

INDIA'S FOREIGN TRADE DURING 16th AND 17th CENTURY: A HISTORICAL STUDY
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Abstract:

During the 16th and 17th Centuries the trade increased many fold in India. The shipping industry's progress played a significant role in it. The topographical conditions of India also played an important part in it. India's long coastline and its connectivity with south-east Asian nations from the Coromandel Coast provided ideal conditions for European powers to do trade. The Europeans were in search of spices got attracted towards the East. India's trade relations with Europe became friendlier in the 17th century. India's imports consisted of three categories- precious metals & stones, raw materials and luxuries items like spices & perfumes. Later the new items traded with the Europeans were Indigo, cotton, saltpetre, lac, rice, sugar, raw silk etc.

Keywords: *Shipping Industries, Topographical, Coromandel Coast, Spices, Indigo, Cotton.*



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Introduction:

With the booming of naval activities on the Indian coast, India's trade relations with Europeans and others nations grew. Growth and development of shipping industry played an important role in growth of commercial activities. India's long coast line, its connectivity with south-east Asian nations from Coromandel Coast provided ideal condition for European powers who were in search of spices got attracted towards the East. Growing cottage industries especially textile industry in 16th and 17th century was also a prominent factor in growth of foreign trade. Rising demand of Indian cotton textile in Europe resulted in the growth of more trade and India became chief textile exporter. In this way foreign trade of India thrived in this stage due to numerous reasons.

Trade Routes:

The geographical location of India projecting southwards from the centre of Asia to the Indian Ocean influenced her history and also resolute the directions of her oceanic trade. India had traditional commercial contact with other ports of Asia, Africa and even Europe. Vasco-de-Gamma rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached Calicut in 1498. It started a new trade history. A century later came the Dutch, the English the French, the Danes and the others to trade with India. India's trade relations with Europe became friendlier in the 17th century than before.

A network of trade routes connected India with Asia, Africa and Europe. The two routes westwards through Kabul and Qandahar not only carried Indian merchandise to foreign countries but also brought foreign goods to India. The flow of traffic was regulated and irregular partially because the goods were transported on pack animals like oxen, horse and camels.

Trade with European Powers:

The arrival of the Portugal in 1498 in Malabar establishment of direct trade with Europeans. In the 16th century both the Muslim and the Portuguese came to dominate the commercial state of affairs. Besides regional motivations the Portuguese determined to dominate the eastern seas started to regulate and secure the eastern trade. The Muslims in



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India accustomed themselves to the situation in the areas of trade and permitted other traders of Bengal, Gujarat and Coromandal to have space and accompany those on their own ships.

In the 17th century The United East India Company of the Netherland first attempted to ascent their claims to a monopoly in the spice trade. The Dutch had to face the competition from the English East India Company. For both companies the reign of Jahangir was a period of experimentation and assessment of the needs and potential laities of this new trade. Buy 1625 they established the trade in indigo. Surat grew to be the chief centre of the European trade. However the dreadful Gujarat famine of 1630-32 led them to pursue alternate fields. By 1650 the Dutch and the English firmly established themselves in all the chief markets of the Indian coast from Sindh area to Bengal. In future the English overthrew all her rivals and came to control India's trade with Europeans.

Trading Items:

In India the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish merchants worked in cooperation in trading activities. The Red Sea developed as a chief overseas market of India. The trade between Asiatic and African countries included precious metals, spices and luxury goods. But in the 16th to 17th century the cotton goods of India constituted the greatest treasured exports in this trade. On the Coromandel Coast the local Telegu merchants carried on a hurried trade with several ships exporting cotton cloths of Golkonda, cotton thread, iron, steel and agricultural goods. They also imported horses from Arabia. These conditions also determined to a great extent the nature of India's demand for imports from the coast of Asian. There were items in demand such as fine spices like cloves, nutmeg and much from Indonesia and horses and rosewater from West Asia. The other items in demand included rubies and other precious stones from Burma as well as metals both precious and non-precious.

India's imports: India's imports during the 16th and 17th centuries were:

- The precious metals and horses. Ornaments display and or hording. Bullion was needed for coinage. Good horses needed for the army and display came from Arabia and Iraq-Persia.
- The Raw materials included raw silk (from China) for Gujarat Silk winding. Metals e.g. Copper, tin (from Malay) Zinc, lead and quicksilver (from Lisbon via Red Sea) and ivory (from East Africa) Coral amber and dye woods (from Persian Gulf) other goods for artistic handicrafts.
- Luxuries or fancy goods for the king and the upper classes included (i) all sorts of precious stones (from Archipelago) and pearls (from Ceylon), (ii) Textiles, silks, woolens (broad cloth) Velvets and brocades (iii) Spices (iv) Perfumes (and rose water) (v) Fruits (vi) Drugs (vii) China goods (fine Chinese porcelain highly prized spirits), (viii) African slaves (ix) rarities or novelties mirrors glassware including colored glass from Venice.

India's Exports: In the 16th century the principal exports from India were as follows:

- Textile's fabrics including calicoes Muslims and fancy goods formed the major item of export throughout the 16th and 18th centuries. These were indispensable to Asia. While the finer varieties of Bengal and the east coast were needed for the aristocrats of Asia the coarser and cheaper ones of Gujarat weavers clothed the masses in South Asia, Indonesia and the Red Sea.
- Common food articles-rice, wheat, pulses, oils surplus grain went from Bengal, Orissa and the Konkan Coast north of Malabar to cities like Malacca, Hormuz and Aden. Coconut products and some minor spices like ginger, Cardamom, turmeric, nutmegs etc. All these were cheap necessities and not luxuries and all even including Bengal sugar on the border line generally illustrated bulk trading.



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- Raw silk from Bengal and cotton yarn or raw cotton from Gujarat

The Dutch and the English companies effected a change in the direction of the textile's exports in the 17th century. At first, they exported the piece-goods of Coromandal and Gujarat to Indonesia but later they extended their import into Europe. Besides pepper and spices which were older exports, the new items to Europe was Indigo.

Demand for a variety of Indian silk goods and cotton goods grew in Europe. Cotton yam however went to Europe in large quantities for manufacture of wicks. In the second half of the 17th century the principal items of India's direct trade with Europe were Madras Calicoes, Bihar Saltpetre, Bengal silk and Bengal sugar.

The Arrival of the Dutch and the English overwhelmingly affected Indian trade and industry. Not only did they established a new direct trade between India and Western Europe but they also modified the course of the old established trade of India with other ports of Asia and the east coast of Africa.

There was a demand among the rich classes in India for costly European novelties, called toys. It was not very extensive but it was the principal commercial necessity at that time. Foreigners used to get political and commercial privileges by presenting 'toys' to the authorities.

Conclusion:

Growth and development of shipping industry played an important role in growth of commercial activities. By 1625 A.D. Surat became the principal port for Europe. The East coast was contributing little and Bengal was still unknown to European buyers. After the famine of 1630-37 many parts of India including Bengal and Orissa were tapped a fresh to supplement inadequate supplies. After 1650 the eastern coast took a prominent place in European trade as the trade of Gujarat declined then on account of the West Indies competition and unfavourable political conditions due to the rise of the Marathas and in the 18th century for political disorders in India and Persia, Bengal became commercially more important. In the absence of adequate data it is difficult to arrive at any definite numerical assessment of the volume and value of Indo-European trade, its imports and exports.

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