



## **Urbanization in Coastal Karnataka in the eighteenth century**

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**Dr. Thriveni Urs,**

Associate Professor, Department of History ,

Mangalore University. Mangalagangothri, Mangaluru-574199. Karnataka, India.

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### **Abstract**

The process of the urbanization in Coastal Karnataka in the eighteenth century is very unique in the history of Karnataka in particular and India in general. The West coastal Karnataka includes the present Udupi districts (North Kanara), Dakshina Kannada (South Kanara) of Karnataka and the Kasaragodu taluk of Kerala, by the beginning of the eighteenth century presents a panorama of towns of varied dimensions that studded all along. While a few of such towns had been reducing to diminutive sizes, many could retain their stature of substance having commercial and political linkage with powers storming them for profit. In a bid to establish and maintain their hold over them, powers completed with one another in which contest these urban centers being a prize of prey were thrown open to pillage and loot; some were burnt and raged to grounds bringing cruel suffering on the urbanities. More than this, certain negative factors indirect and direct, political and military experiences, these nodules for trade were reduced to a state of gloom as a consequence of the declining urban trend of the century. Ultimately the British colonialism absorbed them in its system.

**Keywords: South Kanara, Keris, Konkan, Malabar**

### **Introduction**

The process of the urbanization in Coastal Karnataka in the eighteenth century is very unique in the history of Karnataka in particular and India in general. The West coastal Karnataka includes the present Udupi districts (North Kanara), Dakshina Kannada (South Kanara) of Karnataka and the Kasaragodu taluk of Kerala, by the beginning of the eighteenth century presents a panorama of towns of varied dimensions that studded all along. While a few of such towns had been reducing to diminutive sizes, many could retain their stature of substance having commercial and political linkage with powers storming them for profit. In a bid to establish and maintain their hold over them, powers completed with one another in which contest these urban centres being a prize of prey were thrown open to pillage and loot; some were burnt and raged to grounds bringing

cruel suffering on the urbanities. More than this, certain negative factors indirect and direct, political and military experiences, these nodules for trade were reduced to a state of gloom as a consequence of the declining urban trend of the century. Ultimately the British colonialism absorbed them in its system.

## Discussion

It is very necessary to examine the historical background for the growth of urbanization in Karnataka to understand the process of urbanization in the medieval period as well as early modern period. Passing through the stimulating experience of the process of urbanization the Karnataka West Coast transformed into the most urbanized micro region of the Vijayanagara Empire in the sixteenth century. During the hey days of the empire, the merchants, artisans and their guild associations drew this part of the West coast to the forefront in the economy of the empire with a built-in-infrastructure. The advent of Europeans added a further fillip and commercial map of the Portuguese was adorned with the dots of towns of the west coast of Karnataka. From such a stimuli, they received from the primary position they enjoyed as masters of the situations. The crystals of trade could have moved in for a qualitative change commercial revaluation and capital formation. Instead they implied towards the morass of stagnations only to sink decline. Some of the weak threads inherent in the urban economy and social system of the weak threads stunted their further growth.

Situated between the green Ghats of the Sahyadri and the blue waters of the Arabian sea the topography of the region, being one of the important factors with its rich hinterland, navigable rivers and rivulets from the sea to a few miles on the upstream, with the still waters of the mouth forming into a large lake conducive for the boats and ships to anchor and with ports and harbors from Konkan to Malabar allowing the articles of merchandise to move in either directions of the south and north and across the sea to the farther west, had turned this strip into a land of numerous towns and townships forts and fortresses.

For the convenience of conveyance, towns were built on the banks of the rivers at a point of converging the sea or at a little distance up the stream; but those away from such locations were however vary near to the inlets of the water. Spread around the peninsula or on a flat rugged and refuge in times of attack. The covering high walls or forts were an important component of the towns of those times. Another essential element of the towns was the market which assumed a primary role in the economic life of the urban localities. The town, the fort and the market was separated from the forts in some cases. The openings of the gates and the drew bridge was the symbol of such a linkage.

The towns of the large and medium sized were market towns where trade and commerce played a predominating role. The exceptions to this nature of towns were some castles fortresses, politico-administrative centers and centers of great religious worship and pilgrimage. Nevertheless, the market was present universally in all urban places even in the small sized towns. But it had been assigned only a complimentary role in settlements other than the market towns. Erected on high altitude visible from a distance the fortress-towns presented a scenic beauty to a further view. The urban settlements conglomerated inside the high walls. According to the dimensions and plurality the towns were divided into different 'keris' or quarters of different classes and crafts with temples in the centers having however market as the hub of economic activities. The eighteenth century physic-social morphology of the towns grew further varied as the factories and quarters of the Europeans raised near the water-outlet to the sea and as the spires of churches neat and clean sprang up gradually pulling the nodal point in the direction.

The towns were the habitat of the elites who formed the societal core of the given culture wielding social power. The elite class composed of the ruling clique top officials the lords and their immediate retainers the high priest the intellectuals and the rich merchants. The commoners consisting of lower officials, priests, merchants, artisans, soldiers and other perched in between, Below this stratum, the service class and the wretched poor attending to the menial works had been dispersed out in a short distances from the towns.

The eighteenth century urban social matrix of the Karnataka western coast was woven of the local rulers, the deputies of the Sode Chiefs, the governors of the Bidanuru, commandants of the Sultans, the chief-collectors of revenue and customs-mostly Brahmanas, the Banajigas, the Konkans, the Moplas, Navayats, the Nair leaders, the chief priests and trustees of famous temple, the Jemncars, the Jains. The Christians, the Bunts, the Nadavas, the Mogeyeras, Billavas, Halepaikas, the Tiars and others. To this, new additions were made of a small coterie of European merchants, officials, factors and their families. Urban centers which were already of some considerable size and density now became more heterogeneous. But this increasing heterogeneity was not a sign of urbanization not even of urban growth.

In the beginnings of the eighteenth century, Karnataka west coast and its towns and fortresses were subjected to the political hegemony of the chiefs of Sode in the North upto Mirjan, and the Nayakas of Bidanur in the south. Both the powers were not only fighting mutually, but also against host of rivals, both native and foreign for their political survival and for maintaining their hold over the keys of economic power. Facing the odds from the Bijapuris and Mughals, allying with the Portuguese against the Marathas, picking up quarrel with in the same later, and playing the Chauth to the Peshwas, the chiefs of Sode pretended to be

independent till they were chased away by the armies of Haider. To the south of west coast under the Sodes, the Nayakas of Bidnur put up a better show of themselves by displacing Jain chiefs of Sode pretended to be independent till they were chased away by the armies of Haider. To the south of west coast subduing the Nair rajas of Kolattiri, resisting the Portuguese, Dutch, French and the English companies which had developed vital interest in the west coast for purposes of trade in spices and rice. Then came the lashes of Haider upon the two resulting in the whole of west coast coming under the strong rule of that great upstart for the first time. Haider of Mysore and his son Tippoo challenged the English.

The towns and forts of west coast were dragged into the vortex of wider Anglo-French rivalry with the English participating in full force and involvement which they had never exhibited so far in this part of the coast. Prestigious Mangalore became a scene of a major battle. Tippoo attempted to strengthen his hold over all the towns and forts of importance in west coast knowing that they would be a factor in determining his fate. Ultimately, after the fall of Tippoo in 1799 the west coast submitted to the rule of the company.

By the time west coast was lined fully to the colonial system of the British in the end of the eighteenth century, and a little later when that celebrated Englishman Francis Buchanan traversed across. Witnessing a pathetic view of the land, the urban locale from Shivesvar to Nilesvar was a scene of dark towns, demolished forts, and empty shops with impoverished merchants telling the harrowing story of their ruination. Of it, some towns had the audacity to defy the odds of time, others lingered on still throbbing in an anaemic state, but the rest had of relapsed into reality, Their galore and glory scribed in the accounts of the travellers, engraved on stones and plates belonged now to the obliviscene of the past. Such a dismal urban look was the compound result accrued over the centuries of the absence on the part of the rulers of any steady and constructive policy and political direction promoting urban growth.

Towns had developed during the days of the Vijayanagara Empire, in spite, as other powerful factors; positive could operate for their growth out-weighting the negative effects. The Sodes and more so the Nayakas constructed new and renovated old walls of the forts, perhaps for a military purpose, also with some constructive zeal; but, instances of such were stray and far between. Tippoo and Haider did excel their predecessor in this regard. More than all, the Sultans had a commercial policy and financial planning. They realized the importance of trade and towns, especially coastal in augmenting the resources of the kingdom. If Haider improved the lines of communication, Tippoo opened up three important forts of Bhatkal, Honnavar and Karwar. Tippoo's administration was stronger and he attempted to improve its efficiency by replacing corrupt officials by his own men to check graft. Mysore even in the second half of his rule was better and

happier than many of his neighbours. However, well intentioned and positive might be his policy decisions, they were taken during the short intervals of wars and as such could not be implemented sincerely further, they could not reach the towns of west coast lying away from the core of his kingdom: the berg could not be broken. The cord in his hand was not that strong as to lift the falling towns from the precipice. Things were slipping out of his control making him the man of circumstances rather than its master. A new situation had arisen all along the coasts of the country and in towns; new masters were prowling to become the ordinary of their future, and the west coast towns were only to join the stream.

The political curtain, economic forces had already begun to function which set the decaying urban trend west coast indicating the operation of certain negative forces, both indirect, and direct against the growth of towns. A large number of indigenous records and the accounts of the travelers, the reports of the officials. viz., of Fryer (1672-76), Gemelli Careri (1695), Alexander Hamilton (1720), Anquetil du Perron (1758), Forbes (1772), Parsons (1795), Thomas Munro (1799) and Francis Buchanan (1801) are aids in forming a picture of the urban scene of the period.

According to economic theory the villages can survive on the economy of subsistence, but the towns swell only on surplus. The surplus and the production of commodity are the critical factors of urbanization. Not being the primary producers, the towns are not the generators of agriculture wealth, and as such as they depend upon the flow of surplus from the hinterland. The size of the town is shaped by the quantity or volume of flow from the hinterland which is another determinant factor; any disturbances would naturally affect the towns. The plunder, piracy and loot of the Marathas, the heavy demands of the Sodes and the Nayakas he oppressive exactions of the Sultans was a common witness. The skulking stacks of robbers like Kumarapaikas, the unwise prohibitory orders coming out of the prejudices of Tippoo depleted the stream running behind the towns-side of Sode, of Bidanur and of west coast due to the ravages of the agents of the Peshwa.

The chiefs of Sode and Bidanuru to meet the chauth and other strains on their economy passed on the incidence upon their meek subjects. More articles were brought under the fists of taxation and the levy on land went on multiplying. The period of the Sultans were years of war or of preparation for wars which put stresses on the finances. West coast was looked upon as a fund from which money was enacted to meet the expenses of military operations in other quarters. Further, the suppression of Nairs by favouring the Moplas by Haider, harassment of Christians and prohibition on pepper vine cultivation fell heavily on agriculture. Munro reported that the demand on land was so heavy that agriculture which had lost scope for expansion under the Nayakas, crippled due to the extortions of the sultans. Further, prowlers like Kumarapaikas,

Halepaikas, Maratha free boater like Dhundia Wagh threw open the producers and carriers of articles to risks and damages. Under such circumstances, the stimuli for expansion of agriculture died down, the volume of flow was increasingly reduced and as a result this negative factor working indirectly diminished the size of the west coast towns.

A few negative factors which affected directly the towns was the numerous instances of assault on the ports, harbors, towns and forts of west coast by the piratical Marathas, rapacious Portuguese, and thunderous Tippoo to mention only a few, for political and military gain, for commercial advantage or for sheer loot. Shaken by such shocks, the towns during the recuperative days of interlude between the acts of barbarism struggled to raise again, the merchants to renew their trading operations and the craftsman to reopen their workshops.

## **Conclusion**

An obverse relation is there between the trade and the town. The merchants, the carriers of trade, are the props of the towns and their organization is the scepter of economic power. When trade suffered, it hit the town's hard acting as another direct negative factor. Besides, the system of trade, its nature and volume determines largely the characteristics of towns, their dimension and span of life. In west coast during the great days of the Vijayanagara Empire, the Jains were the chief merchants of the Tuluva and Haiga countries followed, of course, by others. It was an apical time of the merchants and craft guilds. Then came the Nayakas who inflicted a crushing blow upon the Jain chiefdoms of west coast. There after Jain population dwindled; Jain merchants lost their primeval hold over the trade; and towns of Jain of concentrates deteriorated. This created a chasm to fill in and an opportunity to seek. Though, there was no general decline of trade immediately, there was a shift in emphasis, change in the trade situation, confusion in political order, fluidity in economic system and flexibility in social structure. This was reflected in the urban locale of the time. The towns were struggling to adjust and carve a niche for themselves in such a period of flux. Off the shore, an unprecedented change was in motion due to the intervention of the Arab merchants.

The Arab monopoly in trade was challenged and the Arabs were being displaced by the Europeans. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and the French by entering into the world of trade made the situation tense and worse. From the shore reaching the port, harbors, towns and forts by the use of their superior vessels, guns and guts, the European traders had begun to command things for their gain. Many of the towns of west coast taking up trade and shop-keeping, a good number of Christian converts were flocking in towns, a new

class of merchant chiefs, Moplas, Navayats, even of rulers and lords and their agents that were interested in the lucrative trade.

Traditional urban economy had run its course, and the guilds had become a spent force, perhaps. The towns built on such a base were shaken; they were in need of fresh reinforcement which was to come from a different direction altogether and the late eighteenth century showed the direction signaling clearly. The strange foreigners who were in the receiving and earlier, by tact and skill, later, by use of force begin exacting trade concessions, favorable treaties and vast privileges.

The Portuguese bombarding the coastal towns to force Bidnur chief to confer concession upon them, Virammaji granting large trade privileges to the English in her fireman, Tippoo signing an unequal treaty with the British after his defeat were enough to show the direction towards which the trade and politics were moving. The grounds had become slippery for the merchants and rulers to hold on for long. It was a period of flux everywhere; the new masters were pulling the string from behind having the reins of control in their hands. A new situation had come and a new system was lurking to come upon which may be called 'pre-colonial' and the stage ready upon which the towns of Canara were to exhibit their role. It was a period of confusion and tension in politics and society. Especially the merchants had been brought down from their primary position to that of secondary. Henceforth, they were to be contended acting only as compradors of trade complementing colonialism. In such a situation, the towns of Canara having exhausted their reserve were waiting for new impulses for their qualitative change and growth. The finale came when Canara and its towns were absorbed in the madras Presidency by the Company by the end of the century.

At the outset it must be admitted that the charts and the diagrams based on them are full of imperfections, Hence the charts are not presented here: The literal symbols used to point out the size of the towns have no mathematical or quantitative accuracy or perfection as they are not based on any statistics; in fact no such statistics is available. They are the qualitative lumps or impressions gathered from the study of the towns on a broad time-scale with varying degrees of change at a given time. However, the quality is subject to change when there is the thrust of quantity or its recession. There are large sized towns, Medium sized towns and Small sized towns developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century these urban centres developed as cities and towns particularly with the influence of the trade and commerce activities in the west coast. They are Ankola, Gangavalli, Shiveswara, Sadashivagada, Karwara, Gokarna, Tadri, Kumta, Honnavara, Bhatkala, Bidanuru, Kundapura, Basruru, Barkuru, Udupi, Mangaluru, Ullala, Kumbala, Kasaragodu, Kanyapura, Chndragiri, Beacul, Hosadurga, Nileswara,



There are many limitations in the application of this. The limitations become quite apparent when comparison is made between the variables with symbols at a given time: it becomes more stupendous when cross comparison is made between along different variables at different time. Hence, it should be taken with reservation. Nevertheless, such an approach is worth attempting and would be rewarding in the study of urban history when we come nearer to the modern period.

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