

## TAMRALIPTI : THE ANCIENT PORT OF INDIA

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The ocean played a great role in the lives of the coastal people. The exploitation of marine resources along the Indian coast dates back to the times of prehistoric man. Even the Neolithic and Megalithic people used the sea. In the early historical and medieval periods the development of ports and the overseas trade was possible because of the sheltered bays and creeks. In order to facilitate trade and commerce there existed several ports on the river banks and estuaries in India which were navigable. In overseas trade and commerce, the ports on east and west coast of India played a vital role since 3rd millennium BC.

Comparatively the geographical setting was found to be most ideal for the development of maritime trade for the Tamralipti port (22° 20', 87° 55') east coast of India. Other ports of Bengal, such as Satgaon and Sonargaon were also having overseas contacts with Ceylon, Java and Sumatra.

In this paper an attempt is made to synthesize archaeological, literary, epigraphic and numismatic evidences on the trade and commerce, boat-building technology and the causes for the decline of Tamralipti.

### **Tamralipti as Dronimukha Port :**

*Silpasastra* the ancient text mentions two types of sea ports namely *Pattana* and *Dronimukha*. *Pattanas* were situated on the sea coast where cargo were loaded and unloaded from the ship. Even today the place names ending with *Pattana* indicate a port name for example Masulipattana and Visakhapatana<sup>1</sup>.

*Dronimukha* can be distinguished from *Pattana* on the basis of the fact that the former is a port situated near the confluence of the river and sea and in association with upstream routes. The term *mukha* stands for an entry. Interestingly the ports like Dwarka, Tondi, Puhar etc. also had the same meaning. These ports served as port towns with well established markets. *Dronimukha* was a market place which received cargo coming by river and sea routes. Tamralipti and Bharukachbha can be considered as *Dronimukha* ports<sup>2</sup>.

Tamralipti, was Dronimukha as it was located at the confluence of the sea and the river. Ptolemy, Hiuen-Tsang and others have mentioned that sailors and

merchants landing at Tamralipti, located on the bank of navigable river Ganges, also could sail in the Ganges upto Champa, Pataliputra and Varanasi.

#### Archeological Finds :

The archaeological excavation at Pandu Rajar Dhibi (23° 35'; 87° 39') situated in the flood plains of the Ajay in district of Burdwan yielded a black steatite seal with a pictographic and hieroglyphic signs that are considered to be of Mediterranean origin while the terracotta figurines, spindle-whorls and earthen ware are of Crete and Egypt<sup>3</sup>.

The discovery of Roman pottery and terracotta plaque at Chandraketurah (22° 41'; 88° 41') of 24 Parganas district indicates that Bengal had close commercial ties with the Roman world.

Archaeological findings from the excavations at Tamralipti, carried out by Archaeological Survey of India, unearthed copper coins and terracotta figurines dated to Sunga period (3rd cent. BC). Rouletted ware and other objects like sprinkler indicate the overseas contact of Tamralipti with the Romans. Among the ancient structural remains of Tamralipti (2nd-3rd cent. AD) a brick built stepped tank indicate that the prosperity of Tamralipti is significant<sup>4</sup>.

The distribution of Painted Grey Ware and Northern Black Polished Ware in the sites along the rivers of Ghaghara, Ganga and Yamuna clearly suggest the use of riverine routes for the ancient trade channels. Further the movement of country boats towards Kausambi, Champa and Tamralipti along the Ganga and Yamuna is also mentioned in the Buddhist literature<sup>5</sup>.

It is believed that the ancient place of Tamralipti was built on the bank of Rupanarayana river. Part of the city is buried under the river silt and the temple remains are now partly underground. Houses are found at 18 to 20 feet below the surface. A considerable number of silver and copper coins bearing Buddhist symbols have recently been discovered in the midst of debris from the crumbling banks of the Rupanarayana<sup>6</sup>.

#### Literary Sources :

The *Mahabharata* mentions Tamralipti bringing glory to Yuddhisthira. Bhima conquered all the regions of Bengal and at last reached Tamralipti and from there he proceeded towards Sagaradvipa (Sumatra). He defeated the ruler and received gifts such as sandal wood, precious stones, pearl, gold, silver and diamond<sup>7</sup>.

The *Mahavamsa* and *Rajavalliya* mentioned that in 500 BC Prince Vijaya of Bengal with his followers conquered and colonized Ceylon. The texts refer to Tamralipti as Tamalitta and mentions that their journey from Tamralipti to Ceylon

was covered in only seven days<sup>8</sup>.

The Pali text, *Dathadhatuvamsa* describes that ships sailed from Bengal to far off places and there was a regular traffic between Tamralipti and Ceylon. *Dipavamsa* mentioned that King Devanampiya of Ceylon sent a mission to Emperor Asoka that reached the port of Tamralipti. On their return to Ceylon King Asoka provided army escort to the mission members who carried the Bodhi tree from Tamralipti. Prince Mahendra made his journey by water route from Pataliputra to Tamralipti and then on the Ceylon. Asoka travelled upto Tamralipti to see off Sanghamitra carrying a branch of the Bodhi tree to Ceylon by ship<sup>9</sup>.

The *Sankha Jataka*, *Samudra Jataka* and *Mahajanaka Jataka* record that the traders from central India used to pass through Tamralipti on en route to their voyages to Sri Lanka and Burma. The other text *Kathasaritsagara* mentions Tamralipti as a port and also an emporium centre during the period 4th to 12th century AD<sup>10</sup>.

Tamralipti also figures in the works of Pliny and Ptolemy as Taluctae and Tamalitie, respectively. Fa-Hien visited Tamralipti after covering a long distance from Champa and mentioned that it was a prosperous sea port. He sailed in a big merchant vessel for fourteen days from Tamralipti and reached Ceylon<sup>11</sup>. According to I-Tsing, he visited Palambang, Keddah, Nicobar Islands and finally terminated at Tamralipti. He estimated the distance between Nicobar and Tamralipti as 900 to 960 miles with a sailing times of about 15 days<sup>12</sup>. Hiuen-Tsang, informs that Tamralipti is fourty yojanas. In Tamralipti there were five to six monasteries and people of Tamralipti were rich. I-Tsing and Hiuen-Tsang embarked to China from Tamralipti<sup>13</sup>. Acharya Haribhadra Suri in his *Samaraichchakaha* mentions that Tamralipti had contacts with Ceylon, Malaya and China.

#### Epigraphy and Numismatic Evidences :

Coins with boat symbols issued by the Satavahanga King were found on the Andhra coast. Punch marked coins with similar motifs were also collected from the excavations of Chandraketugarh and other sites of Bengal. This confirms brisk maritime activity of Bengal. Boat symbols have also continued on the cast copper coins on which vessel is depicted with a long oar and boatman<sup>14</sup>. The ship symbol is noticed on the terracotta sealings and in the graffiti on pottery from the coastal Bengal and also inland centres of the Ganges. Similar type of objects of Vaisali depict a boat with a prow, stern, oar, passenger decks and a female standing in the boat<sup>15</sup>. The Roman gold coins of Gorbian, Constantine and others found at Bamanghati and Tamralipti shows evidence of contact with the Romans<sup>16</sup>.

The terracotta seals of Bangarh, Hadipur and Tamralipti Museum examined by Mukherjee are inscribed in Kharoshti Brahmi script of early centuries of

Christian era. The vessel on the seal of Bangarh is a bowl shaped sailing boat filled with corn and the bows at both ends are decorated with *Makaramukhas*<sup>17</sup>. A seal found at Chandraketugarh, depicts a boat with a single mast and bears Kharoshti-Brahmi inscription. The vessel resembles the ship motif on the coin of Gautamiputra Yajna Sri Satkarni and the boat motif painted in the caves of Ajanta<sup>18</sup>.

The recent archaeological excavations at Kotasur in Birbhum district of Bengal has brought to light a coin with a boat motif besides Northern Black Polished Ware, Sunga terracotta, black and red ware and other artifacts<sup>19</sup>.

### Trade Routes and Merchandise :

It seems possible that People from all parts of India came by land and river route to the nearest port and then made a coastal voyage to Tamralipti. From Tamralipti ships made direct voyages to the Far East countries. Thus, Tamralipti, is the first port on the east coast of India where regular sailing to Burma, Malay Peninsula, East Indies, Indochina and beyond was possible.

During Mauryan period the overseas trade and commerce of India were at their zenith. Trade routes were connected to all the provincial capitals. Tamralipti was connected with the leading cities of northern India such as Pushkalavati, Taxila, Sakala, Mathura, Kausambi, Varanasi, Vaisali, Pataliputra and Champa. Traders brought their commodities to Tamralipti by land route then exported to Southeast Asian countries, Ceylon and China<sup>20</sup>.

The coastal trade route between Tosali and Tamralipti was very hazardous due to rivers and robbery but it was popular in 1st century BC. This route could be traced from Tosali through along coastal line Lalitagiri, Darmasala, Jajatipur (Jajpur), Soro, Jayampur in Orissa that finally ended with Tamralipti<sup>21</sup>.

In ancient times, long distance trade was not possible without halting at intermediate places for want of water and food. Sailors voyaging from Tamralipti, Palur and Kalingapatnam to foreign countries used Nicobar Island as halting stations. I-Tsing mentioned that Nicobar Island was a month's sail from Tamralipti and China from Sri Vijaya was twenty days sail<sup>22</sup>.

The author of the Periplus says "Tamralipti is a great commercial city near the mouth of the Ganges, the trade of which consisted chiefly in cloths of the most delicate texture and extreme beauty"<sup>23</sup>.

*Brihadkalpasutrabhashya* informs that Nepal, Sindh and Tamralipti were famous as good cloth manufacturing centres. *Manasamanqal* a Bengali text mentions a large number of items like horses, spices imported at this port. The chief export items were grains, earthen ware, cloths and glass<sup>24</sup>. The products such as muslins, pearls and silk were sent to Tamralipti and other ports of western India from North

East regions of India for overseas shipment. An eleventh century Bengali Buddhist manuscript, discovered in Horiuzi temple of Japan, suggests the contact of Bengal with Japan.

### Boat-Building Technology :

As Tamralipti falls in the *Dronimukha* type of port, literature provide information on the use of the river and sea going vessels in Tamralipti. The secular texts, Bengali and Jaina literatures bear ample testimony to this fact. The boat and ship motifs carved on the temples of Bengal also sheds light on the boat-building technology of Tamralipti.

The boats depicted on the terracotta temples are round hulled with raised pointed ends, shallow draft, planks are joined edge to edge and clamped together into rafts, canoes, dugouts, cargo carriers, racing boats and house boats<sup>25</sup>.

The *Charyapadas* mention about the helms, oars, masts, sails and wheels. The Bengali texts such as *Manasamangala* of Bansidasa describe the parts of the vessel as *dara* (helm), *malumkastha* (mast), *iala* (hold), *mainakastha* (prow), *chhaighar* (shed), *patatan* (deck), *dandakerval* (oar), *fas* (chord) *nangar* (anchor), *pal* (sail) and *dara* (keel)<sup>26</sup>.

The *Chandikayya* mentions several kinds of ships. The *Tiathuti*, *Sukapankhi*, *mayurapankhi*, *Paksiraja* resembling *Makara* are found in the old Bengali literature. Besides the captain and crew, the vessels also used to carry carpenter, blacksmith, craftsman, soldiers and admirals for the safety of the boat, cargo and passengers. The representation of boats and ships on the brick temples of Bengal reveal that the similar type of vessels were used in Tamralipti those sailed to Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, China and Japan.

### Causes of Decline

The manmade factors such as political anarchy, taxation and foreign attack as well as natural factors like change of river course, siltation, erosion have played a predominant role in making the Tamralipti port gradually inoperative. The decline of Tamralipti port started from 10th century A.D onwards. The main reason was due to the siltation in the river and changes in the river course which is still continuing. The place of Tamralipti was taken by Saptagram or Satgaon<sup>27</sup>.

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