UNIT 27  CASE STUDY : MASULIPATNAM*

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27.1  INTRODUCTION

The port city of Masulipatnam (Machhliapatnam) is aptly described by Arasaratnam presenting contrasting characteristics of ‘approval and hate’ as expressed by European travellers:

It is thus claimed as an excellent harbour and a dangerous roadstead, healthy and airy while also being putrid and of foul stench, well-watered and swampy, good stately buildings and dangerously congested streets, a place of extensive and busy commerce and of rigorous state monopolies’ (Ray and Arasaratnam, 1994: 3).

The city in its hey days was called bandar-i mubarak, but had a short life span. It emerged into prominence in the late sixteenth century and saw its decline in the eighteenth century. Let us traverse the journey of the rise, growth and decline of the port and the city.

27.2  PHYSICAL CONTOURS OF THE PORT

Masulipatnam situated on latitude 16°9’N, longitude 81°10’E, was the port on the southeast coast (of modern Andhra Pradesh) during the 16th-17th centuries. It is located at one of the many exits of the river Krishna and its tributaries into the Bay of Bengal and these tributaries constituted the Krishna delta, an alluvial plain. One branch of the river falls into the sea at Pt. Divi while the major stream breaks up into three mouths and disgorges itself further to the south. Pt. Divi is an important navigational mark for ships sailing into Masulipatnam. From Pt. Divi, the coast extends towards north-northwest and constitutes a semi-circular bay in which Masulipatnam is situated. In the entire stretch a number of branches of the Krishna river fall into the sea and deposit large quantities of earth forming shoal flats along the coast. The coast is of low level and the rise and fall of tide is about 4 to 5 feet in the spring at the mouth of these rivers. The shore is very flat and the depth in approaching it is not more than half a fathom (a unit to

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measure the depth of water) for the distance of a mile. Large ships bound for the Masulipatnam road are advised to keep along the edge of the shoal flats and not access closer than 4 fathoms of water. The semi-circular bag has at its eastern most end, Pt. Narsapore, where the river of Narsapore, a branch of the Godavari falls into the sea.

It was an open roadstead port, like several others on the Coromandel coast; it had possibly the best anchoring terrain. It had a firm ground, a mixture of sand and mud, was available from 1 to 4 miles from the shore where ships of upto 1000 tons could anchor safely for most of the years, except during the turbulent months of October, November and December. The ships stood in 3 to 4 fathoms of water. It was possibly the best anchoring ground in the Bay of Bengal. The port was situated on the southern side of a bay commonly called the Bay of Masulipatnam. In fact, the masula boat (flat-bottomed, high sided, open boat) that piled from shore to ship were generally of larger size than their counterparts further south. They had a capacity of 6 to 8 lasts or 12 to 16 tons.

Masula Boat, Madras, 1851
Source: http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/m/largeimage56887.html

The bay to the north of Masulipatnam provided safe anchoring for vessels during the height of the south-west monsoon in the months of June and July, when the winds in the Bay of Bengal are strong. During this period there is strong surf at the bar of the Masulipatnam port and to the north and south, this bay is most calm. Native craft when faced the heavy surf, used to sail and anchor in the smooth waters of the bay. It has a soft muddy bottoms. Larger vessels could not sail into it but small crafts of the locality could easily enter into it. It extends 3 miles between the villages of Pechapatnam and Chinnakarai.

Of the two creeks which opened into the sea north of Masulipatnam, none of them was large or perennial which could facilitate vessels of any size. One was located on the north of a suburban village Surigamato the north of Masulipatnam, and was commercially not viable. The other was located on the north of Masulipatnam suited for sea-transport and was useful to the port and the city. It used to have 3 to 18 feet of water depending on seasons and plying of boats depended on that.
Masulipatnam, 1759
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/Musalipatam_Menschilipatnam_port_in_1759.jpg

27.3 WATER, HEALTH AND THE CITY DWELLINGS

The water around the city was mostly stagnant, creating swamps which emitted a nasty stench in particular month of the year. The climate conditions of the city and its vicinity had attracted contradictory responses from its visitors. Some praised its salubrious climate while large majority of travellers reported the opposite.

The water of Masulipatnam was brackish, saline and not-fit for consumption. Therefore potable water was brought from 5 to 9 miles in the interior. Europeans boiled the water with spices for drinking purposes. This storage of drinkable water created problems for the urban population.

Death rates were very high among the Dutch and the English who had large presence there. This was presumable the reason behind their constant search for new residences, a few miles away from the city of Masulipatnam. The English had established Madapolam and suburban areas of Narsapole as their alternative places of residence. Since places were situated near perennial rivers and in the shade of a cultivated interior of the Godavari delta, it had a positive impact on their health.

27.4 PORT AND THE CITY: LINKAGES

The port and the city were linked in a curious manner. Goods were unloaded near the river mouth or boats of about 10 to 15 tones used to enter the river and unload goods nearer the city. The city was situated some distance (a little over a mile) away from the bar of the river. At the bar of the river, on the sea front, emerged a small complex of buildings which subsequently transformed into a bar town and included a basecamp.
small office and a guard post for the Shah-bunder. The city was linked with the port by the sandy stretch which was prone to the flow of the tide and turned into a swamp regularly. At some point a bridge was built over the swamp to facilitate trade and traffic. The city was built on a low lying land, with a river in the north deep enough to allow small ships to come in and the southwestern part of the city was on the higher ground, by virtue of which it was less prone to floods and received better ventilation. However, the busiest part with commercial activities was confined to the northern side, closer to the river. In the history of Masulipatnam port and city, what was very striking was the relative frequency of cyclonic storms and floods with ravaging impact on the coast.

The city was devoid of any stately buildings for public or private purposes. However, later in the latter half of the 17th century, there are frequent references to large attractive residences built by private individuals.

27.5 PORT AND THE HINTERLAND: POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Two peculiar characteristic features of the pre-modern port cities were their fragility and proneness to change on account of changed political circumstances in their hinterland. The rise of Masulipatnam in the period 1570-1600 coincided with the decline of Pulicat in the decade of 1565-1575. The history of the port city in earlier centuries is not so well attested by contemporary sources.

The Arab traders mention Masulipatnam as a port settlement founded by them in the fourteenth century and occupied by Bahmani Sultans late in the fifteenth century. The area between the mouths of the Krishna and Godavari rivers, was the frontier between three political rivals: the Vijayanagar Empire, the Bahmani kingdom’s successor – the Golconda Sultanate – and the Gajapati kingdom of Odisha. Another earlier evidence about Masulipatnam port is a Chinese rutter (or pilot, c.1500) who mentions navigation between Sha-li-patan and Lamri (or Aceh head). Tom Pires and Duarte Barbosa hardly...
referred to it. In 1550, it is referred to in the bill of lading of nau de Rei. Thus, as late as the mid-sixteenth century, Masulipatnam was a supplier of textiles to other ports. It played a limited role.

However, in early 1560’s, Ibrahim Qutb Shah (1550-1580), the fourth Sultan of Golconda, brought the area under its administration. With the sack of Vijaynagar city Ibrahim Qutb Shah got enormous tribute transferred to Golconda, which further contributed to its emergence as a provincial fortress town with incredible capacity for sustaining a huge population. Ibrahim Qutb Shah’s contemporary and namesake, Ibrahim Adil Shah of Bijapur also showed interest in seaborne trade. By the 1560’s, there developed close links between Golconda and Masulipatnam soon in the 17th century it transformed itself into the principal commercial centre in the Bay of Bengal.

27.6 PORTUGUESE AND THE PORT OF MASULIPATNAM

The Portuguese were familiar with the ports on the Krishna-Godavari delta. This is corroborated by the maps of the 1530’s and 1540’s. The first mention of the port occurs in the Portuguese sources in 1540’s. It is mentioned as a shelter for fugitive and renegade Portuguese and also as a supplier of white and painted textiles. By 1568 the Portuguese captain of Manar was expected to collect tributes from ports on Coromandel especially Masulipatnam. The emphasis on tribute from Masulipatnam in Portuguese sources was based on the perception of the Portuguese who considered Masulipatnam as part of an anti-Portuguese (i.e. anti *Estado da India*) network of trade. His hostility of the Portuguese was also owing to Masulipatnam’s trade with Aceh, Malay Peninsula ports, Pegu, and Arakan. Masulipatnam’s trade with Aceh was identified as part of an anti-Portuguese or at least non-Portuguese network of high seas trade. The rise of the north Sumatran Sultanate of Aceh in 16th century is explained in terms of, on one hand, its political and cultural influence in the Indonesian Archipelago (especially as a centre of diffusion of Islam) and on the other hand, rise of Aceh was attributed to Aceh’s influence over pepper and spice trade with the Red Sea. Therefore, in this context, the capture of Melaka by the Portuguese (1511) led to the flight of Muslim merchants from there, initially to the northeast Sumatran ports of Pasai and Pidir and later from 1520’s on to Aceh, or more precisely Kutara, the Bandar Aceh Dar-us Salam. Aceh rose to prominence as an enterpot for its proximity to the pepper producing area of the Sumatran west coast and its linkage with Western Indian Ocean. But during the seventeenth century, the links between Aceh and the Western Indian Ocean weakened. During the sixteenth century, the link between Masulipatnam and Aceh grew stronger and stronger. We hear about an axis formed between the Sultans of Bijapur, Golconda and Aceh and one Portuguese source refers to sacral sieges of Melaka by the anti-Portuguese league when Sultan of Golconda Cota Maluco (i.e. Qutb-ul Mulk) helped Aceh directly to fight against the common enemy, the Portuguese. Thus, Masulipatnam was identified as non-Portuguese/ anti-Portuguese network of high seas trade.

Between 1512 to 1570’s, while the Portuguese on one hand established fairly good relations with the succeeding kings of Aceh, on the other hand Aceh also maintained an independent relationship with Masulipatnam. In 1581, a Portuguese source refers to Masulipatnam as a port of the Cota Maluco, in which there is great trade with diverse parts, principally with Aceh which they supply from there with textiles, munitions, and arms and with many other things of importance. By 1585, the English traveller Ralph Fitch reported about the prosperity of Masulipatnam, where ships came from ‘India, Pegu and Sumatra, richly laden with pepper, spices, etc.’
However, between 1580’s and 1590’s some kind of truce was established between Goa and Qutb Shahi rulers. By 1590, as per the treaty of 1590, the Sultan of Golconda Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah agreed to send a shipload of rice (about 300 khandis or 10,000 kg.) every year to Portuguese garrisons at Ceylon. Another major occurrence around 1590 was that a link was established between Masulipatnam and the Red Sea and Mecca. An additional demand was created for export of textiles from northern Coromandel and interior Andhra (near Warangal), an aspect of trade which already had precedence but now there was a concentrated demand for export of textiles from Masulipatnam to the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Around 1590, another complementary event took place, i.e., rise of Narasapurpettai (commonly known as Narasapore, in Company records) as ship manufacturing centre which had many advantages as a shipbuilding yard. Locally built ships facilitated Sultan’s dispatch of rice to be distributed as alms in Mecca, and travel of Hajj pilgrims. With frequent occurrences of impediments and their resolutions in Masulipatnam’s trade with the Portuguese, Masulipatnam eventually (an agreement was reached between Portuguese and the rulers of Masulipatnam) emerged as a major trading enterpot.

27.7 MASULIPATNAM IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The port and the city expanded greatly in the seventeenth century. John Fryer (1672-81) estimated the population of the city in 1673 around 200,000. The seventeenth century largely belonged to Dutch domination. Ever since the collapse of the Vijayanagara power in 1565 Qutb Shahi rulers of Golconda maintained effective control over the city and the port. Among the European powers, Portuguese presence gradually receded. The Dutch established themselves in the port in 1606 with a modest presence and by 1640s they were a formidable force here. However, from 1678 their downturn started. Though, in 1686 they emerged once again so powerful that even they could control the city and the port for a few months ousting the Qutb Shahis. In contrast the English presence remained more or less muted throughout. The English established themselves in 1620s, followed by the Danes in 1625. Danes though initially had prominence, by late seventeenth century they too became feeble. The French were the last to enter in 1669.

In the seventeenth century southeast Asian network (Acheh, Pegu, Melaka) played an important role in the growth of Masulipatnam as an important port. The city attracted the merchants and traders on account of its rich hinterland which made the city an important centre of export of painted chintz, salt and rice. Masulipatnam is surrounded by a web of weaving villages in a radius of 50 miles. The island of Divi was rich in chaya root, a plant used for making excellent dye, made the region rich in chintz production. The port was also known for its salt pans, thus salt formed an important component of the city’s exports. In the seventeenth century Masulipatnam’s yearly income from salt exports alone was 41,000 pagodas. It was exported via coastal route to Bengal and down south and through the caravans of Lambadi traders on oxloads into the interiors.

Interestingly, neither the Golconda Sultanate nor European Companies ever tried to fortify the town. There was no flotilla of boats ever maintained for the coastal defense, nor was the city fortified. In 1672 Qutb Shahis built a mud fort at the bar of the river. In the city Dutch defense was by far the best, though in 1752 when French occupied Masulipatnam they began major fortifications of the city.

The city and the port had multi ethnic/linguistic groups – Mongols, Turks, Persians,
Arabs, Chulia (Tamil) Muslims, Golconda Muslims, Telugus, Odias, Arakanese, Peguans, Achenese, Malays, Javanese, English, Dutch, Danes, French, Jews, Pathans, Armenians, Kannadas. Sultan Muhammad Qutb Shah’s (1621-24) close links with the Safavids encouraged the influx of Persian merchants further. The city enjoyed communal harmony and hardly any instance of robbery or theft was reported. William Norris (1699) observed ‘absence of drunkenness, disorders, riotous behaviours, or quarrelling in the city’ (Ray and Arasaratnam, 1994: 20).

27.8 DECLINE OF THE PORT OF MASULIPATNAM

The port and the town started declining by mid-eighteenth century. The rich hinterland on which the prosperity of the town and the port depended for its supplies got affected severely. The rice producing hinterland on which the town depended greatly for its food requirements and exports, earlier yielded revenues of Rs. 100,000 (from parganas of Tumdurru and Bomdata, the best paddy yielding regions), in 1752 were leased out to meager Rs. 22,000 and in 1753 for mere Rs. 3000. Further, Masulipatnam was feeder port to consumer markets of Golconda and Hyderabad. However, the Nizams of Hyderabad hardly paid attention to the route. Gradually the exports of products like Bengal silk and other luxury goods to the interiors declined. The rise of Vizagapatnam for export of textiles also had a detrimental effect. In 1766 English got control over the resources of Northern Sarkars. In this period major demand was for long cloth which was largely fetched from Madapollam and Injaram and was indirectly financed from the resources of Masulipatnam itself. Then the textiles were to be shipped. Since Vizagapatnam was better located, British found it more convenient to transport the Andhra goods to Vizagapatnam. It had detrimental effect on Masulipatnam. Gradually merchants’ prospects also declined for, by 1771 English East India Company tried to reach directly to the weavers in the hinterland rather than through brokers and merchants. The chiefs of Masulipatnam and Vizagapatnam vehemently opposed this in vain. The ultimate result was the increasing penetration of European private enterprises which further contributed to the regeneration of the hinterland economy. By the turn of the eighteenth century Masulipatnam was exporting very limited quantities to Jeddah and the Persian Gulfport of Bussora and there also existed some trade with Bengal. Merchant families also started migrating to San Thome and Madras. Only a few Armenian merchants continued their trade that too as agents to Madras and Calcutta merchants. Further, East India Company hardly paid attention to the maintenance of the port resulted in lot of silting. Jacob Hafner, Dutch East India Company servant, who visited the city in 1778 found ‘the morass outside the walls that emitted an unbearable stench in dry weather, the insufferable heat when “one can neither, read, nor write nor think”…he found the city “moderately well populated” and singled out “Moors” and Armenians among its population.’ The final blow to the port was done by 1800 cyclone resulting in flattening the area between the sea and the town ‘to an “expanse of sea and mud”. The earlier advantage of the secured spaces for the ship thus disappeared leading English to abandon the port in 1833 (Ray and Arasaratnam, 1994: Chapter 4).

27.9 SUMMARY

The port and the city of Masulipatnam saw its rise in the mid-sixteenth century. It was hub of Arab, Persian, European and Indian merchants – a truly cosmopolitan city. The advantage of the port was in its being a perfect natural harbour. Its growth could largely be attributed to possessing vast hinterland supplying rice and fine textiles for exports. The city declined with the rupture of this port-hinterland nexus, rise of Vizagapatnam and finally the cyclone disaster of 1800 destroyed its advantage of being one of the finest natural harbour.
27.10 EXERCISES

1) What situational advantages the port of Masulipatnam possessed?

2) What was the impact of Masulipatnam’s geological terrain on water, health and the city dwellings?

3) Trace the prominence of Portuguese in the port town of Masulipatnam in the sixteenth century.

4) Discuss the rise of European powers in the seventeenth century in the port town of Masulipatnam.

27.11 REFERENCES


