

The Portuguse Cartaz System in the Maritime Trade at Canannore

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ABSTRACT: The *Cartaz* was a naval trade license or sea-pass issued by the Portuguese East India Company in the Indian Ocean region including Bay of Bengal during the sixteenth century. Its name was derived from the Portuguese term *Cartaz*, meaning letters. The *Cartaz* was a pass, the holder of which was declared to be free from seizure by the Portuguese navy. The *cartaz* entitled its holder freedom of movement in the Indian Ocean. Its aim was to control and enforce the Portuguese trade monopoly over a wide area in the Indian Ocean and to ensure that merchants paid the tax in Portuguese trading posts. By the implementation of the *Cartaz* system the Portuguese controlled the trade conducted by the native as well as the foreign merchants in the Indian Ocean region.

KEYWORDS: *cartazes, seguros, fanams, Cannanore, Portuguese trade, Pardao, Cruzados*

Medieval history of Malabar is very much related to the advent of Portuguese. The Portuguese were the first Europeans who came to Malabar in search of spices and souls. The commercial interests were stimulated by the possibility of producing or procuring cheaply several goods that Europe lacked and which were thus very much in demand. They established their supremacy and controlled the region of Malabar independently for a long period with no intrusion from any other European powers. But later the commercial interest of the neighbouring countries of Portugal swept away the first European power from the coast of Malabar.

Portuguese Exploration

In the history of the world the fifteenth century has been considered as *the age of discoveries*. The urge for the spices and souls tempted the Europeans to leave their dear and near ones. The support of the Portuguese rulers and especially Henry the Navigator promoted their earnestness in the trade. It was the beginning of the European overseas expansion¹. Paul. A. Sawada calls this age as an age of shrinking Christendom². It was the need of the European nations to find out new routes for the trade with the East. It is generally accepted that one of the aims of the Portuguese adventures and the Crown of Portugal in discovering the perilous sea-route to India was to establish direct commercial contacts with the spice producing areas of the Orient and derive the maximum profit by doing away with the middlemen and probably also the Indian merchants. The King of Portugal issued specific instructions to this effect and the local authorities in Portuguese India tried their best to materialize this goal.

In 1488, Bartholomeu Diaz rounded Africa and found the Cape of Good Hope.³ It was an inspiration for the Portuguese mariners. In 1497 another fleet left the shore of Lisbon with a great expectation of finding the glorious kingdom of India. This strenuous effort was not in vain. Vasco da Gama and his fleet with the help of nautical directions reached the shores of their dream land in the following year. They dropped anchor at Capocate (Kappad), a few miles north of Calicut (Kozhikode) on 20 May 1498. It was the simple beginning of the later flourished Portuguese kingdom in the east. The Portuguese established a vast maritime empire to which they gave the name *Estado da India*, which means the State of the Indies. The avarice and the spirit of adventure later drove them to distant lands. And the aspire for three Gs – God, Gold, Glory – inspired the Portuguese to continue their spirit of discovery. George Winius, an American historian of Portuguese empire wrote that the Portuguese were primarily explorers in Africa, conquerors in the Indian Ocean and businessmen in southeast Asia.⁴

But the Portuguese had to compete with the Arab and Venetian traders in India in the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Portuguese had no profitable goods to offer to the Indian merchants while the Arab

merchants carried goods which found a ready sale in India such as copper from Arabia and Mediterranean, war horses from Mesopotamia, arms, coral ornaments and light woollens.⁵

Beginning of Portuguese Trade with India

It was not easy for the Portuguese to establish trade relationship in the land where they anchored. These places already were engaged in trade with the Moorish merchants. There existed an extremely complex and sophisticated network of indigenous and overseas trade spanning the whole area. Hence it became necessary for the Portuguese to have competition in the field of trade. From their part such a healthy competition was not so easy because of the lack of enough investment. The existing Moors also had very good diplomatic contact with the local kings which the Portuguese lacked at least in the beginning. Hence, they could not establish a smooth trade relationship with the Zamorin, king of Calicut. It was always a centre of disturbance for the Portuguese. The Portuguese never had enough resources for trade like money, men, ships, agents and power not only to maintain themselves but also to compete with Asian traders.⁶

The Portuguese had a definite commercial aim in their activities in Malabar. The four major parties that affected adversely by the Portuguese presence in the commercial activities of the east in the sixteenth century were the Arab merchants patronized by the Sultan of Cairo, the Venetian merchants, the Zamorin of Calicut and the merchants and rulers of Gujarat.⁷ Merchants from Mecca, Tennasser, Pegu, Ceylon, Turkey, Ethiopia, Egypt, Persia and Gujarat frequented the ports of Malabar before the arrival of the Portuguese.⁸ Calicut was an emporium of the oriental commodities and many of the Arab merchants settled down in Calicut. Vasco de Gama in 1502 and 1503 insisted that the Zamorin should not allow any Muslim vessel to land at any of his ports or to have any sort of commercial relations with them.^{9 10} The Portuguese established cordial relations with other kings like those of Cannanore, Cochin and Quilon. There the Portuguese established factories and fortresses in due course of time.

The Gujarati merchants also wanted to retaliate the Portuguese because many of them established their settlements in Cannanore, Calicut and Cochin. They conducted external trade with eastern countries and Europe. They took spices and other commodities to Malacca in the South, African coast, Mecca etc.¹¹

Even though the Portuguese possessed the right of trade routes between Orient and Occident and achieved a commercial monopoly over the spice trade, the unfavourable situations resulted in the collapse of the Portuguese maritime empire not only in Malabar but almost everywhere in Asia within only 150 years of its foundation.

The custom of *Cartazes*

The Portuguese claimed the right to license all Asiatic shipping to force it to pay customs dues at Portuguese ports and to issue it with a *cartaz* or safe-conduct.¹¹ When the Portuguese powers reached its zenith in Malabar coast, it enforced passes for native and other vessels to undertake journeys and trade by sea.¹² The Moorish trade in Malabar was greatly jeopardized by this restriction.¹³ *Cartaz* was in vogue in the Indian Ocean even before the arrival of the Portuguese.¹⁴ The Portuguese introduced it to maintain the commercial monopoly through the expulsion of other merchants. By its implementation the Portuguese acquired perfect dominion over the Indian Ocean and the western coast of India. *Cartaz* had often been a political symbol,¹⁵ but it was also an economic tool to control the power of trade and the movements of ships from using the Red Sea- Venice route. It was a kind of license which the native traders should acquire for their commercial movements.¹⁶ Its victims were the Arab merchants, native merchants and Zamorin's men. The *cartazes* included the documents like the name of the vessel and of the captain, the nature of the cargo, its origin and destination and the name of the authority issuing the *cartaz*.¹⁷ The fee charged for the *cartaz* was only one *pardao* (13 *fanams*) per ship in 1535. It was one of the main sources of income to the fortress. In 1535 the annual revenue from the sale of the *cartazes* in Cannanore alone was 8,000 or 9,000 *cruzados*.¹⁸

The Cartazes or Seguros

The Portuguese commercial policy was to keep the control of trade in their own hands. The Portuguese with a view of implementing strict monopoly, introduced the system of *cartazes* or passes.¹⁹ Those interested in sending their commodities from India were expected to purchase *cartazes*²⁰ from the Portuguese officials and take the imports to the designated ports for the payment of taxes to the Portuguese. The following particulars were contained in the *cartazes*: the name of the vessel and of the captain, the nature of the cargo, its origin and destination and the name of the authority issuing the *cartaz*. It was issued by the captain of the fortress or the factor of the respective factories and a book was kept to register the *cartazes* issued.²¹ The writers of the factory prepared the *cartazes*²². Issuing *cartazes* was a source of income for the issuing authority as well as the writers of the factory who received some fringe benefits. Normally the *cartazes* from the Cannanore port were issued by the Portuguese authorities with the recommendation and consent of the king of Cannanore.

Though some of the Indian merchants and kings accepted this obligation, there were more instances of violation than compliance. The Muslim merchants who had their age-old contacts with the West Asian regions remonstrated against the highhandedness of the Portuguese. They concurred with their counterparts in areas outside the Malabar coast and looked for a common front against the Portuguese. But the Portuguese stuck to their guns and warded off the others from entering into trade with the Malabar Coast though there were cracks in the fabric.²³ Indirectly it was a control over the Muslim merchants. They Portuguese never intended to destroy the trade but only aimed to control it. It affected regionally especially in the Muslim trade centres like Calicut and Ormuz. It also helped for the development of the centres of trade with the Portuguese.

The passport was done mainly to control the trade and to avoid the piracy of trade. It was very usual to have private trade among the common trade. The employers of trade usually arranged commodities for them also which could be sold in their risk and accounted for their profit.

The Portuguese wanted to avoid such corruptions of trade. But it was not easy to control such trade in trade. The king of Cannanore presumably acknowledging the supremacy of the Portuguese over the Indian Ocean regions collected *cartazes* from the Portuguese to send his vessels laden with cargo to Cambay and Ormuz. Sometimes the number of vessels with *cartazes* swelled to ten per year. He was sometimes permitted to import horses to his port²⁴. Similarly the merchants of Cannanore too obtained *cartazes* from the Portuguese. Abu Baker Ali, the uncle of Ali Raja of Cannanore got *cartazes* from the Portuguese to send his ships with commodities to various parts of India and abroad and he himself instructed his people to continue this practice. So the merchants of Cannanore followed it and in 1546 the Muslim merchants sending their ships to Mocha were found carrying *cartazes* from the Portuguese.²⁵

Portuguese had tried to monopolize the oceanic trade in India which was contrary to the tradition of ocean trade in Asian waters. They declared trade in spices, drugs, dyes, arms & ammunition and war horses as royal monopoly and no nation or even Portuguese private traders were allowed to trade in these commodities. Ships engaged in the trade of other commodities had to take a permit or trading license, known as *Cartaz* from Portuguese officials. The Portuguese attempted to force all ships going to the east or to Africa to pass by Goa and to pay custom duty there. To enforce these rules, the Portuguese searched any ships suspected of engaging in trade without *Cartaz* or trade in monopolized commodities. Ships which refused to be searched were treated as prize of war and men and women abroad as slaves. But the complete control over the oceanic trade by using *Cartaz* system did not succeed much and the rules regarding giving *Cartaz* to local traders had to be liberalized because:

1. Traders who lost on sea put pressure on their governments to retaliate against Portuguese trade in their areas.
2. It was impossible to police trade along huge coasts of Asia.
3. Sea pirates preying on Portuguese ships were encouraged by traders and small rulers.
4. The Arabs and Gujarati traders found ways to get round the

Portuguese trade embargo and regulation

5. Even Portuguese private traders were unhappy due to royal monopoly and *Cartaz* and royal officials who received small salary often bribed by private traders (Portuguese, Arabs, Gujarati etc).
6. The Portuguese control over Indian ocean remained incomplete because of their failure to capture Aden.
7. The Portuguese used the *Cartaz* system to control over the oceanic trade though not completely until the other European powers like the Dutch and English made their appearances in the 17th century. The Portuguese trade that flourished well in the Indian Ocean declined during the sixteenth century and it was because of the strict enforcement of the *Cartaz* system by the Portuguese.

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Notes and References

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3. Bartholomeu Diaz called this land Cabo Tormentoso or Cape of Storms. Later this name was changed by King John II. He gave it the present name Cabo da Boa Esperança or Cape of Good Hope. 4 George D. Winifred and Bailey W. Diffie, Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580, University of Minnesota Press and Oxford Press, 1977, p.380.
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8. Cronica do Descobrimento e Conquista da India pelos Portugueses, Coimbra, 1974, p.33.
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10. Ref. Malyn Newitt (ed.), The First Portuguese Colonial Empire, University of Exeter, 1986, pp.6-7.
11. Ibid.
12. The word cartaz takes its origin from the Arabic word Cirtas or Qirtas meaning paper or document. K.S. Mathew, Portuguese Trade with India in the sixteenth Century, Manohar, Delhi, 1983,p.266.
13. K.K.N.Kurup, Ali Rajas of Cannanore, University of Calicut,2002, p.19.
14. Cartaz was nothing other than a safe-conduct issued by the Portuguese officers to vessels other than their own.
15. Luis Filip Thomaz, Portuguese Control on the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal-A Comparative Study, A paper presented in the Conference of Bay of Bengal, New Delhi, 1994,p.23.
16. Pius Malekandathil, Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, Manohar, Delhi,2001, pp-125127.
17. Pius Malekandathil, Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, Manohar, Delhi,2001, pp125126.
18. Letter of Francisco de Sousa Tavares to the king, Cannanore dated 14th January 1535,in As Gavetas de Torre de Tombo, Vol.X, Lisboa, 1974, pp.606-609.
19. Pyrard de Laval explained that "Half of the fleet they (The Portuguese and the viceroy of Goa) send to the north as far as Diu or Cambaye and thereabouts to guard the coast and hold the power over the sea, and prevent anyone from sailing there without their passport. The other part they send south as far as Cape Camorin for the same purpose but principally to purge the seas of Malabar corsairs."(The Voyage to the East indies, I, p.439). Linchotten also mentioned about the pass system, "Among these Malabars the white Mores do inhabit that believe in Mahomet, and their greatest traffique is unto the redde sea, although they may not do it, neither any Indian without the Portingalles passport, otherwise the Portingalles army finding them or any other Indian or nation at sea without a passport, would take them for a prize, as often times it happeneth that they bring shippes from Cambaia, Malabar or from the Ile of Sumatra, and other places that traffique to the red sea."(The Voyage of John Huyghen Van Linchotten, I, p.67-68).
20. The word cartaz takes its origin from the Arabic word "Qirtas" meaning paper or document. Ref. Sebastião Rudolfo Dalgado, Glossario Luso'Asiatico, Vol.I, Coimbra, 1919, p.220. The cartaz could be defined as kind of a safe-conduct or passport issued by the maritime authorities in the East especially in the Indian Ocean, to the merchant ships so that they could navigate and enter the ports to load and unload without any trouble.
21. Cartas de Afonso de Albuquerque, tom.III, p.316.
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