

A STUDY OF GUJARATI TRADING COMMUNITY IN RELATION WITH EMERGENCE OF ALAPPUZHA PORT

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Abstract

The present study trying to trace a comprehensive history of Alappuzha port and this work centers on two set of questions in the first place detailed answers are sought to the question of how Alappuzha port was emerged and developed, politically and socio –economically. Port Alappuzha a planned construction of Travancore government in 1762 for the involment of maritime trading activities was a great challenge to the foreign trading companies which tries to monopolize the entire overseas trade and transports and this kind of trading activities were very rare in Indian subcontinent in 1700s. Another objective of this paper is to trace the history of Gujarati community in Alappuzha in the larger social context of Kerala in relation to the emergence of Alappuzha port and the past and present situation of Gujaratis their social and cultural life focusing on the identification of this community as a dying one. Gujaratis were the one among the trading group settled in Alappuzha, who were conservatives and rigidly followed traditions and social orders. What binds the community together is a common passion for business and money making. They were sharpened through centuries of maritime trade and commerce and has an inherent ability to do business, was attracted Travancore government and they invited gujaratis to settle in alappuzha for counter European merchants.

Key words: Alappuzha Port, Gujarati Trading Community, Maritime History

INTRODUCTION

In Kerala history maritime trade played an integral part of its economic activities. Maritime commerce is known to have been carried on for ages between the Malabar Coast and Persian Gulf.¹ Port acted as the doors for the micro economic units of Kerala to interact with the wider world outside. These were also the main doors through which the outside world enters in to the nook and corner of Kerala. The location of ports and the rhythms of trade are largely determined by the physical factors of geography, geology and climate², specially the monsoon winds dictated the economic life of the region by subjecting its ports ‘The period of activity’ and ‘month of isolation’ bringing ships from Africa, Arabia, and Persia etc.³ In short Movement of the commodities, ideas, and people through this port shaped a lot of the culture of the people inhabiting the region. Travancore had from very ancient time’s maritime trade relations with the western and Middle East and Far Eastern countries.⁴ The anonymous writer of

Periplus of Erythrean Sea describes the commercial activity at the ports of Muziris [Cranganore], Nelcynda [Niranam], Bacre [Purakad], and Balita [Varkala] where coir, topaz, precious metals etc...were exchanged for large quantities of pepper, ginger, ivory, peacocks, apes, piece goods and other indigenous products⁵. Pepper was specifically mentioned as a produce of Cottanara [Kuttanad].⁶

CONTENT

Emergence of Alappuzha port we could understand only with study of the socio economic background of Travancore. Travancore [anglicized version of the name Thiruvithamcode] was pushed by the ambitious and state building Rajas Marthanda Varma 1729-1758, and Rama Varma 1758-1798, who were assisted and guided by skillful ministers of Aiyappa Marthanda Pillai, and Raja Kesava Das, were generally considered as the most brilliant administrators.⁷ These personalities made Travancore one of the major force in south India, specially Marthanda Varma, he cleared all the divisive factors that stood in his way. The expansionist moves of Marthanda Varma came out of his economic policies carried out for strengthening his state. When he came in to power the condition of Travancore was very bad, and to improve the economy he conquered the neighbouring territories. During that period coconut was the main produce and the rulers of the Kayal lands received a lot of profit from the production in those regions. This profit insisted Marthanda Varma to attack the regions of Karappuram and Vaipin⁸. He also annexed Vadakkumcore, Thekkencore and kayamkulam territories because these places were famous for its pepper production.⁹ It's also proved that the Dutch also abandoned their old ally the king of Quilon and kayamkulam at the mercy of marthanda varma.¹⁰ Through the annexation of these places he can easily control the most of the spice trade in Kerala. During that period Dutch were the most important power in sea trade. Because of the annexation of the maharaja, the Dutch lost sizable spice hinterlands from their control. In course of time the Dutch tried to reestablish their hegemony and control over these regions. To utilize the situation maximum the English East India Company supported Marthanda Varma against the Dutch, the defeat of Dutch in 1741 at the battle of Kulachil¹¹ shattered all the commercial interest of the Dutch trade in the region. By the annexation of kollam by Marthandavarma, the pepper trade of the Dutch through this port started to decline. With the treaty signed after the war, the pepper trade came

under the control of the Travancore government. With the treaty of Mavelikkara in 1753¹² the Dutch were compelled to sell a great portion of spices that they had collected from their ports to Marthandavarma. The annexation made by Marthandavarma and the downfall of the Dutch power augmented the economic status of the Travancore state. Ashin das Gupta memorized this act with the following words

“Finally Travancore challenged and broke the Dutch blockade of the coast at sea. This was done not by another navel battle but by the establishment of a new port at Alleppey a little to the south of cochin, which the Dutch were forced to leave alone. All this took some fifty years accomplish , in this half a century the greatest single act in the business world of Malabar was the monopoly of Travancore.¹³

Meanwhile he also made an attempt to procure spices from Kochi by the treaty of 1757, which he signed with the Kochi raja. Following this development there emerged a strong support between Marthanda Varma and English East India Company. He reorganized the state administration and finances on a firmer footing. The company found in him a powerful ruler and they believed that the maharaja would provide all the help to expand commercial interest of the company in Travancore¹⁴,so they gave full support to him providing arms and ammunition for carrying out his expansionist ventures. Marthanda Varma turned his attention to the most economically strategic states among his neighbours and captured them one by one

During the reign of RamaVarma, generally known as *Dharma Raja* or *Kizhavan Raja*¹⁵ the state was going through a crisis. It was during his time that the recurring invasion of Mysore sultan started and got accelerated .It made a large impact on the affairs of the state. With Tipu’s invasion on Malabar, the people from Malabar started to migrate to Travancore. Travancore state was also under the fear of being attacked. In order to defend the state, Raja needed wealth and the support of English East India Company and their army too. By that time the English East India Company had become an eminent power in south India. During the time of Marthanda Varma the relationship between Travancore and the company was very cordial. But during the period of RamaVarma, the Company started to interfere in the internal affairs of the state and the king could not resist it because he had to fight against the Arkot Nawab, Zamorin of

Kozhikode and the Mysorean Sultans.¹⁶ So he was forced to depend up on the English arms, and in return the English increased their demand for pepper.

During that period the condition of Travancore was not good. There was a great need for huge quantity of food and accommodating facilities for the migrating people. And the wealth from the agrarian sector was showing downward trends. It was in such an atmosphere that RamaVarma ruled the country. Against this background he was looking for a personality who would revive the economy of the state¹⁷. He thus got the service of Kesava Pillai who had a high vision about the economic matters. His first and foremost object was to raise the commercial interest of the country. For this purpose he visited almost all the sea coast towns from Cape Comerin to the north and Paravoor in the south. During his journey he identified the important and strategic economic zones of the state and also realized the importance of Alappuzha. And he decided to develop two new ports, one at Alappuzha and another at vizhijam. Within a short time Alappuzha was converted in to a port town and a warehouse and a few shops were opened. Many fairs and markets were instituted at junctional points of the areas of production and exchange. In the real sense, port Alappuzha was constructed at the time of Aiyappa Marthanda Pillai who was in charge of the Diwan of Travancore. Kesava das converted in to a major trading centre and the treaty of 937 [kollam era] [1762] Diwan Aiyappa Marthanda Pillai constructed a fort in alappuzha for the development of trade [mud fort]¹⁸. Another reason was that, with the increasing disappearance of the Dutch trade monopoly in the southern ports of Kerala, the economic status of English East India Company increased. Yet the Dutch domination over the port of Kochi was always a matter of threat to the British. A new port was needed for them to divert the commodities that used to reach the hands of the Dutch in Kochi from the eastern parts of Kerala¹⁹, and this also paved the way for the emergence of Alappuzha port.

The central brain behind this plan was Alexander Hamilton. Kesava Das took rapid actions for the development of Alappuzha port. Thachhil MathuTharakan a native Christen merchant who was to supply timbers to the British, advised Kesava Das about the possibilities of the growth of trade in central Travancore, if a port was developed at Alappuzha.²⁰ Moreover Diwan also recognized the importance of the place which had an extensive mud bank along with sea.²¹. The building work of port was started in 1762 and completed in 1786. The first ship reached the port with cargo in the same year. Mr.Beastan the then chief engineer

of Travancore was the chief designer of the port. This port situated in Lat. 9.30'N Long. 76.19 40 E and is open to coastal and foreign trade in 1786. As a sea port it owes its importance to a mud bank off the coast which renders the sea smooth for shipping operations for the bulk of the year. The port normally functions for a period of eight months from September 15th to May 15th. The Light house and a pier are also helped to the development of Alappuzha port.

For Alappuzha to become shipping harbor favorable factors were Pallaturuthi River, Punnamada River, and Chakara [a peculiar marine phenomenon]. These two famous rivers were linked with manmade canals like Vadathodu and Commercial canal. In order to connect the shipping harbor with the commercial canal they dug Opputti canal. And on the banks of Opputti canal trading centers were sprang up. For the development of trade various roads were opened up for the traffic to the town from various directions, and established a market at Cheganassery and another at Thalayolaparambu. They helped to redirect the commodities to the direction of Alappuzha. For activation of trade, fairs, weekly markets were held in different parts of the state.²² Commodities of hinterlands were brought and collected at Alappuzha from where they were handed over to the foreign trade. Besides Kesavadas, Veluthampi {Diwan of the state} during the period of Balarama Varma played a significant role in the development of trade in Alappuzha. He opened a network of roads for transportation of commodities from various directions and established weekly and by weekly markets at economically important places of the state. He cleared the bushy island lying in the midst of the backwaters north of Alappuzha and planted coconut trees and converted a portion of it in to paddy fields.

In order to increase the state revenue and to stabilize the price level of consumer goods, state introduced the trade system. According to this, Travancore brought important commodities like pepper, tobacco, salt, and cardamom, was directly under the control of the state.²³ The state framed rules for the guidance of the commercial departments and issued special royal proclamations legalizing the monopoly of all such articles by the *Sirkar* and prohibiting all private dealings in them.²⁴ 'Gudams' were instituted in order to collect and sail commodities. The sarkar collected the commodities at a fixed price from the producers and sold through these 'Gudams'. Individual traders were deprived of the chances of conducting exports and imports directly. In 1743 pepper trade was declared as state monopoly. By this law no one could sell

these articles even if produced by him to anyone but the Sirkar and that no one could purchase these articles even for private consumption from any other quarter, except from the Sirkar stores²⁵. As a result of this the merchants can buy products only through the government shops. An important aspect of trading policy was the exclusion of foreign merchants from interior trade.²⁶

Under the direction of Maharaja, Rama IyanDalawa organized a commercial department and established 'Pandakasalas' or Store houses and depots at Padmanabhapuram, Trivandrum, Quilon, Mavelikara, and Arakkuzha near in Muvattupuzha. They were called '*torams*' and were guarded by the military and stored pepper, tobacco, arecanutect purchased at rates fixed by the sirkar .these depots were placed under the supervision of officers called '*Vicharippukars*' or '*Torakars*'. Custom houses known as '*Chowkeys*' were established for the collection of custom duties²⁷ at the frontiers and duties on articles exported and imported were imposed and collected²⁸. At present there are 32 Chowkeys in the state²⁹. An official named 'adhikari' was appointed to collect taxes he was appointed by the king directly. He had to places all the monthly accounts in front of the related officials.

By the opening up of sues canal in 1856, finished products from Europe largely started flowing in to Malabar in general and Alappuzha in particular. The volume of trade from Alappuzha increased considerably. After 1864 and there was a phenomenal increase in the trade of Alappuzha. According to the treaty signed between East India Company and Kochi. Travancore was began to be considered as a state within the British India, before the treaty, Travancore was considered as a foreign state and duty charges were paid on imported goods from Travancore .After signing the treaty all the duty charges paid on imported and exported items, were removed. As a result the Alappuzha based trade increased momentum. The amount of export rose from Rs 34.45 lakhs in 1861-62 to Rs 72.76lakhsin 1869. coir was the most important commodity exported from Alappuzha. During the period of 1905-1906 43.6 lacks coir was exported from Alappuzha to U.S. Australia, and Europe.1918-1919 it was again raise.

Naturally any town with such a harbour and hinter lands will develop rapidly. State invited north Indian merchants and others to settle and trade in the new town, Parsis, Gujaratis kutches and sindhis came and settled in Alappuzha. In addition Chettiyars from present day Tamilnadu, Konkani Brahmin refugees

from Goa and from several places along the Malabar Coast they invited to come on very favorable terms. Especially Land along the commercial canal was given free, and the rents for the use of the state warehouses were low. Temples and mosques were built by the state for the new comers.

By inviting merchants from various regions he could forge trading bonds with many parts of the subcontinent. But the invitation implied also that in Travancore no merchants were available who could deal successfully with the overseas trade. Even the internal trade of Travancore was at that time very limited and it was mainly undertaken by non Hindus or non malayalis like Syrian Christians, Muslims Tamil Chettiyars, and by some Tamil Brahmins. Among the settlers Gujaratis were the main community who had influenced the trade and culture of Alappuzha. And it was around 1798 that they arrived at Alappuzha. The most important aspect of their arrival was the drought spread in Gujarat in 1798. The Gujarati trades men who were put under economic crisis, readily accepted the Diwan's offer which also provide them tax free land, schools and exclusive temples. A Gujarati street with buildings in Gujarati style was constructed for them. In short Gujarati trades men were given all they wanted in return for their trade skill to be used at Alappuzha. The Gujarati trading community thus got settled in Alappuzha. At first a hundred families arrived. Around 1900 it increased in to 400. They engaged in trade on the bunks of the "Commercial Canal" and the important goods that they traded were the high range products, copra, dried coco from which the coconut oil is extracted. Realizing the commercial importance of Alappuzha a number of Gujarati and British companies began to establish their businesses at Alappuzha. Some of the important Gujarati companies were Dharamsi vagji, Rathamsi Azarya, Empire Coir Mill, Mahaveer Coir Mill, Vallabhadas kanchi. They brought spices and other goods from the high range areas and brought them to Kottayam jetty and from there it was brought to Alappuzha through the Vembanadu Lake in large boats which were driven manually.

In 1840 the British resident general Cullan abolished British monopoly in pepper trade. This decision was highly profitable to the Gujarati traders as pepper was the most demanded spice. Copra and coconut oil were other important commodities that the Gujarati's handled. Coconut was the major agricultural product of the coastal region and high range areas, Alappuzha became the trade center of coconut related industries. Dried coconut is called

Copra. This copra has to be dried more and cut in to pieces and coconut oil extracted from it. For the processing of copra “*kanitta*” was established. About 180 *kannittas* were there at Alappuzha. Availability of copra induced the coconut oil production industry of Alappuzha. A lot of oil mills owned by Gujarati’s were established. The Gujarati owners of oil mills, *kannitta* and the oil traders made considerable profit.

Alappuzha was known as the coir city. In early times, the European countries were interested in jute products because of its capacity to resist cold .but when coir matt and mattings were introduced in European markets, it was readily accepted because of its greater quality against jute products. realizing the strength and capacity to resist cold, an American namely James Daragh established the first coir factory at Alappuzha in 1859 viz The Daraghsmail& Company¹. The Gujarati’ traders toured on this area, for the coir products. They set up coir and coir products from the sub urban villages of Alappuzha. And they are exported to European countries.

The Gujarati’s established coir factories as well, as coir and Coir products began to be exported on a large scale. When the demand for coir increased, the coir spinning sectors established themselves as cottage industries. This provided a new livelihood for thousands of village men and women.^{xxx} Around 1812, the Alappuzha pier was completed and it promoted a considerable increase in export. Thus spices and other goods from the high ranges, Coconut oil, timber products, and coir products began to export through Alappuzha and the result was the establishment Alappuzha as “The Venice of The East”. The Gujarati traders were active in the trade Sector of Alappuzha, especially in trade with Bombay from where they came.

GUAJARATIS - THE PRESENT SCENARIO

During the glorious period of Alappuzha there were 400 Gujarati families mainly engaged in trade and commerce. But now they are reduced to 15 families. Along with them the other trading groups in Alappuzha, are one Sindhi, one Marvadi family, and a few Maharashrian families who are mainly black smiths from upper Maharashtra {they reside near mullakal}. The language spoken by this group is

mainly Gujarati. They can understand and speak Malayalam, but with a different accent. The language used for prayer and services is mainly Gujarati.

The Gujarati Community lives near the convent square. The street is mainly known as Gujarati street. It was Raja Kesava Das who invited this Gujarati community to Alappuzha. By profession they were traders. They trade mainly timber, pepper, spices, arecanut, jeera, kaduka, etc, and this type of business was seasonal. In the early period they used money and also practiced barter system for trade. At the beginning of the 19th century the port reached its zenith of its glory, as a result a lot of tradesmen specially Gujaratis came to Kerala. The reduction in the number of Gujaratis is mainly due to the downfall of Alappuzha port.

As Alappuzha port is not a natural port, it has its own drawbacks; it has the difficulty in the shipment of cargos. And Loading of cargo needed extra wages. Because at Alappuzha cargo was to be brought to the ship which was anchored about two kilometers away from the shore. In 1928, Kochi Port was developed with more facilities, which resulted in low cost transportation compared to the Alappuzha port. At Kochi packed cargos as well as large containers could be directly loaded in to the ship. It gave large margin in wages. This attracted the Gujarati tradesmen and they started to migrate to Kochi, and other places

Around 1965 onwards the shifting started .3 to 5 families shifted out of Alappuzha every year. Most of the Gujarati tradesmen shifted their Activities and trade to Kochi, Tamilnadu and other prominent places. A few of them, who were economically backward, still remained in Alappuzha. They could not adapt themselves to the new age mechanization and as a result they suffered great loss. The coconut Oil extraction industry is a good example. The Gujarati mill owners adopted the traditional method of oil extraction and this technology caused a loss of 10% of oil. The introduction of new technology oil- expeller unit could reduce the loss by 4%.The new system needed only a few labourers. Under these circumstances, the Gujarati entrepreneurs who could not adapt themselves had to wind up their business.

The firms based at Alappuzha had to shift their centers. The high range commodities were thus sent to Kochi, coir to Kollam and Copra to Tamilnadu. For a long time the industrial area of Alappuzha felt a doom later, on the basis of market, skilled Labour and availability of quality raw material, the coir industry

revived in Alappuzha. It is still existing, but in a decentralized form, and have been scattered to the suburban villages of the town. Due to the shortage of raw material Coir fiber is purchased cheaply from Tamilnadu, but of poor quality. Thus still the coir mats and matting industry exists in Alappuzha. Decline of trade and commerce compelled the Gujaratis to leave Alappuzha. Yet some factories still exist in Alappuzha, they are Vallabhadaskanchi, Mahaveer coir company etc..These companies are engaged in business of high range commodities, tarpaulin and coir. As the business became dull the number of Gujarati families shift out of Alappuzha. The Gujarati school which was established by Raja Kesava Das was also closed. The school building is now being used as a godown. At present, tourism has emerged as the new generation industry in Alappuzha. The inborn skill of Gujaratis compelled them to turn to new sectors, and as a result a few of the Gujaratis switched on to house boat industry. The political upheavals like PunnappraVayalar upheavals also affected Gujaratis in Alappuzha and its trade relationships. The struggle and its aftermaths paved the way for a tremendous growth of communist party and trade unions. Their demand for more wages was not affordable for the existing new companies of the Gujaratis and they were forced to wind up their companies at great loss. In 1949, saw the integration of Kochi and Travancore and the emergence of a new state namely thiru-kochi. The new state came under the rule of the president of India. When these two separate states were considered as one; the authorities gave more importance to Cochin port, due to its facilities. This adversely affected Alappuzha and the Gujaratis also. In 1956, the state of Kerala was constituted according to the linguistic basis.The Aroor Bridge was constructed which linked the district of Alappuzha with Ernakulum. It presented more profitable route for the transportation of the high range commodities from kottayam to Kochi. The kottayam Ernakulum Railway line constructed in 1956 was a great blow to Alappuzha. This enabled the transportation of high range commodities from kottayam to Kochi at a low cost. The merchants and exporters began to depend on Cochin. At that time there was no railway Line through Alappuzha. It was only in 1989 that a railway line was constructed at Alappuzha. By then majority of trade and tradesmen had migrated to Kochi, Alappuzha that once flourished as a trade center had by then already collapsed

Gujaratis are usually conservatives and very close to their roots and preserve their cultural identity as such. Now one of the major issue faced by the Gujaratis

is mainly related to marriage. Though preference is given to alliances from the same caste, in special cases intercaste marriages are allowed. Matrimonial alliance within the caste is a major difficulty that they are facing. They are finding it difficult to get proper alliances from Kerala. People of Gujarat, and Gujarati community residing in other parts of Kerala are reluctant to give their daughters to Gujarati boys from Alappuzha due to the dismal nature of economy, but the Gujarati girls of Alappuzha are able to find bridegrooms from Gujarat. Some changes noticed in the institution of marriage used to held for two three days in brides resident with many traditional cultural customs and ceremonies held with much gaiety and fun. Now marriage is just one day affair with gaudy and lavish spending asserting one's social and financial status. Most of the rituals related to the birth and death are now also followed by the community. The migration of Gujaratis of Alappuzha to other parts of Kerala is mainly due to the lack of better educational facilities, and poor career prospects. The young generation of Gujarati community in Alappuzha is ready to leave Alappuzha and prefer the metro Politian cities like Bangalore, Chennai etc.

CONCLUSION

Alappuzha port was created under the conditions of state involvement in foreign trade. The state government found it as a rewarding enterprise to have a state controlled export outlet and charged the state commercial department with the construction of the port Alappuzha. This meant that the state could and would participate in the foreign trade of pepper and other spices and of timber, which was dominated at that time mainly by foreign companies. In order to beat the European trading companies in the long run, Travancore government wanted a strong merchant community in Alappuzha so that the merchants were brought from various places especially from the rich provinces of Sindh and Cutch and they were given every facility for carrying out a successful trade.

Gujaratis were the one among the traders invited by the Travancore government for facilitate trade .the government provided everything for their settlement in return for their trading skill. Gujaratis still in alappuzha had preserved their tradition, style of dressing till recently. It is observed that in spite of mingling with Kerala culture the Gujaratis still maintain their tradition, custom and convention. Ingrinded with the soil of Alappuzha a few of them still in Alappuzha are reluctant to leave the land for better pastures. This community of Gujaratis is

not detached completely from their homeland. They are living in a new ethnic, social, and physical environment for a long period of about 200 years. In this process of adaption they have retained much of their past tradition. It is interesting to note that in spite of being settled in a new environment and having been exposed to various forces, this community has managed to maintain their traditional value norms, culture, religion, and language to a considerable extent.

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