INTRODUCTION

The agrarian history of colonial Malabar was characterized by high commercialization and an extreme dependence on the market within a context inscribed by very unequal social relations of production. Non-market forms of domination played a significant role in the maintenance of unequal social relations. The ways in which market forces and state sponsored institutional changes were refracted through the twin prisms of varying crop production regimes and differing configurations of class power to produce change describe the main moments in the story of Malabar's changing rural economy. It was within this dynamic of historical movement that the different rural groups attempted to maximize their returns or prevent losses, consequently both adapting to changed conditions and altering the character of change itself.

Malabar, the southernmost district of British India on the West Coast, was in many ways a 'isolate' when compared with the rest of the Madras Presidency and the subcontinent. Its marked difference from the other Madras districts is probably one reason why many researches on the history of Madras presidency have left Malabar out of their ambit.¹

¹ Burton Stein, Peasant state and society in medieval south India, New Delhi, Delhi, 1985, David Ludden, Peasant history in south India, New Jersey, 1985, Christopher J. Baker, An Indian rural economy, 1880-1955: the Tamilnad countryside, Delhi, 1984.
The secondary historical literature that we do have on Malabar is extremely limited. History writing on Malabar, if we ignore the legendary Kerala Mahatmyam and the Keralolpati started with British colonial officials, most significantly William Logan. Logan's history of Malabar was based on a wide variety of sources. These included medieval inscriptive evidence, travellers' accounts, Factory reports and land deeds. Though what Logan wrote in the section entitled "History" was largely conventional political history, his arguments on the history of land tenures and the information on geography, caste, demography and diseases make the book an essential reading for Malabar's history. Logan however tends to glorify the traditional political and tenurial structure believing that it approximated closely to Bentham's dictum of "the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number". Logan's Report of the Malabar Special Commission is another very important collection of data on all aspects of agrarian relations, land tenures, credit and

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Dharma Kumar's work on agricultural labour in early 19th century Madras is an exception to this trend as it details with Malabar in detail. See Dharma Kumar, Land and Caste in South India, Delhi, 1992. Unlike historians, a number of anthropologists were attracted to Kerala to study its distinctive practices such as matriliney and Nayar polyandry. Post-independent Kerala's paradoxical achievements in the fields of fertility reduction and social development without a commensurate growth in economy once again inspired social scientists to investigate the so-called Kerala model of development.

production. It was Logan who for the first time posited a relationship between crop regimes and variations in agrarian relations.

In the early decades of the twentieth century Malayali historians such as Padmanabha Menon and Elamkunjan Pillai and Aiyar surveyed the history of Kerala using secondary sources. K.M. Panikkar’s works on the Dutch and the Portuguese in Malabar and his survey of the medieval history of Malabar represent nationalist historiography. History writing inspired by Marxism became popular in the context of growing peasant politicization and the growth of the Communist party in the region. The works of Communist leaders such as Namboodiripad provide valuable insights into the peasant movement and its relationship with agrarian structure and relations. Though meant mainly for educating party workers, Namboodiripad’s writings on Malabar, for instance, contain many questions which are now being raised by some writers on the peasant movement in Malabar.

Recent academic writings on Malabar’s agrarian history have


almost entirely focussed on the themes of agrarian relations, land tenures and peasant movements and social change. 6 Works on peasant movements have concentrated mostly on Mapilla uprisings and to a lesser extent on the left peasant movements of the 1930s and '40s. These works are primarily based on official British records and in some cases, their entire reconstruction of the agrarian economy is based on Logan's report. The more rigorous works on Malabar's economic history have been restricted to the region's foreign maritime trade. Unfortunately these reconstructions have not gone into the emporia- hinterland connections in detail. In the case of Malabar there are only two extant monographs on the agrarian economy. In both these works the agrarian economy is studied in terms of land tenures. Varghese's study of the agrarian economic history of Kerala is a general study of agrarian relations focussing on developments and variations in the tenurial pattern. Thomas Shea's work once again examines the impact of land tenures on variables such as productivity and investment. The limitation with these works is that the emphasis is restricted to land tenures. The other

constituent parts of the agrarian structure consequently receive much less attention as independent variables.

The last few years have seen a move towards discovering new indigenous source material to study Malabar in the precolonial as well as colonial periods. This will hopefully see new local histories as well as better documented reconstructions of the past in the coming years. However, secondary works based on these records are yet to be published.

**Stating the Problem:**

The present thesis tries to trace the changes in the agrarian economy of colonial Malabar. The extant economic historiography of Malabar is marked by an emphasis on precolonial foreign maritime trade, colonial land tenures and peasant immiserization under landlord-state exploitation; the silence on associated aspects of the agrarian economy needs to be remedied. Tenurial categories defined by colonial law are only a partial juridical expression of the actual relations of agricultural production. A preoccupation with tenurial classes thus has the potential to mislead discussions of the agrarian in its totality. It with this broad aim that we trace the significance of other constituent parts of the economy such as changing agrarian relations, the role of State intervention, agricultural production regimes, changes in the land, labour and credit markets, trade and demographic movements, in defining the changing history of
Malabar's agrarian structure.

In methodological terms the Marxists, neo-classical economists, the Annales historians and the proponents of American New Economic History offer an array of analytical categories and tools. Such a sweeping aggregation of the practitioners of this trade into distinct categories does much violence to the differences in individual approaches but it still does help in making sense of the variety in economic historiography. Within this range of approaches the Marxists and the neo-classical economic historians have a clearly defined research programme.

The Marxists have a well known endogenous theory of historical change, spelt out clearly by Marx in the 1859 Preface to A Contribution to the Critique Of Political Economy. The base of the social structure is provided by the economic structure of society. This consists of property relations that correspond to the level of development of productive forces. It is the forces of production that form the prime motor for historical change. Changes in the forces of the production, particularly


technological change, lead to tension between the structure of property rights and the economy's productive potential. This imbalance gets righted through class struggle, with the emergence of new institutions.

Neo-classical economists such as North and Thomas, on the other hand, have explained the economic development of Europe between the tenth and the eighteenth centuries basically in terms of innovations in the institutional rules that governed property rights. As in Marxist theory, here too obsolete property rights become obstacles to economic growth. The emergence of new property rights lowers transaction costs and allows an increase in gains from trade. As opposed to class struggle the prime force behind the change of property rights in this case is not class struggle but a long term change in relative prices. Though technological change and changes in the cost of information are recognized to be important, it is population change that is considered to be the most significant determinant of relative price changes.

The Marxist theory of historical change clearly scores over the rival neoclassical school by its theoretical ability to explain change internally by relating variables of a structure

dialectically. Further, as Brenner's significant work on the
decline of feudalism in Europe has shown, relative price changes,
demographic movements and market conditions are not sufficient to
explain the differences in historical trajectories.\(^{10}\) The problem
with Marxist analyses of historical change is that obsession with
the canonically prescribed attributes of a prescribed mode of
production stymies the need to describe and theorize on the basis
of what is historically observed. Very often, the grand theories
of Marxist epochal change and characteristics are applied to
problem areas of very different scale. Many Marxist scholars, and
this is particularly applicable to Marxist histories of Kerala,
tend to portray an entire historical period (in this case the
colonial period) without any ups and downs in economic
performance.\(^{11}\) This stems from a tendency to equate antecedent
relations of production with the 'feudal' mode of production.
Once classed as 'feudal' it becomes difficult to explain how
different institutions historically adapt themselves to changes
in the real world. This in turn has led to long periods of Indian
history being described only in terms of exploitation and
resultant decline. Once caught in this methodological

\(^{10}\) R. Brenner, 'Agrarian class structure and economic development
in preindustrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70, 1976, pp. 30-70.

\(^{11}\) See E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *A short history of the peasant
movement in Kerala*, P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant struggles. land
reforms and social change* and K.N. Panikkar, *Against lord and
state*, Delhi, 1989.
straitjacket, any attempt to provide a rich description of actual historical change runs the danger of reducing Marxist theorems of history to *obiter dicta*. These are however problems of mechanical and simplistic attempts to use Marxist analyses in history writing. There is no reason why the endogenous theory of historical materialism cannot accommodate a richly textured historical account of economic change.\(^\text{12}\) The present thesis tries to avoid these pitfalls that have plagued many Marxists works on Indian economic history.\(^\text{13}\)

Economic historians, in their desire for precision and rigour have frequently used quantitative techniques. The statistics used here only supplement what has been arrived at on the basis of historical description and our understanding of the particular context. A major limitation with predictive and explanatory statistical techniques is that it lends a spurious accuracy given the extreme limitations of some of the quantitative data that is available. Quantitative techniques such as regression analysis


have been used in this thesis to test causal connections only after having located them within particular historical contexts. Keeping in mind the relative strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, we have tried to strike a balance between the narrative and social-scientific modes of inquiry. This thesis is based largely on official documents and statistics. Limitations of the data base are discussed in individual chapters.

The first chapter on late precolonial Malabar and the short discussion on Mysorean rule, forms a prelude to the substantive part of the thesis. Without an analysis of the character of the agrarian economy on the eve of British control any suggestion of change or continuity under the impact of colonialism becomes tendentious. In the first chapter we have argued that irrespective of whether we characterize European commercial presence in eighteenth century Malabar as imperialist or 'emporialist', it did set off a series of fundamental political economic changes extending into the hinterland.14 The history of eighteenth century India has been debated till date within a specific trajectory of change characterized by the collapse of large centralized empires followed by a mushrooming of local or regional centres of power and the consequent/subsequent

14. The term 'emporialist' has been borrowed from George D. Winius and Marcus P.M. Wink, The merchant-warrior pacified: the VOC (the Dutch East India Co.) and its changing political economy in India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, p.5
subjugation to British power. The first chapter examines the late precolonial political economy of the British district of Malabar, a region which did not conform to this pattern of change. It explores the interconnections between Malabar’s state structure, political configurations, commerce and the agrarian economy to understand the region’s changing political economy in the late precolonial period. It is argued here that variations in the degree of State control over surplus, dependence on trade, the extent of commercialization and the nature of the resource base in North and South Malabar produced different trajectories of change in these regions in a context of growing commercial and military dependence on European merchant-warriors. The Mysorean invasions and occupation of Malabar severely disrupted the regions’s long established political hierarchies, exposed its military inability to resist a centralized army and brought to an end the traditional pattern of agrarian surplus appropriation. The Mysorean rule in Malabar in spite of its short lifespan acted as a powerful catalyst in the dissolution of the old order.

Arguing against the reigning new orthodoxy, which posits a continuity between precolonial and early company rule, the first and second chapters show that the weakening of the ancien state in the course of the 18th century was directly linked to the ease with which it was dislodged by the Mysoreans and finally destroyed by the English company. Early company rule marked the beginnings of a fundamentally changed system of political-economic control. Chapter 2 examines the impact on agrarian
Malabar of institutional changes in land tenures, revenue demand, the changed composition of Malabar's exports and the increased financial integration of the district with Madras during the early colonial period.

Chapter 3 estimates trends in agricultural output, land use, cropping patterns and constraints on productivity. It also provides the data base on which we disaggregate the district into distinct garden and wet paddy dominated zones. In subsequent chapters we show how these two agro-economic zones were characterized by differences in tenurial forms, agrarian relations and in their responses to district-wide political and economic stimuli.

The demographic history of Malabar and its relationship with the agrarian economy are dealt with in Chapter 4. The wider questions that we seek to raise here are the role of demography as a determinant of economic change in a precapitalist formation and the existence of a variety of pretransitional fertility regimes in India. We estimate population sizes in the pre-1871 period, construct annual series for mortality and fertility and then relate changes in vital rates to demographic and non-demographic variables. Unlike most of the India, in Malabar fertility was more important than mortality in influencing the rate of population growth. It is argued here that the proximate determinate of fertility in Malabar was nuptiality. There has been no detailed examination of demography in relation to the Malabar economy in any of the existing literature.
Chapter 5 elaborates the relationship between land tenures, agrarian relations and crops regimes. It goes beyond discussions of landlord-tenant and tenurial relations by relating variations in these relationships to garden and wet paddy cultivation regimes. Was colonial Malabar's agrarian economy characterized by market oriented small farmer's or was it sunk in permanent depression under the twin burden of state and landlord exactions? Differential changes in tenurial and agrarian relations in garden and paddy zones under uniform stimuli such as price hikes, depression and tenurial reforms have also been discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6 deals with agrarian labour. The transition from the use of slave labour to free labour, the distribution of the workforce and variations in wage levels in paddy and garden zones, the shift from kind to cash remuneration and finally the determinants of wage trends are some issues taken up here.

The final chapter (Chapter 7) focuses on markets and the agrarian economy. In spite of being a region with a long history of trade and commercialization there has been no study of the market in Malabar for the late colonial period. This chapter deals with the price history of the district, supply responsiveness in agriculture, the credit market, the land market and changes in the commodity composition and geographical distribution of Malabar's export trade. Besides colonial official sources, the annual reports of the Madras and Calicut Chambers of Commerce have been used to reconstruct the trend in Malabar's
maritime trade.

It is in this context that the present thesis attempts a more complete agrarian economic history of Malabar by taking into account the many determinants and constituent parts of the agrarian structure and their interrelations. It may be mentioned here that the current thesis uses some previously unused private family records as a preliminary attempt in this direction. This thesis has used the records of the Nilambur Raja, the Zamorin and those of the Vanjeri, Koodali and Kavalappara family for the first time. Of these records, the first two collection, are yet uncatalogued. Rent registers for a few sample chericals have been used from the Nilambur collection and land lease deeds, cherical registers, and devasvom accounts from the Zamorin's collection. Apart from these two sources, published selections of the records of the Kavalappara and Vanjeri families have also been made use of. Given the limitations of a PhD thesis the unpublished indigenous sources have been used mainly to supplement the information from conventional official archival material.

The district boundaries of British Malabar virtually overlapped its geographic frontiers. Malabar constituted a 'region' not only in the geographers' sense of the term where the

emphasis is on landscape similarities and dissimilarities, but in socio-cultural terms as well. A region, whatever the social characteristics that we may attribute to it is both the product as well the arena of social production. While the individual-society-nature interaction takes the shape of definite traditions, ideas and beliefs within a region, as pointed out in the Vidalian approach to human geography, attention should also be given to the fundamental framework of unequal class relations, within which such interactions take place. Malabar was separated from the rest of the Presidency by the Western Ghats to its east and bounded by the princely state of Cochin in the south and South Canara in the north. The narrow coastal strip that formed the district had a maximum breadth of seventy miles in Palghat and a minimum of five miles in the southernmost part of Ponnani taluk. The Western Ghats running parallel to the Coast maintaining a mean elevation of 5000 feet, forms a barrier in the path of the South-West monsoon. Being on the windward side of the Ghats, the district received a regular, heavy precipitation demarcating it clearly from the drier Tamil country. Within the district the rainfall gradient increased from south to north. Malabar also got some rain from the retreating North-East monsoons in the winter months. The climate was warm and humid with a very small diurnal and seasonal range of temperature. A number of passes in the Western Ghats connected Malabar with the rest of the Presidency. The Perambadi, Periyar, Tamarasseri and Kakkur Ghats offered access to Coorg, Malabar Wynad, Mysore and
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the Nilgiri district respectively. Though accessible these passes were unimportant compared to the 25 miles wide Palghat gap.

Malabar's separation from the rest of the Presidency was not merely in terms of climate and physical geography but also in terms of its socio-political topography and its antecedent history. Caste organization, the matrilineal and avunculocal family patterns and dispersed settlements marked Malabar from the rest of the Presidency. Even in medieval times it was only in Malabar that warrior lineages controlled the state for prolonged periods of time. Malabar though unified and distinct in linguistic, climatic, social and geographic terms, had the advantage (for the historian) of containing fairly distinct 'sub-regions' within it. This disaggregation of the district can be made on the basis of the dominant cropping regimes that exerted a powerful influence on the district's material life. While the northern taluks were dominated by garden crop cultivation, the southern taluks were primarily engaged in paddy production. Both in administrative as well as popular traditional terms of reference the taluks of Chirakkal, Kottayam and Kurumbranad formed North or Vadakke Malabar, with the remaining plain taluks constituting South or Thekke Malabar. There are however some exceptions to our north-south division in terms of crop mix. The northernmost taluk of Chirakkal had more lands under paddy than under garden crops. The central taluk of Calicut, though administratively and traditionally part of South Malabar had a greater proportion of its cultivated area devoted to garden
crops. The existence of such 'sub-regions' within Malabar allows an analysis of the mediating structures through which more general stimuli such as price movements, land reforms and popular discontent were refracted.

The present study spans about nine decades beginning in the 1850s. Considerations of easier data availability and reliability prompted the choice of the 1850s as the beginning period for the present study. By this time the district had been completely 'pacified' and the colonial administration had taken firm roots in the countryside. The terminal period of the study is the 1940s. The historical justification for ending in the 1940s is that during this period crucial changes started manifesting themselves in Malabar's agrarian economy. In the post Depression period under the impact of strong peasant movements under Leftist leadership and the increased partitioning of Nayar tarawads, the power of the land controlling groups was substantially diluted. This period also saw the replacement of Malabar's traditional foreign export markets by those within the subcontinent.

The large number of theses and monographs on Indian history compels any new research, if it is to be relevant, to satisfy one or more of the following conditions: raise fresh questions on the basis of extant information, bring new sources into use and work on regions which have escaped the historians' attention. The present thesis hopes to have justified itself by having fulfilled all these three criteria to a considerable extent.