From Portuguese Hegemony to Anglo-Dutch Rivalry: Trade and Power in Seventeenth Century Coromandel

Dr. Rashmi
Formerly Senior Assistant Professor
Department of History
University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad
Email: rashmichs@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyses seventeenth-century South Coromandel as a contested maritime zone shaped by Portuguese decline and Anglo-Dutch rivalry. It explores the role of textiles, factory settlements, native intermediaries, and shifting European strategies. It shows how collaboration and competition between European trading companies transformed the coastal politics, urban spaces, and regional trade networks.

Keywords

Maritime Rivalry in Indian ocean, Textile trade, Coromandel coast, Factory System,

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Dr. Rashmi

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Seventeenth-century Coromandel was marked by the presence of the Europeans- the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French, who were busy carving out their areas of influence. By the second decade of the sixteenth century by the 'Casado' and other Portuguese private settlers had started congregating at Pulicat and San Thome. Within a decade, Nagapattinam also came up as an important Portuguese settlement. An extensive maritime-commercial network was developed from these settlements to the ports of the Malay Peninsula, Malacca and Acheh. Malaccan spices, which were procured in exchange for Indian textiles, were exported to Lisbon. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese made and entry into the intra-Asian trading network with the help of Tamil Keling[1] merchants settled in the Indonesian ports. Malacca was made the centre point of this trade. The goods included cloves from Malacca, nutmeg and mace from Banda, pepper from Sumatra and Sunda, sandalwood from Timor, Camphor from Borneo, gold from Sumatra, from Malaya and precious stones from Burma. These goods were collected at Malacca and then re-exported to China, Japan and parts of Indian Archipelago. India provided the textiles, which were primarily used to procure Indonesian spices and drugs.

In the Sixteenth century, the Indian merchants on the Coromandel coast found themselves totally excluded from the trade. The Indian merchants had traditionally operated at two levels: first, the Indians in commerce were under the terms of diplomatic engagement to ensure the supply of commodities to the Portuguese and second, they traded trading other places, other than the Portuguese pockets under the special protection guaranteed by them through the cartazes.

However, in the Seventeenth century, the Portuguese met with a dwindling fortune. They were in the process of waning from the coastal commerce. The Dutch and the English had not only made their appearance on the Coromandel coast but were carving a niche for themselves. The factory system was ardently followed by them. By mid-Seventeenth century the factories had started turning into their private enclaves. Madras was once such enclave under the English where a large number Portuguese of took their residence.

1.1 The Portuguese in Madras

After the establishment of Fort St. George, the English realized the importance of Portuguese and invited them to join the English Company as its employees –as linguists, soldiers and so on. As early as 1640-41, the Portuguese of pure and mixed blood migrated from San Thome to Madras where they were promised employment. These migrants were exempted from imports on articles used for food or clothing for the next thirty years. They were also exempted from the Quit Rent levied on all the inhabitants of Madras.[2]

The Portuguese settled in San Thome in the early sixteenth century.[3] Since then San Thome became the base of Portuguese trade. In the seventeenth century the Portuguese migrated to Madras in search of jobs. In 1658 and 1662, they had to flee from San Thome to Madras due to political turmoil there. In the Hague Record of 1662, Governor Laurens Pit of Pulicat wrote to Batavia that "the evacuation of St. Thome has not yet been affected…. In the meantime, some of the richest Portuguese merchants especially those who had removed to St. Thome from Nagapatam, have gone to Madraspatam. This town in consequence is much over crowded, and is being extended very fast".[4] The flight of the Portuguese to Madras occurs in the description of John Fryer, who travelled through the Coromandel in the seventeenth century, writes, 'The number of the English here may amount to Three hundred; of Portuguese as many thousand, who made Fort St. George their Refuge when they were routed from St. Thomas by the Moors about then years past (in 1662), and ever since lived under protection of the English.'[5]

The records of Fort St. George give evidence of Portuguese migrants to Madras who were being enlisted as soldiers. The Consultation of 1672 mentions Sir William Langhorn taking a number of Portuguese into his service as soldiers who were untrained and naïve, whereby the Company remained under the pressure of handling them.[6] The Portuguese also functioned as an active militia in protecting the settlement of Madras by guarding the fort walls. In 1687, Elihu Yale, the then governor of Madras, got a list prepared of the Company servants employed in their protection, of which Portuguese employees constituted the major part of the establishment.[7]

The Indo-Portuguese in Madras may be classified into different categories- first were the rich Indo-Portuguese who lived within the confines of the 'White Town'. In the second category were those who inhabited the 'Black town', who were the poorer Indo-Portuguese and lived with the Hindus, Muslims, the Christian converts, Armenians etc. The Consultation of 1688 gives the details of the survey of the White Town. The survey took into account the important streets, the residents of these streets and the rent paid by them. Love examined the same survey and estimated that out of 128 private dwellings in the White Town, half of them belonged to the Portuguese.[8]

Table 1: The names of streets and assignees were as follows

In the Christian Town / White Town	No. of People
At St. Thomas Bulwarke (John Sardinia de Fonseca)	16
At Charles Bulwarke (Antonio Nogeiro de Souza)	15

At James Bulwarke (Joan Perera de Faria)	15
At the Choultry Gate (Cosmo Laurenzo de Madera)	17
At the Middle Gate (Gaspar de Moto de Brito)	17
At St. Peters Bulwarkee (Lucas Luis de Olivera)	15
In the Mallabar Town/ Black Town	No. of People
At the Corner Bulwark (Antonio Lewis de Vallo)	24
At the Bridge Gate (Antonio Pallia de Lima)	20
At the Bridge Bastian (Gaspar de Cunhia de Sylva)	20
At the Cape Bulwark (Bernado Medan)	20
At the Garden Gate (Antonio Francisco)	20
At the Faulcon Bastian (Manuell de Fonseca)	20
At the Chitty Gate (Francisco Carneiro dal Casona)	20
At the Sea Bulwark (Francisco de Brito Correa)	21
Total 14 posts	260 Men

Source: D&C, 18th April, 1681.

The Portuguese element in Madras town thus could not be ignored. In 1671, Nawab Neknam Khan demanded that a 'havildar' or a native governor of the town must be appointed. The then governor Foxcroft however resisted this demand. The Portuguese inhabitants asked for a judge of their own nation be appointed and justice be done according to their own laws. It is very clear that the Company was not averse to this demand of the Portuguese. For this the Company gave the reason that it would be better for them if they themselves handled their skirmishes and quarrel and not involve the Choultry into it. This dual policy of the English towards the natives and towards the Portuguese inhabitants clearly shows the order of preference the English exercised not only in economic but in social sphere as well.[9]

1.2 The Portuguese in San Thome

The Portuguese established themselves at San Thome in the early sixteenth century. It remained with them in their heyday when Portuguese were a force to reckon with as well as in the seventeenth century when they were a fading power. The Indian power to whom the Portuguese paid customs was the Naik of Tanjore.

In the early part of the 1640s, the English looked at the Portuguese with apprehension. This is evident from the letter that Cogan and Day of Fort St. George wrote to the Company.

The highest Indian authority at San Thome was the ruler of Golconda. The interference of the latter was a problem not only of the Portuguese but also of the English due to their proximity to San Thome. In the initial years of the establishment of the enclave, when the English themselves were uncertain of their position, this fear was not unjustified. It was in 1662, when San Thome came under the siege of the King of Golconda, that the fears of the English government at Madras were allayed. "San Thoma was lost about 10 days ago to the King of Golconda and the Company's Fort is much threatened; but though we have not ordered from the Company, as you call it, we shall defend ourselves to the utmost of our power; and what we cannot doe by Land, we shall revenge ourselves by sea, as in the case of Nabob, rather than wee will loose our trade and privilege."[10] On the same occasion the Agent wrote to Mosulipatnam that : "This ship we have kept here 6 or 7 days extraordinary because of the Combustions of wars about us, San Thoma having yielded up the Coast to the King of Golconda, as you have bin formerly advised, and ourselves must threatened; though wee fears not what strength can come against us soe long as we have the sea open."[11]

The Golconda state which was is possession of San Thome leased it to Kasi Viranna, the chief merchant of Madras. During Streynsham Master's governorship, Viranna's lease was terminated. Master wanted San Thome to be under the direct control of Madras for which he negotiated with the King of Golconda. Gyfford who became the governor of Madras in 1681, was asked by the Company to further the request of firman to acquire not only the minting rights of San Thome but also extend the boundaries by demanding other subsidiary villages through the payment of a rent to the King of Golconda. The service of the Chief merchants, Viranna and Alingall Pillai was employed to negotiate for a lower rent.

The Portuguese were the reason behind the failed negotiations. They nurtured the ambition of resettling in San Thome. At the time, the English were negotiating for San Thome, the Portuguese were also bargaining for it with the Golconda authorities. Their emissary obtained a firman and hoisted the Portuguese flag in San Thome. However, the circumstances changed with the Mughal takeover of Gloconda in 1687. In 1688, President Yale himself represented the cause of the Company and negotiated with the Sair Lashkar Mohammad Sadik. The Consultation reads, 'That we have the free and sole Government of the Town, Customers and all other Revenues of St. Thoma, for five years from first of June last, for which we are to pay the yearly rent of 3800 Pagodas…..'[12]

The Company seemed to have finally reached an arrangement with the authorities. At this juncture the Portuguese struck back and by bribing the officials and took possession of San Thome. In 1696, the Portuguese made a final attempt to revive their authority. The Consultation gives an account of this effort made by the Portuguese. "The Portuguese of St. Thoma have sent Domingo d' Coasta to the Nabob to solicit the renting of the adjoining Aldeas,[13] and the confirming of the kings Phirmaund for enjoying St. Thoma, with Privileges according to Salabad, and liberty of the Nabob to Fortifie. The Nabob has given them a Perwanna in pursuance of said phirumand, tho he has not granted anything according to their request."[14] These petitions and requests were ignored by the Mughal authorities. They were making an attempt to curb the power of the Portuguese.

In 1697, Mughal officials from Arcot arrived to San Thome and demolished three of the bastions. The brick, and the stones from the demolished fortification was carried by the Havaldar to build his own house.[15] According to Manucci in 1702, the Mughal Diwan Muhammad Said visited San Thome and built a rampart of earth around the Muslim and Portuguese quarters. He further mentions that though the Portuguese had their dwellings in the centre of the town, the Muslims surrounded them and occupied a larger space. [16] In reality the Portuguese did not exercise any authority; the real power lay in the hands of the Muslim governors of this region.

1.3 Collaboration and Competition: The English and the Dutch in South Coromandel

The arrival of the English East India Company in 1600 and the Dutch VOC[17] in 1605 in the Indian waters was the beginning of a new episode in the history of European overseas expansion. After its formation in 1602 the VOC, got the sole right for twenty-one years to sail east of Cape of Good Hope. Later the duration was extended by the joint meetings of the chambers as and when required. The Dutch traded with Malacca in spices for which they needed textiles. They had on eye on the Coromandel to procure textiles for this purpose. For the first time in 1605, they landed at Masulipatnam and became involved in the trading networks of the region. As Vink and Winius have specified regarding the nature of the Dutch business, 'In the opening years of the Seventeenth century, however, the new VOC had not yet developed any strategic plans or even any fixed plan or pattern of operation; it was more like an impromptu trade presence.[18]

By 1616, the Dutch had a number of establishments on the Coromandel coast. Beginning from 1606, the first factory was set up at Petapoli in North Coromandel and Tirupapaliyur on South Coromandel in 1608. Later they managed to open a factory at Pulicat which became the base for their commercial operations on the coast. In 1616, all the factories were constituted into a single 'government' with a Governor as its head.

The English East India Company appeared on the coast in 1600. They landed at Pulicat in 1611 with the idea of having a base there. They were however "warned off" by the Dutch who had already been granted the firman to build a factory at the same place. The English then shifted to Nizamapatam and Masulipatam and continued their movement further east. While this was in progress, negotiations were opened with Vellore in order to obtain a footing in the Coastal trade. The arrangement proved unsatisfactory, and after a few years the English factory was shifted to Armagaon, whence it was later transferred to Madras.[19]

Both the Dutch and the English Companies encountered a similar kind of political environment on the coast. In examining the political players on the Coromandel coast, it is necessary to take into account the extent of the coast and the sub-regions it encompasses. The Europeans were thus often faced with the multilayered local authority.

The Dutch had to encounter to three major problems on the coast - first, to maintain harmonious relation with the local Naiks who were prone to get influenced by the Portuguese. It was the local Naiks who granted the firman to conduct trade and to set up a factory. The Second problem was that of the Portuguese who were a force to reckon with, and who came under a constant threat because of the Dutch presence on the coast. The third factor were the English whose Factories were mushrooming and were emerging as a potential competitors to the Dutch.

The hostile relationship between the Dutch and the Portuguese is evident from the statement of William Methwold, who observed about the Dutch presence in Pulicat, that they appeared as 'a badde neighbour to the Portugual'.[20] The Coastal rulers or Naiks did not give up a single opportunity to fill their coffers and thus were always keen on maintaining the privileges given to the Europeans. They took it to the extent where one company always stood as a counterweight against the other. The important trading centres were conveniently subdivided into smaller territories which were farmed out to the hawaldars or revenue farmers (ijaradars). These ijaradars formed the first tier of authority. However, there was a difference in the treatment meted out to the Europeans. While the Naiks granted extensive concessions instead of obtaining immediate gains thus having an eye on the long-term profits whereas the hawaldars or local officials and local merchants were keen on generating immediate gains from the Companies. Thus, in this situation the chief concern for the European Companies was to acquire exclusive trading rights. The extortionate demands of the hawaldar were a cause of anxiety to the Dutch Company servants, who were constantly devising ways and means to appease them either by providing them with interest-free loans or by giving them gifts.

In the early part of the seventeenth century, the Dutch VOC had an upper hand in Eurasian trade both in terms of 'territorial possessions and political power' in South –East Asia, Far Eastern Trade and Coromandel trade. The VOC was marred with debate and controversy regarding the role it should adopt. After the initial spurt of conquests (in terms of the acquisition of forts and factories), the VOC had to review its policy as it reflected in the disputes between the Company governors. Once they acquired their base of operation, they pursued strategies not only of survival on the Coromandel coast but also of further growth vis-à-vis other European contenders.

However, it is difficult to conclude the question of policy formulation. There is no linear development in the VOC's organization or policy but is marked by changes from one period to another. The extent of its operations and the underlying principles roughly remain the same.

The Charter of 1602 proved to be of immense importance for the merchants who were trading to the East Indies at the time. It helped them in securing them a monopoly of trade which was free from all kinds of governmental interference. Even on the Coromandel coast the Dutch were able to obtain a number of commercial concessions; low custom and transit duties, preference as compared to competing traders were some of these. The importance of the Coromandel textile for the Dutch comes out in the observations of Hendrik Browear (1612), the founder of the factory in Siam and later *gouverneur- general*. He writes, 'The Coromandel coast is the left arm of the Moluccas, because we have noticed that without the textiles of Coromandel, commerce is dead in the Moluccas.'[21]

The English, with a factory at Masulipatnam (1611) and a trading post at Petapuli by this time had become a force to reckon with. The Dutch factors were given strict instructions to keep the English away from Pulicat. Pulicat was the most lucrative trading port due to its accessibility to the hinterland from where textiles were procured. Both the English and the Dutch had obtained concessions from the Naiks in Pulicat. To survive under the same umbrella, it was best suited to both the Companies to "forgive and forget" their pasts. Thus, they signed the Treaty of Defence in 1619 (in Batavia) which brought an end to the hostilities between the two countries. It was based on sharing of trade between them, provided they also shared the cost of maintenance of the Dutch fort and garrison in Pulicat. Pulicat at this time was undergoing political disorder. This is clearly evident from the letter sent by the authority at Pulicat to Coen, who was in Jakarta: "There was a great deal of disturbance in the Hindu territories around Pulicat because of the absence of a king. Cloths were being manufactured only in the city of Pulicat by weavers and painters

who had flocked there from the hinterland and had been taken under the protection of the Company. Because of the continued war everything around Pulicat had been burnt down. The prolonged dought had caused a number of starvation deaths……"[22]

In spite of a clear-cut regulation for each provision the Anglo Dutch association did not last long. In May 1622, the tensions in their relationship became visible when Coen at Batavia wrote to Andries Soury and Van Uffelen at Masulipatam about the complaints that Coen had received from the English. Coen writes, '..Regarding the costs at the Moluccas, Amboina, Banda and Pulicat, the English had nothing but complaints to make. Their ambition and greed could never be appeased…'[23]

The English complained of having problems in Pulicat, regarding the procurement of textiles, which was not even half of what the Dutch procured. Moreover, the accommodation given to the English in the Fort was small and a disparity existed in their cost of provisions that the English had to pay vis a vis the Dutch. Lastly, the Dutch factors did not allow the English to ship their textiles on the *Gouden Leeuw* for Batavia. These complaints were discussed by Soury and Uffelen at Masulipatam and later a justification was provided for each rather than a remedy. Slowly, this association seemed to be disintegrating .

The Dutch-English pact could not be repudiated openly. Coen set up a binational Council of Defence comprising of eight Dutch and four English, who met at Batavia, where the English could also maintain their resident agents. It was however with the 'massacre of Amboina' in 1623, that the formal treaty came to an end and the English were withdrawn from Pulicat. According to Coen, '…..friendship with the English meant total ruin of the Company.'[24]

By 1680s the Dutch had started facing recession in its establishments on the Northern Coromandel owing to stiff competition with the English factories. The Outbreak of the Nine-Year War (1688-97) in Europe (France and Holland) had its repercussions in Asia as well.

The French had also emerged as important player in the Coromandel coast at this time. In 1673 the French on one side the Dutch and Golconda on the other were contesting each other. Abbe Carre writes '….Nothing else was spoken of during the next few days in every part of the town but the French at St. Thome.' Abbe Carre goes on to say '….He (Portuguese priest) tried to frighten me by relating the dangers from soldiers, thieves and even from the Dutch, who had their spies everywhere on the road: they had arrested many more French than the Moors had…..'[25]

Along with the problems concentrating around European wars, unrest at the Indian front was adding to the trouble of the Dutch. Both the Mughals and the

Maratha incursions into Deccan provinces were a major hurdle in the trading activities. Owing to these problems Superintendent Hendrik van Reede tot Drakensteyn decided to shift the seat of Dutch Establishment in the Coromandel - from Pulicat to Negapatam. Negapatam was located further south in the Coromandel coast and could not be commercially viable owing to its placement. This was the beginning of the decline of the Dutch endeavour on the Coromandel coast.

By 1680 the VOC and the English Company had worked out a balance whereby the Dutch took over the trade of the Indonesian archipelago, Ceylon and the Southern tip of India while the English took over the rest of the commerce of the Indian sub-continent and the Persian Gulf. Inspite of, this kind of adjustment the Anglo-Dutch tension continued to increase. The reason behind the success of the English East India Company and the concurrent weakening of the Dutch Company was due to shift in the pattern of consumption and demand in Europe for Asian commodities as cotton, calicoes, muslin, raw silk, tea etc. which mainly came from areas under the English. The Dutch aim had been to monopolise the spice and pepper trade. At this time the balance tilted away from spice and pepper. Hence, the English East India Company's trade expanded both in value and volume.

The Dutch did retain a considerable trading capital but the naval and imperial ambition passed into the hands of English East India Company in the Indian Sub-continent. The change in English policy in Asia from a peaceful to aggressive trading during these years brings out the gulf between their ideology and historical events. The English Company was critical of the Dutch method of constructing fortified bases as a viable commercial system. On one hand, the English Company saw its Dutch rivals as a powerful commercial organization determined to destroy all European competitors trading in the Indian Ocean, while on the other, the VOC's political wisdom was much sought after and a concerted attempt was made to copy the Dutch policy of trading from fortified military enclaves. On the lines of the Dutch, the English Company devised long term policies in the 1670s and 80s where a more politically active role was called for and instructed their officials in the presidencies of Bombay and Madras not to neglect political advantages in the pursuit of trade.

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6. D&C., 10th Jan 1672/73, p. 12.
7. D&C, 21st Nov. 1687, p. 179.
8. Love, Vestiges, I., p. 538
9. D&C, 6 September 1671.
10. EFI, 12th May 1662, p. 148.
11. EFI, 12th May 1662, p. 148.
12. D&C, 23rd August, 1688, p. 135.
13. Aldeas here was used to represent the surrounding villages.
14. D&C, 14th September, 1696, pp. 109-110.
15. D&C, 8th and 11th January, 1696/7, p. 169.
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17. VOC – *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*
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