Chapter II

THE COROMANDEL COAST

The east coast of peninsular India was called as the Coromandel Coast by the European writers and the European trading companies have adopted it in their official documents. Portuguese were the first to apply the term "Charamandel" to the coast of present day Tamil and Telugu countries. Barbosa wrote it as "Choromandel" as against the original printing of the term Charamandel, and it stayed for further period. Yule and Burnel and other modern historians adhere and accept the etymology of this term from Cholamandalam, the country of Cholas.

Coromandel had no well defined limits and often was held to extend as far as Krishna river or even to the coast of Orissa. Barbosa defines the limit from Point Calimere to Krishna delta. Some modern writers follow this. Nachinarkkinyiar in his commentary on Tholkappiam, a classical Tamil epic, mentions the limit of east coast as Verkadu (Pulicat). Arasaratnam bifurcates the area north of Pennar as Northern Coromandel and south up to Point Calimere as Southern Coromandel. A modern research scholar bounds the Southern Coromandel from Cape Comerine to Madras. Arasaratnam names the coastal territories from Point Calimere, to Tuticorin as Madura Coast and beyond south of it as Fishery Coast. To Burtan Stein, the Coromandel Coast corresponds more or less with the territory of the Imperial Cholas of the tenth-thirteenth century, extending to the southern tip of the Peninsula to the Krishna deltaic region.

The east coast of South India was known to the Arab geographers, travellers and traders as Mabar. Mabar, the Arabic word, meaning a ferry or a crossing place. The Arabs might have named the coast as Mabar since all the vessels habitually touched the ports of this coast before they crossed to Ceylon and other Eastern countries. The word Mabar was used first by Yakut, the Arab geographer (1179--1229), in his Geographical Dictionary to denote the east coast of the Peninsular India. It is not possible from the accounts of Yakut and other Arab geographers to locate the boundaries and the area it comprises. Abul Fida, another Arab geographer says that, "the first locality of Mabar from the side of Malabar is Cape Comerine". Diminisque, yet another geographer says, "after Quilon comes the country of Sulyans (Chola) the Mabar".

It will be seen from the above that different authors have followed different standards as they fancied it or to suit their convenience. Here, we confine, with regard to our study on the Muslims of Coromandel, the Tamil Speaking Muslim
community of the present day Tamil Nadu, from the shores of Pulicat to Cape Comerine, since it is well with in the limits of the former Cholamandalam and later the Coromandel. Thus the Coromandel Coast of our study consists of the present districts of Chingulpet, South Arcot, Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram Thirunelveli and Tuticorin, the last four being called as maritime districts.

Throughout the stretch of the eastern coastline there were many ports from ancient times. The Sangam Tamil classics of the second century A.D. have reference to the ports of Cauverypoompattinam (Puhar), Tondi and Korkai. Silappadikaram, the Tamil Classic of the second century A.D. gives a very realistic description of Puhar. Here, immense quantity of goods of various descriptions were brought from distant lands and exchanged for gold. In this port one could see sailors from all countries. Korkai, the pearl port of ancient Tamil Nadu, was at the mouth of river Tamiraparani. It is Kolkhol, and Colchi respectively of Ptolemy and the author of Periplus. Korkai became an inland city due to the accumulation of silt at the mouth of the river Tamiraparani and was abandoned and it gave place to a new port namely Kayal.

Some of the modern writers have identified Korkai with Kilakkarai, in the present Ramanathapuram district. A correction is needed here. Caldwell has rightly identified Korkai, with the small village at the mouth of river Tamiraparani in Thirunelveli district. Tamil, literatures of Sangam age speak of the port of Korkai and it’s famous pearls. Archaeological finds confirms the antiquity of the present Korkai village as referred to by Caldwell. Hence identification of Korkai with Kilakkarai is fancyful and cannot be sustained. Nagapattanam, Tondi and Saliyur were other ports of lesser importance during ancient times. Archaeological finds at Arikkamedu near Pondicherry confirms the antiquity of the Pondicherry port.

Under the Pallavas (575-900) Mamallapuram was a prosperous port which attracted foreign ships laden with gems, riches and elephants. Later it lost it’s importance. Under Chola Raja Raja I, the status of Mamallapuram port was shifted to Nagapattanam, which emerged as a vital port for the maritime trade of the various groups of merchants of South India. Epigraphs of eleventh century amply testify the trading activities in the port of Nagapattanam. Mylapore (Santhome) was another port of considerable importance during this period.

Kayal, a few miles south east of Korkai was an important port in the medieval period. Marcopolo, Wassaf, Rashiduddin, Abdul Razack, Nicolos Conti, Varthama and Barbosa refer to Kayal as a prosperous port. Kayal was said to be a great and noble city.
All ships from the west touched this port. It was a meeting place of traders from Hormuz, Kis and Aden. Horses were brought from Arab countries to this port in large numbers for sale. Vasco da gama mentions Kayal. Kayal is now called as Old Kayal. In the course of time, Kayal ceased to be a sea port and present Punnaiakayal was founded (etymologically it is Pinnaiakayal · Pinnai · behind i.e. the Kayal behind the Old Kayal.) With the definite ceaser of the coast by the Portuguese in 1532, the status of Kayal rapidly changed. The local Muslim traders left Kayal and improved the port at Kayalpattanam, originally called Sonadukondanpattanam in inscriptions of the fourteenth century found here and later corrupted in to Songapattanam, five miles east of Pinnaiakayal. So, it is safe to assume that Marcopolo's Kayal is not the present Kayalpattanam. St. Xavier records Kayalpattanam as the principality of the Moors (Muslims) .

There were also many minor ports in the Coromandel Coast during the middle ages with lesser trading activities, and they assumed importance from sixteenth century onwards. Such insignificant ports shot in to the prominence, for export and coastal trade and also to avoid growing European competition.

At the close of nineteenth century there were about 65 ports in the Madras Presidency, among which 42 were in the coast of Tamil Nadu. They are: Madras, Marakkanam, Cuddalore, PortoNovo, Kodialpalayam, Thirumullaivasal, Tranquebar, Karaikkal (French), Nagore, Nagapattanam, Velanganni, Topputurai, Point Calimere, Adirampattanam, Muthupet, Krishnajipattanam, Kattumavadi, Ammapattanam, Kottaipattanam, Gopalapattanam, Soundarapandiapattanam, Pasipattanam, Devendrapattanam, Tondi, Nambithalai, Mudiampanattanam, Attangarai, Pillaiyarmadam, Emmandalamumkondan, Pamban, Rameswaram, Mandapam, Vedalai, Marakkayarpattanam, Valinokkam, Ervadi, Vaipar, Tuticorine, Kulesekarapattanam Kayalpattanam and Colachel .

Among the above ports Madras, Nagapattanam and Tuticorin were ranked as major ports and others as minor ports. Karaikkal, Pasipattanam, Nambithalai, Mudiampanattanam, Attangarai, Pillaiyarmadam, Emmandalamumkondan, Rameswaram, Mandapam, Vedalai, Marakkayarpattanam, Ervadi, Valinokkam and Vaipar ports were reduced to lesser or insignificant trading activities at the close of nineteenth century .

The number of ports increased after the advent of the Europeans since the hinterland products had to be delivered at the coastal settlements and ports. The prosperity of a particular port depended on the availability of goods for export and coastal trade. When the export of the major commodity, the textiles, declined majority of the minor ports lost their importance.
Most of the Coromandel ports were located in the mouth of estuary of small rivers. Country vessels could sail in to these rivers in favourable seasons to bring hinterland products for export. The ships were anchored far away at the firm ground in the sea and loading and unloading was done by numerous small boats. The ocean going vessels would stand out in the ocean and the coastal boats could sail through the narrow channel in to the river to load and unload on the river bank where warehouses and customs houses were located.

A brief description of a few ports are given here for the better understanding of the trade, commodity composition of export and import, the merchants and the companies involved in the trade.

Madras (Chennapattanam) was a fishing settlement before the arrival of the English. It grew as a open roadstead and primarily used for English shipping. The development of the Madras port during eighteenth century was more due to political factors rather than commercial. Regular shipping was undertaken to Malabar, Bombay, Surat and Persian Gulf ports, eastward to Burmese ports, Ache, Bantam later to Manila and Canton. Urbanisation necessiated the development of coastal trade in rice salt and other food articles. The port had good storage facility and later connected with railway link to various places in the Presidency. The principal exports were seeds, leather, raw and tanned skin, raw cotton, grain, pulses, coffee, tea, cotton manufactures and coir. The main items of import were cotton manufactures, metals and ores, yarn, machinery, spices and sugar.

The port of Santhome (Mylapore) was of much significance in the trade to Southeast Asian countries under the Portuguese. The trade from this port dwindled in the nineteenth century. Kovalam (Shahid Bandar), Sadras Pattanam, Alambaram, were ports for inland trade in the eighteenth century but they never developed in trade inspite of the efforts of the Nawabs of Arcot. Next port was Kunimedu. In all these ports the Dutch and English were dealing with the merchants and shippers of this area but they degenerated in the nineteenth century. Pondicherry port under the French was drawn into Eastern trade network.

Cuddalore, called Islamabad by the Muslims, had a continuity as an important port of this region. During nineteenth century, groundnut and its products (oil and kernel) were the staple commodity of export in European countries, and Ceylon. Coloured piece goods, pulmyra jaggery, sugar, rice, pulses, were all exported to various countries. The principal imports were coal, timber, spices, European stores and provisions. There was a brisk coastal trade in groundnut products, rice, paddy, sugar and pulses.
PortoNovo was the smoothest and softest port on the Coromandel. It was known as Mohamed Bandar and the present Tamil name is Parangipettai. The anchorage in the approach of the port was firm and good. This port city had the character of an urban metropolis with ship building and repair yard. The Portuguese, the Dutch and the English had their factories here which will reveal its potentiality and importance in ocean trade. It was largely frequented by native vessels. Commodities of export were rice, paddy, groundnut oil, other oil seeds, textiles, indigo, the imports were European goods and fine grass mats from Ache 28.

Thanjavur coast had a large number of ports in the region, the northern most being Kodiampalayam at the mouth of Coloroon river. Next important port was Thirumullaivasal which had direct Inland access through the Oppanar river. On both the banks of these river, there were many chowkies for the purpose of loading boats with grains to be carried down for exports. Rice and paddy was exported in large quantity to Ceylon. From the next port, Topputhurai, live animals were exported to Ceylon. Tranquebar was a Danish port. Here the trade was not substantial. But coastal trade improved in this region due to the new settlements in the port town from the beginning of eighteenth century. In the later half of nineteenth century larger trade disappeared in this port because of the construction of Nagapattanam - Thanjavur railway line in 1861 and rail connection to Tiruchirappalli in 1862. Native vessels frequented this port very often since the Danes encouraged such shipping activities. British Indian steamers called at this port to pick up passengers bound for Mauritius and other Eastern countries. Rice, paddy, coconut oil, coir products were exported and sugar, timber, sandalwood, French goods, were imported29. Karaikkal, the French port shipped a large quantity of paddy and rice to Malabar and Ceylon. Textiles and dryfish were other articles of export. During favourable season, inland trade was undertaken by small vessels through the river Arasalar30. At the close of nineteenth century, trading activities in this port fell to insignificance.

Nagore port, situated at the mouth of river Vettar, was the home of larger Indian merchant fleets ranging from one masted small vessels to ships of 300 tonnes31. The chief exports were rice, textiles, chank, and other sea products and imports were spices, metals, areca, Pegu ponies and a variety of consumables. Small vessels sailed southwards to the coast of southern Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram, Thirunelveli and Malabar. It was an important port of South Indian trade to Ceylon. It served as an outlet for the produces of the districts of Mayavaram and Kumbakonam32. Nagore blue cloth found good market in Europe. Most of the merchants were Muslim Marakkayars to whom Nagore was the holy place because of the presence of the Dargah of Shahul Hammeed Aulia, popularly known as Nagore Andavar. Holyness and trading opportunities of this place attracted Muslim
trading communities and their settlements grew in this port area. The merchants here built their own vessels of considerable burthen. The Muslim traders of Nagore had depots at Ache, Sumatra, Pegu and Ceylon. At the close of nineteenth century Nagore became a warf of Nagapattanam.

Nagapattanam is about three miles south of Nagore. It was a prominent port of south India for centuries. After their occupation of this port, the Portuguese, permitted native shipping activities uninterrupted through their cartaz system but their general hostility towards Muslims, made the latter migrate to nearby Nagore. When Nagapattanam came under the Dutch, the remaining Marakkayar traders also began to operate from Nagore, because of the hurdles created by the restrictive policies of the Dutch. The port was an open roadstead, offered good anchorage for larger ships, loading and unloading was done by small boats and lighters from 5 to 12 tons. The chief exports were: groundnut, coloured piece goods, tobacco and other country products to Southeast Asian countries. Fresh vegetables, bullocks and sheeps were shipped to Penang, Singapore and Ceylon and ghee, silk, skin and hides and provisions to Straits settlements. Cotton piece goods, twisted yarn, metals, Timber and areca were the chief imports. White Manchester cloth was imported from Straits, dyed and reexported from here. Rice was imported from Culcutta during scarcity seasons. This port was the chief centre for transhipment of coolies to the tea and rubber estates in Ceylon and Malay States. From the close of eighteenth century, larger vessels called to pick up passengers. Steps were taken by the English to attract European ships to this port. In 1861 Nagapattanam was made as the terminus of the southern railway and trade increased. Since salt was the monopoly of the controlling power (English), the country crafts were pressed in to service for the transport of salt to this port. In 1867, the ports of Nagapattanam and Nagore were merged.

South of Nagapattanam, the next port of significance was Adiramapattanam. Most of the sailings from here were to Ceylon, Malabar and Thirunelveli coasts. Rice and textiles were the chief exports and areca and timber were the imports. Fish, dry fish, salt, provisions and grains were the commodities in coastal trade. The other minor ports in the Tjanjavur Coast were used by the native traders for coastal trade and for trade with Ceylon.

Tondi in Ramanathapuram Coast continued as a port of importance from the ancient times. The ships sailing on the coast often took refuge in this port in the worst monsoon seasons for protection. In modern times it developed as a port of coastal trade within the shallow waters of Madura and Thirunelveli Bays and trade to Ceylon. Though the vessels in operation were small, the goods carried were substantial. Native Marakkayar traders traded from this port using country crafts. The Chief exports were textiles, rice, chank and imports were areca, pepper and timber.
The shipping between east and west coast of India used Pamban canal, in between the island of Rameswaram and the Ramanathapuram mainland, or the passage through the Adam’s Bridge and the island of Manaar in Ceylon. Ships up to 800 tons could cross through Pamban. Pamban canal played a vital role in the Coromandel trade, and was bone of contention between European colonial powers and native rulers.

Kilakkarai was a safe port with an anchorage in 2 1/2 to 3 fathoms from the shore. It is said to be the Fatan of Ibn Batuta\(^{37}\). Foreign trade was conducted with Ceylon and inland trade with Malabar and Bengal. The chief exports were rice, paddy, cereals, silk, cotton products, jaggery, coconut, dry fish condiments and chank and imports were areca, pepper, spices, copper and zinc. This port was famous for the Arab horse trade from thirteenth century. The Marakkayar traders of this town played an important role in the economic development of this region during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The celebrated Marakkayar business magnate Periathambi (Vallal Seethakathi) belonged to this town. The chief exports from here were Fullers earth, coral stones, rice and paddy to Ceylon and pulmyra fibres and chank to Bengal. During the nineteenth century chank export trade continued to be an important one from this port.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the chief ports in Thirunelveli districts were, Tuticorin, Manapad, Alandalai, Veerampattanam, Ponnaikayal, Vaipar, and Vembar. Trading activities of these ports are amply recorded in the records, of the European Companies. A study of these records provides a picture of the economic history of this region. Tuticorin became the most considerable port after the advent of Europeans. The Portugese, the Dutch and the English concentrated on this port. The extension of cotton trade increased the importance of this port. Raw cotton of this region was exported to China in the nineteenth century. The port had a safe roadstead with good anchorage in which vessels could ride in all seasons\(^{38}\). Foreign trade was more than the coastal trade in 1880. Inland trade was conducted with west coast. The chief exports were cotton, coffee, jaggery, chilly, sheep, horses, cows and poultry\(^{39}\). Kulasekarapattanam port with a sandy coast and coconut topes conducted trade with Ceylon. At the close of the nineteenth century it was a point of embarkation for passenger vessel\(^{40}\). Ponnaikayal and Kayalpattanam were the other ports in Thirunelveli district. Kayalpattanam had constant trade with Ceylon.

The community needed to run the business of the port such as boatmen, mariners, labourers, administrative personnel and merchants were settled in all these port towns leading to their urbanisation. The sea faring communities
acquired the knowledge about the oceans and seas and astronomical data which were handed down verbally to their families. The Muslims of Coromandel had expert knowledge of Bay of Bengal. The Dutch systematised their knowledge of sailing conditions in the Bay of Bengal. The English codified the favourable routes of trade in the Bay of Bengal. In the course of centuries many ports grew on the Coromandel and many fell under the impact of some reason or other. The hinterland of Coromandel supplied the goods required for export and inland trade and consumed the imported goods. The settlements in almost all the ports of the Coromandel coast were the stronghold of Muslims, particularly the Marrakkayars, and Labbais. Because of their settlement and trading activities many of the ports became urban metropolises. European records speak about the urban nature of ports like PortoNovo, Cuddalore, Tranquabar and Nagapattanam. These port towns contained palatial buildings of Muslim merchants apart from many other structural buildings. The process of urbanisation on the Coromandel Coast is mainly due to the concentration. Muslim maritime community. Because of concentration, Muslims in Thanjavur Coasts in places like Nagore, Nagapattanam, Adirampattanam, the eighteenth century English records call these ports as "Moor Ports". Susan Bayly calls the Thirunelveli ports as "Marakkayar Ports". A large number of Marakkayars and Labbais were engaged in the maritime trade till the second quarter of nineteenth century. There were big merchants, ship owners, nagudhas, sailors, boatmen and ship employees of different descriptions, pearl and chank divers and fishermen. In the coastal towns such as Nagore, PortoNovo, Adirampattanam, Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam were located the Darghas of Muslim Saints and Mystics. Hence these places were considered holy by the Muslims. Such places attracted Muslims and they settled there itself for their trade. During the nineteenth century many new settlements of Muslims sprang up in the coastal region, wherever the situation was favourable for their maritime activities. Thus many of the Coromandel port towns and settlements were the centres of the maritime activities of the Muslims and they have contributed appropriately for the economic development and urbanization of the region.
References


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