

SEAS APART

Step aside, Gujaratis: Tamilians were India's earliest recorded maritime traders

South Asia expert John Guy says that South India traders in the first millennium were driven by an appetite for gold.

Mridula Chari

Feb 6, 2015 · 07:00 am



Photo Credit: Jackie Neale Chadwick

Loading article content

Indians today might like to stereotype Gujaratis as the nation's most mercantile community, but at one point around 2,000 years ago, Tamil was the lingua franca of traders across the South East Asian seas.

Star South Asia expert and museum curator John Guy is in India to explain how Tamil merchants, who are prominent in the early history of the region, became integral cultural and political influences in courts across South East Asia.

“You get a sense of the role of early and medieval merchant guilds in the Deccan and Tamil Nadu and Kerala,” Guy said in a conversation with *Scroll.in*. “You know how common they are in India, but then you find their inscriptions in places like Sumatra and Thailand. It is astonishing how they got around. They were busy boys, travelling far and wide.”

On Friday, he will give a talk in Mumbai about his findings Titled “In Search of Suvarnabhumi: Tracing Tamil Merchant Traders in First Millennium Maritime Southeast Asia”.

Guy's research started with a **highly acclaimed** exhibition he curated last year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. “Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia, 5th to 8th Century” had 160 sculptures, gathered for the first time in such numbers, from museums and collections across India, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. That was in itself a product of Guy's 30 years of research into the archaeological and cultural histories of the countries.

The sea, he found, was the common binding factor to them.

“People used to think of oceans as barriers, but they are actually ways of joining barriers,” Guy said. “The oceans were the great highways of antiquity. It was far easier to sail than to go by land, especially if you wanted to carry a lot of goods and cargo.”

Gold obsession

Around the first millennium, Tamil traders dominated the seas, inscriptions suggest, though they would later give way to Bengalis and Gujaratis from India and Arabic would eventually become the language of the region's merchants.

Gold was more or less what Tamil merchants wanted at that time. Inscriptions suggest that the traders of South India were hoarders of precious metals, even as they paid their debts with textiles such as painted cotton kalamkaris and iron.

“India retains the biggest private stores of gold in the world, and mostly in female hands,” Guy said. “It is true now and it always has been true.”

India was notorious for demanding to settle its foreign debts in precious metals and owed everyone for their trade. Even the Romans were upset at having to buy muslins with precious metals.

Making sure they always had the better deal, in South East Asia, Indian traders imported spices such as cloves and nutmeg in return for kalamkaris, painted cottons.

Trade with South East Asia was as lucrative as it was dangerous. Monsoon winds, which were necessary for travel, also had violent storms that increased the risk of fleets being dashed to pieces. In the early 8th century, for instance, a source speaks of an Indian sailing from Sri Lanka to Palembang in Sumatra who lost most of his fleet of 35 boats in a squall.

These established trade systems continued over millennia. When European colonists such as the Dutch and Portuguese entered the trade of the region, they found it easy to step in and replicate the systems.

Settling in

The money involved also seems to have lured in another unlikely set of travellers: Brahmins who seem to have been able to overcome their community proscriptions against sea voyages to make the journey across the sea.

“We have strong visual evidence that there were Brahmins in South East Asia,” Guy said. “There are grammatically correct inscriptions written in Sanskrit that make it very clear that these must have been Brahmins. And there is no way to travel to some of these places without going at least some of the way by sea.”

Of course, the Brahmins were well rewarded. Over time, they settled and ingratiated themselves into the local populations to the extent that they are still present in rituals today. Priests of that caste presided over the coronation of Norodom Sihamoni, the king of Cambodia, just ten years ago.

There were communities of South East Asian traders in south India as well. Wang Duyuan in an account of China’s southern sea trade records the presence of one such Chinese enclave in Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu. A Burmese inscription corroborates this, noting that the traders even built a monastery “by command of the Maharaja of Chinadesa”, Guy notes in one of his several essays on the subject.

While communities of Indian traders settled in important ports along South East Asia, they never crossed the line into becoming colonisers. What happened instead was that local rulers imbibed Indian traditions.

“A mistaken notion in early scholarship is that these trading points were Indian colonies,” Guy said. “But they were actually proto-states that took on the Hindu

apparatus of religion and concepts of kingship to enhance their position and status.”

John Guy will deliver the 17th Vasant J Sheth Memorial Foundation Lecture, “In Search of Suvarnabhumi: Tracing Tamil Merchant Traders in First Millennium Maritime Southeast Asia”, on February 6 at 7 pm at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. He will give the Project Mausam Monthly Lecture, "Emporiums of Indian Ocean Trade, witnessed by the Java Sea Shipwrecks of the 9th and 10th Centuries" at Delhi's Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts on February 9 at 5 pm.