

THE PORTS OF KERALA: HISTORIC SIGNS OF YESTERDAYS

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Abstract: A state's or region's geography describes its borders, the size of its territory, settlement patterns, prosperity, intra- and inter-regional linkages, and many cultural and social sectors. The ports deserve special notice among the various geographical elements that have a significant impact on a people's lives and history. Kerala, a tiny strip of land between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea with a width ranging from 30 to 120 kilometers, is blessed with natural wonders. The 580 kilometers of coastal plains and natural ports serve as a doorway to Kerala's cultural mosaic. The ports aided the spice trade and increased the country's renown in Europe, the West, and Central Asia, despite a less productive agricultural economy. These interstate and intercontinental interactions developed a distinct economy, culture, and way of life. The existence of middlemen blocked the flow of the lucrative advantage of these economic links to Kerala. The spice trade's immense economic potential was apprehended by Arabs, Europeans, and trading corporations. A statistical examination of the purchase price and selling price of Kerala spices provides a new way to examine the true driving factor behind European colonization.

Key words: Merchandise, Maritime activity, Mercantile corporations, Keralites, Transactions, Intermediaries, Composite culture.

INTRODUCTION

The identity of a nation or state or region is determined by its geographical setting. The interventions of geographical factors are visible in the character formation of a people, their economy, culture, politics, international relations etc. This natural setting may be favourable to some and unfavourable to others. Definitely one could say Kerala is gifted with nature in this context. The phrase "God's own country" is a proof of this statement. Sahyadri Mountains protects the eastern side of Kerala like a fortress and the western side by the Arabian Sea like a wild ditch. It is pretty difficult to breach these natural barriers and hence Kerala was open not to many people. That is how Kerala was able to maintain its identity and integrity for quite a long time.

But extreme audacity, limitless adventure and unstoppable thirst can break any barriers. Hence with the passage of time many reached Kerala by crossing the natural barriers; some through the sea and some through the mountains; again some as friends and some as foes. Both of these categories influenced Kerala considerably. But foremost among them was those who came as friends in the form of traders. Some among them in the course suppressed the people of this land and usurped political power and became masters of the land. The Romans, the

Phoenicians, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danes, the English, the French etc were the predominant people came to Kerala with commercial interests. All these powers came through and exerted their influence through the ports of Kerala. Thus the history of ports and the coastal region deserve special mention in the economic, cultural, political and religious life of the land.

The ancient history of Kerala is shrouded in obscurity and hence it is the most difficult area for a student of history to deal with. The lacks of accurate historic documents, authentic texts or sources hinder the studies relating to this area. But there are some scanty references, some travelogues and few books which shed light on this period and it was only through them that one can construct the history of the ports of Kerala.

THE PORTS:

There are a good number of ports which played decisive role in the history of Kerala. The most important among them are:

CRANGANORE OR KODUNGALLUR:

The port of Cranganore is considered as the greatest port of ancient Kerala. It was also the capital of the Early Chera Empire. It was mentioned in Ramayana as *Murachi pattanam*, in Tamil Sangham works as *Murichi* and in the Jewish copper plate as *Muyirikkode* (Menon, 1967, p. 49). This Chera capital was very prosperous and attracted the attention of many a trading people and trade guilds of the whole world. The Romans, Egyptians, the Arabs etc. reached here for trade in Oriental goods. The port was rich enough to provide a variety of merchandise or say it can provide almost all the articles of the entire world. It was such a prosperous and rich one and hence it was protected with fortress and bastions (Menon, 1967, p. 65). In this context it can be stated that this may be the first fortified city of Kerala.

Not only during the Early Chera Empire, during the Kulasekhara period also (800-1124 C.E) it attracted the attention of the whole commercial world. This time the port was called Mahodayapuram or Makotai. In the 12th century C.E, the Second Chera Empire declined and the port then came under the yoke of the ruler of Cochin Kingdom. This port remained as the greatest one up to the 14th century amidst relentless attack of the enemies. But the fate of this port was determined by the flood of 1341. This natural calamity made the harbor of Cranganore unsafe caused the creation of a new port, Cochin. Since then Cranganore became a second grade port with less maritime activity and significance.

CALICUT OR KOZHIKKODE:

Though not in antiquity, but in prominence the port of Calicut stands foremost among the ports of Kerala, especially during the medieval age. It is very difficult to state exactly when the commercial activities of Calicut started. Still it is evident that Calicut became active in trade related activities with the period of Swaroopams and Nadus (12th century C.E onwards). In the beginning, Calicut was a port of Polanad. Later it was occupied by the Zamorins and they elevated Calicut into a world class port (Menon, 1983, p.127). Therefore it became the best port of Kerala in the middle age. Since then it invited the attention of the traders from China, Yemen, Ceylon, Maldives, Arabia etc (Cheriyian, 2000, p. 227). The fame of Zamorins and their straight

forward character also helped for its progress. But the advent of the Portuguese and the resultant enmity with the Zamorin destroyed the fate of the port since the 16th century.

QUILON OR KOLLAM

Quilon is another significant port to call in Kerala. It is argued that the port have a history of over 2500 years. But there is no exact historical document or references to prove this argument. The earliest references on the port were that of the Thai dynasty records of China (618 C.E to 907 C.E) and the travelogue of Sulaiman (C.E 851) (Logan, 1981, p. 253). Though not directly mention on the port of Quilon, Pliny and Ptolemy referred about Nelcynda and Kottanara, which were the adjoining regions of Quilon. It was assumed that in the ancient period Quilon port was situated in the interior region of Ashtamudi lake, which surrounds Quilon town. If this assumption is right, Quilon do have a maritime history of more than 2500 years.

Quilon became a prosperous port town since it became the capital of Venad. It was with this port that the Chinese made their transactions with Kerala. Between 9th century C.E and the 15th century it was one of the foremost ports of Kerala (Mathew, 1996, p. 253). But with the rise of Cochin as an international port, the policies of the Portuguese and the disappearance of the Chinese from the Kerala coast led to the decline of the once flourishing port city.

COCHIN OR KOCHI:

The port of Cochin does not have a long history to boast. But it is the foremost and leading port of Kerala, which is called the “Queen of Arabian Sea” (Mathew, 1996, pp.36-37). The port was come into being during the flood of Periyar in C.E 1341. The flood created a small cove (kochu+azhi) which provide the amenities of a port. It was from this kochu azhi (small cove) that the name Cochin or Kochi come into being. Because of the great flow of water, the basement or bed of the Periyar river and the adjoining seashore was washed away and this facilitated huge ships to anchor in this place. Thus the port of Cochin was created by the nature itself. In the initial years, though naturally gifted, Cochin cannot emerge as a great trade centre, because of the interferences of the Zamorin of Calicut who was an arch rival of the Cochin rulers. But with the support of the Portuguese it emerged as the number one port of Kerala from the 16th century C.E and it is still enjoying that position (Panikkar, 1929, pp. 42-43).

The list of ports above mentioned is incomplete. There are many ports which find mention in the travelogues and other documents. They are Balita (Vizhinjam), Baris (Pampa), Marahi (Malayi), Bakara (Purakkad), Phili (Ezhimala), Valapatanam, Dharmadam (Dharmapatanam), Cannannore etc.

EXPORT AND IMPORT ITEMS:

The spices which made Kerala world famous were the major exporting items from Kerala. They include pepper, ginger, cardamom, clove, turmeric, cinnamon, cambodge (Malabar tamarind), nutmeg etc (Unnikrishnan, 2019, pp. 46-46). The sandal wood, indigo, cotton, ivory, teakwood, monkeys, peacocks etc were other products of export. The precious gems and pearls of Kerala also have great demand in the international market.

The major exporting items of ancient period are copper, bronze, arsenic, mirror etc. Later the varying products of various foreigners also find market in Kerala. Hence the Roman liquor,

Chinese pottery wares, Chinese nets, Chinese textile etc became popular in Kerala. The modern European merchants also introduced their own merchandise. But as an overall assessment, when compared to the exporting, the importing of items was considerably less in volume.

RELATIONSHIP WITH OUTSIDE WORLD:

Historians argue that Kerala maintained flourishing trade relations with outside world from time immemorial. The earliest among them was the contact with Mesopotamian civilization. As supporting evidence, the historians are pointing to the teak wood of Kerala found from the Mesopotamian city of Ur (Sahai, 1996, pp. 10-17). More than that the similarities of the Sumerian ship building and that of the Beypore ship building was pointed out (Menon, 1967, p. 65). The two claims support the Mesopotamian connections with Kerala. Beyond this it was also argued that Kerala coast have maintained relations with the people of Harappan civilization. In the Biblical stories also Kerala was a part. It was said that the Jewish King Solomon send his ships once in three years to Kerala to procure gold, silver, monkey, peacock etc (Nair, 2002, pp.4-8). It was also said that his Queen Sheba was fascinated with the spices and other cosmetic items of Kerala (Menon, 1967, p. 65). All these arguments clearly highlight the fame and significance of the ports of Kerala. But in spite of the arguments and scanty references, nothing definite in terms of historical proof is available.

From B.C.E 6th century onwards clear cut evidences in the form of North Indian coins are available regarding the relations of Kerala with outside world. P.N.Gupta through his book *The Early Coins from Kerala* categorically states this point (Gupta, 1965, p. 68). Though there are some references about the foreign relations of Kerala in the early period, it was only with the Romans that the Kerala coast maintained everlasting relations. From the period of Augustus Ceasar onwards there is a strong give and take between the Romans and the Keralites. This reached to its peak during the reigns of Tiberius and Claudius (Gupta, 1965, p. 68). It was reported that Tiberius raised a complaint in the Roman Senate that the wealth of Rome is been flowing to Kerala. It was estimated that Rome do have trade with Malabar coast for an approximate sum of 550 crore Cestors. This was mentioned in Pliny's work. This is evident from the Roman coins unearthed from different parts of Kerala. They were unearthed from Keezhur (Kannur district), Mankada (Palakkad district), Angadippuram (Ernakulam district), Poonjar (Kottayam district), High range regions of Idukki district, different parts of Alleppey district etc. More than that, it was from Kerala that Roman coins were discovered in large numbers when compared to the rest of India. The Roman coins were in circulation till the 9th century C.E (Rao, 1920, p.9). The most important among them was Dinarum which found mention in the Vazhappilli inscription. Even the fines, punishments etc were made in the Dinaram (Narayanan, 1996, pp. 162-164). This relationship continued in full flow till the 2nd century C.E and remained in a weaker form till the end of the Roman Empire. The same Roman contact also brought Kerala in connection with West Asia, Egypt and other European nations as well (Bernard, 1977, p.15).

While in the one side the Roman contact was declining, in the other side trade with West Asia (Arabs) was assuming strength towards the early centuries of Common Era. Following them

the Chinese also made their presence felt in Kerala. The strong trade relations with China and Kerala was well proved by the records left by the travelers like Sulaiman, Marcopolo, Jordanus, Ibn Batuta, Nicolo Conti etc. They all provided elaborate descriptions about the Chinese ships with flat bottom navigating through the length and breadth of the Kerala coast. The remains of a Chinese colony at Calicut is an ample proof of the Chinese presence. Moreover the Chinese nets and Chinese wares etc still using in Kerala bear the mark of the long lasting relation. But with the changes in the Chinese politics in the 15th century, the once flourished commercial contact came to an abrupt end.

With the advent of the Portuguese, there came many changes in the commercial relations and politics of Kerala. The Portuguese established their strongholds at Cannannore, Quilon, Cranganore etc and made Cochin as their centre of activities (Mathew, 1985 p. 214). With them the dimensions of foreign relations changed and very soon they assumed political power. Playing the whims and fancies of the small states of Kerala, they actually negotiated and controlled the politics of Kerala. Till the Portuguese what Kerala gained was economic prosperity, but since their arrival the state was brought under political subjugation. After the 15th century, the Portuguese (1498-1653), the Dutch (1653-1795) and the English (1795-1947) controlled the trade as well politics of Kerala. Hence the ports of Kerala have enormous stories of foreign contacts to reveal which include the Romans, the Phoenicians, the Arabs, the Chinese, the Europeans etc.

DIFFERENT MERCANTILE CORPORATIONS:

It is very clear that Kerala do have relations with outside world from time immemorial. But there arose many questions regarding the nature of these relations. What type of relationship was it? Who were the traders? Whether the natives or foreigners? One smaller segment of scholars holds the view that the trade was conducted by the Keralites themselves. But majority of scholars are of the opinion that Kerala during the ancient period was not that much developed and hence the natives were not capable enough to conduct overseas trade relationships. This argument may be right. At present it is largely accepted that it was the Gujarati merchants who managed the trade of Kerala. Hence the Keralites were deprived of the profit that came from the international trade. This also paved the way for the cultural degradation and economic backwardness.

With the course of time many communities like the Jews, Christians, Muslims etc came to Kerala. They settled here and later on they became the torch bearers of the trade and commerce of Kerala. The Tarisapally copper plate and Jewish copper plate clearly bear the testimony of this statement (Menon, 1967, p 49). Both the grants contain information regarding special privileges to the Christian and Jewish communities respectively. The most important mercantile corporations of ancient Kerala like Manigramam and Anchuvannam were that of Christians and Jews (Narayaan, 1996, pp. 171-172). Instead of these there are other merchant guilds like Nanadesikal, Valnchiyar etc. The trade and commerce of Kerala were operated by these merchant guilds and hence the local people not received any share of the lucrative international business.

The activities of the merchant guilds gradually led to the emergence of commercial centers. Many of them later gained the right of self rule like that of the medieval European towns. They were known by the name Nakara or Nagara (almost corresponding to the city). The ruler of Nakara was from among the merchants. They were called Nakarathar (Narayana,1996, pp. 171-173). It was their responsibility to provide protection to the trade and traders both at the land and sea. The local rulers practically have no control over these merchant guilds. Each profession had its own separate corporations as there necessitates separate guilds for the transaction of separate products. Each small guild has a leader of its own. He was appointed with the concurrence of the local chieftain or ruler. He will have separate rights and privileges like that of the Naduvazhi or local ruler. Many of the merchant guilds have branched outside Kerala and even outside India.

MAJOR TRADE ROUTES:

The predominant customers of the spices of Kerala were the Europeans. Hence, though there were difficulties in between, the merchants were duty bound to provide spices to the European markets. Many routes were used by them from time to time. One major route was a sea route through Ormuz via Persian Gulf. From there the merchandise was transported either fully through a land route or a sea route through the Red Sea and then crossing Egypt and again through Mediterranean Sea. Another route was a water route from Ormuz to Bazzora on the banks of Euphrates. From Bazzora they were transported through Armenia and Tartaria and the route ends at Eastern Europe. Another major route from Ormuz was a land route through Aleppo and Damascus, and it ends at the Mediterranean coast of Beirut (Nair, 2002, pp.74-75). Another route starts from Kerala and passes through Aden, Jeddah, Suez and Cairo, and its destination was Mediterranean coast. These merchants were forced to give duties to the major centers they are crossing. In general the land routes were open to attacks and hence the majority of the transactions are through the water routes.

PRICE VARIATIONS AND PROFIT:

The spices of Kerala fetch high prices in the European markets. Though it do have a high price in the international market, the actual producer will get only a meager amount. The products of Kerala purchased at lower prices reaches European markets after many hazardous paths and paying much amount as duties on the way at different points. That's why the hike in prices when it reaches Europe. But still the transactions were tremendous and the profit was sky high. The example cited below will make it clear. How the price of one candy of pepper got changed at different stations in its route to Europe (Nair, 2002, pp.74-75).

Cranganore	2.98 Ducats
Calicut	4.64 Ducats
Alexandria	15 Ducats
Venice	70 Ducats
Lisbon	70 Ducats

The above table clearly establishes the change of price when it reaches at different points. Similarly the prices of other products also changes. Hence it is visible that the traders amazed

huge wealth on the trade with Europe. It was this lucrative business which attracted the attention of the Europeans to India.

THE ENTRY OF EUROPEANS AND EXTENSION OF TRADE:

With the arrival of Vasco de Game in 1498 changed the traditional trade relations and trade policies of Kerala. During the eve of Portuguese arrival the prospects of Syrian Christians and Jews as traders were faded it was the Arabs who had an upper gained in the trade related activities. Hence the Portuguese tried their best to destroy the Arab-Muslim supremacy in trade related matters. By playing the whims and fancies of the smaller states of Kerala, The Portuguese achieved this goal within no time (Mathew, 1982, p.106). After the establishment of trade supremacy and monopoly by the Portuguese, the Kerala trade lost its fairness. They dominated the terms and never allowed anybody to make gains in the field (Danvers, 1966, p.128). That includes the rulers, intermediaries, peasants and Arabs. They dictated the terms, prices etc. This policy was later followed by the Dutch and the English also. Thus they amazed huge profits out of this trade and the actual producers got only very less. The following table relating to the Portuguese will describe the volume of trade the Europeans carried over in spices (Cheriyian, 2000, p.179).

1502-1506 Pepper	1673912 Kg
1502-1506 (Total spices)	1737289.02 kg
Average annual export	434322.30 kg
1506-1507 Pepper	1098802 kg
1506-1507 (Total spices)	1153824.60 kg
Average annual export	576912.30 kg
1509-1511 Pepper	1005503 kg
1509-151 (Total spices)	1060860.96 kg
Average annual export	530430.45 kg

When compares this large transactions with that of the changes in prices of the articles while they reach Europe, it could be understood that the Europeans gained crores and crores as profit from the business with the ports of Kerala.

CULTURAL TRANSACTIONS:

Even though the relations with the foreigners were economically disadvantageous, Kerala gained many things in the cultural sphere. It was the foreigners who came through the ports connected Kerala with the global community. It was through theses ports and trade relations that the religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam etc reached Kerala. The Keralites received all of them with tolerance and it ultimately resulted in the creation of a universal composite culture. Again it was in Kerala that the missionary activities started for the first in India. The activities of the Jesuits, Basel Evangelical Mission, London Mission Society, Church Mission society etc were instrumental in reforming and restructuring the society of Kerala. They brought new ideas and popularized western education in Kerala. This led to the elimination of many evil practices and thus eventually became instrumental for the Renaissance of Kerala. That is why Kerala at present is considered as one of the most culturally advanced states of India.

CONCLUSION

As many of the nations began to produce pepper in large scale and products like chilly came as substitutes, the significance of the ports of Kerala in the international trade map faded. No modern governments either took measures to promote the trade or made the trade in spices a monopoly of the state. As a result the once flourishing ports of Kerala became mere a memory. Many of them became useless and even cannot trace where it is at present.

When makes a realistic approach, it can be seen that many of the ancient ports of Kerala do have the qualifications to become premier ports of India. But a farsighted approach is needed in this context. For that there needs concerted efforts to bring at least some of them into the limelight once again. At the same time all these ports are not intact at present. Hence those ones still remain still as significant could be used for. At present some of them like Cochin, Ezhimala and Vizhinjam are used for many purposes. Cochin, which is called “the Queen of Arabian Sea”, is an international port now. But still it needed help from the authorities to emerge as one of the leading ports of India. Another port which has lot of potential as an international port is Vizhinjam. As its location is near the international channel, it offers many chances and for its elevation as international port there needs much planning an attention. Hence many of the old ports are still usable and if cannot use it as ports, they should be traced and conserve them as heritage centres. Then only we give justice to the once flourished ports which gave us glory and international fame.

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