

CHANGING PATTERNS OF COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES IN INDIA THROUGH AGES.

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INDICATION :

From the Pre-historic times, India is known to have commercial relations with neighbouring and distant countries. With the march of time commercial activities have seen several kinds of transformations, modifications and changes in the composition of commodities, their volumes and even their directions of flows within the country and outside from her ports to their forelands. This paper has an humble objective to present in succinct a condensed picture of changing patterns of commercial activities from the dim antiquity to the present day in a bare outline.

HYPOTHESIS :

I. The patterns of commercial activities in India are an evolutionary ^{out-}growth of their unknown beginnings from the mist of antiquity, punctuated by their growing or declining ~~risks~~ vicissitudes.

II. METHODOLOGY :

The paper heavily draws upon standard written annals of India, including published original papers and present-day observations of the author.

III. EXPOSITION :

The Pre-Vedic ancient civilisations of Harappa, Mohenjodaro including Chanhu-jadaro in Punjab and Lothal in Gujrat were not without commercial intercourse with foreign countries before at least 2000 B.C. (Mukerji, 1970.) The former two are aptly designated as "business civilizations" in excelsis. (Spate, 1954.) Mohenjodaro, the former twin city of the Indian antiquity has been ~~s~~ surmised to be a sea-port on the mouth of the Indus river, with the inland river port of Harappa on the Ravi river, ^{and} had, perhaps, the lion's share of the then Indian maritime trade with Mesopotamia and other ports in the adjacent

countries, exporting textiles including Sindhu or Indian ~~muslin~~ muslin on an extensive scale. (^u Mkerji. 1970) The rich agrarian society with relatively large number of urban settlements, mostly, on river-banks fed the aforesaid trade. It may be conjectured that the existing towns were inland trade centres, catering mostly ~~in~~ high order goods to the local people and related trade was vendor-oriented amidst self-sufficient village communities. Some of the agricultural produce can be gleaned to have outlet to foreign countries down the navigable rivers, serving ^{as} arteries of transport and communication, through the premier port at Mohenjodaro. To sum up,, the export maritime trade co-existed with the flourishing inland ~~trade~~ commercial activities at prosperous trade-centres. This cannot be likened to " dendritic trade ", as defined by Johnson. (197³), involving migrant traders moving goods out the country.

This was followed by the Vedic culture, replacing the impressive urban society, supported by active agrarian communities, by patoral society with the destruction, rejection and, at times, assimilation of the former traits of the past civilizations. The historical evidence points to the extension of commercial activities a little south of the -Sapta-Sindhu (land of seven rivers) to ~~the~~ some of the northern ports of the Deccan with the southward penetration of the

Vedic culture, ^{and} as far as Bengal in North India. It may be noted with earnest curiosity that the Panis, trading community, had been active in the expansion and extension of commercial activities within the Sapt-Siadhu, resulting in ^{migrant} perir permanent ~~permanent~~ colonies to Phoenicia and adjacent region. (Bilimoria, 1940.) Their foreign commercial links covered ^A Egypt, the present-day Palestine and Syria, Mediterranean countries and even the Bri^tish Isles. (IBid.) The growing

range of commodities encompassed sandalwood, monkeys, indigo, indigo-dyed cloth, Indian muslin, precious stones, spices, ivory, apes, pea-cocks, spices, ginger, cinnamon. (Mukerji, 1970.) A major proportion of the exchange of commodities seems to have been monetized with gold and silver coinage in vogue, though in minor business transactions barter obtained. It may be noticed that inland vending consisted of ^{dealing in horses,} cows, sheep, pearls, in addition to convenience goods. It may be illuminating to note the export and import slave trade of males and females with foreign countries and within the country, ^{it} had been prevalent in some form or other from ancient times (Shrivastava, 1978.) till its final abolition in the later half of the 19th Century, when emotional feelings had been roused against this abominable item of selling their own kind loudly and effectively. In brief, it may be said that, on comparison, the commercial activities in the Vedic times, perhaps, did not mark any distinct departure from the past patterns except in their expansion and enlargement in volumes and magnitudes.

Coming down to the Ancient India in her historical annals, we have access to an elaborate saga of commercial activities in Panini's well-known Sanskrit Grammar. Apart from the commercial scene of the past, specialised markets and shops known as apana, seem to ^{have} originated prior or during Panini's times. (about 500 B.C.) Centres of sales for cattle and animals might have been ~~set~~ set wide apart from each other as in the case of durable goods. Sites for vending perishable commodities may be thought of as purely local at long or short spatial distances. The barter system continued ^w, coupled with the use of monetary system as medium of foreign exchange. The wide range of articles of foreign exchange consisted of mostly

durables such as textiles, skins, hides, leather goods, and silver, luxury goods, light in weight and high in value, like perfumes, salts & chemicals etc. The overland trade within the country seems to have been well-organised. Caravans of more than several hundred wagons of merchandise were well protected on trade routes by ^{-th} Sarvahas or caravan-leaders. (Motichand, 1974.). This trade system seems to have been equally well organised under skilful . . . superintendence and vigilant guidance of corporate bodies, known as Samastanikas. (trade guilds)

Fixed shops had already sprung into existence . perhaps, before the days of Panini at least in townships and towns, if not in villages (Agrawal, 1941.) and , possibly in the times of the Jātakas or stories of Buddha's previous births. There were specialised market-places and shops. With reference to the market-place at Madurai, the Pandyan capital , it is of interest to note that it had a well-planned lay-out with assignment of site for each category of article. There was fāag with a specific emblem , indicating the article sold in the shop. There were day market-places and evening market-places. in Madurai , where all articles under the sun were exposed for sale. (Perumal, 1970-71.) In other words, there were market meetings in the morning as well as in the evening but there seems ~~like~~ to be no reference to Periodic Market-Places at different locations on week days.

The Purānass , in some form or other, had preceded the Kautiliyan Arthśāshtra in their compilations. (Smith, 1914.) . They embody allusions to the innovative institutions of commercial activities , namely , Fair-Centre system, existing earlier than the 4th century B.C. Though motivated by religious impulses and also urge for social gatherings ^{among} a few selected

clans, this new system, occurring annually or seasonally at appointed/chosen centres mostly, has involved sales of animals and general commodities, perhaps, since its inception, large congregations of men and animals even at religious fair-centres necessitated vending of food-stuffs and materials for worships of local deities, if not anything else. In a nutshell, the system had accreted to itself religio-commercial functional characters.

Turning to the Mauryan extensive empire, spanning the whole of India, from the Himalayas to the Cape Comorin and N.W. frontiers to Bengal and Assam, fresh elements seem to have been incorporated into the existing commercial activities. *
 These on the heels of Alexander's departure from Sindh, India had become almost a well-knit single political entity, humming with commercial activities of unprecedented nature and intensity through-out its length and breadth, seemingly contemporaneous with the Sangam Age in the south Tamil Land. The long-distance overland trade both in the north and the south supported by a close network of trading routes, interlinked with inland trade centres, terminated on sea ports. In the northern India, the large and small rivers shared a part of the overland and, even, maritime commerce to foreign lands through terminal sea ports. In the southern India, artificial canals on four parallel longitudinal belts, including those close to the west sea coast, served as supply and replenishing stations of merchandise,

* Based on the memory of the contents in N.A.K. Shashtri :
 The Mauryan Empire.

moving out of the country. The relative route linkages via caves passed through natural gaps in hills and the mountain range of the Sahyadris out of the country. To sum up, the former trade routes and inland trade had experienced a phenomenal development and growth. The maritime trade did not lag behind in any way to match with overland commerce. The prevalent well-organised trading corporations for organising the space for movement of commercial goods by means of bands of large caravans and hundred of bullock carts to interior trade centres and sea ports must have acquired further strength and experience in the peaceful regime of the Mauryan emperors. The sea-going commerce had their forelands in S.E. Asia, the Red Sea, the Bay of Iran, the Mediterranean Sea, particularly, the Roman Empire. The export commodities comprised of textiles, including fine muslin, durable goods, spices, iron, sandal wood and oil and in return, ^{India} received ^{perhaps} perhaps, horses from Arabia. (Motichand, 1970; Jataka Tales quoted by Motichand, 1970; Mahaley, 1978; Perumal, 1970-71.)

To the existing patterns of ~~xxxx~~ commercial activities, two innovations seem to have been added presumably before the inauguration of the mighty Mauryan empire. Besides, ~~mobile~~ long-distance internal trade, peddling by individual vendors of goods mostly at large and small trade centres and also in villages, mentioned in villages, came into vogue. (Motichand, 1974.) ~~xxxx~~ To this was added local trading in village fixed (?) shops, resorted to by part-time village traders who also engaged in agriculture as their primary vocation of life. (Kangle, 2-1.11, 1972.) . The long-distance caravan trade have been also referred to explicitly in the ^{two} epics, viz., the Mahabharat and the Ramayan and in a number of Dharmasutra works (ancient Indian religious texts)

such as Yagnavalkyasmriti and in the earlier work, Manusmriti in addition to market-places at certain locations, particularly townships and towns. The caravan trade was under the sway of corporations/confederations of groups of mobile traders. (Sapre, 1920) The Mahabharat incorporates specific references to caravans of thousands of bullocks, under the leadership of Gomis (called banjaras by Sapre), who hardly recognised and accepted the control of contemporary rulers.

(Ibid.)

The Post-Mauryan period till the establishment of effectual Muslim Rule in India had been convulsed by chaos and disorder, caused by foreign invasions of the Sakas, the Huns, and other tribals, combined by internal dissensions among clans. These are expected to upset the normal commercial operations, perhaps, particularly, overland trade and occasionally adversely affecting maritime commerce, except with strong presumptions during the peaceful interludes of the Gupta Empire (320-416 A.D.) and reign of Harsha (606-647 A.D.)

After repeated expeditions of the Arabs in Sindh in 636 A.D. onwards, the imposition of their rule followed in their wake " with a triumph without success. " This was, in its turn, was followed by the advance and occupation of India by the Turks early in the 11th Century and a series of invasions from without and successful rulers, the disruption of the empire and rise of a number of dynastic rulers in the south till the foundation of the Moghul Empire in 1526^{A.D.} loomed large in the contemporary annals of the time.

To the periodic market-place exchange system, manifested in the occurrence of occasional, seasonal and annual fair-entres alluded to above, seems to have been added the system of

Weekly Market-Places or Fair-centres (Nanjunolappa, 1978.), before the 11th Century at least in the south. The new system had been ~~been~~ seemingly established before the arrival of the Turks in North India. It ~~still~~ remains ~~to date~~ conclusively the origin of the new periodic marketing system in India. The periodicity of the new system of commercial activities is almost ubiquitously of weekly interval, ^{but} the author has hit upon a solitary example of a single ~~market-~~ place on the Bastar Plateau in the Kanker Basin with fortnightly periodicity. (Tamaskar, 1978.) There may be undiscovered similar honourable exceptions to the common periodicity of seven days, holding its own in India. The prevalent system of overland caravan trade was further systematised and energised in pronounced degree, with marked camping stages at approximate spatial distances of 24 kms per day during the Moghul Rule in India but the new rulers were relatively land-bound in realm of commercial activities. With the advent of the Europeans, professing declared trading intentions in India, the country was dotted with wide-spread trading ~~factories~~ on the littoral and their ^{branches} inland.

However, a few variants of the periodic market-place system may be exemplified by the specific instance of Chaul with seasonal ^{at} marketing activities observed in the months of December, January, February and March. (Ibid., 1986.) In the Medieval Maharashtra periodic market-places have sought their sites under the shadows of forts, known as Machis in the local parlance. Another noteworthy interesting feather was ~~markets~~ and short-lived ^{shifting} markets, ^{following} the Moghul forces and subsequently also associated with Maratha armies on their march, accompanied by almost en bloc shifts of mobile professional vendors from place to place, follow-

armed

ing closely on the heels of ~~the~~ forces. (Ibid.) Moghul armies have ^{been} aptly and vividly described as towns on the move, folloed closely by mobile markets. The inception of Muslim pilgrim and fair centres in India can be attributed to the arrivals of followers of Islam and associated cultural traits in the country. ^{likewise it cannot} escape the attention of a keen observer the occurrence of fair-centres of other religious faiths and sects, including those of tribals with the passage of time.

The firm political hold of the British Rule and imposition of Pax Britannica had their visible impact in the phenomenal expansion of inland as well as maritime trade with their volumes, impelled by modern shift-moving transport system. The over-all commercial activities underwent changes in commodity structure and also veered ~~ix~~ ^{from} their former directions, combined with the appearance of new commercial nodes and disappearance of decline of some old ones of the Pre-British Period. The introduction of fast-^{moving} traffic on railways in India, the prevalent primitive transport system had suffered decline, except for short-distance movements and absence of the former in remote and inaccessible regions, replacing caravan trade and its ultimate abolition in a large measure. The most distinctive innovative pattern of dendritic commercial activities is associated with British colonial rule in India which can hardly remain unnoticed. In this system, goods are obtained for export, and a wide variety of provisions for urban populations are gathered up in local or near rural market-places and moved to port-cities. On the other hand, consumer goods, not produced by peasant communities, move from port-cities to local retail market-places. (^{Johnson} ~~Johnson~~, 1975.) The novel elitic institution of

departmental stores , organised for the sale of a long range/ almost all varieties of commodities under a single shade at metropolitan centres such as Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, etc.. is a late arrival in and accretion to the commercial activities of the country. Though modernisation and urbanisation had set in with the British ^{rule} the British India , the periodic market-place exchange system, associated with its characteristic weekly temporal spacing has not only maintained its economic health but has gained in vigour and its number of units, though individual ones have suffered mortality or were held in abeyance temporarily on the economic landscape. Peddling in rural areas , difficult of access by vehicular traffic, and hawking in towns and cities have remained relatively stable till today. The stability and persistence of the periodic market-place exchange , including fair-entres, at towns and in exceptional case in metropolitan cities, are remarkable, except the metropolis of Bombay , with a shadow area in the immediate proximate region. However, it may be noted daily market-places in towns and cities witness marked peaks of marketing activities either in the morning or , particularly, in the evening. Even the periodic market-place exchange can make and has made its appearance in some form or other to supplement commercial activities to fill in their existing or felt ^{economic} gaps. At some Indian towns short-term meetings either in the morning or evening are called Gujaris in Maharashtra which are of significant interest .

The accelerated pace of industrialisation on the attainment of independence in India after 1947 gave birth to a few entirely new patterns of commercial activities in the form of ^{temporary} wage-day market-places on week-ends , close to dam construction sites and also pay-day market-places outside

market-places , particularly, remote from any urban settlement. The urbanisation has led to the growth and development of ' Central ' Shopping Centres in large towns and cities and ' Neighbourhood Centres ' in suburbs , multiplication of departmental stores, wholesaling centres with specific locations and specialisation of individual categories of sale commodities and the latest appearance of ' Super-markets ' , ' Hyper-markets ' and their variants for the convenience of customers to enable them shopping of all varieties of goods , required by them , under a single roof . Apart from them , showrooms for machinery, tools and vehicles, retail shops of factory goods , textiles in particular, and others, agencies of manufacturers are outstandingly new features of commercial activities on Indian town-scapes. Hawking and peddling , undoubtedly, have been further strengthened . Hawkers and temporary stalls have resulted in almost disappearance of foot-paths for pedestrians in cities with the resultant traffic congestions on roads . The door-to-door sale of consumer and other goods , urban version of peddling in rural areas , is visibly on the increase. Other noticeable features of recent growth are industrial fairs and exhibitions in big cities as well as occasional / festival attractive discount/^{reduction} sales in large urban centres , and, at times , clearance sales with almost throw-away prices.

IV. CONCLUSION :

In conclusion, it has to be maintained with confidence that the ^{hypothesis} ~~idea~~, posed in the beginning , is amply tested and stands fully verified . Further, it may be observed that the slow and steady accretive process to the existing patterns of commercial activities , except for the complete reversal of

colonial dendritic commercial activities in the period of national independence and projected self-reliance as far as feasible, have ended up with an impressive multiplicity of growing patterns of commercial activities. In other words, simple structure of commercial activities, dating back to the Proto-History of India, has been remarkably diversified, attaining ^{complexity} of unprecedented degree and character, not known to the past, and some of old forms have ^{been} shed to assume sophisticated modern garbs today.

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