

Re-charting the Trade Routes

by Mahalakshmi R.

*Society, Trade and Traders
in Early Indian Society*
by Ranabir Chakravarti
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I

By the 1960s, more than ten years after the publication of his seminal work in French, the English-speaking public, at least in the West, were familiar with the name of Fernand Braudel and the great methodological shifts that he had brought into history-writing. In 1972, the English translation by Sian Reynolds of this path-breaking work entitled *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* was published. Western historiography had until then firmly clung to the dichotomy between the Christian and the Islamic worlds even in contiguous areas of occupation such as the Mediterranean. Braudel, who himself claimed to have been influenced greatly by the French *Annales* school, emphasised the unity and coherence of the Mediterranean region irrespective of the dominance of the Crescent or the Cross in different parts of it. He located this unity in the fact that 'the whole sea shared a common destiny,.. with identical problems and general trends if not identical consequences.'¹ This destiny had as its underpinnings sea-trade through which various regions located in the Mediterranean grew in stature at the cost of others, due to an interplay of structure and conjuncture – the long-term submerged, discreet changes, and the short-term, dramatic, and continual changes.

II

Chakravarti's work acknowledges an epistemological debt to Braudel, and projects a critique of the "conventional narrative approach to the history of

trade" by focusing on the interrelationships between agriculture, trade and the growth of urban centers. In eleven densely packed articles, with seven reprints of earlier publications, Chakravarti takes on a vast canvas geographically and uses a disparate array of sources. Some chapters, which focus on trade in early historical India, particular types of market centers called *putabhedanas* and on royal merchants, appear pan-Indian in focus; three articles provide detailed analyses of maritime trade and trade centers in early medieval Bengal; categories of markets in early medieval north India and Deccan form two separate studies; and finally, the activities of an Arab merchant at the western Indian centre Somanatha in the 13th century is discussed. This is certainly not a book for the idle traveler or the curious reader, but is a must for any academic and researcher interested not just in the history of trade, but also in the historiography on early India.

The overview gives one a sense of the Braudelian notion of a subcontinental unity, albeit without any self-conscious proclamation to this effect. The chapter on 'material milieu' in the early historic period reviews processes of historical change such as the rise of *janapadas* or territorial powers from the *janas* or lineage based polities, the shift from pastoralism to agriculture as bringing about substantive economic generative transformations around the 6th century B.C. Chakravarti locates the emergence of cities within this scenario, and differentiates this from the first urbanization of the Indus Valley civilization, since the 'city' was no longer "a loose agglomeration of traits... but .. a manifestation of... a sharply class-differentiated" society (p. 39). Simultaneously, there was intensive craft

specialization. This further led to hierarchization of traders and merchants depending on the nature of commodities they dealt with. The earliest punch-marked silver coins found in the Ganga valley were minted by the more powerful merchants, postulates Chakravarti. However, the shift from a sub-regional transformation to a "pan-Indian situation could be visualized only since late 4th century B.C. with the establishment of the Mauryan empire" (p. 46). By effectively channeling the agrarian surpluses the Mauryan state was able to exert control over other economic activities as well through the *panya-dhyaksha* (director of trade) and the *samsthadhyaksha* (director of markets). The collapse of the Mauryan empire, in fact, did not affect these economic transformations adversely; instead the process reached its culmination with state control yielding to private enterprise in every field. The *Jataka* tales, Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, *Satavahana* epigraphs are some of the diverse sources tapped by Chakravarti to identify these changes. The growth of trade is discernible in the rise of guilds as bankers, through the knowledge of new sea routes in foreign trade, the hierarchies among ports and through royal initiatives continuing in trade.

In the chapters on *putabhedana* and *rajasresthi*, Chakravarti tries to unravel the layers behind blanket terms such as 'market' and 'merchant'. According to a Pali text dated before the Mauryan period, the former was a place where boxes were opened, a meaning that continued in 5th century A.D. sources. Kautilya's elaboration of its characteristics – as a *panyaputabhedana* – shows the clear association with trade, and of such centers as necessary over every 800 villages. By the 1st century B.C., in the *Milindapanho*, a further elaboration of the

¹Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. London: Collins, 1972, p. 14

'*nanaputabhedana*' dealing in many articles of trade is found. In the *Amarakosa*, dated to the Gupta period, the *putabhedana* is a synonym for an urban centre such as the *pattana*. In the early medieval period, the *pentha* in the Deccan is seen as the equivalent of the *putabhedana* of the north India, and is mentioned usually as a point for the collection of tolls.

As far as royal merchants are concerned, the earliest evidence is cited from Pali texts, where the intimate relation between the merchant and royalty is seen, each gaining from the other. In the Mauryan period, the process of interaction intensified, tilting in favour of the royalty. Even at the turn of the Christian era, it appears that royal merchants were held responsible for any losses incurred by the state, of manpower and of money. In Nepal, inscriptions of the 7th – 8th centuries A.D. show that the merchants were in fact fully employed by the state as '*rajakuliya vyavasyai*', and that they were empowered to provide/collect forced labour. Two instances from Karnataka referring to a '*Rajendra Cola Cetti*' in A.D. 1020, and to *Nolabi-setti* who was the '*Poysala-setti*' of A.D. 1125, show the importance of such royal merchants as late as the end of the early medieval period. In fact, there are numerous such instances in the case of the Hoysalas, as well as a few of the Western Chalukyas and the Silaharas. Interestingly, Chakravarti sees royal favour as capable of changing *rajasresthis*, as in the case of *Vesappayya* who was replaced by *Boppanayya* when *Vijayaditya* succeeded *Gandaraditya*.

Somehow, chapter 10 appears superfluous in Chakravarti's scheme of things, for his discussion on the *pentha* could have easily been elaborated in chapter 4, on the *putabhedana*. It is in chapter 10 on the '*mandapika*' as an early medieval exchange centre that one would find a natural corollary to the argument of the development of trade in the early medieval period leading to the growth of urban settlements substantially different from those of the early historic

period. Again drawing upon Braudel, Chakravarti sees the *mandapika* as an intermediate zone of exchange, not a 'sun-city' or an important trade centre like the *pattana*, but neither a small, dispersed rural market such as the *hatta/hattika*.

The chapters on Bengal's maritime history provide detailed analyses of the nature of trade, means of exchange, ports, and shipping techniques prevalent in the early medieval period. The earliest data goes back to the first four or five centuries of the Christian era, in the form of seals with Brahmi-Kharosti script found in the south-western part of West Bengal. However, in terms of literary recognition of this space, the Bay of Bengal was first identified distinctly around the 10th century A.D., in local inscriptions as *Vangasagara*, and in Arab sources as *bahr Harkand* (Sea of Harikela = south-eastern Bengal). Chakravarti emphasizes the fact that modern West Bengal and Bangladesh was not a single, homogenous region; in fact, there were four broad divisions of *Pundravardhana* (north Bengal), *Radha* (west of the Ganges), *Vanga* (central Deltaic Bengal – Dhaka region), and *Samatata* (Noakhali, Comilla and Chittagong). Interestingly, during various periods different parts became the epicenters of trade, each lending its own name generally to the entire region. For example, the Arab term mentioned earlier would technically apply only to the fourth sub-region, but by the 10th-11th Centuries A.D., with the political ascendance of the *Candras* who had their seat in Harikela or *Samatata*, *Harikela* was used to denote the entire region.

Terracotta seals from the site of *Chandraketugarh* from modern 24 Parganas area have yielded valuable information on the nature of articles traded from this region such as grains and horses. While there is enough evidence to show the agrarian prosperity of the region accounting for trade in grain, the horse was perhaps brought overland from the northwest and through the Ganga valley by the *Yueh Chih* traders. The same seals also bear impressions of ships/water-bodies, and

it has been possible to identify at least three distinctive types: 1) *trapyaka* – meant for coastal voyages, 2) ships undertaking *tridesojatra* (journey in 3 directions), 3) *jaladhisakra* – the Indra of the Ocean. The first was meant only for coastal trade, while the others were meant for long-distance, may be oceanic travels.

Sites of the early historic period such as *Chandraketugarh* facilitated coastal and high sea voyages, though it is *Tamralipta* that finds maximum attention in literary references (modern *Tamluk*, *Midnapore* district) until the end of the Gupta phase. Excavations around this site have shown that there were a number of feeder ports from which probably goods were transited to *Tamralipta* such as *Bahiri*, *Tikasi*, *Tilda*, etc. However, an inscriptional reference of the 7th century to *Devaparvata* in the traditional *Samatata* area indicates the importance of this port by this time, and as having three boat parking stations around it. Further, in Chinese travelers' accounts various ports are seen connected through overland routes such as *Kamarupa*, *Samatata* and *Tamralipta*. Hierarchies can be determined by ascertaining the apparent functions of these ports; the *sambhandariyaka*, therefore, can be seen as a warehousing site, with administrative functions in the early medieval period.

The last chapter in this collection is interesting not just from the point of view of trade but also for understanding the nature of cultural transactions that the Indian subcontinent has witnessed over the centuries. Focusing on a wealthy Arab-shipping merchant *Nuruddin Firuz*, Chakravarti locates through two inscriptions of the late 13th century A.D. the strategic position of the important trading center of *Somanatha*, which despite the *Ghaznavid* invasions continued to gather people of different faiths and cultures harmoniously. *Firuz's* own inscription, the longer portion in Sanskrit and its synopsis in Arabic, refers to the construction of a *mijigiti* (Sanskrit for *masjid*) and the provisions made for its maintenance, for the three religious functionaries and for the performance of

functionaries and for the performance of some *visespujamahotsava* (important festivals). Interestingly, the lands are bought from Pasupata priests, and from other brahmanical temples in the vicinity. The second inscription cited by Chakravarti throws light on the fact that no "image of crisis in the socio-cultural life in the Saiva sacred center" appears; "neither does it offer any indication that there was an element of forced construction of a mosque by Muslims in this holy city of the Hindus." While in terms of readability, this chapter provides a welcome break from the torturous path of economic history; more seriously, it offers a methodological insight into the intertwining of economic and cultural factors. As Chakravarti aptly concludes, "The cultural and social scenario at Somanatha in the thirteenth century is certainly more complex and at the same time diverse than the much cherished, but rather simplistic, notion that it was a merely Saivite sacred center, somehow surviving the devastations of the Ghaznavid raid of 1025." Chakravarti's postulation that the role of Indian Ocean trade and of merchants are bridges among diverse communities appears reasonable in this light.

On the whole, as the author himself states in the Introduction, this book reflects the author's sustained interest in the history of trade in early India, which sometimes tends to overlap, as the articles published earlier have not been modified much. It might be useful if the author in subsequent editions could club some of these themes, such as those on early medieval Bengal, to allow the reader unfamiliar with the sources a better understanding of the processes outlined by Chakravarti. Finally, it brings home sharply to the researcher, that micro-regional analyses, which are the order of the day are no doubt important, but that no history of trade (or any other theme!) can afford to divorce itself from the larger scenario at the sub-continental level.

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