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IRIKKUR: A HUB OF TRADE AND COMMERCE DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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IRIKKUR: A HUB OF TRADE AND COMMERCE DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Irikkur[1] is situated on the eastern side of Malabar and a main short route from Kannur and Thaliparamba town to entry to the Kodagu district of Karnataka. During the colonial period, Irikkur firka[2] was a main part of the Kolathunadu ruled by the Chirakkal Rajas of Chirakkal Kovilakam. Pepper, ginger, tamarind etc. were abundantly cultivated on the fertile lands on the eastern hillocks of Irikkur firka. The climate of the high ranges helped the cultivation of these lands to yield large quantity of these hill products, which was a main source of income to the Rajas of Chirakkal and landlords under him.

When coming to the history of trade and commerce, we can see that Irikkur has a long history of its trade and commerce. Strategic location of the town on the banks of the Irikkur river turned it into a commercial trading centre from the 12th to the 18th century. Irikkur as part of ancient Kolathnad, was also the main administrative headquarters of the British in the region. The register office established by the British in Irikkur in 1896 is evidence of this. Spices such as pepper, rudder and cardamom were extensively exported from Irikkur. Trade was conducted through water transport via the Irikkur river. The river also /+41ensured a ready access to spice producing hinterlands such as Anjarakkandy, Sreekandapuram and Irikkur has caused the rise of Cannanore as the most prosperous commercial hub of Malabar[3]. The trade of aromatic products growing in the fertile areas of the surrounding regions turned the town of Irikkur into a prosperous place. The land route from Irikkur to Kannur helped in the construction of the Irikkur bridge. The Taliparamba – Iritty state highway passes through Irikkur town as boats, bullock carts, and motor vehicles

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made way for each other, and with access opening up to regions like Mysore, Iritty, Sreekandapuram , Taliparamba and Kannur, trade became more active.

The first European powers to establish trade relations with the local rulers of Kolathnad were the Portuguese. Irikkur became a major commercial centre for Portuguese trade. In addition to the Portuguese, the influence of the Dutch also remained in this region. At the end of 15th century the arrival of the Portuguese marked a significant turning point in Kerala's history, with the place like Cannanore (Kannur) entering historical records. Cannanore is generally preferred to be identified with the Naura of Periplus by many including W.H Schoff[4] there is nothing to substantiate this argument except 'a vague similarity in name'[5].The dramatic resistance against the Portuguese, led by the Zamoothiri and the naval commanders the Kunjali Marakkars, stands out as one of the most heroic chapters in the history of both Malabar and India. The wars and invasion led by the Zamoothiri against foreign rule are considered among the most significant instances of resistance in Indian history. During this period, the Portuguese, with the help of local rulers and others, constructed forts in Kannur and other places. The Portuguese were the most important European power involved in trade in Irikkur.

The Malabar region including Irikkur is renowned for its abundant production of spices, particularly black pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon. These spices were highly valuable in European markets. The Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and later British engaged in extensive trade of these spices. The British East India Company gave great importance to trade in Malabar, especially for the export of black pepper, cardamom, dry ginger, and other spices. During the 17th and 18th centuries. The British attempted to strengthen their trading posts in Malabar. Irikkur, Kottiyoor, and Peringome were among the key trade centres in the region.

The ports of Malabar coast especially Cannanore and Cochin were known for their sailor friendly character allowing anchoring of ships in the ports proper[6]. The influence of colonial power left a lasting impact on Irikkur's culture, architecture and economic system. These colonial forces shaped and transformed the region's way of life in many enduring ways. The Nilamuttam stone inscriptions are an important source that provides evidence about maritime trade in Irikkur. A detailed study of

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these inscriptions reveals new insights into the sea trade in Malabar-with the help of Arabic epigraphists and palaeographers, the study of these inscriptions has uncovered myths related to Nilamuttam and provided evidence of the medieval maritime trade connections of northern Malabar.

The work of the Arab geographer and traveler Al-Idirisi mentioned a region called *Jarfatan (Jurbattan*) from the geographical features he describes, it is clear that this region corresponds to the area between today's Sreekandapuram and Irikkur. This area is believed to be the Nilamuttam regionof Irikkur. According to Idirisi's description, *Jarfatan(Jurbattan*) was a fertile town situated on the banks of a small river, where rice and other grains were abundantly cultivated. Grains from this area were even exported to the major markets of Ceylon (Srilanka) like *Sarandib*. While Al- Dimishqi states that, Jurbattan is on the coast and its inhabitants are infidels[7].Additionally in the hills near the town, there were also pepper gardens. Jarfatan provides evidence that Irikkur was an important commercial trading center. The 14th century Moroccan Traveler Ibn Battuta's account also describes the trade connections of Jarfathan under the patronage of its king*, kuwayl*, one among the four powerful Sultans of Malabar[8]. Obviously, the term *kuwayl* must be a derivative of Kolathiri, the title used by Raja of Cannanore[9]. He mentions that the Sultan of *Jarfathan* had many ships and exported goods to regions such as Yeman, Oman, and persia.

Abraham Benyiju exported goods such as black pepper, cardamom, cloves, betel, tamarind, wooden sticks and Iron nails from places like Mangalapuram, Irikkur, Sreekandapuram, Valapattanam, Dharmadam, Panthalayani and Kollam to the port of Aden in the red sea. From Aden, these goods were transported to Egypt and then to Europe via the Mediterranean. Additionally, goods like pepper, cardamon, clothes and tamarind were also exported to Aden and from there, trade ships would return to Jarfathan bringing textiles, in expensive Persian and Egyptian carpets, copper, and poison. The trading ships regularly arrived at Jarfathan from Aden were known as Jarfathan ships and these ships were owned by the authorities of Aden. There is no evidence until the 14th century that local Muslims directly engaged in maritime trade

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either at coastal or inland trade centers. Cairo Khaisa and Khassiya documents in Aden do not provide evidence of Muslim participating in maritime commerce.

During the colonial period, the river basin and the region's well-maintained road network facilitated the smooth movement of goods, contributing to the economic significance of the area. The memories of the arrival of foreigners can still be seen in Kannur. In northern Malabar, and particularly in Kannur, widespread Muslim active in all major commercial centres. In the 16th century the Portuguese arrived here seeking for trade, followed by the English, and they became part of our society. The inscriptions discovered in the archaeological site Ganiya in Egypt mention that a Jewish merchant from Tunisia, Abraham Benyiju, arrived at the port of Mangalore for trade in November 1131.Between 1131 to 1149 Benyiju who stayed in Malabar and conducted numerous business transactions wrote letters that provided evidence of the region's cultural, economic, and social exchanges. In 1132, he married a Tulu speaking Nair woman, and converted to Judaism later he is referred to as 'Appu' in the records. 23 Benyiju exported goods such as black pepper, cardamom, cloves, betel, tamarind, wooden sticks and Iron nails from places like Mangalapuram, Irikkur, Sreekandapuram, Valapattanam, Dharmadam, Panthalayani and Kollam to the port of Aden in the red sea. From Aden, these goods were transported to Egypt and then to Europe via the Mediterranean. Additionally, goods like pepper, cardamon, clothes and tamarind were also exported to Aden and from there, trade ships would return to Jarfathan bringing textiles, in expensive Persian and Egyptian carpets, copper, and poison. The trading ships regularly arrived at Jarfathan from Aden were known as Jarfathan ships and these ships were owned by the authorities of Aden.

By the 10th century with the decline of the Persian Gulf port of Saraf Kareemi traders from North Africa began to arrive in Malabar through the red sea. Inscriptions found from Madayi mention the Kareemi traders. Overtime, these traders gained dominance in the maritime trade of Madayi, which was a setback for the Jewish traders. As a result Jewish merchants moved to places like Irikkur, Sreekandapuram, Valapattanam, Dharmadam, Panthalayani and Kollam. Due to the competition with Arab and Chinese traders, Benyiju and his family moved to Jarfathan, a major center for black pepper production in Malabar in 1146. However, the records indicate that by

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1149, Abraham Benyiju his son Surur and daughter Sittaldar returned to Aden, leaving his wife Ashu behind.

The Portuguese focused on establishing political and military control over the sea routes. They were engaged in constant conflict along the western coast. At that time, the existing sea routes from Kozhikode, through Aden and Alexandria were made stagnant, and new sea routes were established through Kochi, Kozhikode, Kannur, and Goa directly connecting the spice -producing regions of Malabar to Lisbon in the Atlantic. This disrupted the previously existing political, social, and economic relations. In the early centuries, the Portuguese aimed their political and military power at the Al- Karimi traders involved in the sea trade of Malabar. These traders controlled a significant portion of Malabar's spice trade and conducted commerce from Aden to Alexandria. The Portuguese realized that they could only dominate the pepper trade by breaking the supremacy of the Karimi traders over Malabar. As part of this, they attacked the Al-Karimi traders on both land and sea commercially and economically more than any other Arab, Persian, or African traders.

The Tuhfat -ul- Mujahidin by Sheikh Sayinuddin Makhdum[10] describes the anti-Portuguese struggle that took place along the coastal areas of Malabar. In addition, French historians Genevive Buchon and Louis Shackley, in their work "Regent of the sea: Cannannur's Responds to Portuguese Expansion 1507-1548[11]," which was based on Portuguese records available in Lisbon also provide descriptions of the attacks carried out by the Portuguese on foreign traders in Irikkur during this period. The Nilamuttam inscriptions also refer to those who were killed by enemies. The Portuguese committed these murders to maintain. Their monopoly over trade. Realizing that it would be impossible to control the pepper trade without eliminating foreign involved in it, the Portuguese carried out attacks in the foreign trading areas along the banks of the Irikkur River, where those who were killed are likely buried in the Nilamuttam graves.

Under the leadership of the Arakkal commander, Valiya Hassan[12], a strong resistance movement was initiated against the Portuguese in areas such as Madayi. Dharmapattanam and Irkkur in Kannur. These struggles also helped unite Madayi and surrounding regions. Valiya Hassan was also a close relative of the Alee Raja. He led

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efforts to destroy Portuguese ships by pursuing and attacking them. They adopted a strategy of ambushing large Portuguese vessels using small boats in the river shallow waters and the mangrove swamps, launching lightning-fast attacks before retreating to areas with lower sea depths for safety. This strategy, along with its success, fuelled anti-Portuguese sentiments and resistance movements in the coastal areas of Madayi. In 1524, this led to an open confrontation against the Portuguese forces, particularly under the leadership of Gam.

Irikkur was an important administrative centre during the British period. The British had significant influence in this region, and it played a key role in the governance structure of the time. Furthermore, the administration and policies set by the British also left a lasting impact on the region's social, economic, and cultural aspects. Ashin Das Gupta's, Malabar in Asian Trade 1740-1800[13] articulates to place the trade of Malabar into the larger domain of the economic history of early Modern India. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the British made several attempts to strengthen their trading posts in Malabar. Irikkur, Kottiyoor, and Peringome were among the key trade centers in the region. When Tipu Sultan conquered Malabar, British trading centers faced significant challenges. In 1792, through the Treaty of Srirangapatnam, a large part of Malabar came under British rule.

Irikkur's evolution into a vibrant hub of trade and commerce during the Colonial period reveals its strategic importance within the broader economic landscape of Malabar. Irikkur stands as a remarkable convergence of historical significance, cultural richness, and social movements that have collectively shaped its identity. Its early involvement in European trade laid the foundation for economic prosperity and cultural exchange, which contributed significantly to the development of a vibrant local economy and its integration into the global network. The consolidation of markets, expansion of market routes, and the influx of new trading communities positioned Irikkur as a key intermediary between inland producers and coastal export centers. Though colonial economic policies often favoured imperial interests, the local population adapted creatively, contributing to a dynamic commercial environment. Today, many of Irikkur's social and economic patterns still echo these

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historical developments, underscoring the region's enduring place in Kerala's commercial history.

Endnotes

1. Revenue Portal, Government of Kerala Revenue Department; *Irikkur is a small village in Kannur District, Kerala.Both village and grama panjayath holds the same boundaries.It is a place of historic and commercial importance and is one of the largest Mappila Muslim majority towns in Kannur District. It lies on the banks of the Irikkur River. This river is the geographical border of Taliparamba and Thalassery Taluks.It also shares the border with Iritty Taluk.*
2. *Firka* is a historical and administrative term for a revenue division or a group of villages.
3. Sirajudin, Muhammad. K, *Arakkal Swaroopam: Matriliny, Trade and Politics (1723-1907)*, 2020, p.6.
4. Schoff, W.H, *the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean* by a Merchant of the First Century Longmans, London, 1912, p.204.
5. Casson, Lionel, *the Periplus Maris Erythraei- Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, Princet on University Press, Princeton,1 989, p.298.
6. Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, *The Political Economy of Cmmerce: Southern India, 1500-1650,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,1 990, pp. 13-4.
7. S. Husayn Nainar, Muhammad, *Arab Geographers' Knowledge of Southern India*, University of Madras, Madras, 1942, p.35.
8. *The Rehla Of Ibn Battuta (India, Maldive Islands and Ceylon)*, translated by Mahdi Husain, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1976, (Hereafter, Ibn Battuta) p.186.
9. Muhammad Sirajudin. K, p.4.
10. Sheikh Sayinuddin Makhdum's, *The Tuhfat -ul- Mujahidin*, is a historical work on the struggle between the Mappila Muslims of Malabar and South Canara and Portuguese Colonial forces in the 16th century.
11. Genevive Buchon and Louis Shackley, Regent of the sea: Cannannur's Responds to Portuguese Expansion 1507-1548.
12. *The New Indian Express, Malabar* marks 500th anniversary of Valiya Hassan's martyrdom.,& A grave or plaque also marks about Valiya Hassan in front of Kannur City Juma Masjid.
13. Das Gupta Ashin, *India and the Indian Ocean World- Trade and Politics*, Oxford University Press, Newyork, 2004.

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