

Foreign Power and Pursuit: Commerce and Contest in the Pepper Land of Bhaṭkaḷ

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Abstract:

This study examines the historical significance of Bhaṭkaḷ, a coastal town on the Kanara coast, as a vital hub in the Indian Ocean trade. Drawing on Greco-Roman texts, Arab accounts, and European records, it highlights the town's strategic location, economic foundations, and the successive involvement of foreign powers. Arabs established enduring communities and shaped local society, while Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French traders competed for control of its pepper trade and maritime routes. The analysis underscores how Bhaṭkaḷ's identity was defined by its role in global commerce, its resilience amidst foreign rivalry, and its transformation under colonial rule. Pepper, in particular, defined its global reputation, making Bhaṭkaḷ a microcosm of the wider Indian Ocean trade where local resources and global ambitions intersected.

Keywords: Bhaṭkaḷ, Indian Ocean trade, Pepper trade, Portuguese expansion, Nētrāṇi Island, Greco-Roman commerce.

Introduction

Since antiquity, the west coast of India has been a crossroads of maritime exchange, and Bhaṭkaḷ emerged as one of its most significant ports. Its location near Honnāvara, Nētrāṇi island, and Kāikiṇi placed it directly on major routes linking the Malabar and Coromandel coasts. From Greco-Roman references in Pliny's

Natural History and the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* to later accounts by Arab merchants, Portuguese chroniclers, and English factory records, Bhaṭkaḷ was consistently recognised as a hub of trade. Its prosperity rested on commodities such as pepper, rice, horses, textiles, and sandalwood, while its inland connections

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ensured integration with the Deccan interior. Over time, successive foreign powers, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French, contested its commerce, reshaping its economy and politics. This article explores Bhaṭkaḷ's strategic importance, its economic foundations, the role of foreign powers, and the long-term impact of their presence, with pepper as the defining commodity of its global reputation.

Strategic Importance of Bhaṭkaḷ

Bhaṭkaḷ's significance lies first in its geography. Located on the west coast of India, it was a natural gateway for ships sailing between Arabia, Africa, and India. Its proximity to Honnāvara, Nētrāṇi island, and Kāikiṇi placed it directly on major maritime routes connecting the Malabar and Coromandel coasts. Greco-Roman sources such as Pliny's *Natural History* and the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* confirm that foreign merchants were aware of the region's role in coastal commerce as early as the first century CE.¹ Nētrāṇi island, in particular, served as a navigational landmark, guiding ships along the coast.² Whoever controlled Bhaṭkaḷ had access to valuable trade networks, making it a contested yet indispensable port throughout history.

Bhaṭkaḷ's importance was also recognised in later centuries. Abdur Razzaq noted that the Vijayanagara Empire possessed 300 seaports,³ and Bhaṭkaḷ was likely one of them, linking the empire to Calicut, Ceylon, and Persia.

The Bombay Gazetteer described it as a place of historical interest and the southernmost port in the Bombay Presidency, highlighting the Venkatapura and Bhaṭkaḷ rivers that provided anchorage for small craft. While some travellers such as Varthema claimed the town lacked a proper seaport,⁴ others emphasised its flourishing trade. Tome Pires ranked Bhaṭkaḷ next in importance to Goa and Chaul,⁵ and Barbosa described it as a busy port town with traffic in various goods.⁶ Domingos Paes further listed Bhaṭkaḷ among the Vijayanagara ports where the Portuguese established factories, alongside Ankōlā, Mirjān, Honnāvara, Bhaṭkaḷ (Batecalla), Mangalore, Basrūru, and Bārakūru.⁷

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that Bhaṭkaḷ was a flourishing commercial centre, sometimes overshadowed by Honnāvara but consistently recognised as a hub of maritime trade. Its rivers provided natural harbours, and its inclusion in imperial and European records confirms its strategic role as a vital coastal gateway in South India.

Economic Foundations of Bhaṭkaḷ

The prosperity of Bhaṭkaḷ rested on its commodities and the diverse exchanges that flowed through its port. Pepper was the most prized, renowned for its superior quality and even known in Europe as "Butkole pepper."⁸ Rice was another staple, often demanded in tribute by the Portuguese⁹ and the English¹⁰ in

thousands of bags annually. Arab traders supplied horses, essential for Indian armies,¹¹ while iron and sugar were exported through the port.¹² Textiles such as dungarees and dutties became part of English procurement,¹³ while sandalwood exports under Haider Ali brought immense profit, especially in the Chinese market.¹⁴ The Portuguese introduced cashew,¹⁵ which became a major commercial crop, altering local agriculture.

Alongside these commodities, Bhaṭkaḷ's port facilitated a wide range of imports and exports that integrated it into global trade networks. Horses and pearls arrived from Ormus,¹⁶ while rice, sugar, and iron were shipped out in large quantities.¹⁷ Coconuts, palm sugar, and palm wine came from Malabar,¹⁸ while copper, tin, coral, silk, and mercury were imported from Portugal, Ormus, and China.¹⁹ Exports included rice, ginger, cardamom, textiles, and iron, enriching both local and foreign markets.²⁰

The strength of Bhaṭkaḷ's economy also depended on its inland connections. Domingos Paes, writing in 1520–22 CE, described the road from Bhaṭkaḷ to *Zambuja* (identified as Saṇḍūru (Baḷḷāri district) of Vijayanagara, noting its even terrain, streams of water, and the annual passage of five to six thousand pack-oxen carrying merchandise.²¹ This route, along with the Gērusoppa ghat and the Śārāvati river passage via Honnāvāra, linked the coast to the Deccan interior.²² Such connections ensured that commodities

flowing into Bhaṭkaḷ's port could reach inland markets, reinforcing its role as a vital node in both maritime and overland trade networks.

Together, these Strategic Importance of Bhaṭkaḷ, commodities, exchanges, and inland routes formed the economic foundations of Bhaṭkaḷ. They explain why the town became a magnet for foreign merchants and why successive powers, such as the Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French, sought to control it. Pepper remained the defining commodity, but the diversity of imports, exports, and inland connections ensured that Bhaṭkaḷ was not a single-commodity port. Instead, it was a diversified hub, deeply integrated into Indian Ocean and Deccan trade networks, central to the commercial history of coastal Karnataka.

Foreign Powers in Bhaṭkaḷ

Arab Traders

Bhaṭkaḷ emerged as a crucial hub in the long history of Indo-Arab maritime exchange. From early antiquity, Arab merchants established strong commercial links with India, particularly along the Malabar and Karnataka coasts.²³ Unlike many foreign traders who came and left, Arabs often settled permanently, intermarried with locals,²⁴ and formed enduring communities such as the Navāyats.²⁵ This integration gave Bhaṭkaḷ a distinctive cultural and social identity shaped by centuries of trade and migration.

By the 7th century CE, Arab traders were already active in the region, with settlements forming around key rivers and ports. By the 9th century CE, Arab communities were firmly established along the west coast.²⁶ Bhaṭkaḷ became one of their favoured settlements, strategically located for maritime commerce. Inscriptions²⁷ and accounts from travellers such as Ibn Battuta²⁸ confirm the strength of these communities and their influence on local governance and trade.

The town's importance grew further in the medieval period. Arab merchants dominated the horse trade, supplying armies of the Deccan and Vijayanagara kingdoms.²⁹ This economic role made them indispensable. Even with the arrival of European powers in the 16th century CE, Arabs retained influence. They acted as mediators in conflicts, negotiated with the Portuguese³⁰ and sustained trade networks across the Indian Ocean.³¹ Their resilience enabled them to adapt to shifting political landscapes, securing privileges under local rulers such as the Keḷadi Nāyakas and maintaining commercial activity well into the 17th century CE.³²

The legacy of Arab settlement in Bhaṭkaḷ is visible not only in its mercantile history but also in its cultural fabric. The Navāyat community, with roots in Arab migration, reflects this deep historical connection. Links to figures such as Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan further

highlight the integration of Arab-descended families into regional politics.³³

In sum, Bhaṭkaḷ's role in Indo-Arab trade networks shaped the economic and social history of coastal Karnataka, leaving a legacy that continues to define the town's identity today.

Portuguese Expansion

From the early 16th century CE onward, Bhaṭkaḷ became a focal point of Portuguese ambitions on the Kanara coast. When João da Nova and Vasco da Gama first arrived in 1501–1502 CE, they immediately recognised the port's commercial value—its rice, iron, sugar, and pepper trade made it one of the most prosperous coastal towns.³⁴ The Portuguese sought to secure tribute, establish factories, and even build fortresses, but local rulers resisted, balancing diplomacy with caution.³⁵

The kings of Bhaṭkaḷ and Honnāvara initially chose cooperation, paying tribute and maintaining peace to preserve trade stability.³⁶ However, later queens, particularly Chennādēvi and Chennabhairādēvi, adopted a defiant stance. They resisted Portuguese demands, sheltered pirates, and allied with neighbouring powers like Bijāpur.³⁷ This resistance led to devastating Portuguese attacks, most notably in 1542 CE, when Bhaṭkaḷ was burned, prompting the establishment of the new settlement of Mūḍabhaṭkaḷ.³⁸ These events highlight the Portuguese attitude toward the native Indian lands and their trade policy.

By the 17th century CE, power shifted to the Keḷadi Nāyakas, who curtailed Portuguese influence and reasserted local control.³⁹ By 1707 CE, the Portuguese reaffirmed their rights to factories at Mirjān, Honnāvara, Chandāvara, and Bhaṭkaḷ.⁴⁰ Later, under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, Bhaṭkaḷ again became significant in naval ambitions, as they sought alliances with European rivals of the British, including the Portuguese.⁴¹

Dutch Rivalry

Although the Dutch East India Company concentrated most of its efforts on the Coromandel, Malabar, and Bengal coasts, Bhaṭkaḷ still held significance in their broader commercial strategies. Early accounts, such as those of Van Linschoten in the late 16th century CE, highlight the pepper trade of the region and the structured agreements made by local rulers, showing that Bhaṭkaḷ was already recognised as a valuable spice-producing hub.⁴²

By the mid-17th century CE, the rivalry between the Dutch and Portuguese reshaped trade along the Kanara coast. Writers like Schultzen noted that Honnāvara and Bhaṭkaḷ had lost some independence due to Portuguese dominance, yet their importance remained clear.⁴³ The Dutch, seeking to break Portuguese control, allied with the Keḷadi rulers and were granted permission to establish factories, including one at Honnāvara. This marked a turning point, as Dutch support helped Śivappa Nāyaka

expel Portuguese influence, thereby strengthening local autonomy.⁴⁴

For the Dutch, pepper was the most prized commodity,⁴⁵ and Bhaṭkaḷ's reputation for high-quality produce made it a key location in their attempts to secure a monopoly. By the late 17th century CE, Dutch observers like Baldaeus identified Bhaṭkaḷ as one of the few remaining strongholds of trade in Kanara,⁴⁶ underscoring its resilience despite constant European competition.

Although the Dutch eventually withdrew from Karnataka in the 18th century CE, their activities demonstrate how Bhaṭkaḷ remained central to the contest for control of coastal commerce.

English Trade and Colonial Expansion

Bhaṭkaḷ was central to English expansion in India, its black pepper trade shaping the foundation of the East India Company. In 1599, Fulke Greville noted the queen of *Batikala* supplying pepper to the Portuguese at *Onor* (Honnāvara), showing its prominence.⁴⁷ By 1619 CE, traders from Surat purchased pepper there, and in 1637 CE, Captain Wedell Robinson signed an agreement with Keḷadi Vīrabhadra to establish a factory,⁴⁸ appointing Anthony Vernworthy as Chief Merchant.⁴⁹ Courten's Company soon opened factories in Kārwar and Bhaṭkaḷ in 1638–39 CE,⁵⁰ exporting the famed "Butkole pepper."⁵¹ Randolph Taylor's mission in 1663 CE procured 150–200 tons of pepper, while the ships London and American docked in 1664 CE to

negotiate with Nārāyaṇa Mallya.⁵² A Surat Council letter that year considered Bhaṭkaḷ the most promising pepper port. Yet in 1670 CE, a sacred cow was killed by an English bulldog, sparking a mob that massacred eighteen factory members. Though the English never resettled, they continued to buy pepper,⁵³ securing supplies from Nārāyaṇa Mallya in 1671 CE.⁵⁴

In 1727 CE, the English funded a factory in Honnāvara, and in 1751 CE, another treaty with the Keḷadi Nāyakas allowed them to rebuild it, securing pepper exports and exclusive privileges.⁵⁵ In 1763 CE, Haidar Ali took control of Beḍnūru, ruling Kanara. Stracey, the British resident, presented himself to Haidar, ensuring continued trade.⁵⁶ Under Haidar, Honnāvara became a naval dockyard exporting pepper and sandalwood. During the First Anglo-Mysore War (1766–1769 CE), the English captured the fortified island and Honnāvara fort, though Haidar regained them in 1769 CE.⁵⁷ James Forbes, in 1772 CE, noted English factories still operating, while Parsons in 1775 CE described a fortified island at Honnāvara and spotted Pigeon and Hog Islands near Bhaṭkaḷ.⁵⁸

Tipu Sultan succeeded Haidar after the Second Anglo-Mysore War (1780–1784 CE). In 1783 CE, General Mathews captured Basavarājadurgā, Mirjān, Honnāvara, and Bidanūru, aided by coastal Christians who provided 3,30,000 in funds and 1,000 bags of rice.⁵⁹ Tipu recaptured these territories and retaliated

after the Treaty of Maṅgaḷūru in 1784 CE, seizing 30,000–60,000 Christians from Kanara, including Bhaṭkaḷ, forcing conversions and destroying churches. Recognising the damage, Tipu later allowed captives to return and in 1789 CE wrote to the Archbishop in Goa requesting priests.⁶⁰ By October 1799 CE, following Tipu's defeat, the English firmly established control over Kanara.⁶¹ This marked the transformation of Kanara into a structured British trading zone, ensuring stable commerce and long-term benefits for English trade.

French Involvement

Compared to the Portuguese, Dutch, and English, the French presence in Bhaṭkaḷ was limited, yet the town still held significance within the broader European rivalry for control of India's coastal trade. The French East India Company, established in 1664, concentrated its efforts on Pondicherry, Bengal, and the Coromandel Coast, but it was aware of the commercial value of Karnataka's ports. Early travellers such as Pyard de Laval noted the activity at Honnāvara,⁶² showing that French observers recognised the strategic importance of the region even before they established factories elsewhere.

By the late 17th century CE, French merchants had begun engaging indirectly with traders connected to Bhaṭkaḷ, such as Nārāyaṇa Mallya, who was active in both Dakṣiṇa Kannaḍa and Bhaṭkaḷ.⁶³ This suggests that while the French did not

maintain a permanent base in Bhaṭkaḷ, the town functioned as part of the trade networks that facilitated their expansion. Later accounts, including those of Anquetil du Perron in 1758 CE, described Bhaṭkaḷ as a fortified settlement, reinforcing its reputation as a stronghold of both commerce and defence.⁶⁴

French influence in coastal Karnataka was most visible through their military alliances with Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan. French officers and troops supported Mysore's rulers in their wars against the British, and ports like Honnāvara and Bhaṭkaḷ became important for naval arsenals and dockyards.⁶⁵ This collaboration highlights how Bhaṭkaḷ's strategic location was not only valuable for trade but also for military logistics.

Ultimately, French ambitions in the region were overshadowed by British expansion. Their intermittent presence in Bhaṭkaḷ reflects the broader pattern of European competition, where the Portuguese and later the British held stronger control. Yet, the French recognition of Bhaṭkaḷ's fortified position and its pepper trade shows that the town was consistently viewed as an important site in the contest for coastal dominance.

Impact on Bhaṭkaḷ

The arrival of foreigners transformed Bhaṭkaḷ's economy, culture, and politics. Economically, foreign demand boosted pepper, rice, textiles, and sandalwood production, integrating the town into global markets. Culturally, Arabs created

Indo-Arab communities, the Portuguese introduced Christianity and new crops, reshaped trade networks by breaking Arab monopolies,⁶⁶ left religious traces, and influenced local language and customs. Politically, local rulers alternated between cooperation and resistance: kings often paid tribute to preserve stability, while queens like Chennādēvi⁶⁷ and Chennabhairādēvi⁶⁸ resisted foreign dominance. Violence and conflict were recurring themes, from Portuguese burnings to English massacres and Tipu Sultan's persecution of Christians. Ultimately, British colonial rule ended local autonomy, transforming Bhaṭkaḷ from a contested spice port into part of a structured imperial district.

Long-Term Effect of Foreign Arrival

The foreign arrival in Bhaṭkaḷ brought both prosperity and suffering. On one hand, it connected the town to global trade, introduced new crops and technologies, pepper and other commodities enriched the local treasury, and gave Bhaṭkaḷ a lasting reputation in international trade. and enriched its cultural diversity. On the other hand, it subjected Bhaṭkaḷ to repeated wars, foreign rivalries, tribute demands, and violent incidents such as the burning of Bhaṭkaḷ by the Portuguese and the massacre of English factory members, causing instability and suffering. Under Mysore rule, the collapse of pepper cultivation further undermined the region's economic strength. Its story reflects the broader history of the Indian

Ocean trade, where a small coastal town became a stage for global rivalry, cultural exchange, and imperial ambition. Bhaṭkaḷ's enduring importance lay in its pepper trade along with other commodities, strategic location, and resilience, ensuring that it remained central to foreign powers for centuries.

Pepper as the Defining Commodity

Pepper was the most important commodity that gave Bhaṭkaḷ its global reputation. From early Arab geographers and travellers to European chroniclers such as Barbosa,⁶⁹ Nuniz,⁷⁰ and Pietro Della Valle,⁷¹ pepper was consistently described as abundant and of superior quality. In Europe, it became known as "Butkole pepper," considered the finest in India. The fame of pepper even shaped the identity of local rulers, with Queen Chennabhairādēvi remembered by the Portuguese as the "Queen of Pepper."⁷² This shows that pepper was not only an economic product but also a symbol of power and prestige in the region.

Bhaṭkaḷ's global importance rested firmly on its pepper trade. It was the commodity that drew Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and later Mysore rulers into the region, shaping its economy, politics, and reputation. The town proved resilient and adaptable, repeatedly sought after by foreign powers, yet vulnerable to disruptions caused by war, tribute demands, and colonial rivalry. Bhaṭkaḷ's history is therefore a microcosm of the wider Indian Ocean trade, where local

resources and global ambitions intersected to transform a coastal port into a stage of international competition.

Conclusion

The history of Bhaṭkaḷ illustrates how geography and commerce combined to make it a vital node in the Indian Ocean world. Its pepper, rice, horses, textiles, and sandalwood drew merchants from across continents, while its port facilitated both imports and exports on a global scale. Greco-Roman references confirm its early integration into maritime networks, Arab settlements demonstrate its enduring role in trade and society, and European rivalry reshaped its economy and politics. The town's resilience is evident in its ability to adapt to shifting powers, from Vijayanagara to the Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and Mysore rulers. Pepper remained the defining commodity, symbolising both prosperity and vulnerability. Ultimately, Bhaṭkaḷ's legacy is one of resilience, interdependence, and pluralism, a coastal crossroads where commerce and culture converged to shape a distinctive historical identity.

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- ⁶⁵ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, op. cit.*, p. 139; Wilks, *op. cit.*, p. 454; Rice, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-262; James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, vol. IV (London: White, Cochrane, and Co., 1813), 109.
- ⁶⁶ S.U. Kamath, *op. cit.*, p. 154
- ⁶⁷ *Karnataka Inscriptions*, III, pt. I, no. 12 (1939–40); Sewell, *op. cit.*, p. 185; Danvers, *op. cit.*, pp. 460-61
- ⁶⁸ Danvers, *op. cit.*, pp. 546-47, 559-60; Heras, *op. cit.*, p. 294-295
- ⁶⁹ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, Vol. I, pp. 188-189
- ⁷⁰ Sewell, *op. cit.*, p. 388
- ⁷¹ Pietro Della Valle, *Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, vol. 2, trans. G. Havers, ed. Edward Grey (London: Hakluyt Society, 1892), p. 221
- ⁷² *Ibid.*