



TOWNS, TRADERS AND CRAFTSPERSONS

HISTORY

In medieval period many new towns emerged and many old ones developed into administrative centres, temple towns, trade centres or port towns. Some of the rising Rajput clans established their own towns. The founding of towns continued during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Both Gujarat and Bengal being located near the seas and having developed import-export trade since ancient times, many new urban centres emerged. Gujarat had specialised in cotton production, spinning and weaving. The cotton would reach Bengal through the sea route along the coast within days. The trade transactions gave rise to the new towns in these two regions. Likely new towns emerged in the rest of the subcontinent for one or the another reason. Many of these towns were also centres of craft production. Some of them were administrative centres and/or temple towns.



Some important centres of trade and craft production in central and south India in medieval period

Administrative Centres

A thousand years ago Thanjavur was an administrative centre, temple town, centre for craft production and a trading centre as well. Thanjavur was the capital of Cholas at that time. This town is situated near the perennial river Kaveri in the south. Rajarajaeshwara temple was built

by king Rajaraja Chola. Inside the temple is a massive *Shiva linga*. The name of its architect, Kunjaramallan Rajaraja Perunthachchan is carved on the temple wall. Besides the temples, there are palaces. The kings held courts in the *mandapas* (pavilions) of these palaces. The weavers, called Saliya produced fine cottons for the kings and nobles and coarse cotton for the masses. Some distance away at Svamimalai the *sthapatis* (sculptors) made exquisite bronze idols and tall, ornamental bell metal lamps. Bronze is an alloy containing copper and tin. Bell metal contains a greater proportion of tin than other kinds of bronze. This produces a bell-like sound on striking with a wooden stick. Thanjavur was also a trading centre for grain, spices, cloth and jewellery.

Temple Towns and Pilgrimage Centres

Magnificent temples were source of great attraction. People from far and wide came to visit them. These great temples were often central to the economy and society. The kings gave temples grants of land and money to carry out elaborate rituals, feed pilgrims and priests and celebrate festivals. The crowds of pilgrims too donated money and jewellery to the temples. Gradually a large number of priests, other workers, artisans, traders, etc. settled near the temples. Thus, grew the temple towns. Important temple towns in the medieval period were Thanjavur, Kanchipuram and Madurai in Tamil Nadu, Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, Somnath in Gujarat and Bhillasvamin (Bhilsa or Vidisha) in Madhya Pradesh.

Ajmer was the capital of the Chauhan kings in the twelfth century. A Sufi saint, Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, also settled there in the twelfth century. Thus, it became a pilgrimage centre. The lake and Brahma temple at Pushkar near Ajmer is also a pilgrimage centre from ancient times.

Some places which were pilgrimage centres from the ancient times also slowly developed into towns. For example, Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu) and Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh).

Trade in Small Towns

Many large villages turned into small towns. They usually had a wholesale market called *mandapika* or *mandi*. Nearby villagers brought their produce to sell there. Many traders came from far and near to these towns to buy local articles and sell products of distant places like horses, betel nut, spices, saffron, camphor and salt. The towns had also retail markets called *hatta* or *haat*, lined with shops of the traders. Different kinds of artisans had their workshops usually in different streets such as smiths, stone masons, potters, oil pressers, sugar makers, toddy makers, etc. Taxes from traders and artisans were collected in kind or in cash by the *samanta* or in later times a *zamindar*. These tax collectors lived in a fortified palace in or near these towns. Sometimes, the right to collect taxes was donated to the local temples. Taxes were levied on almost everything brought for selling in the town.



A bronze statue of Krishna subduing the serpent demon Kaliya.

Traders, Big and Small

Big traders or small traders travelled in caravans and formed associations or guilds for negotiation with the direct customers, often the kings or the traders of the other countries. From the eighth century Manigramam and Navadesi guilds traded within the peninsula and with South-east Asia and China. Chettiars of the south, Marwari Oswals of Rajasthan, Hindu Baniyas and Muslim Bohras of Gujarat were the main trading groups. From the west coast they travelled upto the ports of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and East Africa. From the east coast they travelled upto the ports of south-east Asia and China. They sold textiles and spices in these ports. In return journey they brought gold and ivory from Africa and silver, tin, Chinese blue pottery and spices from South-east Asia and China.

Similarly, the foreign traders travelled to the subcontinent. Particularly the Arab, Persian, Jewish, Syrian and even Chinese reached the towns on the west coast.

Indian spices (pepper, dried ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, etc.) and cloth were purchased by Italian traders at Red Sea ports. From there it reached Europe at higher prices. The spices became an important part of European cooking and cotton cloth a part of European dress. This attracted the European traders to India.

Crafts in Towns

The craftspersons like masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, bronze smiths, and goldsmiths were essential to the building of temples, palaces, other big buildings and also tanks and reservoirs. These craftspersons were called, as a whole, Panchalas or Vishwakarmas. The craftspersons of Bidar (south India) were so famed for their inlay work in copper and silver that it came to be called Bidri. Weavers such as the Saliyar or Kaikkolars became prosperous who donated to the temples.

The Town of Kabul

Kabul is a big town of present-day Afghanistan. From sixteenth century it became important politically and commercially. Kabul and Qandahar were linked to the famous Silk Route. Besides, thousands of horses were sold annually in Kabul. Slaves were also sold here. From Kabul dried fruits, dates, carpets, silks were carried on camels to the subcontinent and elsewhere.

Case Study : Hampi – Architecture, Trade and Festivals

Hampi was a well-fortified city and capital of the Vijayanagar empire in the south. It was located in the Krishana-Tungabhadra basin. Vijayanagar was founded in 1336. It became the centre of political activity as well as conflict between Bahmani Sultanate and Vijayanagar Kingdom.

No mortar or cementing agent was used in the construction of the surrounding walls of the city. The stones were wedged together just by



A 17th century Candle stand made of brass with overlay.

interlocking. Many foreign travellers visited Vijayanagar Empire in the sixteenth century. They all mention about the grandeur and splendour of the city. The buildings in the Royal complex had splendid arches, domes and pillared halls with niches for holding sculptures.



Watch tower and broken wall of the fort city Hampi

Hampi was a famous commercial centre in the fifteenth-sixteenth century. Moors (Muslim merchants), Chettis (south Indian native merchants) and agents of European traders such as the Portuguese thronged the markets of Hampi. The Portuguese visitor Domingo Paes also narrates the richness of the city. He found rubies, diamonds, emeralds and pearls and many types of clothes in the markets of Hampi. He says that the city possessed "every sort of thing there is on earth that you may wish to buy."



The Vijayanagar kings had built many temples, gateways, tanks, wells and other structures in the city. Temples were hubs of cultural activities. *Devadasis* (temple dancers) performed before the deity, royalty and public in the many-pillared halls in the Virupaksha (a form of Shiva) temple. The Mahanavami festival (Navaratri of today) was celebrated with most pomp and show. The king used to seat on a raised platform and watch the dances and wrestling bouts.

Hampi was ruined after the defeat of Vijayanagar kingdom in 1565 by the combined attack of five small kingdoms into which Bahmani Sultanate had split — the Sultans of Golconda, Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, Berar and Bidar. They burnt most of the monuments including temples.

Case Study : Surat—A Gateway to the West

The port city of Surat, located on the west coast was the gateway for the trade with West Asia via the Gulf of Ormuz. During the Mughal rule, it achieved its prominence and gradually eclipsed Cambay (present day Khambat) as the major port of Western India. In the seventeenth century the Portuguese, Dutch and English had their factories and warehouses at Surat. On average a hundred ships of different countries could be found at the port at any time.



Patola silk



Jewelled furniture of Mughal period



The textiles of Surat were famous for their gold lace borders (*Zari*) and had a market in West Asia, Africa and Europe. It also became famous for its *Patola silk*. The silk cloth from Patan and Ahmedabad and other decorative cottons were dyed in brilliant colours using natural vegetable dyes. These were much sought after by the royalty and nobles in *Malaysia* and Indonesia. The Kathiawad seths or mahajans (money changers) had huge banking houses at Surat. Their *hundis* were honoured (paid) in the far off markets of Cairo in Egypt, Basra in Iraq and Antwerp in Belgium. It means the money deposited with the *seth* at Surat could be claimed at distant places by presenting the record of the deposit (*hundi*).

Surat began to decline towards the end of the seventeenth century. Decline of the Mughal empire resulted in the loss of demand and productivity. Portuguese took the control over sea routes. The English East India Company shifted its headquarters to Bombay (present-day Mumbai) which became a bustling commercial centre. Surat could not compete with Bombay.

Today, Surat is again a big commercial centre particularly in textiles and diamonds.

Case Study : Masulipatnam — Convenience of Anchoring

Masulipatnam or Machhliapatnam (fish port town) lay on the delta of the river Krishna. It was first a poor fisher town. Afterwards, the convenience of the **road** (a place where ships can anchor) made it a residence for merchants. It had risen from a small fishing town and carpet weaving centre. Later it had thriving trade in painted textiles known as Kalamkari textiles. The dyers used mostly vegetable dyes with the help of a 'Kalam' (pen). This art had attracted the western traders and Masulipatnam had achieved a great reputation for the permanency and brightness of these dyes. The British and the Dutch had set up trading **emporiums** (selling showrooms from diverse production centres) in Indonesia on the strength of the textile received from Masulipatnam. These textiles were in great demand with the royalty and nobility in Indonesia. Thus, Masulipatnam was a centre of intense commercial activity in the seventeenth century.

Masulipatnam became the most important port on the Andhra coast. The fort at Masulipatnam was built by the Dutch. Fierce competition among various trading groups—the Golconda nobles, Persian merchants, Telugu Komati Chettis and European traders made the city popular and prosperous.

Masulipatnam was a part of the Golconda kingdom. In 1686-1687 Aurangzeb annexed Golconda. Now the trade was mostly in the hands of the Persian merchants. This caused the European companies to look for alternatives. The English East India company established its own trade centres at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Consequent to the decline of Mughal empire, the Persian merchants had also begun to move out of the



Medieval view of Masulipatnam

port town. Thus Masulipatnam declined in the course of the eighteenth century. It is today just a little town, ruined and neglected.

The Changing Fortunes of the Towns

Hampi, Surat and Masulipatnam declined for various reasons. Similarly, Murshidabad (W. Bengal), a centre of silks and capital of Bengal in 1704 declined in the course of the century. This was because the weavers had to face the competition from cheap mill-made cloth imported from England, Thanjavur also shrank in size and importance over the centuries. However, some towns like Ahmedabad (Gujarat) went on to become major commercial cities. After independence, Surat again developed into a famous trade centre.

New Towns and Traders

Initially great Indian traders like Mulla Abdul Gafur and Virji Vora owned a large number of ships. They competed with the European companies which used their naval power to gain control of the sea trade. In the struggle of English, Dutch and French for commercial and political interests in the subcontinent, the English came out to be the most successful.



Lord Krishna with his consort Radha in Kalamkari or 'pen work'

With the export of textiles, the crafts of spinning, weaving, bleaching, dyeing, etc. expanded. Many people had engaged in the production of textiles. But the policy of the European companies forced the craftspersons only to weave for them against advance money. They had to weave the designs supplied to them by the company agents. In the new cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, the black skinned native traders and craftspersons were confined to a part of the city called 'Black Town'. The white rulers occupied the superior residencies in the forts.

In Other Parts of the World

Indian spices and textiles reached the European markets at very heavy prices through the Arab and Italian traders via Red Sea routes. The Arabs ruled the sea trade and the Italians port trade. In the fifteenth century European sailors tried to find out an alternative route to reach the Indian subcontinent.

On the assumption that the earth was round, Christopher Columbus, an Italian, sailed

west-wards across the Atlantic ocean to find a route to India. He landed in West Indies in 1492. The West Indies got their name because of the above confusion. As Columbus was financed by Spain, he was followed by sailors and conquerors from Spain and later from Portugal. They occupied large parts of the central and South America forcefully.

Vasco da Gama was a Portuguese sailor. To reach India he sailed across the Atlantic to the African coast, went round it, crossing over to the Indian ocean. It took one year to reach Calicut at the south coast of India in 1498. He was followed by English, Dutch and French sailors.



Key Words

- » Mandapas : pavilions
- » Sthapati : sculptor
- » Devadasi : temple dancer
- » Mandapika : wholesale market
- » Hatta : retail market
- » Zari : gold lace borders
- » Hundi : the record of the deposit
- » Kalam : pen
- » Black Town : part of a city for the black skinned craftsmen and traders.

SUMMARY

- ▶ In medieval period many new towns emerged and many old ones developed into administrative centres, temple towns, trade centres or port towns.
- ▶ A thousand years ago Thanjavur was an administrative centre, temple town, centre for craft production and a trading centre.
- ▶ The kings gave temples grants of land and money to carry out elaborate rituals, feed pilgrims and priests and celebrate festivals.
- ▶ Important temple towns in the medieval period were Thanjavur, Kanchipuram and Madurai in Tamil Nadu, Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, Somnath in Gujarat and Bhilashvamin in Madhya Pradesh.
- ▶ Many large villages turned into small towns having wholesale and retail markets.
- ▶ From the west coast Indian traders travelled upto the ports of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and East Africa. From the east coast they travelled upto the ports of south-east Asia and China.
- ▶ Kabul (Afghanistan) was famous for the trade of horses and silks (being at the Silk Route).

Exercise Time

A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. A port town on the West Coast

a. Thanjavur	b. Masulipatnam	c. Surat	d. Madras
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2. One thousand years ago, the capital of Cholas was

a. Thanjavur	b. Surat	c. Kanchipuram	d. Madurai
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3. Copper and tin are melt together to make an alloy called


a. Brass	b. Bronze	c. Steel	d. None of these
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4. Kabul was famous for the trade of silk and

a. Fruits	b. Horses	c. Camels	d. None of these
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5. It was famous for zari work

a. Surat	b. Hampi	c. Masulipatnam	d. Thanjavur
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B. Fill in the blanks :

1. Hampi was the capital of the _____ empire.
2. The Rajarajeshvara temple was built in _____.
3. The Dutch established a settlement at _____ in Andhra Pradesh.

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- The cotton reached from Gujarat to _____ through the sea route.
 - Masulipatnam is situated on the _____ coast of India.

C. Match the Following :

- | | |
|--------------|----------------------|
| Hampi | a. West Coast |
| Masulipatnam | b. Vijayanagar |
| Surat | c. near Kaveri river |
| Thanjavur | d. Afghanistan |
| Kabul | e. East Coast |

D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :

- Merchants preferred to travel individually rather than in caravans.
- Kabul was a major centre for trade in elephants.
- Surat was an important trading port on the West Coast.
- Domingo Paes, the Portuguese visitor had visited Vijayanagar kingdom.
- Ajmer was the capital of Chauhan kings in the twelfth century.

E. Answer in one word or one phrase :

- Where is Hampi located ?
- What were the retail markets called in small towns ?
- Which port city was famous for kalamkari textiles ?
- Which town was centre for making bronze and bell metal craft ?
- Name two south Indian guilds of traders.

F. Answer these questions briefly :

- Why do you think towns grew around temples ?
- What was the position of Thanjavur town one thousand years ago ?
- Describe a small town as a place of trading.
- What was the difference in the routes adopted by Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama ?
- Why did people from distant lands visit Surat ?

G. Answer these questions in detail :

- Which business groups traded from west and east coast, to which countries and in which articles ?
- Discuss the development of the temple towns and pilgrimage centres.
- State the importance of Hampi, Masulipatnam and Surat during medieval period. How did they decline in importance in later years ?

PROJECT WORK

- Find out about a pilgrimage centre. Why do people go there ? What do they do there ? Are there any shops in the area ? What is bought and sold there ? Find out from where these articles come there.
- Name five different functions of any five towns in the medieval period.