
Historical Milieu of the Maritime Relations of Kollam

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Abstract: India is looked upon as a country with enormous resources available through its length and breadth. It had continually been in close contact with the great empires of the West from very ancient time. India has an ancient and glorious maritime history and tradition in which the Kerala Coast occupied a position of pride from very early days. In the newly evolving port hierarchy, Kollam was made to emerge as the most important port in Kerala. During the period between the ninth and fourteenth centuries Kollam emerged as the principal port due to its selection as the principal halting centre by the merchants involved in the maritime trade. Kollam, being the land of spices and precious jewels, is blessed by a very pleasant climate and enchanting scenic beauty. As international emporia of world trade and commerce it remained a source of attraction to the foreigners from different parts of the world. It was the greatest emporium where spices produced in the South and those brought from other countries were in abundance. Oriental commodities went to all parts of the world from Kollam. Thus Kollam occupied an unparalleled position on the Kerala Coast in the course of the commercial relations between Kerala and the maritime nations with the entire world even from the pre- historic times.

Keywords: Kollam, Maritime Trade, History, Geography, Spices, Economy, Ports

Introduction

Kollam has a rich and glorious history of its own. The port of Kollam has been described by early travelers as one of the largest in the world, and its markets the finest in India. The place was notable for trade in cotton, pepper, ginger, cardamom and other articles of import. Apart from this a lot of fish, rice, bananas, pineapple, fruits and pulses obtainable there (Menon 1962). It is a recognized fact that Kollam was repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial goods especially pepper (Gurukkal and Varier 1999). It acted as an emporium of all kinds of products including dry areca nuts, coloured cotton stuffs, span wood, pearls, corals, and butter and jasmine flowers in addition to the spices. The town, Kollam is also called Kurakkeni Kollam. The network of water transportation helps to form a good trading centre. The floral wealth of Kollam mesmerized foreigners. Inter portal and frontier duties were levied by the rulers of Kollam (Nittus 1: 1).

From pre historic to modern times Kollam has had a sizeable and eventful history. Pre historic and megalithic remains have been discovered from various places in Kollam. Prehistoric cultures include the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Megalithic, and their occurrences have been recorded from various places in Kollam. Two urn burial sites discovered at Poredam in Kollam gives much insight in to the prehistoric people of ancient Kerala. During the early Christian era and even before that, the account of classical writers mentioned about foreign ships laden with goods lying at the ports of the seacoast of Travancore.

The anonymous writer of the *Periplus of the 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, piece goods and other indigenous products (Sasthri 1939). Kollam, the erstwhile Desinganadu had good commercial contact with foreign powers that came to Kerala for commercial purposes. For a long time Kollam was famous as an emporium of the east (Menon 1942). The place was a hub of the products such as cotton, pepper, ginger, cardamom and other articles.

Antiquity of Kollam

The antiquity of Kollam is a matter of surmise. According to the St. Thomas tradition one of the seven and a half churches founded in Kerala by Apostle St. Thomas (52 A.D) was located at Kollam. The works of early classical geographers and the Tamil poems of the Sangam age contain certain reference about Kollam. It is however certain that in the early centuries of the Christian era the bulk of the present Kollam District formed part of the Ay Kingdom which comprised almost all the territories lying to the South Thiruvalla.

The author of *the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* seeks to identify with places which fall within the present Kollam District. Pliny (23-79 A. D.) gives an accurate description of the route to India, of the land of Malabar and its main articles of trade. Pliny also says that Greek ships anchored at either Muziris or Nelcynda, the former of which has been identified with Cranganore (Trichur District) and the latter with Neendakara in the Kollam District. The author of *the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* who wrote in the first century A.D. also refers to Nelcynda and says that its distance from Muziris is nearly 500 stadia, whether measured from river to river by the sea voyage and that it belonged to a different kingdom. Marco Polo testifies to the existence of trading communities of Jews and Christians at Kollam (Polo 1994).

Geographical Position

Geography is the background prepared by nature for the progress of history. The study of geographical condition of an area is must for the study of its history. The geographical location of Kollam was copious to become a maritime port of south India. It played a major role in its development as a major maritime trading centre. The presence of mud banks along the shores of Kollam rendered safe anchorage of ships.

According to the geographical conditions the district is divided into midland, highland and coastal area.

The most important fishing centre Neendakara is situated on the north of Kollam. Coastal area was famous for coir manufacturing. Midland area is well-known for agriculture like coconut, cashew, pepper, rice and tapioca. Highland is famous for rubber and teak. Aryankavu pass and Palaruvi waterfall are another important factors. Present Kollam district has blessed with two important rivers, Kalladayeru and Ithikkarayaru and three famous lakes viz. Ashtamudikayal, Paravurkayal, and Sasthamkottakayal (Fresh Water Lake). Kollam town is located between the sea and the backwaters of Ashtamudi. Kollam is situated between the Ashtamudi Lake and Arabian Sea. Kollam district is blessed with unique features like sea, lakes, plains, hills, streams, backwaters, forests, vast green fields etc. (Poduwal 1938).

Natural Divisions

The terrain of Kollam district may be broadly divided into three natural divisions, viz., the lowland enclosing the sea coast and well-known for fishing and coir manufacturing, the midland including low hills and valleys lands, this area is famous for agriculture like coconut, cashew, pepper rice and tapioca and the high land, fringed with dense forests, which abound in teak, sandal wood and other soft wood trees. The altitude gradually increases towards the highlands of Western Ghat.

Sea Coast

The Arabian Sea has a crucial role in the maritime history of Kerala. The Phoenicians had visited the Malabar Coast in about 1000BC, in association with the sale of ivory, sandalwood and spices (Aiya 1906). The sea coast of Kollam is about 30 miles long. It formed a vital part of the five *tinai*s of the Sangam period. The study area largely came under the purview of *neital* mostly inhabited by the Parathavas. Kollam was in *neital tinai*. They excelled themselves in the field of seafaring activities right from time immemorial.

River System and Water Resources

Kollam is gifted with rich water resources including ocean, rivers and the backwaters. Achankovil, Ayirur, Ithikkara, Kallada, Pallikkathodu and Vamanapuram are the major water sheds of Kollam. Apart from these rivers Kollam is blessed with backwaters like Ashtamudi Lake, Sasthamkotta Lake, Paravoor Lake and Edava – Nadayara Lake. The Ithikara River flows in a North West direction. The vattaparaambu stream is important among its tributaries. It passes through the villages of Vayala, Paampira, Ayur, Adichanallur, etc during the course of flow. The soil is predominantly gravelly in the garden lands and high reaches, while in the paddy fields of the lower regions it is clayey loam a good percentage of silt (Menon 1962).

The Kallada River is formed by the convergence of three rivers such as the Kulathupuzha, the Chenduruni and the Kalthuruthy River. The famous Punalur

suspension bridge, the Punalur railway bridge, the Parappan Bridge, the Enathu Bridge, etc. are some of the structures built across the river. The Punalur Paper Mill and Punalur Plywood factory exist on the bank of Kallada River. The soil in the basin is typically alluvial in nature and consists mostly of fine silt. The soils in the hills are loamy in nature.

The Achenkovil River streams in a north westerly course till Kumbazha, and in this portion, it is joined by the Kallar about a mile. It is sometimes known by the name Kulakkada River also some portions of the river are silted up and in certain places encroachments have been made by the local people and cultivation practiced. Kollam is surrounded by hills on all sides, and is protected in the eastern side by an earthen bund about a mile in length. No streams drain in to it and owe its supply largely to the penetration of ground water.

The Ashtamudi Lake expands from Kollam north wards. It is one of the major wetland ecology in Kerala. The name Ashtamudi derived from the fact that the lake limbs off into eight creeks, known by different names. One portion near Kola residency is called the Asramam Lake and another close to the cutchery in the Kurippuzha. The eight branches of Ashtamudi had enabled Kollam to have commercial connections with interior villages (Bhaskaranunni 2015). The place was blessed with Sasthamkotta lake, the largest fresh water lake in the state.

The Paravoor *Kayal* is coastal estuary of Kollam district. It is very deep and dangerous, on account of its being very near to the sea and exposed to sudden land breeze. It has a bar which opens in the rainy season. The situation of Kollam was conducive to have easy ways of communication with other countries, both by sea and land; two roads which lead into Travancore by the Arambully and Ariankavu passes meet at it.

Flora and Fauna

The variations in climate and seasons have had their own role in deciding the nature of flora and fauna. Kollam has a large area under forest cover. So Kollam is rich in flora and fauna. It is blessed with a wide variety of natural vegetation and is mainly tropical in nature. The geography played a significant role in the flora and fauna of this place. The warm and humid climate is favourable for the growth of coconut tree. The main industries in this area are the coir or coconut related products. The monsoon type is favourable for the pepper and other spices. The Europeans are attracted towards these areas because of its rich natural wealth. The well facilitated Ports in this western coast helped them for a profitable trade.

The Arabian Sea has a decisive role in the maritime history of Kerala. The Phoenicians had visited the Malabar Coast in about 1000BC, in connection with the sale of ivory, sandalwood and spices. Greeks and Romans had monopolized the trade relation with south India. The presence of Roman coins in different parts of Kerala suggests the past trade relation between the Kerala and the ancient Roman Empire. The advent of

foreigners like the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and the French through the Arabian Sea not only changed the history of the world, but also caused the world map to be redrawn. Foreign religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism spread its deep roots on the soil and the people embraced the new faiths with great piety.

Kerala is rich in water resources because there are forty-one west flowing rivers and three east flowing ones which are the tributaries of Kaveri. Bharatappuzha is famous in connection with the great Mamankam festival. Periyar is described as Choorni in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Kerala is gifted with a moderate climate, heavy rainfall and diverse flora and fauna. Because of the natural beauty and abundance of vegetation, people from far and wide call the state "God's own Country".

The Perumals held sway in Kerala from 216 A.D. to 428 A.D. (Menon 1873). The Perumal did not administer the entire kingdom directly. Ceyla Perumal was the first of the Perumals who came from Congu Desam. He ruled over the entire Chera Kingdom along with the 64 villages of the Brahmins (Sithambaranar 1972). Kulasekhara Perumal, another Perumal from the Pandya country reigned for 18 years. He was probably the King of Kerala who lived in the palace at Eraniel¹ (Iyer 1903) Bhaskara Ravi Varma locally known as Cheraman Perumal who ruled over the whole Travancore Cochin and Malabar² (Logan 1887). He was the last of the great Perumals. He also lived in the Eraniel palace.

As he was pious, with the instigation of the Saivite Saint, Sundara Moorthi Nayanar, he divided his kingdom among the members of his family (Ayyar 1924). Sthanu Ravi Varma, the brother of Cheraman Perumal became the ruler of Venad³ (Ayyar 1924). The other two divisions, Malabar and Cochin, were assigned to his son and nephew respectively. After making the necessary arrangements for the administration of his kingdom, one day he left his capital with his Guru (Travancore Information and Listener 1948). It was reduced to small units with the Udayagiri fort in the south. Sree Varthanapuram, popularly known as Padmanabhapuram of ancient Kalkulam remained the capital of the early Cheras (Menon 1878).

The Pandya rulers invaded Kerala on many occasions. Taking advantage of the weakness of the Perumals, Sendan or Jeyantavarman, the third ruler of the first Pandya Empire imposed his rule on the Chera Kingdom during the period from 560 to 590 A.D. and assumed the title Vanavan (Sastri 1966). The Velvikudi and Sinnamanur plates credit the victories of Arikesari Maravarman, the son and successor of Sendan at Pali, Nelveli (Aiyar 1923). Sennilam, Puliur and Kurunadu. These plates confirm that Arikesari's conquests extended up to the West Coast.

The Sinnamanur plates state that this monarch endowed many *agrarahas* and numerous *devasthanams*, *tatakas* and also patronized Sucindram, one of the sacred places in Nanchilnad. The Sucindram inscriptions clearly indicate that this locality was under the control of the Pandya ruler. From the epigraphs it is clear that Rajasimha,

the successor of Viranarayana Sadayan continued to be in possession of Sucindram and a part of Nanchilnad up to the 16th year of his reign (Rao 1910). Therefore, it is evident that the seat of the Venad ruler was exactly the same region of the later Ay monarchs. After Varaguna from 885 to 925 A.D. there is no reference about any Ay ruler having the status of a separate dynasty and probably the Ays pressed by the Pandyas sought the protection of the Cheras. They along with Chiravayi Swarupam family, another division of the Ays, merged with the Cheras of Venad.

In 9th to 13th centuries the Cheras under an illustrious line of Kulasekharas ruled with Thiruvanchikulam or Mahodayapuram as their capital. During this time a saint King, Kulasekhara Alwar, from whom the Travancore dynasty traces its descent ruled for forty-four years. Later he renounced his kingdom and made his son Marthanda Varma as his successor and visited the Vaishnava shrines and died at the age of sixty-seven.⁴⁷ After his death one Bhaskara Ravi Varman with the help of his supporters usurped the throne and assumed the title as Cheraman Perumal-III.

In the ancient world commercial and cultural interaction between nations was freer than in the Middle Ages. From very ancient time Kollam had continually been in close contact with the great empires of the west. Ports that centred near the sea coast had developed in Kollam mainly due to the commercial contacts with foreign traders. The traces of cultural expansion are more visible in these port towns than any other parts of Kerala. All the port cities in Kerala were notable for its economic and cultural development. Kollam was a major trading centre on the coast of Kerala and has a long drawing attraction worldwide.

It 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. Kollam port was known in early records like Tarisapalli Copper Plate (849 AD) and Rameswaram records as the *Kurakkeni Kollam* (*kuraku* means curve and *keni* means reservoir), means surrounded by water bodies. Kollam is adjoined with water bodies like Arabian Sea in the west and south and Ashtamudi Lake in the North. The name of the port came from the geographical peculiarity of the place.

Kollam commanded a preeminent position as an entry port of the world trade and commerce. Kollam gave shelter to many trading groups. That importance continued for several centuries. It had its own antiquity and tradition. The history of Kollam is intimately bound up with that of the neighbouring district of Thiruvananthapuram. From pre historic to modern times Kollam has had a significant and eventful history.

Kollam Port and Shipping Facilities

The coast between Alleppey and Kollam except near Tangassery is sandy and nearly straight, but ten miles north of Kollam there is a slight indent which does not however amount to one mile from a straight line drawn between two places. The shore is safe to approach in to the depth of five fathoms mud (Sithabaranar 1972). During the fine

weather period from September till May vessels can anchor in the inner anchorage in 4 1/2 to 5 fathoms of water 4/10 of a mile off the shore (Sithabaranar 1972).

Tangassery's position makes it perhaps the region's most strategic point as it overlooks the Kollam's crescent beach the banks should not be approached under 13 fathoms water by day as 17 fathoms at night. From November to April shipping vessels can lie close in shore with safety. But further to the north the depth is to be found farther from the coast (Sadasivan 2012). Tangassery light house 350 feet above high water level and could be seen 18 miles out of sea. It stands as a sentinel warning to the sailors of the treacherous reefs. The Greco- Roman notices and the internal evidence point out the importance of Kollam as a trade centre.

Ecology played a vital role in moulding the port city. Resources allocation from the tropical evergreen forest areas like Punaloor, Achan Kovil etc. brought immense opportunities for local merchants. Network for rivers and backwaters help the local trades' routes and even from interior part of mid lands and high lands. Good pepper and spices are procured and brought back to the sea port. Coconut and other by products like coir, coconut oil etc always attracted the European attention.

Conclusion

Kollam commands a predominant place in the maritime transactions of the world from time immemorial. It is an established fact that Kollam was repository of all kinds of valuable commercial goods. The network of water transportation with its oceanic and backwater contacts enabled it to form a good commercial centre. The rich flora and fauna of Kollam captivated foreigners. From pre historic to modern times Kollam has had a sizeable and eventful history.

Pre historic and megalithic remains discovered from various places in Kollam like pottery, burials, jars, iron objects, beads, bones and charcoal testify its importance. Kollam, strategically located on the direct sea-route between the Far East and the West, was a thriving port. The edge between the land and sea, with its several ecological and topographical variations, has played an important role in determining human activity. 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.

The fate and destiny of Kollam as a maritime centre was highly influenced by its geographical position. Kollam was unique in many ways, blessed with a port which served the country's trade needs as well as strategic needs. It provides infra structural 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. Trade flourished since the dawn of the civilization mainly due to the distribution of raw material. Trade had ever been a prime factor of socio-economic change in the traditional Indian society and economy was concerned.

Kollam is looked upon as a country with enormous resources available throughout its length and breadth. The economic progress of the world began with the expansion of trade that brought about an increase in industry and finance. In ancient times ports handled every kind of traffic support and storage facilities thus they supported local economy. Some ports acted as strategic military base. The early civilizations were flourished in the inland ports. Ports, the portals of humanity have vast control upon the life of the people. A port is a protected body of water that provides facilities for boats to berth and manage passengers and goods. It is acting as an entryway to socio-economic and cultural transmission.

Notes

1. *Eraniel was once the residence of the Travancore royal family from there one of the Kings suddenly disappeared while sleeping in the palace. It is suggested that the name Eraniel is derived from Era, which in Tamil means King and Neil means disappearance of the King. But as it appears to have existed and borne this name long before this incident, it is called so on account of the saltish nature of its soil, Era in Sanskrit signifies salt soil.*
2. *Kerala also known as Malabar, stretches from Kasarcode to Cape Comorin. The name Malabar seems to be partly foreign in origin. 'Mala' the Dravidian word means Mountain and 'bar' the Persian word means a country.*
3. *Venad was the name of ancient Travancore upto the time of King Marthanda Varma. There are two versions regarding the origin of the name „Venad“. According to one version Venad was the land of „Vels who were petty chieftains under the Cheramanas. According to another version, the term „Venad“ is derived from the word „Vanavarnad“ which means theland of the celestials*

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