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From Spices to Empire: Mountain passes and Historical Transformations in Kerala, special reference to Palakkad Pass.

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Kerala is bordered on the east by the western ghats, a continuous mountain wall that seperates the state from the tamil plains. breaks in this mountain chains called mountain passes and churams, which have played a crucial role in shaping the history, trade networks, migration, political interactions and cultural exchanges of kerala.

Physical geography has played a major role in shaping the socio-political and cultural history of kerala.One of the key factors that distinguishes kerala from other Indian states is its unique geographical features. With the western ghats forming a natural barrier in the east and the Arabian sea stretching along its western coast ,kerala has developed within a distinct physical environment mountains rivers passes ,plains and coastal regions have deeply influenced the lifestyle ,political organization ,trade relations and cultural interactions of the people of kerala.[1]

Among the geographical features of kerala, mountain passes (locally known as churams) stand as silent witness to many significant historical events. primarily forming part of the western ghats mountain range, these mountain passes have played a crucial role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of kerala. For centuries they have served as vital routes that facilitated migration, trade, cultural interaction and military movements. These passes bear testimony to numerous historic events that span hundreds of years and remain deeply embedded in the historical memory of kerala.Since ancient times these passes were used as important routes for the trade of spices and other valuable commodities.[2] For centuries they functioned as vital links connecting diverse cultures and communities, enabling military movements as well as large scale migrations.

This paper primarily discusses some of the major mountain passes of kerala and their historical importance with a focused analysis on the palakkad pass. Because

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The mountain passes of kerala are symbols of the inseparable relationship between nature and human life.They are not merely tracks or roads, but lifelines that have shaped the history, culture and future of a land. Kerala has several mountain passes both major and minor level.

Thamarassery churam located in the western ghats between Kozhikode and vayanadis one of the most historically significant mountain passes of kerala from ancient times this served as an essential trade route linking the spice rich highlands of wayanad with the coastal commercial centres of Malabar particularly Kozhikode.the pass enabled the movement of pepper, cardamom and forest products to coastal markets that attracted arab, Chinese and later European traders. [3] It played a crucial role in regional political history especially during the anti-colonial resistance led by pazhassi raja who frequently used the rugged terrain of this pass for guerilla warfare against the british in the late 18th and early i9th century.pazhassi revolt occurred in and around this route highlighting its military importance.

Aryankavu churam , historically served as one of the few feasible mountain passes in southern western ghats .it connects punalur and thenkasi/shenkotta in tamilnadu.It is a natural conduit for movement of people goods and cultural exchange between kerala and Tamil Nadu.[4]It is a part of the colonial and post-colonial infrastructure network ,shaping trade, migration and integration of hill and plain zones.

Aruvamozhi churam located near the southern extremity of the western ghats in kanyakumari region holds immense significance as a strategic mountain pass connecting kerala (Travancore)with tamil regions.Its historicity is closely linked with the military and administrative policies of the Travancore kingdom,particularly during the reign of marthanda varma.The pass served as a crucial gateway during the wars between Travancore and the Dutch especially the battle of kulachil enabling the movement of troops and supplies.[5]It also historically importantant after the construction of the aruvamozhi fort which functioned as a defensive line protecting Travancore from the invasions of Tipu sultan and mysore forces in the late 18th century.Archival records describes that travancore built series of nedumkotta-style

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fortifications to secure this passage.It also facilitated trade and cultural exchanges between kerala and tamil regions.

Periya churam located in the wayanad district,is an ancient mountain pass on the wayanad –mysore route running through the western ghats .historically it served as a crucial corridor linking the Malabar coast with the decan plateau enabling cultural,commercial and military interactions between kerala and Karnataka.periya churam facilitated the movement of spices ,forest products and textiles making an important part of regional trade networks controlled by kolathiris ,pazhassi raja ,mysorean powers and the british.this pass acquired significance with the mysorean invasions led by hyder ali and tipu sultan who used this route to enter wayanadand establish military control in Malabar.

Palakkad churam is the most important and historically significant mountain pass in kerala,located between the nilgiri hills to the north and the anamalai hills to the south in the western ghats.it forms the largest natural pass in the entire mountain range,stretching nearly 30-40 km wide ,and has served for centuries as the primary gateway connecting kerala with tamilagam.[6] Because of its distinctive geography palakkad churam has played a crucial role in shaping the political ,social and economic and cultural history of kerala.From ancient times the pass facilitated inter-regional trade enabling the exchange of spices,rice ,cotton ,horses and forest products.,linking the Malabar such as muziris and beypore with the tamil inland cities of Coimbatore and kongunadu.archaeological and historical evidences suggests that roman ,arab and later European traders used routes connected through this gap.

From the collected sources it was understood that Greeco- Roman people used the palakkad pass for trade relations with the eastern regions.Muziris was considered as one of the key ports and what the Greeks and romans wanted were beads and gem stones like garnets and diamonds from the kaveri river basin.indians though needed gold and silver ,they exchanged stones for gold.Peter francis ,a bead specialist in his work bead site states that some precious stones like garnets ,emeralds ,glass and quarts beads ,handicraft work originated from arikamedu,kodumanal passing through the palakkad gap and reached muziris for sea transport to the west.sangam literature was first to mention this gem industry

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carried out by" pandukal"and all this came to light with the discovery of Arikkamedu.[7] Pandukal were the metal smiths and gem smiths. The raw materials according to peter francis apparently went to kodumanal were crafted and then sent through the palakkad pass to ponnani.from there it went by boat to muziris and by ship to red sea ports.there . There is also some assumption that the actual transshipment centre before material moved to muziris was kovai or Coimbatore. According to Dr. s..suresh.archaeologist took phd in roman archaeology states that evidence of Indo Roman trade relations are found especially in south India and within south India,large percentage of this evidence has been unearthed in kongu region, which today forms a large portion of the district known as Coimbatore. This place was closely connected with palakkad gap since ancient times. Mortimer wheeler (et.al),*Arikamedu an Indo -Roman trading station on the east coast of India,* 1946 gives detaled information on the trade communications of palakkad gap in ancient times.passing through the palakkad gap and reaching muziris for sea transport to the west. It connects the gemindustry of the pandukal through the palakkad gap to ponnani from those it went to muziris and by ship to red sea ports.[8]

Palakkad pass played a decisive role in the military and political history of kerala during the period of mysore and british domination in the 18th and 19th centuries.the pass became the principal entry route for hyder ali and tipu sultan during the mysore invasions of Malabar.controlling the palakkad pass meant controlling access to the rich resources and strategic ports of the Malabar coast.In 1757 hyder ali intervened in the conflicts between the raja of palakkad and the zamorin.capturing palakkad fort and using the pas to extend mysorean authorityover Malabar .Tipu sultan continued this strategy repeatedly using the route for troop move ment .communication and enforcing tax systems which significantly impacted the political and social structure of kerala.

The British east India company realized the strategical value of pass,especially during the anglo-mysore wars.after the fall of tipu sultan in 1799, the British secured control over palakkad pass and developed it in to a major military and administrative corridor.,strengthening the palakkad fort and establishing transport and communication networksthrough it.the pass became crucial in british campaigns against pazhassi raja and other anti-colonial resistance in Malabar,enabling rapid

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troop deployment between Coimbatore ,palakkad and Calicut.the opening of roads and later railways through the pass transformed palakkad in to astrategic colonial centre linking the hinterland to commercial ports and integrating kerala more closely in to the British imperial economy. Therefore in the context of mysore and british rule the historicity of palakkad pass is rooted in its role as a military gateway ,a corridor of imperial expansion and a key factor in the reshaping of malabars political and economic landscape.

Thus, the study concludes with a notion that the mountain passes were not merely routes connecting one region to another. From a historical perspective, they served as vital corridors facilitating trade relations, the exchange of goods and resources, migration of diverse communities and cultural interactions between different regions. At the same time, they played a significant role in the military campaigns, imperial invasions and the expansion of political power that took place during different historical periods,

END NOTES

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