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BROACH, THE DECLINING RIVER PORT OF WESTERN INDIA

A Note

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ABSTRACT : The paper attempts to bring out the development and importance of Broach as an inland river port located on the River Narmada. In the pre-steam navigation age the port was more accessible from the inland producing areas and the market of consumption. In the absence of railways, sailing vessels were the most economic means of transport and Broach was one of the few important centres of trade that served a vast area of Gujarat. A favourable inland location having greater accessibility, a rich hinterland and a very extensive foreland of Arab countries. Indian sea coast and even the Far East and European nations were the factors responsible for its early development. Added to these advantages was the deep and capacious estuary of the River Narmada which has been protected by the occurrence of few islands in the estuary.

The port, however, has been declining for the last few decades not only because of better land transport but also due to competition from steamships which are more efficient, economic and secure and for which Broach is not suitable. The port nevertheless can have great potential for the coastal trade of Gujarat within a limited area.

Right from the earliest times Broach has made a great contribution to the trade of Western India. It was a famous river port. In the days of sailing vessels, Broach was known for its trade with the Middle East countries. Mcrindles in his times described Broach as the greatest seat of commerce in Western India. It's trade was mostly with the coastal territory of Western India. In the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a good deal of trade with Saurastra and Malabar and about 600 to 700 vessels used to visit Broach every day.

During the reign of Anhilwara Dynasty (1094-1143), Broach was a leading port of Western India and was responsible for handling the foreign trade of Gujarat coast. The city exploited its position on the mouth of the river Narmada and become a good estuarine port in the historical past. The city as a port has become defunct now because of the silting of the astuary. As early as in the middle of the twelth century Broach is described as in the Gazetteer of Broach and Surat as a station for ships coming from China to Sindh, a city large and beautiful,

well-built of bricks and plaster with people rich and enterprising in speculation and distant expeditions.

Due to trading enterprise of the English people, Broach became the Centre of a large and prosperous trade area. Not only Indians, but Arabs and Moguls also used to come for trade with India. It can be observed that in a peaceful political atmosphere Broach was the nearest sea port in the West, including the Arab countries. Accessibility to the interior was possible by small crafts to a distance of 300 miles. This gave prosperity to the city. However, the domination of the British in the 19th century over the Indian trade affected the prosperity of the town which lost its importance as a coastal port of Western India. The importance was shifted to cities like Surat and Bombay, which had been developed by that time and had better contacts inland, especially with the cotton growing areas of the Deccan. By the middle of 19th century, Broach was almost without any foreign trade, but the establishment of British rule over India and a reliable District administrative organization for the city, saved it from further decline.

In the middle of 19th century the trade and commerce of Indian waters had gradually passed into the hands of Europeans who did not attach much importance to Broach. They had developed their own port by this time in Bombay. Even earlier, Broach did not find sufficient favour at the hands of Portuguese. Also, due to competition with Surat, which was being rapidly developed by the East India Company, who started her factories in Surat, Broach lost much of its importance.

The trade with the Middle East with the Arabs and Moors on which Broach had thrived also declined as a result of the appearance of European power in the navigation of the Arabean Sea. This shift of maritime power was a great loss to Broach because it was more a commercial rather than an industrial town.

PHYSICAL SUITABILITY OF THE PORT

Broach, a very important river port in the historical past, is located on the Arabean shore of Western India. The port is located on the estuary of River Narmada, one of the prominent rivers of the Deccan plateau which push the continental divide between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabean Sea to the further East. It lies on 21 42' North latitudes and 73 02' East longitudes and marks almost the northern most point of the coastal plain which stretches in a longitudinal narrow strip between the Western Ghats and the Arabean Sea. The estuary of the River Narmada on which Broach is situated appears like an indentation, probably as a result of the submergence of the coastline which has resulted in the penetration of the sea inland. The occurrence of a few islands in the estuary represents the remanents of the interfluves between the distributaries of River Narmada, before the phase of submergence had set in. This had given an additional advantage to the port of Broach in two ways. Submergence has made the site of the city more accessible to the sailingvessels and secondly the occurrence of islands in the estary has extended protection to the river port by resisting the breakers in the estuary. The hanging Peninsula of Kathiawad, though has lengthened the route to this city from the Arabian countries, yet it has made the approach to the city more secure, once the sailing vessels reach the Gulf of Cambay.

REASONS FOR DECLINE OF BROACH

There has been a considerable change in the pattern of trade within the last fifty years. During this period not only the volume of trade has declined but significant changes have been observed in the commodities of trade.

In the beginning of present century one of the main items of import was coconut from Malabar Coast and crores of coconuts were imported every year. This provided employment to a large number of families. The trade, however, at present has declined considerably due to the large amount of investment needed to make the coastal trade more economic. In addition to this, the lack of security has also made coastal trading less advantageous than transport by railways.

Another item of import was wet dates. In the trade of this commodity, Broach has suffered competition from ports of Saurashtra which are nearer to Persian Gulf ports from where wet dates were imported.

A commodity which Broach used to export was 'long-dal' which was grown locally but consumed in the south. The export of this commodity is now diverted to Kandla Bunder from where it is exported as bulk cargo. This furnishes a typical example of the decline of one port due to the development of the another.

Broach is an important cotton producing district and hence is an important collecting centre for cotton, which is then transported from Broach to Bombay and Ahmedabad, the leading textile industrial centres of India. Before the development of rail and road transport, cotton was also one of the exports from this port, but now due to competition by rail and road, cotton is diverted along these land routes.

Among the other commodities, cereals, pulses and oil-seeds are also some items of import. They are collected at Broach and then sent to other places. Being the largest town of the district, the city has some wholesale trading in consumer goods which are distributed in its service area.

In addition to these economic considerations for the decline in the trade of Broach, natural causes like silting up of the river mouth has further induced a downward trend in the trade of Broach. Marine surveys have been conducted since the year 1910 and recently also to improve the channel.

Transport cost, economy, time, security and development of other ports are some of the important factors which have adversely affected the coastal trade of Broach in almost all items except oil. Trade in recent years in oil between Broach and Saurashtra has increased considerably. This is because of circutons routes and a number of transits by railways.

What was once at the zenith of its glory seems to be declining progressively without any resistance. The economic and historical conditions obtained in the past have considerably changed and no longer effort favourable considerations for maintaining port activities at Broach. Even the physical factors are no longer same in their relative importance to economic activities due to changes and innovations introduced in the means of transport. The port, however, can be developed to the advantage of Gujarat particularly for the coastal area.

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