MEDIEVAL KERALA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE NETWORK

CHAPTER VI

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Having discussed the various aspects of trade and trading centres of medieval Kerala, it is relevant to examine her role in Indian Ocean trade network. New studies are emerging with regard to oceanic trade and commerce and in the light of these new studies an attempt is made in this chapter to look into the status of Kerala as a link in the East-West trade. The theories of world economic system introduced by Wallerstein and Braudel and their critics have been adopted as a guideline for this study.

1. Indian Ocean trade network means the entire area from Red Sea to China, covering the Coast of East Africa and South Africa in the West to the littoral areas of south eastern China in the East.

The concept of world system is beyond the scope of a simple definition. It "denotes a largely self contained economic system which need not include the entire world but is bigger than any modern political unit". "It is a world system not because it encompasses the whole world, but because it is larger than any juridically defined political unit and it is a world economy because the basic linkage between the parts of this system is economic..." According to Wallerstine the present world system began in the 16th century. Before this there existed a few world empires of which the Indian Ocean - Red Sea complex was one. To Wallerstine the world economies before 16th century were 'empires.' Wallerstein's theory is essentially Eurocentric.

The continuous accumulation of capital and the long distance trade in necessities are the essential features of the world system of Wallerstine. The existence a core and periphery is fundamental to it. The core or the centre would be exploiting the periphery.

5. Ibid. p.17.
There are also peripheries which protect the core. There would be changes in the centre-periphery relations. In this context Modelski speaks of 'hegemony and rivalry'.

Hegemony refers to the political and economic supremacy of a centre of accumulation which varies with period of rivalry among other such centres. Samir-Amin speaks of the 'metropolis' and 'tributaries' which are akin to the 'centre' and periphery. A.G. Frank put forward the concept of 'metropolis' and 'Satellite' in the place of metropolis and tributaries.

M.N. Pearson traces the development of this system back to the period before colonialism. Abu Lughod in a critical discussion on Wallerstein's thesis described a 13th century world system which begins in 1250 and ends in 1350 and which is distinct from all such systems. According to her the present world system emerged from what developed in the 13th century Europe.


Middle East, India and China and the "fall of the East preceded the rise of the West". The central regions of this system were Central Asia and Indian Ocean and later the Mediterranean was appended to it. The rise of the West by the 16th century was but a hegemonic shift from East to West and not a new one. Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills stretched the world system back to five thousand years. According to them it existed in the ancient, medieval and modern world. It has been continuing, with of course shifts in hegemony.

The Eurocentric view of Wallerstine suffers from certain basic flaws. it neglects the case of certain societies like the America before colonisation which definitely had a trade system. So also the world system of the Wallerstein centred on U.K. and the U.S.A. cannot hold a candle with the empires like Mongol or Ming. The acceptance of A.D. 1500 as a dividing line is also losing ground. The continued accumulation of capital can be seen much before 15th century, as is highlighted by Elkhome and

14. A.G. Frank and Barry K. Gills, op.cit, pp.81-115
Friedman.\textsuperscript{16} Actually capitalism was global from its very beginning. It is clear that there existed a world economic system much before the 16th century. The characteristics of this system changed through the ages. The concept of world system is to be analysed through a humanocentric view rather than a Eurocentric one.\textsuperscript{17} Then it can be applied to older empires and regional economies. Orientalism provides an alternative approach to Eurocentrism.\textsuperscript{18} The traditional view that the Indian ocean trade network developed only with the advent of European naval powers has been subject to several critical analysis. Re-examining the Eurocentric theory recent studies have concluded that the Indian ocean trade network was well knit long before the advent of European powers. Kerala was a link in this system.

On the one hand Kerala was part of a world system that connected together the various littoral states of Indian ocean. At the same time there developed a regional economy and culture that could be compared with any of the existing system in other regions. These are facts that

\textsuperscript{16} Elkhom and Friedman, "Capital Imperialism and Exploitation in Ancient World System", \textit{Ibid.}, pp.59-81.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, p.11

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, p.12
often go neglected in a grand narrative. Medieval trade of Kerala is to be viewed from two angles, one within its regional boundaries and other as a link in a wider economic world. The former part has been analysed in the foregoing chapters whereas the latter will be discussed in this chapter.

We cannot find a single maritime tradition for the entire Indian Ocean region. Instead there are a series of local traditions and histories of local technologies, each suited to a particular maritime environment and set of human needs. Medieval Kerala is an example to this.

The hallmark of Kerala's trade history is a seaward orientation resulting from her extensive coastline and peculiar sea board features. As cited earlier the geographical location of Kerala brought her within the ambit of monsoon winds which set the rhythm of Indian Ocean trade. More than any political and social factors, the oceanic trade of Kerala was determined by what Braudel styled as the *longue durée*. The peculiarities

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20. For details of the geographical peculiarities of Kerala see chap. II

Map 12: THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE WORLD

both in climatic conditions and the geographical factors of the region resulted in the growth of rarities in her resources and they in turn enriched trade, both internal and overseas. The Arabs and Chinese, the important trade partners of medieval Kerala had extensive trade relations. With the rise of Islam trade got great stimulus as the religion was favourably disposed towards trade. The Jews, Christians and Muslims who came for trade to Malabar coast connected Kerala economy with the international trade network.

With the formation of Abbassid Caliphate in the 9th century the Arab trade gathered momentum which affected Kerala also. Along with the development of this trade Kerala coast was studded with the settlements of traders. These settlements were due to commercial and climatic compulsions. Traders had to wait for favourable winds or stay in the port for collecting cargoes. In the wake of the south west monsoon traders from the West would come to the western ports of India. As they were unable to reach Malacca and Canton in a single monsoon, they were forced to stay along Malabar coast and thus the region became a stopover for the merchants from the west. This

22. See note No. 17 in chap. III and note No. 220 in chap. IV.
along with other factors made the ports of Malabar entrepots in the East-West Trade.

The Jews who were famous for their intercontinental trade relations had made their settlements in the important trading centres of Kerala. In the early medieval period their trade covered a vast area between Europe and China. In the 12th and 13th centuries the main commercial activities of the Jews were between Egypt and Malabar coast. And through these Jews the goods Malabar got wider markets. The letters written by a Jewish merchant chief at Aden to his counterpart at Malabar reveal the systematic trade of the Jews and give pointers to the nature of the prevailing trade in the Indian ocean region. In all the transactions money, the mālioki dinār was used. The way in which the Jews kept accounts and calculated freight charges and the like reminds one of the mechanism of modern export trade.

The Eurocentric view integrates Indian Ocean trade with the world system only with the advent of European capitalism. That is to say till the development

23. For details of Jewish traders, see notes on the trading communities in Chap. III

of Western capitalism Indian ocean trade was rather isolated. But recent studies show that the Indian ocean trade network was well organised long before the emergence of European capitalism. How Kerala was linked with the Indian Ocean trade scenario can be gleaned from the following grounds.

To understand the maritime trade system of Indian ocean is to know how the bulk of the pre-modern societies in littoral regions of Indian ocean were integrated into a unique world. The accounts of medieval travellers on South India reveal facts on oceanic trade system extending from Red sea to the China sea which was linked with eastern Mediterranean. The centres of this oceanic trade system were Venice, Alexandria, Hormuz, Aden, Cambay, Kollam, Kozhikode, Malacca, Canton and the like port towns.

These maritime cities had links among them closer than the centres of their political power. The spice importing ports of Aden, Jiddah and Hormuz were situated at the outlet of land routes through which the products of Middle East and Mediterranean were carried by caravans.

Through these ports they could be carried to overseas countries. The vigorous activities of the international traders of Asia was facilitated by the establishment of powerful governments in contemporary China, Indo-China, Burma, South Indian states and Egypt. These traders focussed on the two ends of Asia—Mediterranean in the west and China in the east. According to Fernand Braudel the Italian cities of Venice, Genoa and Florence formed the centre of economic life in the fifteenth century Mediterranean. K.N. Choudhuri extended this ideal of world economy to the Indian ocean. He affirms that the whole of Indian ocean and eastern Mediterranean was held together by the urban gravities of Malacca, Calicut, Cairo and Alexandria. For nearly 300 years from the end of the seventh century the Middle East, South Mediterranean and the ports of Western Indian ocean constituted an area of political, economic and cultural unification which shared some of the core periphery relations of a world


system. A chain of oceanic and caravan trade that stretched all the way from Indian ocean to the straits of Gibraltar supplied the practical means of binding local production in the trans-oceanic system of distribution and consumption.

In the absence of modern technological devices voyages were strenuous and risky. And as it was very difficult to touch all these centres in a single stretch, the commercial voyages were split into various sections. Usually merchant ships from Hormuz and Aden travelled upto the Malabar coast. Merchants from Siam and Malaya continued the trade from Malaya to China. Thus the trade arc was completed. This trade network was dependent on international co-operation. Merchants worked beyond political considerations. The establishment of powerful governments in the various littoral states of Asia had its impact on Indian ocean trade, especially on the trade at Malabar. The development of the Caliphate and the consequent strengthening of East West trade dominated by Islamic traders, the establishment of the Yuan dynasty and the unprecedented development of Chinese trade under this

30. Ibid. p.385
government, all had been stimulus to the oceanic trade of Asia. There were powerful merchant families which dominated the trade of a region like the Kārīmī merchants of Egypt, in the 12th and 13th centuries. 32

These Kārīmī merchants specialised in spice trade and were known as merchants of pepper and spices. They purchased these goods from Yemen to where they were transhipped by the merchants of Malabar coast. From Cairo or Alexandria these articles were sold to the merchants from Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Marseilles or Barcelona. 33 Thus 'commodities were transported over a surprisingly long distance, some times traversing the whole breadth of Eurasian continent'. 34 The Kārīmī merchants were members of a powerful mercantile corporation dedicated to spice trade namely Genossenschaft and under this organisation a trade network functioned very actively connecting Europe on the one hand and Aden and Malabar coast on the other. In the early decades of the 15th century the government of Egypt put effective control on these merchants and this led to their decline. But they continued their trade

33. Ibid. pp.161-165
34. Meera Mary Abraham, Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India, Delhi, 1988, p.6.
until the discovery of the Cape route by the Portuguese and the establishment Portuguese power over the major ports of Malabar. In supplying Egypt and Europe the products of the East especially the pepper of Malabar the Kārīmi merchants played the role similar to those of the Portuguese, the French and the English East India companies in later centuries. Indeed they were the forerunners of these European naval powers in the East-West trade.35

By the beginning of the 14th and 15th century Malabar became the focal point in pepper trade. We have seen how trade in the Malabar coast was focussed mainly on Kollam, Kochi, Kodungallur, Kozhikode and Pantalayani Kollam and other exchange centres. These towns were flourishing local trade centres having the infrastructure for overseas trade. Even in the 9th century the port town of Kollam was a brisk trading centre with all facilities for foreign trade.36 Regarding the overseas trade of Kollam Marco Polo records thus: "The merchants from Manzi and from Arabia and from the Levant come tither with their

35. Walter J. Fischel, op. cit, pp. 170-75

36. See section on Kollam, Kodungallur and Panthalayani Kollam in chap.III and IV.
ships and their merchandise and make great profits by what they import and by what they export.\(^{37}\)

By the beginning of the 15th century Kozhikode had developed into a great emporium of international trade. Foreign traders could be seen there in all diversity. The traders were not only from Arabia and Persia, but also from Syria, Egypt, East Indies and China. Foreign traders and their merchandise were safe at Kozhikode. This feature is all the more important when we consider the fact that pirates were very active in a number of ports along west coast.\(^{38}\) The security of her waters as well as the efficient facilities for trade attracted foreign trades to Kozhikode. Wealthy merchants and ship owners linked Kozhikode with other trading centres of Indian ocean. Ibn Battuta makes special reference to a wealthy merchant ship owner who possessed many ships that were sent to different parts of the subcontinent and also to China and Yemen.\(^{39}\) Like Kollam, Kozhikode was famous for its trade with China. Its port was so large as to hold the massive Chinese fleet.\(^{40}\) These

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38. Genevieve Bouchon and Denys Lambard, *op.cit* pp. 59-60.
40. Ibid.
foreign ships could winter at the near by port of Pantalayani Kollam which was safe from the travails of weather.

The Chinese annals reveal the brisk trade at the port of Kozhikode, especially the trade in pepper. The Chinese travellers refer to the fine quality horses imported to Kozhikode.

The spice traders at Kozhikode insisted on payments in gold and silver. Egyptian dinars and Venetian ducats, the standard coins of the period in international trade, were in circulation at Kozhikode. In the beginning of the 16th century Varthema speaks of the money changers and brokers at Kozhikode. The very presence of these money changers and brokers indicate a brisk trade involving foreign peoples and foreign currencies. Abdr Razzak testifies to the goods brought from Zindbad and Zainsibar to Kozhikode. From Kozhikode vessels

41. See the section on Chinese trade at Kozhikode in chapter IV. Also see Note Nos. 60 to 65 in chap. IV.
42. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, op.cit, pp. 294-98
43. G.R. Crone, op.cit. p.25
continuously sailed for Mecca. The quantum of trade between China and Malabar is evident from the fact that Kollam and Panthalayani Kollam were among the trading centres to where the export of precious metals from China was banned by the Chinese government in the 13th century.

There was a colony of South Indians at Quanchow (Zaitun) which formed the Indian diaspora in China. In the light of the naval expeditions of Cheng Ho and the diplomatic exchanges between the China and the trading centres of Kerala, one is inclined to believe that there were traders from Malabar also in that settlement. The abundance of pottery and pot sherds found along the coast of Malabar is a brilliant testimony to the trade with China. But when the world economic system of medeval period is evaluated the trade between Malabar and China seems to have been neglected.


Barbosa testifies to the brisk trade between Kozhikode and the west in the beginning of the 16th century. Every year ten to fifteen ships sailed to Red sea, Aden and Venice from Kozhikode. The goods carried by these ships included spices, items of clothing, metals etc.

The trading centre of Kochi, by the mid-fifteenth century further exposed the Malabar coast to the overseas trade. Kochi had powerful merchant families with wide connections in the inter Asian trade. One such family was that of the Mamale Marakkar who had well established trade connections with the East Indies. In the beginning of the 16th century, this merchant used to supply pepper to the Portuguese in large quantities in return for copper. By the closing decade of the 15th century trade at Kochi was comparable with that of Lisbon. All these reveal that before the advent of the Portuguese Kochi had developed into a brisk overseas trading centre. The trading centres of Kerala had been well acquainted with the West and the westerners knew about the facilities and prospects of trade in these centres.


50. M.L. Dames, op.cit. p.93.
The functioning of the port towns of Kollam, Kodungallur, Kozhikode and Panthalayani Kollam shows that they were core areas fed by their hinterlands which were like peripheries. In Kerala we cannot find an overarching core exploiting the periphery. Instead there are a number of cores and peripheries.

That trade developed connecting different centres over such a distance from Aidhab to Canton was facilitated by the institutionalisation of trade. During the period under review powerful merchant organisations having intra and international trade connections developed in various parts of South India. The Anuvannam and Manigrāmam and the like mercantile associations were active in the exchange system of Kerala. The Manigrāmam had special interest in foreign trade. The Takuapa Manigrāmam inscription gives a clue to the fact that these organisations sent their members to distant countries to establish overseas trading stations. Among the goods transacted by the Ayyavole guild in international trade there were articles which were the monopoly of Kerala.

51. See the section on merchant organisations in chap. III

52. EI, XVII. p.71.

53. Meera Mary Abraham, Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India, pp. 156-175.
The Valaṇcīārs, functioning in the trading centres of Kerala were seaborne traders. All these mercantile organisations were very active in Kerala from 9th to 14th century, connecting each exchange centre and port town with the Indian ocean trade. Political boundaries were no impediment to them.

The medieval overseas trade of Kerala and the advent of foreign traders to the exchange centres are reflected in indigenous literary works. There are references to foreign ships that call at the ports. In the market places described in the Manipravāla kāvyās there are traders from different countries.

Overseas trade in Kerala was facilitated by the formation of trading diasporas along her coast. The secular functions of these Jewish, Christian and Islamic diasporas were to be brokers in the trade between their host country and the traders coming from their own homeland. These diasporas were effective institutional arrangements for cross cultural trade. Their commercial functions resemble those of a Wakil al tujjār of Muslim

54. Unnunīli Sandēśam, part I, v. 70, p. 70.
55. Unṇiāti Caritam, gadyam, 19 and Unnunīli Sandēśam, part I, ślokas, 80-85. See Note no. 38 in chap. IV.
Mediterranean and the commission agents under the English East India company. The very formation of these diasporas testifies to the age old overseas and over land trade. It is to be noted that the settlements of foreign traders along the Malabar coast have been typical of the trade and cultural diasporas.

Malabar ports were the entrepots for the trade in horses which was very significant in the inter-Asian trade system. Kulamukku and Kannur were centres of the lucrative horse trade. Thousands of fine quality horses were imported to the ports of Malabar from the trading centres of Red Sea, especially Hormuz. The ruling powers of the Deccan especially Vijayanagar obtained horses from Kannur and this trade thus had political significance also. It was because of the great economic and political significance of this trade that the Portuguese wanted to monopolise the same trade. With the capture of Hormuz and Goa the Portuguese managed to monopolise the horse trade. They shifted the centres of this trade from Kannur to Goa. The Portuguese could get the support of the Vijayanagar rulers mainly because the former was the suppliers of horses to them. The horse trade gives a

57. See the section on horse trade in chap. IV.
classical example as to how the Portuguese destroyed a flourishing indigenous trade for their own commercial progress. Here we recall Abu Lughod "the fall of the East preceded the rise of the West".\textsuperscript{58} Here what we see is not a creation or a development of a new trade by the Portuguese but a shifting of a centre - a shifting of hegemony. The rise of the European traders in the East was at the expense of the native traders.

The traditional belief is that luxury items formed the bulk of the commodities exported from Kerala. But from the 12th century there was a change in the nature of commodities traded and in the quantum of trade. Necessaries like pepper for mass consumption, iron, copper, and the like became important.\textsuperscript{59} Marco Polo lists copper in ballast, silk, porcelain etc. among the goods imported from China to the Malabar coast. Among the goods exported from Kozhikode there was a fine variety of cotton called the bukram.\textsuperscript{60} Horse which was an essential commodity was among the items of import from Arabia to Kerala. That goods like iron, brass etc. were exported by

\textsuperscript{58} See note No. 12 above

\textsuperscript{59} Basil Gray, 'Export of Chinese Porcelain to India', \textit{TOCS} No. 36, pp. 24-25.

\textsuperscript{60} K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (ed), \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 83-84.
the Jews from Kerala to Aden is well attested by some of the Geniza letters. But for a long time the export of iron from Malabar coast went unnoticed. Jews also transacted in the vessels from Malabar.61

Overseas trade of Kerala had direct impact on the production of necessities in side the region. This is best evident from the import of copper from the East by the Chinese and from the West by the Jews. The traditional metal smiths of Kerala were depended on this item of external trade. Here an external origin of internal trade can be seen. Polanyi says that the acquisition of goods from a distance may be practiced either because of status motive or profit motive.62 The Jewish sources show that in Kerala the transactions in copper and iron were out of profit motive. Thus the trade in high bulk necessities, a characteristic feature of the modern world system was common in Kerala.

Thus the trading centres of Kerala were well acquainted with the West even before the advent of the Portuguese. Gama has made references to the Tunisian merchants who spoke Castilian and Genoise and the Jews who


spoke Venitian and German at Kozhikode.\footnote{M.N. Pearson, \textit{The New Cambridge History of India, The Portuguese in India}, Delhi, 1990, pp.12-13.} Actually in the intra Asian trade the Portuguese were one among many. They had to engage in this in order to have the purchasing power for the goods from Kerala.\footnote{Andre Gunder Frank, \textit{World Accumulation (1492-1789)}, London, 1978, p.37.} They accommodated themselves in this system 'forming new diaspora that operated along with the old one, using the same commercial technique'.\footnote{Georgia Borsa, 'Recent Trends in Indian Ocean Historiography', \textit{Trade and Politics in Indian Ocean}, Delhi, 1990, p.8.}

The above analysis reveals that the trade of Kerala during the period under discussion was not confined to luxury items only. Instead it centred around a wide variety of articles and embraced the entire region from China to Mediterranean. Trade of Kerala was quite comprehensive both in its scope and subject matter. Marco Polo testifies to the large number of ships at Zaitun, bound for Malabar coast\footnote{Nilakanta Sastri, \textit{op.cit.} pp.83-85} and Ibn Battuta speaks of the Chinese ships lying anchored at the port of Kozhikode.\footnote{Mahdhi Hussain, \textit{op.cit.} pp. 188-189.} More convincing is the fact that the five signatories of

the TPCP belonged to different regions of West Asia. All these reveal the truth that the trade and commerce of Medieval Kerala was conducted on a broad spectrum and it would be a terrible injustice to reduce it to a narrow canvas like 'isolated' and confining to high priced, low bulk commodities. Actually the trade and commerce of Medieval Kerala was on commodities ranging from necessaries to luxury items.

According to Wallerestine in the 12th century the eastern hemisphere contained a number of empires and small worlds and the Indian Ocean Red Sea complex formed one such world. But the very fact that medieval Kerala had a brisk trade with China breaks the notion of such isolation.

The Indian Ocean trade of Kerala was not based on stereo type. Through the centuries there were steady developments in maritime technology, skills and trade. The process was indeed complex. It was not at all a 'monotonous repetition of the same event'.

68. Meera Mary Abraham, Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India, pp. 20-21.
luxury items has been over estimated in connection with the medieval trade of Kerala. By the 14th century pepper had become a necessary commodity meant for mass consumption in Europe and shipments of pepper came from the Malabar coast. This increased demand was in response to the increase in population and wealth.

In the 16th century the Portuguese also traded in very same articles as in the 15th century, as noted by Varthema. There was only an increase in the quantum of trade. And the basis of Portuguese trade in Kerala was their intimate collaboration with the native merchants who had well established connections with the countries of the West and East. Till the advent of the Portuguese there was a near absence of documentation with regard to trade. It may be this absence of documentation which made historians minimise the Indian Ocean trade of medieval Kerala. In the 18th century the British built up a well knit commercial net work in the Indian ocean. It was not only because of their capital and technology but because of the use of force. It is simplistic to discard a

71. K.S. Mathew, *op.cit.*

historical process because it is non-European. All reconstructions of history with preconceived concepts are "dangerous and misleading". Here is the relevance of Edward Said's warning that the non-European world should not be viewed negatively.

74. Edward Said, op.cit.