



## "Trade and Commerce with Historical Perspective of Tamralipta Port and Subsequent Ports"

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### ABSTRACT: -

Tamralipta was one of the most important seaports of ancient Bengal, known as a centre of international trade from the pre-Christian era to the medieval period. This port served as a maritime trade link between India and Southeast Asia. Evidence of Tamralipta's commercial relations has been found with China, Sri Lanka, Java, Sumatra, and even the Roman Empire. The port played a significant role in religious, cultural, and economic exchanges. However, due to natural changes, shifts in river courses, and political transformations, Tamralipta gradually lost its importance. In its place, ports such as Srihatta, Chittagong, Satgaon, and Hughli (Hooghly) developed as major canters of trade activity. This research presents a discussion on the rise of the Tamralipta port, the scope of its trade and commerce, and the development and role of the subsequent ports.

**KEY WORDS:** - Tamralipta's port, Kolkata port, Haldia port, Significance, Nature, Trade rout.

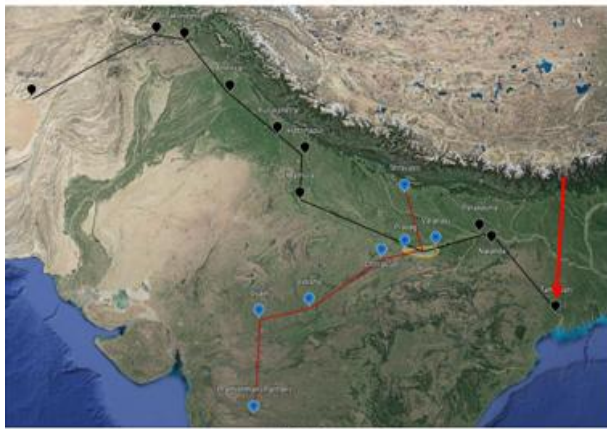
### I. INTRODUCTION: -

Among the many historically significant places in Indian history, Medinipur district of West Bengal holds a prominent position. One of the most important towns in the history-making Medinipur district is Tamluk. In ancient times, Tamluk is mentioned in the Ramayana, the Puranas, and the Mahabharata as a commercial city. Situated on the banks of the Rupnarayan River, this port was well-known among foreign traders as a key center of commerce. Alongside the growth in agriculture, craftsmanship, and industry, the advancement of trade during this period gave it a special place in ancient Indian history. Traders were sometimes referred to as *vanik*, sometimes *sarthavaha*, and at times *shreshthi*.

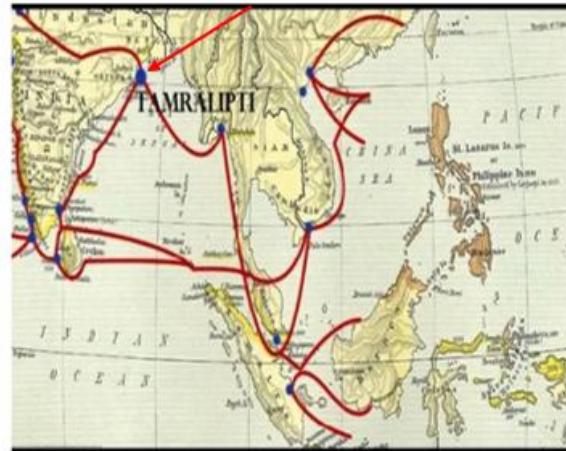


Ancient Time copper port image

The Chinese traveler Xuanzang (referred to here as "It-sing") mentioned a westward route from Tamralipta to Bodh Gaya. In the Dudhpanishila inscription, there is reference to a long road from Ayodhya to Tamralipta. This very route was used to maintain trade and cultural relations with various regions of the Medinipur district. In Ptolemy's accounts, there is mention of a port called *Tomelitis*, which undoubtedly refers to the famous ancient Bengali port of Tamralipta (modern-day Tamluk in Medinipur district). However, historian Bratindranath Mukhopadhyay has shown that Ptolemy used this term very carefully and selectively. In ancient times, Tamralipta was known by various names such as *Damlipta*, *Tamalini*, and *Tamalika*. Places like Vishnugriha, etc., and the copper deposits kept in Ghatsila indicate that copper mining was conducted there from the first century CE. It is presumed that copper or copper ore from these regions used to be transported to the Tamralipta port and from there exported overseas by ship. Some scholars believe that the name *Tamralipta* may have originated due to its connection with copper (*tamra* in Sanskrit).



Source:  
<https://letusdiscoverindia.com/uttarapatha-and-dakshinapatha-ancient-indias-cultural-super-highways/>

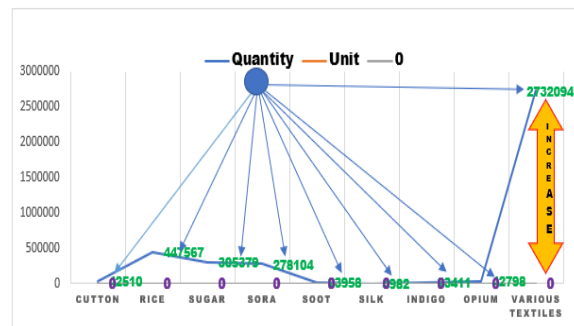


Trade Route

Among the major ports of eastern India, Tamralipta was particularly significant. The items exported from this port included teak wood, rice, various spices, gold, silver, valuable silk garments, cotton textiles, aromatic substances, precious stones, pearls, and more. In addition to these, the district's own exportable goods included jute, gunny bags, rice, pulses, oil, flaxseed, mustard, locally produced cloth, leather, tobacco, and indigo. The district also imported various goods such as fuel oil, cotton, betel nuts, iron products, lime and limestone, sugar, bamboo, European textiles, coconuts, and tobacco. There was a route for bringing horses into India that passed through Kashgar, the Pamirs, Hunza, Gilgit, Tilas, Dasu, Mansehra, and Abbottabad, ending in Taxila. Later, horses were sent to various regions across the Indian subcontinent. Among the ports from which horses were exported by sea, Tamralipta was one of them. From this port, merchants of the Yuezhi or Kushan Empire transported horses by ship to Southeast Asia.

To use the market for the benefit of society, it is essential to be aware of its limitations. The last 25 years of the 19th century was largely marked by widespread famines. On October 16, 1942, a devastating cyclone struck Medinipur, wreaking havoc across South Bengal. This disaster completely shattered the economic condition of the eastern region. What followed was a severe famine, known as the Bengal Famine of 1943. The sea rose by 22 feet, submerging rivers, streams, plains, and settlements, causing massive floods that inundated vast areas. Accompanying this was a powerful cyclone, with wind speeds reaching 180 to 200 km per hour. The most severely affected areas were the

Contai (Kanthi) and Tamluk subdivisions. Sir Francis Joseph, chairman of the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation (a notorious looting agency that exported resources from India), stated at a banquet in Britain: "In 1941, India saved Iran from famine with its wheat; Syria, Palestine, and Turkey also received supplies. Even the Russians got various items from India, including flour." India's own people were starving while its food was sent abroad to alleviate famine elsewhere — resulting in a devastating famine, particularly in Bengal. A major famine also occurred in 1866–67.



The responsibility of surveying this famine in Bengal was entrusted to F.R. Cockrelt.

According to Daniel Thorner, the entire colonial structure was an "inherent obstacle" to India's — and especially its districts' — agricultural economy. A series of devastating famines in the late 1870s provides clear evidence of this. The region suffered from cyclones and floods in the years 1807, 1823, 1831, and 1833. The catastrophic tidal surge of 1834 severely flooded Khijuri (Khajuri), with 75% of the population dying from starvation and epidemics. Many Europeans also perished, and were buried there. As a result, Khijuri's name as a



commercial port was erased by the waves of the sea. In contrast, Diamond Harbour rose as a complementary port following the decline of Khijuri. By the mid-19th century, British political dominance in India, the emergence of new commercial centers, the transformation of traditional trade routes, and the development of the Kolkata port significantly accelerated internal trade processes.

With Graph

**\*Exports via Kolkata Port (Later Period): -**

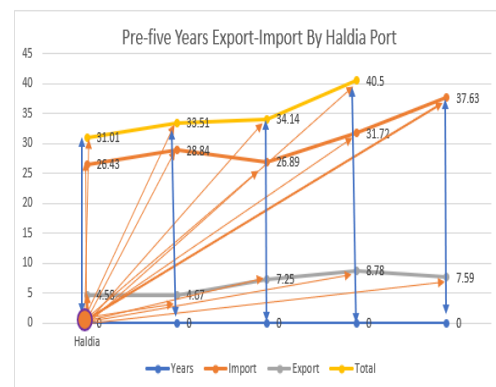
Product	Quantity	Unit
Cotton	42,510	Packets
Rice	447,567	..
Sugar	305,379	..
Saltpetre (Sora)	278,104	..
Silk waste (Soot)	23,958	..
Silk	4,982	..
Indigo	23,411	..
Opium	42,798	..
Various textiles	2,732,094	..

- **Historical Significance:** From the 3rd century BCE to the medieval period, Tamralipta was one of India's major seaports. It was a hub of international trade, as evidenced by archaeological findings such as Roman coins and seals.
- **From 1807 to 1982:** Due to changes in the river's course and flow, the port was nearly destroyed by the 7th century. As a result, there are no effective import-export statistics available for this port during the mentioned period.

**\*Modern Ports: - Kolkata and Haldia: -**

- **Kolkata Port (Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port Trust): -**
  - Established: 1870.
  - Between 1838–1917, over 100,000 indentured laborers were transported.
  - Export Focus (1930–1970): Textiles, leather, steel.
  - Import Focus: Wheat, raw cotton, machinery.

This is not the end — another port we find is Haldia Port, which developed a little distance away from City Centre. Although it is generally known as a port for petroleum, fertilizers, and other commercial goods, the course of trade has shifted due to changes in the flow of the Rupnarayan River. Standing in the present time, it can be said that Tamluk's trade and commerce hold the potential to claim a portion of the significance currently held by capital cities in the future.



With Graph

Data Source:

<https://www.kolkataporttrust.gov.in/showfile.php?layout=2&lang=1&level=2&sublinkid=1500&lid=1283>

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Port & Period	Exports	Imports	Notes
Kolkata (1930–60)	Textiles, leather, etc.	Wheat, machinery	Gateway to the South and Northeast India
Haldia (1977)	Industrial goods via bulk cargo	—	Industrial development and warehousing

## II. Conclusion:

The historical significance of Tamralipta port lies in its strategic location and its vibrant role in ancient maritime trade. As a crucial hub in both inland and international trade networks, Tamralipta connected India with regions such as Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and even the Roman Empire. It facilitated the exchange of goods like spices, textiles, precious stones, and metalware, and also served as a cultural bridge, spreading Indian art, religion (especially Buddhism), and literature overseas.

However, over time, natural calamities like silting of the river channels and shifts in political power led to the decline of Tamralipta. As its importance waned, newer ports such as Satgaon, Hooghly, and eventually Kolkata emerged, taking over the mantle of maritime commerce in the Bengal region. These subsequent ports adapted to changing trade dynamics and colonial influences, reflecting the evolving nature of global commerce.

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