From Camp to Port: Mughal Warfare and the economy of Coromandel, 1682-1707

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Conclusion to Part I

This preliminary conclusion sums up the major findings of the last three chapters and summarizes the differences between the port–hinterland complexes discussed so far in terms of three themes: ecology, political economy and resilience to wars.

Ecology

The common binding factors in Coromandel were the two monsoon regimes and the heavy reliance on tank irrigation which sustained agriculture away from the coastal plains and river valleys. The major sea ports on the Coromandel Coast were located at the mouths of river deltas: Masulipatnam (Godavari delta) and Nagapatnam (Kaveri delta). The coastal plains which provided gaps in the Eastern Ghats were ubiquitous in Coromandel – Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri.

Masulipatnam in northern Coromandel was marshy and swampy, and cyclones in this area could be particularly devastating. The humidity and the flood–prone character of the Godavari delta meant cotton produced in eastern Deccan was unsuitable for production of textiles and unless the monsoon had been poor, farmers did not bother to grow cotton. The principal crop here was rice. South of the Krishna delta rainfall fluctuated. Jowar was the main crop on the border of Andhra and Tamil Nadu around dry Nellore, a region whose oxen were renowned as sturdy draught animals. There was hardly any clash between cultivation and weaving. The latter was a specialized occupation, as Dutch surveys demonstrate.

The two cropping seasons in the Tamil country were from June to September and October to January. There was extensive rice cultivation in central Coromandel along the river valleys and – with the help of tanks – inland. But agriculture in this region was nonetheless characterized by a delicate balance between the demand for and supply of rice: in years of good harvests it acted as a rice exporter while after poor harvests rice had to be imported to satisfy the demand from manufacturing towns and villages. Since the coastline had two monsoons, however, the chance of a total rice crop failure was minimal.

The Kaveri delta was prone to floods and produced rice in abundance. Rainfall decreases beyond Tanjore in the west of the delta, where the soil comprises alluvium and coastal sands. In areas of higher elevation, such as interfluves, the main crops were millets and sugar. South of the Kaveri, in the ‘dry southeast’, Madurai and Tirunelveli provided cotton for the delta’s textile industry. To the west, beyond the Coimbatore plateau, are the passes in the Western Ghats that led to Malabar, forming a trade route that has been in use for perhaps two millennia.

Political economies

Each of the three port–hinterland complexes discussed in the first three chapters exhibited significant differences in the political economy. Chapter 1 showed that the Andhra delta in northern Coromandel was the terminal point of trade routes from western India and that Masulipatnam was, first and foremost, an imperial centre. As an economic entrepot, it

successfully connected the west and east of the Deccan with the Indian Ocean – a factor that European companies found attractive. The Qutb Shahis extended control here through portfolio–capitalism, a strategy whereby political figures combined their governmental role with economic functions and invested in overland and maritime commerce. The Masulipatnam port–hinterland complex extended more deeply inland than that of either of its counterparts Pulicat or Nagapatnam and the textile industry here drew its raw materials mainly from the west of the Deccan – cotton was transported along the Godavari to the villages in its delta to the west of Masulipatnam, and spices imported from South–East Asia were conveyed to western and northern India via Hyderabad.

Pulicat owed its early rise and fall to the fortunes of the Vijayanagara Empire and the restrictive effects of the Estado da India's concession system; when the Empire went into decline Pulicat shrank back to the size of a small village. Dutch patronage in the seventeenth century turned the settlement around, restored its ties with its textile–producing hinterland of central Coromandel and re–established it as a local centre and port. After the fall of Vijayanagara, political patronage in this region came from the *nayaka* states, which expanded agriculture and settled ports to boost their economies.

The logistics of textile production in central Coromandel were quite different from those found in northern Coromandel. Masulipatnam drew from production sources deep in its hinterland, while production for export from Pulicat was more concentrated around the port itself. The weaving villages that produced for export were located near the coast because of ease of access and proximity to ports and settlements that produced for inland trade were located off the highways. The frequency of temple towns increases as we move further south beyond the Krishna. As noted in the introductory chapter the Mughal chronicler Bhimsen commented on this feature of the Tamil country in *Tarikh–i–Dilkasha*. Temple towns such as Tirupati and Kanchipuram supported weaving by providing accommodation for weavers. They also exercised control over rice cultivation, acted as centres to change currency and were fixed nodal points as pilgrimage centres on long–distance routes.

Although Nagapatnam, like Pulicat, was an exclusively Dutch enclave and a local centre that shipped textiles produced in its hinterland, it had a far longer history that can be dated back to the eleventh century when, as a premier Chola port, it was connected to South–East Asia. The port disappeared from the records in the fourteenth century and its re–emergence in the seventeenth century was the product of a geopolitical and economic expansion similar to the one that shaped Pulicat. *Nayaka* states connected the dry and wet farming societies of Tamil Nadu. Cotton came from near Mysore, upper Madurai and Tirunelveli, and the textile industry that fed Nagapatnam was located along the Kaveri delta and resembled Masulipatnam's in this regard. Another characteristic shared by Nagapatnam and Masulipatnam is the survival of village surveys made by the VOC, which restored Nagapatnam's connections with South–East Asia; we do not have many such surveys for Pulicat. As in Pulicat, however, the VOC in Nagapatnam established control over production

processes by setting up joint–stock companies of suppliers and binding the weavers on rigid contracts that threatened punishment for violation of their conditions. Overall, Nagapatnam's close connections with Ceylon and Malabar helped it remain more immune to shocks of military invasions from the north.

With this in mind, let us now turn to the final section to construct a hypothesis about how these three port–hinterland complexes responded in distinct ways to wars and political instability.

Political instability and wars

Most of the wars and conflicts discussed in the foregoing chapters date from the seventeenth century, but in the case of Nagapatnam we have access to older sources that offer a longer–term view of developments in the region.

As a regional entrepot for European companies, Masulipatnam would have been highly sensitive to imperial crisis. The port's overland connections with western and central India were highly vulnerable to conflicts and wars in the west and east of the Deccan. This was not so much due to length of production or trading lines, but more due to an extensive west–east web of networks that linked disparate regions having different economic specializations with each other: riverine deltas of northern Coromandel with extensive rice cultivation and textile production were connected to the black soil belts of the west of the Deccan that produced cotton. It was not possible to find local substitutes for such specialist economic functions, especially cotton. So, the vulnerability stemmed from the tendency of wars and political instability to snap or disturb the to and fro movement along this west–east web of connections between different regions with distinct economic specialization.

In this context it is also important to distinguish between production lines and trading lines. The former was vulnerable to wars, especially with regard to the west–east web of connections, but the latter could be flexible. While it would have been possible to look for alternative routes to transport textiles from weaving villages of the Godavari delta to Masulipatnam during wars or political instability, this was a slightly difficult option to replicate for cotton because one, it grew best in specific areas in the west of the Deccan and two, *banjaras* had to move along the Godavari for easy access to water during their trips to the Godavari delta. Wars could create severe difficulties when it came to growing cotton and transporting it to the Godavari delta; possible effects of that could be an inflation in prices of raw cotton and thus of cloth produced. So, the production line of textiles was more vulnerable to wars than the trading line. Wars further undermined the strength of this west–east web of connections because unsafe roads would lead to a disruption of the trade in commodities imported by European companies and other merchants. Eventually, these dynamics would strike at the vitality of Masulipatnam and result in a diminution of its position as the primary port of the Bay of Bengal. Wealthy inland centres such as Hyderabad were defenceless against armed troops; when wars had already debilitated the connecting nodes in this hinterland, the cities that depended on them could be almost crippled by raids. We can therefore conclude

that the most likely result of long wars in northern Coromandel would be the decline of Masulipatnam.

In times of war and political instability Pulicat could experience an increase in population thanks to its fortifications. Though it was a local centre, Pulicat and the weaving villages around it depended on supplies of cotton from elsewhere and continual wars would snap this connection. If conflicts in the hinterland led to an influx of weavers, for example, it would not necessarily lead to increased production since wars would put a stranglehold on the food supply, and famine and epidemics would soon ensue. Being a similarly local outlet, Nagapatnam, along with its hinterland, might have encountered comparable problems when it came to securing supplies during prolonged wars. However, the extensive cultivation of rice in the Kaveri delta offered Nagapatnam greater food security and attracted immigrants from the north during military campaigns. Given these conditions, the influx of human resources had the potential to economically strengthen or sustain this port–hinterland complex.

As we noted in Chapter 1, the Mughal general Jai Singh instructed the European companies to obstruct the activities of the Maratha fleet. This strategy was devised from a recognition of the naval power that European companies possessed. Not only military help, but the commercial operations of European companies from ports in Coromandel could also assist a marching army in terms of provisions that were brought by the sea. So, we can expect that during a long military campaign in South India the Mughals would try and incorporate the operations of the European companies within the functioning of their empire. Although European ports could attract people fleeing the disturbances caused by wars, their reputation as secure places would be unable to mitigate the consequences of wars. They had to depend on supplies from inland for exports and European companies would have found it hard to operate if the connections with inland were affected by the wars. In such a scenario, the costs of production of textiles would increase. Finally, during long wars overcrowding of European settlements could even lead to deaths of people resulting from starvation.

We can conclude the following points: Masulipatnam and its connections were profoundly weakened by long wars; Pulicat attracted migration but at the same time ran the risk of famine, Nagapatnam had similar concerns to Pulicat's but fared somewhat better because of its rice–producing hinterland, dependence on cotton from Tirunelveli and ties with Malabar and Ceylon; in general, throughout the Coromandel, the Mughals needed to incorporate the Europeans in the operation of the Mughal Empire in order to access the coast, as Jai Singh did (Chapter 1); and despite their reputation as havens for non–combatants, the ports operated by the European companies were far from immune from the devastating consequences of long wars. In the following chapters we turn our attention to the Mughal wars in the Deccan and put this hypothesis to test.