



Maritime relations between Kollam and the portuguese – A review

■ H. Adabiya

P.G. Department of History, Iqbal College, Peringammala, Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala) India
(Email : adabiyaiqbal@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

India has an ancient and glorious maritime history and tradition in which the Kerala Coast occupied a position of pride from very early days. The coast of Kerala has a rich and long maritime heritage. The geographical situations and economic resources made this country a great trading and maritime power. Kollam is an important trading town with a well set up Port. It had trading relation with Chinese, Arabs and other oriental world. Kollam is an old sea Port town on the Arabian coast had a sustained commercial reputation from the days of Phoenicians and the Romans. The place was famous for trade in cotton, pepper, ginger, cardamom and other articles of merchandize. Moreover plenty of fish, rice, bananas, fruits and pulses available there. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a trading centre at Kollam. The present paper seeks to analyze the maritime intercourse between Kollam and the Portuguese. The arrival of Vasco Da Gama at Calicut in 1498 brought Kerala into the arena of international politics. Thangasseri in Kollam is one of the earliest settlements of the Portuguese. Certainly, the impact of the early colonizers on Thangasseri is very deep. It brought about far reaching changes in the socio-cultural and religious map of the city. It is true that the arrival of Portuguese made many socio-economic changes in Kerala. The Portuguese policy of establishing their supremacy cannot be confined to trade alone.

INTRODUCTION

India has an ancient and glorious maritime history and tradition in which the Kerala coast occupied a position of pride from very early days. The long coastline and several natural harbours of Kerala facilitated the development of her external trade. It has been acknowledged as an important centre for maritime trade. Kerala had maintained close commercial contact with the great empires of the west from time immemorial. The coastal regions of Kerala had enormous capacity to

produce spices and other agricultural products. The fate and destiny of Kerala was highly influenced by its geography and its exposure to a vast maritime space. The expansion of maritime trade led to the emergence of Port towns in Kerala. The principal trade centers among them like Calicut, Cochin and Kollam or Quilon eventually emerged as the new power centers in the pre-portuguese Kerala. According to Pius Malekandathil, "there existed to inter related phenomenon in the history of Malabar on the one hand, there existed a port hierarchical in which from among the various nodal point along it coast one

Port would emerge and at for a definite period of time as a central port and other would become minor satellite ports revolving round these principles and pivotal ports, thus, the prime and pivotal position occupied in the ancient period by Muziris was taken over by Quilon in the early period which later was assumed by Calicut and later by Kochi.² The advent of the Europeans in the Indian Ocean let down the peaceful maritime enterprise of the people of the land and opened the coastal area for trade and commerce. Thus, the coastal strip of Kerala that enjoyed far flung trade contacts with distant lands through ages came under their influence and exploitation.

Kollam or Quilon was a major trading centre on the coast of Kerala from the remote past and has a long drawing attraction worldwide.³ Kollam was one of the most famous trade hubs in India during AD 800-1800 period. It was unique in many ways, blessed with a port which served the country's trade needs as well as strategic needs. It provides infrastructural facilities for the countries inland and foreign trade and also serve as inlets and outlets of socio-cultural intercourse with the people of different countries. Kollam has a rich and glorious history of its own. It is an established fact that Kollam was a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial centre. For a long time Kollam was famous as an emporium of the east⁴.

The Kollam port was one of the most important ports in the east-west trade of the Indian Ocean. That importance continued for several centuries. The spices which produced here had great demand in the oriental world. Portuguese expansion in India limited mainly to the coastal regions between Gujarat in the North and Kollam in the South⁵. The Portuguese in fact sought to wipe out the Arab monopoly of trade in the Indian Ocean region. They were the first Europeans who took well-built steps to demolish the harmonious relationships that existed among communities of diverse faiths. They considered the local trading communities especially the Muslims as their enemy and wanted to replace the Muslim merchants from the coast of Kerala⁶. With the advent of the Portuguese the Chinese traders found it impossible to resist the onslaught of the Europeans. They withdrew gradually from Kerala. Though the Arabs remained for some more time. When the European dominance became a reality the century's old Arab-Chinese trade was lost for Kerala.⁷

From the first landing of Vasco Da Gama at Calicut in 1498, the policy of the Portuguese was to maintain an absolute supremacy in Eastern waters. The arrival of

Vasco Da Gama brought Kerala into the arena of international politics. The long history of commercial and economic activities enabled the Portuguese to formulate a concept of mercantile state based on national monarchy by the time they entered Malabar.⁸ The chief aim of mercantilism is to strengthen the state authority itself and to use economic forces for the furtherance of the interests of the state. They occupied territorial dominions on the coast either by force or by diplomacy.⁹ Right from the first decade of the sixteenth century itself the structure and form of the Portuguese State in India was slowly emerging: It was almost like that of a political archipelago with connections hidden beneath the surface.

Portugal maintained trade relations with India mainly in three modes. First, trade was conducted with the conquered areas of the Indian Ocean regions by establishing commercial relations with the local people as vassals with their lords whose revenue for entry and exit belonged to the Crown of Portugal.¹⁰ Secondly, the Portuguese concluded permanent contracts with the local kings and rulers regarding the prices of commodities purchased and sold by the Portuguese as it was done with the kings of Cannanore, Cochin, Kollam and Ceylon. The said contract was only for the supply of spices to the officials of the Portuguese king stationed in his factories in India for the annual fleet going over to Portugal. The commodities other than spices were free to be purchased by the Portuguese privateers and local people at any price mutually agreed upon by the seller and buyer. Thirdly, the Portuguese merchant vessels plied through all the parts of the Indian ocean conforming themselves to the practice of the place and exchanging commodities with the local people at prices agreed among themselves.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a trading centre at Kollam. Ralf Fitch described Kollam as a fort of the Portugals: from whence cometh great store of pepper, which cometh for Portugal: for often times there ladeth one of the caracks of Portugal.¹¹ The Portuguese developed it into a commercial centre of importance.¹² On his second voyage to India, Vasco Da Gama entered into an agreement with the Queen of Kollam in 1502 A.D., by which the Queen agreed to deliver all the pepper in her territories exclusively to the Portuguese and in the same terms as the king of Cochin was supplying.¹³ Kollam was an important Portuguese trading centre at the time of Almeida and Albuquerque. Albuquerque established a commercial depot and a factory at Kollam.¹⁴ He himself visited Kollam and

concluded a treaty according to which the queen agreed to grant all the spices in her territory annually to the Portuguese at prices stipulated. One great cause of the success of Alfonso de Albuquerque at Quilon was that here there were no Moors, or other foreigners with whom the Portuguese were likely to come in to serious competition in the matter of trade.

In 1505 the Portuguese under the cover of subsequent agreement began building a fortress called St. Thomas fort at Thangasseri in Kollam and armed them to fight against the Arab merchant who were obstructing them by all means. This was contrary to the spirit of the agreement already entered in to between the ruler of Kollam and themselves. The people of Kollam and the junior princes of the royal household were against the Portuguese.¹⁵ The new governor Lopo Soares saw the necessity of concluding a new treaty with Kollam Regent Rani on 25th September 1516. Though the relations between the Queen and the Portuguese were friendly after this treaty, the general public in Kollam continued to be hostile to the new comers. The Rani promised to favor and to protect the Christians as heretofore; to pay 500 *bhars* of pepper in three yearly installments; to let the Portuguese have all the pepper and other spices they might require at the same prices as they paid for them at Cochin, and export no drugs or spices without their consent. In case of war with a common enemy, each party agreed to assist the other.¹⁶ No ships from Quilon were to enter the straits of Aden beyond Cape Guardafuy, unless in the service of the Portuguese; and any of the King's subjects, whether natives or Moors, who might desire to become Christians are to be at full liberty to do so. Another treaty on much the same lines as above was subsequently concluded on the 17th November 1520 with the Queen of Quilon in which it was stipulated that all the pepper in the land was to be sold to the King of Portuguese and to nobody else.¹⁷

During 16th century the Portuguese enjoyed a monopoly of pepper trade but by the turn of the century they were ousted from Kerala by their more successful rivals the Dutch. After 150 years of their arrival, the Portuguese had to leave the Malabar Coast because of their avariciousness and rapacity.¹⁸ The remnants of the Portuguese power were wiped out by the Dutch. The strong bondage of cultural relationship between India and the foreign countries were made possible only through oceanic trade. By the end of the 16th century Portuguese

predominance and prestige showed symptoms of gradual waning. Local rulers who were dissatisfied and disgusted with the domineering attitude of the Portuguese welcomed Dutch presence. The advent of the Dutch actually culminated in the growth of rivalry between European powers to establish trade monopoly on Kerala Coast.¹⁹ This was adversely affected not merely on the trading activities on the Kerala Coast, but on the entire process of colonization of East Asia by different European powers.

Thangasseri is one of the earliest settlements of the Portuguese. Certainly, the impact of the early colonizers on Thangasseri is very deep. It brought about far reaching changes in her socio-cultural and religious map of the city. Elements of Western culture are still found among the people of this area in their tongue, dress, behaviour, food habit and even in marriage ceremonies. Even the ecclesiastical architecture of Thangasseri came to be influenced by Portuguese ideas and styles.²⁰ Portuguese techniques of weapons and warfare came to be included. A very significant impact was in its economy where the process of monetization brought about wonders in the economic development of the town. Kollam, from the establishment of the factory and fortress, became a settlement of the Portuguese. The region of Thangassery with the remains of the fortress and other survivals, stands today as a monument to the erstwhile colony of the Portuguese.²¹ The surviving churches built by the Portuguese and the cemetery in ruins as well as the people in Kollam speak for the influence of the Portuguese and their mingling with the local women.

Medieval travelers spoke very high about the linkage between Kollam and the Portuguese. Both Varthema and Barbosa describe Quilon then as a powerful kingdom. Varthema recorded that he found twenty-two Portuguese Christians at Kollam. Barbosa recorded that there are a number of Moors and Christians in the city of Coilum (Kollam).²² Many of the natives of Kollam became Christians and there were twelve-thousand households of Christians scattered among the Heathen. He refers about the churches in the inland country. Marignoli also refers about the St. Thomas Christians of Kollam²³. It is apparent that with the coming of the Portuguese, Kollam's trade rising to wider commercial horizons, by regularly feeding the Cochin-Lisbon mercantile route. Though the Portuguese commercial arrangements demoted Kollam to the status of a feeding satellite Port for Cochin, it also got access to the large bulk of cargo coming from the

Atlantic, particularly copper being brought to Cochin from the Portuguese factory at Antwerp, where it was supplied by the German copper syndicates.²⁴

When the Portuguese assumed political power they issued orders regarding the social life of the people above whom they had control. The local women were asked to dress themselves in such a way that they could easily be distinguished from the Christians.²⁵ The Portuguese influence in Indian life began to go deep into the social life of the people when they started to interfere in the social practices of the Hindus. The Portuguese encouraged the widow marriage. Commercial interests were definitely the prime motivation behind the adventurous navigations undertaken by the Indian and European merchants. But once the contacts with the people of different locations were established it bound to create interactions and the consequent cultural diffusion. The Indian merchants had already established wide ranging contacts with coastal regions of various parts of the world. Besides the Portuguese introduced several American plants into Malabar Coast, such as tapioca, cashew, pineapple, sweet potato, chillies, papaya and maize.²⁶

It is true that the arrival of Portuguese made many socio-economic changes in Kerala. The Portuguese policy of establishing their supremacy cannot be confined to trade alone. They have a strong conviction that they were carrying out a mission of expanding Christianity. They even considered themselves to be carrying out the mission of St. Thomas. But they never treated the converted Christians on par with the European Christians. They were forced to work hard without proper remuneration. The Portuguese who settled down in Indian provinces, considered the new land full of opportunities and unlimited profits. They exploited the opportunity for satisfying the needs like religious and financial. Hindus and Christians of Kerala used to have a cordial relationship and they used to live in the same area. The Portuguese took steps to avoid this by issuing orders that the Hindus should not live among the Christians and they should have separate places for their residences. Moreover, the Portuguese connection helped for the restoration of the lost tradition of long distance Asian maritime trade in the latter half of the sixteenth century, by the private traders operating under the so-called concession system urban life and the flow of more people from the villages to the towns were boosted up by the Portuguese trade. As a result of

Portuguese influence the intermediaries became independent businessmen.

Conclusion:

Kollam is an important trading town with a well set up port. It served as the leading spice market in medieval and modern times. Kollam is a Port town famous for its antiquity. It is an established fact that Kollam was a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial centre. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a trading centre at Kollam. During 16th century the Portuguese enjoyed a monopoly of pepper trade but by the turn of the century they were ousted from Kerala by their more successful rivals the Dutch. After 150 years of their arrival, the Portuguese had to leave the Malabar Coast because of their avariciousness and rapacity. The remnants of the Portuguese power were wiped out by the Dutch. It is true that the maritime intercourse of Portuguese made many socio-economic changes not only in the history of Kollam but also in the history of Kerala. The Portuguese linkage helped for the reinstatement of the lost tradition of long distance Asian maritime trade in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

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