

Rulers and the Rise in Trading Activities in Western India (C.600-1300 C.E.)

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Abstract: This paper deals with the role of ruling class in the promotion of trade and commerce in western India during the early medieval period. Being well aware of the revenue generating potential of the trading activities, the rulers encouraged trade by organising fairs, and establishing markets. They also extended facilities to merchants and travellers by providing safe environment, water facilities, and by building rest-houses.

Keywords: Rulers, western India, trade, markets, exchange centres, revenue

Western India during the early medieval centuries (c.600-1300 C.E.) witnessed burgeoning rural economy and large scale agrarian expansion. The judicious efforts by rulers helped in the expansion and spread of efficient irrigation system. Excavation of different sources of irrigation by royalty ensured higher agricultural yield and proliferation and diversification of the crops giving a boost to the rural economy which ultimately provided base for dynamic upsurge in trading activities of Western India.

In fact rulers being aware of the revenue generating potential of the commerce themselves encouraged trade by establishing markets. Ghatiyala inscription dated 861 C.E. of Pratihara ruler Kakkuka furnishes a good example of expansion of agrarian economy by the efforts and initiatives of the ruler and replacement of a primitive tribal economy by an advanced economy.¹ Pratihara Kakkuka founded a market fit for traders crowded with brahmanas, soldiers, and merchants at the village of Rohinsakupa. He constructed a market place (*hatta*) decorated with variegated streets, went to houses of brahmanas, kshatriyas, and vaishyas, promising them with means of livelihood, and established the *mahajana* there. Owing to its being infested by Abhiras the place became deserted but it was re-peopled by him by inducing men of three principal castes to come and reside there after defeating and ousting Abhirs.

B.D. Chattopadhyaya² argues that we need to look at nature of exchange centres and the nature

of authority at such centres. He stresses on the need to look at the linkage between the proliferation of ruling lineages with their various centres of power, and of centres of exchange. We have before us an example of Naddula which was a node in a cluster of rural settlements, and its emergence as a node and an exchange centre at which commercial levies were collected was related to its being a centre of Cahamana power.³ He mentions that initiatives taken by kings and ministers helped in creation of urban centres.

In western India the early medieval towns had a political character. Emergence of regional kingdoms enhanced the importance of castles and forts which became the main requirement of the period for defence against powerful rulers for which forts were constructed at strategic points and for the control of newly won lands administrative centres were created.⁴ These forts were inhabited mainly by the non-producing class which comprised of chiefs, their retinues, and armies. It is possible that rulers collected necessary provisions in the form of tribute from the neighbouring rural areas.⁵ Luxury requirements of the elites were fulfilled by traders and merchants living inside or outside the fortress. Certain needs of that population residing in the towns were probably met with through the mechanism of trade. The case in point is of Shergadh in Rajasthan which testifies our assumption.⁶ The Somanatha temple located inside the fort (*kotta*) of Kosavardhana formed the core of the city and several donations were made to it by private individuals, mostly merchants and landlords. They must have been the residents of the city. Apart from them we get references to the guild of oilmen, and to oil-mills, *sankhika* or couch-shell worker which hints at it being some kind of manufacturing centre as well. Rise of state capitals or capital towns encouraged trade, besides being the seat of government they were inhabited by king, his household, royal officials, soldiers, merchants and artisans.⁷ They required a strong agrarian base to sustain and thus, were supported by surplus produced in the villages. The luxury requirements of king and his royal household, officials were probably met by the merchants.

The revenue collected through taxes on shops and goods also encouraged many kings to organise fairs and markets. Immense profit fetched through the commerce hardly escaped the notice of the rulers. Interest of kings in market activities is reflected from the various departments set up and officials appointed such as *hattadhyakasa* or head of market. He was evidently responsible for the enforcement of market rules and regulations and collected state's share on the transactions conducted in the markets.⁸ *Saulkika* or *sulkadhyaksa* was the tax collector or collector of custom-duties.⁹ *Talarabhavya* was probably the payment made to the *kotwal* of the area by local people

including merchants for protection to their person and wares.¹⁰ *Volapika* was an officer who collected tax from merchants in return for protection and safety to their goods in course of their journey through a particular area.¹¹ Shergadh stone inscription dated 1018 CE refers to donation of 5 *vrishabhas* from the produce of octroi duties by *marggadaye kaupitika* Varamga.¹² *Marggadaya-kaupitika* was entrusted with the collection of road tax and other dues. *Hindipika* was a tax collector and *uparahindiya* was a tax inspector.¹³ Abu inscription of 1449 CE mentions levy of toll tax from the persons coming into the town.¹⁴ Panahera inscription of the time of Jayasimhadeva of Malwa (1059 CE) contains reference to grant of 1 *vimsopaka* on every bull that passed on the road to God Siva.¹⁵ *Lekhapaddhati*¹⁶ contains list of various departments established by the Chaulukyas for promotion of trade and commerce such as department of collecting *sulk* (taxes), department of harbours (*velakula*), department of roads and waterways (*jala-pathak*), department of trade and commerce (*vyapara-tantra*).

Nandini Sinha¹⁷ argues that the initiative of the local states in helping the trade to thrive can be seen in the political undertaken. The kings always ordered the local residents of the land to provide protection to all the merchants and pilgrims passing through the region, and provided them with financial assistance whenever required. They are building rest houses, water reservoirs to help the travellers and traders. Travellers were provided with amenities which remained a concern of the local administration. State also arranged guards to patrol markets at night.¹⁸ Rulers also spent handsome amount on building roads and highways. Road links between rural areas, and markets were established which helped in better administration.¹⁹

V.K. Jain²⁰ opines that the Chaulukyas, ruling over a vast area including Gujarat, Kutch, and Saurashtra, western Malwa and southern Rajasthan needed a wide network of roads to keep far flung areas under their control. Therefore, they evinced keen interest not only in preserving the existing highways but also in constructing the new ones when required. The references in numerous inscriptions to *rajamargas* or *rajamaggas* and village roads in connection with the boundaries of donated lands show that the trunk roads connecting the main centres of the Chaulukya dominion had a large number of feeder lines. These facilitated inter-exchange of commercial goods between towns, and villages. Internally, there were various trade routes which linked different parts of western India with each other. In the 12th century Jayasimha Siddharaja constructed a new military road through the peninsula to subdue the Cudasama chief of Junagarh.²¹ This road later became a regular route for traders and travellers from north Gujarat, though the coastal route of Saurashtra also continued to be used. Ladol copper plates of Jayasimhadeva dated 1100 CE refers to roads leading to villages of

Kabeli, Vadalavi, and Takavardh.²²

Indian kings who resisted Arab attacks on their coast welcomed Arab merchants to visit their kingdoms and treated them with kindness just because they appreciated the fact that the prosperity of the region depends on them. The inscriptional references show that in the 11th and 13th century large number of Muslim merchant were stationed at the ports and inland towns of western India. They penetrated into different parts of Western India as traders, merchants, and seafarers at a time when it was still ruled by Rajput princes.²³ An epitaph found at Gogha taluk, Bhavanagar dated 1171 CE states that Bahauddin abu'l Barakat Abu Muhammad Zakariyya, son of Muhammad Ghauth and grandson of Abu Bakr al-Qureshi was born on the first date and died on the 2nd date at the age of 100 years, which sheds light on the long history of settlement of people of foreign origin in western India.²⁴D. No.5 dated 744/5 CE instructs all the officers that the goods being carried on carts from Anahilwada to Navsari with *sahu* should not be called to the presence of *vulapika* nor should be harassed.²⁵

The atmosphere of peace and order that prevailed in Mewar during the 15th also helped the state to develop economically with an enriched trade and commerce.²⁶ The rulers of Mewar also encouraged these businessmen to come and settle in Mewar.²⁷ Rulers also encouraged trade by participating in it. Certain commodities were considered to be royal monopolies and were reserved for sale by rulers. An incident recorded in *Kharataragaccha-brihad-gurvavali* throws a flood of light on relationship between a local king and the merchants from outside.²⁸ It tells us that once in 1187 CE a caravan of pilgrims and traders from Ajmer received the permission of Jagaddeva Pratihara, the chief minister of Chaulukya king Bhima II to pass through the kingdom of Gujarat. When the caravan reached Asapalli, the *dandanayaka* Abhayada, who belonged to a rival sect entertained the nefarious design of plundering it as it had many rich people. When Jagaddeva came to know it, he was extremely angry with Abhayada and warned him that if he tried to molest the *samgha* he would be sewn in the skin of a donkey because it was with great difficulty that Jagaddeva had been able to form a truce with king Prithviraja of Ajmer. The incident is remarkable in the sense that it shows that merchants and travellers enjoyed state patronage and their molestation by a foreign state could invite intervention and retaliation by the king of their parent country. It shed light on the fact that the caravans who obtained permission probably after making some payment to pass through an alien country enjoyed certain privileges such as safety and protection during the course of their movement.

In short it can be said that rulers, being well aware of the revenue bearing aspect of commerce

tried their best to encourage trade and commercial activities. They provided congenial atmosphere, safe environment and also extended facilities, such as building rest-houses, *prapas*, *vapis*, for merchants, and travellers which ultimately helped in the growth of trade and commerce in western India during the early medieval period.

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