

MARITIME CONTACTS ON THE COROMANDAL COAST

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Peninsular India in general, the coromandal coast of India in particular has played a vital role in the maritime activities with the South East Asian countries and Mediterranean countries since very early times. The sources for the study of maritime contacts both politically and economically from the eastern coast to the South East Asian countries are numerous indeed. The archaeological and inscriptional evidences provide valuable information regarding the contacts of these countries and the ancient ports in the eastern coast, various types of ships anchored, types of goods both export and import, mercantile groups and their functions etc. Apart from these indigenous sources the Chinese and other regional literary sources, the number of foreign inscriptions and the architectural wealth in the form of Stupa, monasteries, temples and sculpture discovered in these countries have been immensely helpful to recognize the influence of Indian culture. Besides, the sangam literatures as well as the inscriptional evidences help us to fix some active ports on the coromandal coast.

Sangam literature amply refers to the imports and exports and the important ports located on the eastern coast. The Periplus of Erythraean Sea, the magnanimous work of the first century A.D. quotes several ports on the coromandal coast. Ptolemy mentions several port towns on the south east coast. They extended right from Tamralipti (Taluk of Midnapur, West-Bengal), Dosarne (Dhauri, Orissa), Kainapara (Konark), Palura (Gopalpura district, Orissa) Kalingapatna (near Salihundam, district Srikakulam), Vengipura (Peddavegi), maisolia (Machilipatnam, district Krishna) Utukuru – Krishnapatnam, Dugrajapatnam and Beripeta Sriharikota, Mylarphan (Mylapore, Chennai). Keberis (Kaveripumpattinam), Pudukey (Arikamedu), Soptana (Marakkanam), Nikam (Nagappattinam), Periyappattinam, Kayalappattinam, Alagankulam, Colchi (Korkai) and Comari (Kanyakumari) etc.

A team of Indian Archaeologist headed by the Japanese Professor Noboro Karashima discovered a touchstone which bears a Tamil Brahmi inscription, kept in the Klong Thom Buddhist Museum gives concrete evidence of Tamil contact with South East Asian Countries. This inscription paleographically assigned to 3-4th centuries A.D.¹

Another place of evidence in the form of potsherd bears the Tamil-Brahmi inscription discovered in Quasir-al-qadim near Mediterranean Sea. It also throws light on the contacts of the Tamil sailors with the Mediterranean countries in the early Christian era².

The holy visit of Hieun-T-Sang to Kanchipuram during 7th century A.D. to the Pallava court is a clear indication of the cultural contacts of the Tamil country with china in those days. Both Indian traditions and Chinese annals amply speak of the overseas contacts between these two countries even in the early period. The famous Vayalur pillar inscription of Narasimhavarman II refers to the maritime activities to the foreign countries³ and the Chinese annals narrate that the pallava king sent an embassy to China and allowed the Chinese merchants to erect a Buddhist stupa at Nagappattinam and a fragmentary inscription datable to the pallava period⁴ discovered in the Naganathaswamy temple at Nagappattinam states that the town Nagai (i.e. Nagappattinam) and a donor peruntattan (smith). It supports the views that the city Nagai was a flourishing trade centre under the able rulers of Pallava.

The Takuvapa inscriptions discovered in South East Asian countries is another clear indication of the Pallava Maritime activities⁵. It mentions the Tamil mercantile Guilds Manikkiramattar and Senamugattar. It further states that the donor belongs to a village Nangur. Probably the village Nangur could be identified with the village that bears the same name, located very near the famous port city, Kaveripumpattinam.

During Chola hegemony the maritime activities in the Bay of Bengal reached its zenith. The Chola army crossed the sea and conquered its zenith. The Chola army crossed the sea and conquered several foreign countries. During Chola's time Rajaraja I allowed the Sailendra King Chumdamanivarman to build the Buddhist vihara at Nagappattinam.⁶ The donation of the land to this vihara was renewed by his successor Kulottunga I.⁷

The Chidambaram inscription of the same king conveys that the king of Kamboja presented a stone from his country, which was fixed on the wall of a shrine in Chidambaram temple⁸. Besides, the Chola's king's fame spread beyond the sea and it was sung by a lady from Persia⁹. All these evidences attest the close maritime activities of the Cholas.

¹ Subbarayalu, Y., *RVANAM* Vol. III, pp. 82-84.

² Journal of Tamilnadu Archaeological Society, Thanjavur.

³ White Comb. D.S., and Johnson. J.H., Quasir-al-qadim-1980.

⁴ Epigraphia Indica Vol. XVIII p.151-52.

⁵ Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy 1990-91.

⁶ Epigraphia Indica Vol XVIII pp. 71-74.

⁷ Ibid Vol. XXII p.222.

⁸ Ibid pp. 267-281.

⁹ Ibid Vol.V p.104.

⁹ Ibid.

The Pandyas in the further south of Tamilnadu also developed their international relationship and maritime trade. They had close contacts with Rome and other countries. Their port city Korkai was always busy with trade. A recent discovery of a ship's bell in Newzealand¹⁰ supports the view that the Pandya merchants had voyaged as far as Newzealand.

The maritime contacts were accelerated during the Vijayanagara period. Quite a number of Chinese porcelain were encouraged in the medieval port towns in South India¹¹ attest the voyage of vessels to the ports on the coromandal coast. An interesting inscription of Krishnadevaraya dated saka 1442 i.e. 1521 A.D. records the assignment of the custom levies at ports under their control¹².

Some Medieval Ports on the Eastern Coast

Apart from the important ports, which are often referred to in literature and other sources, a few medieval ports quoted in the inscriptions have not been elaborated by the scholars, so far.

KRISHNAPATNAM: This port is located on the eastern coast in the taluk of Gudur of Andhra Pradesh. Once, it was a flourishing port centre stated by the Chola and Telugu Chola inscriptions. The port was referred to in the inscriptions as Kollitturai alias Kanda Gopala Pattinam. Probably it could be named after the Telugu Chola king Vira Rajendran dated in 1256-57 A.D.¹³ this port was engaged by the foreigners of various countries (pandine) bhumi samasha paradesigal and merchants. It also records that various types of vessels and boats were anchored in this port. They were referred to in the inscriptions as kalam, tonuru, tuli, kalavam, vidavu etc. Kalam is identical with kalam (small boat) mentioned in the Tamil literature and to Uru probably identical with Tamil Toni. It has two words Toni + Uru which ultimately became Tonuru. Uru is also a small vessel used both for inland and coastal navigation for boarding a ship, loading a ship and fishing in the coastal areas in addition to their use in the rivers as ferry boats. It is not clear to give the meaning of tuli, kalavam and vidavu.

During Irumadi Tirukkalattudevar (1279 A.D.) time, the merchants of various countries residing in this port donated one fourth percent on the appraised cost of all the goods exported and imported at this port¹⁴. During Vijayanagara period the port was renamed as Rajavibhadan Pattinam¹⁵.

MOTTIUPPALLI: It was located in Bapatla taluk, Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. This port was referred to Marco Polo, who calls it Muttili¹⁶. This was an important port centre in the medieval age. Traders from various countries reached this port after facing many problems like storm attacks and shipwrecks. The facing traders took shelter in this port whose vessels were wrecked on the coast¹⁷. The levy called aputrika dendam was not to be imposed on the foreigners. The exported and the imported materials like gold, elephants, horses, gems, sandal, camphor, pearls, rose-water, ivory, civet, camphor-oil, copper, zinc, lead, silks, silk-threads, corals, perfumes, pepper, areca-nuts were levied in this port as noted in the inscription. This port was known as Desyuyakkondapattinam. Foreigners were allowed to sell their goods to whomsoever they liked and could buy whatever article they liked. We can say that port served as a free-customs centre as is seen today. The vessel Uru was also anchored in this port. They came both from South and North.

PALAVERKADU (PULICAT): It lies on the eastern coast very near the north of Madras. This port served as an important centre for the sea-faring activities during Vijayanagara period. While mentioning the various ports of Vijayanagara period by an inscription of Krishnadevaraya, this port is referred to very specifically¹⁸. Palaverkadu was called by the name Anantarayan Pattinam during this period. Besides, the mention of exported goods from this port specific mention of Indian saris (silk) is noteworthy. It is also interesting to note from the inscription of a type of ship called tongu kappal anchored in this port. It could have possibly been a Chinese vessel.

KODIYAKKADU: This small port is located in Tanjore District very near to Kodiyakkadu of Tamilnadu. This was an important port also under the Cholas and later on. An inscription of Sundara Pandya states that the boat Uru stationed in this port¹⁹. Besides, it mentions that various types of articles were exposed and imported in this port.

VEDARANYAM: It is also situated in the eastern coast in Tanjore district of Tamilnadu. It was known as Siruvayi mugham alias Kulottunga Chola Pattinam²⁰. Later on, named as Kaliyanapuram Konda Chola Pattinam. It was

¹⁰ Sridharan K. A Maritime History of India pp. 45-46.

¹¹ Karashima Noboru "Trade Relations between Tamilnadu and China during 13th and 14th centuries. A.D."-paper presented at the 6th International Conference of Tamil Studies 1987.

¹² South Indian Inscriptions Vol.XVII, No.679.

¹³ Butterworth Ed., Copper Plate and Stone Inscriptions – Vol.I. pp. 411-412.

¹⁴ Ibid. P.414.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Yule, Marco Polo, 2nd Ed. Vol. II, No.346.

¹⁷ Epigraphia Indica Vol. XII p.195-196;
South Indian Inscriptions Vol.XXVI No.635.

¹⁸ South Indian Inscriptions Vol. XVII No.679.

¹⁹ Ibid. No.522.

²⁰ Ibid. No.447.

occupied by the merchants and had a status of Nagaram under the Cholas²¹. It could have served as a small port as evident from the world siruvayi mugham. Hence, small boats only were stationed here.

DEVIPATTANAM: This port is situated on the eastern coast of Ramanathapuram district of Tamilnadu. It was a flourishing trade centre under Later Pandyas. The port was referred to in the inscriptions as sirukadarkaraicchenumulam²². This port had a mercantile settlement near the coastal line of Sethu, known as Sivallavapattinam named after the Pandya king Srivallabha. It is evident from the inscriptions that the original port was located in the town of Sivallavapattinam. Many kinds of taxes were levied on this port. During sundara Pandya's time this port was named as Ulagamadevipattinam²³, probably, the present name Devipattinam is the short form of the above. This port anchored small boats, uru, sirruru, toni, etc.²⁴ It is interesting to note that the rate of taxes on goods loaded to the toni is lower than that of goods loaded in the sirruru. For uru, it was ½ panam, for toni, it was ¼ panam. Hence, it can be presumed that the uru, a kind of boat is probably bigger than the sirruru and again the uru is somewhat larger than the sirruru. The exported commodities were sarees, areca-nut, pepper, etc. This port town was engaged by the mercantile community of Nanadesis.

These literatures, Ports, Archaeological findings in the form of potsherds, coins and epigraphical sources clearly shows that, the eastern coast had much contact with Southeast Asian countries from the 1st century A.D. onwards.

Bio-data:

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21 Ibid. No.458.

22 Ibid. Vol. VIII; No.403.

23 Ibid. No.404.

24 Ibid. No. 405.