

Situating Telangana in 17th and 18th Centuries – An Economic Perspective

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Abstract

Despite being a pivotal region for both territorial trade and transit trade, the Economic history of Telangana pertaining to the 17th and 18th centuries still remains to be explored in depth. After formation of the Telangana state in 2014, there has been a spurt in the researches pertaining to the region and hitherto unknown and less-known facts have been coming to the fore. There is surely a need to take this effort further and enrich the regional history which helps in arriving at broader generalisations at a national level.

The present paper, 'Telangana in 17th and 18th centuries – An Economic Perspective' attempts at assessing the primacy of the region in relation to the trade and commerce during the period of study.

The current historiography on trade and commerce in the region broadly links Telangana with the rich coastal trade on the coromandel coast but key details are still to be fathomed. Situating on the major trade route from Maharashtra to Andhra to Orissa and other ports of the east coast, Telangana acted as a good hinterland to support exports from the coastal ports such as Machilipatnam.

Contemporary sources refer to brisk trade between Golconda, Bhongir, Shapurin Telangana to Kondapalli in Andhra to reach Machilipatnam for export destinations. The prosperity of coastal trade during 17th-18th centuries owed much to products from Telangana such as textiles, carpets and swords, among others and tries to bring out details of patterns and participation.

A central theme in the debate on the eighteenth century India has been the impact of the hinterland affairs on trade in particular and economic activity in general. Most of the traditional scholars tried to show that the impact of political confusion following the death of Aurangzeb, and the growth in the independence and power of regional elite with a relative fall in the law and order situation and the commercial rivalries among the European trading companies for supremacy on Indian soil had a devastating impact on trade and commerce. An economic perspective of Telangana in the period can give better clarity in this regard.

With the theory of political decline being challenged with putting into perspective the rise of regional elite in different regions in India, it becomes pertinent to examine the changing patterns and to establish whether there was any continuity or not. While the centrality of Coromandel Coast in the trade patterns of the eighteenth century is well recognised by the economic historians, the eastern Deccan and Telangana in most occasions remained outside the purview main studies with occasional footnotes and references.¹ Thus, there is a need to identifying the patterns and participants in

¹ However, there has been a change of late.

commercial networks in Telangana but also to place them in some framework that would help us to understand the complexities better. There arise some crucial questions such as what was role of Telagana in the political and economic scenario of the shifting mercantile alliances and alignments? How it provided the much needed hinterland support for ports in Andhra, especially Machilipatnam and connected trade networks of Western India to the eastern Deccan, among others.

In this regard, one can study the trade ties between Telangana and the port city of Masulipatnam which was one of the vibrant commercial centers in 18th century Eastern Deccan². The textiles and carpets from Warangal, iron and steel from Karimnagar, toys and kalamkaris from Bodhan, Nizamabad were sent from Telangana. In the seventeenth century, Masulipatnam was considered as a 'safe heaven' for trade and commerce.³ This was a major port for the hinterland in the North Coromandel for the areas up to Hyderabad and up to Ludur and Nurhanpur in the north.⁴ It acted as a major port for the rich Qutub Shahi Kingdom and had attracted many articles of trade from the hinterland for exports. For instance, 'Gingham' type of cloth, woven in and around Masulipatnam was exported to Siam, Japan and West Asia.⁵ Other varieties called Cassaputach and

² Though some scholars say that the port city was in a state of decline from the turn of the eighteenth century, we humbly disagree with that contention. Because in the first half the century, there were some disturbances in the form of Sarvai Papadu who disrupted trade routes from Telangana to Andhra with his 'social banditry', the Maratha raids on Hyderabad. However, by 1724, order had returned to the Deccan in general and Telangana and Andhra in particular and the credit goes to Nizam ul Mulk Asaf Jah – I.

³ Contemporary sources talk a great deal about the flourishing trading activity at the port during the seventeenth century. This also led to the emergence of high-class trading class along with small and medium itinerant merchants such as banjaras who brought bulk goods and raw material from the frontier to distant ports for exports who can be termed seasonal merchants. See Inscriptions of Chidpirala and Jammalamadugu Kaifiyat, AP State Archives, Hyderabad, 1964, cited in Srinivasulu, Gandikota Charitra Mariyu Sanskriti, Produutur, 1994. For the activities of Banjaras in trade in South India see, Joseph J Brenning, The Textile Trade in India, A Study of Pre-modern Export Industry on the Northern Coromandel in the Late Seventeenth Century, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1975, Chapter-III.

⁴ SN Alam, 'Masulipatnam, a Metropolitan port in the Seventeenth century', *Islamic Culture*, XXXII, pp.174-78.

⁵ JN Sarkar, *Mughal Economy: Organization and working*, Calcutta, 1987, p.162

Cassa merch went to Malaya states.⁶ It was the Dutch who played a key role in this networking of international trade off Masulipatnam.⁷ Suffice it would be to say here that the political stability under the Qutub Shahis and the economic vibrancy of Telangana region and its produce had greatly aided this economic prosperity of the eastern Deccan. There has been a general agreement among the prominent historians on the centrality of Masulipatnam in the trade and commerce of the seventeenth century Coromandal coast.⁸ The South East Asian trade was also at its peak with Masulipatnam having considerable shipping to Achheh, Bantam, Mannila, Burma and Siam.⁹

However, the political context of this economic order underwent a sea change after 1687 when Aurangzeb made the region a part of the Mughal Empire. From this point up to 1724 the eastern Deccan is said to have undergone a political fragmentation which must have affected prospects of trade and commerce. The chief votary of this stance is Arasaratnam, who has done extensive study on the Coromandel trade in the seventeenth century. Recently, there has been a change in his stance over the fate of Masulipatnam and he himself has accepted in principle that they are signs of picking up from the low position to which trade had sunk in the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth century.¹⁰

On the basis of the contemporary the Telugu sources and East India Company Records , it can be said that it is very difficult to apply the term `decline` to the economic order of the region in the early decades of the eighteenth century on two grounds. Firstly, the trade networks that connected the hinterland of Telangana region with that of Masulipatnam were still intact, though however suffered occasionally because of banditry

⁶ Om Prakash, *Dutch Factories in India, 1612-1629*, New Delhi, 1984, p.275.

⁷ Ibid. The Dutch had established a trading station here in 1605.

⁸ Among the factors that triggered of the expansion of the commerce, the role played by the European trading companies is also important. Masulipatnam had witnessed a large proportion of bullion imports into the Coromandel. See, S. Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 141. In the hinterland too, there was large-scale over land trade in raw cotton from the central Deccan to this region, which was carried to specific markets like Rajahmundry, Vamagiri and Palakollu. See, W.H. Moreland, *The Relations of Golconda*, London, 1929, p.68.

⁹ For a further discussion in this regard, see K. S. Mathew, `Masulipatnam and Maritime Trade of India during the Seventeenth Century`, *Proceedings of Andhra Pradesh History Congress*, 1987, pp.76-89.

¹⁰ Arasaratnam and S. Ray, *Masulipatnam and Cambay: A History of two port Towns, 1500-1800*, Delhi, 1994.P. 87.

and the Maratha raids.¹¹ While the temporary erosion of order was beyond dispute, the traders in the Masulipatnam region were so entrenched that they themselves took protective measures. The Mughal officials in Telangana in the early eighteenth century did participate in the trading activities with Arabia and Gulf of Persia and their ships sailed from St. Thome and Porto Nova, which were also connected with Masulipatnam. A Mughal deputy Governor of Hyderabad Daud Khan Pani – himself a Pathan – evinced keen interest in overseas trade. In the south, Masulipatnam had regular trade with Madras and Pondicherry. In 1736, Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah had imported 9 pieces of cannon. There was an increase in the number of French Vessels touching Masulipatnam - two in 1729 to eighteen in 1740. As late as 1750s, Masulipatnam was still continued to be the main point of Hyderabad's trade on east coast and got significantly enriched by the contribution from Telananga.

The volume of trade and the primacy of the port in the international and inter-regional trade registered a slow-down in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The reasons could be the loss of the hinterland support in the direction of Vizagpatnam on one hand and with Hyderabad on the other. However, despite the acceptance of some historians regarding the positive side of the eighteenth century eastern Deccan economy,¹² it is important to note that even in the second half of the century, Masulipatnam still continued to be an important center of trade.

There are many references in the contemporary Telugu literature to trade and commerce in the eighteenth century. There are many references to the towns and trade centers in the contemporary Telugu literature. There is a general reference that Bandarulu served as centers of exports and must have been quite popular because the term is mentioned, as it is too common.¹³ It may be postulated that while Vizagpatnam and Masulipatnam had served as major ports for exports with a strong presence of European trading companies, there must have been in land waterways well connected with the major ports. For example, Telugu sources mention Nagaram, now a small town in the

¹¹ A Maratha band had appeared at Puliconda (Palakollu) in 1704 and freely looted the region. According to Manucci, Mughal Governor Rustum Dil Khan did not take any action and untroubled by the imperial forces, the Marathas took their own time in devastating the region. Manucci, III, 503-4.

¹² Bhaswati Bhattacharya, for instance subscribes to the view that there was no total disappearance of trade while conceding that Masulipatnam had a marked decline. See, Bhaswati Bhattacharya, 'The Hinterland and the Coast', 'The Pattern of Interaction in Coromandel in the Late Eighteenth Century' in Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Lakshmi Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998.

¹³ Here also we can see continuity from *Sukasaptasati* to *Hamsavimsathi*. *Athavana Vyahara Tantram* has corroborated these details also.

east Godavari District on Godavari as exporting Miriyalu, Vakkalu and Elakulu up to Balaghat.¹⁴ Logically, we may assume that there must have been a link between Narasapur (very close to Pallicollu, a Dutch station) and Nagaram. The other towns referred in the contemporary sources were Adoni (cotton), Dharmavaram, Gutty, Tadipatri, Warangal, Rayadurgam, Nizamabad, Hindupur and Walajipet etc, which must have served urban centers with a rural tilt.

Besides these places, there is also a specific mention of towns and bazarars, which include Pagonda, Nagole, Tallur, Mylapuram, Jataprolu, Bhuvanagiri, Kongondi, Tarigonda, Dharmavaram, Ramachandrapuram, Bezwada, Kotakonda (present Kotappa Konda). Their connectivity of these trading points with other prominent places in the South such as Bandar (Machilipatnam), Surat, Kondavidu, Nelakondapalli, Bellamkonda, Devarakonda, among others.

Hamsavimsathi is not the only Telugu work that testifies to the presence of towns and trading activity in the region under study. Eenugula Veeraswami (1780-1836) penned many interesting aspects of his times during his journey to Benaras in his *Kasi Yatracharitra*, first published in 1838.¹⁵ His descriptions of Pithapuram, Peddapuram, Rajahmundry, Bandar (Machilipatnam), Srigravriksham, Vizianagaram and Tuni clearly show the considerable size and scale of the rural economy.¹⁶

Thus, it can be said that Telangana region had rich contribution to the economic prosperity of eastern Deccan in the eighteenth century with reference to trade and commerce. There is also a need to investigate further aspects of Telangana economy of the 18th century to assess its true contribution to the overall economy of the region.

On the basis of above study, we argue that trade in the Eighteenth Century Eastern Deccan had seen some periodic eclipses. But in general, the regional economy appears to be on a thriving note and this can disqualify the notion that eighteenth century was a dark age as far as economic aspects are concerned. In fact this can be described as a formative period in the economic history of the eastern Deccan because of the gradual integration of the region into the vicissitudes of the global trade. The promising economic aspects of the eastern Deccan could be listed as one of the factors for the competition for the Northern Circars between the French and English. It might be more beneficial to investigate the dynamics of the newly emerging centers in the broader context of mushrooming urban and semi-urban centers in the region under study. And Telangana did play a crucial role in shaping the political, economic, social and cultural formation of the entire region.

¹⁴ *Athavana Vyahara Tantram*, p. 11.

¹⁵ For the purpose of the present study, we have used *Eenugula Veeraswamayya gari Kasi Yatracharitra*, (Third Print) Asian Educational Services, Madras, 1941.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.330-363