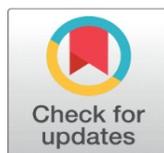


POLITICAL AUTHORITIES AND TRADE DYNAMICS IN 18TH CENTURY MALABAR

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ABSTRACT

The 18th century was a period of significant political, economic, and social transformation in Malabar, shaped by the intersection of indigenous power structures, colonial ambitions, and regional trade networks. This era witnessed the coexistence of traditional political systems, led by Naduvazhis and Desavazhis, along with the growing influence of European colonial powers. These interactions profoundly impacted the region's economic and political landscape. This study investigates the complex relationships between political authorities and the trade dynamics, focusing on the interactions among local chieftains, merchant communities, and European colonial powers. It examines how local rulers and trading groups negotiated their roles amidst challenges posed by colonial interventions, Mysorean invasions, and shifts in global trade patterns. The study emphasizes the importance of key commodities, such as pepper and cardamom, which were vital to the region's economy, and explores the mechanisms of control, resistance, and collaboration employed by various stakeholders. Using archival research and historiographical analysis, the paper underscores the adaptability of Malabar's political authorities and mercantile groups in navigating the complexities of 18th-century trade networks. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the interdependence between political structures and economic forces, illustrating how trade played a pivotal role in shaping the history of Malabar during this transformative period.

Keywords: Mercantile Realm, Political Authorities, Fragmented Polity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Malabar is a historically important region on the south-western coast of India and renowned for its rich cultural heritage, diverse political setting, and significance in maritime trade, particularly as a key centre for the global spice trade. The term Malabar itself has its roots in early Arabic and European references, with Arab geographer Yaquti and Portuguese chronicler Duarte Barbosa emphasizing Malabar's significance as a land of trade and cultural interactions. Under British rule, Malabar became synonymous with the coastal tract extending from Kumbala in the north to Cape Comorin in the south, a region that formed a critical node in the global spice trade.

The 18th century was a transformative period for Malabar. Its political and economic landscape underwent dramatic changes during this period characterized by a complex interplay of indigenous political structures, Mysorean invasions, colonial interventions, and global trade dynamics. The region's political order was unique, rooted in a feudal system without centralized governance. The decentralized authority vested in regional chieftains called *naduvazhis* and the local

leaders known as *desavazhis* and other landowning elites who created a variety of principalities, each competing for power and control over lucrative trade routes. Prominent kingdoms such as Kolathunad, the Zamorin's Calicut, Cochin, and Travancore sought to assert dominance, often navigating alliances and rivalries with European trading powers like the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British.

This period also witnessed significant upheavals, including the Mysorean invasions led by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, which disrupted the traditional political and economic systems. The Mysoreans introduced centralized revenue models that eroded local authority, leading to widespread resistance from regional rulers and communities. Amid these disruptions, European colonial powers capitalized on the instability to establish control, with the British East India Company emerging as the dominant force by the late 18th century. Their policies, driven by a desire to monopolize the spice trade, reshaped Malabar's political and economic fabric.

The mercantile realm in 18th-century Malabar embodied a distinct and autonomous sphere of influence that operated parallel to the region's fragmented polity, often beyond the control of political power, dominated by European traders like the Dutch, French, and English. This realm saw foreign merchants acquiring land, extending loans to local merchants and rulers, and gradually subordinating them as agents and collaborators. Through treaty agreements, even the Rajas were integrated as trade partners, further consolidating foreign economic dominance. Despite its autonomy, the mercantile realm did not empower indigenous merchants, who remained in subordinate roles, inhibiting the potential for capitalist growth led by local actors in Malabar. This study is an attempt to explore the nature of political authorities and their interference in trade dynamics in 18th century Malabar. By examining the roles played by local chieftains, princely states, and mercantile communities, the paper aims to shed light on the region's unique political dynamics and their impact on trade networks. The analysis also highlights the resilience and adaptive strategies of native actors in the face of colonial expansion, offering insights into the broader processes of political and economic transformation in pre-modern Malabar

2. POLITICAL AUTHORITIES IN 18TH-CENTURY MALABAR

The political landscape of 18th-century Malabar was a complex combination of feudal structures, localized governance, and strategic interactions with external powers, including Mysorean rulers and European colonial forces. The period was marked by significant transformations in political institutions, trade practices, and governance, culminating in British dominance by the late 18th century. Before the Mysorean invasions, then Malabar consisted of numerous petty principalities. In 1743, Stein Van Golleness identified 42 principalities and four significant kingdoms: The Kolathiris of Chirakkal, the Zamorins of Calicut, the Rajas of Cochin, and the Travancore kingdom. Despite efforts by rulers like Marthanda Varma in Travancore and Sakthan Thampuran in Cochin to establish centralized state structures, Malabar remained predominantly feudal, characterized by a decentralized political system. The political authority and governance structure was featured with Naduvazhis (rulers of Nadus), Desavazhis (heads of Desams), and Mukhyastans (local chiefs). These rulers, primarily from the Nair caste, also served as landlords or Janmis, owning extensive lands and collecting rents from tenants. The Rajas, who were also Janmis, depended on these revenues rather than direct taxation of agricultural production. The Naduvazhis maintained armed men, reinforcing the militarized nature of the feudal system.

The political structure of Malabar in the 18th century was militaristic, with each Naduvazhi maintaining their own armed forces and holding vast tracts of land. These lands were distributed to sub-tenants for cultivation. The system was feudal, as all land was owned and controlled by the Naduvazhi, who dominated the means of production, leaving tenants without any rights to the land. The key political units in Malabar at the time included Chirakkal, Arakkal, Kottayam, Kadathanadu, Kurumbranadu, and Kozhikode. Along with them the local households were also enjoyed some political authorities in their respective localities.

In the early stages of colonial intrusion, the Zamorins of Calicut were the dominant authority in Malabar. However, their influence began to wane by the second half of the 18th century. The Kolathiries of Kolathunadu, rulers of Chirakkal Swarupam emerged as the significant ruling dynasty. By the time the English arrived, the Kolathiri Kingdom had fragmented into several principalities and the political authority is shared among them. When the English established their factory at Tellicherry toward the end of 18th Century, key principalities that had gained independence from the Kolathiri Kingdom included Randatara, Iruvanad, Kurungot, Cannanore, Kottayam, Kadathanad, and some semi-independent territories. Randatara was governed by four prominent Nambiar houses of the Achanmar caste: Kandoth,

Palliyath, Ayillath, and Arayath. The modern places of Mavilayi, Chembilode, Iruveri, Makreri, Muzhiappilangad, Edakkad and Anjarakandy form constituent parts of Randatara.

Iruvalinad, also known as Iruvanad, was governed by six prominent houses of the Nambiar chieftains. The modern areas of Panur, Puthur, Tripurangottur, Panniyanur, Perinkulam, and Kariya formed the territories of Iruvanad. Kurungot, originally a part of Iruvalinad, came under the control of a Nair chieftain, with present-day Kallayi and Olavilam belonging to this lineage. The Arakkal Swarupam, led by the Ali Rajas of Cannanore, was the only Muslim royal family in Malabar. They held suzerainty over Cannanore and the Lakshadweep Islands in the Arabian Sea. Their influence increased during the Mysorean rule, but they eventually lost their authority with the advent of British hegemony.

Kottayam, under the Puranad Rajas, was an independent principality within Kolathunadu, situated between Tellicherry and Wayanad. This house played a significant role in Malabar politics during the late 18th century, fiercely resisting the British under the leadership of Pazhassi Raja. Interestingly, Pazhassi Raja was also the first to enter into an agreement with the East India Company when they established their settlement at Tellicherry. This highlights the complex ways in which local rulers interacted with the Company during its early presence in Malabar. Kadathanad was ruled by the Kadathanad Rajas, whose territory extended between Mahe and Puthupattanam. The ruler, known as the Vazhunnavar of Badagara, governed a region claimed by the Kolathiri but was influential enough to adopt the title of Raja by the second half of 18th century. The northernmost part of the Kolathiri Kingdom was managed by the Rajas of Nileswaram belongs to Allada Swarupam. These chiefs and Petti principalities of controlled the political authority of North Malabar during 18th century and each maintained control over their respective territories.

The invasions by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in the latter half of the 18th century disrupted the traditional feudal order and political setup of Malabar. These rulers sought to centralize governance, abolishing the privileges of Naduvazhis and Desavazhis and introducing a new revenue system. Land revenue assessments became the foundation of Mysorean administration, although the mountainous terrain of North Malabar limited their implementation. The revenue demands of the Mysorean rulers strained the agrarian economy, leading to stagnation in pepper cultivation and disruption of coastal trade. The political landscape witnessed unrest and upheaval, with notable resistance from the Chirakkal Raja and the Kottayam Raja. The invasion also catalysed the emergence of Mappila political entrepreneurs, who combined trade, agriculture, and military activities to navigate the new administrative landscape.

The advent of Colonial powers and their attempt to establish trade monopoly and territorial control also altered the existing political order of Malabar. Though the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French powers attempted to attain the trade monopoly it was the English who succeed in securing both trade monopoly and territorial control in Malabar by the end of 18th century. The British East India Company's engagement in Malabar began in the late 17th century with the establishment of trading posts at Tellicherry, Calicut, and Travancore. Initially, the Company focused on securing commercial interests, fortifying trade posts, and negotiating with local rulers. By the 1750s, the Company controlled several key forts in Malabar, including Thallassey, Kannur and Anchuthengu etc.

Following the defeat of Tipu Sultan, the British annexed Malabar in 1792, integrating it into the Madras Presidency by 1800. The transition marked a significant transformation of Malabar's political institutions. The British adopted a dual approach: negotiating with regional Rajas to secure trade privileges and attempting to establish direct administrative control. The Company's agreements with the Rajas often involved monopolizing pepper trade by demanding government shares of pepper as part of their tribute. The Malabar Commission, established to streamline governance, observed that the British could not maintain order without collaborating with local elites. This dependency on native rulers and the strategic use of treaties reflected the challenges of establishing colonial authority in a region with deep-rooted feudal traditions.

The British colonial administration disrupted the pre-colonial polity, economy, and society of Malabar. The segmentation of power, with significant authority residing in local elites and Rajas, was gradually replaced by centralized governance. The feudal privileges of the lesser Rajas eroded, and the integration of Malabar into the colonial economy diminished their control over trade and land revenues. Nevertheless, the local rulers' responses to colonial intrusion were varied. While some collaborated with the British to safeguard their interests, others resisted, as seen in the armed struggle led by Pazhassi Raja in Kottayam. The British strategy of fostering divisions among local rulers and leveraging trade monopolies facilitated their consolidation of power.

3. TERRITORIAL AUTHORITIES AND TRADE CONTROL

The fragmented polity of 18th-century Malabar, characterized by its decentralised structure of political authority divided among rajas, naduvazhis, desavazhis, and local chieftains, significantly influenced the dynamics of trade control in the region. This decentralization prevented any single ruler from asserting dominant control over the trade networks, fostering the emergence of a parallel mercantile realm. European powers, particularly the Dutch and the English East India Company, exploited this fragmented sovereignty to establish their own spheres of influence. They entered into agreements with local rulers, securing monopolies over lucrative commodities like pepper and cardamom. Treaties and contracts often granted Europeans exclusive trading rights, as seen in the case of the English Company's arrangements with local rulers such as the Coringottu Nair and the Raja of Kadattanad, ensuring their dominance over trade routes and markets.

The East India Company's efforts to control trade were further reinforced by its strategy of granting advances to local merchants, such as Chatoor Chitty and Chavacara Musa, who acted as intermediaries for procuring pepper. Simultaneously, measures were taken to curb clandestine trade, with armed patrols preventing rival European powers like the Dutch and French from interfering in the British-dominated trade. This collaboration between colonial powers and local authorities not only subordinated indigenous merchants but also undermined the economic autonomy of the region. Ultimately, the interplay of fragmented territorial sovereignty and the assertion of European mercantile power reshaped the trade landscape of Malabar, embedding it within the framework of colonial control.

4. CONCLUSION

The 18th century was a transformative period for Malabar, marked by a complex interplay of fragmented political authority, shifting colonial ambitions, and a dynamic mercantile realm. The region's decentralized political structure, with power divided among local chieftains, regional rulers, and feudal elites, created a unique environment for trade, where no single entity could dominate the economic landscape. This fragmentation allowed European colonial powers, particularly the British, to exploit the divisions, establishing their own monopolies and controlling lucrative trade routes, especially for commodities like pepper and cardamom. The British East India Company's strategy of making alliances with local rulers and merchants, along with its suppression of rival European powers, fundamentally reshaped the region's trade networks. While the colonial powers achieved economic dominance, the indigenous merchants and local rulers were often demoted to subordinate roles, unable to challenge the growing influence of European economic interests.

The introduction of centralized colonial governance, particularly after the annexation of Malabar by the British, led to the erosion of traditional political structures and further undermined the region's autonomy. However, the resilience and adaptability of native actors, including the political authorities and mercantile communities, played a crucial role in navigating the colonial encroachment. Despite the overwhelming presence of European powers, local resistance and the ability to strategically engage with the colonial system ensured that the legacy of Malabar's feudal and mercantile traditions continued to influence the region's socio-political landscape.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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