CHAPTER – 6

COMING OF STEAMSHIPS AND THE DECLINE OF INDIAN SHIPPING IN THE ARABIAN SEA

One need not underline the fact that the replacement of sailing ships by steamships in the nineteenth century brought about a revolution in navigation and world trade. Steamships began to be introduced in the Arabian Sea, and gave a crippling blow to Indian and Arab-owned sailing fleets. Yet it is prudent to recall that steamships replaced sailing ships on the high seas fairly slowly. Though Britain was the greatest shipping nation, had as late as 1860, as many as 6,876 sailing ships compared with 447 steamers.1

As early as the 1830s the introduction of steam navigation in the Red Sea began to be planned. Wellsted (1833) welcomed the plan, though suitable anchorages had to be identified and developed. He approved of bringing steamships up to the port of “Mersa Zahab” (The Golden Port) in the Gulf of Aqaba.2

2 Wellsted, op. cit., Vol. II. p 153
The Company that initiated steam-borne trade in the Red Sea as well as the Gulf was the British India Steam Navigation Company. According to Zwemer till 1862 no steamer had been introduced in the Persian Gulf. It was only in that year that steamer services began, initially for six-weekly, then for monthly and fortnightly and finally a weekly service was established. The British India Steam Navigation, being the pioneer, commanded other lines engaged in the trade between India and the Persian Gulf.¹

The Suez Canal set the seal on the supremacy of the steam-ship, since it could not be used by sailing ships.² India's maritime trade climbed from £99.6 million in 1859 to £162.8 million in 1877,³ partly made possible by increase in the steam tonnage in the Canal, which had risen by 1875-6⁴ to 26.5% in the total tonnage of both steam and sail, calling at Indian ports.⁵ By 1897 English steamers dominated the Arabian Sea trade. English manufactures not only flooded Indian markets, but were carried across the sea: Reels of thread in Najd and jack-knives in Jabal-Shammar were all now of English

¹ S.M. Zwemer, Arabia: The Cradle of Islam, Flaming H. Revell Company, New York, 1900, p. 225  
² Knowles, op. cit., pp. 299-300  
⁵ Knowles, pp. 299-300.
manufacture. Thousands of bags of rice in Hasa and Bahrain were shipped in English ships from Rangoon and distributed in the inland area on camels.¹

The currency in circulation during the last decade of the 19th century all along the Arabian coast from Aden to Basra was now the Indian rupee. The Maria Theresa dollar was current in the interior, but it was becoming scarce and loosing popularity among the Beduins of the interior. The mark on the rupee coin represented a girl's head ("abu bint"), while the eagle ("abu tair" i.e. the father of a bird) was stamped on the Austrian dollars.

The French also launched steamer service in the Persian Gulf in 1897. There was soon a break of the service but after some time again the service was re-opened.²

The British India Steam Navigation Company established a weekly steamer service from Bombay to Basra and back. The steamers called at the intermediate ports in the Persian Gulf after leaving Karachi, viz. Gwadur, Muscat, Jask, Bandar Abbas, Lingah, Bahrain, Bushire, Fao and Mohammareh. The journey took 14 days and the distance covered was 1900 miles.³

¹ Zwemer, *op cit*, p 225
² Zwemer, *op cit*, p 225
³ Wellsted, *op cit*, p 153
The Aziziya Misriya Steamship Company began service from 1870 in the Red Sea. After some pause, it once again began regular service from 8 July 1872 plying between Suez and Jedda, Suakin and Massawa. Taking over the contract from the Austrian Llyod in 1873 it started a monthly mail service between Constantinople and Jedda. Hodaida once again emerged as the port for Sanaa and proved its superiority over other ports. The Turks controlled much of the Arabian Peninsula including the Suez-Aden route to the East. The Suez Cannal was initially important to Turkey for the transport of mail, troops and supply of grain from Odessa to the Turkish garrisons in Arabia. Abyssinian slaves, eunachs and “galla women” as well were exported to Turkey through the Canal.¹

By the turn of the century the sailing ships trading in the Arabian Sea decreased much in size and number. Between 1884-85 and 1904-5 the tonnage of steamships using Indian ports had increased from 4.3 million tons to 13.5 million tons; but the tonnage of sailing vessels declined from 2.3 million tons to the insignificant one of 353,000 tons. Such sailing vessels as still plied were “now almost entirely native craft, engaged in trade with East Africa, Arabia, Persia and Southern Asia”.²

2. *Imperial Gazetteer of India (The Indian Empire)* (Reprint), *op. cit.*, Vol. III. p 276.
One can see that Indian trade expanded considerably with the opening of the Canal. But the gain from this went largely to British-owned shipping; steamships could better pass through the Suez Canal than sailing ships. By 1904-5 the share of steamships in the total tonnage of India's maritime trade had gone up to 97.3%. By 1896(?), the tonnage of vessels passing through the Canal and entering and leaving the ports of India by that route had risen to 26.5% of the total tonnage of ships visiting Indian ports.¹

While the Suez Canal added to India's trade generally, it proved to be an adverse factor for Indo-Arab trade, by the fact that short-range maritime trade lost its cost advantage. Entries of customs clearances are indicative of the fact that in 1904-5 61% of the total tonnage of the trade was conducted to and from the United Kingdom and other British colonies.² Indian-owned sailing vessels, confined to Arabian Sea had their share reduced to well under 2.7% of the entire sea-borne trade of India. On the opening of the Red Sea route to Europe and with the coming of the Suez Canal, the major beneficiary was undoubtedly Britain, and Indo-Arab trade did not gain much as a consequence.

¹ D.A. Farnie, p. 171
² Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. III, p. 276