

## INDIAN TRADE - Postclassical Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

**Overview** India was part of inter-regional trade from at least the time of the Indus Valley civilisation in the third millennium BCE. By 100 CE, overland and maritime routes had connected Indian traders and goods with Roman, Greek and Persian empires. Later maritime routes linked them with China and Southeast Asia, but trade across the Indian Ocean to Africa and the Middle East remained the most lucrative. The arrival of British, French and Dutch ships during the colonial era pushed India into the very centre of global trade. In general, India enjoyed a healthy balance of trade, due to the foreign demand for such commodities as sugar, spices, indigo and cotton.

### Early Postclassical Period 500-1000

**Indian Ocean** The Indian Ocean, separating India from Africa and the Middle East, became a major trading route. The fall of the Roman Empire created a vacuum that was filled by Arab, Persian and Indian merchant. This route became a truly global one, with India in the middle, from the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE onward, when the Tang Empire in China sought to extend its commercial connections. For centuries, this crossing was undertaken at great risk to boats, subject to unpredictable winds and the less-than-regular monsoon. By about 1000 CE, a number of depots were broke the voyage into smaller and safer segments.

**South India** Another major maritime trade route ran from coastal south India to Southeast Asia. This trade was largely controlled by the Chola Empire, which reached the peak of its power around 1000 CE. Chola ships sailed to the tip of Sumatra, down the straits of Malacca and up the eastern coast of the Malay peninsula and then to Cambodia and China. The medieval guilds in central and south India funded these expeditions. One guild based in the Deccan (The Five Hundred Lords of Ayyavole) left inscriptions in their name in Cambodia and Sumatra. These routes were also protected by the sophisticated Chola navy, which conducted military campaigns along the same route and controlled much of the coasts for two centuries.

### Late Postclassical Period

**Domestic trade** Domestic trade flourished under the Delhi Sultanate, as evidenced by the descriptions of foreign travellers. The account given by Ibn Battua (14<sup>th</sup> c.) includes details of Delhi as a major centre, where high quality goods (rice, betel leaves, sugar and wheat) were brought provincial regions. The sultans also saw to it that major roads and riverine routes were well maintained and policed. Foreign imports were also transported from coastal ports to major centres, such as the road from Goa to Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagar Empire in the hinterland. One report mentions more than 5000 bullock carts carrying goods between the two points. The Vijayanagar Empire also carried on its own lucrative, domestic trade in diamonds.

**Foreign Trade** During the Sultanate major exported goods included silks, gold-trimmed clothes, guns, diamonds, elephants, pearls and coconuts. The big cash earners were sugar, indigo and spices. Chief imports were horses from the northwest, dates and precious stones from Arabia (across the Indian Ocean), satin and other luxury textiles from Persia, and raw silk and porcelain from China. Among favoured foreign goods were scented oils and perfume, wine, coral and velvet. During this period, and generally throughout history, India enjoyed a good balance of trade, with exports far exceeding imports.

### Reading

Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)

Romila Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Penguin, 2002)

B. R. Tomlinson, *The Economy of Modern India* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, 2013)

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Land, Politics and Trade in South Asia* (Oxford, 2004)