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Dubhashi and the Colonial Port in Madras Presidency

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Language/s and Professions of Natives in British Ports

With no railroad yet ready to connect Indian towns, European traders had to depend on boats to receive and deliver their goods as well as to export the goods they managed to produce with the help of natives. Their language competence in local idioms was not noteworthy. But, wisely, they found a way out from this difficult communication situation.

Dubhashi is the general term that was used among south Indians to refer to the interpreters who helped European traders with their multilingual skills. *Dubhashi* is also a last name of certain castes in north India. Google search for the term *Dubhashi* actually brings out a large number of individuals with *Dubhashi* as their last or surname.

Dubhashi literally means one who possesses two languages, a bilingual. In the history of modern Tamilnadu, the name of Anandarangam Pillai (b. 1709) is mentioned with praise for his role as a *Dubhashi*, an interpreter of French and English and several Indian languages, who was consultant to Dupleix (Joseph Francois Dupleix, the Governor of Pondicherry between 1742 and 1754).

Languages around the Port

Indian ports have always been multilingual in character. Ancient Tamil literature, written about 2000 years ago, talk about several ports in Tamilnadu, all of which received foreigners speaking a variety of languages. While there is no mention about the linguistic composition of the local populace, ancient grammars such as *Tolkaappiyam* make references to territories and boundaries that speak of languages other than Tamil. In addition, some of the goods described as commodities sold in the ports clearly reveal that these goods must have come from outside Tamilnadu.

Situation in the newly emerging port of Madras or Chenna Pattanam was no different. Moreover, Madras or Chenna Pattanam was clearly in a region that was adjacent to the Telugu speaking area.

Religious Composition

Strangely, the Europeans were more focused on the religious diversity of the population they encountered in India. Linguistic diversity of the population was noted, but not taken into account in any serious manner for political purposes. As Thirumalai points out, language diversity was recognized as an important political policy only when the British tried to avoid the partition of India during the visit of the British Cabinet Delegation in 1946 (http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2006/constituentassembly1.html). On the other hand, Christian missionaries seemed to have always taken linguistic diversity as an essential element of their missionary work, even as they were interested in religious conversion.

The largest mercantile group which resided in the town of Madrasapatnam included the Hindu merchants of coast. The Hindu merchants came from two important caste groups: Komatis and Chetties, most of them being the migrants from northern Coromandel or from the hinterland. These merchants were involved in coastal trading, wholesaling and retailing, brokerage, banking and shroffings.[1]

The Komatis belonged to the right hand caste division and dominated the textile trade mainly as brokers and suppliers of cloth from the hinterland to the port. Like in the northern coast, the Komatis of Madrasapatnam too had established direct links with the weaving villages. They were a highly mobile group and operated from the hinterland and ports and some of their individual operations extended to the whole Coromandel.

The main competition for Komatis came from another Telugu speaking caste group, the Chetties. The Chetties belonged to the left hand division and concentrated only in the northern and central coasts. Apart from Komatis and Chetties, Balijas who belonged to the right hand castes, dominated the coastal trade and oceanic trade. They were also

[1] . S. Arasaratnam, *Merchants Companies and Commerce,* p. 215

active in the politics of the coastal region, especially during the first half of the seventeenth century

In general, one found a mix of traditional trading castes from both Telugu and Tamil territories dominating the Indian side of port trading.

Language and Gender Distribution among the General Population

The population of Madras during the final decades of colonial rule was less male dominated and less heterogeneous than that of Bombay or Calcutta. The sex ratio in 1901 was approximately 102 males to 100 females.

Tamil, which was spoken by 63 percent of the population, was the majority language in all census divisions of the city; Telugu, accounting for 21 percent of the population, was the second language of the city. English was spoken by only 3 percent of the population. Native-born persons accounted for 68 percent of the city inhabitants in 1901; 28 percent came from other places in the province of Madras; and less than 4 percent was born elsewhere in India or abroad.[2]

English continued to be spoken by a small minority, perhaps literate to some extent, especially those who maintained the accounts books, and prepared written documents. Madras was well known for its "Butler English," a sort of pidgin that mixed Tamil and English in some interesting ways. I believe that this "English" is mentioned in the writings of several East India Company recordings, including the writings of Lord Macaulay (personal communication with Dr. M. S. Thirumalai).

Origin of Metropolitan Cities in British India- Founding of Madras

Even in the 1st century A.D., Sopatma or Su-patana ('fair town'), according to *Periplus*, was "a good port and mart commercially connected with the countries of the entire east coast and also with the Gangetic area and Chryse...".[1] The 'fair town' has been identified as modern Madras and Chryse refers to Suvarnabhumi or Sumatra. That establishes the antiquity of the port.

After that reference, we hear very little of the town till in 1639 Cogan and Day are said to have founded a trading settlement on the site of a small fishing village called Cennapatnam. It is difficult to say at this stage if Sopatma and Chennapatnam were the same or next door neighbours, or entirely different.[2]

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[2]. Meera Kosambi and John E. Brush. Three Colonial Port Cities In India**,** *Geographical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Jan., 1988), pp. 32-47

Yet the origins of the three metropolitan cities – Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras – date long before 1757, the date when the British Empire was founded. These colonial port cities began as modest trading outposts of the East India Company. Madras was founded in 1640, Bombay ceded to the English by the Portuguese in 1664, and Calcutta established in 1690.[3]

Pre-European Madras

Before the coming of the British, Madrasapatam was an insignificant town on the Coromandel Coast.[4] But Madrasapatam was already a cloth producing center when the East India Company came in search of cotton goods that could be traded in Bantam, Java, for cloves, spices, and nutmeg that brought such a good price in England.[5]

The growth of Madras is a remarkable testimony to British enterprise, energy, and perseverance, and also to Indian appreciation of the newcomers and of their methods; and it is a matter of satisfaction that many illustrious Indians have played an energetic and conspicuous part in the development of the city and the promotion of its welfare.[6]

Madras City, founded in the mid-seventeenth century, was the earliest colonial port city established by the British in India. Like the other port cities of Asia which were the creation of European powers, Madras functioned primarily as a base for overseas trade.[7] However, by the middle of the century, Madras City, with its own hinterland, functioned as the capital for the whole of South India.[8]

The late nineteenth century was an important period in the history of India's colonial port cities: it was during this time that Madras, Bombay and Calcutta began to take on a visibly urban form. After 1858 when the British Government assumed full administrative control over its colony from the East India Trading Company, municipal institutions in the three Presidency capitals were granted effective powers of taxation, and for the first time were able systematically to provide urban facilities such as hospitals, burial and burning grounds, markets, housing and transport.

Madras particularly benefited from its new urban status for in the course of the nineteenth century the administrative offices of the Madras Government, and the major banking and commercial establishments of South India were located in the city, as were the principal educational institutions. Voluntary associations of a political, social and religious nature were also founded in Madras. This was a time when the city assumed a larger role as a distribution center for goods and services throughout the South; when innumerable buildings were erected to give the city a new urban image; and when plans were made for constructing a harbor, and for laying railway lines to link Madras with its hinterland and the other major cities of India.[9]

A Base for Ready-made Cloth Export

However, Madras was established as a base for the export of ready-made cloth to a European market, and its initial settlement patterns were controlled by the British. Merchants and dubashes (interpreters) were given permission to settle on land adjacent to the Fort (St. George) and White Town, the European enclave. Their residential neighborhoods were bordered on the north by weavers and dyers of cloth, who were at a lower economic level and thus lived further away from the Europeans; towards the limits of the settlement were the food processors (the fishermen, butchers, bakers, milk suppliers, oil-mongers); and the boatmen, potters, barbers and others who serviced the European and indigenous communities.[10]

By 1688, Madras town had grown to such an extent that it was incorporated by Royal Charter of the East India Company. At this time three distinct areas of the town were recognizable: The Inner Fort, containing the Factory House; the Outer Fort, and the European Quarter or White Town; and Black Town to the north of the Fort, marked by temples, a mosque and bazaars.16 Although there are discrepancies in population figures for early Madras, the most reliable estimate places the population in 1687 at about 50,000, "and even this is an immense number to be collected in forty-seven years in connection with a trade that never at that period amounted to more than six ships per annum".[11]

Ever wondered what made the British to turn a fishing village called Chennapatnam into the metropolis of Madras? What is the reason for Chennai to be one of the four largest cities in the country? Any idea about why Chennai became the capital of Tamilnadu? The only answer for all the above questions is the sea port, which helped history to dock in.

Built on Trade

It is quite imperative that the city of Madras was built on her trade. It was a trading settlement that Francis Day founded in 1639. On the site of the little fishing village; the East India Company had no interest whatever in anything else. When in the nineteenth century her trade declined, her importance sank to nothing. As efforts were made to improve her shipping accommodation, her trade began to return and the withered beldame to revive.[12] The more the harbour grew, the more trade and prosperity returned, and for this reason the history of the Port is a vital part of the history of Madras and also the Presidency for more than three hundred and sixty years.

The success of Madraspatnam as a trading settlement soon made it the chief port of the English in India. On September 24, 1641, it became the chief factory of the English on the East Coast. Commercial success came despite the settlement not being a port.[13]

Port Activities in Madraspatnam

Whenever a ship arrived at Madraspatnam, it caused great excitement, everybody thronging the beach to watch the ship lying at anchor in Madras Roads, a mile or more from the Fort; and in front of it was nothing but an angry surf and a narrow strip of beach that could be reached only by local rowboats called *masula*-s. The journey to shore and back was fraught with danger.[14]

The first offices of this 'harbour' and its godowns were in Fort St. George, but by the end of the 18th Century, trade had outgrown die Fort. The Governor, the second Lord Clive, in 1798 moved the Sea Customer out of the Fort, first of all to temporary huts on the beach, and then to the Paddy Godown on the northeast beach that had once been a French prison. The Custom House is even today on this site.[15]

It was the Madras Chamber of Commerce (now the Madras Chamber of Commerce and Industry), born 170 years ago (1836) on September 29, that first pressed for a harbour for Madras, though Warren Hastings did moot the thought in 1770. The earliest proposal the Chamber backed was by a French engineer in 1845, but nothing came of its endorsement. The first definite proposal for a harbour at Madras emanated from the Madras Chamber of Commerce. In a resolution dated 31st July 1868, the Chamber requested the Government to take up actively the proposals for the construction of a harbour.[16]

A Harbour for Madras

However, in 1861, a pier was built, but storms in June 1868 and May 1872 made it inoperative.[17] The idea of a harbour for Madras was first suggested by Warren Hastings, Export Warehouse keeper and Second in Council in Madras in 1770. He wrote to his brother-in-law in Britain asking for help with his idea for a pier for Madras. But with Hastings being transferred to Calcutta - and on his way to becoming the first Governor-General of India - nothing came of these efforts.[18]

In 1771, Capt. George Baker who had retired as Master Attendant in 1762 wrote to the Court of Directors suggesting a structure that would deliver water to the ships in the Roads. Next, in 1782, Alexander Davidson, a Civil Servant and a member of the Council, revived the views of Hastings and Baker when he wrote to the Council, "The grand Object at Madras ought...to be a Pier, the building of which is said to be very practicable...A permanent Pier...if by Encouragement could be effected, Fort St. George would, undoubtedly, become the greatest Port of delivery in the East Indies". Again nothing happened.[19]

Captain William Lennon of the Madras Engineers in 1798 once again revived thinking on the subject. He offered Government a scheme, which, he stated, he would complete in three years and for which he would raise the funds.[20]

The earliest proposal made to the Chamber after it pressed for the development of a harbour for Madras was in 1845 by M. Piron, a French engineer. It was finally resolved to carry out the plan by means of a Company which was formed with a capital of Rs.4 lakhs. In 1857 M/s. Saunders and Mitchell proposed to the court of Directors to erect an Iron screw Pile Pier at Madras at a cost of £ 95,000.

The proposal was referred to the Madras Government for consideration of a committee in which the chamber was represented. The want of such a pier was urgently felt more than ever by all parties connected with the trade and Port of Madras in consequence of the most unsatisfactory conditions of the Harbour. On 17th December, 1857 the first pile of the pier was screwed down.[21]

After 1857

But in 1857, the scenario changed. The First War of Independence (Sepoy Munity) was over. The storm of mutiny may have raised only a couple of ripples in Madras, as H.H. Dodwell pointed out, but the consequences were far-reaching for India. The Crown took over the business of governance in India from the East India Company in 1858. And the era of the Raj began.[22]

In the presidency of Madras, however, the transfer of the Government of India from the Company to the crown evoked no disturbance.

On the 16th December 1861, the construction of the pier was completed and was thrown open to traffic. In a few years this pier also was found to be inadequate for the increasing amount of cargo to be handled which rose to 3,04,000 tons valued at Rs.3 crores by 1868.[23]

On the 6th June 1868, during a storm, the French barge Saint Bernard of 359 tons fouled the central part of the pier, after heavy surf. The Piles began to give way and the surf which became very violent drove her completely through the Pier making a gap of 200-250 feet on the north side of which she sunk. The opening on the South side extended from the 48th to the 73rd Pile.[24]

This serious accident made the Government concurred on the need for a safe anchorage and appointed a committee to study the whole issue. Patrick Macfadyen of Arbuthnot & Co., later to die in disgrace, represented the Chamber.[25]

The committee recommended, on the principle of the Plymouth Harbour breakwater, a detached structure of rough stone to be placed parallel to and at a distance of 3600 feet from the beach. The length of the breakwater was to be 6000 feet and its ends were to be slightly splayed. The committee felt that this type of construction would have no effect on siltation. That it would leave a depth of about 7 fathoms at low water. Unfortunately, a

member of the committee gave a minute of dissent, saying that a closed harbour was the only answer. Whereupon the Government of India sought expert assistance from London and an engineer from Britain, George Robertson, arrived in Madras on January 14, 1871. He examined the site and recommended in April that year that a breakwater was a better solution than an enclosed harbour.[26]

Meanwhile, the Chamber succeeded in persuading the British Government and the Indian Government to share the cost of the Hydrographic Office set up in 1871 to survey the coasts and update the charts - a work of permanent utility to the ship-owners, underwriters and navigators. More significantly, this was a harbinger of things to come, namely, the two governments contributing together, as suggested by the Chamber, to make a port a reality.[27]

The committee's report was circulated among experts and in 1872 the problem was referred to William Parkes (then busy with the construction of Karachi Harbour). Parkes was a civil engineer with earlier experience in harbour construction in London. After a detailed study of the effect of cyclones and using his experience in Karachi, he suggested that the cost of construction could be reduced by creating walls of concrete blocks that would rest vertically on a rubble mound instead of the suggestion by the committee of a rubble mound breakwater. He, however, pointed out that a closed harbour could be constructed at much less cost than recommended by the committee and was a better proposition. The plan for the closed harbour suggested by Parkes was the one later adopted, though it was constantly criticised on many counts. He suggested two breakwaters equidistant from the existing iron screw-pile pier, each starting from the coast and running parallel into the sea for 3600 feet into 7 fathoms of water. These west-east breakwaters should be 3,000 feet apart, Parkes recommended, and each would have an arm at its extremity turning to face the other. These arms would terminate centrally in pier heads 450 feet apart and about 5 feet above high water, forming the entrance to the protected anchorage. This, as it turned out, was the nucleus for the present harbour.[28]

An Unsafe Anchorage?

Shipping interests in Calcutta and London, however, thought Madras not only an unsafe anchorage but also costly and, as a consequence, recommended its abandonment. However, in March 1875, Secretary of State Salisbury sanctioned the harbour, acting on the advice of the Madras Governor, Lord Hobart. The original estimate, for a little over Rs. 5 million, was approved, the expenditure to be provided from Imperial funds and from money raised on loan. The accepted design consisted of a closed harbour, providing accommodation for 13 large ships to swing at their moorings, in addition to space for several smaller craft. The two breakwaters were to be constructed by juxtaposing packed concrete blocks, each about 27 tons in weight, on a rubble mass 4 to 20 feet in depth. The work began in the financial year 1875-76 and by the end of the year an expenditure of Rs. 341,703 had been incurred.[29]

On December 15, 1875, a memorial stone marking the commencement of the work was installed on the east side of Beach Road, opposite the Old High Court (Bentinck's Building, now site of the Madras Collectorate) by the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, on the occasion of his visit to the Presidency of Madras.[30]

In January 1876, the base of the North Pier was commenced and in December the first concrete block was laid. The greater part of 1876 was taken up with constructing the block base and erecting the stationary engines, cranes, machinery and locomotive engines necessary for the construction and casting of the concrete blocks. The machinery was capable of turning out 16 concrete blocks of 27 tons weight each every day. As ill-luck would have it, in May 1876, James May, the Superintendent of Works, who was in charge of the work, under Parke's guidance, died, succumbing to the effects of the weather. His death delayed the work and the heavy surf prevailing in June-July 1876 caused further difficulties. But the work pushed ahead.[31]

In March 1877, work on the South Pier commenced, with stones brought from Pallavaram on the South Indian Railway which had opened by then and which was extended to the Beach by the Harbour Works Authorities. The elbow of the North Pier was ready in October 1879 and that of the South Pier by June 1880. Unfortunately, as the work was carried out from the coast, the sand accumulated about it to the southward so rapidly as to cause the line of the foreshore to keep pace almost with the work.[32]

In fact, as early as March 1877, divers had discovered that the rubble base foundation of the North Pier was entirely buried in sand. For several months every possible means was used to remove this sand accumulation - by dredging, by working from caissons, by jets of steam and jets of water at high pressure - but to no avail. Finally, the Superintendent of Works determined to place the concrete blocks upon the sand and allowed them to sink through to the rubble base. Owing to the problems caused by sand accumulation, the work was considerably delayed in 1877-78. In May 1877, the work was also severely affected by a cyclonic storm, but suffered no damage of any consequence. In November and December 1878, the work was again considerably interrupted by bad weather and in January and March 1879 by the breaking down of the Titan cranes and the delay in the receipt of stores from England.

Progress in Construction

There was considerable progress once these problems were solved and by the end of 1879-80, the North Pier had advanced to a length of 2745 feet, of which the last 445 feet were built on a curve of 568 feet radius. The South Pier was carried to a total length of 2146 feet during the year 1880-81. At the end of the year, the expenditure amounted to Rs. 5,352,890 and the North Pier had been extended to total length of 3635 feet from the shore. Both piers terminated' water 8 fathoms below mean sea level, and the distance

between their ends was 890 feet, or 340 feet more than the proposed ultimate width of the harbour entrance, which it had been decided to increase to 550 feet instead of the 450 feet originally suggested by Parkes.[33]

By October 1881, both the North and the South Piers had been completed to their full length, with a 550-foot entrance on the east; 7836 lineal feet of breakwater had been constructed, 13,309 concrete blocks set in position. This completion in 1881 is considered the beginning of the modern harbour of Madras that has grown into the Port of Chennai.

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