



## Analysing the role of Kollam Port in the maritime intercourse of Kerala

■ H. Adabiya

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

### ARTICLE INFO :

Received : 15.09.2020  
Accepted : 05.11.2020

### KEY WORDS :

Maritime relations, Emporium, Artefacts

### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE :

Adabiya, H. (2020). Analysing the role of Kollam Port in the maritime intercourse of Kerala. *Adv. Res. J. Soc. Sci.*, 11 (2): 87-90, DOI: 10.15740/HAS/ARJSS/11.2/87-90. Copyright © 2020: Hind Agri-Horticultural Society

### ABSTRACT

Kerala had maintained active trade relations with countries of outside world from very ancient time onwards. Among the ancient Port of Kerala, Kollam or Quilon had enjoyed a prominent place from the remote past and has a long drawing attraction worldwide. It is an old sea Port town on the Arabian coast had a sustained commercial reputation from the days of Phoenicians and the Romans. The spices which produced Kollam had great demand in oriental world. Early Christian and Arab travellers spoke very high of Kollam and its commercial significance. The Kollam was one of the most important Ports in the east west trade of the Indian Ocean. The present paper seeks to analyse the space of Kollam in the maritime relations of Kerala. In 2014 the Port trust had discovered thousands of Chinese coins and Stone Age weapons from the Kollam Port, which is revealing the amazing historic background and trade culture of the Port city. This is first time that these much of artefacts are getting from a Port in India. The emergence of antiques from Kollam Port area reveals that Kollam was the most famous Port city in India which served as the business hub of people from China, Middle East, Dutch, Portugal, Brazil and other Eastern Mediterranean Countries. The archaeologists believe that there is an engulfed city in the seabed of current Kollam Port. It is an established fact that Kollam was a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial centre. For a long time and today Kollam was famous as an emporium of the east.

### INTRODUCTION

Kerala was the mysterious land of spices which brought foreign people and cultures to her shores even from the third millennium B.C. Kollam or Quilon was a major trading centre on the coast of Kerala and has a long drawing attraction worldwide. The Arabs, the Assyrians the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Chinese were among the foreign peoples who had contacts with the Kerala coast in the ancient period. Kollam was one of the most important

ports in the east west trade of the Indian Ocean and had brisk trade with almost all other ancient civilizations. That importance continued for several centuries. From the glimpses of travel accounts, it was known as the international capital of spice trade. The spices which produced here had great demand in oriental world. Early Christian and Arab travellers spoke very high of Kollam and its commercial significance. The network of water transportation helps to form a good trading centre. Kollam 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. Kollam 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 inter course 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.<sup>1</sup>

Kollam was the chief destination for the Christian immigrants from Persia in the beginning of the ninth century A D the Arabian coast.<sup>2</sup> Kollam appears in the international trade map only by the ninth century, when it was being frequented as the chief halting centre by the merchants engaged in the long distance trade between Abbasid Persia and T'ang china.<sup>3</sup> It 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 its coast one Port would emerge and at for a definite period of time as a central Port and other would become minor satellite a Port revolving round this principles and pivotal Port, thus, the prime and pivotal position occupied in the ancient period by Muziriz was taken over by Quilon in the early period which later was assumed by Calicut and later by Kochi."

Early Christian and Arab travellers spoke very high of Kollam and its commercial importance.<sup>5</sup> The anonymous writer of the *Periplus of Erythrean Sea* describes the commercial activities at the ports of Muziris (Cranganore), Nelcynda (Niranam), Bacre (Purakkad) and Balita (Varkala) where coir, topaz, precious metals, etc., were exchanged for large quantities of pepper, ginger, ivory, peacocks, apes and other indigenous products.<sup>5</sup> It was at one time a great political and commercial centre. It is not clear as to when exactly the Port of Kollam first came into lime-light. The town of Kollam, according to K.P. Padmanapha Menon, is older than the era (Kollam era) to which it has given a name. Kollam was a flourishing port of the Chera dynasty until the formation of Venad kingdom when it became the capital of the

independent Venad kingdom. The Jewish traveller from Spain, Benjamin of Tudela who travelled in the East between 1159 and 1173 A.D., wrote about the trustworthy nature of the trading community of Kollam.<sup>6</sup>

The Venetian traveller Marco Polo who reached Kerala during the last decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and Ibn-Batuta, the African Arab traveller who came to Kerala in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup>, had given vivid description about the Chinese traders and Chinese ships. Ibn Batuta mentions about these types of Chinese ships that had reached the Kerala coast. "They are Junks, Sou and Kalam. Junks were big ships middle sized one are sou and Kalam were "smaller ships. It is assumed that even during the Ancient times Kerala had commercial links with China.<sup>7</sup> It is believed that Chinese were the first foreign power who maintains direct trade relation with Kollam. The rulers of China and Kollam exchanged Embassies and there was a flourishing Chinese settlement at Kollam.<sup>8</sup> It had diplomatic relations with Kublai Khan, the great Mongol emperor of China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Arab traveller Suleiman who visited Kerala in 851 A.D. had reported about the flourishing trade that existed between Kollam and China. Quilon was, according to Suleiman "the most considerable port in South India at that time."<sup>9</sup> In his opinion the Kollam Port was so wide and deep which had helped the Chinese ship to enter the port without any difficulty. The Chinese ship also going to the Persian Gulf was also stopped for a while at the port of Kollam. Recently Chinese coins and artefacts have been largely obtained from Kollam cargo Port while dredging. The emergence of these artefacts from the sea could be used to establish that Kollam was a rich port city and trade centre of yore. At the same time the Arabs also maintained good trade relation with Kollam.

With the advent of the Portuguese the cordial relationship that had existed at the coastal areas of Kerala was broken and conflicts developed. As the Chinese traders found it impossible to resist the onslaught of the Europeans, they withdrew gradually from Kerala. The Arabs remained there for some more time. When the European dominance became a reality the century's old Arab-Chinese trade was lost for Kerala.<sup>10</sup> The arrival of Vasco Da Gama at Calicut in 1498 brought Kerala into the arena of international politics. With the advent of the Portuguese, the importance of Kollam as a commercial port began to decline. The emergence of Calicut and Cochin as full-fledged natural harbours with depth and

calmness of water might be one of the causes for Kollam's diminishing importance as a port. But the immediate cause for Kollam's deteriorating importance seemed to be the dishonest and treacherous nature of the business dealings of the Portuguese merchants.<sup>11</sup> The abundance of pepper and other spices grown in this country created an unseemly rivalry among the European merchants who came here in quest of these precious commodities.

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. The Portuguese developed it into a commercial centre of importance. On his second voyage to India, Vasco da Gama entered in to 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.<sup>12</sup> Kollam was an important Portuguese trading centre at the time of Almeida and Albuquerque. Albuquerque established a commercial depot and a factory at Kollam.<sup>13</sup> 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.

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.<sup>14</sup> A fight ensued and the Portuguese were defeated. But a contingent of army send by Almeida was able to retrieve the situation for the Portuguese. The new Portuguese governor Lopo Soares saw the necessity of concluding a new treaty with Kollam on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1516.<sup>15</sup> the treaty was concluded with the regent since the ruler was a minor.<sup>16</sup> 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. During 16<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

The leftovers of the Portuguese power were wiped out by the Dutch. The Dutch defeated the Portuguese and it toiled the death knell of the Portuguese political and commercial power and influence. They also considered that their trade would flourish if they could occupy Kollam.<sup>18</sup> They strengthened the fortification of what they called 'Dutch Quilon'. The Dutch had taken possession of Thangasseri after defeating the Portuguese. Captain Nieuhoff was appointed the chief Director of the fort and factory. He arrived on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1662 and gave immediate orders to renovate the old damaged fort of the Portuguese at Thangasseri.<sup>16</sup> The fort at Thangassery was repaired and renovated and the place became the commercial residence and transit camp of Dutch east India company at Kollam.<sup>19</sup> The fort of Thangasseri played a decisive role in controlling the rajas of Kollam and Travancore. After capturing the Kollam fort they obtained monopoly of pepper. The Dutch entered into an agreement with the queen of Kollam in 1664 and the dutch paid an annual gift of honour to the ruler in accordance with the peace signed.<sup>20</sup>

The Dutch were deficient in establishment and money to sustain the possession of trade in the Malabar Coast. They pulled down all the fortifications at Kollam keeping a ghost of the former fort and reducing the number of personnel to the minimum. Mean while the market price of pepper rose owing to the rivalry of the English, French and the Dutch in purchasing huge stocks for their home markets. As a part of this the Dutch tried to en force their contact with different warring princess in the Travancore area like Elayidathu Swarupam (Kottarakkara), Kayamkulam and Chempakassery who were engaged in fights against king Marthanda Varma of Travancore. He adopted a policy of subduing these refractory elements and unifying the whole area in to a powerful kingdom. This made the business in pepper very difficult for the Dutch. This was cause for the beginning of the war between Travancore and the Dutch in 1741 and the Dutch were defeated in the Battle of Kolachal.<sup>21</sup> The Dutch resolved to negotiate for a treaty of peace with Travancore in order to preserve trade. The Dutch tried to enter into negotiations for a contract of peace and on 15 August 1753, a treaty of peace known as the Treaty of Mavelikkara was concluded with the king of Travancore. By this treaty, the Dutch promised not to

stand in the way of Travancore's expansion. This enabled Marthanda Varma to fulfil his ambition of greater Travancore.<sup>22</sup> The Dutch gave him fabulous price and warlike stores both of which enabled him to affect his conquest successfully.

The Dutch however, had to face serious rivalry from the English who ultimately became the most powerful among the European nations trading with India. The English wanted to monopolise for themselves the entire pepper stock of the country at a price which would fetch them enormous profit in the European market. Rivalry of the Dutch, the Danes and the French gave them terrible headache. By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they had become a quasi political force in the Madras Presidency. The English east india company came to Travancore in 1644 and founded their first settlement at Vizhinjam.<sup>23</sup> The English also wanted to crush the monopoly of the Dutch in pepper trade there. The relationship between the English and Travancore was rather passive in the beginning. The formal treaties were concluded between Travancore and the English in 1795 and 1805, according to which the raja accepted the British supremacy. Thus, the maritime trade in the entire Travancore was also under the control of British.<sup>24</sup>

Kollam, is the place which takes the credit for being the hub of the Kerala's foreign trade. It is considered as one of the oldest ports on the Malabar Coast and has long been drawing attraction of worldwide. The emergence of antiques from Kollam Port area reveals that Kollam was the most famous port city in India which served as the business hub of people from China, Middle East, Dutch, Portugal and other Eastern Mediterranean countries. The archaeologists believe that there is an engulfed city in the seabed of current Kollam Port. Maritime relation has led to radical changes in the society and economy of Kollam. It moulded the destiny of Kollam through the centuries, which also facilitated the economic and commercial prosperity of it as an emporium of international trading centre and acted as one of the most important port towns in Kerala. The town served as the leading spice market in medieval and modern times. It is an established fact that Kollam was a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial centre. Kollam commanded a pre eminent position as an emporium of world trade and commerce.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>Nilakanda Sastri, K.A. (1939). *Foreigns Notices of South India*, Madras, 1939, pp.57.
- <sup>2</sup>Pius Melekandathil (2006). Christians and cultural shaping of India in the First Millennium A D, in *J. St. Thomas Christians*, 17 (2) : 8.
- <sup>3</sup>*ibid*, p.12.
- <sup>4</sup>Nilakanda Sastri, K.A. *Foreigns Notices of South India, opcit.*
- <sup>5</sup>Velayudhan Panikkassery (1985). *Sancharikalum Charittrakaranmarum (mal)*, PartII, Kottayam, 1985, pp. 9-10.
- <sup>6</sup>Bhaskaran Unni, P. (1994). *Kollathinte Charitram (Mal.)*, Kollam, 1994, pp.38.
- <sup>7</sup>Padmanabha Menon, K.P. (1982). *History of Kerala, I*, New Delhi, 1982, pp.260.
- <sup>8</sup>Padmanabha Menon, K.P. *opcit*, pp. 274.
- <sup>9</sup>Bhaskaran Unni, P., *opcit*, p.97.
- <sup>10</sup>Velu Pillai, T.K., Travancore State Manual, II, Trivandrum, pp. 148-149.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibrahim Kunju, A.P. (1975). *Studies in Medieval Kerala History*, Trivandrum, 1975, pp.27.
- <sup>12</sup>*ibid*, pp.149.
- <sup>13</sup>*ibid*.
- <sup>14</sup>*ibid*.
- <sup>15</sup>Raja, P.K.S. (1966). *Medieval Kerala, Calicut*, 1966, pp.117.
- <sup>16</sup>Sreedhara Menon, A., *A Survey of Kerala History*, D.C. Books, Kottayam, 2012, pp.189.
- <sup>17</sup>Koshy, M.O. (1989). *The Dutch Power In Kerala*, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 14-15.
- <sup>18</sup>*ibid*.
- <sup>19</sup>*ibid*, pp. 289.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibrahim Kunju, A.P. and Varma, Marthanda (1990). *The Rise of Modern Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1990, pp.52.
- <sup>21</sup>*ibid*
- <sup>22</sup>A.Sreedhara Menon, *opcit*, pp. 252.
- <sup>23</sup>*ibid*, pp. 258.