Chapter I

SOUTHERN COROMANDEL COAST ON THE EVE OF THE DUTCH SETTLEMENTS

The Coromandel Coast derives its name from Cholamandalam – the circle of the Cholas, rulers of the Thanjavur region and of the extensive tracts of southeastern India in the early centuries of the previous millennium.\(^1\) The first recorded mention of the word is in an inscription of the eleventh century,\(^2\) and the term continued to be in use even during the seventeenth century. Coromandel, thus, was a creation of the medieval period. From time to time, the Coromandel region was divided into convenient administrative units. An attempt is made here to define the Coromandel region and set the geographical limits of the coast. The question of regional boundary is complex, considering that a boundary evolves with historical changes and political necessities.\(^3\) For contemporary visitors of the seventeenth century to the area, the Coromandel Coast was the wide expanse of India’s eastern coast from Point Calimere, where coastline takes a sharp northerly drift, to near the 20°N latitude, the port of Ganjam. It was divided into two parts, the north and the south, with the Godavari point being the dividing line between the two. In later times, the Coromandel Coast proper between the south Godavari point and the north was known as the Gingelly coast or Golconda coast. The term denoted the coastline of the modern state of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and the southern tip of Orissa\(^4\). The Pennar River remains the line of demarcation of the Coromandel Coast into north and south, and this study makes the region south of Pennar River – called southern Coromandel – as the study area. After limiting the geographical area

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of the study, the Dutch East India Company’s connection with Coromandel
developed as a by-product of its chief commercial interest – the export of spices,
textiles from the Indian Archipelago to Europe. During the greater part of the
sixteenth century, the Portuguese enjoyed a monopoly of the seaborne trade
between Asia and Europe, which mainly consisted in the export of spices from India,
Ceylon and the Spice Islands, and the Dutch were content to act as the principal
distributors from Lisbon. When, in 1580, the crown of Portugal passed to the King
of Spain, then at war with the provinces of the Netherlands, the Dutch were forced
to seek a direct access to the spice markets in southeast Asia, a necessity which led to
a series of voyages from 1596 onwards and the eventual formation of the Dutch East
India Company in 1602.5

The struggle between the Dutch and Portuguese centred around attaining in
maritime trade. The Dutch were quite successful in challenging the claim of the
Portuguese and fought a number of naval battles. The Dutch entered into this
subcontinent with great zeal to get a share in the eastern trade by the turn of the
seventeenth century. A quick survey of the political, social and economic state of
affairs will help a researcher in evaluating the Dutch East India Company’s trade
with Southern Coromandel Coast.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS: SOUTH INDIA

At the turn of the seventeenth century, India was made up of three major
political entities:

(a) The Mughal Empire,6 and the Rajput principalities in the mountainous
terrain of Rajasthan

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5 Tapan Raychaudhuri, Jan Company In Coromandel 1605–1690 A Study in the Interrelation of
6 S.R. Sharma, Mughal Empire in India: a systematic study including source material, Vol.1,
(b) The offshoots of the Bahmanli Kingdom, namely, the Sultanates of Golconda, Bijapur, Ahamednagar, Berar and Bidar with Jagirs under the emerging Maratha chieftains in the Deccan

(c) The remnants of the Vijayanagar Empire and its subordinate Hindu Nayaks

Besides these three broad principalities, the Portuguese who had made their entry into the political arena of India had established small trading settlements on the coastal regions. They consisted of several ports with commercial and strategic importance. The Portuguese had command over the ports of Diu, Daman, Goa, Cochin with western India and San Thome and Hooghly in the east. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Dutch appeared on the coastal regions to check the monopoly of the Portuguese in the eastern coast.7

THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

The Mughal Empire, established in 1526, consolidated its hold over the whole of Hindustan and bequeathed a line of strong and powerful emperors to the throne on Delhi. The Emperor stood at the top of the political system. Akbar the Great (1556–1605)8 was succeeded by Jahangir (1606–1627),9 Shah Jahan (1627–1658) and Aurangzeb (1658–1707)10.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN SOUTHERN INDIA

With the gradual expansion of Mughal authority over the Deccan, the authority of the Bhamani Sultans started declining, while at the same time the

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feudatory chiefs under the Bhmanis – especially the Hindu chieftains of Maharashtra – grew in power and strength. The Qutub Shahi kingdom of Golconda, which came into existence in the early sixteenth century, emerged as the strongest power in peninsular India in the early part of the seventeenth century. With its capital in the fortress of Golconda, later shifted to the newly built city of Hyderabad, in 1589, the sultanate expanded into central and eastern Deccan and controlled the eastern seaboard beyond the Andhra delta. To the north of its boundary located the Orissan foothills. Further, southward expansion brought them up to the Palar River and gave them control over the fertile regions around Poonamallee, Chengalpet and Kanchipuram.\footnote{H. K. Sherwani, \textit{History of Qutub Shahi Dynasty}, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1974, Chapter VI.}

The Adhil Shahis established their power in their capital city Bijapur\footnote{William Joseph Jackson, \textit{Vijayanagara Voices: Exploring South Indian History and Hindu Literature}, London, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2005, p.215.} and looked to the east for expansion after it had achieved political stability in its affairs. In the early 1572, Ali Adhil Shah of Bijapur and Ibrahim Qutup Shah of Golconda\footnote{Domingos Paes and Fernao Nunes, \textit{A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagara Contribution to the History of India} “Chronica Dos Reis De Bissnaga”Middlesex, Echo Library, 2006, p.118.} made an agreement to keep Palar River as their territorial limit. Bijapur then commenced its expansion to the southern parts and took the lands south of the Palar River up to the frontiers of Thanjavur. This gave Bijapur control over seaports like Madraspatnam, Puducherry, Cuddalore, Mohamed Bandar (Porto Novo) and Devanampatnam situated on the South Coromandel Coast.\footnote{Sinnappah Arasaratnam, \textit{Op cit}.p.41.}

The early decades of the seventeenth century saw the height of power and prosperity of these two sultanates. Although both were under Muslim rulers, they had their own personal rivalries, as a result of which they occasionally met each other in the battlefield.
Golconda was governed by an autocratic ruler who possessed a fair measure of centralized authority, although the degree of centralization and the extent of royal power depended largely on the personality of the king. The king was assisted by a number of high functionaries with wide powers but ill-defined functions.

The king’s chief minister was known as the *peshwa* or *peshwa-i-kul*. Next to him was the *mir jumla*, whose title literally meant “the chief of the collections”. *Sensu stricto*, his office was that of finance minister, but his duties often embraced police and military functions. Similarly, the *sar-i-khail*, or chief of cavalry, had to discharge civil and revenue functions as well. Thus, there was no clear demarcation between the functions of the three highest officers of the state and occasionally the same person simultaneously held more than one of these offices. Such a system could lead to an extreme concentration of authority and render one man all-powerful in the kingdom for a time, as was the case when the famous Mir Muhammad Sayyid became *mir jumla*. The king was also assisted by a council of advisers called the *majlis*, the members of which were known as *majlisian*. Then there was the larger body of courtiers or attendants called *mulaziman*, many of whom enjoyed considerable power and influence in proportion to the degree of royal favour bestowed on them.

For administrative purposes, the country was divided into districts, or *mahals*, administered by governors called *sar-samts*. Apparently, there were exceptions to this system and some regions were placed under the authority of military commandants called *sar-i-lashkar*. The districts were divided into smaller administrative units governed by *havaldars*, or local governors.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Yar Muhammad Khan, *The Deccan Policy of the Mughals*, New Delhi, United Book Corporation, 1971, p. 203.

The Vijayanagar Empire

The southern part of the Coromandel was included in the Vijayanagar Empire, which was separated from its Muslim neighbours in the north by the Krishna and Pennar rivers. Founded a little earlier than the Bahmani Kingdom in the first half of the fourteenth century, this Hindu empire of the south became the traditional enemy of the Muslim kingdom and its five successor states, some of whom, in their mutual struggles, formed an occasional alliance with the Hindu rulers.17

For more than two centuries, the power and wealth of Vijayanagar rivalled those of the greatest empires of the time, until, in 1564–1565, a confederacy of the Muslim powers, including Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Golconda and Bidar, decisively defeated the Vijayanagar army at Rakshasa-Tangadi (Talikota) and destroyed the Hindu capital.18 The empire never really recovered from this blow, although it continued an enfeebled existence for several decades, with its capital first at Chandragiri and then at Vellore. The Golconda and Bijapur kings, taking advantage of Vijayanagar’s weakness, made repeated incursion and annexed large parts of its northern territories, often with the help of the treacherous local chieftains19. The Nayaks (the term Nayaka in Sanskrit means leader or chief) are provincial and district governors, the commanders of fortresses, the poligars or local chiefs vested with administrative authority, and other hereditary chieftains who gathered power during the anarchy that followed the disastrous battle. Pre-eminent among such semi-independent feudatories were the Nayaks of Gingi, Tanjore (Thanjavur) and Madura (Madurai), part of whose territories covered a wide tract of south

Coromandel.\textsuperscript{20} Their internecine wars and acts of defiance against the feeble authority of the so-called emperor further weakened the state.

In the course of his long reign, King Venkata II (1586–1612) succeeded in instilling once more some vigour into the decadent empire.\textsuperscript{21} He recovered most of the territories captured by Golconda, again pushing the frontier nearly as far north as the Krishna River. The attempts of many nobles and poligars to carve out independent kingdoms were also crushed. So great indeed was his power that du Jarric, quoting Pimenta, described him as still one of the most powerful monarchs of Asia. But, this was really an exaggeration, for his success was by no means unqualified. The Kondavidu district still remained in the hands of Golconda.\textsuperscript{22} The power of the great nayaks was but little curbed. The Vijayanagar Empire still remained a congeries of semi-independent principalities loosely held together by the suzerainty of an ineffectual overlord, who had only a small territory under his direct control. Venkata’s comparatively vigorous rule merely postponed the total eclipse of the empire.

**EMERGENCE OF NAYAKS**

Coromandel was the fifth province of Vijayanagara Empire\textsuperscript{23} under the Saluva, Tuluva and Aravidu dynasties in the sixteenth century. Great and small warriors ‘nayaks’ are presented as the key political figures in the Vijayanagara state, and, according to sixteenth-century European reports, some part of the resources which they commanded was transferred to the capital city in the form of tribute. While


\textsuperscript{21} R.C. Majumdar, ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People the Mughal Empire*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1994, p.497.


indigenous sources are at least ambiguous on tribute payments from nayaks to the imperial rulers of Vijayanagara, there is no question about the two principal elements of this ‘war-state’. One was the hundreds of local military chiefs who often bore the title of ‘nayaka’; the other was the system of Vijayanagara fortifications usually under Brahman commanders. These were the core elements of Vijayanagara power in the southern peninsula and the means of imperial control over the macro-region. Under them, the practice gained currency of granting nayakattanams to subordinate chiefs for supervision over the territory. Nayakattanam was hereditary in Gingee, Thanjavur, etc. The same nayak families dominated at many places like Poonamallee, Tiruvur, Sripurumbudur, Devikapuram, Cheyyar, Tiruvannamalai, Kugaiyur, Tirukkoyilur and Bhuvanagiri in Coromandel. Some other localities – Trichy, Padaiveedu, Tiruvadigai, Sittamur, Tindivanam, Uraiyyur, Kanchipuram, Chandragiri and Chengalpet – were ruled by different families. It would thus appear that there existed multiple and differential patterns of distribution of local power.

Nayakattanam was given as an office and some of the simai units granted by the Vijayanagara rulers to nayaks were called nayakattanam simai. Other divisions, such as parru and nadu, granted to nayaks, were only called nayakattanams. It would appear that the Vijayanagara kings never interfered with the internal politics of any area in the Tamil country and gave the nayaks a free hand. The nayaks, in their turn, seem to have accepted the Vijayanagara king as their superior. Epigraphs demonstrate that the Vijayanagara rulers directly appointed and removed the local rulers. Thus, Kempadeva Annagal was deprived of Senalur nayakattanam which was given to Kalama nayaka of Vellore in 1538. Also, the king ordered the surrender of

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27 A.R.E, 1933-1934, p.110.
28 A.R.E, 1921, p.194.
*Mappedu simai,* which was the nayakattanam of Timmaraja. The Vijayanagara rulers also ensured that the nayaks did not grow too strong to challenge the authority of the central rule.

Thus, the general of the Vijayanagara ruler invaded Tamil country to suppress the tyrannical activities of Koneti raja. Achyutadevaraya suppressed the revolt of Saluva Chellappa nayaka in 1531 and King Venkatapatidevaraya defeated Lingama nayaka of Perumbedu *simai.* Various inscriptions generally record that local rulers in Coromandel continued to be subordinates of Vijayanagara even after the Battle of Talikota in 1565 where normal transactions were recorded as if nothing had happened. According to Nuniz, nayakas had appointed a secretary at the court of Vijayanagara who always kept the nayaks informed of the happenings at the capital city. The native literary source *Rayavacakamu* corroborates this.

The Vijayanagara kings appointed many nayaks at various places in the Tamil-, Telugu- and Kannada-speaking regions of the empire. The Vijayanagara Empire covered a vast area of South India and administration under a heavily centralised authority would have been difficult. Much easier was a system of polity with indirect taxation. In this system, the right to rule portions of the territory of the kingdom were farmed out to individuals in return for assured collection of revenue. This relieved the central government of the problem and expense of raising revenue through personal taxation from among a heterogeneous population with its diversity of customs. In return for the share in the right to rule over a particular

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30 *Indian Antiquary,* XL, p.142.
territory, the nayaks had a strong personal interest to administer the nayakattanams well. In turn, this shaped the nature of the Vijayanagara state. Thus, it appears reasonable to assume that revenue farming was the single most important feature of the political economy of the Coromandel in the seventeenth century.

Many of the problems which the Dutch had to face in Coromandel are traceable to the administrative conditions of the region. Here, again, there were basic differences between the southern and northern parts of the coast.

Besides the kingdoms of Golconda and Vijayanagar, the Dutch had also to reckon with the Portuguese settlements of San Thome and Nagapattinam, situated in the territories of the nayaks of Gingi and Thanjavur respectively. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese sought to dominate the Asian sea trade by acquiring possession of a few strategic outposts, whence their fleets could control the main sea routes. Their colonies at Malacca in the east and at Goa, Cochin and Colombo in the west were considered adequate for dominating the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, so that no territories were acquired on the east coast of India. Still, in the early decades of the sixteenth century, some Portuguese trading settlements grew up along the coast which, if not subject to, were at least inhabited and defended by the Portuguese. Nominally subject to the authority of the local Indian governments, these settlements, of which only San Thome and Nagapattinam survived till the early years of the seventeenth century, were independent for all practical purposes and even had fortresses of their own. Besides, there were groups of Portuguese settlers in important centres of trade like Masulipatnam. Their relations with the local authorities were generally friendly, and the Dutch, during the early years of their

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trade in Coromandel, had to come up repeatedly against the great influence which the Portuguese had with the Indian princes and nobles.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF SOUTH COROMANDEL COAST

Agriculture was the primary occupation of the coastal region. The small-scale peasants used the productive forces of their own family members in the process of production.\textsuperscript{38} It was a type of the unit of production in agriculture, which was widely prevalent in South Coromandel Coast. They attained self-sufficiency in labour force because of their personal involvement. This group of peasants had complete proprietorship over lands\textsuperscript{39}. The second category of peasants constituted average or middle-class people. They were partly dependent on their personal labour and partly on the work of hired labourers\textsuperscript{40}. The hired labourers were taken in for seasonal work on land during seasons of transplantation and harvest and were paid daily wages either in kind or in cash. But sometimes the middle-class peasants followed the practice of joint cultivation to avoid the problem of labour force. According to this system, the said group pooled their resources in the process of cultivation. At the time of harvest, they had their share of income in proportion to the size of the land\textsuperscript{41}.

In the South Coromandel, rice being the staple food of the people, paddy cultivation was done on a large scale. It was cultivated on the wetlands. The intensive and productive method of paddy cultivation was based on the transplantation of seedlings. There were two main seasons of rice cultivation, \textit{kuddappa-kar} and \textit{samhapashnam}, named after the varieties of paddy, cultivated during the summer and winter months. Two types of land prevalent in the south are dry fields \textit{punchai} and

\textsuperscript{40} T.V. Mahalingam, \textit{Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar, Part II Social Life}, Madras, University of Madras, 1975, pp.280-295.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.} pp. 295-296.
wet nanchai. Among the types of rice cultivated girasal, asal, auavagas, paccar and kuruvai were important. The Pulicat, Cauvery delta, specialized in abundant rice cultivation because of the fertility of the soil and irrigation facilities available this region.

The cereals such as varagu and tinai occupied the place of importance in agriculture as far as cereals were concerned. Sugarcane was grown wherever the soil was suitable and water was available. Among the oil seeds that were grown, gingelly, sesame and castor were the chief ones. The important fibres that were produced were hemp and cotton. The latter appears to have been largely cultivated. It was mostly found in the black and red soil regions of the coast like the areas around Madras and Chengalpet. The availability of good cotton textiles in this region attracted the European companies in the early part of the seventeenth century.

The production of cotton was of particular importance for the Southern Coromandel plain, another non-food crop of importance, although its cultivation was far less widespread, indigo (avari). There is evidence of the cultivation of indigo in three separate areas: the Arcot region, in the neighbourhood of Devanampatnam and Pulicat. The Pulicat indigo quality was generally thought to

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be poor, and sufficient only to meet local demands of the textile industry, not worth the trouble of selling at distant markets.\textsuperscript{47}

Spices were produced both for local consumption and for export to foreign countries. They were pepper, cinnamon, cloves, mace, cardamom, mustard and ginger. The last one was both green and dried.\textsuperscript{48}

The monsoons played an important role in South Coromandel agriculture. Sometimes its failure caused a lot of havoc and distress to the people. To meet the need, tanks or reservoirs were built as important sources of irrigation in South India.\textsuperscript{49}

Weaving, a non-agricultural occupation was not separated from agriculture and was an additional calling of all agricultural families. Women and children of all castes, excluding the Brahmans, usually did the spinning of cotton, for family use. Home spinning and weaving was carried on to meet local needs or partially for the market.

It could be a home industry when the women folk of agriculture families spun mainly for sale. It was considered an additional income of the family.\textsuperscript{50} There existed a relationship between agriculture and the professional intercommunity crafts. The craftsmen comprised weavers, who produced mainly cotton textiles of low-quality to meet the demand of the local market and also the external one.\textsuperscript{51} The Coromandel artisans achieved high artistic skill and excellence especially in textile

production. There were many categories within the weaving community according to the type of cloth which they produced.\textsuperscript{52}

The weavers who were generally called \textit{Kaikkolas} were an influential community who supplied the necessary clothing to the people\textsuperscript{53}. The other important professionals were the potters, toddy drawers and leather workers. The washermen and barbers were also necessary functionaries in each village and town.\textsuperscript{54}

The important non-agricultural industry that was connected with land was mining. Next to diamond, gold was mined, especially in the kingdom of Golconda.\textsuperscript{55} Another metal that was mined was iron, which was found in southern and northern parts of Golconda and Bijapur. Among the other minerals that were extracted from the earth were sulphur and copper. The latter was widely used for making household articles. Salt, being an article in great demand, was produced on a large scale in the seacoast and in the inland territory.

\textbf{Textiles}

Textile manufacture was a major production unit in the secondary sector of production. Since cotton (\textit{parutti} – raw cotton) was cultivated widely in South Coromandel, different types and varieties of cotton textiles were manufactured by the weaving community. Besides, raw silk was used in loom, dyed in different colours and woven into fine cloth with floral patterns. For example, Pulicat was a famous centre for textile manufacture for large quantities of painted cotton cloths.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid}.pp.104-105.
Floral and patterned textiles called *chintz* had a great demand among foreigners. The local name was *chichchilli*. There were many varieties of white and printed clothes such as *baftas, tapecinds, sarassas, beathilles* and were exported to the Malay Archipelago. The weavers community manufactured varieties of textiles with good colour and precision. It attracted the attention of European companies and so with the turn of the seventeenth century, the companies gradually started to settle down in India to carry out their business activities.

In South Coromandel, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the merchants like chetty and Muslims carried out their trading activities within the hinterland as well as the overseas. The principal seaports in South Coromandel were Nagapattinam, San Thome and Pulicat.

**Imports and Exports**

The people in India had achieved a fair degree of self-sufficiency. The Indians showed an insatiable desire for precious metals and were interested in accepting them in return for their merchandise. As a result, gold and silver were flowing into the country, which was used to meet the needs of coinage and display. But, some amount of gold was mined in the kingdom of Golconda. However, bullion was mostly imported from Aden, Melinde and China by the royalty. Copper, tin, lead and quick silver were some of the other metals that were brought in.

There was a great demand for elephants and horses on the part of the Coromandel regions. The king of Ceylon, who appears to have had a monopoly of the elephant trade, sold them to the merchants of the Coromandel Coast. Another animal that was imported from outside was the horse, which was in great demand.

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both for state paraphernalia and for military purpose. The horse trade was largely a monopoly of the Muslim merchants of Ormuz, but later it passed on to the Portuguese.59

Among the different products imported were spices like cloves, cardamom and cinnamon, which came from Sumatra, Moluccas and Ceylon. The Moorish ships brought many kinds of spices and drugs such as Olive wood, camphor and frankincense. The perfumes that were imported into the region were saffron, rose water and musk.60

The articles of luxury that were imported were precious stones from Pegu, Ceylon and Ormuz. Pearls and seed pearls, curious articles like toys, glassware, clock and machines were also brought to Coromandel.61

Rice was the major food product that was exported mostly to Aden, Ormuz and other places in the west and Ceylon in the south Coromandel Coast regions in Thanjavur, Cauvery delta62. The next commodity that was exported was sugar. Wheat, millet and coconut were also exported to Aden and Ormuz. The other commodities that were exported were cinnabar, indigo, myrobalan, sandalwood and teak wood. Besides, spices such as ginger and cinnamon were shipped to foreign countries.63 Among metals, iron was exported to Ormuz. The important finished products exported from the Coromandel to other places were chiefly cotton textiles, which were sent to Achin, Prman, Bantam and Malacca. The printed cloths of Pulicat (chintz) enjoyed a good demand in the above places. In the countries of the

Malay Archipelago, the patterned cloths of San Thome fetched a good market.\textsuperscript{64} The cotton fabrics of the coast were exported also to Ormuz, Aden, Arabia and Africa. Coromandel cloth and Malabar spices were exchanged for Persian horses, seed pearls, sulphur and dried fruits.\textsuperscript{65}

**Hinterland Trade**

Although there was such an extensive volume of foreign trade carried in South Coromandel as well as the people were largely doing a lot of internal trade, the rural market was an important feature of the hinterland trade of Coromandel. Even in the smallest villages, rice, flour, butter, milk, beans and other vegetables were sold in abundance. A wide range of commodities such as food grains, fruits, salt, pepper, cotton threads and metalware offered for sale in the weekly markets, called \textit{sandai} in Tamil.\textsuperscript{66} Most of the major towns had several markets, or \textit{bazaars}, one of which was the “main” or “big” \textit{bazaar}. The producers such as the textile weavers often marketed their products on their own. Miscellaneous items entered the inter-regional trade of the period. Merchants from Coromandel procured pepper, coconut, areca nuts and other spices at Cochin and Cannanore in return for textiles.\textsuperscript{67}

Land revenue was the principal source of income and the proportion of produce claimed as land revenue varied from one-sixth to as much as half of the gross produce. It was paid both in kind and in cash.\textsuperscript{68} Besides the land tax, the riots had to pay other kinds of taxes like grazing tax, marriage tax and house tax. Almost all the foreigners trading with India had to pay customs duties on imports and exports. The merchants were taxed while they exported local products. Also tolls were imposed.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. pp.73-74.
on the roads. Manufacturers and craftsmen like potters, weavers, blacksmiths and
goldsmiths paid professional tax.\(^6^9\) Other than these taxes, the state received revenue
from gardening and plantations, crown lands; plunder during war times; and annual
tributes from feudatories and provincial governors.

**Coins**

*Pagodas* were the gold coins issued by the Vijayanagar rulers and the Muslim
city of Golconda. But in the Vijayanagar areas *pagodas* were called “hun” or
“varahan.” Besides pagodas, the Deccan Sultanates coined bullion *tankas.*\(^7^0\) In
addition to the pagoda and half-pagoda, there were *fanams* of different values,
nominally of gold coins, but the proportion of alloy was very high. There were
copper coins, known as *casu.* Tavernier says that a “silver rupee” was issued by the
king of Golconda.\(^7^1\) According to Fryer, 32 *fanams* were equal to one gold pagoda
and six *casu* to one *fanam.* Besides these, *chacra* was a coin widely circulated in
Thanjavur area.\(^7^2\)

**SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF SOUTH COROMADNEL COAST**

**Right-Hand and Left-Hand Castes**

Many of the communities in South India were divided into two main groups:
the *valangai* (right hand) and the *idangai* (left hand) groups.\(^7^3\) Each group consisted
of many subsections. There is no historical evidence regarding the origin of these
groups. However, some of the inferences proposed here deserve consideration.
Often, these groups disputed among themselves. Perhaps the sole cause of the
conflict was the right to wear slippers or to ride through the streets in a palanquin or

\(^7^1\) E.H.Nolan, *The Illustrated History of the British Empire in India and the East*, London,
\(^7^2\) Elliot, *Coins of Southern India*, Varanasi, Prithivi Prakashan, 1970, p.147.
\(^7^3\) Mattison Mines, ‘Models of Caste and the Left-Hand Division in South India’ *American
on horseback during marriage festivals; sometimes, it was the privilege of being escorted on certain occasions by armed retainers or the use of paraphernalia or native musicians at public ceremonies that provided the ground for any right. At times, the particular kind of instruments suitable for such occasions could be the object of dispute, or it could be the right of carrying flags of certain colours or of certain device during the ceremonies.74

Slavery

There is evidence to believe that the institution of slavery was prevalent in Vijayanagar region. What the agricultural serf was in the rural areas, the slaves appears to have been in the urban areas. Slaves were obtained from various sources. Some families sold themselves as hereditary slaves.75 They were liable to change hands as chattels. A debtor who was an insolvent and could not repay the loan to the creditor became his slave. Slave trade appears to have increased during times of famine. Barbosa says that when the people on the Coromandel Coast were actually starving and many died of hunger, the people sold their children for four or five panams each and that during such seasons, the Malabaris brought them great store of rice and coconuts and took away shiploads of slaves.76

TRADING COMMUNITIES

The social composition of the merchants of Coromandel reflects the confusion prevalent in Indian society over the ages between caste-based occupational divisions and more-flexible social structures with occupations pursued across castes by the sheer force of economic necessity. Consistent with Hindu social theory, the South Indian caste name for that group of society engaged in mercantile activity was

74 Ibid.pp.467-484.
76 Ibid.p.398.
chetty, a term which in usage appears to be comparable to the vaniya of northern India, immortalized in contemporary Europe accounts as banya. 77

The western Malaya coast counterparts of the Chetty merchants of the Coromandel Coast were called klings 78. Taking the whole commercial world of Coromandel, overseas and coastal trading, wholesaling and retailing, brokerage, banking and shroffing, there is no doubt that Hindus as a whole continued to dominate. Hindu interests predominated in all these avenues of commerce, except in overseas and coastal trade, which they shared with Muslims. Among the Hindu merchants, Telugu-speakers clearly dominated north of the Palar River and had an extensive presence to its south as far as Nagapattinam. Komatties are the most clearly recognizable caste group, because of their ubiquitous presence all along the coast and their clear leadership roles among communities engaged in commerce and handicraft production. 79 Their leadership ambitions were seen in the roles they played in inter-caste disputes. In the vertical division of South Indian society between valangai and idangai, they were leaders of the right-hand faction. 80 They were prominent in the textile trade mainly as brokers and suppliers from producing villages to coastal ports. They also seem to have been exporters and shippers. In textile brokerage, they used to take advantage of the positions they had in the weaving villages of the Godavari delta. They also moved far and wide from their Andhra homelands southwards up to Nagapattinam and the Thanjavur kingdom. Besides textiles, they also traded in foodstuffs, owned retail shops and functioned as moneylenders.

Another important Telugu merchant caste was the beri chetties, from whom came many wealthy and large-scale shippers, brokers and wholesalers dealing in a variety of goods. They had not penetrated too far southwards but concentrated their

78 Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century, Op.cit. p.120.
79 Ibid.p.215.
80 Record Fort St. George Despatches to England, 10 October, 1707, p.76.
activities in north and central Coromandel. They were great rivals of the komatties and also appear to have had vaisya pretensions. They were the leaders of the left-hand faction. The baliya was another large Telugu mercantile caste, identified with right-hand faction. There were a number of subdivisions among them, depending on commodity specialization. Thus, gazulu baliyas were barge sellers, while pericavar baliyas were cloth and salt sellers. They were spread southwards into the Tamil districts of Arcot and Chingalpet. Tamiiized baliyas were known as kaveri chetties. In mid-seventeenth century, they produced some influential leaders who dominated commerce and influenced politics along the coast. Through their political influence along the coast, they emerged as revenue farmers in addition to their usual occupation of trade. Their caste title was chetty or nayudu.

It is difficult to identify Tamil mercantile castes that open our period of study, although there are a number of merchant names identify them as Tamils. It is, however, significant that few of the prominent merchant personalities that come to view were Tamil Hindus. A number of merchants were of the Tamil Chetty castes, such as vyapari chetty, kasukara chetty, kaveri chetty and nagaratthu chetty. There were some who sprang from Tamil weaving castes such as kaikolar and seniyar. There were a few brahmanas, a large number from agricultural and pastoral castes: vellalar, mudaliyar, kanakapillai and idaiyar. There were some from fisher and boatmen castes. There were some ship owners and overseas merchants among the Tamils, although obviously not as many as among the Telugus. Most Tamils were in the small to middle range, in brokerage and supply, wholesale and retail, money lending and peddling. They were present from Pulicat southwards in all the minor ports, Indian and European.

In the far south, along the Madura coast, was a strong group of Christian Paravas who, from small beginnings, had become stronger under European influence. When they embraced Christianity in the mid-sixteenth century, they were given Portuguese protection and favoured status in the Portuguese commercial system.\(^{83}\) They entered themselves in trade of that region, separated themselves from Hindu Paravas and competed more strongly with the Muslims. They had a strong presence in the trade of the Bay of Madura and the trade from Coromandel to Malabar and to Ceylon.\(^{84}\)

The earliest Arab settlements in South India were on the Malabar Coast. These were the progenitors of the Mapilla Muslim community\(^{85}\) of North Malabar. Not long after were founded Arab settlements in Kayalpatnam, the old Pandyan port and then eastwards in Nagapattinam, Nagore, Muttupettai, Karaikal and Porto Novo. The coastal Muslim communities of the Tamil country that resulted were thus a blend of Arabs, Tamil coastal communities that had converted to Islam, and Indo-Arabs who were the product of mixed marriages. By the seventeenth century, these coastal Muslims were totally Tamilized, spoke Tamil as their mother tongue, followed habits of diet and dress as well as some ritual customs—like tying the thali at nuptials—in common with the Hindus among whom they lived.

To foreign observers they formed a distinct group of Muslim whom they called Chulias, a name they probably received from the habitations in Cholamandalam. Later censuses recognize four subdivisions among them:

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Marakkayar, Labbai (Paradesis)\textsuperscript{86} Rawther and Kayalar,\textsuperscript{87} There was no social ranking among them. The Marakkayar\textsuperscript{88} were the wealthiest group, being dominant in the trade to South East Asia and the coastal trade, east and west of the subcontinent\textsuperscript{89}. They concentrated in and around the major and minor ports of South Coromandel and Madura: Cuddalore, Porto Novo, Karaikal, Nagore, Nagapattinam, Adirampatnam, Tondi, Kilakarai and Kayalpatnam. The Labbai\textsuperscript{s} were also seagoing traders in our period. They participated in internal trade, peddling and brokerage, as did the Rawther, who do not feature as an important separate group in our period. The fourth group, Kayalar, were the poorest, being mostly peddlers and dealers in second-hand goods. As a whole, this community played important roles in the seaborne and inland trade south of Coromandel. They entered every major and many minor avenues of trade in textiles, areca nuts, spices, grain, minerals, chanks, dried fish, salt, precious metals and pearls. They were also moneylenders.

The above account shows that the pre-modern market in South Coromandel Coast brought together a variety of commodities for the consumption of the local buyers and had a hierarchy of scales ranging from the rural weekly lair to the emporia of international trade centres like Nagapattinam, San Thome and Pulicat. Southern part the Coromandel was parcelled out into various political units, which were constantly fighting among themselves, South Coromandel Coast areas, the kings encouraged the European commercial relations, granted permission and land to establish their trading settlements. This support was not because of the income it brought through customs and tolls, but because the native rulers thought that foreign trade could boost production in the agrarian and non-agrarian sectors, which

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. p.63.
\textsuperscript{87} M. Mines, \textit{Muslim merchants: the economic behaviour of an Indian Muslim community}, New Delhi, Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, 1972, pp.24-28.
\textsuperscript{88} C.S. Srinivasachari, \textit{A History of the City of Madras}, Madras, University of Madras, 1939, pp.30-37.
\textsuperscript{89} Sinnappah Arasaratnam, `A Note on Perathamby Marikkar - a 17th Century Commercial Magnate', \textit{Tamil Culture}, XI (I), 1964, pp.1-7.
in turn could bring prosperity to the country. So they obviously supported the European companies engaged in trading operations. Therefore, the European companies could acquire their own factory sites in the South Coromandel region. The indigenous merchants practised their own traditional commercial enterprises in the South Coromandel and reaped good profits. The arrival of the Portuguese expanded the European contracts with South Coromandel Coast. The Dutch who were looking for trading contacts had to acquire royal permission (firmans) from the Vijayanagar ruler. In the initial stages, it was very difficult to obtain commercial privileges from the Vijayanagar ruler, because of Portuguese influence at the Chandragiri Court.

The past experience of the Portuguese with the South Coromandel elites and mercantile groups helped the Dutch Company to formulate its policies acceptable to the Coromandel environment. Thus, the situation in the beginning of the seventeenth century offered an atmosphere in which the Dutch companies could establish themselves in various important centres of trade, get concessions from the rulers and establish good relations with the local merchants of the South Coromandel coast.