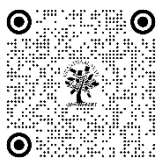


COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL HISTORY OF COLONIAL THALASSERY

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ABSTRACT

Thalassery, or Tellicherry in colonial records, is a strategically located town on the western coast of Kannur district of Kerala state. It was a trading hub on the Malabar Coast where Chinese, Arab, Jewish, and many European traders had established considerable influence in the spice market. European trade contacts with the Malabar Coast played a significant role in shaping the political, economic, cultural, and intellectual configuration of the Malabar region, particularly Thalassery. The Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English competed to establish trading stations on the Malabar Coast. They all tried to make close relations with the local chieftains and wealthy merchants to establish their supremacy in Thalassery. Eventually, the English established economic and political domination in this region. The port of Thalassery offered anchorage for ships throughout the year. Large numbers of commercial establishments were started in Thalassery by European firms, Gujarati merchants, Parsee traders, Konkani merchants, and merchants from other parts of Kerala. The major trade items are spices, timber, cereals, and other locally available commodities. The commercial history of Thalassery became active with the establishment of the warehouses by the British. Foreign ships began visiting Thalassery and exporting merchandise; thus, this region became the major centre of colonial trade. The export and import of native and foreign goods resulted in the development of Thalassery as an essential commercial centre in Kerala. The industries that started in the nearby places of Thalassery town during the colonial period also contributed much to its economic growth. The present study attempts to discover the origin, development, and significance of colonial trade and industries that contributed to the development of Thalassery.

Keywords: Trade, Spices, Industry, Colonial Period, Thalassery



1. INTRODUCTION

Thalassery in Kannur district of Kerala has a unique position on the world trade and commercial map. It is believed that there was a good trade relationship between Thalassery and foreign countries in the pre-Christian eras. The basement of this foreign trade relation was the availability of spices near this region. Thalassery was the gateway of the spice trade between Malabar and the outside world. The Jews, Chinese, Arabs, and Europeans arrived at Thalassery for commercial purposes. However, the English East India Company succeeded in making Thalassery as the commercial hub and significant centre of Colonial administration in Malabar. Before the consolidation of the settlements in Thalassery by the British, the French established a commercial centre there with the help of Kurungot Nair, the local ruler near Thalassery. Later, the French abandoned Thalassery and concentrated their activities in Mahe. After getting permission from Vadakkilamkur, the regent of the Raja of Kolathunad region, the English East India Company established their commercial centre and factory at Thalassery. The British built a fort in the coastal area of Thalassery to regulate their commercial activities and political administration. Since the sea did not have sufficient depth for the big ships to anchor there, the essential goods in the vessel were taken by small boats. Gradually, it led to constructing a Pier in 1910 that raised Thalassery into a trading town. The commercial history of Thalassery became active with the British

establishment of warehouses near its coastal area. The English East India Company started to store spices in their warehouses at Thalassery that were collected mainly from the Kottayam taluk (mentioned as *Cotteath* Nadu in William Logan's *Malabar Manual*), hilly areas of Wayanad and the markets of Coorg. The export items comprised cardamom, cinnamon, pepper, tea, coffee, sandalwood, herb oils, turmeric etc. The pepper of Thalassery was famous in foreign countries as 'Tellichery Black Peppers'. Among the spices, pepper was the major trade item between India and foreign countries from an early period.

After establishing a trading centre at Thalassery, the English started to make friends with the local chieftains for raw materials and spices. They mainly sought commercial support from local merchants, mostly the Mappila merchants, to ensure a cheap supply of spices from the Malabar hinterland. The Keyi Mappila merchant family was the forerunner of indigenous commercial activities of Thalassery during this period. Apart from acting as agents of the British factory, the Keyis also maintained contact with the Coromandel Coast, particularly with the port towns of Tuticorin and Masulipatanam, as well as the western port towns of Allepey, Cochin, Mangalore, Bhatkal, Bombay, and Surat. The Keyis provided commercial and financial assistance to the British for several years. The other trading groups in the business centre of Thalassery, together with the British, were the Alayi Saints, who came from northern India. Haji Habib, Phir Muhammed Sait, Ibrahim Kassim Sait and Hussain Kassim Dada Sait consolidated their position in the trading centre. The most essential items in Thalassery's commercial activities were coffee and pepper.

The Malabar Coast of Kerala played a significant role in India's maritime trade during medieval and modern times. This area was ruled by local kings and chieftains who invited foreigners to their kingdom and gave them facilities and concessions for trade to enhance their revenue from customs and other levies. However, in due course, the local rulers were forced to grant many privileges to the British, including political rights and the maintenance of law and order within their settlements. It encouraged the foreigners to shift from commercial activities to political interests and the possession of colonies in Malabar. During the 18th century, the British favoured the political condition of Malabar not only for the expansion of trade but also for the establishment of many industries in the regions of Thalassery.

With the fall of Mysore and the defeat of the Pazhassi Raja, the monopoly of the English East India Company rose higher, and the complete control of Malabar fell into their hands. The centre of business of the British at Thalassery began to increase gradually. They collected vast amounts of hill products from the territories of Kottayam Raja. As the hill products trade strengthened, industrial companies started to process the collected materials before shipment. The prominent industrial and trading companies at Thalassery during those days were the British Steam Navigation Company, Aspinwall Company, Walkart Brothers, English and Scottish Company, and the Pears Lesley. These companies were involved in preparing the commercial products for export. The English and Scottish companies remained in Thalassery till 1964. Out of the companies mentioned above, Pears Lesley stopped their industrial activities in Thalassery recently. The main product of the company was cashew nuts and its oil. The company exported its products to countries like America, Britain, Tanzania, and the Soviet Union through containers from Cochin Port. The maximum production of the company in a day was 12 to 16 tones. Thousands of native labourers worked in the company, and 95% of them were women; the company existed in Thalassery for over 200 years under colonial rule.

Another important colonial Industrial company in Thalassery was Southern Venice. It was established by a French man named C J Reval. The company's main product was veneer for panelling walls. Mahogany and rosewood were the important trees used to manufacture veneer. It is mainly exported to countries like America, South Africa and France. Another prominent among the Colonial Industries in Thalassery was the Walkart Brothers of Salman Walkart. Though this company played an essential role in the business circle of Thalassery, there is no document to prove the exact date of its construction. The company prepared coffee and pepper to export through the Thalassery Port. The greatest attraction of the factory at Morakunnu is the steam boiler for processing coffee. The steam siren at Morakunnu was the time watch to the neighbouring people.

The origin of foreign industries in India was not an isolated or accidental event in History. It was the culmination of a long-standing ambition on the part of an emerging nation to participate in trade with India and the European powers. The expansion of the industries favoured the political condition of India and, gradually, the territorial annexation. The industries in Thalassery had a continuous history of over a century, an essential period in the socio-political history of Malabar. Politically, North Malabar during this period was divided into several kingdoms with mutual jealousies and hostilities. Although the earlier phase of the colonial commercial and industrial was actively characterised by a non-intervention policy on the Malabar coast, they often intervened in local politics to reap advantages.

The impact of the factory was considerable on the Malabar trade in many respects. Throughout the Middle Ages, Malabar had a vigorous merchant class in society. Their trade depends on small farming and handicraft production. During the 16th century, the Muslim aristocracy of commerce had retreated from Malabar due to the advent of the Portuguese. The medieval Muslim merchants of Malabar couldn't carry the trade with the advent of the Portuguese. The *Cartasz* (naval trade license or pass) system introduced by the Portuguese was one of the cause for the retreat and decline of the trade of Muslim aristocracy. The English at Thalassery also continued the 'Pass' system, but it was not enforced as a commercial weapon to intervene in the native trade except in pepper. A few individual merchants emerged around the factory from the Mappila and Thiyya communities of North Malabar. The new traders were mainly indebted to the Company for their capital and investment. During the pepper season, these native merchants of some reputation contacted the English to supply them with a stipulated quantity of trade items at a fixed price. They received half of the money in advance from the factory. Generally, they procured the products from the local cultivators at the lowest rate and supplied them to the Company at a higher price. However, the emergence of a new middle class did not materialise in Malabar because of many factors.

The colonial industries and administration contributed a lot to the infrastructural development of Thalassery. The first step in this development was that foreigners built a seaport in Thalassery, where a variety of spices, such as pepper, cardamom, and several industrial goods, were exported. It helped the colonial industries to well root in Thalassery. As a part of this, new companies established their branches in Thalassery, and gradually, it became one of the major centres of trade and commerce in India. As a part of this growing industry and trade, the Company built a factory and a Pier to make their export and import comfortable. It also led to the construction of a lighthouse. The dynamic growth in trade and commerce developed a better transport system in the native places of Thalassery. The English introduced the plantation of cash crops in Malabar. Even in the 18th century, the natives had not developed the sense of an organised plantation. Spices were cultivated on a small scale, but the industry's growth resulted in the plantation of spices like pepper, coconut, coffee, cinnamon and other plants. They built houses and chapels for the labourers. Foreigners also introduced the system of scientific techniques, which resulted in the beginning of massive output in trade and industry.

2. CONCLUSION

The fall of Constantinople and the historic mission of Vasco De Gama in May 1498 were important milestones in the growth of colonial trade and industries in India. Thalassery was the gateway for spices, and its commercial history began with the commencement of the warehouses by the British. The English East India Company established many '*Pandikasalas*' (warehouses) in Thalassery to store spices and goods for export. The ports and advanced navigation were the most significant advantages of their trade system in Thalassery. The linking of Kerala's subsistence economy with the international market through European companies resulted from the pressure of circumstances. The political condition of Kerala, especially in Thalassery, was favourable to the expansion of many companies like Walkart Brothers, Aspinwall, Southern Venice, Consolidated Coffees and Pears Lesley. The establishment of colonial industries resulted in many changes in the social life of Thalassery. As a part of industrialisation, the native people get the opportunity to become familiar with industrial jobs and liquid forms of money in terms of wages. It also led to the rise of the merchant class in society. The reform activities introduced by the company destroyed the traditional evil practices in society. Considering the things mentioned above, we can assume that colonial trade and industries significantly impacted the social, political, economic and cultural life of Thalassery.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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