Mechanism of Transportation: Rajputana (17th-18th Century)

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Abstract- When we think of trade and commerce, a few things immediately come to our mind, like commercial groups, means of transport, commodities and their carriers, the taxation system, and so on. The current research tries to analyse the modes of transportation prevalent in Rajputana during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Furthermore, our study sheds light on commercial communities involved in the profession of transport.

Index Terms- Means of Transport, Banjaras, Rebaris, Charans, Bhats, Rajasthan.

I. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

For the study under consideration, several approaches have been used, including the analysis of primary and secondary sources, visits to numerous Rajasthani archives and libraries with the aim of material acquisition. Different sources have been used, like archival material in the form of Bahishti (preserved in the Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner), travelogues, Persian texts, modern works (books and articles), and dictionaries. Rajasthani primary sources both published and unpublished, are also available at Rajasthan Shodh Sansthan Chaupasni, Jodhpur.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While dealing with the transportation system, we find that in 17th-18th century Rajasthan, goods were either transported by bullock and camel carts or on the back of oxen, camels, and ponies/pack horses. Camels, known as ‘the ship of the desert’ were used for transport as well as for travelling. We find references to Katkar, Balad, Poth and Guadi as means of transport. The term katkar refers to the caravan of camels. Camels and carts drawn by camels were mostly used in western Rajasthan-the desert region. For example, ten camel-carts loaded with gunpowder were sent to Jodhpur from Jalor. Similarly, two camels loaded with cotton, lead, and groceries were carried by traders from Pali to Rajghar. Camels were mostly used for transport between Multan, Sindh and Rajasthan as evident through sources. That is why, almost all the routes of western Rajasthan (connecting the towns of Sindh and Multan) were known as camel-routes (Katkar). The carriers of grain or owners of the caravan were called as katariya.

Literally, the terms balad and poth meant ox/oxen. The two terms are synonymous and are defined as a group of oxen carrying goods on their backs from one place to another. In eastern Rajasthan, bullock carts were generally used for transportation. For example, goods were carried on eighteen bullock carts by traders from Nagaur to Bundi. Normally, fifteen maunds of goods were carried by bullock-carts. The roads coming from eastern and southern Rajasthan were called cart-roads (balad). The owners of oxen were called as baladiya.

Chariots drawn by bullocks or horses were commonly used by the rulers for travelling purposes.

In the profession of transport, Banjaras and other communities like Rebaris, Bhats, and Charans were engaged in large numbers.

Banjaras were also known as ‘baladiyas’ in our region. Basically, the term banjara has been derived from the Sanskrit word-vanij, which means a trader. Banjara was a large trading community since the medieval period that dealt with bulky commodities/ goods/items like food grains, sugar, salt, butter, etc. Salt was carried on a large scale by banjaras to the different parts of Rajasthan and outside as well (from Sambhar, Didwana, Pachchhadora, and Nawa). Nayak Heera Gogera transported 2257 oxen of salt to Jhansi via Harauti from Pachchhadora. Similarly, Nayak Maru of Marwar carried 885 oxen of salt from Pachchhadora to Harauti. They were honoured by the state with siropaos (robes of honour).

An affluent banjara used to possess a huge number of oxen (balad) ranging from 200 to 2000. The banjara who had one thousand or more oxen was known as Nayak. We also find 200 to 300 balads in a single group of banjaras. Mostly, this trading community was involved in long distance-trade having large herds of animals with pack waggons on their backs and moved in large groups for security/safety purposes. Even Jahangir mentions that they had a huge ox (numerous animals) and transported grain from surplus areas to the towns. They also accompanied armies. Both Muslims and non-Muslims were involved in this trade. Banjaras have been dubbed by Tavernier as ‘non-muslims’ (idolaters). He even mentions that their womenfolk used to tattoo their skin and had priests and idols (like serpents). But it is not accurate as we find references to Muslims also in this group particularly in north India like Multanis, etc. Sixty-six bullocks of grain were carried by Sujat Khan (Multani) for whom he had paid Rs. 55. Mostly, they organised the trade themselves, but merchants also hired them for trading purposes.
Rebaris were chiefly involved in the profession of camel transport. Their camels were hired by traders and the state. For instance, the state paid Rs. 5,000 to the Rebaris for the camels hired for the transport. Similarly, a Rebari of mauza Kapars was given Rs. 122 and annas 8 for seven camels hired by the state for a period of three and a half months.

Bhats and Charans were also involved in the transport profession. They had a respectable position and took benefit of this to become general carriers of goods in the country. Charan,xxxii were known for their literary pursuits and their main work was to preserve the glorious deeds of Rajput dynasties. They composed songs that were recited on several occasions like social gatherings, battle fields, etc. They were being ordered to write chronicles, martial epics, and descriptive genealogies. In hours of need, they played a significant role for the state.xxxiii Bhatsxxxiv were genealogists and their main job was to recite the genealogical histories of families on certain occasions like festivals, marriages, etc.

These two groups were also involved in trading activities.xxxvi They were mostly engaged in transporting goods from one place to another and walked with flocks of camels and bulls known as katar (rows of camels) and balad (rows of oxen). They also transported the goods of other traders outside Rajasthan. They carried different commodities like salt, opium, grain, spices, tobacco, etc.xxxvii We find references to some important charan and bhat traders like Paima Naik Bhat,xxxix Charan dev Karan,xxxv Nathu,xxxvi Heera bhat,xxxv Charan Pitha,xxxv Maru bhat,xxxvii Charan Dullah, Naik Kali Bhat, Naik Guman Bhat,xxxviii Hariram Kesu Maru,xxxvii Lacheram Bhat Maru, Charan Jivo,xxxvii etc. They were engaged in both inter-provincial and inter-regional trade. Being a respectable class in society, they were exempt from taxes and were also not looted/plundered as was the case with others. Sometimes they misused this by taking goods of other traders.xxiv They offered their services to traders (on payment) to transport their items.xxxv This meant losses to the state treasury, so they were warned later on.

III. CONCLUSION

Our study revealed that the chief means of transport were camel-carts, pack horses, camels and bullocks, and bullock-carts. In the eastern part of Rajasthan where the roads were generally even and had a hard surface, bullock-carts were commonly used whereas in uneven tracts of hilly areas, pack-horses and bullocks were used for carrying commodities from one place to another. The camels were used mostly in the desert parts of the state for travelling and transporting purposes. Generally, the transport work was mostly done by Banjaras who used to carry rice, grain, salt, sugar, etc. on the backs of their oxen. Rebaris, Charans and Bhats were also engaged in the profession of transport as shown by our research.

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i Long documents that are folded (an account book or ledger).

ii Ponies were common on uneven tracts of hilly regions.


iv The term “Poth” is employed for sack/bales.

v The term “Gaadi” is employed for carts.

vi Sanad Parwana Bahi, Jodhpur, no. 1, V.S. 1821/A.D. 1764, p. 26, f. b; Kagad Bahi, Bikaner, no. 3, V.S. 1827/A.D. 1770, p. 45;

vii Five camels loaded with alum were carried from Jaisalmer to Jaipur by Brahman Chand Pokaran. Sanad Parwana Bahi, Jodhpur, no. 20, V.S. 1835/A.D. 1778.


ix Sanad Parwana Bahi, Jodhpur, no. 19, V.S. 1834/A.D. 1777.

x A trader named Khem Chand Khatri carried one hundred and four maunds of indigo from Jaipur to Multan on camels. Zakat Bahi, no. 81, V.S. 1807/A.D. 1750. Three camels laden with tobacco were brought by Tejpal Golecha to Deshnok from Sindh. Similarly, sixteen camels loaded with asafoetida were brought to Bikaner from Multan by a Pathan. Sawa Mandi Sadr Bahi, Bikaner, no. 3, V.S. 1805/A.D. 1748, and no. 4, V.S. 1807/A.D. 1750.


xii Sawa Mandi Sadr Bahi, Bikaner, no. 8, V.S. 1815/1758 A.D.


xiv Sanad Parwana bahi, Jodhpur, no. 21, V.S. 1835/A.D. 1778.

xv Ibid.

xvi Bajrang Lal Lohiya, Rajasthan-ki-Jatiya, Bikaner, 1891, pp. 167-68.


Nayak Ganga Ram was given a *siropao* of Rs. 19 and annas 11 as he carried 3600 oxen of salt from Pachbhadra to be taken to Jhansi. Similarly, Nayak Heera and Mana were rewarded with a turban and *siropao* each worth Rs. 10 and annas 8 as they carried 1205 oxen of salt from Marwar to Chhabara via Kota.


G.S.L. Devra, ‘A Study of the Trade Relations Between Rajasthan and Sindh/Multan (1650-1800)’, pp. 584-94.
