

A historical analysis of Christian traders as progenitors of early medieval economic merchandise in Kerala

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Introduction

India had been a hub of trading activity right from the Indus times and was a preferred destination for traders within and outside the continent. The most pertinent question that broods any historian is the role played by trade in building a community especially its role promoting various forms of mercantile activities in a region. India throughout its annals of times witnessed many such communities coming in either as traders or as colonisers and establishing their settlements in India. The story of many nations of Asia also appears to be the same with India being the core and focal point of such activities. Historical narrations may show considerable interest in such mercantile involvements because no community or no ethnographic entity can ever remain hostile or closed to such development which itself earmarks the beginning of new civilizations.

Maritime trade was a full fledged affair in the world merchandise map between Indian subcontinent and other Asian as well as European countries. All we can say is that the arrival of Christianity was the by-product of this long enduring trade which was happening. India was to the outside world known for its quality goods especially spices and exotic goods. Indian economic centres were well connected with the outside world both via land routes and sea routes. The Indus –Euphrates route and red sea route was the main routes which was operated by the traders for their economic exchange. It was Hippalus a Greek sailor discovered a sea route from red sea to India crossing Indian Ocean which was a huge discovery which changed the very cause of Indian Ocean trade maritime trade was flourished during this time¹. The author of the Periplus has testified the presence of roman traders in India and high volume of trade that happened during that time². By 3rd century the Western Roman Empire fell and the trade monopoly goes into the hands of Arab merchants. These traders came to kodungallore which was the main port centre at that period. Europeans got the Indian goods from mesopotamia. so these Arab, Egyptian merchants groups form a caravan or middle men between the Indian good and European or roman merchants. Pepper was the main item of trade as it was in a greater need to preserve the meat for the winter, around 1000 tonnes of pepper was in need for Europe for the whole year Mesopotamian traders sell these goods to Europe for double the price³. Trade with Antioch and Edessa was much more familiar for India. This trade route was testified by Mar Aphrem in his hymns that by 4th c mortal remains of St Thomas was brought back to Edessa⁴. COSMOS also written for the first time that he had witnessed the presence of Christians in Kerala, he called Kerala as Malay⁵. Antioch was the finishing point to silk route which brought goods from china and India to the west⁶. The Silk Road connected to India also passed through Edessa with which Antioch was an important centre of early Christianity. Megasthenes also points out the flourishing trade.

1. LW BROWN ,the Indian Christians of st Thomas,1956, p 59,Kunjunjukutty yohannan, using the heritage of the st thomas Christians to develop an outreach strategy, Andrews university
2. Schoff and Warmington , the commerce between roman empire and india pp145-272,the periplus of erthraean sea.
3. adamson and melitta Weiss, food in medieval times, west port , green wood press, p-65
4. 1001 hymns of mar aphrem, Oxford University press.
5. Velayudan panikkassery , Sancharikal kanda keralam,p-53
6. William Dalrymple,From the holy mountain a journey among the Christians of middle east p66

Ferguson also explain that there were diplomatic exchanges between India and Rome⁷. Pearls silk ivory pepper were the main items of export and tin lead, gold and silver, wine, glass, coral etc, were the import items⁸. Pliny the author

of periplus of erythrean sea and Plotomy also gives vivid account on the trade in the Indian ocean. Ships travelled from Mesopotamia and Egypt via red sea to Malabar every year. More than 100 cargo ships were coming annually. So technically coming of Christians or St Thomas itself is not a bigger technical or practical issue at that point of time. So it is said that gospel travelled to Rome using the land route and to India via sea route⁹. It was said that St Thomas preached the good news (gospel) to a Jew community who were already settled in Kodungallore Prof Mathias Mundadan is of the opinion that St Thomas established the first church in these Jewish colonies¹⁰. Kp Padmanabha Menon in his book argue that the first Jews who arrived on the Malabar coast came in Solomon's fleet of merchants¹¹. Jewish immigration of AD 68 to Kerala was the direct effect of early commercial contact with Israel¹². In honour of their trade Cheraman Perumal gave possession to the land and it was recorded in the Jewish copper plate or 'Jootha shasanam'. The head of the 'Anjuvana' was given the title of prince and thus considered him as the King of the kingdom of Kodungallore

Essenians and other Jews came to Muziris in AD68 and settled in Palayur, Chathukulangara. Manimeghalai the Tamil epic also says the presence of Essenians in Kancheepuram¹³. The major event happened in 345AD with the coming of Thomas of cana and seventy two other families to Kodungallur. The King of Kodungallur welcomed them by giving land and other facilities required for trade. In 379 AD Bhaskara Ravi Varman granted copper plates to these Christian Jews. Joseph Rabban, the leader of the group was uplifted to the position of a noble giving him the full jurisdiction in his land. KP Padmanabha Menon points to their attainment of power, wealth and prosperity in this land. The Syrian Christians occupied high social ranking in the society¹⁴.

7 encyclopaedia of early Christianity, Ferguson New York, pp570-571, 1990

8 Gillman and Klim Kiet, Christians in Asia before 1500, 1999, googlebooks.co.in

9 Peter J Frost, ancient trade routes and mission of the apostle Thomas in India, 2010, p-7

10 a Matthias mundadan, history of Christianity in India vol-1, p-19

11 k p padmanabha menon, history of kerala vol1, p 298

12 a sreedhara Menon, survey of kerala history, p-20

13 p v Mathew, sughandhanadu nasrani charithram, pp-57-58

14 k p padmanabha menon, history of kerala vol-2, p-5

In AD800 the king of Kollam granted these Persian Christians with copper plates grand. Prof Mundadan says to keep the status on par with the high caste Hindus the Christians accepted the caste hierarchy and never questioned the validity of the system and evils of the slavery¹⁵. LW Brown pointed out that they never try to cooperate lower class people or others to the faith of the church. So these Christians took advantage in their status given by the rulers and maintained like higher class Hindus in the society. The Christians had an important role in the trade with other western Asian countries. Stories attributed Mar Sapor to be the founder of the city of Quilon¹⁶. Vasco da Gama in his memoir writes that Calicut was inhabited by Christians¹⁷

Prof Malekandathil also points to the fact that the rulers gave these privileges to Christian traders because of their link and contacts with west Asian trade and thus gave autonomy to regulate their community affairs and customs¹⁸.

Marignolly writes that the pepper gardens of Malabar were owned by St. Thomas Christians he further testified that these Christians were given the charge of public distribution and weighing office¹⁹. Barbosa also writes on the penetration of Christian churches into the interiors of Malabar especially to the hilly region. When we analyse the trade route between Persian Gulf and China port, India was considered as a land of sojourn for these maritime traders for rest and trade as the monsoons in Indian Ocean is a villain for the journey. Indian coast became a fulcrum point to meet the west and east coast. The items of procurement has been identified in these areas and further more trade has been happening here. The economic importance of trade, production of goods export and import became a daily basis process. The Indian markets began to produce goods on these trade demands.

15 am mundandan, Indian Christians search for identity and struggle for autonomy, Bangalore p-19

16 Abraham Meera, two medieval merchants' guilds of south India, p-27, delhi-1998

17 ravenstein, a journal of the first voyage of vascodagama 1497-1499, p49, Asian educational services

18 pius malekandathil, coastal polity and changing port hierarchy of Kerala. P-78, ed Yogesh sharma, coastal histories ;social and ecology in premodern India Delhi 2013

19 velayudhan panikkassery , sancharikal kanda keralam,p-176

The rulers of the land gave privileges to the immigrant traders for the economic prosperity and for their personal political stability. The markets began to grow in these places, more and more traders began to migrate and establish settlements on these trade points or trading centres. The Quilon plate of Mar Sapor and Mar Prod was such an example of economic privileges from AY kingdom to the Persians these grands indirectly helped in spreading Christianity and directly to the economic prosperity of the land, thus Christian merchants evolved out to be a strong hold people in wealth and social status. These linkages helped them in maritime trade and hinder land trade. It is said that these Jews and Christians had a military group of their own to protect their wealth family and church. When we talk on the socio economic significance of these Christian traders in early medieval India the Tarisapally copper plates had a significant role to play. The Persian merchants Mar Sapor and Mar Prod built a church in Kollam for their prayer activities and later it became the most important centre of social, economic and cultural life of people lived around. The Christian merchants of Kollam and the Tarisapally were the custodian of weights and measures. Later these privileges were handed over to the church and made it as the custodian of a company to ensure the unification and honesty in their trade.

The chera feudal lord presented forty three Ezhava families, four vellalals, one thatchan and one vannan family to the church and also given the right to collect the taxes from them²⁰. The church was given permission to collect money from Quilon market the vaniyom and kasu were collected by the tarisapally²¹. The merchant's guilds such as Arunnoottuar, Manigramam and Anjuvannan were entrusted with the protection of tarisapally²². They were given their duties to enquire into to the matters of dispute and to fix the problems on the question of the grands of Church.

Anjuvannan was basically a Jewish merchant guild while Manigramam belonged to Christian traders²³. The guild became strong trading company among the Christian traders and for maritime as well as inland trade²⁴. These trading activities were testified by Nestorian annals as well as Indian literary sources.

The inland trade was not going smoothly in Kerala so the rulers knew the fact that by keeping these Christian traders in favour for their trade activities only for the personal profits to acquire power because the feudalisation and its effects were started to affect the society²⁵. The trading activities were controlled by the cholas in south east asia and in kerala or the western coast it was controlled by the cheras. manigramam and anjuvanam were the trumb cards for the cheras to cop up with the cholas. The development of the port city of kollam was an important turning point in the course of the trading activities in kerala. The Christian migrants to India as well as the missionaries have a good knowledge on the Indian Ocean trade that is the trade between Persian Gulf, Red sea and Levant regions. Mar Abraham, Christian monk Cosmas etc. had a clear cut understanding on the sea trade routes and markets²⁶. The frequent war between the Chera and Pandiyan kingdoms and seizing the Vizinjam port by the pandyas made the AY kingdom to look for another port to continue their economic negotiations²⁷. This led to the development of Quilon port for gathering the income from the trade and for the political progress and stability for the chera kingdom. By 11th century the activities of the merchant guilds began to decline and the maritime activities were taken over by Muslims and they started to continue with the works into the interior lands. These guild were supported by the local temples in return they were given donation. Gradually the Christian traders and other Christians lost their power. The trade extension into the inland made them more close to their Hindu counterparts. Daniel KN write that the Manigramam nairs of Quilon were the Christian converts thus economic stability directly links with the religious status people move out from one religion to another on the basis of economic prosperity and vice versa²⁸.

20 t a Gopinath Rao, Travancore archaeological series vol-2 pp63-71

21 ibid pp-63-70.

22 ibid pp-67-71.

23 MGS Narayanan ,Perumal's of kerala,p-155

24 pius malekandathil,Christians and cultural shaping of india in the 1st millieunem,journal of st Thomas Christians vol -17, no1 p-10

25 rajan gurukkal , the kerala temple and early medieval agrarian system .1992

26 priyatosh sharma, Christian traders in maritime world of Kerala c1000-1300ce some reflections, ijrss 2019, vol-19, issue -2 page-4

27mgs Narayanan, cultural symbiosis in Kerala tvn pp-32-33

28 daniel kn, the anchuvanam and the manigramam of the Kottayam plates of tanu iravi of the jews and the Christians of Malabar, p-261, 1924

While we look into the trade and commerce of medieval period we come across the conclusion that Indian ports were highly developed in terms of export import processing of goods and grabbing markets. And also a highly sophisticated step towards urbanization. Ranbir Chakravarthy says early Indian urban centres can be characterized as agro cities²⁹.

In the beginning of the ninth century the concept of nagaram or cites came up in Kollam, Panthalayani Kollam etc. The perumals of mahodayapuram and the second chera kingdom understands the possibilities of these cities and have taken several steps to develop these so that directly they were funding and getting back the surplus from the trading corporation. The development of nagaram and processing up of angadis or market made society into more engaged way of economic surplus. New ports make way for new wayfarer's foreign traders and geographers. Demand for more goods accelerated full time trade. Commercial crops from the mainland was connected with these ports. Riverline routes, ghat routes got revamped and trade began to start in these routes thus trade played as a catalyst for accelerating urbanization.

New economic centers like Kodungallur, Koyilandi, Madayi, Mathilakam, Thazhakadu kudavoor, Calicut the great Cochin began to grow. With the development of markets the foreign Christian traders were carrying out the maritime trade while the Indian counterparts began to spice production especially pepper in the forest regions. The networks began to grow stronger in terms of production quality of goods and exchange. Local markets began to form around the churches which was indirectly mediating the trade between maritime trade and hinterland. Cities and urban centres began to develop around these churches. The economic identity of the Christians as traders was preserved and maintained in the inland Christian settlements with the development of angadis or local markets³⁰.

The merchant guild started to expand to other places. The tazhekadu church inscription of 1024 AD is one such example of giving privileges on Christian traders in Inland trade. The Christian traders like chathan vadakkan and Iravi chatan the members of the Manigramam were given the privileges by king Rajasimhan³¹.

In central Kerala, the local markets were connected with Kodungallur, Kayamkulam, Kollam and Cochin by the end of 1490's. Another merchant guild named Korran or Kurran came up in Cochin which was referred in Alberque's diary. In 1502 the queen of Quilon sent a Christian merchant as emissary to invite Vasco D Gama. The

notable names of Christian merchants at that period was Matihias in Quilon and Tharakan Thomas in Kayamkulam, from whom the Portuguese took their pepper. With the coming of Portuguese Christian merchants began to act like middle men between the Inland traders and Portuguese. They played as emissaries or ambassador to invite the Portuguese to the Quilon port, with the arrival of the Portuguese the trade had been taken over by them. Thus the Christian traders began to focus more on spice production in the interior land. Beginning of the 10th century witnessed more Christian traders into the hinterland with spice farms and production units. They established new churches in their surroundings most of these churches were in the central parts of Kerala that is modern Pathnamthitta, Kottayam, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Allapetty.

29 ranbir Chakravarty, trade and traders in early Indian society, p-15

30 Pius Malekandathil, Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, pp.50-80

31 a sreedhara menon kerala charithram, p135

These churches and trading centres were along the resourceful soil and nearby rivers and lakes. This spice producing Christian communities were testified by Bishop Marignoli as he writes the Christian were people rich and pepper producers³². Portuguese documents also testify about the spice production of Christian merchants. These merchants were also trained fighters for the King and have their own Kalaris. One such Christian panicker was Vallikadu Panicker and his Kalari was at the banks of Muvattupuzha³³. These Christian forces also held the Portuguese in their later land accusations. The pre Portuguese inland trade with Madurai was initiated by the St. Thomas merchants. Churches especially Kothamangalam, Mudalakudam, Aruvithara, Kanjirapally etc were established on the interiors of forest which were considered to be the trade routes connecting the central Kerala and Tamil nadu. There were ghat routes which also connects Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Christian merchants were the producers as well as the traders. The church benefitted from the profit they got from trading. The pepper trade with Madurai and Din Digul were pre dominant trade routes of that period.

In 1613 Jesuit Robert De Nobili travelled in these routes to reach Cochin from Madurai. The St. Thomas Christians as well as the Ravuthars of Madurai had a full-fledged trade links in these ghat routes, which marked smooth flow of pepper from interiors of Kerala to Tamil Nadu³⁴. The inland spice production prior to Portuguese period was majorly concentrated in the ghat routes began to continue in Portuguese period too. When the Portuguese began to interfere in the religious matters of these Christians, they began to concentrate on the ghat route trade and it flourished even more. As the spice production was mostly under the control of these Christians they started tricking the Portuguese by not giving the goods as an opposition to their religious policies. This further accentuated more trouble in the region and played a pivotal role in re-aligning the course of history by triggering incidents like the Oath of the Coonan Cross and the Orthodox schism and the reunification of the Orthodox and the Catholic factions etc. Here we are peculiarly tracking down how mercantile and trading intervention had played an important role in altogether reshaping the destiny of a community in Kerala.

Concluding Observations

The gaze of a historian becomes incomplete unless he looks into a historical underpinning from various dimensions say economic, social, political, intellectual and cultural. These dimensional points create turns and twists in history and moves it in various trajectories of time. Here also we see how Indian Christianity as a mercantile community and its multifaceted commercial endeavours did play a crucial role in re articulating the history of Kerala. In the new millennium also this process remains relevant though more closely connected with globalization, fragmentation and with the development of various demographic and contextual trends. When we analyse the importance of trade and mercantile activities in Kerala history as well as Indian, the role played by these Christian traders is undeniable.

32 velayudan panikassery, sancharikal kanda keralam, p-176

33 o m Varghese olickal, vazhakulam oru charithra veekshanam, p-37

34 S Rajamanickam, the first oriental scholar, p-37

Pius Malekandathil, Portuguese Cochin, pp54-57, pp-114-116

