



Dutch-Maratha Contacts: A politics of trade on the Coromandel Coast in the Seventeenth Century

Anuradha

PhD Research Scholar, Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067. Email- anuradha.jnu@yahoo.com, Mob- 8826755540.

Abstract

This paper explores the Dutch Maratha contacts on the Coromandel Coast in the Seventeenth Century. The Coromandel Coast was the centre of political as well as commercial interference by the local power and the Europeans as well. The historical processes that directly or indirectly help to understand the economy and politics of the Marathas which were somehow linked with the Dutch in Coromandel. As Maratha and European's connections have always evolved curiosity among scholars for understanding 17th century India. Anglo-Maratha, Franco-Maratha, Portuguese-Maratha relations have already been explored extensively but there is lacuna in the study of Dutch Maratha relation and therefore the study of Dutch-Maratha relations would shed light on both Dutch and Marathas histories. The chain of dialogues Shivaji wanted to get engaged with the Dutch, mostly the political and commercial domains brought them together for mutual interests.

Key Words: Maratha, Dutch, Coromandel, trade and commerce.

Introduction

One of the most well-defined description of the Coromandel Coast was given by Thomas Bowrey, a English sailor that, "begineth at Nagapatam ... (and) ... extendth it selfe to point Godaware, on the south side of the bay Corango, which by computation is in length 400 miles."¹ As Arasaratnam has defined the coast, "it was the wide expanse of India's eastern coast from Point Calimere, where the coastline turns a sharp northerly drift, to near the 20 degree north latitude or the port of Ganjam. In later times the Coromandel Coast proper was held to be to the south of this Godavari point and the north was known as the Gingelly coast or Golconda coast. By the seventeenth century usage, the term embraced the coastlines of the modern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh (Telugu Desam) and the southern tip or Orissa."²

A characteristic of the trade of Coromandel was its decentralized and diffused character. Unlike the trade of Gujarat or of Bengal, the trade of Coromandel did not flow through one or two large entrepots which served as collecting points for the exports of the area. Producing villages of its major export, textiles, were scattered through a coastal area about 1,000 miles long, some on the littoral, others somewhat to the interior and these were not tied north to south by safe and reliable

¹ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries Round the Bay Of Bengal, 1669 to 1679*, ed., R.C. Temple, Cambridge, 1905, pp. 2-3.

² S. Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on The Coromandel Coast 1650-1740*, OUP, Delhi, 1986, p.7.

communication links. Ports of outlet were thus scattered along this stretch of coastline, strategically located to tap a cluster of weaving villages.

The Dutch were the second European nation to come to India and emerged as a prominent power during the seventeenth century. In 1600, the states of Holland appointed a commission of five, which recommended union of all the companies on the basis of a national monopoly. On 20th March 1602, a charter was granted for the “monopoly of Dutch trade east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of the straits of Magellan for twenty-one years, with authority to wage defensive war, negotiate treaties of peace and alliance, and build fortresses”³.

Textiles comprised the most important commodity of export, and also catered to the considerable internal market both for luxury consumption and commodity. Bowery mentions that despite the large quantities of Coromandel textiles which were annually dispatched to England, ‘great stores’ were “transported and vended to most places of note in India, Persia, Arabia, China, and the South Seas, more especially to Moneela (Manila) one of the Molucca Isles”.⁴ Other products of the Coromandel trade handled by VOC factories were indigo, saltpeter⁵ rice in Masulipatnam, some iron products, and slave in times of famine⁶.

At the same time the emergence of Marathas as one of the important powers was a striking feature of the period. Due to the rise of Marathas power, the Mughals received a serious blow at the hands of these local powers. The Marathas in the Deccan began emerging since the early 17th century under the Bijapur, Ahmednagas and Golkonda states. They served in the army of Bijapur and Ahmednagar rulers, and some served the Golconda state as well. The Rise of the Marathas under Chhatrapati Shivaji, was an important political development in seventeenth century. This paper deals primarily with the Shivaji’s Karnataka campaign in 1677 and examines a different aspect of the activities of the Marathas and their presence on the Coromandel Coasts. In the Maratha historiography Marathas are generally looked upon as a political entity, not much attention has been drawn on their relations with the Europeans whose presence were visible along the coast in the seventeenth century. This have been grounded by saying that the Marathas did not take any notice of trade, and their relation with the Europeans were dictated by political needs. In this paper, an argument has been made that these Europeans were totally dependent on these local powers for their commercial aggrandizement.

The Marathas arrived in the Coromandel in the wake of the Bijapur and Golconda armies in the late 1640’s. But they were prominent in the region only after the Shivaji’s Karnataka expedition, which is an important episode in the Maratha history and resulted in occupation of the Adilsahi forts at Vellore and Jinji. In this paper we

³ Glamann, Kristoff, *Dutch Asiatic Trade 1620-1740*, Martimes Nighoff S. Gravenhage, 1981 pp-3-5.

⁴ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, p. 5.

⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political economy of Southern India, 1500-1650*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.30.

⁶ Tapan, Raychaudhuri, *Jan Company in Coromandel*, The Hague, 1962 pp. 165-168.

will see that how after capturing the famous fort of Jinji and other places, he began setting up and reorganizing the administration of the newly won province. Conquest of Jinji proved very crucial as it served as the Maratha Capital for nine years during the Mughal-Maratha Wars. During this period Dutch were also trying to penetrate and establish their trade and commerce in the region and various financial proposals were made between Dutch and Marathas officials and how each of them was eager to meet for their mutual interest in the region.

Shivaji's Karnataka Expedition

When Shivaji arrived on the coast the English reported in 1677, that Shivaji had been “entertained in the King of Gulcondahs service, and now upon his march to fall upon Chengy with an army of about 20 thousand horse and 40 thousand foot...”⁷ He arrived at Hyderabad, the capital of the Qutb Shahi kingdom in March 1677. On 4th March 1677, a treaty was made between the two,⁸ and about a month later, the vanguard of the army reached the coastal plains of Adilshahi Karnataka and reached the strong fort of Jinji and the fort was captured soon. This siege continued for fourteen months more, and only in 1678 could Marathas finally take it.⁹ To the west of the plains lay the Jagir of Ekoji, the half-brother of Shivaji with headquarters at Bangalore.

Gradually Shivaji turned to the southern district, administered by Sher Khan. He surrendered on 5th July, 1677 and agreed to give up all his territory and also pay 20000 Hons¹⁰. Many other smaller fortresses in the vicinity were also captured and considerable booty was acquired.¹¹ Thus, within a year, the coastal plains of Adilshahi Karnataka were captured by Shivaji without much resistance and or losses. He departed for Maharashtra sometime during October 1677, leaving a large army behind and Raghunath Pandit as the governor of the province¹².

There is a debate among the scholars on the ground that whether Shivaji was spirited by the “idea of plunder or conquest” and “annexation” when he advanced for his Karnataka campaign. While Sir Jadunath Sarkar is of the view that “he was motivated by the idea of plunder alone as he could not have intended to annex permanently a territory on the Madras coast, situated more than 700 miles from his capital. His aim was merely to extract the region of its wealth and that a partition of his father’s jagirs was only a plea to give a show of legality to the campaign of plunder”. On the contrary, S. N. Sen, opines that “there would be no difficulty in maintaining an empire situated some hundred miles away from the capital, provided the communications were safe and good”¹³. While it is evident from the Martin’s Memoirs that after carefully studying the fort, Jinji was too large as it required the positioning of large number of troops to guard it. He ordered a part of it to be demolished and the adjacent territory to be cleared of habitation so that new fortifications could be raised.¹⁴

⁷ Records of Fort St. George- Diary and Consultation Book, 9 May 1677.

⁸ Dutch letter from Pulicat to Batavia, Cited in Kruitzer, *Xenophobia in 17th century India*, pp. 173-174.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-75.

¹⁰ A gold coin used in Deccan.

¹¹ S. N. Sen, *Foreign Biographies of Shivaji*, pp. 262-5, 281-300.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.339.

¹³ Cited in C. R. Reddy, *History of Gingee and its Ruler*, p. 231

¹⁴ Lotika Vardarajan, *India in the 17th century*, Vol 1, part II, p. 600

Martin further speaks of havaldars sent by Shivaji “to govern Pondicherry and other places in the conquered territory”. Therefore, it shows that he decided to conquer and govern the territory, permanently after appointing havaldars and capable officers. He has noted that “the prompt appointment of havaldars and subhedars for the government of the conquered territory by these officers meant that the Marathas wished to retain their conquests”¹⁵. As Ranade, too argued, “Shivaji by his conquests and alliance formed a new line of defence on the Cauveri valley in Southern India to which he could retire in case of necessity”.¹⁶ After appointing capable officers in the Carnatic¹⁷, Shivaji returned to Maharashtra to continue the ‘Mughal war’. With the conquest of Jinji by Shivaji, the Marathas became landlords of the Dutch factory of Devanampatnam and a treaty was negotiated with him in 1677 confirming concessions earlier given by Bijapur. Port customs duties were fixed at 2.5 percent and the customary land duty was to be paid. The Dutch were prohibited from purchasing slaves as they had done under earlier governments.¹⁸

The Dutch diplomatic Mission to Shivaji

In addition to the native powers, the European trading companies of the English, Dutch, French and Danes were present in the provinces as well. The Europeans were anxious to continue their trading rights obtained from the former government and also to secure new lucrative deals, if any. Soon after this, the Dutch began preparations for meeting Shivaji and securing trading rights from him. Herbert de Jager, the Dutch merchant famous for his mastery of oriental languages, contacted his superiors at Tegenapatnam for further orders in view of Shivaji’s activities. He went to the Dutch factory and Nicolas Clement, the second-in-command at the factory accompanied him. They spent the next day finalizing the gifts they would give to Shivaji. On 6th August, Shivaji arrived there with Raghunath Pandit and Janardan Pandit. He listened to the VOC’s demands and promised to be helpful and confirm to the contents of the previous *qawls*¹⁹. He also held a friendly conversation with Nicolas Clement, after which the Dutch wanted to give him an account of their trade at the moment, but Shivaji said it was not necessary.²⁰

Regarding slavery, which was a general practice of that time, Shivaji as a ruler always refrained Europeans from this act which we can see in his *qawl* granted to the Dutch ambassador Herbert de Jager in 1677. In this Shivaji banned the slave trade and did not follow this reprehensible practice which shows his “radical and ideological break with the past”; the passage is as follow:

¹⁵ Cited in C. R. Reddy, History of Gingee and its Ruler, p. 231.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 232.

¹⁷ Europeans used the term ‘Carnatic’ in 17th century to the south Coromandel region.

¹⁸ J. E. Heeres, *Corpus Diplomaticum*, Vol 3, November 1677, pp. 61-65.

¹⁹ J.E.Heeres, *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico Indicum*, vol. 3, 1934, pp.60. Also see the English translation of the same was published by G.H.Khare, one of the great Maratha Historians, in the *Quarterly of the Bharat Itihas Samshodhan Mandal*, year 49, aka the *Aitihāsik Sankirna Nibandha*, volume 10, pp.30-37 in 1969.

²⁰ A detailed paraphrase of this *qawl* (grant) was given for the very first time in *Pieter van Dam’s Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, Vol.2, part 2, pp. 113-14., also in *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico Indicum*, vol.3, pp.61-65.

“In the days of the Moorish government it was allowed for you to buy male slaves and female slaves here [the Karnatak], and to transport the same, without anyone preventing that. But now you may not, as long as I am master of these lands, buy male or female slaves, nor transport them. And in case you were to do the same, and would want to bring [slaves] aboard, my men will oppose that and prevent it in all ways and also not allow that they be brought back in your house; this you must as such observe and comply with.”²¹

The amicably neutral relations with the Dutch helped in granting favorable terms in the *qawl*. Thus, through this *qawl* facilitated Shivaji's stable rule over the Adilshahi Karnataka & his cordial relations with Qutb Shah and Ekoji, the Dutch Coromandel region experienced a rapid boom in trading activities, with net profit peaking just before Mughal invasion of the Qutb Shahi started. At the same time, in his *qawl*, he ensured that the people in his dominions would not be sold off as slaves.

The Dutch establish themselves at Porto Novo

Porto Novo was an important port city situated on the mouth of Vellar river that flows through the Coromandel plains on its way to the Bay of Bengal, and attracted the attention of Europeans including Dutch. The Dutch started making negotiations with the local chiefs at Porto Novo and on 20th March, 1678, a *qawl*²² was granted to the Dutch by the havaldars of Porto Novo and exempted them from half of the toll on the goods brought there & also allowed them to build a customs house there. But Gopaldas Pandit, the governor at Devanampatinam²³ and Porto Novo was very much displeased with the *qawl* granted by his Havaldar to the VOC; because “He feared that, as was their habit, the company (i.e. The Dutch) would penetrate there more and more until even the ruler of the land couldn't do anything.”²⁴ These measures soon met with a severe backlash from the Dutch, who then refused to issue passports to native ships going out from Porto Novo. As a result, the trade there was in shambles. The matter thus went before Raghunath Pandit, the governor of the Adilshahi Karnataka appointed by Shivaji. The merchant Jacob Clement, a native broker negotiated with Raghunath Pandit & secured a *qawl* from the later that allowed the company to conduct trade at Porto Novo.

According to the March 1680 *qawl* by Raghunath Pandit, the Dutch were allowed to build a company lodge at Porto Novo and after that, trade soon returned to normal.²⁵ As a result, Maratha soon ships began to sail far & wide from there. An entry in the Batavia Dag Register says that trade was running well at Porto Novo and that a small ship of Raghunath Pandit was to go to Malacca from there and that he had asked for the exemption of customs at Malacca.²⁶ This example shows the eagerness of Shivaji and his men to engage in overseas trade. As the new ruler of the province, Shivaji had

²¹ Cited in G. Krutzler, *Xenophobia in Seventeenth Century India*, p. 188.

²² *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico Indicum*, Vol. 3, PP.126-27.

²³ *India in 17th Century, Memoirs of Francois Martin*, Volume 1, part 2, pp.631.

²⁴ See Nikhil Bellarykar, ‘Dutch-maratha relations and the Porto-Novo affair, 1678-1680’, *Quarterly of the BISM*, Vol. 1-4, pp.57-71, Pune, Year 92(June2015-April 2016).

²⁵ *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico Indicum*, vol 3, pp.211-13.

²⁶ *Batavia Dag Register*, 15 November 1680, pp.753-54.

to reconcile the interests of native merchants along with the VOC. This clashed with the monopolistic ambitions of the later, but a compromise was soon worked out, since by that time, owing to various reasons, the Dutch began focusing more on their European rivals than on native ones.

Conclusion

To sum up, there was a need to maintain good relations with the local Governors, something that was constant reiterated the Dutch clearly understood that the company prospect was entirely depended on the 'favour and grant of the local government', and so the frequent small presents were justified, as being necessary to maintain a reasonably cordial relationship. More important was of course the fact that such a relationship would guarantee the continuance of trade. Thus, we see that how much beneficial was Maratha rule to the Dutch traders and Shivaji's stable rule over the Adilshahi Karnataka & his cordial relations with the Dutch, the Coromandel region experienced a rapid boom in trading activities. Question of establishing horizontal relationships of the Company with the Marathas was both heterogeneous and continues almost impenetrable till the end. It is interesting to note that the Dilemma of relations with the Dutch was not agreeable to such rapid and easy answers. These relations were acclimatized by the Dutch animosity to Portuguese, English and French hazards in the region, enmity among Portugal, England and Holland in Europe was the character and ardors of commercial rivalry among them at times.

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