Chapter IV

First Phase of Timber Trade: Wars, Naval Exigencies and Native Forest

Later half of the 18th century witnessed a structural change in the timber trading practices of the native state owing to the heavy demand from the East India Company and the emergence of a powerful class of timber merchants who were capable of meeting any exigent demand for the commercially valuable timber. During the period which was the first phase of timber trade in Travancore, the forests were widely felled mainly to cater the crucial requirements of the navy and the continental wars. The global phenomenon of western capitalism which entrenched in the state by the time caused the emergence of timber traders as a new dominant socio-economic class. Operations in timber trade were further facilitated by the native state and its ruler owing to the shortage of funds for administration and other activities in the state. Events that succeeded revealed the magnitude of some timber merchants who started influencing the government through the power of their wealth and material possessions. A political economy was thus created in the state which determined the political ecology controlled in many ways by the merchant capital of the native traders who were catering to the needs of the western timber magnates.

The timber resources were the most important factor that made the hitherto unnoticeable native state visible to the foreigners. The sylvan assets of Travancore proved to be an exigent resource for both administrative and military purposes of the British Empire. The gaze of the Empire thus penetrated into the native forest in which they found abundant of raw materials which could cater their exigent needs arising out of the incessant continental wars and naval requirements. For strengthening their warfront and the navy timber resources proved to be a prerequisite. It was this resource that helped the British to build an Empire where the Sun never sets. Thus native forest of Travancore played an important role in
strengthening the political and economic position of both the Empire and the native government.

It was during the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century that the shipbuilding industry managed and owned by the European companies began exerting heavy pressure on the native state for teak timber, which was a crucial factor for establishing naval supremacy and also for consolidating their power in the colonies. The desire to corner a vast stock of teak prompted them to scan and survey the areas where teak was abundantly available in the Malabar Coast. In the succeeding phase, the native state witnessed the emergence of powerful timber contractors who facilitated a continuous supply of teak timber for the European firms and thereby emerged as a powerful trading class who enjoyed considerable influence in the King’s court. Timber merchants who conducted trade in Travancore were not only from within the state, but also we have evidences of timber merchants from places outside the state and even from Britain. Almost iconic was the master role played by Mathu Tharakan, an affluent timber merchant who operated timber trade from various areas in the state and whose stature as a timber trader remained unchallenged during his life time.

The East India Company (hereafter EIC) through scrupulous surveys determined that the best of timber for shipbuilding would be found in abundance in the state of Travancore. The Maharaja on realizing the profits to be gained through timber trade extended contracts to private timber traders on his behalf. Amazing was the extent to which these contractors enjoyed royal patronage. This is revealed through a number of letters and other correspondences between them and the state authorities like the royal deeds, correspondence between the Raja and the Resident, various timber agreements etc. These timber traders gradually began to dominate the economy of the state and even developed into a powerful lobby in the realm of native politics. They not only became middle-men for the government but also emerged successful in procuring profitable deals such as the development of ports.

**Empire and Timber**

The colonial masters indiscriminately extracted the timber wealth of Indian forests. At a critical point in the history of British Empire, teak trees in Indian
forests emerged as a crucial factor in consolidating its political supremacy. The British were frantically searching for a timber that could replace oak tree which became practically extinct in their forests due to ruthless extraction for industrial purposes. They found the alternative in teak, which was qualitatively superior to that of oak and this realisation gained by the British through their research, paved the way for empire consolidation basing on the teak timber. The forests of India immensely contributed to the emergence of the British Empire in two ways.\(^1\)

Firstly, Indian wood was used in building ships which were employed in conquering rival European powers, and expanding the British Empire. Secondly, enormous quantities of forest resources were utilized for the construction of railways to transport resources essential for the functioning of colonial rule.\(^2\)

Timber also gained significance in several manufacturing industries engaged in the production of wooden tea chests, plywood, oil casks and materials for infrastructure development.

**Early Phase of Timber Trade in Travancore: Shipbuilding Industry**

**Teak in Shipbuilding**

Extraction and export of sylvan resources from the forests of India was an incessant process from time immemorial. The lumber trees of the Himalayas were brought down through river channels as early as 2000 BC. The export of Indian teak, sandalwood, blackwood, ebony etc., to the western markets existed even before the coming of the British. With the arrival of the British, large indents were made for the teak timber of South India for the construction of ships on behalf of the British fleet. The major agenda of shipbuilding, the first industry established by the British on the Indian shores, was to counter the menace of the French who were led by Napoleon Bonaparte, and to maintain the British supremacy on the seas against the French.


\(^2\) Ibid.
Teak, the king of timber, is considered as the most precious among all lumber trees. It is famous for its endurance and efficacy. The high oil content of the timber acts as an innate, natural water repellent which shields it from rotting, fungi and harsh chemicals. Teak timbers defy the attack of the termites and is able to endure the heat of the desert. It is invulnerable to color change when it comes in contact with metals. It grows profusely in tropical forests and contains a high level of silica\(^3\), which causes rapid blunting of cutting edges.

**Fig 4.1:**

*Figure Showing Cross Section of Teak*

![Figure Showing Cross Section of Teak](source)

Source: Teak Museum, Nilambur.

Note: Wood deposition increases according to age of the tree. Sap wood area will be lesser in comparison with heart wood in older trees. Heart wood is the useful part for ship building, furniture making and construction purposes.

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\(^3\) Silica is sand which gives traction to those who walk on a wet teak deck.
Teak was the pillar of the shipbuilding industry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when naval campaigns were a frequent affair. This resulted in widespread deforestation as the nascent industry required huge quantities of timber. Teak has been used in aircraft carriers, tall masted graceful clipper ships, exquisite cruise ships, refined yachts, and dinghies etc. There are very few timbers that can surrogate teak in its versatile utility. For centuries teak decks have been at par with excellence. They are recommended for the exterior of the ships because they serve as a marine disinfectant and have the quality to withstand the heat of the sun and it does not split, crack or warp.

The history of shipbuilding in India using teak can be traced back to the third millennium BC, during the Harappan Civilization. Adding to the great achievements of this civilization, the oldest known tidal dock in the world was built at Lothal, near the present day Mangrol harbor on the Gujarat coast in India around 2500 BC. Jane McIntosh in her book *Ancient Indus Valley: New Perspectives*, gives a description of Harappan ships and the wood used for its construction. In her words:

> “a clay model from Lothal represents a boat with a mast, attachments for a sail, and a steering oar. It seems to have a keel, a flat bottom, and high bows with a lower stem. Such a ship could have been used for seafaring in the gulf, where its shallow draft would have been advantageous. Although the model gives no indication of the materials from which such vessels would have been built, teak a preferred timber for shipbuilding, grows in Gujarat, where the Harappan seagoing ships would have been constructed, as does *Thespesia Populnea* (country teak) a wood used particularly for the keels of ship. It is likely that Harappan ships would have been built of those timbers, which were also

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among the Harappan exports to Mesopotamia where they were also destined for ship building."\textsuperscript{6}

Many scholars have compared Harappan ships which brought timber from Malabar to Gogha, to the modern day vessels. From this analogy, it can be assumed that a load of 60 tons could be carried by the Harappan ships. The size of the anchor stone found in Lothal dock also support this view.\textsuperscript{7}

Though trade in teak and the knowledge of its multifarious uses in India predated Europeans, a bigger onslaught on teak and teak forest occurred during the process of industrialization and colonialism. These processes initiated the commoditization of forest as timber began to be exploited on a large scale. Around 1860, Britain had emerged as the world leader in deforestation, utilizing timber for shipbuilding, iron smelting and farming purposes.\textsuperscript{8} The safety of the British Empire depended on the wooden walls of the Royal Navy. It is said that it was the Indian Teak that saved England during the war with Napoleon and later helped them in their maritime expansion.

**Timber Trade in the Malabar Coast**

According to Michael Mann, an organised timber trade through state agency existed in Malabar Coast during the time of Tipu Sultan who established a ship building enterprise in 1786.\textsuperscript{9} Here the timber trade was carried out by jungle merchants and coastal merchants and the method of working consisted of four stages:

1) On demand for timber the master carpenter went to a coupe and marked the trees fit for felling.


\textsuperscript{7} Rajeshwer Nath, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{8} Madhav Gadgil, and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Oxford University Press, California, 1992, p. 119.

2) Under the direction of the master carpenter the trees were felled on a special day with a sacrosanct saw.

3) The transportation of logs was carried out by the draught animals. The amount of timber to be transported and its price per logs were decided by the local chieftains who controlled the trade in the Western Ghats.

4) Coastal merchants, who brought the logs from the depots and stored them, distributed the timber to the shipwrights.¹⁰

Travancore was a regular supplier of teak timber to the Bombay dockyard. This can be best explained in the words of Anne Bulley, who wrote that “… Bombay was well placed for teak supplies, North and South of the Island. The forest of Ghir in Kathiawar produced precious crooked timber for the knees of ships while the principal forests lay in Gujarat, Konkan and Travancore.”¹¹ Philip Dundas also thought that Travancore forests were inexhaustible.¹² Additionally, the end of the Seven Years’ War created a lumber shortage in Europe. As a result of the acute shortage of timber, the British admiralty and the London shipyard owners imposed a ban on the EIC against building large ships in London. The English company had by this time, through their ‘travelling gaze’ and botanical explorations comprehended the quality and quantity of Indian woods, especially that of teak. They had also explored the areas where teak was grown abundantly in India. Therefore, the ban did not prove to be a hurdle for them, and the English EIC almost immediately chose to build their ships in India.¹³

The outbreak of the French Revolution, however, soon compelled the British government to make a compromise with the EIC, and requested them to supply the British Isles with rice and other food items with the help of ships built in India, in contradiction to the previously enforced ban. Thus, in 1800 a frigate named Cornwallis weighing 1363 tonnes and 50 built-in guns entered the shores of

¹⁰ Michael Mann, op.cit., p. 408.
¹³ Michael Mann, op. cit., p. 404.
Britain\textsuperscript{14} gaining unexpected praise from the British admiralty. This was the first ship built and launched by the EIC at the Bombay dockyard.\textsuperscript{15} Hereafter, several ships built of teak entered the London dockyard which impressed the admiralty, prompting the EIC to establish a large scale shipbuilding enterprise in Bombay.\textsuperscript{16}

Anne Bulley in her work \textit{The Bombay Country Ships} has referred to the comment made by William Taylor Money, the Marine Superintendent in Bombay regarding the qualities and the properties of teak. An iron bolt fixed in teak was prevented from corroding, unlike in oak, by the oil in the wood. It did not splinter when shot upon and therefore proved to be a durable option when used in war. He referred to \textit{The Milford}\textsuperscript{17} as another example to demonstrate the longevity of teak. After twenty-four years of trade journey to China and occasionally to Europe, he remarked that on her first thorough examination in 1810, “it was not found necessary to shift a single timber.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{The Search for Travancore Timber}

The victory of the British over Tipu Sultan helped them establish internal control along the Malabar Coast from Portuguese Goa to the independent country of Travancore.\textsuperscript{19} The Bengal - Bombay Joint Commission instituted in 1792 prepared a detailed survey of natural resources of the province of Malabar and referred to the timber resources available along its coast.\textsuperscript{20} The survey specified the quantity of teak timbers accessible within the region while various ecological explorations implemented by the British were crucial in identifying the worth of the timber for commercial purposes. Travancore which was then administered by an independent Maharaja, was the only state capable of meeting the increased timber demand of the


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Michael Mann, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{17} A ship built in Bombay.

\textsuperscript{18} Anne Bulley, op. cit., p. 29.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
company at that time, as all timbers in the forest of Konkan, Gujarat and Malabar Coast were virtually annihilated due to indiscriminate felling.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1802, Olephant John Hope, who later became the Commissioner of Cochin, was ordered to enquire into the availability of teak and other hardwood timber procurable on the Malabar Coast for the Bombay dockyard.\textsuperscript{22} He was directed to specify the tracts of those countries on the coast where timber and planks suitable for shipbuilding could be abundantly procured. His report read like this: “teak timber and planks fit for shipbuilding is most abundantly to be procured from the hills of Travancore and Cochin Countries. The quantity of fine timber in the former is considerably greater than what is to be procured from Cochin.”\textsuperscript{23} He also suggested that the contract with the Maharaja of Travancore be signed before the rains. This was due to the following reasons:

1) It would be difficult to work in the forests during the monsoon season.

2) The timber would be ready for floating through the rivers when the rain comes.

He added that teak timbers and planks of a significant marketable quantity amounting to one and a half lakh or even two lakhs of rupees could be obtained on the condition that half the money was paid in advance, one third more on delivery of half the contract and the full amount on completion of the whole.\textsuperscript{24} The report also mentions that the floating of timber and planks from Travancore and Cochin countries would be rendered easy by means of inland navigation and backwaters. It provided not only a detailed list of the prices of timber and planks to the first purchasers of Calicut and Cochin but also the prices at which such purchasers could sell their timber and planks to those who buy them for export purposes. The prices given were as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{21} Anne Bulley, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{22} Letter dated 14/11/1802, from Mr. Olephant to the Governor of Bombay, Bombay Castle, Secret and Political Diary No. 130A/1802.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\end{verbatim}
1) Six Rupees per *candy* for timber of first sort, each beam measuring from 40 - 45 feet in length and squaring from 12 - 14 inches.

2) Four and a half rupees per *candy* for timber of third sort, measuring from 22 - 35 feet in length and squaring from 10 - 13 inches.

3) Planks of hill-cut sizes sufficiently free from cracks to be good merchantable quality, the first purchaser ought to procure at Rs. 15 per 100 Bombay guz\(^{25}\) or at Rs. 60 per 100 square guz of Malabar.\(^{26}\)

It was from the first purchaser that the timber was dispatched to the markets of Bengal and Bombay for shipbuilding. The merchants who bought timber for shipbuilding from the first purchaser had to pay an advance of 100% of the above prices. Nevertheless, this was not considered as a clear profit to the First Purchaser because of several reasons:

1) The first purchaser usually procured timber six, eight or ten months in advance which may not obtain a profit for him at the time of selling it.

2) He was at the risk of the contractor failing in the engagements, the rejection of timber being shaken in its fall and the rejection of planks for cracks.

3) The first purchaser also had to incur the charges of hiring *coolies* and other expenses.

4) He had also to pay the duty imposed on each Raja’s territory while transporting it for export.\(^{27}\)

Olephant also stated that no timber or planks fit for shipbuilding could be procured without paying advances to the hill contractors.

**Combating the Arab’s Timber Trade**

Travancore’s timber trade relations with the Gulf of Persia and Arabia date back to the ancient times. Evidently the Conservator of Malabar Forests wrote to the British authorities informing them of the supply of teakwood timbers and

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\(^{25}\) A unit of measurement used during the colonial times.

\(^{26}\) Letter dated 14/11/1802, op.cit., Secret and Political Diary No. 130A/1802.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
planks from Travancore to the Arabs. In one of his letters he reported that, “within the last seven days, two vessels from Alleppey bound to Muscat have touched at this port, having on board about two thousand two hundred planks and some timbers.” His letter continues like this:

“In the course of the present week two Daws have been launched at Quilon and one at this port on their return from Alleppey, one of which named Kairat to the port of Muscat has on board 25 corz of planks, another named Gusal to Mocha and Jeddah has on board 1 corz of teakwood planks and the third named Sahin Sultan with 204 pieces of planks and some candies of timbers.”

He concluded the letter by stating that the presence of the Arab merchants was extremely destructive to their trade in the region. In 1809, the Bombay Government proposed to prevent the export of timber from Travancore and Cochin to the Arab countries. The Supreme Authority in Calcutta in due course authorised the Madras Government to carry out the proposal. The Board’s Resolution of 1811 disclosed that the Bombay Government was eager to stop the supply of lakhs of timbers and planks to the Persian Gulf from the Kutch and from the Malabar Coast. Through this resolution they were determined to put an end to the trade with the Arabs. They despatched three cruisers, viz., The Mercury, The Prince of Wales and The Chaser, in order to thwart the expeditions of the Arab ships from the Gulf of Persia. From the documents it is evident that the Arab ships were

28 Letter dated 02/02/1811, from the Conservator of Forests of Malabar to the Secretary of Government, Secret and Political Diary No. 370/1811.
29 Ibid.
30 A unit of measurement during the colonial period.
31 Letter dated 02/02/1811, op. cit.
33 Board’s Resolution dated 01/03/1811, Secret and Political Diary No. 370/1811.
34 Letter dated 23/02/1811, to the Chief Secretary, Fort St. George, Secret and Political Diary No. 370/1811.
35 Letter dated 12/02/1811, to the Secretary to Government, Marine Department, from the Conservator of Forests of Malabar, Secret and Political Diary No. 370/1811.
anchored at Quilon and Alleppey for loading timber.\textsuperscript{36} The British wanted to put a stop to this trade, since the Bombay Government was eager to exclusively procure the timber rights from Travancore and Cochin.

Anne Bulley’s book also gives corroborating statements regarding the disrupted Arab trade with Travancore. In her work, she cited the example of an Arab merchant named Shaik Bin Abdulla Ba Lakee who had sought permission for building a \textit{bhugla} at Alleppey, as the cost of building elsewhere was very expensive. His trade had primarily focussed on loading timber annually between Alleppey and Mocha for the last ten years. To his dismay, he was informed of the recently enforced regulation of the Hon. Company’s Madras Government which prohibited the building of vessels either at Alleppey or at Cochin, except by subjects of the British government. In forwarding his request to Madras, the Bombay Government pointed out the prejudicial effect in point of revenue which resulted from the prohibition on the Arab and Cutch traders from purchasing timber on the coast of Malabar, whereas in Travancore, the Maharaja gained large profits by facilitating the trade of the Arab teak exporters.\textsuperscript{37}

Following the launch of the \textit{Minden} in 1810, the Bombay Marine deliberated the construction of ships along the same line. To ensure the supply of timber resources for the same, “Governor General, Lord Moira, forbade the export of teak from Malabar, Kanara, and Travancore.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Timber Agreement with the Travancore Maharaja}

In an earlier letter dated 25 November 1802, the Company had reported the measures adopted for collecting the necessary quantity of teak timber intended for shipbuilding.\textsuperscript{39} Since then, the Commercial Residents at Anjengo (Anchutengu) and at Calicut (Kozhikode) concluded a contract with the minister of the Maharaja of Travancore for the entire quantity of timber and planks specified on the schedule

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Anne Bulley, op. cit., pp. 32 - 33.
\textsuperscript{38} Michael Mann, op. cit., p. 417.
\textsuperscript{39} Letter dated 09/04/1803, from the Honourable Company, to the Honourable Court of Director, for the Affairs of the United Company of Merchants of England trading to the East Indies London, Secret and Political Diary No. 130A/1802.
transmitted to them.\textsuperscript{40} The British influenced the timber trade in these states through the Residents at the court of the Maharajas. “Mr. Handley the then Resident of Travancore informed that this form of trading connection was the only viable course because no individual merchant could guarantee the large quantity and the high quality of timbers. Besides, all forests vest in the hands of the Raja, so it was with him that the EIC had to negotiate their contracts.”\textsuperscript{41}

The EIC sent applications to the Residents of both the states for assistance in obtaining all the timber cut in Cochin and Travancore for the purpose of ship building. The replies of the Residents indicated that the Maharajas of both the states were willing to enter into an agreement for selling their timber to the Company, provided they received a fair price.\textsuperscript{42} In 1803, the EIC entered into a treaty with the Maharaja of Travancore for procuring teak timbers. A breach occurred in the contract when the Maharaja was not willing to fulfil the contract as he was dissatisfied with the financial clauses of the treaty. Later, when the EIC advanced an enhanced sum of money, he agreed to provide the fixed quantity of teak.\textsuperscript{43} From the documents it is evident that these contracts for timber were mainly for the construction of 74 gunships and 36 gunships.\textsuperscript{44} The agreement was signed on 28 January 1803 at Anjengo (Anchutengu) by which it was arranged that the Maharaja of Travancore would supply the Company with teak timbers and planks which were to be delivered at Ayacottah and Quilon (Kollam). As per the agreement the rate of timber above 12 borrels\textsuperscript{45} which were deemed as first sort was Rs. 12 ½ per Malabar candy. Timber which was 12 borrels and under, deemed to be second sort, was paid at Rs. 9 ½ per Malabar candy. The rate of timber, the length and breadth of which were not defined, deemed as the third sort, was Rs. 8

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Michael Mann, op. cit., p. 414.
\textsuperscript{42} Gleig, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{43} Michael Mann, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{44} Letter from the Commercial Resident at Anjengo and in Malabar, reporting the conclusion of the contract with the Raja of Travancore, Secret and political Diary No. 138/1803.
\textsuperscript{45} A unit of measurement.
per Malabar candy. For all the planks of whatever description the Maharaja was to be paid at the rate of Rs. 108 per every 100 toodas or square covits.

The agreement detailed that the Company on their part should advance a cash of Rs.30,000 on signing of the contract and a second advance of Rs.30,000 on or before the 13 Koombam or 22 February of the following year. The third advance of Rs. 30,000 was to be paid on the delivery of half of the timber and planks contracted for, and any balance left was to be paid on the complete delivery of the timber as per the contract. The British tried to get an extension of the contract of timber trade three years later, which was readily accepted by the Maharaja Avittam Thirunal Rama Varma. He promised to supply the British with the annual teak harvest of his country.

The Maharaja captivated by the timber wealth and the future revenue prospects of his country, ordered the British to make a survey of his forest. In 1807, “the British resident in Travancore was instructed to organise a survey and he informed the Forest Commission about the intention of the Bombay and Travancore governments respectively”. This trade relation continued till 1814, after which there was a decline in the timber trade due to the decline in the value of timber. This decline in value could be because of the internal tensions that ensued from the events that occurred in Travancore, such as the revolt of Veluthampy etc.

**Timber Trade in Travancore**

During the time of Dharma Raja, from 1758 to 1798, lucrative timber trade existed in Travancore. The government engaged several contractors for the purpose. The system of timber extraction during the period gave complete monopoly over the hilly regions to contractors for the entire period of contract. Some of the prominent contractors involved with the Travancore state were Mathu Tharakan, Mukammathu Mukatheen Kunju (Muhammad Moideen Kunju) Kammathu Vadakkan, Kaliya Nayakan and Kochu Pilla Mether.
Fig. 4.2
Map of Travancore Showing the working area of the contractors
During AD 1758-1821

1 Aluva
2 Idiyara
3 Moovattupuzha
4 Kollakkadavu
5 Ranni
6 Kallada
7 Kavanarun
8 Manimala
9 Achencovil hills
10 Aryankavu hills
These contractors worked the monopoly regions of Moovattupuzha, Kollakkadavu, Ranni, Kallada, Aluva etc. The felling of trees was however not confined to the above regions. They worked on the forests in the regions of Kavanaru, Kariyar, Manimala, Achencovil hills, Aryankavu hills etc. (see Fig. 4.2) From these regions they exploited not only teak but various types of timbers and softwood like eravu, pamaram, valla palaka (planks for boat building) and other jungle woods.

Irregular Practices in Timber Trade

From the government records it is evident that these contractors often failed to remit the contract money on time. The record shows that Mathu Tharakan had to pay Rs. 10 per candy of teak which he was to sell to a company at Cochin. From the Moovattupuzha monopoly, Mukammathu Mukatheen Kunju had to pay Rs. 10 per candy of teak, from the Kollakkadavu, Ranni and Kallada timber monopolies MathuTharakan, KammathuVadakkan, KaliyaNayakan, and Kochu Pilla Mether had to pay Rs. 7 per candy of teak each, from the Aluva monopoly Mathu Tharakan had to pay a kole-vila of Rs. 4 per candy, and from the Moovattupuzha monopoly Kalika Nayakan Mathu Tharakan, Kammathu Vadakkan and Kochu Pilla Mether had to pay a kole-vila of Rs. 2 ½ each per candy. The government issued an order (Neettu) to Sankaranarayanan Chempakaraman who was the officer responsible for collecting the revenue from the timber traders, to collect the said amount and remit it to the Mavelikkara Mulakumadisseela.

Another Neettu disclosed that the timber contractors default a large sum of money even to the extent of more than 21,000 panam. It could be derived from the records that the timber contractors never remitted their monthly instalments in time. Other records also indicate the failure of the contractors to remit the money

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52 Located in Alappuzha district, the Achencovil river flows through this place.
53 Neettu Record, Vol. 2, dated 961/1/22 ME (AD 1785 - 86).
54 Also known as Meenachil river in Kottayam District.
55 Neettu Record, Vol. 2, dated 962/1/22 ME (AD 1786 - 87).
56 Ibid.
57 Malayalam word for Treasury.
58 Neettu Record, op.cit., dated 962/1/22 ME (AD 1786 - 87).
in the treasury, which seemed to be a regular practice. If this practice continued, the government was afraid that it would create great difficulty for the treasury to recover money even for emergency expenses. It led the government to declare that money was not to be spent from the Rasi Theeruvai (reserve fund) while there was a large amount of money pending from the monopolists. It further instructed Padmanabha Pillai, officer in charge (Melvicharippukaran), to collect the dues urgently at any cost, and the reserve not to be used under any circumstance. The defaulters were also to be brought and kept under custody and were to be forced to remit the default money.

The Royal Order of 998 ME (AD 1822 - 1823) revealed that as the existing contractors became defaulters to the government and as other contractors did not turn up to take up the contract, the government decided to take up the business of cutting, transporting, and selling of timber by themselves.

The record clearly speaks of the route through which timber transportation was conducted from the forests during the period. In 986 ME (AD 1810 - 1811) the timber was transported through Kollakadavu river, in 987 ME (AD 1811 - 1812) through Ranni and Kallada rivers, in 988 ME (AD 1813) through Malayattur river, in 989 ME (AD 1813 - 1814) through Aluva river, in 990 ME (AD 1814 -1815) through Muvattupuzha, Kavunaru, Manimala rivers and in 993 ME (AD 1817 - 1818) through Idiyara river. From all these routes the timber was brought to Alleppey for sale. While the government went through the account book of sales for a period of 10 years from 986 - 996 ME (AD 1810 - 1811 to 1820 - 1821), it became evident that the accounts were not properly maintained and there was a clear evidence of corruption and malpractice in the business.

The Maharaja consequently, ordered the Dewan Gundo Pandithan Venkittarayar to strictly audit and finalise the accounts of the above 10 years. When it was audited, it was found

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59 Ola No. 10 dated 998 - 3 - 12 ME (AD 1822 - 23).
60 Neettu Record, op.cit., dated 962/1/22 ME (AD 1786 - 87).
61 Ibid.
62 Ola No. 10, op. cit.
63 This is a river flowing through Chengannur region.
64 Ola No. 10, op. cit.
that the total sale proceeds of the timber and its duty amounted to 86,25,335 ¼ panam and the total expenditure for the period was accounted as 41,57,617 panam. 65

Records show that merchants from different countries came to Travancore for getting timber suitable for building ships and barges. The price agreements for such teak timber were as follows:

1) Half a panam per candy above 300 candies.
2) ¾ rupee per kole below 300 and above 200 candies.
3) ½ rupee per kole below 200 and above 120 candies.
4) ¼ rupee per kole below 120 candies. 66

During this period there was a rule that no other trees could be felled except teak. It also seems that the government imposed high rate of taxes for anjily 67 and other jungle wood at the rate of 20 panam per hundred or less which was not clearly fixed at a particular rate in order to dissuade the contractors from extracting such type of wood. 68 As a result of this it appeared that the traders complained that at this high rate of taxes it was difficult for them to bring down the timbers from the hills for building barges because it was not profitable to them. Therefore the government decided to bring about a certain reduction of levy by bringing it at the rate of 5 panam per hundred. 69 It was considered that this would be a sufficient solution for the problems that the traders were facing and that it would promote the business. This resulted in the increase of the traders which in turn led to a widespread complaint during this time that they were not getting teak timbers sufficient enough to build ships and barges. On the basis of this the government issued an order permitting to extract timbers such as anjily and other jungle woods and

65 Ibid.
66 Neettu Record Vol. 6, part. II, dated 992 - 9 - 11 ME (AD 1816 - 17).
67 Similar to teak in qualities, sometimes the British ordered the collection of anjily trees in the event of shortage of teak timber.
68 Neettu Record, Vol. 6, op. cit., dated 992/9/7 ME (AD 1816 - 17).
69 Ibid.
permitting the contractors and the tenants to extract such kinds of timbers at their own expenses paying a nominal tax of 5 panam per hundred.\textsuperscript{70}

During the year 1012 ME (AD 1836 - 1837) there was a great demand from the merchants of Vilathi (England) for timbers like teak and karunthali.\textsuperscript{71} The elephants engaged in the forests to transport the timbers were found to be insufficient in number to meet the increasing demand. Therefore, the Travancore Government suggested engaging fifty to sixty more elephants to conveniently fell at least 3,500 timbers. However, the officers responsible for taking care of the elephants were more interested in extracting profits out of their given responsibilities, as a result of which the elephants were not fed properly and were not medically treated when they fell sick.\textsuperscript{72} Although the government had allotted a large sum of money for the welfare of the animals and the officers were instructed to take care of them, they appropriated the allotted money for themselves. The revelation of the enduring corruption resulted in the government directly getting involved with the protection of the animals and the large-scale trade of timber.\textsuperscript{73}

**Timber Traders in Travancore during the Early Phase**

Though the forest and the land belonged to the Travancore Government, it encouraged private merchants to take up timber trade in the state. It was however with the arrival of European companies, particularly the EIC that the extensive extraction of timber from the Travancore forests began. During the initial years of the timber trade with the Company, the government leased out rivers to private contractors,\textsuperscript{74} which meant that the contractors were permitted to extract timber from the forests which were situated on the banks of these rivers. This was the former system of timber working in Travancore as is seen from the reports and surveys.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} *Neettu* Record, Vol. 32 of the year 1012 ME (AD 1836 - 37).
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
The earliest record available to us regarding the contractors is that from the period of Dharma Raja. Though several contractors were appointed during this time, Mathu Tharakan was recognized as the most influential contractor among them. Shungoonny Menon wrote that, “the timber grown in Malayattoor and other forests was given out on contract to an influential native Christian (Mathoo Tharagan), who was directed to bring timber to Alappay and sell it there.” Other prominent contractors were Kammathu Vadakkan, Kaliya Nayakan, Kochu Pillai Mether, Mukammathu Mukadeen Kunju, Purushothama Das etc. Besides timber, these contractors also engaged in the trade of commodities like tobacco, pepper and other minor products. They also helped the government by lending money in time of emergency. The government sought advice from contractors like Mathu Tharakan in the development of the Alappay port.

During the time of the visit of Lieutenants Ward and Conner to Travancore, the government had introduced a new system by which timber was to be worked down by the state. Under the new system, initially the felling of timber by the government was entrusted to Captain Robert Gordon, who was then the Commercial Agent at Alappay. It was in about 1892-93 that an end was made to this system and timber began to be sold directly by the Forest Department. However, when the timber began to be sold directly by the department they incurred a huge expenditure and therefore later, in order to reduce the cost of cutting, logging and delivery of logs, each coupe was given in contract to private traders. Initially the selling unit had been determined per candy instead of the later cubic feet. A Candy of teak and black wood were priced around Rs.14 to

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75 Neettu, Record, Vol. 2, dated 961/1/22 ME, op. cit.
77 Neettu, Record, Vol. 4, dated 976/3/21 ME (AD 1801).
78 Ward and Conner, op. cit.
79 As this system proved to be ineffective and adversely affected the interest of the government, it was stopped in 1892 - 93 and timber from that time onwards was to be sold directly by the Forest Department.
80 C.K. Karunakaran, Keralathinte Vanangal Noottandukaliloode, State Institute of Languages, Thiruvananthapuram, 1988, p. 64.
Rs.18 respectively. In the beginning, most of the demand for teak from Travancore was for shipbuilding purposes.

**Thachil Mathu Tharakan**

Thachil Mathu Tharakan, the great timber trader of Travancore born in 911 ME (AD 1735 - 1736), catered to the timber requirements of the Company up to 1814. He was the second among the four sons of Itti Anna and Thachil Thariathu, a minister to the king of Alangadu. His maternal grandfather Mathu, a very rich man, belonged to the Ookkan family of Edakkulam which was in the kingdom of Cochin (*Perumpadappu Swaroopam*).

Mathu Tharakan became a subject of the Travancore king when Alangadu was annexed to Travancore in 938 ME (AD 1762 - 1763). There exist two opinions regarding his entrance into the timber trade. One of his biographers alludes to him as a man who lived a life of extravagance. Subsequently he squandered the wealth of the family but managed to regain it with the help of his father’s business partners, the Shenoy brothers. It was they who introduced Tharakan to a new arena of business i.e., timber trade. He commenced his career as a labourer of the Shenoy brothers, who entrusted to him the herculean task of collecting 3000 teak logs from the Achencovil hills. The Achencovil hills in those days were covered with dense forest and brimming with wild animals. The collection of timber was as per orders from the EIC which required the teak logs to be delivered at the Alleppey port. Tharakan emerged successful in the tasks assigned to him. The Shenoy brothers sold the teak logs to the EIC at a huge profit which according to the available sources was mostly handed over to Tharakan. It proved to be a great encouragement and inspiration to him and persuaded Tharakan to fully concentrate on the timber trade with the Company. He gradually gained the

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81 Ibid.
82 C.C. Lonappan Ookkan, *Thachil Mathu Tharakan*, St. George Press, Irinjalakkuda, 1966, p. 1. In the biography of Mathu Tharakan by M.O. Joseph it is stated that he was born in 1741.
83 Ibid., p. 3.
84 P. Shungoonny Menon, op.cit., pp. 190 - 191.
86 Ibid.
orders from the Travancore government providing the right of cutting teak timbers from both the Periyar and the Pampa Valleys. This was a great achievement for the government also, as it opened a new source of revenue to the coffers.\(^{87}\)

The second version is that he was introduced to the business by his uncle Iypu Mathu (mother’s brother) who was a timber contractor in Cochin and engaged in business with a Dutch (Lantha) company. Mathu Tharakan obtained permission from the Maharaja of Cochin to extract timbers from Idyaramadu which was a part of the Malayattoor hills. According to the royal order which was addressed to Edakkulathu Iypu Mathu, the Maharaja leased out the Malayattoor hills for five years to him from *Dhanu* 963 to 968 ME (AD 1787 - 1788 to 1792 - 1793).\(^{88}\) He was given the right to extract timber from these hills and had to pay Rs.3,000 as rent in two instalments i.e., in the months of *Karkadagom* (July-August) and *Vrichigam* (November - December) every year. As per the agreement, Tharakan had to employ his own elephants or rented animals to work in the hills. But he was not allowed to sublease the area to anyone else without the permission of the Maharaja and he was bound to surrender this agreement at its expiry on the first of *Makaram* 968 ME (1792 - 1793 AD).\(^{89}\)

Enterprising and intelligent as he was, Mathu Tharakan was eventually entrusted with several responsibilities of the trade. He took certain places like Pappinivattom on lease and constructed godowns there and began to collect rents from them. It was around this time that Alangadu was annexed to Travancore, as a result of which the Thachil family became the subjects of Travancore.\(^{90}\) This opened great prospects for Mathu Tharakan. He had to travel frequently to Trivandrum and there he was granted the opportunity to come into the service of the Dharma Raja in 943 ME (1767 - 1768 AD), which proved to be a turning point in his life. He realized that the timber monopoly in Travancore was more lucrative than his business with the Dutch company in Cochin. Consequently, he took

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87 Ibid.  
88 Lonappan Ookkan, op. cit., Royal Order given as Appendix 68, p. 187  
89 Ibid.  
90 Lonappan Ookkan, op. cit., p. 3.
several virgin forest on lease and worked on it. The timbers extracted from these hills were extraordinarily big and ensured great demands at the port of Cochin. He began to receive orders for timber from far off lands. As his timber trade progressively flourished, Tharakan became very rich. In the words of Bourdillion:

“In North Travancore the name of Mathu Tharakan is mentioned as a great teak contractor. I have been unable to find exactly when he lived, and have only ascertained that he flourished in the first half of the century; he was in all probability the man, or one of the men, who rented the rivers for their timber. So much is certain, that he was a man of great enterprise, that he had numerous elephants, and that he travelled into the most distinct parts of the forests of the Idiyara valley and just outside of it to get teak of large dimensions.”

That Mathu Tharakan was a famous timber contractor can be corroborated with the statement made by Velu Pillai, the Conservator of Forest, in the Malayala Manorama newspaper, dated 6 Chingam 1101 ME (AD 1925 - 1926). According to him, the Forest Department came across certain timbers worth lakhs of rupees from the Idiyara River. These timbers were inscribed with the name Mathu Tharakan. It was a practice of the contractors in those times to stock the timbers from forests on the shores of rivers for drying so that it could be easily floated down through rivers during floods. It was possible that some of these timbers were stuck in the Idiyaramadu area. Idiyaramadu was a place of several obstacles which prevented the smooth flow of timbers. There are other instances of excavating such timbers with his name from the rivers running through the territories of both Travancore and Cochin. The timbers found were auctioned by each state and the

91 Ibid.
93 Malayala Manorama daily, dated 6 Chingam 1101 ME, as shown in appendix 70 of Lonappan Ookkan., p. 188.
94 Ibid.
revenue was remitted to their treasuries. According to the working plan report of the Malayattoor forest:

“One Mathew Tharakan, a very enterprising and influential man of North Travancore had contract with government to collect teak from Malayattoor forests and deliver them at Alleppey depot for sale. Large quantities of teak timber had been worked down under this contract from the Malayattoor reserve and some of the teak logs exhumed and hauled in 1940’s from Periyar beds bearing the name of Mathew Tharakan reveal that large quantities of teak were supplied by him to British navy for shipbuilding.”

As a result of the several wars (1789 - 1795) waged by Travancore, the treasury was depleted and the government suffered greatly from lack of funds even for traditional festivals like Murajapam etc. Being a rich and influential contractor Mathu Tharakan lent large sums of money to help the government. There is a notion that the government did not repay the money given by him and that there was about 14 lakhs of rupees pending at the time of his death. Nevertheless, from the original records we can understand that the money borrowed by the government from Mathu Tharakan for Murajapam festivals had been repaid in several instalments. The Royal Neettu of the year 976 ME (AD 1800 - 1801) indicates that the government borrowed money from Kuthiyathottungal Mathu Tharakan in the year 973 ME (AD 1797 - 1798) for Murajapam and other sundry expenses. It also reveals that arrangements were made by the government to repay the debt with principal and interest in kind from godowns in Pirakkattu. Mathu Tharakan, however later complained that he was unable to sell several of the old commodities he received in kind, and hence requested to allot some new ones so that he could sell the old ones along with the new ones. The government without making any further enquiries ordered the officers responsible, Thampi

96 Neettu Record, Vol. 4, dated 976-3-21 ME (AD 1800 - 1801).
97 The government perhaps repaid the amount in tobacco, cardamom or timber planks. They often gave the merchants an assortment of both old and fresh items.
Chempakaraman Velayudhan and Chidambaranathan Somanathan to take necessary steps to take back the old items from Tharakan and sell them with the new articles at the rate of 17 chakrams per rathal (pound). The money was to be paid to Tharakan and the receipt received from him was to be properly accounted against the payment made.\(^{98}\)

On the other hand, there are evidences that Mathu Tharakan was sometimes not able to lend money to the government on demand because of the scarcity of funds with him. The Royal Neettu dated 976 ME (AD 1800-1801) reveals that Mathu Tharakan agreed to pay 25,000 panam to Akavooru Nambudiri on behalf of the government, from whom it had bought an elephant named Kutti Chankaran for 50,000 panam, of which 25,000 was already paid by the government.\(^{99}\) However, Tharakan failed to pay the money before the scheduled time. So the government decided to pay 10,000 panam from the Mavelikkara Mulakumadisseela and 15,000 as instalment of 5,000 panam, in three months.\(^{100}\)

Even when the Travancore government borrowed large sums of money from Mathu Tharakan it is evident from the records that he had defaulted large amounts of money due to the government against timber monopoly. One of the records discloses that he had to pay 51,500 panam due to the government up to the year 970 ME (AD 1794 - 1795) on behalf of his timber monopoly. The record which was a royal order instructed the responsible officers to recover the amount from Tharakan by the 20 Midunam 976 ME (AD 1800 - 1801).

Another government record notes that the Raja was eager to pay back the money borrowed from Mathu Tharakan. The government was due to pay him 3,65,013 ¾ panam from the Mavelikkara treasury. Because of the lack of funds in the Mavelikkara treasury the Raja paid him the amount from the Padmanabhapuram treasury. It is evident from the records that the government borrowed money not only from Mathu Tharakan but also from other merchants.

\(^{98}\) Neettu Record, op.cit., dated 976-3-21 ME (AD 1800 - 1801).
\(^{99}\) Ibid.
\(^{100}\) Neettu Record Vol. 4, dated 976-4-8 ME (AD 1800 - 1801).
like Purushothama Das of Janna Pattanam (Chennai). Due to the penurious state of the treasury, the Raja ordered officers Thampi Chempakaraman Velayudhan and Chidambaranathan Somanathan to collect various taxes that were payable to the government within six months from *Chingam* (August-September) to *Makaram* (January-February), and to return Purushothama Das the amount owed to him.

Besides timber, Mathu Tharakan engaged in the trade of hill produces like dry ginger, cardamom, pepper, etc., and salt. He became a favourite of Karthika Thirunal Maharaja and the Raja honoured him with the title of ‘Tharakan’. Thus, from the state of an ordinary contractor he rose to the position of the leading contractor of the state. With the engagement in these trades he shifted his centre from Kuthiyathodu to Alleppey, which later attracted the attention of the Dewan. For the development of trade he bought two ships from Bombay named *Valia Padavu* and *Cheriya Padavu*.

**Tharakan’s Timber Monopoly**

Tharakan gained monopoly of trade in several articles and among them the most important was the timber monopoly. This can be substantiated with original government documents including the royal proclamations and royal orders preserved in the archives. One of the records of 958 ME (AD 1782 - 1783) shows that he had given the contract for cutting *anjily* trees from Karinthoni Anmbathumalakal. The same record reveals that the government even helped him by paying an advance of 1000 *kali panam* to meet the expenses of coolies. In 981ME (AD 1805 - 1806) Tharakan acquired the timber monopoly over Kodasseri and Palappilly rivers. During this period he was felling timbers from Ponnambuzhakkal and Chakki Parambu hills. From 963 - 983 ME (AD 1787 - 1788 to 1807 - 1808), Thrikkaruru hills came under his monopoly as well as several hills in Northern Travancore. He however, carried out his main business through the Aluva River. Throughout these years the hills were leased out for a fixed period. The lease was given either by

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101 *Neettu* Record, dated 975-5-14 ME (AD 1799 - 1800).
102 Ibid.
103 Lonappan Ookken, op. cit., p. 4
104 Ibid, p.18.
105 *Neettu* Record, Vol. 1, dated 958/5/11 ME (AD 1782 - 1783).
dividing hills or giving out a region as a whole or by leasing out the rivers. Tharakan had appointed a Muthalpidi (supervisor) along each river routes. He gave each supervisor 240 puthen\textsuperscript{106} a month and supplied them with 2 ¼ Edangazhi\textsuperscript{107} rice and other food items per day.\textsuperscript{108}

**Method of Extraction of Timber**

The first step in the lumbering process was to mark the trees. Then they were felled and brought to the river banks by elephants. The timbers were usually left to dry for a while before they were floated through the rivers. The royal trees like teak and blackwood were sold as timbers itself, while other trees like anjily and cheeni were sold as planks and pieces suitable for building barges and small boats.\textsuperscript{109} It is said that the English bought timbers from Tharakan to build warships which were used in their wars against Napoleon. Lonappan Ookkan’s book revealed that the main timber traders at that time were Kustanthinose, an English man at Cochin, Anathan Srappu at Azhikkal and Moosa Koyi at Cheranchirakkal, and Naoroji, a famous trader who shipped timber from Travancore to Bombay.\textsuperscript{110}

Historian Fr. Bernard referred to the trade activities of Mathu Tharakan and mentioned that he brought the timber and other forest produce gathered from the hills to Alleppey and engaged in a whole sale business with the foreigners. The timber he collected was sold exclusively to the British EIC. Most of the ships constructed by the company during the period were with the teak timbers sold by Tharakan. There are many evidences that confirmed the reckless cutting of teak by Tharakan during the time.\textsuperscript{111} M.O. Joseph also in his biography of Mathu Tharakan

\textsuperscript{106} An old unit of value money.
\textsuperscript{107} An old unit of measurement of quantity, approximately 1 kilogram
\textsuperscript{108} Ookkan, op. cit., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} John Kachira Mattom, Thachil Mathu Tharakan, Dr. Kachira Mattom Foundation, Kachira Mattom, 2004, p. 62.
stated that “the ships which helped in the naval victory of the British on the Neela River,\textsuperscript{112} Cadis\textsuperscript{113} and Trafalgar\textsuperscript{114} were built with the teak provided by Mathu.”\textsuperscript{115}

**Development of Alleppey Port**

The biographies on Mathu Tharakan confidently asserted the contractor’s immense contribution to the development of Alleppey as a port town. When the Maharaja of Travancore visited Cochin he was greatly fascinated with the growth of the Cochin port. As a consequence of his visit he expressed his desire to Mathu Tharakan who accompanied him, to develop Alleppey along the lines of the Cochin port.\textsuperscript{116} Mathu Tharakan, as a trader had visited different ports and possessed great knowledge and understanding on the working of ports in general. He was very aware of the benefits of converting Alleppey into a trade centre. Thus, he took up the challenge and proposed a comprehensive plan for the transformation of Alleppey. Describing the establishment of Alleppey town, Fr. Bernard affirmed that, “it was Mathu Tharakan who acted as the left hand of the Dewan in his attempt of establishing the town. Though the Dewan made an overall supervision it was Tharakan who made the plan of the port.”\textsuperscript{117}

The most striking feature of the port was its simplicity. Small boats called *vallams* were loaded with spices, timber and other produce from the hinterland. These were naturally drifted into the commercial canal and were unloaded near the beach. The cargo was stored in the warehouses which stood near the canal. Seafaring barges then carried the exports to ships.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{112} The Battle of Nile was fought on 1 August 1798 between the British and the French fleet in Aba Qir Bay near Alexandria, Egypt. It was one of the greatest victories of the British admiral Horatio Nelson.

\textsuperscript{113} The Battle of Cadiz was fought on 3 July 1797 between the British Royal Navy and the Spanish fleet.

\textsuperscript{114} The Battle of Trafalgar fought on 21 October 1805 was a naval engagement carried out by the British Royal Navy against the combined fleet of French and Spanish navies.

\textsuperscript{115} M.O. Joseph, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p. 17.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118} Broeze, op. cit., pp. 297 - 298.
Mathu Tharakan was also successful in persuading the Maharaja to construct two canals from Pallathuruti to Kadalpuram (port) and also from Kallupalam to the port. He became instrumental in constructing trading centres and markets on both banks of the canals. He constructed godowns on the banks of the canal and gradually most of the business shifted to these centres. Later, this canal was named as ‘Mathutharakan Thodu.’\(^\text{119}\) In the beginning there was a lack of traders in the centre. So he brought more Christian traders to Alleppey and assisted them in establishing their business there. The Patans from Tinnevelly and the Gauda Saraswathas from Mattancheri also came to Alleppey and entered into trade. Mathu Tharakan brought with him sixty-four Syrian Christian families from Thathampally and made them settle in Alleppey. He constructed a church for them at Alleppey at his own expense. Thus Alleppey developed into a commercial town. As the business in Alleppey developed, an increased number of traders began to migrate to the town. It necessitated the construction of more godowns and trading centres and other facilities for the traders.

**Great Demand for Venteak Planks**

There was a great demand for venteak planks outside Travancore for shipbuilding purpose. In a letter to the Dewan, the Acting Conservator of Forest mentioned that a large quantity of venteak trees should be ordered to be felled since this timber was not much used within Travancore.\(^\text{120}\) Most of the conservators who were white in mind and Indian in colour were very much eager to respond to such demand and they were ordering the felling of trees without the government sanction. A letter from the Conservator to the Dewan explains this:

> “Taking advantage of the provision laid down in your letter, I propose to the felling of large number of trees and sawing them into planks. I beg to know whether you approve the scheme. I shall take care to see that the operation is performed close to the watch stations

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\(^\text{120}\) Letter No. 3237/1077, dated nil, from the Conservator of Forest T. Ponnambalam Pillai to the Dewan of Travancore K. Krishnaswamy Rao, Cover Files No. 11720, B – 283.
nearest to the forests where the timber is felled under the supervision of a departmental officer.”

He also requested the government’s permission to enter into an agreement with Messrs Cox & Roberts to supply 1,000 candies of Venteak planks during the year 1077 ME (1901 - 1902) and 1078 ME (1902 - 03) at a higher rate of Rs. 8 ¼ per candy instead of the prevailing rate of Rs.6 to 6 ½, which according to him would bring a fair profit to the government. He proposed this rate on the ground that the logs to be worked down were of a huge size. In 1902 the depot at Puliyara was transferred to Shencottah. This was 5 miles farther than that of Puliyara and the timber had to be brought to Shencottah only through Puliyara. So as the transport charges had been increased, the Forest Department proposed to raise the price of all sorts of timber by half a rupee per candy. The existing rate of selling price for first quality teak logs was Rs.18 and the proposed rate was Rs.18 ½. For blackwood the existing rate was Rs.19 and the proposed rate was Rs.19½. From the records, we can conclude that there was an attempt on the part of the government to increase the price by one fourth of a rupee for all sorts. But the Forest Department had stopped this move and strongly argued for raising it by half a rupee. The promotion of the trade through the port of Cape Comorin was another aim of the Conservator in laying the scheme. According to him, ‘the planks of the species I refer to will pave the way for it’ and he had already made agreements with merchants who promised to export the planks through this port.

On 9 July 1902 two agreements were entered into with Pakir Meera Rowther and Vava Rowther Mythin for delivering 2,000 Venteak planks at Quilon for an amount of about Rs.4,145 each. Though the agreement stated that the planks should be delivered either at Tuet or at the Quilon Beach Depot, the Conservator

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Letter No. 4130 of 1077, dated 14/03/1902, from the Conservator of Forest T. Ponnambalam Pillai to the Dewan of Travancore K. Krishnaswamy Rao of Travancore, Cover File No. 8674, B - 268.
124 Letter No. 4343 of 1077, dated 23/04/1902, from the Acting Conservator of Forest to the Dewan of Travancore, Cover Files No. 11720, B - 283.
125 Ibid.
strongly recommended the delivery at the latter depot due to the convenience of the purchaser. He also wrote to the government to sanction the agreement entered with V. Muthali Thampi Pillai of Quilon for purchasing the above planks at Rs. 22,500.\textsuperscript{126}

In another letter the Conservator wrote to the government about the withdrawal of the contractor Vava Rowther. Another agreement was executed with two other contractors Ahmed Kunju and Shabdin Mudaliar for delivering 2000 Venteak and Pumaruthu planks.\textsuperscript{127} He also wrote for sanction to extend the period of agreement of V. Muthali Thampi. The probable value of contract as per accompanying agreement was Rs.9,912.\textsuperscript{128}

\textbf{John Nidhri}

He was the contractor of the Meenachil range. He had executed an agreement for four years from 1882 to work down 1800 cubic feet of royalties i.e., 1500 cubic feet of teak and 300 cubic feet of blackwood along five main rivers viz. Pamba, Manimala, Kavanar (Meenachil) Muvattupuzha, and Periyar.\textsuperscript{129} He was given another contract for the extraction of royal trees i.e., teak and blackwood, for four years from 1059 ME (1884 - 1885 AD).\textsuperscript{130} By agreement he could extract 4,000 candies of these royal trees (3,500 candies of teak and 500 candies of blackwood) along the five rivers mentioned above.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{126} Letter No. nil, dated 09/07/1902 from the Conservator of Forest T.F. Bourdillion to the Dewan of Travancore, Cover Files No. 11720, B - 283.
\item\textsuperscript{127} Letter No. 1392, dated nil, from the Conservator of Forest T. F. Bourdillion to the Dewan of Travancore, Cover Files No. 11720, B - 283.
\item\textsuperscript{128} Letter No. nil, dated December 1902 from the Conservator T.F. Bourdillion to the Dewan of Travancore, Cover Files No.11720, B - 283.
\item\textsuperscript{129} C.K. Karunakaran, Deputy Conservator of Forest and Working Plan Officer, Second Working Plan for the Kottayam Forest Division (1970 - 71 to 1984 - 85), Government Press, Ernakulam, 1975, P. 40
\item\textsuperscript{130} K.S. Narayana Iyyengar, Divisional Forest Officer, Working Scheme, Meenachil Range, Kottayam Division, 1922. Development File No. 1802, B - 84.
\item\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Chisholm Ewart and Co.

This was one of the earlier firms in Travancore which had its origin as far back as 1890. It was established by D.G. Cameroon and E.C. Chisholm who started their business jointly at Quilon. Cameroon sold his interest in the firm in 1900 and Ewart joined Chisholm in the business. They obtained the required quantities of timber like teak and other hardwood from the government forests in Travancore. The wood was seasoned before it was manufactured into roof timber and all soft wood timber was made into various sizes of packing boxes.

Conclusion

Although timber trade existed in Kerala from the ancient times, it is through the interventions of the EIC and later the British Empire that it emerged in its scope as a profiteering business for both the government and private traders. The Colonial rulers through extensive inspections of the Travancore forests highlighted the importance of teak and blackwood timber for the shipbuilding industry. In the initial years of timber trade between the EIC and the Maharaja of Travancore, they maintained an exclusive business relationship, with the least amount of interference in the affairs of each other. It is also notable that in the early phase of timber trade, the Travancore Government on realizing the revenue to be gained was enterprising enough to extend contracts to private timber traders.

If we analyse the history of timber trade of Travancore, we can infer that though the number of contractors were limited, some of them were very influential in the public affairs of the government. These prominent traders, especially Mathu Tharakan, even acted as banker to the government. There are evidences of the government borrowing money from them in order to conduct traditional festivals like Murajapam etc. Ola No.10 is a significant evidence for the timber contractors making default of payment of monopoly revenue to the government. It also exposes the inefficiency and corruption that existed among the officials who were responsible for collecting and accounting the revenue


133 Ibid.
from timber trade. When revenue accounts were properly audited on royal orders, it revealed an enormous income of 86,25,335 ¼ *panam* and exposed the harsh reality of indiscriminate extraction of large quantities of timber.

It is clear from the royal *Neettu* dated 992-9-11 ME (AD 1817) proclaimed during the reign of Regent Rani Gouri Parvathi Bhai, that there was a rule prohibiting the extraction of timber other than teak. But we do not know when this rule was put into practice. However, from our study of timber trade in Travancore we can conclude that the contractors extracted timber other than teak from the Travancore forests. It therefore seemed that the order was issued for regularising this unauthorised extraction and for increasing the government revenue, and the profit of the contractors. There also emerged a period of relaxation of this rule which implied that when there was an increased demand for timber from the EIC, the government of Travancore came under immense pressure to extract timber to satisfy the orders regardless of the destruction of the Travancore forests. Also, it is apparent that the government was leaning more towards protecting the interest of the merchants rather than protecting the native forests.