

ANCIENT INDIA'S OVERSEAS TRADE THROUGH THE NORTH-EASTERN REGION

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The north-eastern region of India has played a dynamic role in the political and cultural history of India throughout the ancient period.¹ In the field of overseas trade also the region was at the forefront. The geographical situation of the region proved to be a boon for its leading role in maritime commerce. The Buddhist literature is full of stories about sailing on the ocean and rivers² and enterprising activities of traders going abroad.² In the Sutta Nipata we come across a reference made by the Buddha of sailing on the oceans for six months.³ Since the Buddha's activities were confined to eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the sea faring activities referred to above were obviously connected with India's maritime trade with east and south-east Asia through the Bay of Bengal. The Dighanikaya refers to merchants crossing the⁴ ocean with the help of direction showing birds.⁴ The Therigatha mentions accounts of merchants sailing on the sea with the hope of earning more wealth.⁵ We come across several stories of sea-voyage and shipwrecks in the Jatakas. They also mention ship building activities and commercial voyages from Varanasi, Videha and Champa to Suvarnabhumi (Burma and neighbouring territories) and Tamraparni (Srilanka).⁶ The account from the Ceylonese chronicle Dipavamsa about Prince Vijay's voyage from Bengal with 700 men on board further confirms the brisk maritime activities in the Bay of Bengal.⁷

According to the Arthashastra, the Mauryan state had instituted an officer designated as Navadhyaksha to supervise the shipping department. Arrangements were made for giving proper training to sailors in the science of Navigation which was

known as Niyamakashilpa. The mariners were trained by giving them knowledge of various trade-routes, direction of winds, safety from shipwreck and handling of the direction showing birds. The navigators had formed their own guilds, under the leadership of their head who was styled as Niyamkajethaka.

A large number of traders from the various ports and trading centres on the Ganga sailed every year to eastern countries. The Jatakas have preserved several accounts about these ventures. The voyage of a Brahmana named Shankha from Varanasi to Suvarnabhumi is mentioned in the Shankha Jataka. The rescue of shipwrecked victims in far off sea and their safe return to Varanasi by a sea faring nymph occurs in the Silanisamsha Jataka. Another Jataka gives a graphic account of the sea voyage of king Mahajanka from Champa to Suvarnabhumi along with 700 men.

The eastern region had trade relations with the west also. This trade was carried through the port of Brigukaccha (Broach in Gujarat) which was connected with this region by both land and sea routes. The land route passed through Kausambi, Vidisha and Ujjain and the sea route was along the Coromandal¹⁰ Coast, Ceylon, Malabar and Konkan to Broach.

The volume of internal as well as external trade of this region during the 3rd century B.C. is attested to by Megasthenes who refers to six boards in the municipal administration of Pataliputra out of which five were connected with trade and industries. One of these boards had to look after the comforts of foreign merchants.

Trade Relations with China

The intercourse between China and India could be traced right up to the epic period. The

Ramayana refers to the Gobi desert of China beyond the Himalayas as Valukarnava. Reference to the import of Chinese silk into India is found in the Arthashastra which describes the commodity as 'China-patta'.¹³ Commercial intercourse between India and China during the 3rd and 2nd century B.C. has been recorded by Pan-ku,¹⁴ the Chinese historian of the early Han period. The name of the Indian Kingdom with whom China had commercial relations has been given as Huang-che. Huang-che was identified with Kanchi in Tamilnadu.¹⁵ But recently scholars have questioned the correctness of the said identification. Dr.P.C. Bagchi has equated¹⁶ Huang-che with Ganga on philological grounds. Dr. K.K. Sarkar has substantiated the same view on the basis of the striking similarity between exports and imports from this region mentioned in Chinese accounts and the Greek accounts of the 1st and 2nd century A.D.¹⁷ D.K. Chakravarty has further corroborated this view by pin-pointing on rhinoceros as one of the major items exported from India to China.¹⁸ There is no doubt that the north-eastern region is known for the occurrence of this animal right upto the 10th century A.D.¹⁹ On the other hand, the association of rhinoceros with south India is not mentioned in any source. Therefore, it is now certain that the first region of India with which China had developed trade relations was Ganga i.e. the deltaic region of South Bengal and not Kanchipuram area of Tamilnadu.

Ganga was the name of the river, a Kingdom, a people as well as a market town. This is proved by the testimony of the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea.²⁰ On the basis of Ptolemy's geography the market town of Ganga²¹ was situated at the principal mouth of the Ganga. It's occurrence in Chinese as well as the Greek accounts leaves no doubt about its being a trading centre as well as a port town engaged in overseas trade. But its exact location has

not been done so far. Dr. D.C. Sircar has identified it with Gangasagar island which is one of the four holiest Tirtha Ksetras of India.²² The present topography of the site of Gangasagar Sangama however does not suit it to be a harbour. Shri D.K. Chakravarty has suggested its identification with Chandraketurah in 24 Pargana district of lower Bengal on the basis of the discovery of terracota seals and punchmarked²³ coins with ship motifs found at the place.²³ From the viewpoint of similarity of name, tradition and geographical location Gangasagar seems to be the possible modern equivalent of the great sea-port of Ganga. Due to sea erosion the whole topography of the site seems to have been changed as indicated by Dr. D.C. Sircar.²⁴

Besides the port town of Ganga, Tamralipa, modern Tamluk in the Midnapur district of West Bengal was another port engaged in overseas trade. It was an active centre of commercial activities right from the Mauryan period. Emperor Ashoka himself is reported to have visited this town.²⁵ It is²⁶ frequently mentioned in the Buddhist literature.²⁶ Fahien, the Chinese²⁷ traveller sailed to Ceylon from this port-town.²⁷ The archaeological finds corroborate the literary evidence about the hectic maritime activities at this place. The occurrence of Red polished and Rouletted wares at Tamluk confirms its commercial contacts with the Mediterranean world also.²⁸ But surprisingly the name of this port does not occur either in the Graeco-Roman or Chinese sources with whom India had major commercial contacts. On the other hand, the name of the port town of Ganges is mentioned in the Chinese annals as well as Ptolemy's geography and the Periplus. It indicates that the port of Ganga was the main port in Bengal through which the overseas trade was carried. From the Gupta period onwards, Gangasagar ceased to be a port mostly due to the topographical

upheavals created by the sea erosion and changes in river beds. Naturally its place was taken by Tamralipta. During the medieval period, the place of Tamluk was taken by other ports such as Hoogly, Chittagong and Sonargaon. Under the British, the position was occupied by Calcutta. Archaeological explorations at Gangasagar will certainly shed a new light on the history of this oldest sea port of India in the east. For this purpose marine archaeological excavations will have to be undertaken as done in the case of Mul Dwarka.

With the beginning of the Christian Era, India's trade with the Roman empire reached to its maximum height. This is evidenced through the literary sources as well as archaeological finds. These trade relations were bound to have their effects on the cultural life of ancient India. The Romans imported articles of luxury from India on a massive scale which brought prosperity to this country. The Indians also developed a fascination for certain Roman things due to their fineness. The fine pottery of Italian manufacture known as the Arretine ware and the Black Rouletted wares impressed the Indians so much that they imported these varieties of Roman pottery on a very large scale. Where its import was not possible, the local potters manufactured its imitations.³⁰ Therefore several sites all over India have yielded these varieties of Roman pottery. In the north-eastern region also there are several such sites. Tamluk,³¹ (the ancient Tamralipta),³² Chandraketugarh,³³ Harinarayanpur,³⁴ Berachampa,³⁵ Atghara,³⁶ Baral,³⁷ Bangarh³⁷ and several sites in the Gangetic West Bengal. Besides this pottery the sites of Chandraketugarh and Harinarayanpur have yielded coins and Terracota seals with ship motifs indicating overseas trade of this region. The association of these archaeological finds with punch-marked coins and the NBP suggests that the region

was active in³⁸ foreign trade even during the Mauryan period. On some of the T.C. Seals from Chandraketugarh there are carved different poses of rhinoceros. Minakha, a neighbouring site has yielded a stratified skeleton of the animal for which the Chinese emperors had a deep fascination and therefore it³⁹ was the major item of export from India to China.

Among the articles of export to China were pearls, glass, rare stones, rhinoceros and beads of various types and material. In return the Chinese gave fine silk and gold to Indian traders.⁴⁰ This does not mean that silk and gold were not local products. The evidence of silk manufacture in India⁴¹ has already been traced right upto 1500 B.C. on the basis of archaeological evidence. The gold mines of Assam and Bengal have been referred to by many authorities.⁴² Why then the Chinese silk was imported to India? It may probably be due to its superior quality. Cotton of a good variety was another product of export, particularly to the western countries. As a matter of fact, cotton was introduced to the Western Countries by India. This is confirmed by the testimony of Herodotus. The Greek word for cotton is 'Carbasus' which⁴³ is obviously derived from Sanskrit 'Karpasha'. Ivory, wet variety of aloe, conch shell and corals also formed the products of export from North-east India right upto the medieval period.⁴⁴ These products were brought for their export to the⁴⁵ coastal ports from far-off places such as Assam and the hill states⁴⁶ in the north-east and Ayodhya in the north-west. China was connected with Bengal through land routes also which passed through the north-eastern hill states. The whole Prachya Desha was thus involved in the Sino-Indian trade.

Indian monopoly on the sea routes is established not only by Indian sources but even

by the Chinese sources which record the use of Indian ships by the Chinese traders for transporting their commodities. The progress in ship building activity of ancient India is witnessed by literary as well as archaeological evidences.

The legacy of overseas trade was continued by Bengal right upto the beginning of modern times. This factor attracted the attention of Europeans towards this region and ultimately the north-east region became the first Indian territory to become the part of the British empire.

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