

Hudud-Al-Alam

On the Foreign Trade of North East India

Ambika Prasad Morarka

For a historian, writing on the history of North-East India, the main hurdle is the paucity of authentic sources. So the best way to overcome this difficulty is to have a through examination of whatever sources that are available. It is observed that some of the sources, though brought to light long back, have not been utilised for the reconstruction of the history of this region, 'Hudud-Al-Ālam' is one of such sources. It is an account of the various regions of the world written in Persian by an unknown Arab geographer during the last quarter of the 10th Century A.D. Very few scholars have taken cognisance of this work and that too in a very limited way². The accounts of Yaqubi and Sulaiman give an idea of the brisk trade relations between this region and the Arab World. The present work further substantiates it. In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight the importance of the Hudud-Al-Ālam as a source for the study of the foreign trade relations of North-East India during the Early Medieval Period. Following Kingdoms or Cities of this region have been mentioned in the Hudud.

1. Qamrun

It is obviously the corrupt form of the name Kāmarupa which was the ancient geographical appellation applied to present state of Assam in North-East-India. It is described as "a Kingdom in the Eastern part of Hindustan. Rhinoceroses and gold mines are numerous there. From it come Sunbadha (emery) and good fresh aloes".

This work was composed during the year 982 A.D. At this time Kāmarupa was ruled over by the kings of Salastambha dynasty which ruled

Assam from A.D. 800 to 1000. Under the rulers of this dynasty Kamarupa flourished as a powerful and independent kingdom. It included a part of North Bengal also³. This is substantiated by the traditional accounts that river Karatoyā formed the western boundary of Prāgjyotisha or Kāmarupa⁴.

The political stability naturally gave stimulation to foreign trade relations of Kāmarupa which is recorded in the 'Hudud'. The commodities exported from Assam to China and Central Asia included Rhinoceroses, gold, emery and fresh aloes.

2. Sanf

According to Hudud-al-Ālam Sanf was a large city in the kingdom of Kamrup. It was well-known for Sanfi aloes. According to Minorsky 'Sanf' is the regular Arabic tendering of the Indian Champa which was the ancient Indian name of southern Anam. But since it is described as a part of Kamrup, it will have to be located in North-East India or in its neighborhood. There is a place named Champā, situated near the source of the river Manās which rises in Bhutan and falls into the Brahmaputra. This formed the western frontier of Kamarup⁵. If this identification is correct, it will have to be accepted that during that period Bhutan or atleast some part of it formed the part of the kingdom of Kamarup.

3. Mandala

The Hudud-al-Ālam further describes Mandala as the part of Kamrup. Minorsky has suggested its identification with a place named Vyāghratati Mandala situated in the delta region of the Gangā. He has also indicated the possibility of its identification with Mandalay in Burma. The place was famous for Mandali aloes. If the identification of Mandala as suggested above is correct the boundaries of the ancient Kamrup will be stretched

to the south and east right upto the coastal regions of Bengal and even Burma.

4. In the course of description the 'Hudud' mentions the five coastal districts of NMYAS, HARKAND, URSHIN, SAMANDAR and ANDRAS. The work further relates that the royal power of this land belongs to DĀHUM who does not consider any one superior to him and is said to have an army of 30,000 men. In no place of Hindustan are fresh aloes found but only the possession of the kings of Qumrun and of Dahum. These countries produce in large quantities good cotton which grows on trees yielding their produce during many years. The product of this country is the white conch which is blown like a trumpet and is called Shank. In this country there are numerous elephants.

According to Minorsky these five countries represent the whole eastern coast of India from Bengal to Andhra Pradesh. Harkand has been identified with Harikela, one of the most flourishing kingdoms of East Bengal. Nimiya was probably situated to its east, on the borders of India and Burma. Samandar was in the coastal region of West Bengal. Urshin has been identified with Orissa and Andras with the northern coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. King Dahum has not been identified. It is probably a reference to the Pāla ruling dynasty of Bengal. The Palas are credited with victory over Assam. Orissa and even the coromandal coast of south India⁶. An Arab merchant Sulaiman, who had visited India during the 9th Century describes the Pāla kingdom as Ruhmi. The account of the author of 'Hudud-al-Ālam was probably based on it. There is further striking similarity in the description of the military strength of the Rhumi and Dahum. Under the Pālas the whole coastal region of East India had brisk trade relations with the Arab world. This is thus confirmed by the Hudud-al-Ālam.

5. While describing the countries bordering to China the 'Hudud' refers to the following three kingdoms.

Tusul

It was a large country adjacent to China from which it is separated by a mountain. The inhabitants of this country are dark and their garments are of cotton. Minorsky has suggested Turchul in Burma as the present counterpart of Tusul. But its identification with Tripura is more justifiable.

Manak

The Hudud describes it as a country adjacent to China. It is probably a reference to the small state of Manipur in North-East India.

Musa

It is one more country in the same region which is probably represented by the eastern most state of Arunachal Pradesh.

It is mentioned that the three countries referred to above are at war with the Chinese in which the latter comes out stronger. Yaqubi and Sulaiman also mention these kingdoms in their accounts. They were known for good musk and strong forts. The people of these countries dressed like the Chinese. This clearly confirms that even the eastern most hilly states of this region were active in trade relations with the Arab World.

6. While describing the countries of Hindustan the 'Hudud' mentions names of following countries most of which were actually situated in south-east Asia.

Fansur

According to Hudud-al-Ālam "Fansur was a large town and a merchant resort. From it comes much camphor. It is a maritime emporium. The

king of Fansur is called Situha. He has a separate kingdom. In the kingdom of Fansur there are ten kings all on behalf of Situha. Minorsky has identified the city with Panchur, a celebrated port on the western coast of Sumatra. Situha was probably the corrupt form of Srivijaya, the ancient name of the present day Indonesia.

Haddanjira

"It is a town with a market one Farsong long. Its king is Situha. It is a flourishing and pleasant town". According to Minorsky Haddanjira probably represents the kingdom of the Sailendras of Indonesia. It was also known as Srivijaya which has been referred to as Situha.

Qimar

"A large country and its kings are the most just among the kings of Hindustan. And in all Hindustan adultery is licit, except in Qimar; where it is forbidden. The presents given by the kings of Qimar consist of elephant tusks and qimari aloes. Minorsky has rightly identified Qimar with Khmer the ancient kingdom flourished in the Me-kong valley of Cambodia.

Nubin And Sarandip:

"Nubin forms the frontier of Dahumis country. The provisions and corn of Sarandip came from this town.

These two place names have not been identified by Minorsky. Sarandip is obviously the corrupt rendering of the sanskrit geographical name Suvarnadvipa, which was applied during ancient times to the whole Malayan Peninsula. As Nubin has been placed on the frontier of Dahum country, it can be located somewhere on the southern coromandal coast, through which commodities were directly exported to the Malayan archipelago.

Urshifin:

"It is a town with a district producing into the sea like an Island. Its air is bad. The royal power belongs to a woman who is called Rayinā. Extremely large elephants are found there such as in no other place in India. From it came large quantities of pepper and rotang. This place also has not been identified. It may stand either for Ceylon or for the Andaman and Nicobar islands as they are known for the unsuitable climate.

The Hudud-al-Ālam thus not only describes the trading centres of North-East India but also some of the centres of South-East Asia. The work calls them as territories of Hindustan. It is an established fact that the whole South-East Asia had very close cultural and commercial contacts with India through out the ancient period. So much so that they had become the parts of a greater Indian Empire. The present Persian work further substantiates this fact.

Notes & References

1. V.Minorsky, **Hudul-al-Alam, The Regions of the Wrold**, pp.86-87.
2. Ramkumar Chaube, **Indian Historical Quarterly**, 1939 pp.661-671.
3. **The Age of Imperial Kanauj**, p.60.
4. Ibid.
5. Minorsky, op.cit.
6. **The Age of Imperial Kanauj**, p. 50.
7. Ibid.