

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SEA TRADE BETWEEN THE SUB-CONTINENT AND THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE (622 AD TO 1258 AD)

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ABSTRACT

The trade relationship between the sub-continent and the Arab world from the time of the rise of Islam up to about the fall of Baghdad can be termed as the golden age. During the period under review, there seems to have been flourishing trade in precious stones, diamonds, pearls, dates, ivory, pepper, fine muslin, cotton cloth, various types of fruits and different birds and animals. The goods exported from the sub-continent were costlier and more valuable than those imported. This paper delineates the development of commercial relations between the Arabs and the sub-continent in the historical perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The history of sub-continent's commercial relations with the Arabs goes back to very ancient times to the days of the Ptolemaic kings of Egypt and the Himayarite civilization of southern Arabia. Several centuries before the rise of Islam the Arab merchants, mainly belonging to the southern coasts of Arabia or to the Persian Gulf, traded with different regions of the sub-continent. Characteristically, the Arabs were a commercial race by nature, although it applied mainly to the Arabs of the coastal regions and not so much to those living in the hinterland of Arabia. However, even after the rise of Islam in the first half of the 7th century A.D., when the Arabs acquired political supremacy in the Middle East, this characteristic of theirs remained the dominant feature throughout the succeeding centuries, with the exception of the Arab conquest of Sindh during the early years of the 8th century and their short lived rule in that region, their relations with the sub-continent have by and large remained either commercial or cultural. Wolseley Haig (1928:349) chronicles that the Arab conquest of Sindh affected only a small portion of the fringe of that vast country. While the Arabs in Sindh had antagonistic relations

with the neighbouring princes, the Gurjarat Pratiharas of Kanauj, the Rashtrakuta princes of the Decçan patronized the Arab merchants living in their kingdom and treated them with love and friendship (Sauvaget 1948:12). However, the conquest of Sindh is a historical fact, and since this episode history does not seem to have recorded any invasion of sub-continent by the Arabs. An academic study on the Indo-Pak trade relations has rarely been undertaken. This paper deals with the commercial relation and examines the balance of trade between the sub-continent and the Arab world. Primary data pertaining to the sub-continent forms part of the source material for this study. Among the most prominent writers include merchant Sulayman, Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, al-Masudi, Istakhri, Ibn Hauqal, al-Muaqddasi, al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, al-Baladhuri, al-Idrisi, etc. However, secondary sources have also been used in this study.

DEVELOPMENT OF ARAB TRADE WITH THE SUB-CONTINENT

Islam originated in and spread from Hijaz. Unlike the Arabs of Southern Arabia, the Arabs of Hijaz were mainly inland traders. Mecca, which lay midway between Syria and Yemen, was the centre of their commercial activities. However, these Arabs carried on some sea-trade as well. They were agents of trade between Egypt, Abyssinia and Hijaz, and their main port was Jiddah. In the inland trade they bought sub-continent goods in Yemen and sold them in Mecca and other towns. In Mecca at this time an annual fair was held in which the commodities bought in Sana and other towns or in Syria were sold to the Beduins who gathered there to buy their annual requirements and also to worship their deities kept in the Kaba. The Quraysh, who were the custodians of the Ka'ba, were also the leading merchants of the town, Mecca, being the nerve-centre of the commercial and cultural activities of Hijaz at this time, it is no wonder that the message of Islam originated and spread from this town and was propagated by a man who himself was a merchant.

From among the goods that were imported from sub-continent in this period and sold in the markets of Hijaz was the sub-continent sword called by the Arabs *al-Muhannad*. The Beduins being warring tribes, the instruments of war were most

popular. Swords were imported both from Yemen and sub-continent. Those manufactured in Yemen were made out of the iron imported from sub-continent; others were manufactured in sub-continent. The swords of sub-continent had the reputation of being very supple and sharp. Pre-Islamic Arabian poetry has many references to these and other goods that came from sub-continent and were popular among the Beduins (al-Ali 1953:217).

An important factor contributory to the development of Indo-Arab trade' was the rise and spread of the Arab political power, which within a few years of the rise of Islam engulfed vast territories stretching between the Canary Islands off the west coast of Africa in the West and the borders of China in the East, and between the Caucasus in the North and the shores of the Arabian Sea in the South. The inclusion of Sind within the Arab Empire further accelerated the overland trade with sub-continent. However, the greatest impetus to Indo-Arab sea-trade was given when Baghdad was founded by the Abbasid Caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur on the site of an ancient Sasanian village of the same name (Hitti 1962:292). The foundation of Baghdad was an epoch-making event in the history of Indo-Arab trade relations, for now for the first time the capital of the Arab Empire was directly linked by water with the Arabian Sea through the water systems of the Tigris and the Euphrates, which jointly flowed into the Persian Gulf. The ancient ports of Ubullā, Darayn and Sohar continued to play their role (al-Ali 1953:230) and in time Basra was also developed and during the succeeding centuries acquired the significance of a Liverpool for the Arabs, where the imports and exports of the East and the West were stocked and exchanged. Goods imported from sub-continent, China, Egypt, East Africa and other countries were stocked here and then distributed to various centres of the Arab Empire; similarly, goods of export were carried from here to another port in the Persian Gulf, called *Siraf* (Sauvaget 1948:41), and from there loaded on boats bound for Sub-continent, China and other countries of the East.

In sub-continent the most important ports for the Arab sea trade were Daybul, Cambay, Broach, Thana, Sindabur (Nainar 1942:74) and Quilon on the west and south-west coast; then Ballin Kanja (Conjeevaram) and Samandar on the east coast. For about four centuries (9th-12th centuries A.D.) these ports were the main

distributing centres of Indo-Arab trade. It is difficult to judge how far Arab trade extended in the interior of sub-continent, but all evidence leads to the conclusion that it was restricted mainly to the coastal region and to the southern peninsula of sub-continent, and of course Sindh and parts of the Punjab. There is evidence, however, that Bengal and Assam had also come within the reach of Arab merchants (Al-Idrisi 1954:81).

By the 10th century A.D. large communities of Arab merchants had settled down along the coastal regions of sub-continent. According to al-Masudi (d.956 A.D), thousands of Arabs were found settled in Chaul and other towns of the Konkan region of Bombay. These communities had their own 'chiefs' appointed by the ruling princes and were given the right to administer their communal affairs, but unlike the European merchants of the Mughal days or of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab merchants during this period do not seem to have acquired trading or capitulatory rights for themselves. They settled down in Sub-continent as peaceful merchant communities and even intermarried. The children of such marriages came to be known among the Arabs as *bavasira* (Al-Masudi 1989:86). Even, the Konkani Muslims of Bombay and the Mopalas of Malabar trace their origin to the Arabs and are imbued with Arab culture.

During the period under review, Arab trade relations with sub-continent may be said to have been at their zenith. In the art of navigation, the Persians, the majority of whom were now converted to Islam, continued to hold the supreme position. But from the 10th century onwards Persian navigation began to decline until it collapsed during the 16th century under the pressure of the Portuguese. Albuquerque, the Portuguese governor of sub-continent, sealed Persian trade with Sub-continent by restricting the commercial activities of the Persians within the confines of Goa (Hasan 1928:147).

The Arabs seemed to have learnt and utilized the art of navigation from the Persians. From the accounts of Merchant Sulavman, al-Masudi and others we get some idea of the sea-routes to Sub-continent followed by the Arabs: normally, leaving Siraf, the boats which carried hardly two hundred odd passengers reached Muscat, where they collected fresh water for the journey then with favourable winds they sailed straight to Quilon. The total

voyage took two months or so. From Quilon the boats crossed the Straits of Palk and reached a port called Baum; here the routes bifurcated: the boats bound for China left for the Andaman Nicobar Islands and from there went to Kalah in the Malay Peninsula, from where they went to Canton via Indo-China; others sailed north in the Bay of Bengal and went to Kanja, Samundar and other ports in the Delta of the Ganges. Indeed, coastal sailing from the Persian Gulf was in vogue, and boats sailed along the western and the eastern coasts of Sub-continent, cruising and calling at numerous ports.

The details of Arab navigation or the art of boat-building is beyond the scope of this study, however, mention has been given of an interesting fact about boat-building. The Arab sailors specially constructed boats from coconut-wood. After the boats were built they loaded them with coconut-wood and other goods and carried them away to their homeland (Al-Idrisi 1954:12). These must have been the smaller types of boats which the Arabs used for cruising along the coasts: in those days this was a very lucrative trade in which the Arabs indulged.

During the first century after the rise of Islam (622–722 A.D) the main trade of the sub-continent was with Iraq, but there was a considerable decline as compared to the previous position and the sub-continent's trade with other Arab countries also declined. This was a direct result of the Arab conquests. The import of finished goods from Sub-continent had decreased, as the Arabs, who had now become masters of the Middle East, were in greater need of armaments and weapons of war and cheap essential commodities than costly finished goods (*Ibid*:129). Moreover, Arab merchants became engaged in the purchase and sale of stocks of booty acquired by the conquering armies, which business they found to be more profitable (al-Ali 1953:232). Sea-trade declined, as it involved greater risks like wreckage, pirate activities, etc. However, gold played an important part in the trade between the sub-continent and the Arab countries. It was used as the only means of exchange by merchants of the sub-continent. Thus the demand for gold increased and almost all known gold mines of the Middle East were exploited. This also resulted in an increase in the number of brokers in commercial towns like Basra and speculation accompanied it (*Ibid*:217). After the foundation of Baghdad in 762

A.D., trade relations between sub-continent and the Arab countries seemed to have improved and this state of affairs lasted until roughly the 13th century AD.

IMPORTS AND EXPORTS

Teak-wood, used mainly for house-building and ship-building, was an important commodity of export from sub-continent. Raw iron and swords manufactured in sub-continent were exported in large quantities. Gold, silver and, other metals were also exported. Among precious stones, diamonds, crystals, etc., were exported. Besides, there seems to have been a flourishing trade in pearls. Al-Idrisi states that there were pearl-fisheries in Sopara, near Bombay, the products of which were probably exported to the Arab world (Al-Idrisi 1954:51). The horn of the rhinoceros, used for manufacturing necklaces and other ornaments, was another rare and precious commodity that seems to have been in demand and were sold at high prices. The Rajas and Nawabs of the sub-continent made knives out of them and used them for detecting poison in food by dipping them into it (Chatterjee 1953:117). Indeed, the rhino was more widespread in sub-continent at that time than it is to-day. Another much coveted commodity was ivory which was traditionally exported from sub-continent from very ancient times. Again, a variety of aromatics, spices and scents were exported in large quantities. The Malabar Coast was famous for pepper, and the Arab's main trade with that country was in this commodity, as also in cardamom, cinnamon, camphor, sandal-wood, aloes-wood and perfumes (Al-Muqaddasi 1994:110). Among fruits, mangoes, jack-fruit, lemons and citrons, coconuts, jamans, etc., were very well known to the Arabs. Al-Masudi points out that the lemon was exported to Oman and planted there and then it was transferred to Basra, Syria and other places; but since it lacked the rich soil of the sub-continent, the fruit lost its original sweet taste, flavour and beautiful colour (Al-Masudi 1989:438). Sugar-candy was manufactured in large quantities in Sind and was exported to the Islamic lands (Al-Muqaddasi 1994:480). Among animals, elephants, civet-cats, etc. were exported. South sub-continent was famous for elephants of great heights. Among birds, peacocks are said to have been exported to the Arab countries. Al-Mas'udi reports that Sub-

continent peacocks were imported into the lands of Islam, but they soon lost the original charms and colour, for the climate did not suit them. A part from the articles listed above, fine muslin, cotton cloth, indigo, various types of dyes and many other articles were exported to the Arab countries from Sub-continent. Thanā was famous for its cloth and Cambay for sandals (Al-Muqaddasi 1994:481). It is very likely that ambergris secreted by the whale sperm was also exported from here (Sauvaget 1948:335).

Among the goods imported by the sub-continent, there were frankincense, ivory-tusks, horses, gold, pearls, dates, and other finished goods (Chatterjee 1953:79).

DECLINE OF TRADE RELATIONS

By the 10th century A.D., Baghdad had lost its former glory and importance as the cultural and economic centre of Islam. As a result of the continuous wars of the Crusades, a large portion of Syrian and Egyptian trade was diverted to western countries. Then, the devastations caused by the Mongol invasions of Western Asia and the rise of the petty dynasties in the latter Abbasid period caused much disruption in trade. The Abbasid caliphate came to an end in 1258 AD, when Hulaku sacked Baghdad. All these factors led to the decline of Arab trade with sub-continent. But, by far the greatest setback was caused by the appearance of the Portuguese in the Arabian Sea. Soon after this event both Arab and Persian navigation and sea-trade with the sub-continent collapsed.

CONCLUSION

The trade relations between the Arabs the sub-continent is of a great significant in the political history of two regions. Both the regions benefitted for centuries from goods and commodities exchanged between them. But, it is difficult to say anything about the general effects of this trade on the economy of the respective countries, as the details of the imports and the exports and the periodic trade returns have not yet been worked out. However, on the basis of the accounts of the Arab writers of this period it may be surmised that the total balance of trade must have been favourable to the sub-continent. This might have been caused by: firstly that gold was used by the merchants of the sub-continent as a means of exchange; secondly that the volume of sub-continent's

exports seems to have far exceeded that of the Arab countries to sub-continent; and lastly that the goods exported from the sub-continent were costlier and more valuable than those imported.

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