



Coastal Ports and Maritime Trade in Early Modern Konkan: A Historical Survey

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Abstract

The Konkan coast of western India occupied an important position in the maritime trading system of the Indian Ocean during the early modern period. Its geographical location between the Arabian Sea and the Deccan plateau enabled coastal ports to function as intermediaries between inland production centres and overseas markets. Ports such as Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla played significant roles in the movement of agricultural commodities, textiles, spices, horses, metals and other commercial goods. Their maritime activities connected the Konkan with Gujarat, Malabar, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, East Africa and Southeast Asia. The arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century introduced new forms of maritime control, including fortified settlements, naval intervention and the *cartaz* system. During the seventeenth century, Dutch and English competition further transformed the established commercial network. The decline of Dabhol and the temporary rise of Vengurla illustrate the process of commercial realignment on the western coast. The emergence of Maratha power under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj also significantly influenced the political and economic environment of the Konkan. This paper examines the geographical foundations, commercial functions, political influences and changing fortunes of the major Konkan ports. It argues that the history of these ports cannot be explained exclusively through European intervention; indigenous merchants, regional rulers, inland markets and local maritime communities remained fundamental to the functioning of the trading system.

Keywords: Konkan, Maritime Trade, Coastal Ports, Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur, Vengurla, Portuguese, Dutch, Marathas, Indian Ocean

1. Introduction

The Konkan coast represents one of the historically significant maritime regions of western India. Extending along the Arabian Sea and separated from the Deccan plateau by the Sahyadri ranges, the region possessed a distinctive geographical advantage. Numerous creeks, river mouths, estuaries and sheltered anchorages encouraged the growth of port settlements. At the same time, mountain passes connected these coastal centres with the economically productive regions of the Deccan. Consequently, the Konkan ports developed as points of interaction between maritime and inland commercial networks.

During the early modern period, ports such as Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla became important centres of regional and overseas commerce. Their importance was not based solely on their proximity to the sea. Their prosperity depended upon their connections with inland markets,



agricultural production, craft centres, political capitals and commercial communities. The Konkan coast was therefore an integrated economic zone in which maritime shipping and overland transportation operated together.

The sixteenth century marked an important transformation in the maritime history of the region. The Portuguese attempted to establish control over important sea routes and ports of the western Indian Ocean. Chaul became an important Portuguese settlement, while Dabhol continued to function as a major commercial centre. Portuguese efforts to regulate shipping through the *cartaz* system affected indigenous maritime merchants but did not completely eliminate their activities. During the seventeenth century, the entry of the Dutch and English intensified competition. The decline of Portuguese influence, political instability among regional states and changing commercial routes contributed to the decline of some established ports. Dabhol experienced a substantial decline, while Vengurla temporarily emerged as an important commercial centre. Recent historical-geographical research identifies Vengurla's rise as part of the wider seventeenth-century realignment of coastal western Indian trade. ([ResearchGate](#))

The emergence of Maratha power further altered the political geography of the Konkan. The expansion of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj into the coastal region created new relationships between maritime trade, political authority and military strategy. Thus, the early modern history of Konkan ports reflects continuous interaction between geography, commerce, politics and maritime power.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the geographical and historical factors responsible for the development of major coastal ports in early modern Konkan.
2. To study the commercial importance of Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla in regional and overseas maritime trade.
3. To examine the major commodities exchanged through the Konkan ports during the early modern period.
4. To analyse the influence of Portuguese, Dutch and English commercial activities on the traditional maritime network of Konkan.
5. To examine the role of indigenous merchants and regional political powers in the development of maritime trade.
6. To understand the causes responsible for the rise, decline and commercial realignment of major Konkan ports.
7. To assess the significance of the Konkan maritime network within the wider Indian Ocean trading system.

3. Significance of the Study

The study of Konkan maritime trade is significant for understanding the economic and political history of western India. Maritime history has frequently been examined through the activities of



European trading companies, but the Konkan experience demonstrates that indigenous commercial networks continued to play an important role.

The study is significant geographically because the location of Konkan ports determined their relationship with inland markets. The Sahyadri passes connected the ports with the Deccan, making the coast an important outlet for inland commodities.

The study is also economically significant because the ports handled a wide range of commodities. Pepper, cardamom, rice, cotton yarn, textiles, horses, metals, spices and provisions circulated through the region. Vengurla, for example, became connected with routes leading towards Surat, Hormuz, Basra, the Red Sea, Malabar, Ceylon, Bengal, Batavia and other regions. ([ResearchGate](#)) Politically, the ports were important because control over maritime centres provided customs revenue, strategic advantages and access to international trade. Portuguese, Bijapur, Maratha, Dutch and English interests frequently intersected along the Konkan coast.

The study also contributes to understanding port decline. The decline of Dabhol and the temporary rise of Vengurla demonstrate that maritime commercial geography was dynamic. A port could rise when political, economic and geographical conditions were favourable and decline when those conditions changed.

4. Review of Literature

The maritime history of Konkan has been examined through historical, geographical, archaeological and economic perspectives. Early European travellers and chroniclers provide valuable descriptions of the ports, commodities and commercial practices of the western coast.

Duarte Barbosa's account provides information about the coastal settlements, commodities and commercial activities of western India during the early sixteenth century. His observations are particularly useful for understanding the pre- and early Portuguese maritime environment.

The *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* provides substantial historical information about the Konkan region and discusses the historical importance of ports such as Chaul and Dabhol. It is particularly useful for reconstructing the geographical connections between coastal ports and the Deccan.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam's work on the Portuguese Empire provides a broader framework for understanding Portuguese political and economic activities in the Indian Ocean. His analysis demonstrates that Portuguese commercial expansion involved both trade and political-military intervention.

M. N. Pearson's studies of coastal western India provide an important interpretation of the relationship between local societies and Portuguese maritime expansion. His work is useful for examining the interaction between European maritime power and indigenous commercial communities.

Sinnappah Arasaratnam's work on maritime India highlights the continuing importance of Indian merchants and indigenous shipping in the seventeenth-century Indian Ocean. Such studies challenge interpretations that treat European companies as the only major actors in maritime trade.



Recent research by Dipesh Karmarkar provides a historical-geographical interpretation of Vengurla during the seventeenth-century crisis. The study demonstrates that the decline of Dabhol created a gap in the coastal trading network, while Vengurla temporarily benefited from its geographical location and the political-economic interests of the Dutch and Bijapur authorities. The existing literature therefore provides valuable information about individual ports, European companies and maritime trade. However, a comparative study of Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla helps to understand the broader process of transformation in Konkan maritime commerce.

5. Methodology

The present study is historical and analytical in nature. It is primarily based on secondary sources relating to the maritime, economic and political history of the Konkan region.

Historical accounts, government gazetteers, books, research papers, scholarly articles and available archival studies have been consulted. Information relating to major ports, commodities, trade routes and political developments has been collected and arranged chronologically.

A qualitative historical method has been used to examine the development and transformation of the ports. Comparative analysis has been employed to understand differences between Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla.

The study also uses historical-geographical analysis to understand how location, hinterland connections, political control and maritime routes influenced the rise and decline of ports. This approach is particularly relevant to Vengurla, where geographical location and seventeenth-century political circumstances jointly contributed to its temporary commercial prominence.

The study does not attempt to provide precise statistical estimates for the entire Konkan maritime economy because surviving historical records are uneven. Instead, available qualitative and quantitative evidence is interpreted within its historical context.

6. Geographical Foundations of Konkan Maritime Trade

The physical geography of Konkan was one of the principal foundations of its maritime development. The region's coastline contains numerous natural harbours, estuaries and creeks. These provided anchorage and facilitated the loading and unloading of goods.

The Sahyadri ranges, although they formed a physical barrier between the coast and the Deccan, also contained important passes through which goods and people travelled. Consequently, the ports became the coastal ends of inland commercial routes.

Chaul was connected with inland centres through routes crossing the Western Ghats. Dabhol similarly maintained connections with the Deccan, including routes towards Bijapur. Vengurla had important links with Raybagh and the Bijapur region.

This relationship between port and hinterland was essential. A port could not prosper merely because of a favourable harbour. It required access to commodities and markets. The Konkan ports therefore functioned as nodes in a network consisting of maritime routes, inland roads, production centres, markets and political centres.



7. Major Coastal Ports of Early Modern Konkan

7.1 Chaul

Chaul was one of the major ports of northern Konkan. It possessed a sheltered harbour and strong connections with inland Maharashtra. During the sixteenth century, the Portuguese established a factory at Chaul and subsequently developed fortified settlements.

The port handled textiles, rice, spices, coconuts, betel nuts and other commodities. It was also involved in the importation of horses from Arabia and Persia, which were highly valued by the Deccan states.

Chaul's importance derived from its position between the maritime and inland worlds. Vessels arriving from Malabar, Gujarat, Persia and other areas could access the port, while inland routes connected it with the Deccan.

The port continued to function during the seventeenth century, although its long-distance commercial importance gradually declined. Its continued participation in coastal and inland trade demonstrates that the decline of international trade did not necessarily result in the immediate disappearance of the port economy.

7.2 Dabhol

Dabhol was one of the most important commercial centres of the southern Konkan. Its location on the Vashishti river system provided access to vessels and inland routes.

Dabhol's commercial connections extended towards the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. It was also involved in the horse trade, which was strategically important for the Deccan states.

The seventeenth century brought increasing difficulties. Portuguese connections made Dabhol a target during the competition among European maritime powers. Dutch and English attacks affected the security of the port. Political instability and changes in inland trade routes further weakened its position.

Research indicates that Dabhol declined substantially by the 1630s. The resulting gap in the coastal network contributed to the emergence of Vengurla as an alternative commercial centre.

7.3 Rajapur

Rajapur developed as an important commercial centre during the seventeenth century. Its location provided connections with the inland regions of the southern Konkan and the Deccan.

European merchants became increasingly interested in Rajapur because of the availability of commodities and its position within the coastal network. English commercial interests became particularly significant.

Rajapur also became connected with the political changes associated with Maratha expansion. The capture of Rajapur by Shivaji in the 1660s illustrates the close relationship between political control and commercial centres.

Although Rajapur did not develop into a permanently dominant international port, it remained an important component of the southern Konkan commercial network.

7.4 Vengurla

Vengurla experienced a notable rise during the seventeenth century. Its geographical location approximately 60 km north of Goa made it strategically valuable in the rivalry between the Dutch and Portuguese.

The Dutch established a factory at Vengurla in the late 1630s. The port was connected to the Bijapur kingdom and to inland commercial centres such as Raybagh. Pepper was particularly important, and Dutch merchants attempted to obtain substantial quantities from the inland region. Vengurla developed connections with Surat, Hormuz, Basra, the Red Sea, Malabar, Ceylon, Bengal and Batavia. Its trade included pepper, cardamom, cotton yarn, rice, textiles, copper, incense and other commodities.

However, Vengurla's prosperity was relatively short-lived. The Dutch-Portuguese peace agreement of 1663 reduced one of the major strategic reasons for the Dutch presence at Vengurla. Political instability associated with Bijapur, the Marathas and other powers further weakened its position.

8. Major Commodities in Konkan Maritime Trade

The commercial activities of the Konkan ports involved both local products and commodities imported from distant regions.

Agricultural commodities such as rice, wheat, coconuts and betel nuts were important in coastal and regional commerce. Spices, especially pepper and cardamom, had considerable international value.

Cotton yarn and textiles were important exports. Vengurla's seventeenth-century trade records indicate the movement of cotton yarn towards overseas markets. Copper and other metals were also traded through the port.

The horse trade represented another important sector. Horses imported from Arabia and Persia were transported through western Indian ports and supplied to the military establishments of the Deccan.

Table 1: Major Ports and Their Principal Commercial Characteristics

Port	Major Period of Importance	Major Trade Connections	Important Commodities	Major Political Influence
Chaul	16th–17th centuries	Gujarat, Malabar, Persia, Deccan	Textiles, rice, spices, horses	Portuguese, Deccan states
Dabhol	15th–early 17th centuries	Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Deccan	Horses, textiles, rice, spices	Bijapur, Portuguese
Rajapur	17th century	Coastal Konkan, Deccan, European markets	Cotton goods, textiles, provisions	Marathas, English
Vengurla	17th century	Surat, Persia, Red Sea, Malabar, Batavia	Pepper, cardamom, cotton yarn, copper	Bijapur, Dutch, Marathas



The table demonstrates that the four ports performed different but interconnected commercial functions. Chaul and Dabhol had strong connections with the Deccan and wider Indian Ocean routes. Rajapur gained significance during the expansion of European commercial activity and Maratha political power. Vengurla became particularly important during the seventeenth-century restructuring of coastal trade.

The diversity of commodities also indicates that Konkan maritime trade was not dependent on a single product. Agricultural commodities, textiles, spices, horses and metals circulated through different ports according to changing market conditions.

9. European Intervention and Maritime Competition

The arrival of the Portuguese introduced a new phase in Konkan maritime history. Portuguese maritime policy attempted to regulate shipping through naval power, fortified settlements and the *cartaz* system.

The Portuguese sought to control strategically important ports and maritime routes. Chaul became one of their important centres, while their relationship with Dabhol reflected the broader competition for control of western Indian commerce.

During the seventeenth century, Dutch and English merchants challenged Portuguese dominance. The competition was not restricted to commercial transactions. It involved naval warfare, blockades, diplomatic negotiations and alliances with regional states.

The Dutch presence at Vengurla demonstrates this relationship between commerce and military strategy. Vengurla's proximity to Goa made it useful for challenging Portuguese maritime power. The port's commercial importance was therefore partly dependent upon the strategic rivalry between European powers.

10. Role of Indigenous Merchants

Indigenous merchants were essential to the functioning of the Konkan maritime economy. European companies depended upon local merchants for the procurement of commodities, inland transportation, credit, brokerage and information.

Merchants operated ships and maintained commercial connections between ports and inland markets. They also adjusted their activities according to changing political conditions.

At Vengurla, Dutch merchants faced competition from indigenous traders in the procurement of pepper and other commodities. Historical research indicates that the Dutch sometimes preferred to establish direct relationships with selected local merchants because of the complexity of dealing with wider indigenous trading networks.

This evidence demonstrates that European commercial companies did not replace indigenous merchants. Instead, they became additional participants within an existing commercial structure.

11. Political Power and Maritime Commerce

Political authority played an important role in determining the prosperity of Konkan ports. Regional rulers could provide commercial privileges, reduce customs duties, protect merchants or restrict foreign traders.

The Bijapur state supported commercial activities at Vengurla because the port provided access to inland markets and international trade. Dutch merchants obtained favourable trading conditions from the Bijapur court.

The rise of Maratha power created another political environment. Shivaji's expansion into the southern Konkan brought several ports under Maratha control. His administration recognised the economic importance of maritime trade and maintained pragmatic relations with European merchants.

The relationship between political authority and commerce was therefore reciprocal. Rulers benefited from customs revenue and imported commodities, while merchants required security and favourable trading conditions.

12. Maritime Trade Routes

The Konkan ports were connected to a complex network of maritime and inland routes.

Table 2: Major Trade Routes and Their Economic Significance

Trade Route	Principal Connection	Major Commodities	Historical Significance
Konkan–Gujarat	Chaul/Dabhol–Surat	Textiles, spices, cotton yarn	Connected Konkan with major western Indian markets
Konkan–Persian Gulf	Dabhol/Vengurla–Hormuz/Basra	Spices, textiles, provisions	Connected Konkan with West Asian markets
Konkan–Red Sea	Dabhol/Vengurla–Red Sea	Textiles, spices, rice	Important long-distance maritime connection
Konkan–Malabar	Chaul/Vengurla–Malabar	Spices, rice, textiles	Linked western coastal commercial centres
Konkan–Batavia	Vengurla–Batavia	Pepper, cardamom, cotton yarn, copper	Important Dutch commercial connection
Konkan–Deccan	Ports–Sahyadri passes–Bijapur	Horses, textiles, grain, spices	Integrated maritime and inland trade

The table illustrates the extensive geographical range of Konkan maritime commerce. The ports were not isolated coastal settlements; they were connected to both regional and international markets.

The Deccan routes were particularly important because they supplied the ports with commodities and provided access to inland consumers. At the same time, maritime routes extended commercial activity towards the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Malabar and Southeast Asia.

Vengurla's trade network was particularly diverse. Historical evidence indicates that the port was connected with Surat, Hormuz, Basra, the Red Sea, Malabar, Ceylon, Bengal and Batavia.

13. Decline and Realignment of Konkan Ports

The decline of Konkan ports was a gradual and complex process. Several factors contributed to changes in their commercial fortunes.



The decline of Portuguese maritime dominance altered established routes. European competition created instability through attacks and blockades. Political changes in the Deccan also affected inland commercial routes.

Dabhol provides a clear example. Its connections with the Bijapur state were weakened by political changes, while attacks and instability discouraged merchants. At the same time, Surat became increasingly important as a stable commercial centre. Trade routes consequently shifted towards Surat.

Vengurla temporarily benefited from the decline of Dabhol. However, its dependence on Dutch strategic interests and Bijapur's political support made its prosperity vulnerable. Once the political circumstances changed, Vengurla also began to decline.

The history of these ports therefore represents not simply a process of rise and fall but a **realignment of maritime trade.**

14. Important Points Related to the Study

14.1 Konkan as a Maritime Gateway: The Konkan coast served as a gateway between the Arabian Sea and the Deccan plateau. Its ports provided outlets for inland commodities and entry points for overseas goods.

14.2 Importance of Hinterland Connections: The success of a port depended heavily upon its connection with inland markets. Chaul's relationship with the Deccan and Vengurla's connection with Raybagh and Bijapur illustrate this principle.

14.3 Diversity of Commodities: The Konkan maritime economy handled agricultural products, spices, textiles, horses, metals and luxury commodities. This diversity provided resilience to the regional economy.

14.4 Role of Indigenous Merchants: Indigenous merchants remained important throughout the early modern period. European companies relied upon them for procurement, brokerage, transportation and local knowledge.

14.5 European Commercial Competition: Portuguese, Dutch and English competition transformed the political and commercial environment. European companies used both economic and military strategies to secure access to markets.

14.6 Maritime Trade and Political Power: Ports were economically valuable but also strategically important. Control over ports generated customs revenue and provided access to naval routes and imported military commodities.

14.7 Rise and Decline of Ports: The fortunes of Konkan ports changed according to political circumstances, security, market demand, inland routes and international competition.

14.8 Vengurla as an Example of Commercial Adaptation: Vengurla's seventeenth-century rise demonstrates how a relatively small port could become important when its geographical location matched contemporary political and economic requirements. Its later decline demonstrates that port prosperity depended on broader networks rather than geography alone.



14.9 Importance of the Indian Ocean Network: Konkan ports formed part of the wider Indian Ocean system. Their connections with Persia, the Red Sea, Malabar, Gujarat, Ceylon and Southeast Asia demonstrate their international significance.

14.10 Continuity of Coastal Trade: Even when long-distance trade declined at particular ports, coastal and inland commerce continued. Therefore, port decline should not automatically be interpreted as complete economic disappearance.

15. Findings of the Study

The study reveals several important findings.

1. The geographical position of Konkan was fundamental to its maritime development. The combination of sea access and Deccan connections created favourable conditions for port development.
2. Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla did not perform identical functions. Their importance changed according to political and economic circumstances.
3. Third, the Portuguese significantly altered maritime practices but did not completely control indigenous commerce.
4. Dutch and English competition contributed to the redistribution of maritime trade during the seventeenth century.
5. Indigenous merchants continued to play a major role in maritime commerce.
6. Sixth, the decline of Dabhol and rise of Vengurla demonstrate that maritime trade routes were flexible and capable of geographical relocation.
7. Political instability was one of the major factors affecting port prosperity. War, blockades and changing political alliances could rapidly reduce commercial activity.
8. Eighth, the Konkan ports were integrated into long-distance Indian Ocean networks and should therefore be studied as part of global maritime history rather than merely as local trading centres.

16. Conclusion

The history of coastal ports and maritime trade in early modern Konkan reveals the importance of western India's connection with the wider Indian Ocean world. Ports such as Chaul, Dabhol, Rajapur and Vengurla functioned as important commercial nodes connecting inland Deccan markets with maritime routes extending towards Gujarat, Malabar, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, East Africa and Southeast Asia. The geographical characteristics of the Konkan coast provided the basic foundation for maritime commerce, but geography alone did not determine the success of a port. Political patronage, security, inland routes, commodity availability, merchant networks and international competition were equally important.

Chaul developed as a major northern Konkan entrepôt, while Dabhol became a significant centre of trade with the Deccan and western Indian Ocean. Rajapur gained importance during the seventeenth century as European commercial interests expanded. Vengurla temporarily emerged as a major centre during the decline of Dabhol and the Dutch-Portuguese rivalry. Its subsequent



decline illustrates the temporary nature of port prominence. The study also demonstrates that European maritime powers should not be treated as the sole agents of change. Indigenous merchants, sailors, producers, brokers and regional political authorities continued to shape maritime commerce. European companies depended heavily upon these established networks. The Konkan maritime economy was therefore a complex and adaptive system. Its history reflects not simply European expansion but the interaction of local and international forces. The rise and decline of individual ports was part of a broader process of commercial realignment within the Indian Ocean. The early modern Konkan should consequently be regarded as an active maritime region that connected western India with distant commercial worlds. Its ports contributed substantially to the movement of commodities, people, capital and political influence across the Arabian Sea. The study of these ports provides valuable insights into the economic history, maritime culture and political transformation of western India.

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