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Trade Dynamics during Delhi Sultanate

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Abstract: ***Chaos ensures survival, and man's need to constantly procure better goods for evolution is an integral part of this survival. Even before time existed as a concept, trade was prevalent among homo-sapiens. However, what role does trade have in our understanding of history? In Greek Mythology, Mercury (god of commerce) held the caduceus which was a symbol of sacredness and revival. The caduceus and Mercury are nothing but a metaphor for the role of trade in History. Trade ensures the survival of civilization and hence becomes an elixir of evolution. Trade creates history by ensuring that there is movement, connectivity, and chaos. History can be perceived as a subjective concept by many and if there's anything that holds the factual part of history together, it is archaeology. Remnants of trade are often supported by the archaeological evidence of a particular region. Hence, this paper makes an attempt to understand the society during Sultanate by delving into the trade dynamics. It is believed that trade influenced the economy and lifestyle during the Sultanate to a very large extent. Information about the trade will also guide us through the causes of the market and internal reforms that took place in this glorious era.***
Keywords: Sultanate, trade dynamics, history, survival, internal reforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine Mercury sailing through the infamous Ghaznavid invasions, generosity of the Mamluks, Razia's unorthodoxy, Khilji's reforms, and the Tughlaq experiments that India had witnessed. Won't it be phenomenal to let him explore the remarkable phase of Indian history that was known for its diversity, politics, cultural heritage, and royal leadership? In spite of the various manifestations of love and royalty established during the Mughal period, it is the Delhi Sultanate that creates a sense of romanticism in Medieval India. Opinions might vary but it is a fact that Delhi Sultanate laid the foundation for the Mughal rule and its progress. All the economic reforms, social structure, religious policies of the Sultanate period find their legacy in the Mughal era. Thus, it becomes very important to analyse and understand the various dimensions of our history through different perspectives. Trade is one such perspective and through various sources, we can construct the pattern of trade that was prevalent in the past. The economy of any society is closely interwoven with its respective trade and the composition of exports and imports highlight the needs of people. Learning about the market reforms of Alauddin Khilji and unconventional experiments of Mohammad Bin Tughlaq has always been fascinating. However, as students of history it is our duty to find the roots of every incident and event. As E.H Carr put it, "The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present." Trade is as important as wars, battles, policies and genealogies in understanding History and thus the aim of this project is to focus on the commercial aspect of the Delhi Sultanate and the impact it had on the overall economy. Topics like International trade, maritime dynamics, mercantile class, exclusive goods and salient features have been discussed in this paper. Authenticity and diversity were the main principles that were adhered to while writing this paper. It is an attempt at providing information and opinions from varied and trustworthy primary sources. During the articulation, works of scholars like Irfan Habib, Tapan Raychaudhari, K.S Lal, Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, and Harbans Mukhia were referred to along with the Cambridge History of Medieval India, scholarly articles, research papers and archived journals. Compared to other academic assignments, the research for this paper felt like a journey through the crooks and streams of Delhi Sultanate that gave a bird's eye view of being a merchant. The main goal of this research is to make the reader and critics feel the same. If not, we always have the caduceus to revive things for us, don't we?

II. INTERNAL TRADE

Internal trade occupied a major share in the economy of the Delhi Sultanate. The base was mandis in large villages, while the focal points were Delhi and the provincial capitals. Ibn Batuta's Indian itinerary brought him to towns and cities with large markets, and one market in Delhi appeared to him to be the largest in the world. In another context, the same writer remarks that, with the exception of Quilon and Calicut in Malabar, Sudak in Crimea, and Zaytun in China, he has not seen an equal in the universe when describing the splendid port of Alexandria in Egypt. The rich seaports of Gujarat, Deccan Malabar, and Bengal are described by the Portuguese writer Barbosa as handling an extensive trade (inland, coastal, and overseas) in the remarkable variety of merchandise. In the city of Vijayanagar, large size and huge population, rich bazaars (markets), skilled craftsmen, dealers in precious stones, and other artists impressed profoundly a succession of foreign visitors.

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The Portuguese traveller Domingo Paes was one among these and he has described the heavy traffic and busy markets in his accounts. In villages and small towns, petty business was in the hands of pedlars, shopkeepers, itinerary dealers, and middlemen who were professionals working on a hereditary basis. Special groups or communities were in charge of the large-scale enterprise. Under the caste system, the mercantile community was known as Vaisya. The Multanis and the Gujarati Baniaswere the most important business communities of Northern and Western India. Internal trade was almost completely dominated by the Hindu merchants; but foreign Muslim merchants, generally known as Khurasanis, were engaged in the trade all over the country. The smooth flow of trade depended to a large extent on the cooperation of other classes such as carriers of goods, brokers, bankers, and money lenders. The Banjaras of Rajasthan were engaged in transporting agricultural and other products from one part of the country to another. Their operations were extensive. Hundreds of thousands of oxen were used in their carts and wagons. Brokers played an important role in commercial operations. They frequently increased the price of commodities by charging both the vendor and the buyer a commission. Alauddin Khilji's price control measures included the suppression of the class of brokers. This was, however, a temporary interruption of their work. By the time of Firuz Shah Tughluq, 'the business rules and practices of brokers were sufficiently important to find a place in the legal compendium of the reign'. Bankers accepted deposits and provided capital in the form of loans (hundis). The money lenders, known as sahusand mahajans, played the same role on a smaller scale; they lent money on interest through bonds.4 The Malabari merchants nearly totally monopolized the very profitable direct trade between Gujarat and Malabar. The list of imports from Malabar included cocoa-nuts, emery, wax, iron, and sugar from Bhatkal, sandal-wood, and brazil-wood, silks, cardamon, and other articles. In the Tulu region, the Malabar merchants imported cocoa-nuts, spices, palm sugar, palm wine, and exported rice, iron, and a variety of sugar. The famous market for Burmese rubies and musk, Pulicat, was frequented by a huge number of Muslim ships. The famous Bengal muslins, as well as good white cane sugar, were shipped by Muslim merchants in their own ships to Malabar, Cambay, and other areas, with the price of these products in Malabar being sufficiently high to be recorded by Portuguese writers.

III.OVERSEAS TRADE

For foreign trade, both land and sea routes were used. On the northwest frontier, the Mongol invasions interrupted but did not cut off trade with Turkistan and Khurasan. The commerce in musk, furs, guns, falcons, camels, and horses flourished after the Mongol invasions ended. Horses were the principal article of import. The bulk of foreign trade was sea-borne. On the west, two routes were used. The merchandise was carried either along the Persian Gulf or thence overland through Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast, or by sea route to the Red Sea ports, and thence to the Mediterranean coast through Egypt. From Alexandria, Indian goods were passed on to the Italian merchants for distribution over the rest of Europe. In the fourteenth century, Ormuz became the principal emporium of a trade by the first route. It is worth noting that there was great progress of overland as well as maritime trade between India, Iran, and the countries of Central Asia during the time of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. Aden and Jiddah occupied the same position in the trade by the second route. Ibn Batuta says that Ormuz was the entrepot of the trade of Hind and Sind. From the detailed narrative of Ibn Batutah, it appears that the Western coast of India was studded with a large number of seaports, excellent harbors, and extensive trade. Among these ports, Diu, Goa, Calicut, Cochin, and Quilon gained more prominence. (From south-east Asia and China). The relative smallness of the Indian Ocean explains the enhanced communication and rich consequences. Cotton, fabric, wheat and other cereals, horses, and carnelians were the most common exports. Both Gujarati and Malabari merchants appear to have participated in the coastal trade of the Deccan ports. The former imported silk and cotton cloth, opium, common silk camlets, wheat, gingerly, and horses, and they exported cotton and linen fabrics. The latter imported spices, drugs, areca-nuts, cocoa-nuts, palm-sugar, wax, emery, copper, and quicksilver, and they exported cotton goods, wheat, rice, millet, gingerly oil, muslins, and calicoes. Amir Khusro mentions the use of Shami(Syrian) paper in Delhi. Barbose (around 1518. A.D) further refers to a kind of sash named Sarband made in Bengal, which was used by European ladies for their headdress and by Arab and Persian merchants for their turbans. The trade of the neighbouring island of Ceylon appears to have been largely controlled by the Indians. Merchants from the kingdoms of Coromandel and Malabar, as well as the Vijayanagara, Deccan, and Gujarat, are said to have visited the island and Colombo. The imports consisted of very fine Cambay cotton cloths, saffron, and coral, quicksilver, cinnabar, gold, and silver. The enormous profit margin of this trade may be shown in the fact that elephants were sold in Malabar and Coromandel for 400 or 500 (increasing to 1000 or 1500) Portuguese gold pieces, despite the fact that gold and silver were selling for more than their worth elsewhere. The coastal trade of Coromandel and the Vijayanagara kingdom was carried by Hindu and Muslim merchants from Malabar. The imports consist of areca-nuts, cocoa-nuts, horses, etc., and the exports comprise rice and cloth. In the case of Coromandel, even children were sold into slavery by their parents in times of famine.

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The ports of Malabar were the principal clearinghouse on the Indian side, but Cambay occupied an important position. Ships from this Gujarat port carried merchandise to and brought imports from, Ormuz and Aden. The principal exports were cotton and linen cloths, carpets, drugs, gems, seed-pearls, and carnelians. The principal imports were copper, quicksilver, vermillion, rosewater, gold, silver, woollens, colored velvets, coral, lead, alum, saffron, etc. The author of 'Rahat-us-Sudoor'also refers to Indian swords being exported Cambay had commercial relations with East Africa. According to Barbosa, ships from Cambay visited Makdashau with cloths and spices and returned with gold, ivory, and wax. Cambay cloths and beads were exported in ships to the ports of Melinda, Mombasa, and Kilwar and thence carried by local Muslim merchants to the ports of the Zambesi delta and Sofala for sale in the Bantu Kingdom. The Cambay clothes sold at the African ports and the African ivory sold in Gujarat were paid for in gold. China established direct trade with India in the twelfth century. Regular voyages were made by the Chinese ships to the Malabar ports in the early fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century, Malacca became the most important international port in South-East Asia. Next in importance was Pegu. Among north Indian ports Cambay and Rander in Gujarat, as also ‘the city of Bengala’, participated in the trade with Burma and the islands of South-East Asia. Mahaunsays that ships were fitted out in Bengal and sent out for foreign trade. Not the Hindu merchants of North India, but the foreign Muslim merchants living in the country controlled the country’s foreign trade till the Muslim control over the seas was effectively challenged by the Portuguese about the middle of the sixteenth century.

IV. MARITIME RELATIONS AND PORTS

From the early medieval period, significant changes took place in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean. The activity of trade in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean and China Sea increased from the 7th century. The Persian Gulf and Canton were flocked by Arab merchants. The voyages initially did not involve transhipment but later Malabar Coast became the chief area for this as it could provide the most durable woods. A Group of Muslim settlers followed by other settlers from West Asia, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians appeared in the western and southern Indian coasts. The emergence of the South East Asian empires with Hindu and Buddhist influence in the earlier centuries also gave impetus to the trade of the Indian Ocean of the period. India's participation in the cultural and economic exchange had increased significantly. The control of trade went into the hands of the Chinese junk and continued so till the fifteenth century but the importance of South India did not change. The transhipment in the Malabar Coast continued till late medieval times since it gave security to the goods and ships as the condition of wind varied in the eastern and western side of the Indian coast. By 1200 the commodities of the maritime trade were mainly carried in two types of vessel evolved in the eastern and western ends of the trading route namely the ‘dhow’ and the ‘junk’. Along with this, there were many types of vessels with independent historical origins. The exact genesis of the ' dhow' type ships in India is unknown but the increased demand for Indian textile and spices in the Arab market gives ample proof of India’s importance. By the middle of the 14th-century, one hears of sultans of Madura venturing for an expedition to the Maldives and Ibn Batuta describing the harbor of Mali-pattan of strong wooden defenses suggest the ship-building activity of both Coromondal as well as Malabar. However, knowledge about the ship-building activity in the Bay of Bengal is unknown. Malacca probably had ship-building factories too Bengal also perhaps had a traditional method of ship-building influenced by the Chinese as well as Arabian techniques. Mughal sources as well as Ibn Batuta of the earlier centuries hinted so. The trade between Bengal and Maldives continued in exchange for rice and cowries in traditional palm tree canoes till the twentieth century. Chinese evidence does claim that Bengal had indigenous ship-building traditions. Early 16th-century Portuguese accounts were able to distinguish between ‘dhows’ and ‘junks’. By 1175 the pattern of transshipment was set in the Indian Ocean Trade. The Arabian Sea ships sailed to the ports of Malabar and Coromondol, Eli, Quilon, Calicut, Cochin, Kayal, Malipatan, Negapatan. The commodities then moved from the dhow to the junks for the Eastern Indian Ocean. The Tarikh - i - Ghazan Khan also refers to the frequent visits of Indian traders to the lands of Mongils. The contemporary Arabic sources further furnish detailed information about the expansion of India's trade with the outside world. Shihabuddin-al- Umari informs us that, "The merchants bring pure gold to India and take in exchange merchandise of herbs and Arabic gums." He also mentioned that the merchants, both Indian and foreign at this time appear to be the leading capitalists of their age. They sailed in ships or lived in caravans to different countries7. The garments distributed by Mohammad Bin Tughlaq in spring were prepared in Alexandria. The garments for the summers were prepared in Delhi but their stuff was brought from China and Iraq. Atif also informs us that two thousand slave girls in the harem of Khan-i-Jahan belonged to Rum and China.

A. China

Regarding the Chinese trade one can say that it was always in the hand of the foreigners who were not part of the Confucian bureaucracy. The traders maintained their separate identities strictly. The process of absorption was absent through the traders of Zayton were subjects.

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The exchange of envoys and gifts between China and the Delhi Sultanate proves how important the Indian Ocean trade was to the political powers of the region. The exchange included slaves, luxury goods, and weapons like swords. The Chinese in particular used to send porcelain, spices and silk. Incidentally, spices occupied the bulk of the imports in Chinese trade. Marco Polo listed that each ship could carry 5000 to 6000 bags of spices approximately weighing 720 metric tonnes. Isamirefers to the presence of Chinese traders in Delhi during the reign of Iltutmish.8

The Arabian ships on the contrary carried more staple commodities and precious luxuries. The luxury goods included precious stones like diamonds, perfumes, exotic birds and animals, and expensive textile and wood. The pickles and condiments were also part of the goods that moved in the area.

Furnishing from Gujarat happened to be in demand. Ivory goods, Chinese tea, and crafted vessels were also in high demand. The Coromandel Coast ports of India, for instance, were said by Chinese sources to have exported pearls, coral, betel nuts, cardamons, and cotton products. The fundamental division apart from eastern and western trade can further be classified. Marco Polo and Barbosa mention the huge demand for pepper in the Chinese market. Pepper was cultivated in Ceylon and Indonesia but the largest supplier was Malabar Coast according to Ma Huan and Chau Ju Kua. Chinese sources also state that silk, porcelain, camphor, cloves, sandalwood, cardamons, and gharuwood were all imported by the Malabar Coast from the east. The diamonds of Deccan were in high demand as it could scratch ruby jade and sapphires from Ceylon. The pearls of Tuticorin and Ceylon and corals of the Persian Gulf were consumed highly in China. The Ivory of Africa was in high demand in India. Black slaves of Africa were also in high demand in the Chinese market.

B. Indonesia

The trade between Indonesia and India had definitely existed but the documentation was sparse. Furniture from the Macassar sandalwood was used in the court of the Sultan of Delhi. Indonesian politics saw political control moving from the Sri Vijayas to the Muslim rulers during this time. Before the advent of the Portuguese, the Indonesian land saw complete Islamization. The transshipment continued till the fifteenth century in south India after which Malacca became important.

C. Persian Gulf, Arabia and East Africa

The vast overseas trade of India with Western Asia flowed during this period. The merchandise was carried along the Persian Gulf and thence overland through Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast, and also by the sea-route to the Red Sea ports, and then, Western Europe by the Venetian and other Italian merchants. In the latter part, Hormuz became the grand emporium of the trade by the former route, while Aden and Jiddah were the two great emporia of the trade by the latter route. In the work of Barbosa, we have a valuable report of India's maritime commerce with the Western world at the beginning of the sixteenth century. We find that an enormous and highly profitable trade existed between Indian ports such as Diu, Chaul, Dabhol, Goa, Bhatkal, Calicut, and others, and Arabian and Persian ports such as Jiddah, Aden, Esh-Shihr, and Ormuz. The comprehensive list of imports from India into Ormuz included pepper, cloves, ginger and cardamoms, sandal-wood and brazil-wood, saffron, indigo, etc., from Cambay, Chaul, and Dabhol, as well as Bengal muslins.

The exports carried to India on the return voyage are said to have consisted of Arabian horses (to the number of one thousand to two thousand) and other things. For a while, ships from Cambay brought to it cotton cloth in 'astonishing quantities' as well as drugs, gems, seed-pearls, and carnelians in abundance, and carried back madder, opium, copper, quicksilver, vermilion, gold, and other things from the eastern coast of imported commodities, etc.

The Muslim merchants of Cambay, Chaul, Dabhol, Bhatkal, and Malabar imported cotton cloths, inferior gems, rice, sugar, and spices into the neighboring Arabian port. Ships from Cambay carried to Aden, Mecca, and Ormuz cotton, linen cloths, large carpets, colored cloth as well as spices, and brought back coral, quicksilver, vermilion, lead, gold and silver, madder, rose-water, and opium of superior quality.

Ormuz merchants brought a significant quantity of horses to Goa. Rice was exported from Barakur to Ormuz, Aden, and Esh-Shihr. The foreign Muslim merchants of Calicut made their great annual voyages (from February down to the middle of August, September, and October of the same year), in their fleet; of ten to twelve ships, to Aden as well the Red Sea ports and back. In the list of India's imports mentioned so far, rose-water, frankincense, and horses are specially stated to be the products of Arabia. Other merchandise like copper, vermilion, woolen, and silken cloths, etc., found at Jiddah and Aden for the Indian market was doubtless imported from Europe in return for the Indian merchandise, which was carried via Suez and Cairo to Alexandria for distribution by the Italian merchants over the rest of the European world.

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D. Iran

A Sanskrit text from Gujarat composed in the 13th century is one of the first few sources that reiterated the trade between India and Hormuz. A remarkable bilingual inscription at the famous place Somnath on the Gujarat coast shows that Iranian Muslim merchants also lived and built-in Gujarat.

Marco Polo, who visited the port of Hormuz in 1295 testifies to the flourishing India-Iran trade conducted from that port. According to him, the Indian merchants brought ships loaded with spices, precious stones, ivory, silken cloth, pearls and sold these to the merchants at Hormuz who carried these wares to different parts of the world. A great number of horses of good breed from Iran were exported to India through Kisi (Qeshm) and Curmosa (Hormuz).

V. SALIENT FEATURES

A. Horse trade

"Horses were imported from Turkestan, Russia, Iraq, and Bahrain. When the import of horses had almost ceased as a result of political changes in Central Asia, Balban is reported to have boasted that he could maintain the necessary supplies even if horses from the Mongol territories did not reach India." Warhorses were natural attractions for rulers. The Delhi Sultanate was not an exception when it came to procuring war horses, whether by purchase or by pillage. Information about the Bahri, Tatari and Shami (Iraqi) horses is well documented.

The Kakatiya ruler of Warangal, Rudradeva had to surrender 20,000 Kohiand Bahrihorsesto Malik Kaur (general of Alauddin Khilji). According to Ranabir Chakravarti, these horses were brought to eastern Deccan through Bengal. Chinese documents also point to the overseas trade in horses from Bengal to China.

Apart from that, the Pattinippalai describing the Cola port of Puhar or Kaverippatanam speaks of the arrival of the "warhorses that came by sea." Similarly, to the port of Nirpeyyar in Tondaimandalam came milk-white manned horses with "riches from the north, in ships standing out in the cool ocean by the seafront." These horses from the north appear to have been brought to the Tamil coastal area through the Bay of Bengal network of trade.

B. Precious metals

The flow of precious metals to the Sultanates of Delhi and Gujarat along the major trade routes suggested that changes within their respective circulating media often coincided with external variations in international trade and the pattern of bullion flows from Europe to the Islamic East and the Indian subcontinent.

An important supply of precious metals to India was the Levantine trade, which passed eastern commodities to Europe in exchange for gold and silver since Roman times.

The overseas trade with the Red Sea and the Levant was already an established feature of the economic life when the Delhi Sultanate was established. Significantly, this was also an era of expansion in silver coinage in most of the regions lying to the west. Marco Polo, who was traveling through Iran on his return journey to Europe, described the city as an important center of trade with India in the late 13th century.17

The reference of Indigo in the account of Wassaf facilities the identification of one expensive product for export in exchange of the silver bullion. We can also conclude that the bullion reaching South India and the Deccan was brought to Delhi in raids conducted by Alauddin Khilji and Muhammad Tughlaq.

Tribute paying Bengal also played an important role in increasing the silver treasury of the Sultanate. The Broach hoard throws light on the composition of coins and the source of gold imports and it is possible to link this with the trade pattern of both the exporting and importing countries.

Altogether 448 gold coins have been reported as against 1200 in silver. Out of these 448 coins, 367 are reported to have belonged to the Bahri Mamluk Sultans of Egypt. The coins are unevenly spread across the reigns of 13 Sultans (1260- 1381) and came from 3 major mints of Egypt and Syria.18 But, in the coming years due to a monetary crisis in Europe, the silver and gold bullion became scarce.

This culminated in what we now call the Tughlaq reforms. In a quest to make up for the debasement of silver currency, the copper token currency was introduced by Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. Since then, the share of precious metals in the Indian economy became low. The quantity of silver in coins became the least during the Lodis. However, the proportion of gold in the total bullion exports from Europe, Egypt, and Iran increased to a substantial degree. The currency of South India maintained its gold standard in the 15th century and the region continued to maintain an export surplus by sending spices to the Levant.

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C. Slaves

The contribution of slave labor in the urban life of the Delhi Sultanate was very significant, however, the evidence to confirm notable peasant-slave population is not available. From the works of Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, it is evident that the Slave-trade was a profiting business. According to Ibn Batuta, Multan and the port cities of Gujarat and Lahiri in Sind were crowded by foreign merchants and yielded huge revenue in the form of custom dues. He also emphasized that the exchange of gifts between different rulers that comprised of products of their countries as well as gifted slaves, both male and female, led to diversity in culture and the improvement of crafts.19 The Mafuzat of Sayyid Muhammad al- Husaynī Gaysū Darāz also mentions the various slave trade centers prevalent in our country. Slaves were mainly imported from countries like China, Turkistan, Central Asia, Byzantine, Africa, Arabia, Persia and Khurasan. The eunuchs were imported from Bengal and Malaya islands. The abundance of slaves in India encouraged a continuous export of slaves as well. The purchase of the slaves from India and their sale in Ghazni is documented even before 1325. Different Sultans had their specific slave-trade policies. For instance, Alauddin Khilji banned the export of slaves to Afghanistan. In return, Qutlugh Khwajā, a Mongol general, ordered a ban over the supply of horses to India. Similarly, Firuz Shah also banned the export of slaves. It is evident from the statement of Al Umari that slaves were cheap in India. Since the Sultans aimed to collect a large number of slaves for themselves, therefore, it can be assumed that the policy was made by the Sultans to keep the prices and supply of the slaves in control.

D. Mercantile Class

The Mercantile class is an aspect of trade that often gets ignored while focusing on the Delhi Sultanate. India’s foreign trade, both overland and overseas was truly an international enterprise. In the Indian Ocean trade, Arabs were the dominant class but the Indian traders like Gujaratis, Tamilians did not fall back. From a bilingual inscription dated 1264 in Gujarat, we find that a shipmaster (Nakhuda)'the king of kings of traders' named NuruddinFiroz of Hormuz had bought land and built a mosque. Muslim merchants often traveled overland in caravans to different parts of India, long before the Sultans' armies arrived there. The familiarity bred by such caravans enabled MuhammadBhaktiyarKhilji's troops to masquerade as merchants bringing horses for the sale to the Bengal ruler Lakshmansena's capital of Navadip. The Muslim Bohra merchants were also a part of this trade. The overland trade with Central and West Asia was in the hands of Multanis and Khurasinis and they had settled down in Delhi. Yahya Sirhindi refers to the prosperity of the Khurasani merchants during this period and says," All the big mansions in Delhi were owned by them. They used to purchase all articles such as gold, silver, books, paper and slaves and sent them to Khurasan." According to Barani, the Multani merchants were so wealthy that gold and silver abound in their homes, and the nobility were so stingy with their money that if they wanted to host a feast or a celebration, they had to rush to the Multanis' homes to borrow money. When Barani chose to be scornful of the mercantile antecedents of a minister of Alauddin Khilji, he found the words, 'Multanibacha'(son of a Multani) as appropriately opprobrious for him.

There are good indications that 'Multani' was a term also used for Hindu merchants of the city. Marwaris and the Gujaratis dominated the coastal trade and trade between the coastal ports and north India. They were extremely wealthy and some of them particularly the Jains, spent large sums for the construction of temples. Marco Polo has described them as the "best merchants in the world and most truthful." From the inscriptions, in Naraina and Sarban we find evidence of Baniya class in Delhi. It is likely that most Hindu merchants of Delhi were Banyas. For the richer Bania merchants, Barani seems to use the word 'Sah'.(probably a variant of the Persian Shah).

In a petition drafted by Amir Khusro on behalf of a merchant and presented to a high official during the time of Allauddin Khilji, there is a reference to foreign traders in Delhi who had made enormous profits in Syria, Abysinnia, Egypt and Madain and were expected to proceed to China and Khita after visiting Delhi. There were other important classes in the south that were highlighted by Ibn Batuta and Barbosa.

Barbosa mentions 'Biabers' (transcription of 'Vyabari' merchant) and they dealt extensively in pepper and ginger, the great commercial products of Malabar. Ibn Batuta on the other hand talks about the Sulis (Chulia) and talks about their great wealth and Ships. Based on the accounts of Benjamin of Tudela on Quilon, the regular presence of Jewish merchants was confirmed on the Malabar Coast. Many wealthy merchants lived in Cambay with lofty houses built in fine stone and mortar, with tiled roofs. Their houses were surrounded by orchards and fruit gardens which had many tanks. These wealthy merchants and skilled craftsmen lived a luxurious life and were accustomed to good food and clothing. The merchants, Hindu and Muslim, were attended by pages bearing swords with silver and goldwork. Hindu merchants in Delhi rode expensive horses, lived in luxurious homes, and celebrated their festivals with much pomp and show.

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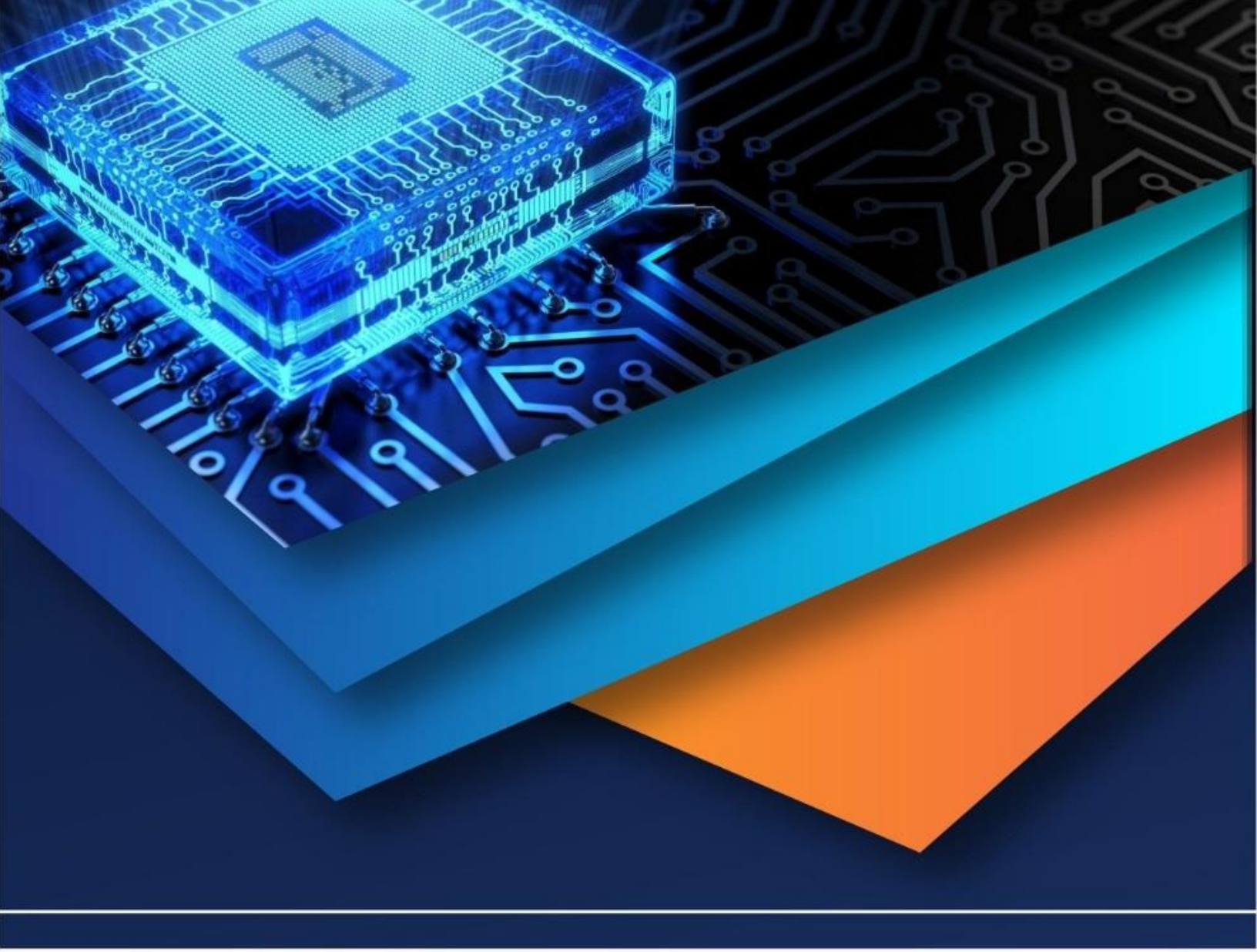
VI. CONCLUSIONS

After going through the accounts and sources of famous travellers and historians, it is obvious that trade did turn out to be an integral part of society during the Sultanate. The various exotic items that were exported, precisely highlight the economic condition of the people in that era. Apart from the exports, the limits of that period were also revealed in the form of imports. The import and trading of horses and slaves mark an important event in the history of medieval India. Those who assumed that commerce runs in the veins of Gujaratis, Sindhis and Moppilahs, were indeed right as various accounts give detailed information about the mercantile class during that period and one can see the legacy being followed. The lifestyle of merchants, traders, brokers and retailers also reveals the socio-cultural aspect of the Sultanate society. Considering the prevalent sources, one can also infer that the economic condition of women had not improved at all. In spite of finding references about pearls, gold, emerald and ruby, it is tough to believe that women enjoyed all the modern-day privileges. The existence of slavery corresponds with the feudalistic society in Europe and many historians have written about the similarity too. Instead of delving into it deeper, we can study the changes that took place in the last 7 centuries. The economy, social evils, commerce, trade surplus, the balance of payment and everything related to our country has their roots in the past. It is our duty to understand their structure and work on ways to create a better future. It can thus be concluded that India was a prosperous nation in terms of trade and economy and it is still not late to adopt a robust policy to revive our legacy. However, one has to keep in mind the limitation of this research and the lacunae that it carries. Every word has been derived from a literary source and it is almost impossible to note down the actual dynamics that prevailed in the overseas trade. This leads to assumptions and that blur the image of a particular incident. As a history student, I have tried my best to provide an unbiased outlook about the trade dynamics but I cannot assure unblemished perfection in terms of my interpretation of facts. History keeps on evolving and anything that helps us understand it better should be pursued without any hesitation. Until then we can always afford to learn from it, can't we?

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