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PIRATES OR PATRIOTS: RECONSIDERING KERALA'S MARITIME RESISTANCE UNDER PORTUGUESE RULE

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The Indian subcontinent, forged by centuries of empires, cultures, and civilisations, bore witness to one of the most vicious colonial campaigns in history. Although much of the discourse regarding colonial India is relegated to the British Raj that spanned across two centuries, from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, it is the Portuguese who made such a discourse possible in the first place through their discovery of a direct sea route to India in 1498, thereby laying the foundation of colonialism in India. And in this grand scale of Indian colonial history, Kerala occupies a significant position as the land that first bore the imprints of European colonialism with the arrival of the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama in Calcutta in 1498.

Vasco da Gama's voyage to India was not born of simple wanderlust or a fate independent of intention. On the contrary, his landfall at Kappad, in the present-day Kozhikode, was the culmination of nearly a century of European fervour to secure a trade route to Asia independent of Middle Eastern influence, thereby bypassing Ottoman-controlled land routes and gaining access to the spice trade. The Portuguese, in particular, were driven by this lust for wealth through the lucrative Asian spice market and other resources, namely gold and agricultural lands, as well as the potential to secure allies "in Christianity's ongoing battles with the Islamic caliphates."[1] As such, Kerala, and by extension India, as it existed in the late 15th century, proved hospitable for Portuguese colonial domination, leading to the formation of the *Estado da India*.

The *Estado da India*, otherwise the 'State of India', was formally an administrative apparatus founded in 1505 with the intention of governing the Portuguese colonial empire and its trade network. The Empire can best be encapsulated as an extensive network of interconnected ports linked by consistent trading fleets. Therefore, *Estado da India* came to encompass fortresses, ports, and lands extending from the Cape of

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Good Hope to the Far East that were under the colonial dominion of the Portuguese Crown; independent of *Estado do Brasil*, which ensured sovereignty over the Portuguese colonies in South America in the 16th century. "At its height in the late 1500s, *Estado da India* stretched from Africa to Japan",[2] thereby entangling the Portuguese colonial economy in gold, slaves, and spices.

Within this framework, India is established as the heart of the Portuguese colonial network both geographically and economically. The Portuguese State of India operated as a panopticon, becoming "one section in the inspection part affording the most perfect view of every cell",[3] by maintaining scrutiny and control over land and sea on either side of the subcontinent. Kerala, in particular, garnered heavy significance as a bastion of Portuguese influence, most prominently inferred through the status of Cochin as the first capital presided over by the first Portuguese Governor and Viceroy, Francisco de Almeida. Additionally, the Portuguese traders were tapping "into an existing thriving trade network"[4] built on the immense wealth of spices accumulated in Kerala, including pepper, cinnamon, ginger, and so on, which were shipped to Portugal in droves throughout the 1600s. Kerala's approximately 590 km coastline, which formed the third longest of the states bordering the Arabian Sea, was another aspect that endeared the land to the Portuguese, enabling its establishment as a maritime stronghold and ensuring tight control over trade and defence in the *Estado da India*. In particular, Kollam, formerly Quilon, became a prime maritime trading centre for the Portuguese colonial powers, with one of the earliest Portuguese settlements established in Tangasseri,[5] vestiges of which linger in contemporary times in the form of forts, lighthouses, syncretic cuisines, and burial grounds, namely the St Thomas Fort and Portuguese Cemetery. Consequently, Kerala proved central to the Portuguese colonial project due to its political, economic, and geographical position, thereby conversely bearing traces of Portuguese presence that has seeped into the fabric of Kerala culture and society, hence leading to the existence of modern-day Kerala as a colonial palimpsest or a space that retains the legacy of colonialism, its laws, cultures, and histories that are ineffaceable unlike the Indigenous colonised' legacy under centuries of colonial rule. Portuguese influence on the solidification of the Malayalam language, such as *kasera* or chair being derived from the Portuguese *cadeira*, *savala* or onion from *cebola*, *chavi* or key from *chave*;

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and the inflow of cashew, guns, tobacco, guava, printing presses and the like into Kerala's ecosystem form two of the most prominent exemplifications of Kerala's status as a colonial palimpsest in the modern day, outlining the presence and impact of Portuguese control.

However, the Portuguese affinity for Kerala served solely as a boon to imperial interests and was therefore detrimental to local trade, resources, and ways of life. In colloquial memory, the *Estado da India* signified the brutal hand of the colonial entity that bled the land and profited off its corpse. To exemplify, in the context of Kerala's vibrant history, it is noticeable particularly through the strict religious persecution conducted under the Portuguese banner. To the predominantly Hindu populace of 16th-century Kerala, the Portuguese introduced and aggressively propagated the dogma of Christianity, particularly in the Malabar and Konkan coastal areas, involving missionaries such as St. Francis Xavier in conversion efforts. An event that invariably led to the arrival of the Inquisition in India, which was "just as ruthless, unpopular, and socially damaging as they were in Europe"[6] in their efforts to root out heresy and enforce religious conformity based on Christian ideals, which in Kerala involved the confiscation of lands, restriction of cultural practices, destruction of temples, and persecution of individual belonging to non-Christian religious communities. This bred severe resentment among the native populace towards Portuguese rule, which only heightened after each and every intrusion of the coloniser into native socio-cultural spaces with the intention to loot and destroy what it cannot assimilate or dominate. A sense of resentment that further heightened after the trend continued onto the maritime spaces of Kerala, catastrophically affecting the ecosystem of local trade and, in turn, the lives of the populace.

The oceanic frontiers of Kerala in the 16th century were, as aforementioned, primarily held hostage by the Portuguese for colonial interests. Tight control over the Indian Ocean and adjacent water bodies was pivotal to the Portuguese colonial project, which sought to ensure a monopoly of trade between Europe and Asia. In the pursuit of this, *Estado da India* created a series of customs and rules that were forcibly imposed on Indian maritime spaces. The most significant of which is the Blue Water Policy introduced by the first Viceroy and Governor of Portuguese India, Francisco de Almeida, with the intention of securing sole command of trade in the Arabian Sea and

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Indian Ocean. The policy was crafted to achieve its goal by regulating maritime routes, strengthening the Portuguese Navy, and eliminating Arab and Muslim influence on trade, particularly that of the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, the Sultan of Gujarat, and the Zamorin of Calicut. The decisive victory over these forces by the Portuguese in the 1509 Battle of Diu to gain control over the maritime trade routes surrounding India was instrumental in exhibiting the success of the policy, as it asserted Portuguese naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean and symbolised the beginning of European dominance over the Asian maritime trade. An aspect of the policy that proved "most important for the Portuguese and most humiliating for the Indians"[4] was the Cartaz System that ensured Portuguese monopoly of Indian trade routes through the notion of a sea pass or naval license named the *cartaz*. The *Cartaz*, hailing from the Arabian 'qirtas', meaning paper document, was a "sort of license of movement or safe conduct for navigation issued by the Portuguese to native ships",[7] without which ships were confiscated, crews arrested and enslaved, and even executed in the case of Muslim traders. Even the ships in possession of the *cartaz* faced the danger of plunder from Portuguese vessels. The system was strictly enforced throughout the 1600s and 1700s to a degree that not even the ruling Mughals were spared, as Maryam Zamini, the mother of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, was detained while attempting to sail from Surat, her ship seized due to the lack of a *cartaz*. The implementation of the Cartaz System ensured a considerable decline of the Indian trade ecosystem in the 16th century, which once flourished in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese further choked trade along the Malabar coast through the establishment of restrictions, fortresses, and trading factories crafted to solely benefit imperial interests. Therefore, it can be synthesised that the Portuguese dominion over the maritime space in India was instrumental in not only curbing and controlling trade but also in curbing and controlling the native populace and heightening discontent towards colonial rule. Accordingly, as the militaristic and economic supremacy over the sea paved the way for Portugal to emerge as a colonial superpower in India, becoming the first to come and the last to leave, it simultaneously gave birth to the very first seeds of anticolonial resistance in India through the medium of piracy.

Piracy is traditionally defined as any robbery or other violent action committed for private ends and without authorisation by a public authority. In the contemporary

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scenario, the term is popularly associated with intellectual purloining and digital theft. In *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates*, Adrian John places the advent of 'piracy', as intellectual property violations, "some time in the mid-seventeenth century".[8] However, piracy, both as a notion and as a practice, predates this. Piracy and the subsequent 'pirate' materialised in the English language in the 1300s, from the Greek *peiratēs* meaning 'the one who attacks'. As such, the act of piracy, or simply put, 'robbery upon the sea', has been in common currency on the global stage throughout history.

The Late Bronze Age bore witness to the earliest documented instances of piracy with the Sea Peoples – a diverse coalition of mercenaries and raiders who prowled the Aegean and Mediterranean waters. Following this, the Greek and Roman pirates dominated Classical Antiquity and found successors in the Vikings and Danes, who terrorised the coasts of Medieval Europe. Despite the theorised Western origins, piracy was not exclusively Western, as far beyond the pirate-infested waters of Tudor England, where tales of fearsome French buccaneers and corsairs ran amok, Eastern maritime narratives forged their own pirate histories. From the Barbary corsairs of North Africa to the Maratha pirates of the Malabar coast, the pirate confederations of Imperial China to the Somali pirates of the modern era, piracy has always been an undisputed constant in the history of mankind.[9]

Focusing on Kerala, its history is deeply acquainted with piracy, as the earliest recorded activity dates back to the period of intensified Roman economic operations, leading to frequent pirate enterprises across the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean. To substantiate, Ptolemy outlines the entire Western coastal plain of India, stretching from Ariake, or Ariavartam, referring to the Northern hemisphere, to the Southern reaches of Lymrike or Malabar, as infested by pirates.[10] The observation is further expanded by Pliny, who claims "that the pirates operated as far south as Muziris",[11] i.e., modern-day Kodungallur, thereby establishing the presence of the Malabar pirates in the Western coastal area of India since early antiquity.

The Age of European expansion was significant in the discourse of piratical operations across the globe, as it not only brought about a tremendous increase in activity but also nuanced the notion of piracy. Piracy was no longer limited to an act of criminality performed to satiate personal interests. On the other hand, the concept

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of piracy was reimagined as both a colonial construction and a mode of resistance against colonial interests. In the context of Kerala, piracy entered its Golden Age in the 1600s, instigated by the presence of the Portuguese colonial powers. And through questioning the identity of those who were labelled as pirates during this era and an examination of their motives for venturing into the high seas, it becomes increasingly evident that the pirates in Kerala during the 1600s were categorised so by the Portuguese colonial authority for exhibiting fierce resistance against the colonial institution that exploited the land and enslaved the people; therefore, uncovering the earliest evidence of anticolonial action in India.

The pirates who operated in the colonial palimpsest of Kerala during Portuguese rule can be primarily classified as merchants, traders, and ordinary people belonging to the brunt of society, largely affected by maritime restrictions and trade monopoly. The most significant of the pirates were the Mappilas and the Marakkars, originally prominent Muslim trading clans, who terrorised the Portuguese maritime forces throughout the 1600s. As the Portuguese originally entered the waters of Kerala as merchants, the Mappila and Marakkar clans situated on the Malabar coast were engaged in cordial trade relations with the eventual colonisers. The situation was soon upturned as the Portuguese advanced their goal of colonial control, deploying customs and rules such as the aforestated Blue Water Policy and Cartaz System that stripped the Indian Ocean down to a *mare clausum*, i.e. a 'closed sea' where only the Portuguese or those affiliated were allowed to conduct travel and trade, effectively pushing out local traders and merchants, especially those of Muslim identification including the Mappilas and Marakkars; consequently leading them to the embrace of the pirate life. At one point, the Mappilas and Marakkars were contracted by local rulers, particularly the Zamorin, to fight against the Portuguese. The experience of the Mappilas and Marakkars forms a collective echo of the intense discontent bred through Portuguese dominance over sociocultural spaces, religious identity, trade ways, and overall native lives that drove people out to the sea en masse. Consequently, it can be ascertained that piracy in Kerala emerged as a natural response to Portuguese colonial exploitation, and the pirates themselves involved traders, merchants and other ordinary folk, for whom piracy was a means of survival, protesting against colonial oppression and retaining their traditional practices.

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Furthermore, the Portuguese tendency that categorised all those who opposed its colonial structure under the terminology of "'*cossarios*' or having engaged in '*cossaird*' activity, as in the case of Pate Marakkar, Kunjali Marakkar and Ale Abraem,"[12] is reflective of the larger colonial framework that constructed the piratical Other. Though distinct from the colonial Other, as Jon Beasley-Murray suggests, "the pirate is not the colonial other",[13] the pirate figure as the Other nevertheless follows the same social, legal, and ideological construction where Otherness is weaponised by the colonial system. The colonial labelling of pirates as *hostis humani generis* or 'enemies of mankind' showcases how pirates are deliberately othered in accordance with the colonial blueprint, with the single goal of destroying what the colonial project is unable to dominate or assimilate, especially since piracy posed an ideological and economic threat to the colonial superpowers existing outside the boundaries of European law, order, and rationality. In Portuguese Kerala, the pirate is the colonised subject who undertook the identity of the piratical Other as a mode of resistance against the colonial structure, therefore radicalising the Otherness imposed by colonialism, and as a way of safeguarding and empowering their colonial Otherness. Hence, transforming the pirate into a weapon of anticolonialism.

In light of this, there emerges the conundrum of who occupies the role of the true pirate figure within this Golden Age of Piracy in Portuguese Kerala. In adherence with the definition of the pirate under traditional frameworks, as one who plunders maritime spaces with malicious intent to appease one's own interests, the Portuguese colonial entity can be theorised as the most nominable candidate for the role through their systematic efforts in plundering the wealth, resources, and lives of people in the Indian subcontinent, primarily through maritime monopolistic strategies. Therefore, establishing the pirates of Portuguese Kerala as the earliest patriotic figures in Indian colonial history.

Endnotes:

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