chartered companies, the Dutch, the British and the Danish had acquired and consolidated their settlements along the Coromandel Coast. Each of the companies had an established capital on the coast which was the seat of authority and command for activities along the whole coast and even beyond. In the tough competition that existed among the chartered companies, the British emerged successfully. The commercial accomplishment led to their political supremacy also.

Keywords—Coromandel; Coast; Chartered Companies; Fort.St.George; Port; Hinterland; Trade

1. INTRODUCTION

The Coromandel Coast is a term applied to the east coast of the Peninsula of India. The Coromandel region has a long tradition of trade going back more than two thousand years when trade and mercantile activity had already become specialised economic functions and the region had developed much beyond the subsistence economy and localised trade which characterised early agrarian settlement.

On the origin of the word Coromandel, Professor K.A.Nilakanta Sastri says, “This coast generally bears the distorted name of Choromandel and is now only known thus; but rightly it is Sjolam - Mandalam, after Sjolam, a certain king of this name, and Mandalam a kingdom and this used to be in olden times a powerful Kingdom in itself”. Valentijn proves this derivation with a reference to a letter of a Genoese trader, Hieronymus, written on September 1, 1499 from Tripoli, where the writer speaks of “the abundance of sandal wood in a place called Songomental, which Valentijn contends, is an altered form of Colamandalam”. The first recorded mention of the word is found in an inscription of the eleventh century.

Arasaratnam divides the maritime region of India into four zones namely Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal. The coming of the Europeans viz, the Portuguese, the British, the Dutch and the French to the Coromandel Coast constitutes an epoch in the history. The Coromandel Coast attracted eastern trade more than any other coastal regions of India. The coast embraces the coastlines of modern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Southern tip of Orissa.

2. THE EUROPEANS ON THE COROMANDEL COAST

Among the Europeans, the Portuguese were the first to draw the Coromandel into trade. They dominated the trade in the Indian Ocean and monopolized spice trade a larger extent. In contrast with the Portuguese, the Dutch merchants did not have sufficient silver to buy spices, but after finding out the cotton fabrics from India, notably from the Coromandel Coast, they started to set up their trading factories on the coast.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, there was a marked intensification in the business activities of the British East India Company. While the British were establishing themselves at Surat on the Western side of India, they made futile attempts to effect a settlement on the eastern side, the coast of Coromandel. The trade on the Coromandel Coast was very valuable. The natives in this quarter had brought the art of painting or dyeing calicoes to the highest pitch of perfection. They were in great demand in Europe. Above all, they were in great demand in the countries further eastward; in Burma, Siam and the Indian Archipelago, especially in what were known as the Spice Islands. Hence, Coromandel Coast was British's main field in of operation.

Besides the Dutch and the British, the French East India Company also acquired some importance in the second half of the seventeenth and in beginning of the eighteenth century, by establishing factories on the Coromandel Coast. There existed a tough competition among the companies in extending their influence on the Coromandel Coast and to acquire its wealth.

In this trade it was the British who slowly acquired dominance to the exclusion of their early rivals, the Portuguese and the Dutch. There was a very brisk trade between Madras and the ports in Burma, Malaya, Archipeleago and China. The British faced impediments which hindered the progress of their trade. They were the Mughal and Maratha wars, Pirates menace and the New British Company's rivalry. Later the trade flourished gradually without any disturbances. In the name of trade, they exploited the wealth of the coast and its hinterland. Their commercial supremacy led to the political supremacy which they later established.

3. THE BRITISH SETTLEMENTS ON THE COAST

The British East India Company was the gift of Queen Elizabeth I, who granted a royal charter to a group of merchants who submitted a petition to her, requesting permission to constitute a company. On 31, December 1600, the East India Company was formed with exclusive privileges of trading into the East Indians. It was also assigned the monopoly of British commerce from the Cape of Good Hope to the Straits of Magallen for a period of fifteen years.

The first British ship to arrive on the Coromandel Coast was 'The Globe' (1611) under captain Hippon, to endeavour to open a trade on the Coromandel Coast. He sailed to Pulicat but the Dutch refused to let him trade there; hence he went on to Masulipatnam and a factory was established there. Masulipatnam situated on latitude 16.9. North, Longitude; 81. 10' East, was the port with the greatest publicity on the coast. The Masulipatnam station became a well-established factory and it was the foundation for the British trade in East India. In 1625, due to the Dutch disturbance, the company agent at Bantam in Java suggested to the authorities in Europe the expediency of directing their attention to the trade on the coast and themselves at the close of the season despatched a vessel from Batavia (in Java) to a place called Armagon (on the Coromandel) where a small trading establishment was setup. During this period the great preponderance of the British trade was on the Eastern or Coromandel Coast owing to the fact that the place was not convenient for the inland trade, the Armagon factory did not exist long.

Thomas Ivie, the chief of Masulipatnam, commissioned Francis Day, Chief at Armagon, to find out a better site for the erection of a fort on the same coast. In 1667 after exploring the Coromandel Coast up to Pondicherry, he chose a narrow strip of land, a fishing village called Madraspatnam. Francis Day obtained a grant of territory of Madraspatnam on 22 July 1639 besides "Privileges and License to construct and make settlement at the place" from Venkatadri Nayak through the mediation of his brother Aiyappa." The eagerness of Day and his immediate superior Andrew Cogan, was mainly responsible for the construction of a grim brick and granite structure - the fort which was named after St. George (23 April 1640). The fort formed the nucleus of the present town of Madras. Fort St. George or Madras (originally Chennapatnam) situated on latitude 13.5 North, longitude 80.18 East, in the beginning was primarily used by British shipping. It was only in the eighteenth century with the expansion of Madras into interior and its administrative integration with neighbouring villages that it became a part of the region, rather than an alien settlement. Fort St. George became the residence of East India Company's president and council, controlling all the trade of Bay of Bengal and eastwards.

3.1 The Ports

The British spread out into a number of factories or trade settlements in ports all along the coast. San Thome, situated four miles to the South of Fort St. George had a remarkable history in this period. It had a prosperous town and the weaving centre of Mylapore as its suburb. Later the place attracted many merchants, artisans, weavers and boatmen. Among them Pathans, soon began to feature prominently in the trade of San Thome.

To the South of this coast, were the two ports of Porto Novo and Cuddalore, within twenty-five kilometres of each other. In these ports Chulia Muslims set up permanent residences and gradually made those places their home. Porto Novo, situated on latitude 11.30. North, Longitude 79.45. East was one of the most consistently flourished major ports, though its beginnings are obscure. Its primary strength was in the coastal trade and trade eastward, in which it was probably the pre-eminent port of Coromandel. Cuddalore had a remarkable longevity and continuity as a port of trade. The British purchased the site from the Maratha Raja, Rama Raja, and later the Fort St. David was built (1691), which was about 100 miles to the South of Madras and 16 miles to the South of Pondicherry. The Establishment of Fort St. David made Cuddalore to continue as an important port of the coast. There was another port, Devanampatnam, three kilometres north of Cuddalore, where ships used to land. North of Cuddalore was the port Sadurangapatnam, known to the Europeans as Sadras, which was an open roadstead port.

3.2 The Hinterland

Coromandel was a region with an expanding hinterland ever going deep as the necessity for purchase grew. Thus while the coast defines itself, the hinterland is limitless. The port which grew and developed under the influence of a wide hinterland was Masulipatnam. It did not have particularly favourable natural characteristics, but its good land communication with the heart of Golconda gave this port an edge over its neighbours. The port of Sadraspatnam drew on a hinterland of weaving and indigo culture. The ports of Porto Novo and Cuddalore served the Palar valley and, through land routes, had access into the Salem and Coimbatore districts. One particular example of this was in the great British demand for long cloth which could not be supplied from the then existing centres along the coastal strip. Hence the merchants started going into Salem for their supplies and thus brought these weaving centres into the export market. Similar

extensions westward were seen in the North Coromandel area, where again the pressure of demands forced merchants to go inland to Warangal, Nagalvanche and neighbouring centres.

4. THE TRADE LINKS OF THE BRITISH

The British on the Coromandel Coast especially from Fort St. George, (which was their headquarters for the entire coast) had trade contacts, of different types namely Euro- Asian trade i.e., inter-continental trade, Asiatic trade or country trade and port-to-port trade.

In the above mentioned trade, both the British company servants, and non-servants residing in the settlements were engaged in the trade. Other than the British, the native merchants who owned ships also participated. Their ships sailed both for company purpose i.e., for procuring goods for company and for their own purpose too.

In the Inter-continental trade, the ships from Fort St. George sailed to England and Persia. In the Country trade, the ships sailed to South East Asian Countries (Burma, Malaya, Archipelago, Philippines, and Ceylon) and China. In the port-to-port trade, the ships sailed between the ports of Coromandel and Bengal (Ganjam, Vizagapatnam, Porto Novo, Cuddalore or Fort St. David, etc) and from the Coromandel to the West Coast (Surat, Gujarat, Bombay, Calicut, Malabar Coast).

5. CONCLUSION

The British company secured a clear idea of the potential of the Coromandel trade of their interest in it. It was obvious that they decided that Coromandel was going to be a major artery of their commerce. The British were poised for a major growth of their commerce in this region, and for the expansion of trade; political and military commitments backed up their commerce. Thus commercial investment was increasingly supported by the deployment of military and naval force and by a more aggressive diplomatic involvement with and governors of hinterland.

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