

Chaul : A Declining Port of Konkan

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The geographical and strategic position of the port town of Chaul on the West Coast of India was in a large measure responsible for its once flourishing trade and cultural interaction with foreign countries.

Location

Chaul (18° 33' N and 73° 00' E) also known as Ceul is situated about thirty miles south of Bombay on the right bank of Kundalika river in the Alibagh taluka of Raigarh district of Maharashtra, (Fig. 1).

Historical Sketch

Chaul is a place of antiquarian interest to the archaeologists. In early historical times Chaul served as an important port on the West Coast of India. According to tradition during the reign of Krishna, Arjuna, the third Pandava brother, visited the area when Chaul was known as Champavati (Imperial Gazetteer 1908 : 184-185). The trade and commerce of Chaul is known from the archaeological evidence, accounts of the travellers and records of the foreign rulers. The Greek Geographer Ptolemy mentions Chaul as Symulla or Timulla and the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang mentions it as Chimolo while the early Mohammedan travellers call the port Saimur, (Schoff 1974: 200-201). The Barhut inscriptions mention Chaul as Cikula or Cekula, (Law 1967:330). It had trade contacts with Alexandria and exported rice, cloth as well as sugar to Egypt, (Warmington 1928: 1-112). The possibility of Chemul being Pliny's Perimula, the great emporium in India half way between Cochin and Hyderabad in Sindh cannot be ruled out. The two Kanheri cave inscriptions also

mention Chaul port as Cemulla (Maharashtra Gazetteers 1964 : 715-755). Chaul was ruled by the descendants of the Silaharas and Yadavas of Devagiri from the eighth to the fourteenth century. Later on, Vijaynagara, Mughal, Maratha and Portuguese rulers had their sway on the port. Al-Biruni mentions that Chaul was a chief port of western India and other cities on the same coast namely Kambayat (Cambay), Bahruj (Broach), Sindan (Sanjan), Sufara (Sopara) and Tana (Thana) as having commercial contacts with Chaul, (Mc Crindle 1972:42-44). Due to Chaul prosperous overseas trade had contacts with other trade centres like Nasik and Junar, (Nagaraju 1981 : 55). The economy of Konkan (part of present Maharashtra) was sound and stable in the early historical period because of overseas trade of Kalyan, Sopara, Chaul and Dabhol. The rise of Buddhist centres at Nasik, Junar, Panhale Kaji and Ter is attributed to their importance on the trade routes from the East Coast and Gangetic valley to the West Coast (Deo 1985: 87-95).

Due to the availability of teak and skilled craftsmen the ships could be built in Chaul in less time and were less expensive than those built at Cochin (Bulhao Pato 1935 : 99-101). Merchants used to collect spices and textiles from Chaul. Owing to its commercial importance and strategic position Chaul was considered the gateway to Persian Gulf countries, (Elliot & Dawson 1877 : 27). In the early medieval period merchants from the Gulf countries namely Baghdad, Basara, Oman and Siraf settled down in and around Chaul (Kenny 1992 : 1-13). Ships from Egypt and the Red Sea ports used to call at Chaul.

Observations During Exploration

At present, except a few Mughal period structural remains, nothing of earlier periods is traceable here because the structures built of timber have perished. On a hillock about one kilometer to the Southeast of Chaul a row of Buddhist caves presently used as shrines of God 'Hinglaj' can be seen. Almost all caves are in a dilapidated condition. In the facade of the rock a Chaitya dormer has been carved. A path leads behind the cave to another shrine called 'Dattaraya'. In front of this shrine there are two footprints on a rock believed to be holy. A festival is held here on the full moon day of the month of Margasira (Dec-Jan). The old Chaul port town, the relics of which can be seen from the top of the hill, is now difficult to reach because of scrub jungle and marshy land. Anciently this hillock seems to have served as a light house. At the foot of the hillock a number of hero stones are lying in the bushes.

A kilometer from Chaul the musalman bath called 'Hamam khana' having six cells with a dome is in a ruined condition. At the eastern end of the building a door leads a double domed central hall with three recesses. One more Mughal structure called 'Haweli' adjacent to the bath is also in a dilapidated condition. A road leading to the port in old days is presently covered with mangroves and bushes. In this area a large quantity of Chinese pottery is lying on the road side. The pottery is painted in blue and grey colours with floral designs. The main types are cups, platters and dishes datable to 1400 to 1700 AD according to K. K. Mohammed. An indigenous pottery including glazed ware was also collected from the same site. This area can be explored more extensively in the summer months.

Revdanda village which is two kilometres from Chaul was a Portuguese base with a fort known as Agar fort. It is in a dilapidated condition and half of the fort is already washed away by the sea. A few Semicircular towers with parapet walls and two gateways are the noteworthy features surviving in the fort. The south gate to the sea side and the north gate opens to the land side. A sea wall has been constructed in recent years to arrest further damage to the southern gateway by using old stones from the fallen chunks of gateway. Besides the China ware a few glass bangles and indigenous pottery were collected from the debris of the fort wall, apart of which is submerged and becomes visible in low tide. The decline in overseas trade has limited the occupations of the nearby villagers to fishing and boat building.

Probable Causes of Decline

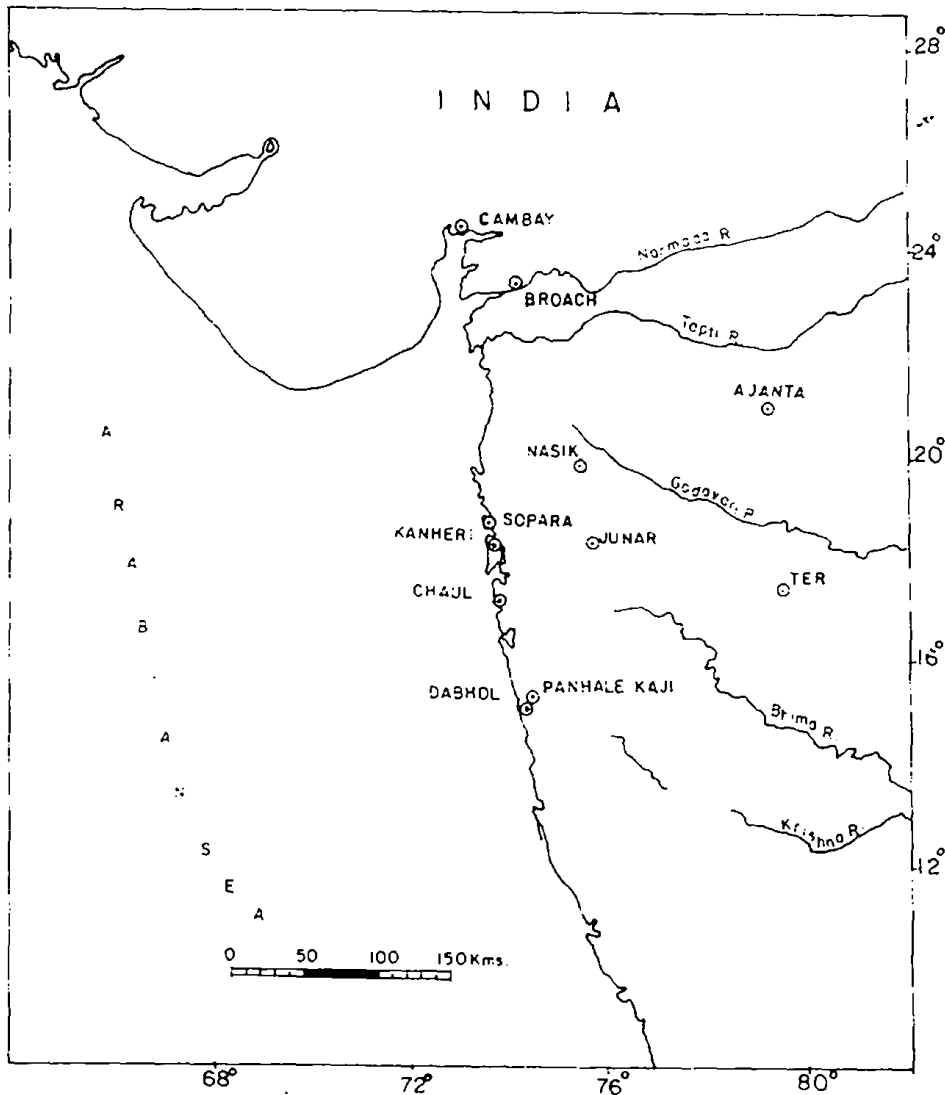
Nature and man seem to be jointly responsible for the decline of Chaul as a major port. For instance piracy and naval warfare contributed as much to the decline as the encroachment by the sea and silting of the river Kundalika. Another cause for the decline of boat-building is the introduction of steam ships. References are available for the naval battles fought between the ruler of Gujarat and the Portuguese at Chaul. A few ships were sunk in Chaul waters (Mookerji 1912 : 201) during these battles.

Acknowledgement

The author is thankful to Director NIO for encouragement and to Dr. S. R. Rao, Advisor, Marine Archaeology Centre, for his guidance and valuable suggestions. Thanks are also due to Sri K. H. Vora for providing necessary suggestions.

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MAP SHOWING THE STUDY AREA