Chapter Three

Character of Ports

In the simplest of definitions, a port stands for a place alongside the navigable sea or river. It had provisions for the loading and unloading of cargoes. Merchandise was collected and distributed into the hinterlands from the ports. However, there were many factors at play in transforming a small town alongside navigable river or sea into a busy seaport. It was expected to have ample storage for merchandise. Better connectivity with hinterlands was an added advantage. Security from pirates and justice had to be firmly established if a town aspired to become an important port. Ports represented a cosmopolitan culture. Many foreigners visited these places to undertake commercial activities. For example, around forty-four languages were spoken at the port of Malacca in medieval times. The rulers were thus forced to ensure the neutrality of ports. Ruling elites even provided autonomy and protection to the foreign nationals to promote their harbours. Religious freedom was extended to the merchants. Rulers benefited a lot in return. Increased commercial activities at their ports brought revenues and filled their coffers.

Like any important trading centre on caravan routes, these ports were the nerve centres of the Indian Ocean trade. The itinerant merchants arrived at these ports for trading. With them, they brought foreign commodities in demand and carried back other products. The rulers around the Indian Ocean were fully aware of the benefits of the well-established ports in their areas.

Nature has endowed India with a long coastline. With the Arabian Sea to its west, the Bay of Bengal to its east and the Indian Ocean to its south, it has been dotted with several ports since antiquity. But the point to remember

---

is that all of these ports did not hold the same importance for the sea merchants. Some ports attracted more sea traffic than others for a long span of time. The same was true about the period between c.1000- c.1500. Some ports were successful in attracting a sizeable inflow of the mercantile trade, whereas others could only dream of such activity. For example, no port in Gujarat could rival the supremacy of Cambay, which remained a flourishing trade emporium till the sixteenth century. On his visit to Alexandria, Ibn Battuta remarked, "It has also the magnificent port, and among all the ports in the world I have seen none equal to it, except the ports of Kawlam (Quilon) and Qaliquot (Calicut) in India."\(^2\) Thus, even the contemporary writers could identify ports that were suitable for maritime trade. These ports could easily be termed as trading emporiums, which were on the list of every merchant who operated in the Indian Ocean. Working on this hypothesis, the present chapter would concentrate mainly on such trading emporiums. The reasons behind their success along with their decline, if any, would also be discussed. An attempt would be made to work out the factors that enabled these ports to attract a large number of merchants and a corresponding volume of cargoes. Towards the end, a comparative study would be undertaken to relate their success with some famous ports in other countries. It will enable us to identify some general characteristics that were applicable to all the major ports irrespective of their geographical locations.

This study commences with a survey from Sind and proceeds through Gujarat, Konkan, Malabar, the Coromandel, Orissa and ultimately reaches Bengal. In every region, an effort will be made to identify the chief trading emporiums. Even contemporary travellers, visiting India, made it a point to identify the chief port in a particular region. They addressed the hinterlands with the name of the main port. For example, Cambay, Calicut and Quilon were addressed as both ports and the surrounding areas.

Sind

Sind was the first place of call for the ships entering into India from western Asia. In fact, it was directly associated with the Persian Gulf. Situated on the frontier of India, it witnessed flourishing mercantile trade since antiquity. It was an important centre of mercantile trade, but the invasion of the Arabs and the inclusion of Sind into the Islamic area of influence resulted in an unprecedented growth of maritime trade in this region.

The Arabs and Persians had their colonies in Sind even prior to the emergence of Islam. Muhammad bin Qasim invaded Sind in 712 AD. The incursion was followed by a large migration of the Arabs into Sind. The Arabs not only settled around the coasts but, unlike other areas, they penetrated into the interiors also. Now the question remains why Sind, which was neither a good producer nor manufacturer, was preferred by the foreigners. Al Idrisi explains that Sind owed its prosperity to commerce because its land was arid and hence not suitable for agriculture. He further adds that the people of Sind had earned riches by playing the role of intermediaries. They bought the entire cargo of ships and hoarded it till the things became dearer. Nevertheless it still does not answer our question as to why was Sind visited by foreign vessels after all?

Sind enjoyed a basic geographical advantage. It was well connected with the fertile plains of Punjab through river transportation. The proximity to important land routes passing through Multan also enabled it to act as a suitable place of storage, from where the merchandise could be sent to Punjab and Afghanistan. This is the reason for Andre Wink to suggest that the invasion of Muhammad bin Qasim was prompted by a desire to secure the maritime route passing through Sind. This invasion was mainly directed against the pirates of Sind who plundered ships sent for the Caliph from Ceylon. When Dahir, the ruler of Sind, expressed his  

---

3 Al Idrisi in *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, Vol. I, p. 77.
helplessness in controlling piratical activities, the Muslims had to intervene for securing sea routes to Malabar, Cambay and even China. With the conquest of Sind, Muhammad bin Qasim tried to secure the port of Daibul. He even launched campaigns to chastise the pirates.

Daibul, near modern Karachi, remained the most important port of Sind up to the thirteenth century. Located on the confluence of river Indus with the Arabian Sea, cargo could be procured/distributed easily from/into the hinterland of Daibul. It enjoyed close contacts not only with western Asia but also with Africa. Nkitin found it to be a very large place and ‘the great meeting place for all nations living along the coast of India and Ethiopia’. Daibul, however, faced a serious problem of silting which ultimately resulted in its downfall. Lahari, referred to as a prosperous port town by Ibn Battuta, attracted the flow of trade when navigation became dangerous in Daibul. Continuous silting remained a constant threat to all the important ports of India. Not only Daibul but even Cambay and Satgaon suffered great setbacks due to silting in later times. When the port of Daibul went into decline due to silting, navigation became difficult and the ships found the alternative port of Lahari. When Ibn Battuta visited Sind, he noticed the prosperity of Lahari. This port was located near the confluence of the Indus. Traders from Persia, Yemen and other countries assembled in Lahari to trade. The annual revenues of Lahari had grown to the tune of ‘60 lacs.’

The extension of Islamic area of influence into Gujarat under the armies of Alauddin Khalji would also have encouraged the migration of the foreigners settled

---

5 Nkitin, p. 30.

6 Almost every important port was facing the problem of silt. Situated at the mouths of rivers, the ports became unsuitable and dangerous for navigation. Not only Sind but even Cambay was facing grave problem of silting. Islands of sands emerged and disappeared quickly. The ships needed skilled pilots to reach the destination. Any mistake could land ships stranded in the bed of mud. Duarte Barbosa, Vol. I, p. 139.

in Sind to move towards the more promising lands. In the later half of the thirteenth century, Ghiasuddin Balban (1266-86 AD) sent his elder son to Sind, with an instruction to regulate the supply of the bahri horses. The migrants settled in Sind would have easily acquired horses of the best breed owing to their contacts in western Asia. When Duarte Barbosa arrived in India during the early sixteenth century, he found the presence of a large number of horses in Gujarat. The horse trade appears to have moved along with these foreign immigrants. Thus, the silting of Daibul and expansion of Islamic empire into Gujarat diverted sea trade to new destinations.

Gujarat

Gujarat was the central zone of mercantile activities since antiquity. Bestowed with fertile arable land and a rich variety of products, it emerged both as a producer and manufacturer. Gujarat was well connected with the fertile plains of the Ganges from where cargo could be easily brought by the indigenous merchants. The rivers, though seasonal, also helped in bringing heavier merchandize to its coastal areas. Gujarat had its reference in the Periplus and its author noticed great oceanic trade around the gulf of Cambay. Another important port was Lothal which belonged to the Harrapan age. As discussed earlier, the emergence of Islam encouraged the mercantile trade to a considerable extent and Gujarat became its prime beneficiary. Even during Muslim invasions, the Arabs merchants were warmly welcomed and offered a good deal in Gujarat. Islamic religious practices were freely observed in

---


Sindan and Saimur. The rulers and the governors in Gujarat always remained alive to the benefits that were derived from the sea. As a result, it remained home to vast treasures and thus lucrative for any ruler on the throne of Delhi. Alauddin Khalji acquired much wealth from his invasion of Gujarat in 1298 AD. The ruler of Ahmedabad was called the 'King of the seas.' He also participated in an Afro-Asian alliance against the Portuguese in 1508-09 AD.

Gujarat being so vast and rich, was a home to several ports. Lothal and Broach were important ports in ancient times. Around the tenth century, Somanath was a rich port and it was touched by almost all the ships bound for Aden. The invasion and subsequent plunder of Somanath by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni resulted in its decline after 1024-25 AD. Romila Thapar argues that Somanath recovered quickly from this plunder. She finds the elite of the city working towards the revival of the port city. The Chaulakya king, Kumarpala, appointed a governor at Somanath to check the piratical activities of local Abhira chief. Still the menace continued. Bawarjis, the dreaded pirates of the sea, had access to Somanath and they came to worship the deity also. The land grant to Nuruddin Firoz, a Persian sea-merchant, might have been an effort to revive the merchants' confidence in the administration of Somanath. Still, its projection into the open sea appears to have encouraged its decline because the increasing troubles by local rulers and piratical activities (of Bawarjis) would have forced the merchants to look for safer harbours. Romila Thapar also suggests that the invasion of Somanath might have been an attempt of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni to destroy the western links of the port. Horses were coming to India through the sea. The phenomenon was not favourable to

---

12 Ibn Haukal, p. 38.
14 Al-Qalaqashandi, in *Arab Accounts of India During the Fourteenth Century*, Eng. Tr., Muhammad Zaki, p. 73, (hereafter cited as Al-Qalaqashandi).
16 Ibid, p. 39.
Ghazni which desired to play the beneficial role of intermediary in this horse trade
through its land routes.\textsuperscript{17} If it was true, then this could be the long lasting impact of
Sultan Mahmud's invasion. After his invasion there are very few references of
horses coming through Somanath. Balban sent his son to Sind to control the supply
of \textit{bahri} (sea) horses,\textsuperscript{18} whereas Duarte Barbosa finds Cambay having a good stock
of horses in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{19} Surat did not come into the limelight till the
fifteenth century, when Duarte Barbosa noticed that the governor of Surat earned
handsome revenues from maritime trade.\textsuperscript{20} Gogha, though visited by Ibn Battuta,
could never compete with other important ports of Gujarat in its prosperity. So the
question arises which was the port emporium for this geographical zone? The
answer was loud and clear in the accounts of all the observers and travellers.
Cambay remained a port \textit{par excellence} during the period under study.

The naval incursions and piratical activities forced the merchants to search for
safe harbourage in Gujarat. The pursuit led them to Cambay, which was situated
inside the gulf and could be secured during emergencies by lowering the chains
across the mouth of the gulf or blocking it with stones. P. K. Singh suggests that
Cambay was developed by the Gurjara Partiharas as a rival port to Broach, which
was under the control of their deadly enemies Rashtrakutas.\textsuperscript{21} Whatever may be the
reason, Cambay emerged as the port emporium between eleventh to sixteenth
century. S. R. Rao traces the history of Cambay to antiquity. According to him,
Cambay ‘must have been a port in the Harrapan times.’\textsuperscript{22} It, however, came to

\textsuperscript{17} Romila Thapar, op. cit., p. 51.
\textsuperscript{18} Simon Digby, \textit{War-Horse and Elephant in the Dehli Sultanate: A Study of
Military Supplies}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{19} Duarte Barbosa, Vol. I, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp. 149-150.
\textsuperscript{21} P. K. Singh, ‘Cambay Trade and Commerce’, \textit{Proceedings of the Indian History
Congress}, 48\textsuperscript{th} session, Goa University, Bambolin, 1987, pp. 117-118.
\textsuperscript{22} S. R. Rao, op. cit., p. 220.
limelight only after the eleventh century. Ibn Battuta found Cambay inhabited by a large number of foreign merchants who constructed beautiful houses and resided in them. He even appreciates the design of a handsome mosque in Cambay.\textsuperscript{23} Tome Pires remarks:

"...Cambay- the chief city of Milingobin- sail many ships to all parts to Aden, Ormuz, the kingdom of Deccan, Goa, Bhatkal, all over Malabar, Ceylon, Bengal, Pegu, Siam, Pedir, Pase and Malacca where they take quantities of merchandize, bringing other kinds back, thus making Cambay rich and important. Cambay chiefly stretches out two arms, with her right arm she reaches out towards Aden and with the other towards Malacca, as the most important places to sail to."\textsuperscript{24}

Cambay was so well connected with the Red Sea that even the annual pilgrimage to Mecca commenced from Cambay. The envoy (of the Fatimid caliph in Egypt), who brought a \textit{khilat} for Muhammad bin Tughluq started his return journey to Egypt via Cambay.\textsuperscript{25} Alauddin Khalji acquired rich plunder from his invasion ofCambay in 1298 AD. The inclusion of Cambay in the Delhi sultanate further helped its expansion. As suggested earlier, the prosperity of Daibul might have suffered a setback with the expansion of the Islamic diasporas in Gujarat. Ghiasuddin Balban sent his son to Sind to secure the supply of the horses from western Asia, but Duarte Barbosa informs that horses were found in abundance in Gujarat.\textsuperscript{26} It is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibn Battuta, (Mahdi Husain), p. 172.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Tome Pires, Vol. I, p. 42.
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{Khilat} was the official robes bestowed by the Caliph to his deputies (rulers in practice) in different kingdoms to symbolise the act of investiture. It was designed to uphold the supremacy of the Caliph (though in theory only) and attracting the allegiance of Muslim \textit{ri`ya`ya} (population). Muhammad bin Tughluq felt the need to obtain \textit{khilat} when a political crisis in the sultanate assumed threatening proportion. Ibn Battuta, (H.A.R. Gibb), Vol. III, p. 674.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Duarte Barbosa, Vol. I, p. 118.
\end{itemize}
probable that the same thing might have happened to the inflow of other merchandize from and to western Asia.

The question remains why Cambay managed to dominate the mercantile trade of the Arabian Sea? During the first half of fourteenth century, Cambay had beautiful buildings and ‘wonderful’ mosques, which were continuously built by the foreign merchants. This strengthens the argument that Cambay owed its prosperity to Islamic diasporas that followed Muslim conquerors to Gujarat. These Muslims traders must have had their roots in western Asia and, thus, stood in better position to attract the inflow of oceanic trade from the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. At the same time, Cambay was bestowed with some other crucial advantages. Situated on the Mahi estuary, this port provided security and better interconnectivity to the foreigners. The rulers were aware of the profits that accrued from the sea trade. Urfi narrates an incident in which some locals burnt the mosque and killed eighty Muslims. The local ruler, Rai Singh, acted swiftly and ordered the arrest of two ‘leading men from each class of infidels, Brahman, fire worshipper, and others’ to be punished. He also distributed money to enable the Muslims to rebuild their mosque and minarets.27 This action was primarily taken to satisfy the aggrieved foreign merchants, lest they should leave the city en mass. A visit to the busy city of Cambay was therefore extremely advantageous for the sea merchants. Gujarat was home to a wide range of merchandize. These ranged from simple crops to finished products of great value. Well connected with the northern plains, the commodities could have been easily transported to Cambay. The role of the local merchants called Banias, known for their trading skills, was also significant but would be discussed in the subsequent chapter. The prosperity and importance of Cambay could best be highlighted with a statement of Duarte Barbosa, pointing to the residence of wealthy traders belonging to different nationalities. He remarks, "...a great and fair city called Cambaya in which dwell both Moors and Heathens. Therein

27 Muhammad Ufi in The History of India as Told by its Own Historians, Vol. II, p. 164.
are many fair houses, very lofty, with windows and roofed with tiles in our manner, well laid out with streets and fine open places and great buildings...in the city dwell substantial merchants and men of great fortune, both Moors and Heathen.\(^{28}\)

Cambay was also a place of considerable manufacturing, where considerable work was done in ivory, gold, cloths and quilts, that "in this city the best workmen in every kind of work are found."\(^{29}\) By the sixteenth century, the gulf of Cambay began to face the problem of silting. The navigation became difficult. Duarte Barbosa writes:

> "Sailing from these ports is very dangerous for keeled ships, because being at the top of the tide the water here runs out so far in the gulf that, in a very short space of time, four or five leagues are left bare....and when there is a flowing tide it flows so strong that they say a man running at full speed cannot escape it...many (ships) are left stranded on rocks where they are lost."\(^{30}\)

As the political balance shifted to Surat, the latter emerged as one of the richest ports after the sixteenth century.

**Konkan**

Konkan was the next zone of Indian maritime trade. However, its mercantile character differed a lot from Sind and Gujarat. It presented a entirely different scenario, which was created by a peculiar set of ecological conditions and economic compulsions. Konkan is a hilly area and does not have a satisfactory cultivation. Life in general was hard. Its greatest asset was its location. It was favourably located enroute (via sea) to Gujarat and Malabar. Its favourable location encouraged its mercantile activities. In medieval times, it derived considerable profits from its role as an intermediary. The absence of good farm products was compensated by the availability of teak and pearls from the gulf of Sopara. It also exported a large number of


\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 138-139.
quantity of cotton cloths, but this must have been more like a re-export than original products. The availability of sufficient quantity of teak proved to be a great allurement for the ships, especially dhows, trading in the Arabian Sea. Bassein, Thana and Chaul emerged as centre of respectable shipbuilding industry. Apart from the construction of new ships, these might have served as a place of repair for the old ships. Konkan also followed the cruel policy of plundering the ships that did not make a call at its ports. Marco Polo informs us about a local ruler who even encouraged the pirates to rob the ocean going ships from his principality in return of horses.31

As mentioned earlier, Konkan was famous for its teak. Though Bassein, Thana and Chaul developed as leading centres of shipbuilding, but Chaul outpaced others in attracting the inflow of sea traffic. First mentioned by Ptolemy as Symulla or Tamulla, several travellers observed a considerable mercantile activity in Chaul. Duarte Barbosa found Thana infested with pirates,32 whereas Chaul witnessed the great oceanic traffic during the winter months of December, January, February and March.33 Chaul benefited a lot from its location. Situated on the banks of the river Kundalika, it was visited both by the Arabs engaged in long distance trade and Banias from Gujarat doing coastal trading between Malabar and Gujarat. It seems that Chaul also promised better facilities and protection to the foreigners. The better connectivity of Chaul with Gujarat, Red Sea routes and the Persian Gulf, forced the Portuguese to pass a royal charter to regulate the spice trade between Chaul and Red Sea. The Portuguese did not want that any spices should reach Europe through Alexandria and Venice.34 This charter forced the Nizam of Chaul to join the league formed by the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt against the Portuguese.

33 Ibid., p. 159.
The presence of Arab merchants at Chaul also attracted the trade in good horses towards this port. It supplied horses to the Yadavas, Vijaynagara and other important principalities in south India. The famous Siddis regulated Chaul on behalf of the Mughals and Bijapur rulers. Copper was another important commodity that was exported from Chaul to other areas, specially Cambay, through coastal trading.

The Portuguese followed a systematic policy to destroy the commercial activities in Chaul. In their attempt to regulate the spice trade of India, they diverted horse trade from Chaul to Goa. They provided protection to merchants in return for Cartez. With the establishment of their factory in Surat, they forbade the import of spices to Chaul. Around 1520 AD, they issued an order that anyone found carrying spices to Chaul would be condemned to death or given severe punishment. This proved to be a deadly blow to the prosperity of Chaul. The supremacy of Chaul was now replaced with the new capital of the Portuguese at Goa.

Malabar

Malabar was the most important zone in the oceanic trade. In touch with the outer world since antiquity, this zone became an eye sore for Pliny who complained that India was draining the Roman Empire of precious metals with her grass and

36 B. Ashok Rajeshirke, op. cit., p. 111.
37 Cartez was closely linked to Estado da India of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese gave passes to ships trading in the Indian Ocean. These passes ensured security from the Portuguese warships in the sea. Any ship travelling without the cartez was liable to be confiscated. K.N. Chaudhuri, 'European Trade with India', in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, eds. op. cit., pp. 384-385.
Malabar was traditionally known for its supply of spices, specially pepper. The prosperity of the Roman Empire and its insatiable demand for spices made Malabar a favourite destination of foreign merchants. An intense struggle to control the supplies of Malabar ensued between the Sassanids (Persians) and the Romans. The emergence of Islamic caliphate once again generated a huge demand for Indian spices in west Asia. Victories of the Islamic armies extended the influence of the caliphate in Asia and Africa. It heralded the era of Pan Islamica. It was represented by general prosperity and extension of trade. Muslim armies plundered huge treasures in Africa and Asia and brought them in circulation for the expanding Asian markets. Cities grew rapidly. Products of distant world were brought for the caliph and Muslim gentry. This 'country of pepper', as designated by the Arab geographers, gained a lot from such a scenario. Ports of Malabar soon acquired a cosmopolitan character. They attracted a big diaspora of foreign nationals professing different religions. Earlier it had come into contact with Christianity when Saint Thomas arrived in south India around the first century. After twelfth century, it gained more importance because it emerged as the single zone of trans-shipment for the vessels trading in the Indian Ocean. There is some evidence that sailing was done all the way from the Persian Gulf to China prior to the eleventh century, but sources point to the absence of such a phenomenon in the period under study. Junkns sailed up to Quilon and Wassaf writes about their vastness. Dhows were confined to the western sector of the Indian Ocean. This trend encouraged large

38 Pliny calculated that there was an annual drain of 100 million to India alone. Similar sentiments were repeated by Wassaf, "....since the days of Adam till the present, there has been a country to which people export gold, silver, commodities and curiosities and from which in exchange they bring away only thorns, dregs, dusts, pebbles and various aromatics roots, from which money has never been sent to any place for the purchase of goods." For further details see Wassaf in The History of India as Told by its Own Historians, Vol. III, p. 30; A. H. M. Jones, 'Asian Trade in Antiquity', in D.S. Richards, op. cit., p. 5.

39 Malabar was also called ‘the country of pepper’ by the Arabs. Al-Qalaqashandi, p. 75.

40 Wassaf in The History of India as Told by its Own Historians, Vol. III, p. 32.
settlement of traders in Malabar. Duarte Barbosa records the presence of the Gujaratis, Arabs, Persians and Dakhnis, known as Pardesis in Malabar. According to his testimony, the foreigners were provided with their own controllers and governors to regulate their affairs.\footnote{Duarte Barbosa, Vol. II, p. 76.} Malabar was dotted with several small and big ports of national and international fame. Throughout medieval period, ports of Malabar nurtured internal rivalry for supremacy in attracting the inflow of maritime trade. The struggle to emerge as a single trading emporium was mainly confined to two important ports, namely Quilon and Calicut. The prosperity of these two constrained Ibn Battuta to compare them with the magnificent port of Alexandria.\footnote{Ibn Battuta, (H.A.R. Gibb), Vol. I, p. 19.}

We would therefore study the multi-dimensional trade of Malabar, with special reference to these two ports in order to locate its trading emporium.

Ruled by a Hindu ruler, who was designated as Samuri, Calicut emerged as a rich, prosperous and populated port. It was extremely famous in the Indian Ocean trading world. In 1498 AD, the great sailor Ibn Majid brought the Portuguese, in search of Indian pepper, to Calicut. Increase in maritime activities after the eleventh century attracted considerable number of merchants to Malabar. Muslim diaspora from Gujarat and western Asia moved towards Malabar. Arrival of these diaspora strengthened contacts of Calicut with other trading zones of the Indian Ocean. The Chinese also made Malabar their farthest destination in the Indian Ocean. They normally terminated their voyage in Calicut. Availability of the Chinese commodities, silk and porcelain in particular, was an added advantage. Porcelain and silk were in huge demand throughout India, western Asia and Africa. Trading activities in Calicut, however, remained in the hands of Muslim merchants. They almost monopolized its foreign trade. They even threatened the Samuri that they would leave the port if the Portuguese were allowed to trade in Calicut around 1498 AD. The threat was serious enough to force the Samuri to turn hostile towards the foreigners (the Portuguese). Duarte Barbosa informs us that the Gujaratis (Muslims) owned the
best houses in Calicut. Calicut developed with the active participation of the ruling class. As mentioned earlier, the rulers granted autonomy to merchants. They (merchants) had their own shahbandar who regulated their internal affairs. The merchants were promised security of their lives and goods. The duties were moderate. Abdur Razzaq records:

"Security and justice are so firmly established in this city (Calicut) that most wealthy merchants bring thither from maritime countries considerable cargoes, which they unload, and unhesitatingly send into the markets and bazaars, without thinking in the meantime of any necessity of checking the account or of keeping watch over the goods. The officers of the custom-house take upon themselves the charge of looking after the merchandise, over which they keep watch day and night. When a sale is effected, they levy a duty on the goods of one-fortieth part; if they are not sold, they make no charge on them whatsoever."

Ibn Battuta describes that in Malabar, it is a custom that whenever a ship was destroyed, whatsoever was saved from it went to the treasury. But, this practice was not followed in the town of Calicut. The merchandize went back to the true owner. The maritime trade proved beneficial to the Samuri and Duarte Barbosa adds that the merchants from Calicut returned with even more foreign nationals who were quickly given shelter. It was with this consideration that Portuguese were also given a warm welcome as traders. With better deals to offer, the port of Calicut succeeded in attracting the maritime flow. It emerged not only as an exporter but also as an important intermediary. Precious commodities brought from all quarters of the world were available in Calicut. It fulfilled the demand of both the luxuries and

---

43 Duarte Barbosa, Vol. II, p. 73.
staples. Even costly products from Abyssinia, Zirbad and Zanguebar were available here.

Quilon was another important port of the Malabar. It was reputed for its supply of pepper. Tome Pires remarks that the ruler of Quilon used to receive forty elephants from Ceylon in earlier times.47 Elephants of Ceylon were greatly cherished in India for their warring skills. Ibn Battuta refers to the merchants of Quilon who possessed considerable wealth, so much so that one of them could buy the whole ship with its merchandize in one deal.48 Duarte Barbosa also found Quilon populated with traders from several nations and religions. They possessed many ships and sailed in all directions.49 These merchants would have enabled the port to have favourable trading relations with western Asia. Quilon also acted as the first port of call for the ships sailing for southeast Asia. Quilon was in close commercial contacts with the Chinese merchants.50 Chinese mission to Muhammad bin Tughluq landed at Quilon. Ibn Battuta saw a big Chinese cock for the first time in Quilon.51 It seemed that the big junks made Quilon their last port of call. Jews and Christians also participated in the maritime trade of Quilon. Contemporary sources even point towards Jews owning large chunks of pepper land (gardens) in Quilon In short, ships from Quilon sailed to all directions loaded with the goods of diverse varieties.52

The reasons for the prosperity of these two ports were not hard to seek. Primary reason for their emergence was favourable conditions for trading activities. Calicut and Quilon could boasts of multi dimensional trade. Products from western Asia, Africa, Gujarat and China were available alongwith indigenous products. Ships

51 Ibid., p. 110.
Ports of Malabar and the Coromandel
could take pepper as ballast because it had a considerable international demand. The presence of mercantile guilds and well kept storehouses were added advantages. The rulers were also aware of maritime prospects. They replenished their treasuries with taxes acquired from maritime trade. In return, they granted autonomy to the traders. They welcomed foreigners and even acknowledged their distinct customs. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians and Chinese enjoyed much economic and religious freedom at these ports. In Malabar, a major share of the sea trade was in the hands of the Muslims and rulers (mostly Hindus) faced no problem in dealing with them. Ships were not plundered even if they wandered into the jurisdiction of Calicut. Writing about Quilon in 1348 AD, John De Marignoli states that the king had granted to the Christians of Quilon the privilege of weighing. Even the Portuguese allowed these Christians to continue with their judicial system which was extended to them by the former local kings.\textsuperscript{53}

**The Coromandel**

The Coromandel, famous for its clothes and pearls, emerged as a commercial destination with the rise of the Cholas. The eleventh century witnessed the Chola navy marching upto Srivijaya (1025 AD) to further its mercantile interests. The Cholas had already invaded Ceylon to monopolize maritime trade on the advice of merchants from Tamil areas. Various guilds like the Nandesi, Manigramam and Ayyavole started recording their presence in the Coromandel. These maritime activities were not new to Tamil areas. Sangam literature alludes to big ships entering the port of Puhar (Kaveripattinam) without lowering their sails.\textsuperscript{54} Joseph Needham records Roman Syrian settlements in Virapattinam (around modern

---


Pondicherry) during the first century. The Tamil merchants helped in Hindu colonization of southeast Asia. The eleventh century witnessed a great impetus to these maritime activities. The Cholas and Pandayas contributed a lot towards these developments. Islamic influx into the Coromandel under Muslim armies brought Tamilnadu into the Islamic area of influence. However, it benefited the most with the Chinese participation in the Indian Ocean after the eleventh century. Historically, the eastern coasts of India remained more inclined towards southeast Asia and China. Wassaf observes that the big ships, floating like mountains in the sea, started arriving in Ma'abar.

The Coromandel and Tamil areas faced one major disadvantage, which was the lack of good and deep harbourage. Kayal, Hinawar and Tochi were recorded as the main ports, but they could not be compared with Daibul, Cambay, Calicut and Quilon in their grandeur. Hence one can find reference to the inscriptions encouraging the traders to come to these ports. One such inscription in Motupalli (1358 A.D.) is worth mentioning. It converted Motupalli into a safe haven for sea merchants and remitted many taxes. It also promised to extend autonomy to them in their internal affairs.

An important feature in the composition of these ports was their concentration in the southern zone. Kayal, Kaveripattinam and Nagapattinam went on to emerge as important ports in southern Coromandel. The reason could be their proximity nearer to the marked international trading routes. Ships destined for China from Malabar hesitated to steer deep into the Bay of Bengal. Ports of southern coasts, on the other hand, could be touched without deviating from the marked routes. This phenomenon resulted in the concentration of all the major mercantile activities in the ports situated in the southern Coromandel. They also served as the ports of trans-shipment for the ports located in the interior of the Bay of Bengal. Ships brought

---


56 Wassaf in *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, Vol. III, p. 32.

merchandize from northern areas to do trading in the southern ports. The sixteenth century traveller, Duarte Barbosa writes, "Cael has a great haven whither every year sail many ships from Charmandel and Benguala, so that...there is a great traffic in goods of many kinds coming from other regions." Kayal was a prominent port. It survived throughout the medieval period and received a regular supply of horses from western Asia. Marco Polo records that Kayal was in touch with the ships coming from the west. Ships arrived from Hormuz, Arabia, Kish and Aden bringing a large supply of war-horses. It witnessed brisk mercantile activities. Both Chettis and Lubbais were found trading in Kayal, yet it did not emerge as the trading emporium of Coromandel. Which port can be designated as the trading emporium in the Coromandel? The claim to greatness was contested between two major ports of Tamilnadu. Kaveripattinam was an important port of Tamilnadu. It had its reference even in the Sangam literature. Ships sailed to the port of Kaveripattinam without slacking their sails and brought precious metals from Malaya, Ceylon and Arabia. Developed under the patronage of Pandayas, Kaveripattinam attracted a huge volume of sea traffic. The Pandayan attempt to attract horse trade to Kaveripattinam also brought prominence to it. However, the decline of Pandayas and the subsequent revival of Chola power shifted the centre of south Indian political and economic activities towards Chola areas. The Cholas patronized the port of Nagapattinam and it soon surpassed Kaveripattinam in its grandeur and extent of mercantile trade.

60 In Tamil, Kayal stands for "a lagoon". Now a village in Tinnevelly District of Tamilnadu, it has lost all its glory of the past. The village is now one and half miles away from the coast. Presently, the Muslims, Roman Catholic fishermen (of Parvara caste), Vellars and Brahmans constitute the main population. The natives refused to accept anything about its past glory, but the ruins of forts, Chinese pottery, wells, tanks, temples and excavated coins attest to its greatness as described by Marco Polo. For more details see Marco Polo, Vol. II, pp. 370-374 (fn. 1).
Nagapattinam, developed under the patronage of the Cholas, witnessed a tremendous rush of sea traffic and remained an important port throughout early medieval period.\textsuperscript{62} The Portuguese, on their arrival in the area, marked Nagapattinam as their chief city in the Coromandel.\textsuperscript{63} Expansion of the Chola influence, which extended up to Bengal and Malabar, provided large and secured hinterlands. They patronized and attracted the inflow of commercial traffic to their areas. The Cholas were fully aware of the benefits of maritime trade and vigorously attracted itinerant and sea merchants, who were provided security and freedom to govern their internal matters. The Cholas sent embassies to different countries. In order to attract the Buddhist merchants of southeast Asia, they even permitted the construction of a Buddhist sanctuary in Nagapattinam. A large volume of porcelain related to that period has been excavated at Nagapattinam. Chinese works of twelfth and thirteenth century testify the greatness of Nagapattinam. Zhuavo Ragua in Zufan Zhi (1290 AD) and Wang Dayaun in Daryio Zhiva (1305 AD) refer to this large city.\textsuperscript{64} Availability of porcelain was important as it was in considerable demand all over Indian Ocean trading world. The merchants would prefer to visit a port that promised Chinese porcelain and rarities. The improved links with China and southeast Asia enabled Nagapattinam to ensure supply of porcelain and silk from China and spices of southeast Asia. The Cholas also monopolized the supply of pearls. Their missions to China carried pearls and other costly finished products with a view to signify their control over these routes to the Chinese emperor. However, it perhaps went into decline in the first half of fifteenth century. Famous Chinese commander Cheng Ho did not arrive in Nagapattinam during his seven expeditions of the Indian Ocean in the mid fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{65} Nevertheless, it recovered soon. It

\textsuperscript{62} It is a port situated in the modern district of Thanjavur in Tamilnadu. \textit{Microsoft Encarta} (1993-2001 computer edition).

\textsuperscript{63} Duarte Barbosa, Vol. II, pp. 123-124.

\textsuperscript{64} K.V. Raman, op. cit., p. 114.

\textsuperscript{65} \texttt{www.chinapage.org}. 
was a flourishing port when the Portuguese arrived. Realizing its strategic importance, the Portuguese made it their headquarters in the Coromandel.

**Orrisa**

Orrisa was known all over the Indian subcontinent for the breeding of elephants. It generated some amount of shipping from Chilka and Puri. Khalkatapatna, eleven kilometers east of Konark, witnessed maritime traffic during the reign of the Ganga dynasty. Chinese celadon, porcelain with blue floral design on white background, and glazed chocolate ware of Arabian origins have been excavated at this place. Chinese copper coins of the fourteenth century with peculiar motifs constituted another important find from this site.\(^\text{66}\) Still there was certainly no such port as to claim the prestigious position of a trading emporium. Perhaps Bengal and Tamil areas continued to attract products from Orrissa via land routes. Coastal trading between the Coromandel and Bengal would have brought ships to these ports of Orrissa.

**Bengal**

Bengal was known for the production of cotton, sugarcane, ginger and slaves. It was a prosperous and important zone in the Indian Ocean trading world. It remained in contact with southeast Asia since antiquity. Fahien embarked on a ship from Bengal enroute to China. The Bengalis played a leading role in colonizing southeast Asia.\(^\text{67}\)

Bengal remained closely aligned to north Indian politics. Control of Bengal was important for any ruler in Delhi because it ensured an outlet to the sea through

\[^{66}\text{S. R. Rao, op. cit., p. 230.}\]
\[^{67}\text{Tome Pires, Vol. I, p. 143.}\]
the Ganges. It is the only river that covered almost all the major cities of central India. The Yamuna in the vicinity of Delhi also merged in the Ganges near Allahabad. In the absence of suitable land transportation, a considerable volume of merchandise could be brought to the sea through the river. This phenomenon of better linkage of ports with hinterlands, through the rivers, resulted in the emergence of Bengal as an important zone of maritime trade. It enjoyed close ties not only with southeast Asia but also with western Asia. Both junks (suitable for the eastern sector of the Indian Ocean) and dhows (suitable for the Arabian sea) were constructed here. The result was the availability of vast range of merchandise. Bengal had hot and humid weather. It was also infested with dacoits who plundered the merchants. Numerous battles further complicated the situation; still the incentives were so huge that merchants could not avoid the place. Ibn Battuta calls Bengal Duzakhast bur ni'amat (literal meaning 'A Hell full of Good Things'). Tome Pires remarks that in Bengal goods were highly taxed, but still merchants received

68 In Bengal, river transportation proved to be the cheapest mode of transportation upto the recent times. In the words of Bhattacharya, "In lower Bengal the country boats linked the smaller market-places (hats and bazaars) with entrepot towns (ganjas and bandars) for the greater part of the year. But in more parts of lower Bengal, 'the country has even in the dry season some navigable streams within a third part of that distance', and it was estimated that this inland navigation kept in constant employment about 30,000 boatmen in 1780." Comparing the cost of river transportation with that of land transportation, he finds that," The cost of transporting goods per ton mile by country boat in 1849 was 1.2 pence down stream and 1.6 pence upstream. About the same time steam boats were coming into use and they cost at least 25 per cent more per ton mile; overland transport continued to be the costliest, about twice as expensive as country boat freight." S. Bhattacharya, 'Eastern India', in Dharma Kumar, ed., The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. II, pp. 270-274.

69 Dacoity was rampant in Bengal and there were villages and families who carried out these plunders. Even the English had to take a strict action against such families. It was laid out that dacoits on conviction would be executed in their villages and their families be made slave to the state. Warren Hastings, justifying the order, observed, "It becomes the indispensable duty of government to try the most rigorous means, since experience has proved every lenient and ordinary remedy to be ineffectual." M. P. Jain, Outlines of Indian Legal History, p. 62.

70 Ibn Battuta, (Cathay and the Way Thither), Vol. IV, p. 5.
Ports of Bengal and Southeast Asia (c.1000-1500)
good profits if they landed at the harbours of Bengal.\textsuperscript{71} Thus, a visit to Bengal was sure to bring immense profits to sailing vessels.

Expansion of Islamic area of influence resulted in corresponding expansion of mercantile activities in Bengal. Interestingly, Duarte Barbosa found Muslims living in the coastal areas.\textsuperscript{72} Merchants from Bengal extended their areas of operation. Ibn Battuta found Bengali merchants living in separate quarters in Sumatra.\textsuperscript{73} Ships sailed to all directions from Bengal. Ibn Battuta boarded a \textit{junk} from Bengal on his journey to China.\textsuperscript{74} Duarte Barbosa noticed both \textit{dhows} and \textit{junks} in Bengal.\textsuperscript{75} Simon Digby believes that Bengalis constructed their own \textit{junks} and this technique might have filtered down to Bengal after such a long era of commercial intercourse with China.\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Junks} were built in Bengal even when the Chinese withdrew from the Indian Ocean trade around fifteenth century.

Now the question arises which was chief trading emporium of Bengal? This question has been hotly debated. Contemporary travelogues refer to two important ports, with different characteristics. The first port Satgaon or Chitgaon was located near the shores and witnessed a large volume of sea traffic till 1623 AD when Hooghly was made the royal port by the Portuguese.\textsuperscript{77} Satgaon was loosely controlled by many governors till the arrival of the Mughal armies. It witnessed continuous conflicts. Why was it visited by maritime traders after all? The answer lies in its location. Outside the delta of the Ganges, Satgaon offered ships a passage

\textsuperscript{71} Tome Pires, Vol. I, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{72} Duarte Barbosa, Vol. II, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibn Battuta, (Mahdi Husain), p. 242 (fn. 2).

\textsuperscript{74} Ibn Battuta, \textit{(Cathay and the Way Thither)}, Vol. IV, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{75} Duarte Barbosa, Vol. II, pp. 142, 145.


\textsuperscript{77} Ibn Battuta, \textit{(Cathay and the Way Thither)}, Vol. IV, p. 82.
into Bengal. The merchants unloaded cargoes from the big vessels into smaller vessels before steering into river Meghna. During rainy seasons, big ships would have sailed into river Meghna from Satgaon. Ibn Battuta boarded a junk from Satgaon for southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{78}

Sunargaon was, strictly speaking, not a port. It was not situated near the sea. It was located in the interiors on river Meghna. But, if the volume of commodities and the number of merchants contributed to the emergence of a chief trading emporium, then certainly Sunargaon was not lagging behind. Ships brought immense merchandize from the distant countries of the Indian Ocean trading world to Sunargaon. The ships sailed to Satgaon to find their way to Sunargaon. It was well fortified city and big bazaars were held in it. It also remained the seat of the governors of east Bengal from 1351 AD to 1608 AD.\textsuperscript{79} The presence of nobility would have created a zone of considerable demand for both luxuries and staples. As a terminus to the Grand Trunk road, it witnessed a great inflow of merchandize both from land and sea routes. Decca, an important centre of textiles, was just 15 miles away from it. Better interconnectivity between land (through the Grand Trunk road) and sea (through river Meghna) routes placed Sunargaon in an advantageous position. Though Bengal was infested with robbers and pirates, the presence of the governors and fortifications ensured better protection to merchants and their cargoes in Sunargaon. The merchants were offered security and fair deal. Things were available at cheap rates in the markets.\textsuperscript{80} Both luxuries and staples were

\textsuperscript{78} Ibn Battuta, \textit{(Cathay and the Way Thither)}, Vol. IV, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 93.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibn Battuta provides the following price list of some commodities:

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\hline
\textbf{COMMODITY} & \textbf{QUANTITY / PRICE} \\
\hline
Milch cow & Three silver dinar \\
Fat fowls & Eight for a dirham \\
Small pigeons & Fifteen for a dirham \\
Fine cotton cloth & Thirty cubits in length for two dinars \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
available in plenty. Merchants could divide their risks fairly between costly and cheap products. Thus, Sunargaon was the chief trading emporium of Bengal.

**International Trading Emporiums**

We have studied the major ports of India with reference to the geographical, political, social and economic factors that contributed to their emergence. In order to examine whether the same factors contributed to the growth of trading emporiums throughout the Indian Ocean trading world, four ports located in different parts of Asia will be studied. Situated in the different sectors of the Indian Ocean, these ports witnessed tremendous prosperity with the expansion of mercantile activities. Aden, now a port of Yemen, was located in the Red Sea whereas Hormuz was a prominent port in the Persian Gulf. Malacca emerged in southeast Asia and attracted goods from distant zones. Canton, the terminus of the Indian Ocean trade, was a Chinese port. It drew its fame for its silk and porcelain. Almost all the contemporary observers praised the great bazaars of Canton

**Aden**

Aden was the leading port of Yemen in the Red Sea. The Periplus refers to it as Eudaemon, "a village by the sea shores." It went into decline after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Ummayads made Damascus their capital. However, the emergence of the caliphate in Baghdad (under the Abbasids) completely diverted the flow maritime trade to the Persian Gulf. Economic decline of the Europe further reduced the importance of Red Sea routes. Ships also avoided the Red Sea on

---

A beautiful girl  ----------------- A dinar of gold
(Marriageable age)
Ibn Battuta bought a young slave girl Ashura for one dinar and his comrades bought a slave called Lulu for two dinars. Ibn Battuta, Vol. IV, pp. 81-82.

account of numerous reefs that made navigation dangerous. The merchants preferred the Persian Gulf ports. The cargoes were then distributed in western Asia and even re-exported to Europe through land routes upto Alexandria. Aden achieved its past glory only when the Fatimids established the caliphate in Al Fustat (Egypt). The destruction of Baghdad (first by the Buwayhids and then Mongols) and the Silk Route under the Mongols once again revived the fortunes of the Red Sea traffic around the tenth century AD. It also coincided with the economic recovery of Europe.\textsuperscript{82} Maritime trade began to expand in the Red Sea and Aden soon achieved its past glory.

Aden became 'the key of seaports'\textsuperscript{83} in the Indian Ocean, and extensive traffic was carried on there.\textsuperscript{84} Merchandise was exported far and wide into the Indian Ocean trading network. Describing the prosperity of Aden, Ibn Battuta remarks that Aden was 'the port of merchants of India. To which comes merchants of India, to which comes great vessels from Kimbyat, Tanah, Quilon, Hinawar, Sindabur and other places...the merchants of Aden have enormous wealth...and sometimes a single man may possess a great ship with all it contains, no one sharing in it with him.'\textsuperscript{85} The sultan of Aden received a large amount in duties from the ships and 'ti's said he is one of the richest princes in the world.'\textsuperscript{86}

The port of Aden was located in a hostile environment. Water was scarce and a band of Bedouins could disrupt the supply of water into the city to demand ransom. Why did, then, Aden witness such commercial activity? The reasons were many. Its advantageous geographical location was the most important of all. It was

\textsuperscript{82} The revival of Europe brought prosperity to the Red Sea ports which once again performed the role of intermediaries between the products of Asia (India in particular) and the Mediterranean. Philip K. Hitti, \textit{History of the Arabs}, p. 669.

\textsuperscript{83} Tome Pires, Vol. I, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{84} Stefano, p. 4.


\textsuperscript{86} Marco Polo, Vol. II, p. 438.
located just around the entrance of the Red Sea. Big ocean vessels feared the treacherous wind system and reefs of the Red Sea. Navigation was difficult and Aden provided immunity from these dangers. It promised a deep harbour and ships could unload their merchandize. Smaller ships freighted the merchandize further into the Red Sea. The duration of voyage was also shortened. The port was close to the Indian Ocean monsoon circle. Ships could easily catch the first breeze of the monsoons from Aden, maximizing their profits with little dangers. This pattern of navigation suited the ships during antiquity and it was followed up to the arrival of steam engines. The Periplus quotes 'they could not sail from Egypt to the ports across the ocean'.

Marco Polo observes a similar situation in the last decade of thirteenth century, "from Aden, merchants transferred their cargoes to smaller vessels. After seven days, they land the goods and load them on camels and so carry them a land journey of 30 day...to Alexandria." Aden was also successful in attracting the merchandize of neighbouring areas. Products of Africa reached Aden before flowing into India and same was applicable to the merchandize of India destined for Africa. K.N. Chaudhuri characterizes the trade of Aden as 'multi dimensional'. A vast range of goods enabled Aden to penetrate into distant markets. Horses were exported to India in large numbers. Indians brought pepper and textiles to secure horses in return. Textiles were further re-exported into Africa from Aden to procure gold, ivory and slaves. Availability of both staples and luxuries made a visit to Aden extremely beneficial for sea merchants.

Political patronage was another important factor, which helped Aden on its way to a great trading emporium. Almost all the travellers refer to the strong fortification of Aden. The merchants were ensured the security of their person and belongings. They were offered autonomy and they could appoint their own

**shahbandars.** Leaders could fix the amount of custom in their joint capacity. Sound judicial system was available to the foreign merchants. Religious tolerance was practised. We hear of a Jew named Madmun. He was appointed the Nagid, the prince of the land of Yemen. He concluded treaties with pirates as well as foreign rulers on behalf of his clients.⁹⁰ Permission to exercise foreign diplomacy to an individual speaks for the rulers inclination towards the profits of maritime trade. Madmun also fixed custom tariffs of south Arabian ports.⁹¹

Emergence of the Karimis also contributed to the prosperity of Aden. The Karimis took control of pepper and textile trade between Aden and Egypt. Aden became their foremost trading centre. As mentioned earlier, the deep sea vessels avoided Red Sea. Merchants from India and other countries unloaded and loaded their products at Aden. The Karimis assumed the traditional role and helped the transportation of cargo to Al Fustat, Cairo and Alexandria. It increased the volume of trade at Aden and thus Tome Pires could not help terming Aden as the right hand of Cambay.

**Hormuz**

Hormuz was a celebrated port in the Persian Gulf. Located in Persia, it replaced Kish to emerge as the greatest trading emporium of its times. Hormuz developed in two phases. The old city was located on the mainland. Marco Polo visited the old city and recorded its import of Indian pepper, spices, precious stones, pearls and silk etc.⁹² Invasion of Tartars however forced the merchants to seek an alternative secure haven. Result was the colonization of a new Hormuz, situated few miles away from the old city on an island. New Hormuz lacked in all the necessities of daily needs. The excessive heat in summers made life difficult. Water was

---


⁹¹ Ibid.

transported from the mainland in ships. Nevertheless, it managed to retain its place as a great trading emporium. When Ibn Battuta visited the city of New Hormuz, he observed immense sea trade going on there. He called New Hormuz "the port of India and Sind, from which the wares of India are exported to the two Iraqs, Fars, Khurasan." Hormuz also boasted of big bazaars. The merchants of Hormuz bought everything coming from India and exported it further to the entire world.

Hormuz was mostly favoured by its location. Situated on an island, it made navigation to its harbours easy. Big ships could avoid the dangers of delta formed by Tigris and Euphrates falling into the Persian Gulf. Basra and Kish faced the same problem. Ships could easily tack the wind system of the Indian Ocean from Hormuz. Hormuz was a cosmopolitan city and promised ample amount of security to its inhabitants and merchants. Abdur Razzaq designated it as *Daralaman* (abode of peace). Merchants could freely practice their customs and rituals in Hormuz. Even idolatry was permitted and 'no injustice was permitted towards any person.'

Referring to numerous nationals engaged in trade at Hormuz, Abdur Razzaq records:

"The merchants of seven climates from Egypt, Syria, the country of Roum (Anatolia), Azerbijan, Irak-Arabi, and Irak-Adjemi, the province of Fars, Khorassan, Ma-war-ama-har, Turkistan, the kingdom of Deschti-Kaptchak, the countries inhabited by the Kalmucks, the whole of the kingdom of Tchin and Matchin, and the city of Khanbalik, all make way to this port; the inhabitants of sea coasts arrive here from the countries of Tchin, Java, Bengal, the cities of Zirband, Tenasserim, Sakotora, Scharinou, the islands of Diwah-Mahall (Maldives), the countries of Malabar, Abyssinia, Zanguebar, the ports of Bidjanagar, Kalbergah, Gudjarat, Kanbait, the coast of

---

94 Ibid.
95 Abdur Razzaq, p. 7.
Arabia, which extend as far as Aden, Jeddah and Yembo; they bring hither those rare and precious articles which the sun, the moon, and the rains have combined to bring to perfection, and which are capable of being transported by sea.  

The greatest success of Hormuz lay in its monopoly over the inflow of goods from adjoining territories. Pearls and horses were easily available at Hormuz. Horses always accompanied men coming from Hormuz to India. Availability of horses at Hormuz worked towards its advantage. Horses enjoyed a considerable demand in India. According to Duarte Barbosa, horses and pearls from Hormuz fetched handsome gains in India. Indian merchants came to Hormuz with their cargoes to fetch horses and pearls in return. The ships secured good ballast in the form of salt and dates.

Malacca

Malacca occupied an important place in the Indian Ocean trade. Successor to Srivijaya, it witnessed great prosperity and sea traffic. Malacca was a busy port. Tome Pires records the presence of thousands of merchants from Cairo, Mecca, Aden, Hormuz, Kilwa, Malind, India, Maldives, Armenia and China and many other countries. Ships continued to sail throughout the year paying handsome tributes to the rulers. Malacca was a truly cosmopolitan city as around eighty-four languages were spoken in it. Malacca had so successfully controlled the flow of spice trade

---

96 Abdur Razzaq, pp. 5-7.
97 Ibid., p. 9.
98 Duarte Barbosa, Vol. I, p. 82.
100 Ibid., p. 269.
Malacca enjoyed a small hinterland and was dependent on sea for its supply of food grains. It owed its prosperity solely to maritime commerce. Commercial traffic was attracted into Malacca due to various natural, political and economic considerations. Ships could sail to Malacca throughout the year. It is located at the terminus of two varied monsoons. Ships could sail easily from India and China to Malacca. Political will also helped in the emergence of Malacca trade. Realizing the benefits of the sea, the ruler worked hard to offer incentives to sea merchants. Tome Pires records:

"There was a large number of merchants of many nationalities in Malacca, and Pase was already beginning to be less great than it had been, and the merchants and sea-traders realized how much difference there was in sailing to Malacca, because they could anchor safely there in all weathers and could buy from others when it was convenient. They began to come to Malacca all the times because they got returns. The king of Malacca dealt kindly and reasonably with them, which is a thing that greatly attracts merchants especially the foreigners. He took pleasure being in city...hear and decide about the abuses and tyrannies which Malacca creates on account of its great position and trade."  

Political missions were sent to Java, Siam and China to invite foreign merchants. Malacca became successful in diverting the spice trade from Java to Malacca. We are informed by Tome Pires that Xamel Shah converted to Islam with a view to divert the flow of pepper trade to Malacca from Pase. Pepper was formerly carried to Java from Pase. However, the conversion to Islam meant better relations

102 Ibid., p. 246.
of Islamic Pase with Malacca. Rising population of Malacca also proved to be a better market for Javanese rice and Pase pepper.

Better relations with Gujarat and Bengal also consolidated the position of Malacca in southeast Asian markets. Gujarati merchants traded in Malacca. The clothes of Gujarat and Bengal enjoyed a huge demand in southeast Asia. Ships came calling from neighbouring islands to Malacca for Indian clothes. Malacca had good trading links with southern China. Chinese traders brought silk and porcelain that were greatly sought after in Asian markets. Thus, the rulers ensured the availability of a vast range of products in Malacca. It managed to play a successful role as intermediary in maritime commerce.

The rulers ensured the security of cargoes. Piracy in Malaccan water was sternly suppressed. Malacca even involved Celates, dreaded pirates, into government machinery.\textsuperscript{104} They were offered a noble status to secure the water frontiers of Malacca. Force was also employed to ward off the piratical activities in southeast Asian waters with the help of Celates. Huge godowns were constructed to keep the goods till they were further trans-shipped to foreign destinations. Malacca was found buying more \textit{junks} to accommodate its growing trade.\textsuperscript{105} The merchants were given a considerable amount of autonomy. They were provided lands to build their houses and religious places.\textsuperscript{106} Sea merchants were beset with many problems. They had a short time to find suitable local markets. They were time bound with the pattern of monsoons. In Malacca, one hears about a noble practice that satisfied both local and sea merchants. According to Tome Pires:

\begin{quote}
"It is an old custom in Malacca that as soon as the merchants arrive....ten or twenty merchants gathered together with the owner of said merchandize and bid for it, and by the said merchants the price was fixed and divided amongst them all in proportion. And because time was short and merchandize considerable, the merchant was
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{104} Tome Pires, Vol. II, pp. 235, 146.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p. 283.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 241.
cleared, and then those of Malacca took the merchandize to their ships and sold them at their pleasure; from which the traders received their settlements and gains, and local merchants made their profits. and that was done thus orderly, so that they did not favour the merchant from the ship, nor did he go away displeased; for the law and prices of merchandize in Malacca are well known.\footnote{Tome Pires, Vol. II, p. 274.}

The taxes and duties were also kept low so as to attract sea trade. Tome Pires records that merchants from west paid twelve percent (six as duty and other six as royal due) and natives paid six (three as custom and rest as royal due) as duty on goods.\footnote{Ibid., p. 273.}

### Canton

Canton was one of the greatest and busiest ports of China. It outlived all other ports of China. It was the only port open to foreigners during the nineteenth century in China. Canton had its roots in antiquity. It was in direct contact with southeast Asia. Fahien, a Chinese traveller, took a ship from Java to Canton in 414 AD.\footnote{P. Bagchi, \textit{India and China}, pp. 81-82: G. F. Hudson, 'The Medieval Trade of China', in D. S. Richards, ed., \textit{Islam and the Trade of Asia: A Colloquium}, p. 161.} Prajana, a Buddhist monk travelling from India to China, followed him on the same route.\footnote{H. Yule, \textit{Cathay and the Way Thither}, Vol. I, p. 112 (see fn. 1).} The Sungs transferred their capital nearer to sea in the face of the Juchits threat around the thirteenth century. South China did not boast of fertile land and favourable cultivations. Therefore, they lost revenues from land. In return, they patronized maritime trade to strengthen their economy. Changing economic trends helped Canton. Situated on the confluence of Hsi-Keing into the Pacific Ocean, Canton was visited by a large number of junks. Hamilton records that approximately

\footnote{Tome Pires, Vol. II, p. 274.}

\footnote{Ibid., p. 273.}


\footnote{H. Yule, \textit{Cathay and the Way Thither}, Vol. I, p. 112 (see fn. 1).}
1500 junks visited Canton in the early eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{111} Odoric, during his visit to China, provides a vivid description of Canton, "tis a city as big as three Venice...all Italy hath not the amount of craft that this city hath."\textsuperscript{112} Ibn Battuta praises Canton for its 'finest of bazaars' and export of porcelain to other cities of China, to India and Yemen.\textsuperscript{113}

To Rashid and Alberuni, Canton was large enough to be called Mahachin (Greater China).\textsuperscript{114} It was customary to bestow such names to the chief trading emporium of a particular area. Several factors contributed to the rise of Canton. The ruling class provided protection to Canton. An inspector of shipping was appointed at Canton.\textsuperscript{115} He was entrusted with the duty to protect mercantile interests and redress the grievances and complaints of foreigners. The commissioner supervised Chinese merchants going abroad and licensed their ships. He handled the affairs of foreign merchants in China. He inspected ships and levied duty on imports.\textsuperscript{116} Merchants were also bestowed with autonomy to regulate their internal affairs. Ibn Battuta, during his visits to Sin ul Sin (Canton), observes:

"In one of the quarters of this great city is the city of the Mohammedans where they have their cathedral mosque, convent and bazaars; they also have a judge and a shaikh, for in each city of China you find always a shaikh of Islam, who decides finally every matter concerning Mohammed and a Kazi to administer justice."\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{111} K. N. Chaudhuri, op. cit., p. 158.

\textsuperscript{112} Odoric, \textit{(Cathay and the way Thither)}, Vol. III, pp. 179-180.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibn Battuta, \textit{(Cathay and the way Thither)}, Vol. IV, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{114} H. Yule, \textit{(Cathay and the way Thither)}, Vol. II, p. 179 (fn 5).


\textsuperscript{116} Juang-Pang Lo, op. cit., p. 65.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibn Battuta, \textit{(Cathay and the Way Thither)}, Vol. IV, p. 121.
View of Canton
Source: British Library (London)
If Muslims were extended autonomy to such an extent, then certainly merchants of other nationalities and religions would not have been far behind. River Hsi-Keing simplified transportation of cargoes to and from Canton to its hinterlands. Merchants could easily procure both costly and staple products at Canton. Therefore, if availability of merchandize was a prior condition for any successful trading venture, then Canton was not lacking in it. Canton boasted of 'the finest of bazaars. One of the largest of these is the porcelain bazaar, and from it china ware is exported to the cities of China, to India and to Yemen.'\textsuperscript{118} Vast range of products was available at Canton and to Idrisi, Canton was 'the terminus of Western trade.'\textsuperscript{119} Duty to the tune of thirty percent was extracted at Canton, but still a visit to Canton was sure to bring huge profits to foreign merchants.

From the preceding discussion, it becomes evident why certain ports surpassed others to emerge as trading emporiums? Trade in medieval period, like any other time, was based on one consideration: profits. Merchants crossed seas and undertook tremendous risk to earn profits. If they were promised better facilities by a certain port, they could be easily lured into it. Better facilities could easily double their returns with low risks. Their visit was determined by multiple factors. These factors existed right from Aden to Canton during the period of our study.

Political patronage was an essential priority in developing a trading emporium. Security and neutrality of the ports could only be ensured by the ruling elites. Sea merchants shunned oppressive and cruel rulers. We have a ruler of the fourteenth century Ceylon named Chakarvati. He was despised by the sea merchants. On the other hand, the port of Quilon was a favourite destination of sea merchants. Here taxes were low and the ruler, like other princes, did not rob the merchants. We have reference of the Balharas (the Rashtrakutas) who were very considerate towards the Arab merchants. Indian rulers always maintained a distinction between the invaders and traders. Muslim merchants were always welcomed. In the first half of thirteenth

\textsuperscript{118} Ibn Battuta, \textit{(Cathay and the Way Thither)}, Vol. IV, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{119} Idrisi, \textit{(Cathay and the Way Thither)}, Vol. I, p. 142.
century, Rai Jai Singh of Cambay personally intervened to dispense justice to Muslims when local miscreants burnt their houses and mosque. Only the rulers could ensure the neutrality of ports, giving it a true cosmopolitan character. It was the first step towards becoming a chief trading emporium.

Geographic suitability was the next factor. The chief trading emporium should be ideally located. It must promise deep harbours. Navigation should not be a dangerous enterprise. It must be well connected with its hinterlands. Aden provided security from the dangerous reefs of the Red Sea. Hormuz replaced Basra because it provided shelter from the delta of Euphrates and Tigris into the Persian Gulf. Cambay replaced Somanath because it provided protection from piratical activities. Malacca was blessed because of its location between the ends of two different circles of monsoons.

Availability of profitable markets was another characteristic of chief trading emporiums. Foreign merchants were bound with the monsoon circle. They had limited time at hand. They preferred to visit ports specializing in a vast range of products. Ports that were well connected with their hinterlands thus had an added advantage. K.N. Chaudhuri finds the trade of Aden 'multi dimensional,' but this characteristic was common to all chief trading emporiums. Merchants could procure both staples and luxuries there. This helped them to spread their risks.

Strong and autonomous mercantile organizations were also important. Merchants preferred to visit ports where mercantile organizations were offered autonomy. Presence of commercial organizations promised security and better deal in local markets. There were fanduqs/mohallas in every trading emporium. Merchants were tied to their clans. Nationalities and, more importantly, religion formed strong ties among sea merchants. Ibn Battuta tells us about an Iraqi merchant who was ready to visit India, but afterwards moved towards China in the company of his native fellow merchants.¹²⁰ No doubt, that Iraqi merchant was not a sea merchant, but merchants in general were guided by almost similar

considerations. It is thus beyond doubt that sea traders, irrespective of their nation and religion, looked for similar circumstances to ensure their voyage a success. They favoured the ports promising autonomy, profits, security and better commercial transactions. Almost all the chief trading emporiums of the Indian Ocean displayed similar characteristics contributing to their success not only in India but also in Asia.