

CHRISTIAN TRADERS IN MARITIME WORLD OF KERALA (C.1000–C.1300 CE): SOME REFLECTIONS

Dr. Priyatosh Sharma*

Abstract:

Maritime trade has played a significant role in history of Kerala. Expansion of trading activities created space in the trading world of Kerala which attracted new migration of foreign communities. Nestorian Church of Persia under the protection of Caliphate expanded its influence and its diocese were found both in China and India around eleventh century. Christians of Kerala were affiliated to Nestorian Church. The western linkage of the Christians made them significant in maritime venture and the local rulers, responding to the changing economic paradigms of the sea, patronized the Christians while bestowing certain privileges. Christians of Kerala never faced any social degradation. They continued to enjoy various privileges granted to them by the local rulers until the Zamorin of Calicut, with the help of resources generated by Muslim Karimi merchants, deprived the Christians of Quilon of all privileges transferring the same to the Muslims of Calicut.

Keywords: Kerala Christians, Maritime trade, Nestorian Church, Quilon, Calicut

* Assistant Professor, Deptt. of History, Panjab University, Chandigarh (India)

1. Introduction:

India remains home to various socio-religious groups. Blessed with the varied climatic zones, the country witnessed emergence of both agrarian and mercantile classes. The coastal and semi arid zone housed communities which undertook trading ventures both inland and in foreign regions in search of profit. Pioneering works in the Indian Ocean trading networks in the second half of the twentieth century has opened new vistas for Indian scholars while highlighting the vital role played by the sea and coastal areas in shaping the tides of history in the subcontinent. The work of K.N. Chaudhuri in his seminal work *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (1974) argues in favor of interdependence of mercantile network across Indian Ocean despite political boundaries. Kenneth Mcpherson's work, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (1973), has endeavored to highlight the continuities in the Indian Ocean trading world where, before the emergence of capitalist economies in eighteenth centuries, even the Europeans were accepted as one of the various constituent of trading communities. Ashin Das Gupta's work *Indian Merchants and Decline of Surat, 1700-1750* (1984) has studied the role of western Indian ports which could increase one's understanding of politico-economic situations in the mainland. Andre Wink's *Al Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (1999-2015) has studied the role of maritime world of the Indian Ocean in forging Indo-Islamic culture. Despite, huge corpus of scholarship available towards Indian Ocean trading world, wide gaps exists which needs to be plugged.

II. Christians Traders in Kerala

The Christians played an important role in the maritime trade of India around tenth century. Legends address Mar Sapo, a Christian priest, as the founder of the city of Quilon (Abraham, 1998, p. 27). Christian presence in Kerala even excited the myth of Christian Kerala in the European intellectual circle that Andre Wink observes that 'the illusion of a Christian India was still alive when Vasco-Da-Gama set foot in Calicut.....Alvares Cabral was the first European to fully acknowledge that the vast majority of Indians were 'idolaters'(Wink: 2003, p.203). Vasco Da Gama, thus, in his description of Calicut writes that the city of Calicut 'is inhabited by the Christians' (Ravenstein, 1998, 49). Local rulers Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal bestowed many privileges because the Persian Christians could ensure increased maritime activities

owning to their linkage with the western Asia and thus gave the Christians several privileges and autonomy to regulate their community affairs and customs (Malekandathil 2003: p. 78). The Christians were also controlling certain economic operation as recorded in contemporary sources. Marignolli observed that the proprietors of pepper gardens were the Christians of Saint Thomas. The Christians also acted as the masters of public steel yard (weighing office). Marignolli was given cordial welcome and patronage by the local Christians who gave him hundred gold coins every month and a thousand when he embarked on further journey (Yule, 1998, p.217). Interestingly the Christians of Kerala never faced social degradation. They were, on the other hand, given a higher status in caste hierarchy of Malabar. These included men of repute, noblemen and merchants. The Nayars did not abhor contact with these Christians. In sixteenth century when Tome Pires visited the region, he counted the Christians to be around fifteen thousand minus recent converts (Rodrigues, 1990, p. 73). On the other hand, *mlecchas* (Muslims) and other low caste were not extended these privileges. Duarte Barbosa must have felt strange seeing the fusion of local Christian with the Hindus and he observed the same while recording the same that Christians of Kerala were scattered among Heathens (Dames, 1990, p. 100). Duarte Barbosa encountered a church located in the interiors of Kerala. Christianity also penetrated in the interiors by the sixteenth century.

The Christians of Kerala followed the Nestorian church. Nestorian is a Christian sect that originated in Asia Minor at Syria. Nestorian Church believed in independence of the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. It is also known as Persian or Assyrian Church. In first half of fifth century, Nestorian Church became regional to Persia. The Islamic Caliphate granted them the status of *zimmi*, which also resulted in cordial relations between the Caliphate and the Church. The expansion of Islamic armies expanded the operation of the Church which reached as far as China and India in the tenth century. In sixteenth century, the Church reunited with the Rome also initiating the unification of the follower of Saint Thomas in Kerala with Rome.

The Christian immigrants to India were skilled traders. Even the missionaries displayed a keen understanding of trade and commodity structure of the Indian Ocean. Acts of Judas Thomas also testify the close nexus of traders and missionaries. Monk Abraham of the sixth century wrote, “I was a merchant of the number of those who traded on the sea, it happened to us that on our way back from the country of India, our ship broke up (Abraham, 2018, p. 27). Cosmas, another Christian monk of sixth century, also possessed a good understanding of maritime trade and commodity structure of Ceylon and south India. Referring to Ceylon, he remarks:

The island being, as it is in central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia, and it likewise sends out many of its own...And from the remotest countries I mean Tzinsta and other trading places, it receives silk, cloves, sandalwood and other products, and these again are passed on to the marts on this side, such as Male, where pepper grows, and to Calliana which exports copper and sesame-logs and cloth for making dresses, for it also is a great place of business. And to Sindhu also where musk and castor is produced...and to Persia and the Homerite country and to Adule. And the island receives imports from all these marts, which we have mentioned and passes them on to the remoter ports, while at the same time exporting its own produce in both directions.

(Abraham, 2018, p. 19)

The Christians of Kerala were known as the follower of Saint Thomas because legends attribute their arrival in Kerala to the Saint. The saint was said to have visited India during the times of Gondophares. It is claimed that the saint even converted the ruler to the Christianity (Abraham, 2018, pp. 24-25). Saint Thomas impressed the ruler with his divine powers. He was allowed to build a church but, later on, persecuted owing to fear of his rising popularity. With the passage of time, the church of Saint Thomas fell into neglect and merchant Thomas was sent to maintain the church. His followers accompanied Thomas from Jerusalem, Nineveh and Baghdad. The story might be a religious cloak to cover the forced migration due to religious persecutions under the

Sassanid and trading interests in Malabar. Malabar was important for its supply of spices and pepper. The Christians of Quilon had become the masters of pepper gardens when Marignolli visited Malabar. Another wave of Christian migration was said to have arrived in Malabar around the eighth and ninth century. First Bishop Thomas of Cana and later Mar Sabrisho and Mar Piroz brought groups of Christians to south India. The account of the Jacobite priest from Malabar refers to the migration of Christians in the following words:

Then in the year 823 AD the Syrian father Mar Sapon and Mar Piroz, with the illustrious Sabrisho came to India and reached Kullam. They went to king Shakibiti and asked from him for a piece of a land in which they could build a church for themselves and erect a town. He gave them the amount of the land they desired and they built a church and erected a town in the direction of Kullam, to which Sapon bishop and Metropolitans used to come by the orders of the Catholics who sent them Jacob priest. (Abraham, 1998, pp. 20-21)

Thus the Christians migrated to India in different phases. Both religious persecutions and trading interests attracted them towards Quilon. However, it was not only foreign groups that provided reservoir for the Christians, but the locals also embraced Christianity. Money and equality might be another two driving forces to the low castes. Duarte Barbosa candidly remarks, 'these men (locals) baptized for money' (Dames, 1990, p. 101).

The Christians in south India were favored by the same factors like Jews. The two displayed a considerable similarity. Both were present in south India before the arrival of Islam. At this juncture, Islam was not properly established and Buddhism was on the decline. Hinduism was regressing back into agriculture. The Hindu abhorrence to the sea encouraged the Christians and Jews to fill the trading space thus created. Maritime trade always remained an important constituent of the state policy in south India. Thus, the rulers responded to the changing scenario and displayed much initiative and warmth

in encouraging the Jews and Christians participation in their areas. The Christians were even accommodated in the nobility.

The Manigramam was an important and powerful guild of south India. There is much controversy over its character. Daniel quotes many sources to prove that members of the Manigramam were Christians. According to him, the Manigramam was entrusted with the duty to protect the Church and adjoining land (Daniel, 1924, p. 259). Tanu Iravi copper plate records, 'No poll shall be levied upon the slaves brought by these people. In case of vehicles (or merchandize) these people are entitled to collect eight cash for admitting in or letting out, and to collect four cash when it comes and goes in *veti* (meaning not known) or in boats.' The members of Manigramam were further authorized to levy duty on articles. These people were given seventy two such privileges. They could redress their complaints 'by stopping the custom duty on the weightage.' They were given jurisdiction to govern their criminal matters (Daniel, 1924, p. 257). Mar Sapo and the church of Quilon were also provided protection in buying and selling around the tenth century (Abraham, 1998, p. 22).

After the eleventh century, the Manigramam expanded its activities and recorded its presence in Southeast Asian countries. But, the Christian participation began to decline. The Muslims strengthened their organizations and soon monopolized the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean. The Manigramam responded to the changes and started expanding in the interiors. It started granting donation to the local temples with a view to associate with the masses. The Manigramam continued to enjoy various privileges but the Christians did not benefit from it. Association with Hindu temples and institutions brought them once again into the ambit of Hinduism. The Christians lost their status and identity. They requested the Portuguese governor to restore their ancient rights 'that the Christians who had the management of the Church also should have in their keeping the seal and the standard weight of the city, which privileges the governor of Canlao (Quilon?) had taken from them for the fault and negligence of one of their member' (K.N. Daniel, 1924, p. 259). Concentration of trading activities of the Manigramam in the interiors brought it close to Hindu religion. Daniel opines, 'Whereas the church of

Travancore is at that time totally demolished the great part of its parishioners having above forty years ago turned perfect heathen, all which has happened through the negligence of sending priests among them by reason of their great distance from any church, there being nevertheless several good Christians among them (Daniel, 1924, p. 261). He believes that the Manigramam Nayars of Quilon were in reality the Christian converts to Hinduism (Daniel, 1924, p. 261).

III. Conclusions

Thus one can see submit that Indian maritime trade has played a significant role in the history of India. It attracted various trading communities which remained precursor to various socio-economic dynamics in Indian history. Christian participation in Kerala's maritime trade remained one such important chapter in which the declining participation of the Buddhist and Hindus created space for the foreign communities like Christians and Jews. Islamic expansion had not yet penetrated the south India and thus Christians of Kerala played an important role while participating in maritime trade which brought increased resources to the local principalities. These Christian communities also attracted the foreign missionaries who acted as the carrier of information between the Christians of Kerala and Europe. One must not, however, forget that it was the Nestorian church of the Persia which was influential in the expansion of Christianity in Kerala. It was only in sixteenth century that the followers of Saint Thomas were incorporated in the Roman world of Christianity. The expansion of the Islamic influence from the thirteenth century onwards reduced the participation of the Christians of Kerala when the Red Sea became operational zone of Karimi merchants. Support of al Samuri of Calicut to Karimi further brought flow of maritime trade towards Calicut hampering the prospects of Christian and Jews in Quilon (Wink, 2015, p. 204). However, the arrival of the European (Portuguese) in the trading world of Kerala once again enabled the Christians of Kerala to request for the restoration of their earlier privileges.

References:

1. Abraham Meera. *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India*. Manohar, Delhi.1998. Manohar.
2. Dames Longworth. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants*. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi. 1989
3. Daniel, K.N. The Anchuvannam and the Manigramam of the Kottayam Plates of Tanu Iravi of the Jews and the Christians of Malabar, *Indian Antiquary*;1924 (52): 257-61.
4. Malekandathil Pius. Coastal Polity and the Changing Port-Hierarchy of Kerala, in Yogesh Sharma (eds.). *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Pre Modern India*, Primus, Delhi. 2013: 75-90.
5. Ravenstein, E.G. *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco Da Gama 1497-1499*. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi. 1998
6. Rodrigues, Francisco. *Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, New Delhi. 1990
7. Wink, Andre. *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World .Vol. III*. Primus, Delhi.2015.
8. Yule, H. *Cathay and the Way Thither. Vol. III*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi. 1998.