

Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1680

The Bay of Bengal has traditionally been among the most intensively traversed of the Asian seas in pursuit of maritime commerce. Both littorals of the Bay have been reasonably densely populated on a continuous basis for a long time and have been characterized by a substantial amount of trade being carried on by merchants based there. This trade has taken the form of both coastal trade, linking up different segments on each of the two coasts, as well as high seas trade between segments on the two littorals. The voyage between any two points on the two littorals was a relatively short one, taking on an average no more than two to three weeks one way. The rate of return would in general seem to have been reasonably satisfactory accounting for the large volume of trade on both the coastal as well as the high seas circuits. The strong bond of interdependence between given segments across the two littorals was often reflected in situations where a segment on one of the littorals had more to do with another on the other littoral rather than with parts of the interior of the country of which it formed a part. Thus, as the late Denys Lombard often reminded us, Aceh, located at the southeastern edge of the Bay, probably had more to do with the Coromandel Coast than with the interior of the island of Sumatra.

This paper seeks to situate Coastal Burma in the trading world of the Bay of Bengal in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Before such an attempt is made, however, it might be useful to draw attention to a key element characterizing the economies, societies, and the politics of the Bay of Bengal region during the centuries under discussion. This element was the distinctively important role that trade played in these societies. This was to be expected in a port state such as Melaka where revenues from foreign trade accounted for an overwhelming proportion of the total revenues of the state, making this sector the life blood of the kingdom. The sultans of Melaka themselves participated in trade, owning ships and operating on major routes in the Bay of Bengal. What is less obvious is the perceived key role of trade even in societies which were predominantly agrarian in character. These would include regions such as Coastal Burma, Mughal India, and Golkonda. Take the case of Mughal India. For one thing, proceeds from the customs duties at Mughal Indian ports accrued directly to the imperial exchequer making the authorities at the centre quite sensitive to the legitimate concerns of those engaged in foreign trade. Also, considering that the domestic production of precious metals in Mughal India was negligible, foreign trade was the principal channel through which these metals were obtained for coinage and other uses. It was not without reason that the port of Mocha

in the Red Sea, the principal provider of silver, was repeatedly referred to as the treasure-chest of the Mughal Empire.¹

From the perspective of the Mughal Indian *mansabdar* group, consisting of the Mughal nobility as well as senior state officials, the foreign trade sector held an even more immediate attraction. Investment in the sector by organizing voyages to destinations in the Bay of Bengal and elsewhere was one of the more profitable channels available for the employment of the substantial liquid resource base at the command of this group. Although these individuals engaged in trade purely in their private capacity, and the use of their official position to further their trading interests was frowned upon, they often did exactly that to enhance their margin of profit from trade.² The provisions of *sauda-i khas* and *farmayish* authorizing the administration to requisition goods for official use at a reasonable price were often invoked to procure goods for private trade at prices below the market (Prakash 1985, 32). On other occasions, trade in particular commodities was monopolized by an official in the area under his jurisdiction (Prakash 1985, 32). While it is impossible to say how widespread these practices were and the extent to which they enhanced the rate of return earned by these officials in their role as merchants, the fact of their widespread participation in the coastal and high seas trade from ports on the east coast of India has been documented. In a study of the trade from the ports of Hugli and Balasore in Mughal Bengal that I carried out some years ago, it was found that major branches of trade from the region were dominated by state officials in their role as merchants through the greater part of the seventeenth century. To take only one example, all six ships reported in November 1653 to be preparing to leave Bengal for the eastern littoral of the Bay belonged to nobles and state officials. Two belonged to Prince Shah Shuja, (one vessel was scheduled to go to Tenasserim and the other to Kedah), another two to *Diwan* Malik Beg of Orissa (one bound for Aceh and the other for Kedah) and one each to *Faujdar* Nawazish Khan of Rajmahal (scheduled for Kedah) and *Nawab* Inoriya Muhammad of Orissa (scheduled for Tenasserim). In fact, even the seventh vessel recorded as being equipped at Balasore (for a voyage to Masulipatam) was also operated by an official *Faujdar* Ahmad Beg of Hugli (Prakash 1985, 229). While such intense involvement of politically privileged merchants in coastal

¹ The importance attached by the Mughals to the importation of precious metals is illustrated by the following incident. In 1657, following a refusal to pay the local toll, the captain of one of Prince Shah Shuja's ships on its way back from Kedah had been forced by the Dutch East India Company factors at Melaka to part with tin worth Rs. 1631. On top of this affront had come the Hugli factors' refusal to provide naval assistance for the proposed Mughal campaign against Arakan. These two episodes together so infuriated the prince, who was the *subahdar* of the province of Bengal, that he threatened to raise the rate of the customs duty payable by the Dutch at Hugli from the usual 4 per cent to 20 per cent. But he was careful to exempt precious metals from this threatened increase (*Algemeen Rijksarchief* (hereafter ARA), letter from the Governor-General and in-Council at Batavia to the factors at Hugli, 19.7.1657, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (hereafter VOC) 881, f.311; letter from the Hugli factors to the Board of Directors in Amsterdam, 4.12.1657, VOC 1221, ff.760-761; letter from Governor-General and in-Council at Batavia to the Board of Directors in Amsterdam, 17.12.1657, VOC 1220, ff.108vo-110).

² In 1672, the English Factors at Kasimbazar wrote to their counterparts at Hugli, 'Trade all over Bengall (by reason of almost all governors, great and small turning merchants and most unreasonably abusing those they deale with) is at present very dead' (letter dated 9.8.1672, India Office Records, London, F.R. Misc. Vol.3, f.173).

and high seas trade might well not have characterized other segments of the Bay of Bengal littoral, there can be no question that such merchants were an important constituent group of the trading community of the region.

The case of Coastal Burma itself is instructive in this regard. The shift in Burma's political centre of gravity from the interior towards the coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries derived in part from the growth of Indian Ocean trade. As long as Pegu remained an independent capital (1369-1599), maritime revenues may have constituted the bulk of royal income. Although the relative importance of these sources declined after the capital returned to Ava in Upper Burma during the period of the Restored Taungngu dynasty (1600-1752), the Crown remained inordinately concerned to protect and preserve its coastal revenues. Burmese kings consciously encouraged foreign trade by initiating embassies to maritime states and by offering trade concessions and a reduction in customs duties. As Victor Lieberman points out, 'Throughout the period under consideration, Burmese rulers milked international trade through a combination of customs duties, royal monopolies on valuable exports and imports and overseas trading expeditions in vessels owned or rented by the Crown' (Lieberman 1991, 1-31). A closely related development was the role of the imported precious metals in promoting monetization in the Burmese economy. From the late sixteenth century onward, the import of large quantities of New World silver via India and the Philippines facilitated the increasing replacement of copper coinage by coins made from silver. By the early eighteenth century silver had become the basic currency medium throughout most of the valley (Lieberman 1991, 1-31).

The coastal trade links from Burma extended in an important way to ports in Thailand and Malaya, Aceh in Sumatra, and on to Melaka. For the early sixteenth century, Tomé Pires mentions fifteen-sixteen junks and twenty-thirty shallow Malay-type craft travelling each year from Lower Burma to Melaka and north Sumatra (Pires 1944, 64). As for Aceh, a Portuguese author of the 1580s tells us that the annual trade of the port comprised five to six ships from Pegu, two or three ships from Coromandel, and between six and nine ships from ports dominated by Gujaratis — that is Dabhol, Surat, and Jiddah (Subrahmanyam 1999, 64). Indeed, merchants and others from Pegu are known to have inhabited a particular district in Banda Aceh to the north of the town and located very close to the river estuary. Malay and Dutch sources on Aceh attest to the name of 'Kampung Birma' or of 'Kampung Pegu' and a Dutch map of the town dating probably to the middle of the seventeenth century shows the location of the 'Pegu quarter' (Lombard 1999, 191).

In addition to coastal trade, there was an extensive high seas trade between Burma and eastern India on the western littoral of the Bay of Bengal. Before we go into the details of that trading link, however, it might be useful to draw attention to the key position occupied by India in the trading world of the Indian Ocean at this time. In part, this indeed was a function of the midway location of the subcontinent between West Asia on the one hand and Southeast and East Asia on the other. But perhaps even more important was the subcontinent's capacity to put on the market a wide range of tradable goods at highly competitive prices. These included agricultural goods, both food items such as rice, sugar, and oil as well as raw materials such as cotton and indigo. While the bulk of the trade in these items was coastal, the

high-seas trade component was by no means insignificant. The real strength of the subcontinent, however, lay in the provision of large quantities of manufactured goods, the most important amongst which was textiles of various kinds. While these included high value varieties such as the legendary Dhaka muslins and the Gujarat silk embroideries, the really important component for the Asian market was the coarse cotton varieties both in the eastern markets of Indonesia, Malaya, Thailand, and Burma as well as in the markets of the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa. While it is impossible to determine precisely what proportion of total domestic demand for mass consumption textiles in these societies was met by imports from India, the available evidence would seem to point in the direction of this not being altogether insignificant. India's capacity to manufacture these textiles in large quantities and to put them on the market at highly competitive terms made it in some sense the 'industrial' hub of the region surrounded by West Asia on one side and Southeast Asia on the other.

This circumstance also determined to a large extent the nature of India's demand for imports from the rest of Asia. This demand consisted essentially either of consumption goods which were not produced domestically for soil, climatic or other reasons, or of minerals and metals of various kinds whose domestic supply was either nil or substantially below the total demand. In the first category were items such as fine spices like cloves, nutmeg, and mace from Indonesia, and horses and rosewater from West Asia. The second category included rubies and other precious stones from Burma as well as metals — both precious and non-precious. By far the most important non-precious metal imported was tin from Malaya. Precious metals, mainly silver, were imported overwhelmingly from West Asia. The important point to emphasize is that by virtue of its relatively more advanced structure of manufacturing production and its capacity to provide large quantities of a basic manufactured consumption good such as inexpensive cotton textiles at highly competitive terms, India significantly enhanced the basis of trade in the Asian continent. It not only provided the textiles and, on a more modest scale, the foodgrains and the provisions in great demand in the neighbouring societies but also provided an important outlet for their specialized agricultural, mineral and other products. Trade satisfied different kinds of consumption needs for India as compared with her numerous trading partners in the Indian Ocean region. This by itself provided an excellent basis for a significant and growing level of trade. It is really in this sense that the critically important role of India in the structure of early modern Asian trade needs to be assessed.

Coastal Burma had traditionally been an important trading partner of regions such as Bengal and, more importantly, the Coromandel coast on the Indian littoral of the Bay of Bengal. From Bengal, the connection with Burma was mainly through the ports at Martaban, Dagon, and Cosmin (Bassein) in the Irrawady delta. According to the 1516 testimony of António Dinis, the Portuguese factor at Martaban, four or five Bengal ships visited Cosmin each year carrying mainly textiles which were exchanged primarily against silver made into rings or small hoops.

A considerably larger volume of trade would seem to have been carried on between the Coromandel coast and Burma. By the early sixteenth century, Pegu and Lower Burma, in particular the ports of Martaban and Cosmin figured prominently in the trade

from the central Coromandel port of Pulicat. Dinis mentions the figure of four to five ships annually to Cosmin from this port. While the export cargo consisted of textiles and yarn, the imports were mainly gold and rubies. This trade, however, came under increasing pressure as the Portuguese concession system involving monopoly rights progressively replaced crown shipping. Being unable to operate as independent shipowners any longer, the Coromandel merchants engaged in this branch of trade, most of whom were Muslims, known as Chulias in parts of Southeast Asia and Marakkayars in Coromandel, in addition to Telugu-speaking Chettis of the Balija and Komati communities, were increasingly obliged to freight space on the ships of the Portuguese concession holders. There was a substantial decline in the volume of trade and by the end of the century the port of Pulicat was no more than a shadow of its former self.

The port that succeeded Pulicat as the premier port of the Coromandel coast was that at Masulipatam, which was a relatively minor port until the middle of the sixteenth century. The rise of Masulipatam was in part related to the consolidation of the sultanate of Golkonda under Ibrahim Qutb Shah (1550-80). But it also had a good deal to do with the emergence of an alternative network of trade in the Bay of Bengal. This essentially represented the Indian merchants' response to the Portuguese stranglehold over the Pulicat-Melaka sector. The other constituent ports of the newly emerging network were Aceh, Malay peninsular ports such as Perak and Kedah, and the Burmese ports of Pegu, Bassein, Tavoy, and Martaban, all of which had taken on an anti-Portuguese character. The network of Burmese ports with which trade was carried on from Masulipatam came to include in the 1580s the ports of Mrauk U and Chittagong in the northern Burmese kingdom of Arakan. In the 1590s, two or three ships regularly left Masulipatam for Pegu laden with textiles and yarn. The rise of the alternative network greatly alarmed the *Estado* which tried very hard to destroy it. Through official or unofficial armadas, attempts were made to disrupt trade both at Aceh and at Masulipatam. The merchants of the latter port, who navigated freely without seeking the Portuguese *cartazes*, were sought to be countered by the granting of licences by the *Estado* to privateers to lie in wait outside Masulipatam in their ships with a view to capturing the local shipping. But these attempts were not particularly successful at any point: indeed, there were occasions when Portuguese captives from such attempts had to be ransomed from Masulipatam by private Portuguese citizens (Subrahmanyam 1990, 97-98, 148-153).

The Portuguese themselves had been engaged in trade at the Burmese ports since soon after the conquest of Melaka in 1511. The *Estado* had initiated links with the Irrawady delta ports around 1512-13 but had run into undisguised hostility at the hands of the rulers of the Taungngu dynasty. By the late 1540s captains of the Portuguese Crown's shipping on the *Carreira de Pegu* were complaining of the conditions under which they were required to trade at Burmese ports. There were long periods of time when the use of the ports of Pegu was totally forbidden to the *Estado*. But by carefully distancing themselves from Goa and its policies, the private Portuguese merchants had managed to avoid such problems. The Portuguese acquisition of Syriam early in the seventeenth century boosted greater control over trade with Lower Burma. Portuguese ships were now obliged to call at Syriam and pay duties there (Subrahmanyam 1990, 154).

Following the establishment of the English and the Dutch East India Companies at the beginning of the seventeenth century and the successful challenge by them of the Portuguese monopoly of the Euro-Asian seaborne trade, the European presence in the Indian Ocean registered a quantum leap. In addition to Euro-Asian trade, the Dutch East India Company also engaged in a considerable amount of trade within Asia as an integral part of its overall commercial strategy. The quest for inexpensive cotton textiles needed for the procurement of pepper and other spices in the Indonesian Archipelago took the Company to the Coromandel coast where four factories were established between 1606 and 1610 covering both the northern and the southern stretches of the coast. Further expansion of the Company's trade into the Bay of Bengal was entrusted to the Coromandel establishment.

As early as 1607, the Coromandel factors had deputed Pieter Willemsz. and John Gerritsz. Ruyl to Arakan to investigate the trade opportunities there. They managed to persuade the king to allow the Company to trade in his territories without having to pay any duties. The *quid pro quo* asked for was assistance in expelling the Portuguese settlers at Chittagong. A Dutch factory was established at Mrauk U in 1610 by Jacob Dirksz. Cortenhoeff but nothing much happened by way of trade there for several years and the Company's representative was recalled to Pulicat in 1619.

It was Jan Pietersz. Coen's plans to procure a large number of slaves to provide the labour force needed for the nutmeg and mace plantations on Amboina and in Banda and generally to populate and secure the Dutch colonies in the Indonesian Archipelago that seriously attracted the Company to Arakan for the first time (Coen 1919-1953, 75, 177, 180, 209). The correspondence between Coen and the successive heads of the Company's Coromandel establishment in the early 1620s establishes beyond any doubt Coen's near-obsession with this project. In his letter of 8 May, 1622, to Andries Soury and Abraham van Uffelen at Masulipatam, for example, Coen wrote,

The *Muys* is being sent to Coromandel mainly to bring back as many slaves — young males and females — as possible. In spite of the fact that Coromandel textiles were in great demand, the interest of the Company would be served better by the procurement of slaves, who were likely to afford a much higher profit. With the *Gouden Leeuw*, Batavia had expected to get no less than 1,000 slaves but, in fact, we had received only 124... It was a matter of shame that such an important matter had been treated so lightly. A large number of boys and girls from various quarters of Asia were needed to populate Batavia, Amboina, and Banda with servile people. Even hundreds of thousands of such persons would be welcome. It was instructive to consider the Portuguese precedent of how they had populated their possessions. It was also useful to consider how the Muslims had extended their rule over Asia. They had obtained manpower from the enemy and had also purchased it. The Dutch had been so imprudent as to ignore these precedents.³

³ ARA, Letter from Governor-General Coen and Council at Batavia to Andries Soury and Abraham van Uffelen at Masulipatam, 8 May 1622, voc 1076, ff.76-78.

The regular slave-capturing raids made by Arakanese war-fleets into eastern and southern Bengal had turned Arakan into the largest supplier of this human cargo in the Bay of Bengal region.

The Company's attempts to procure slaves (or for that matter, rice or elephants, the other two items the Company was interested in procuring) in Arakan, however, did not meet with a notable success at any point. One major problem was the unacceptably high mortality rate amongst the slaves — in Arakan, on the way to Coromandel, and finally on the trip from Coromandel to Batavia. Thus of the 400 slaves bought by the *Vrede* and the *Medenblick* in Arakan in 1624, as many as 100 had died, some in Arakan itself and others on the way to Coromandel.⁴ The situation was even worse the following year. The Arakanese fleet had brought in as many as 10,000 slaves that year. But an unusually severe epidemic had taken a toll of 4,000 of them soon after. The two Dutch ships, the *Medenblick* and the *Jager*, managed to buy 544 of the surviving slaves of whom, however, as many as 386 died soon after in Arakan itself. Some more died on the way reducing the number reaching Coromandel to 130. Four more deaths reportedly occurred in Coromandel while another twenty-six were reported to be too ill to travel. The result was that the *Delftshaven* had only 100 slaves on board when she left Coromandel for Batavia.⁵ This practically spelt the end of the Company's trade in Arakanese slaves. Even Jan Pietersz. Coen, who had relinquished the office of the Governor-General of the East Indies in February 1623 only to return in September 1627 for a second term, had in the meantime lost his enthusiasm about populating Indonesia with slaves. In a letter to Marten Ysbrantz. at Pulicat in June 1628, Coen wrote,

We ask you to issue strict orders to all places wherever slaves are purchased that only young persons — boys and girls between the ages of eight to twenty years — are to be bought. The old, the unsuitable, and the useless are to be left out. If you cannot get the right ones, do not buy any slaves for a while.⁶

In September 1628, the remaining factors of the Company in Arakan were recalled to Coromandel.

At this time the Dutch East India Company's interest in the Pegu trade was even more marginal. Two galliots, the *Jager* and the *Haas*, had been sent to Pegu from Masulipatam on 15 April, 1619, on an exploratory mission. But the vessels went instead to Arakan.⁷ Another two frigates were sent in October 1620 to Tenasserim,

⁴ ARA, Letter from Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat to the Directors at Amsterdam, 28 April 1625, voc 1084, ff.166-168.

⁵ ARA, Letter from Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat to De Carpentier at Batavia, 5 December 1625, voc 1087, ff. 174-177vo; Journal kept at Fort Geldria at Pulicat between 20 November 1623 and 28 November 1625, voc 1087, entry under 28 November 1625.

⁶ ARA, Letter from Jan Pietersz. Coen to Marten Ysbrantz. at Pulicat dated 14 June 1628, voc 1095, f.296.

⁷ ARA, Letter from De Haze aboard the *Zwarte Beer* at Masulipatam harbour to Coen at Bantam/Jacatra, 21 June 1619, voc 1069, ff.452-457.

Arakan, and Pegu but it is not clear if Pegu was in fact visited.⁸ In May 1622, twenty-six free burghers had started out from Batavia for the Bay of Bengal in the yacht *Bonijt* intending to engage in trade in the region as well as to inflict damage on the Portuguese. But a storm forced the vessel into one of the ports of the King of Pegu where it was seized. The Dutch chief at Masulipatam, Abraham van Uffelen, wrote to the King of Pegu requesting the release of the ship together with its cargo. Masulipatam merchants engaged in trade with Pegu were warned to stay away from the area because a possible action against the King of Pegu might inflict collateral damage on them (Coolhaas (ed.) 1960, 133-134). The result was a disruption in these merchants' trade with Pegu, a branch of trade that together with that of Arakan had traditionally been a reasonably important one for them. Information available in the records of the Dutch East India Company enables one to form a broad idea of the magnitude of this trade. In 1617, for example, three to four small yachts were reported to have arrived at Masulipatam from Pegu on the account of Muslim merchants. Aboard one of these yachts had also travelled the ambassador of the King of Pegu to the King of Golkonda with presents of gold and rubies worth 7000 guilders.⁹ In October 1624, six ships owned by Muslim merchants were reported to have left Masulipatam for Arakan in addition to four for Pegu. Another two had left for Aceh and one for Tenasserim.¹⁰ In September 1625, ten ships were reported to have left Masulipatam including two each for Pegu and Arakan. Of the remaining six, three each went to Tenasserim and Aceh.¹¹ The following March, a ship belonging to Mir Kamalud-Din reached Masulipatam from Pegu richly laden with tin and costly rubies. It also brought news that another five ships were on the way.¹² In April of the same year, a ship belonging to the *kotwal*¹³ of Arakan reached Pulicat (note that the ships recorded as having arrived at Pulicat were most probably on their way to Masulipatam).¹⁴ It started back from Coromandel for Arakan on 12 August. Later in the month the yacht *Masulipatam* belonging to the Hindu merchant Malaya left Pulicat for Pegu with a cargo worth 15,000 pagodas.¹⁵ A small yacht, the *Pagal*, also left Pulicat for Arakan on the account of this merchant on September 30, 1626.¹⁶ Of the nine ships listed as having left Masulipatam in September 1626, three went to Pegu and four to Arakan. One each went to Tenasserim and Aceh.¹⁷ We next find a ship belonging to Muhammad Taqi, *havaladar*¹⁸ of Masulipatam, listed as arrived from Pegu in April 1627 with

⁸ ARA, Letter from Andries Soury at Masulipatam to the Directors at Amsterdam, 29 January 1621, voc 1073, ff.156-159.

⁹ ARA, Letter from Hans de Haze at Masulipatam to Jan Pietersz. Coen at Bantam/Jacatra, 5 June 1617, voc 1066, ff.113-117vo.

¹⁰ ARA, Letter from Goeree and Liberer at Masulipatam to the Directors at Amsterdam, 4 October 1624, voc 1082, ff.50-53.

¹¹ ARA, Letter from Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat to De Carpentier and Council at Batavia, 16 October 1625, voc 1087, ff.164-169vo.

¹² ARA, Masulipatam *Dagh-Register* 1625-1626, entry of 4 March 1626, voc 1095, f.48.

¹³ The *kotwal* was the person in charge of law and order in a town.

¹⁴ ARA, Pulicat *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 23 April 1626, voc 1095, f.30vo.

¹⁵ ARA, Pulicat *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 29 August 1626, voc 1095, f.33.

¹⁶ ARA, Pulicat *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 2 October 1626, voc 1095, f.33vo.

¹⁷ ARA, Masulipatam *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 20 September 1628, voc 1095, f.55vo.

¹⁸ The *havaladar* was the governor of a designated area.

the news that another ship belonging to Mir Murad was on its way.¹⁹ Yet another ship was recorded as having reached Pulicat in April on its way to Masulipatam, but was then wrecked.²⁰ A ship belonging to the King of Arakan carrying thirteen elephants (eight on the king's account, three on that of the *kotwal* of Arakan, and two on the account of the 'governor' of Pulicat) also reached Pulicat the same month.²¹

Among the arrivals recorded at Pulicat in March/April 1628 was a yacht belonging to Malaya returning from Pegu with a cargo worth 100,000 pagodas in rubies, and two ships from Arakan belonging to the King of Arakan carrying elephants and rice besides forty-eight male slaves on the account of the Company.²² In September of the same year, two ships were reportedly ready to leave Masulipatam for Pegu, one belonging to Mir Murad and the other to the *sar-i-khail*²³ of Masulipatam.²⁴

What these scattered references to the shipping between Coromandel and Coastal Burma in the 1620s would seem to suggest strongly is the dominant position of the Masulipatam merchants, many of whom were of Persian origin, in this branch of trade, though the participation by merchants based at the partner ports, including the kings of Pegu and Arakan as well as state officials such as the *kotwal* of Arakan, was by no means altogether insignificant. What the *voc* documents of this period also bring out clearly is the disruption that this trade was often subject to because of political circumstances such as the deteriorating relations between the Company and the authorities at Golkonda. The events surrounding the arrest of Abraham van Uffelen by the Golkonda authorities and the threatened blockade of the port of Masulipatam by the Dutch in retaliation is a case in point.

Abraham van Uffelen had taken over as the governor of the Coromandel factories in October 1621. This man was somewhat aggressive in his ways and often had skirmishes with the local administration. Matters deteriorated to a point where, in November 1623, Van Uffelen was arrested along with an underfactor and three of the Company's chief merchants in Masulipatam. The grounds given for this extraordinary action were (a) that Van Uffelen had detained in the Company's factory the *sarraf*²⁵ to whom the exclusive right to deal in bills of exchange had been farmed out till such time as he had agreed to exchange 5,000 rials into *pagodas* at a favorable rate; (b) that Van Uffelen had violated the ban on the export of tobacco to Arakan, and (c) that Van Uffelen had refused passes to Indian ships for Pegu. The Dutch maintained that the *sarraf* had been detained long before the arrival of the present *havaladar* at Masulipatam. In the matter of the export of tobacco, it was pointed out that the Dutch had only been advised the postponement of the export until after the arrival of the new *havaladar*. But since the season was running out, it had not been possible to

¹⁹ ARA, Masulipatam *Dagh-Register*, 1626-16228, entry of 8 April 1627, *voc* 1095, f.73.

²⁰ ARA, Masulipatam *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 27 April 1627, *voc* 1095, f.74.

²¹ ARA, Pulicat *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 14 April 1627, *voc* 1095, f.38.

²² ARA, Pulicat *Dagh-Register*, 1626-1628, entry of 30 March and 17 April 1628, *voc* 1095, f.43-43vo.

²³ A *sar-i-khail* was ordinarily the chief of cavalry, but was also obliged to discharge civil and revenue functions.

²⁴ ARA, Letter from Marten Ysbrantsz. at Masulipatam to Coen and Council at Batavia, 24 September 1628, *voc* 1095, f.11-18.

²⁵ *Sarraf* was a general term used for persons dealing in money and bills of exchange.

accept this advice. The Dutch maintained that the real reason behind the outrage was the desire of the authorities to wriggle out of the agreement permitting the Company to trade in Coromandel toll-free subject to an annual payment of 3,000 *pagodas* at Masulipatam. But whatever the merits of the case, Van Uffelen and the Company's merchants were subjected to severe torture and their release was ordered only after 16,000 *pagodas* had been collected from the Company. The Company claimed that as a result of the bodily injuries suffered while in prison, Van Uffelen died in Masulipatam in February 1624.²⁶

The immediate reaction of the Coromandel factors was to suggest that Batavia take retaliatory action by suspending the Company's trade at Masulipatam, blockading the port, and seizing Asian shipping returning from Pegu and Arakan, among other places. Batavia, however, counselled patience and asked the factors to carry on as best they could.²⁷ Efforts to recover the 16,000 *pagodas* extorted from the Company did not bear fruit. Instead, the Company was forced to deal with just three designated merchants and the situation became increasingly tense. In June 1628, Batavia finally decided to take the offensive and in a secret communication asked Marten Ysbrantsz. to organize the seizure of the ships returning from Mocha, Pegu, Arakan, Tenasserim, Aceh and other places in order 'to recover with interest the sums extorted from the Company'. Ysbrantsz. was asked to keep the matter confidential even from the Masulipatam Council till it was time to begin the preparations for the ships' seizure.²⁸ After the long-awaited *Cameel* had reached Masulipatam and the goods in the Company's warehouses had been loaded on it, the factors boarded the vessel on the night of 1 March 1629 and abandoned the Masulipatam factory.²⁹ The yachts *Terschelling*, *Vlielandt*, *Bonne Remedie*, and the *Duyve* together with a sloop were drafted for the siege of the port. Until 19 April 1629, the only ship to return was one belonging to Mir Kamalud-Din which had travelled from Aceh. The ship was seized, but since a good part of the cargo belonged to the merchants of Surat and Persia, whom the Company did not wish to alienate, the cargo was released.³⁰ In September 1629, an accord was reached with the Masulipatam merchants stipulating that the Company would not hinder the departure of their ships and indeed would itself resume trading at Masulipatam.³¹ The episode finally came to a close on 11 December 1629, when the King of Golkonda granted a *farman* assuring the Company that

²⁶ ARA, Letter from Van Uffelen in jail at Bondara (situated at a day's journey from Masulipatam) to the chiefs of the Dutch forts, factories and ships on the Coromandel Coast, 28 November 1623, voc 1083, ff.176-180; Van Uffelen to Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat, 5 December 1623, voc 1083, ff.185-185vo; Van Uffelen at Golkonda to Van den Broecke at Surat, 27 December 1623, voc 1079, ff.234-235; Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat to De Carpentier and Council at Batavia, 24 March 1624, voc 1083, ff.205-205vo.

²⁷ ARA, Letter from Goeree and Libener at Masulipatam to the Directors at Amsterdam, 4 October 1624, voc 1082, ff.50-53.

²⁸ ARA, Secret letter from Coen and Council at Batavia to Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat, 14 June 1628, voc 1095, ff.275-277vo.

²⁹ ARA, Letter from Marten Ysbrantsz. at Pulicat to Coen and Council at Batavia, 23 May 1629, voc 1098, ff.488-491; letter from Masulipatam to Surat, 3 March 1629, voc 1097, ff.425-426.

³⁰ ARA, Resolution adopted at Masulipatam roadstead in the yacht *Terschelling*, 19 April 1629, voc 1098, ff.495-495vo; Resolution at Masulipatam, 12.9.1629, voc 1097, ff.469-470vo.

³¹ ARA, Masulipatam Resolution, 15.9.1629, voc 1097, f.468.

its liability in the matter of tolls at Masulipatam would continue to be limited to 3,000 pagodas per annum.³²

The wars between Arakan and Pegu in 1630 and between Arakan and Bengal in 1632 contributed to keeping the volume of Indian merchants' trade between Coromandel on the one hand and Arakan-Pegu on the other fairly low. Thus the departures from Masulipatam for Arakan were one each in 1629 and 1630, zero in 1632-3, and three in 1633-4. The corresponding figures for Pegu were two, three, zero, and one. The departures from Pulicat for Arakan were one each in 1633-4, 1641-2, and 1642-3, and two in 1643-4. The corresponding figures for Pegu were three, two, zero, and one (Coolhaas (ed.) 1960, 410; Subrahmanyam 1990, 214, 311, 334). In 1677, two ships are recorded as having arrived at Arakan from Coromandel. One of these belonged to the King of Golkonda and had arrived at Arakan in the name of Dutch free-merchant Thomas Keerdecoe. It returned to Coromandel in February 1678 with ten elephants and sixty lasts of rice aboard. The second vessel was a small yacht belonging to a Hindu merchant which returned to Pulicat with four elephants.³³ The three 1682 arrivals at Arakan from Coromandel included two yachts from Pulicat belonging respectively to a Hindu state official of Golkonda and a *topas* called Francis Fernando. The third vessel was a sloop belonging to the free-merchant Thomas Keerdecoe and had come from Masulipatam. A new ship, acquired by a Persian merchant Muhammad Sharif in Arakan, was reportedly also lying ready to leave for Coromandel — with rice and elephants.³⁴ More systematic and detailed information on Indian merchants' trade from Masulipatam and the Bengal ports to the ports of Pegu and Arakan from about this time onward is available on a selective basis in the so-called 'shipping lists' in the Dutch East India Company documentation, but these have not been used in this paper.

As far as the Dutch East India Company was concerned, attempts were made to penetrate the Pegu trade from the 1630s onwards. A ship with a sizeable cargo was sent to Pegu in 1634 followed by the establishment of factories at Syriam and the capital city of Ava in 1635. The Company's investment grew progressively from 36,000 guilders in 1634 to 156,000 guilders in 1639. The intense competition provided by the Indian merchants, however, kept the profit earned rather low. Royal monopolies continued to shackle the Company's endeavours and permission to export elephants, which alone would probably have constituted a profitable return cargo, was not granted. The unsettled conditions caused by the 1659 attack on Ava by the ex-emperor of Ming China who had been expelled from his country by the Manchu conquerors and who had taken shelter in Burma, caused further problems. The Company tried to supplement its profits by carrying freight cargo between Coromandel and Pegu but this source never yielded more than about 15,000 guilders in any single year. Around 1674, the Company seriously began contemplating leaving

³² ARA, Farman of the King of Golkonda dated 11 December 1629, voc 1100, ff.90-90vo.

³³ ARA, Report of Jacob van der Plancken, the head of the Dutch factory in Arakan to Governor-General Joan Maetsuyker and Council at Batavia, 14 April 1678, voc 1339, f.939.

³⁴ ARA, Report by Dirck Vonck, ex-head of the Arakan factory to Governor-General Cornelis Speelman and Council at Batavia dated 30 January 1683, voc 1377, f.1246 vo.

Pegu. A report submitted to the Governor-General and Council at Batavia in March 1675 by an ex-chief of the Pegu factory, Joris van Coulster, however, recommended continuation at Pegu and suggested that an annual profit of 100,000 guilders could be made by engaging in trade and freight traffic.³⁵ But the recommendation was not accepted and the Company abandoned the Pegu establishment in 1678 (Raychaudhuri 1962, 81-85).

The story of Arakan was equally dismal. The factory there was intermittently abandoned and re-established till 1665 when a resolution adopted by the Batavia Council on 27 July again led to a closure of the factory (Van Dam 1932, 99). But this did not turn out to be the final closure either. On 29 September, 1677, yet another Dutch team under Jacob van der Plancken reached Arakan. He was cordially received by the king who was given modest presents including a gilded mirror. A small compensation of 744 guilders was given to Van der Plancken for the goods left behind by the factors in 1665.³⁶ Profitable trade, however, continued to elude the factors and in a letter to the king dated 5 November, 1682, Governor-General Cornelis Speelman declared his intention of finally recalling the factors. When the chief of the factory, Dirck Vonck, paid a courtesy call on the king on 16 November, 1682, to bid farewell, he was assigned his usual place 'close to that of the highest in the kingdom'. When the king asked Vonck why they were leaving Arakan, he gave an honest answer saying that it was trade that the Company was looking for and that there was no trade to be done in Arakan. Despite this, he did tell the king that a Dutch ship would be calling there from Melaka in January or mid-February 1683 to collect rice. With the king's permission, a sum of Rs.1200 was handed over against an IOU to one of his captains, Frenchman Nicolas Ledue, for favor of investment in rice to be kept ready for the ship from Melaka. The king promised that if the Dutch returned to his kingdom in future, 'I shall extend to them more friendship than I have ever shown to anybody so far'.³⁷ An occasion to test the sincerity of this promise, however, never presented itself.

To conclude, Coastal Burma had a distinct identity of its own in the trading world of the Bay of Bengal of the early modern period. The concern of the Burmese state in the continued participation of the country in an important way in the trading network of the Bay reflected both the role of the imported precious metals (which represented an overwhelming proportion of the total availability of these metals) in promoting monetization in the Burmese economy as well as the important share that revenues from trade formed of the total state revenues. The Burmese king himself was an important participant in the trade from the kingdom. This consisted of both the coastal trade with ports in Thailand, Malaya, and Sumatra as well as an extensive high seas trade with Bengal and the Coromandel coast on the other littoral of the Bay.

³⁵ ARA, Report by Joris van Coulster to Governor-General Joan Maetsuyker and Council at Batavia, 30 March 1675, voc 1313, ff.168-181.

³⁶ ARA, Report by Jacob van der Plancken to Governor-General Joan Maetsuyker and Council of Batavia, 14 April 1678, voc 1339, ff.933-40.

³⁷ ARA, Report by Dirck Vonck to Governor-General Cornelis Speelman and Council at Batavia, 30 January 1683, voc 1377, ff.1241-1249.

The Europeans' involvement in the trade from Burma began on a rather negative note with undisguised hostility already developing in the early years of the sixteenth century between the rulers of the Taungngu dynasty and the Portuguese *Estado da India*. But with the coming in of the Dutch East India Company into the Indian Ocean at the beginning of the seventeenth century with a strong emphasis on participation in intra-Asian trade, the situation improved somewhat. In the 1620s, the primary interest of the Company in the region was the procurement of slaves in Arakan for the nutmeg and mace plantations in the Spice Islands. But the slave trade never really picked up and was effectively given up by the end of the decade. In the following period, attempts were made to diversify the range of goods traded but again only with limited success owing largely to the intense competition provided by the rival Asian merchants. The Pegu establishment of the Company was eventually abandoned in 1678 followed by the one at Arakan in 1682.

References

- Coen, Jan Pietersz. 1919-1953. *Jan Pietersz. Coen: Bescheiden omtrent zyn bedrijf in Indië*, edited by H.T. Colenbrander. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Coolhaas, W. Ph., ed. 1960. *Generale missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Lieberman, Victor. 1991. 'Secular Trends in Burmese Economic History, c. 1350-1830, and their Implications for State Formation.' *Modern Asian Studies* 25 (1): 1-31.
- Lombard, Denys. 1999. 'The Indian World as seen from Aceh in the Seventeenth Century.' In *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800*, edited by Om Prakash and Denys Lombard. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Pires, Tomé. 1944. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires and the Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, edited by Armando Cortesão. 2 vols. London: The Hakluyt Society.
- Prakash, Om. 1985. *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal 1630-1720*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Raychaudhuri, Tapan. 1962. *Jan Company in Coromandel 1605-1690* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 1990. *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500-1650*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1999. 'Persianization' and 'Mercantilism': Two Themes in the Bay of Bengal History, 1400-1700.' In *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800*, edited by Om Prakash and Denys Lombard. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Van Dam, Pieter. 1932. *Beschryvinge van de Oost-Indische Compagnie*, edited by F.W. Stapel. Book 2, Part 2. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

