Chapter - 1

INTRODUCTION

Contents

• Mercantile Capitalism and New Trade Practices
• On the Source Materials
The political processes in Kolathunadu, one of the major royal houses in Malabar on the eve of establishing colonial sovereignty by the English East India Company is subjected to a close analysis in the present study. Kolathunadu occupied a unique place in the socio-political history of the Malabar coast on account of the crucial phases discernible in the advance of colonial control on the spice trade since the mid sixteenth century. The study attempts to elaborate the collaborations and conflicts among the indigenous and colonial politics which ultimately resulted in the disintegration of the Kolathunadu political cluster by the end of the eighteenth century. The collapse of this native political power becomes a problematic theme because of the novelities of colonial takeover through negotiations, manipulations and debt trap.

It was the Arab travellers who used the appellation ‘Malabar’ to denote the southwest coast of India between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. Duarte Barbosa, in the early half of the sixteenth century, identified that “the Land of Malabar begins from the place called Cumbola (Kumbala), and in all from the Hill of Dely (Mount Eli or Ezhi Mala) and ending at the Cape of Comorin (Kanyakumari)” and that “it is one hundred and thirty leagues along the coast”.1 The long chain of mountain line on the east sets apart the region from the rest of the South India. Neither the Muslim Sultanate that conquered Vijayanagar, nor the rising Mughal Empire which overran northern India for centuries, could ever penetrate effectively into the region.2 The early history of the region is shrouded in obscurity. The latter half of the twelfth century was a turning point in the

1 Duarte Barbosa, The Book of Duarte Barbosa, M.L. Dames, trans & ed. (New Delhi, 1989), rpt., II, pp.1 - 6
2 Holden Furber, Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient: 1600-1800, (Delhi, 1990), pp.10-11
history of the region. The second Chera Empire had disintegrated and four chieftains—Venad in the extreme south, Cochin in the middle and the Zamorin and Kolathiri in the north—became independent. The four chieftains preferred themselves to be independent sovereign powers. There also existed “besides these […] many Lords in the Land who wished to be called kings, which they are not, for they neither coin money, nor roof houses with tiles […]”.

Kolathunadu was in the northern portion of Malabar between the territories of Vijayanagara and Calicut. Traditionally it was the land lying between Perumba river in the north and Putupattanam river in the south, Kudakumala in the east and Arabian Sea in the west. Probably as a legitimisation process, most of the theories on the origin of the Kolathiris displayed the familiar pattern of connecting them also with Parasurama or Cheraman Perumal. Megesthenes, the Greek ambassador to Chandra Gupta Maurya’s court, mentions about ‘mooshikanas’. The Hatigumbha Plate (173-160 BC) of Kharavela, the king of Kalinga, mentions about the military encounters of mooshikanas in a territory known as mooshika kingdom over the western parts of his territory. In Bharatamuni’s

3 M G S Narayanan, ‘Political and social conditions of Kerala under Kulasekhara Empire’ (Unpublished PhD thesis), University of Kerala, pp.120-2
4 Malabar is used in this study to mean the entire geographical extent corresponds to the modern state of Kerala while dealing with developments prior to the later half of the twelfth century. Specifically after this period the four Swarupams had its individual identities and hence terms appear precisely in Venad, Kochi, Calicut and Kolathunadu.
5 Barbosa, n. 1, p.6
8 A. Sreedhara Menon, Kerala District Gazetteers: Cannanore, (Trivandrum, 1972), p.74
natyasastra, mooshika is included in the Kalinga kingdom. In Mahabharata, also there is a reference to the mooshika kingdom. However, it is very difficult to convincingly establish, that all these references denote to the ‘mooshikas’ of the Northern Malabar. However, some of the ancient puranas contain references about the gradual transformation of the mooshakas from tribal settings to a primitive state system. Vishnupurana refers to the mooshakas along with other Dravidian and hill tribes in South India. Vayupurana and Markendeyapurana present them as an important group of people in South India, whereas, the Brahmandapurana identifies the mooshaka as separate South Indian kingdom.9 ‘Mooshakavamsa’, a Sanskrit Mahakavya composed by Atula, towards the end of the eleventh century or in the beginning of the twelfth century, deals with the genealogy of 118 rulers of the Mooshaka dynasty beginning with its legendary founder, Ramaghata Musika, and ending with Srikanda.10 The Mooshakavamsa is the earliest surviving independent work of dynastic and regional history in India.11 In Sangam literature, Kolathunadu or ‘kingdom of Eli is referred to as one of the three great kingdoms of the region, and akananuru, purananuru, nattinai, patittippathu and kurumthokai often describe its conflicts with the Chera kings.12 Badami inscription mentions the king of Mooshaka as a separate King.13

12 Ibid, p.8
Kolathiri was not cited as an attester of the Syrian (A.D. 849) and Jewish (A.D. 1000) copper plates. It pointed to the fact that Kolathiris enjoyed an independent status during the Perumal’s rule. Some scholars are of the opinion that the new power structure of Kolathiris came into being on the debris of the decline of the mooshika rule during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is difficult to examine the circumstances leading to such a change, as the available evidences are meagre and defective.

Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller who visited the coast towards the end of the thirteenth century, made a descriptive note on the prosperity and independence enjoyed by the Kingdom of Eli.

“Eli is a kingdom lying some 300 miles to the west of Comari. They have a king of their own, are idolaters, pay tribute to none…pepper grows there in abundance and ginger too. They also have quantities of other kinds of spices. The king is very rich in treasur es, but not powerful regards soldiers. His kingdom, however, has strong frontiers, that no one could invade it with army in order to do it any harm. Thus the King fears no one”.

Kolathiris were powerful and styled as ‘Lord of Horses’ as they controlled the trade in horses with Arabia, the Persian Gulf and Southern India. Cannanore was a great emporium of such trade and with the rise of the Brahmini and Vijayanagara kingdoms in the fourteenth century the

14 Menon, n. 8, p. 68
15 K.N. Ganesh, Keralathinte Innelekal, (mal.), (Trivandrum, 1997), p. 369
16 Quoted in Menon, n.7 , p. 192.
import of horses from Arabia grew multifold. “At Cannanore...horses from Persia disembarked. On every one, customs duty of 25 ducats had to be paid before they could proceed on the fifteen-day journey to Vijayanagara”. In addition to the prospects of maritime trade, the commercial activities with the Vijayanagara kingdom also might have provided necessary impetus for this growth.

However at the time of European penetration into the area Kolathunadu was a non-figurative Kingdom. Owing to many reasons like the decentralized power structure of the Kolathiri family, the perpetual threats of invasions from the parts of the Zamorins of Calicut, the Nayaks of Ikkeri and the Mysorean Sultans, the power and prestige of Kolathunadu was often in jeopardy. Julius Valentijn Stein Van Gollensse, the Dutch commander of Malabar observed in 1743 A.D.

“colastry (Kolathunadu) is the last and most northly [sic] of the four chief kingdoms of Malabar. It has been much ruined by internal dissensions and wars that this country, formerly so powerful, is no longer a chief kingdom except in name”.

The internal dissensions and wars among the various claimants of political power within the royal family and the quest for independence by their feudal vassals accelerated the processes of colonial intrusion in Kolathunadu. By the closing decade of the eighteenth century the English

18. Quoted in K.A. Nilakanda Sastri, A History of South India: from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar, (New Delhi, 1999), edn. 4, rpt. 17, pp. 304-5
19 A. Galletti, ed., trans., The Dutch in Malabar, (New Delhi, 1984), rpt., p. 66
East India Company became the sovereign power in the region without waging any major military movement against the native rajas.

**Mercantile Capitalism and New Trade Practices**

The era of colonialism came into being as the by-product of commercial revolution and mercantile capitalism of the West. The generalization that commercial rivalries of the Western European nation states to gain economic affluence and supremacy over the orient as the prime moving spirit behind the establishment of colonial empires is a mere oversimplification of the whole spectrum of diverse but symbiotic indigenous and colonial interests. The indigenous politics could no longer resist the independent functioning of European merchant capitalism, particularly that of English, through the application of commercial monopoly. On the other side, the institutional framework of the mercantile companies had its inbuilt contradictions. As far as the English company and their Malabar trade was concerned, the private traders, both native and alien,\(^{20}\) posed a great threat to the company for enjoying the profitable spices trade, exclusively. They controlled the country trade and developed a suitable system of price manipulation in union with the company authorities. The Court of Directors of the company assessed the volume of pepper to be procured during the ensuing year and communicated the matter to the Presidency Board at Bombay. It was the duty of the Tellicherry factors to secure the required volume of pepper from the Malabar hinterland. The harvesting season of pepper was in the month of

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20. Pamela Nightingale, *Trade and Empire in Western India: 1784-1806*, (Cambridge, 1970), pp-98-115. Murdock Brown was a very influential European private merchant in Malabar. He had close acquaintance with the Malabar rajas and native traders. He was moved by his own self-interests and always became successful in shifting the course of events for his own favour.
January and February and well in advance the Tellicherry factors held meetings with the French directors at Mahe to fix a compromise price. The factors at Tellicherry could not negotiate trade directly with the producers, as they didn’t have any grip in Malabar hinterland. They, instead, negotiated with the local merchants for the price of pepper per candy and advance payments were made to them. The local merchants advanced money, cloth and other goods to the producers through their agents in the interior during festive seasons of June, July and August. The Malayali populace were prone to contracting debts during the festivals and as a result of the collaboration between native and alien merchant capitalisms the price of pepper was fixed at an unreasonable rate.21

**On the Source Materials**

The political processes of collaborations and conflicts in accentuating colonial yoke in Malabar have to be analysed further as the studies on colonialism in Malabar have been kaleidoscopic. The methodology followed in the study is descriptive analysis using both primary sources from archives and published secondary sources from libraries. Among the various archives of India which have been consulted for this study--the National Archives, New Delhi, Bombay Archives, Mumbai, the Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, the Regional Archives, Kozhikode--the Tamilnadu State Archives at Chennai is the main repository of sources for this study. The Tellicherry Consultations between 1725 and 1751 in 20 volumes, the Diary and Consultations of Tellicherry Factory between 1751 and 1794, particularly, the Political and Secret Consultations, are of immense use for dissecting the colonial operations on

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the coast of Malabar. The political, commercial and economic developments in Malabar after the establishment of colonial sovereignty in 1792 were examined with the help of the Revenue Consultations and Malabar Collectorate Records found in several volumes. Reports on Land tenures and Joint Commissioners Reports were the most indispensable sources of information with regard to the native politico-social and economic scenario.

The available literature on the history of Kolathunadu centres round the general pattern of colonial penetration. British administrators cum historians were the pioneers in this area. Their efforts aimed to provide ‘Manuals’ for the use of the new recruits to Indian administration. William Logan was in Malabar for more than two decades in different official capacities such as the district Collector, Magistrate and Special Commissioner. The Madras government deputed Logan to prepare an administrative manual on the district of Malabar, not only in consideration of his rich experience in the district but also on the ground of the fame acquired by him as the compiler of ‘A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and other papers of Importance: Relating to British Affairs in Malabar’ in 1879.22 ‘Malabar’, the invaluable work on the history of Kerala, was published in two volumes in1887. It is an authentic manual on the geography, religious and caste systems, linguistic and cultural aspects of Malabar which shows the author’s capacity as an erudite scholar. His painstaking efforts to unearth the pre-colonial historical developments are laudable. However when it comes to the colonial period he meticulously evaded the responsibility of investigating the reasons for colonial

hegemony against the backdrop of native socio-political environment. 

Logan was himself an instrument of colonialism in Malabar and it would be vain to search for the roots of colonialism in his writings. Sir Charles Alexander Innes I.C.S compiled the ‘Malabar Gazetteer’ in two volumes which was officially published by the Government of the Madras Presidency under the editorship of F.B. Evans I.C.S in 1908. The Gazetteer appears in the form of administrative handbook with brief descriptions of the physical, political, demographic, economic, climatic and judicial conditions of the land. It also presents detailed descriptions on different taluks and the essential statistical accounts. The work is of immense value for examining the land revenue system, land tenures and agrarian relations in Malabar. The political history was, however, presented with an explicit colonial bias.

The post-independence period in India witnessed the growth of new perspectives and methodological experiments in analysing colonialism and its aftermath. K.M. Panicker’s magnum opus, ‘Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco de Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498-1945’, (1953), evaluates the Portuguese period in Indian history. According to him this period of 450 years which begin with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut (in 1498), and ending with the withdrawal of British forces from India in 1947 is the ‘da Gama epoch’. Seven years after he wrote A History of Kerala, (1960).

K.K.N. Kurup is one among the few writers of recent years who tried to review the indigenous socio-political aspects of Kolathunadu on the eve of European intrusion. In ‘The Ali Rajas of Cannanore’ (1975), he examined the independent status enjoyed by a vassal of Kolathiri and the circumstances leading to their conflicts with the former which ultimately resulted in inviting external aggressions from the Ikkeri Nayaks and later from Mysorean powers.26 ‘The History of the Tellicherry Factory (1683-1794)’, is the result of his strenuous pursuit for analysing the East India Company’s colonial tactics in Malabar with the authenticity of a rare collection of primary sources.27 He has many other works to his credit which reveal various other facets of colonialism.28 N. Rajendran (1979) is another noteworthy Indian scholar who examined the establishment and development of British power in Malabar and its repercussion in the indigenous order.29

Pamela Nightingale’s ‘Trade and Empire in Western India’ (1970) deserves special mention as it gives authentic report about the trade practices under the auspices of a colonial Empire in Western India. The work elaborates the friction between the merchant capitalist interests of the English company at corporate level and the prospects of private trade interests of the company servants at local level and explains explicitly the

27. K.K.N Kurup, History of the Tellicherry Factory (1683-1794), (Calicut, 1985)
28. K.K.N Kurup, Aspects of Kerala History and Culture, (Trivandrum, 1977),
   K.K.N Kurup, Modern Kerala: Studies in Social And Agrarian Relations, (Delhi, 1988)
29. N. Rajendran, Establishment of British Power in Malabar 1664 to 1799, (Trivandrum, 1979)
reasons for two different policies—moderation and forward—of the company authorities towards the native rulers.30

Bonaventure Swai made a laudable contribution in analysing the colonial politics in Kolathunadu. He did his D.Phil from Sussex on the topic, ‘The British in Malabar’ in 1974. He contributed several scholarly articles on colonial hegemony in Malabar. He identified Randathara as a flash-point in Anglo-Kolathunadu relations and analyses the colonial foul play initiated by the English East India Company to control it in the course of colonial penetration.31 He analysed the peculiarities of the colonial state in Malabar32 and the demotion of Kolathunadu to the status of a petty principality as a result of the merchant capitalist intrigues of colonial agents33 and the role played by the Moplah merchants of Tellicherry in strengthening the cause of British colonialism.34

Margret Frenz’s ‘From Contact to Conquest: Transition to British Rule in Malabar, 1790-1805’ (2003) is a revised version of her doctoral dissertation. The book studies the annexationist policies followed by the English company towards Kottayam, one of the native kingdoms of north Malabar. The policy and conceptual frameworks of indigenous and

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30. Pamela Nightingale, Trade and Empire in Western India, (London, 1970)
34. Bonaventure Swai, ‘East India Company and Moplah Merchant of Tellicherry, 1694-1800’. In Social Scientist, 8:1 (1979)
colonial leadership and their impact on the society of Kerala are the core area of Frenz’s study.\(^{35}\)

But significantly enough, literature on the role of the indigenous socio-political milieu and hierarchy--both in collaboration and in conflict with colonial agents--in institutionalising the colonial hegemony is lamentably meagre, if non-existent. Very few historians succeeded in answering the significant and haunting question of the true driving force behind the establishment of the symbiotic relationship between the two world orders, the medieval and the modern. The possible suggestions by the historians--like economic motives, native rivalries, and modernization motives--reveal only one side of the coin, but the real problem still remain to be unearthed. Notwithstanding the paucity of information the present work investigates the whole spectrum of colonial hegemony and its relations with the native socio-political situation with reference to Kolathunadu, down to 1812 against the backdrop of British Imperialism. The Kurichya Rebellion of 1812 is taken as the last of the indigenous struggles, against the colonial hegemony in Kolathunadu, by a group of aborigines at a time when all other native claimants of political authority submitted themselves before the agents of colonial administrators. Hence the year 1812 is fixed as the final point in this study.

The political processes in India, before and after the arrival of western European maritime powers, are perhaps a widely discussed subject in recent times. Different schools of thought have attempted to study the problem from their own specific ideological bases and

\(^{35}\) Margret Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest: Transition to British Rule in Malabar, 1790-1805*, (New Delhi, 2003)
preferences. The so-called traditional historians on India limited their enquiry into the dynastic and heroic accounts and put various components of political formations, like the administrative, social, cultural or economic developments as watertight compartments, without seeking empirical linkage among them. Thus the scope of a vibrant and vociferous discipline had been subjected to stereotyped creation of eulogies. However thanks to a group of scholars, who opted for innovative approaches,’ history’ was discarded and the scope of ‘histories’ came up with the realisation that historical events have multiplicity of causes. State formation is rather, the result of various constituent factors like, geography and socio-economic peculiarities. It is possible to find many similarities in the various political divisions and constituents of Malabar and even those in the various zones of South India taken as a whole but one can as well discern instances of dissimilarities in the case of Kolathunadu which might be at variance with the general pattern of the advancement of colonialism. Kolathunadu was historically part of Malabar sharing a whole range of experiences with the contiguous localities and regions of Malabar. Nevertheless they followed numerous differences in the agricultural pattern, tenurial systems, and the socio-cultural milieu, besides differences in the trade commodities and trade practices. This justifies the present study as a serious academic endeavour.