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The Ali Rajas of Cannanore: status and identity at the interface of commercial and political expansion, 1663-1723

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CHAPTER THREE

LORDS OF THE SEA

Introduction

Scholars striving to visualize the commercial world of pre-colonial Indian Ocean merchants meet with the difficulty in obtaining reliable source materials pertaining to their trade activities. Often they have to be satisfied with the scattered references which appear in various, mainly foreign sources. Because of the absence of any reliable local source materials, this problem becomes even more acute in the case of the pre-colonial Malabar Muslim trading magnates. These merchants, whose commercial interests usually clashed with those of the European trading companies, generally appeared in trade reports of the latter as 'unruly guests' who by 'smuggling' commodities contravened the clauses of the treaties and outstripped the existing control mechanism. The 'clandestine' character of this trade prevents us from obtaining a detailed picture of their commercial activities even from the European East India Company accounts. The trading activities of the Ali Rajas of Cannanore were no exemption to this. Nonetheless, scattered references from various sources combined with some 'intelligent guess work' can provide, though still incomplete in many respects, a broader picture of their trading networks, organizational techniques, commodity compositions and the like. In the following pages, I will present a survey of the trading world of the Cannanore Mappila merchants in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the beginning decades of the eighteenth century, within the broader framework of the changes in the maritime trading system in Malabar between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

The fifteenth century: Decline or continuity?

The fifteenth century witnessed tremendous changes in the pattern of the Indian Ocean commerce which was laid down during the preceding centuries. The Chinese junks abruptly withdrew from long-distance, oceanic trade although the reason for this continues to evade a satisfactory explanation.¹ The Black Death and the ensuing economic crisis in Egypt gave the Mamluk Sultans

¹ Haraprasad Ray attributes the reason for this withdrawal to various internal developments rather than to any pressure from other maritime powers. On the other hand, Meilink-Roelofs suggests a connection between the rise of the Muslim maritime hegemony in the Indian Ocean and the withdrawal of the Chinese from long-distance maritime ventures. Haraprasad Ray, 'China and the 'Western Ocean' in the Fifteenth Century', in Satish Chandra (ed.), *The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1987), 109-24 at 118-19; M. A. P. Meilink-

the opportunity to introduce a spice monopoly in the empire and secure a steady flow of money into the State treasury.² This manoeuvre conflicted directly with the interests of the influential Karimi merchants and this could have gradually weakened their leading role in the Indian Ocean spice trade.

The Indian Sub-Continent was not free from politico-economic disarray either. The Delhi Sultanate, which maintained its sway over a large part of the Sub-Continent, was experiencing its twilight of power after Timur's onslaught in 1398. Indeed, Janet Abu-Ludhod looked at the state of Asian affairs in the fifteenth-century as a preparatory stage to the impending dominance of Europe. After the disintegration of an Asian dominant 'thirteenth century world economy', she perceives the Asian situation as almost being conditioned to be replaced by the Euro-centric 'modern world system', proposed by Emmanuel Wallerstein.³ In that sense, the fifteenth century is presumed to be a period of decline and disintegration in Asian history.

An opposite viewpoint is held by such scholars as André Gunder Frank and Kenneth Pomeranz. They do not discern a phase of sharp decline in Asian economies as opposed to the 'rise of the West' in the fifteenth century.⁴ A close look at the developments in fifteenth-century South Asia demonstrates that the pessimistic view of the 'decline of Asia' is indeed unfounded. What occurred were realignments rather than recession in the existing Indian Ocean commercial patterns. Indian Ocean trade did not fall apart in the course of the fifteenth century. On the contrary, as commented on by K. N. Chaudhuri, it was a period of unusual prosperity.⁵ Malacca began to assume a pivotal role in the Indian Ocean commerce in the fifteenth century after the Chinese withdrawal from Oceanic trade.⁶ It was especially the Indian Sub-Continent which gained greatly from the realignments in the Indian Ocean commercial system. Traversing the length and breadth of the Indian Ocean, Gujarati traders began to claim a larger role on the maritime scene. Cambay emerged as the fulcrum of the Indian Ocean trade with its two arms stretching eastwards to Malacca and

Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 A.D and about 1630* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 74.

² Lopez, Miskimin and Udovitch, 'England to Egypt, 1350-1500: Long-term Trends and Long-distance Trade', M. A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East: From the Rise of Islam to the Present Day* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 93-128; John L. Meloy, 'Imperial Strategy and Political Exigency: The Red Sea Spice Trade and the Mamluk Sultanate in the Fifteenth Century', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 123/1(2003), 1-19.

³ Janet Abu-Ludhod, thus, takes it as a 'fact' that the 'fall of the East' preceded the 'rise of the West'. Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 361. Emmanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 3 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974, 1980, 1989).

⁴ André Gunder Frank and Kenneth Pomeranz argue that the Asian economies continued to be vibrant till the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was only after that the European dominance became a reality in Asia. André Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁵ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 63.

⁶ Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence*, 27-35.

westwards to Aden.⁷ This was also the period in which the emergence of Vijayanagara and the Bahmani Sultanate invigorated the political economy of South India.⁸ The buoyant regional economy created prolific inland markets for the Indian Ocean merchants.⁹ Located in a geographically strategic position between the western and eastern spheres of the Indian Ocean with a spice-producing hinterland, the Malabar port cities continued to play an important role in the burgeoning maritime commerce of the period. The emergence of the port city of Cannanore by the middle of the fifteenth century has to be located in this broader historical context.

The sixteenth century: Changing port order in Malabar

Although in its initial phase the position of Cannanore in the oceanic trade of Malabar remained principally subordinate to Calicut, the sixteenth-century political developments irrevocably altered the existing situation in Malabar. As M. N. Pearson comments, the introduction of violent politics into the Indian Ocean commerce by the Portuguese restructured the existing port-hierarchy in Malabar.¹⁰ The attempts of the Portuguese to control the pepper trade in Malabar and the capture of Malacca by the Portuguese [1511] shattered the till then flourishing Malacca-Calicut-Red Sea commercial axis. This change greatly diminished the role of Calicut, which was the main redistribution centre for South-East Asian spices in the Arabian Sea. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Cambay emerged as an alternative redistribution centre for South-East Asian spices to West Asian traders.¹¹ The loss of its entrepôt status in the Indian Ocean trade relegated the position of Calicut in Indian Ocean commerce¹² Under Portuguese patronage, Cochin emerged as the main contender of Calicut for the control of the regional maritime trade and became a crucial link in the emerging Malacca-Cochin-Lisbon axis. Cannanore, albeit rather temporarily, became a part of this newly emerging *Estado* commercial system in the Arabian Sea with the establishment of a Portuguese stronghold there.¹³ The attempt of the Portuguese to reorganize the maritime commerce of Malabar under Cochin,

⁷ Pires, *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires, 42.

⁸ For a recent comprehensive study on Vijayanagara see, Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). About the Bahmani Sultanate; Haroon Khan Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan: An Objective Study* (Hyderabad: Manzil, 1953)

⁹ Abdul Rassaq gives a brilliant picture of Vijayanagara and its importance in the regional economy in the fifteenth century. Major, *India in the Fifteenth Century*, 21-43.

¹⁰ M. N. Pearson, 'India and the Indian Ocean in the Sixteenth Century', in Ashin Das Gupta and M. N. Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1987), 71-93 at 71.

¹¹ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 43.

¹² Niels Steensgaard presumes that Calicut had already entered its waning phase, vanquished by the competition from Cambay. Niels Steensgaard, 'The Indian Ocean Network and the Emerging World Economy, circa. 1500-1750', in Satish Chandra (ed.), *The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History*, 125-50 at 131.

¹³ The Portuguese constructed a strong fort in Cannanore by 1505 to replace the *feitoria* established there by Cabral in 1501. Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*, 78.

however, met with stiff resistance from the Zamorins and the prominent foreign Muslim trading communities settled at Calicut. The confrontation between these two commercial interests led to the bifurcation of the existing port order in Malabar in which Calicut had enjoyed such an indisputable prominence. Calicut and Cochin formed two epicentres of regional maritime trade, representing two irreconcilable maritime interest groups. This development was a significant departure from the preceding centuries.

The participation of Malabar ports in the Indian Ocean trade before the sixteenth century presents characteristics which resemble the operation of the medieval Gujarat port system. Ashin Das Gupta described the functioning of this port system in which a principal port dominates the adjacent maritime ports. He also pointed out the recurring realignments in this system of port-hierarchy from time to time.¹⁴ The working of a similar port system can also be observed in medieval Kerala. Between the ninth and the thirteenth century, Cranganore and Quilon respectively occupied the pivotal place in the oceanic trade of Malabar. All other ports along the Malabar Coast were integrated into this system as satellite ports of the principal harbour, albeit performing regional economic functions of their own. It was this key position as the principal maritime port in Malabar which Calicut occupied, replacing Quilon from the fourteenth century onwards.¹⁵ Consequently the change from this single port dominated port order in sixteenth-century Kerala to that of a two port dominated system—Calicut and Cochin—generated a new situation in the region.

There were ambiguities in the position of Cannanore in the newly developing commercial scenario in the sixteenth century. While the Kolathiri ruler was favourably disposed to the Portuguese in Cochin,¹⁶ local Mappila traders were overtly and covertly linked to the struggle of the *paradesi* Muslim traders of Calicut against the *Estado da India*.¹⁷ The second decade of the sixteenth century witnessed further realignments in the port order after the departure of the major section of the foreign Muslim traders from Calicut.¹⁸ The vacuum created by the exodus of the *paradesi* Muslim traders in the trans-oceanic trade was gradually filled by the emerging local Islamic commercial interest groups in Malabar. Alongside Calicut, Cannanore emerged as the major centre of operations of one of these newly burgeoning groups. These two groups, dominated by local Mappila traders, displayed a considerable difference in their attitude towards the *Estado*. The Calicut faction persisted in an all-out opposition against the *Estado* till the close of the sixteenth century when it ended

¹⁴ Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Ocean Merchants and the Decline of Surat, c.1700-1750* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979), 1.

¹⁵ Pius Malekandathil, 'Maritime Malabar and a Mercantile State: Polity and State Formation in Malabar under the Portuguese, 1498-1663', in K. S Mathew (ed.), *Maritime Malabar and the Europeans, 1500-1962* (Gurgaon: Hope India, 2003), 197-227 at 198.

¹⁶ Varthema, *Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema*, 50.

¹⁷ 'Albuquerque's Letter to D. Manuel, Cochin, 1 Apr. 1512', *Cartas de Affonso de Albuquerque*, I, 38. The term *paradesi* means 'foreigner'. Barbosa mentions that some of these Muslims nationalities such as Arabs, Persians, Guajaratis, Khorasanis, and Decanis settled in Calicut to trade. Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 75-6.

¹⁸ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76.

abruptly with the fall of the Kunjali Marakkars of Kottakkal.¹⁹ By contrast, the Cannanore Mappilas responded cautiously to the changing circumstances. Sheltering behind the shadow of the Portuguese-Calicut struggle, Mamale Marakkar was able to build up a true thalassocracy, consisting of Cannanore and the Maldives-Lakshadweep Islands, and began to dominate the maritime commerce of the region.²⁰

The centrifugal forces working in favour of the rise of a multi-centric port system in Kerala took a definite shape by the second half of the sixteenth century. The rise to power of the Arackal Ali Rajas as the predominant force in Cannanore was an outcome of these developments. The port town of Cannanore, surrounded by its feeding Mappila ports of Kumbala, Nileswaram, Madaya, Dharmapattanam, and Baliapattanam, emerged as a separate port system in Kerala alongside Calicut and Cochin.²¹ The appearance of such a multi-centred port system was the main feature of sixteenth-century maritime Kerala and it had profound repercussions on the regional political economy. The same configuration was still operating when the Dutch East India Company established itself in Kerala in the second half of the seventeenth century. Against this historical background, this chapter analyzes the successful response of the Mappila traders of Cannanore, especially the Ali Rajas, to the changing maritime commercial atmosphere of the Indian Ocean that was set in motion by the arrival of the European chartered companies eager to gain control of the regional spice trade, and hence sailing on collision course with the former.

The rise of the Mappila trading network in Cannanore

As discussed in the first chapter, the rise of the Cannanore Mappilas to prominence can be traced to the middle of the sixteenth century under Arackal Swarupam. Both regional and supra-regional factors precipitated such a development in sixteenth-century Kerala. The challenge posed by the Portuguese maritime power along the Malabar Coast severely affected the supremacy of both Calicut and the West Asian Muslim traders in the regional spice trade. Gradual changes were already at work militating against their dominance in the Arabian Sea spice trade. One such alteration in the established pattern was the strategy of the Mamluk Sultans to monopolize the Red Sea spice trade in the fifteenth century. This forced a large number of *Karimi* merchants to settle throughout the various port cities of the Arabian Sea, including Calicut.²² Their expatriate position rendered them vulnerable to even minor political changes in their host cities. At the same time Gujarati traders were able to expand their influential networks in the Indian Ocean, a process which reached its zenith by

¹⁹ For a detailed study, though nationalistic in approach see, Nambiar, *Kunjalis: Admirals of Calicut*.

²⁰ For more details see, Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*.

²¹ Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 77.

²² Geneviève Bouchon, 'Calicut at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century: The Portuguese Catalyst', *Indica*, 49 (1989), 2-13 at 7. For more details about the al-Karimi merchants of Egypt see Walter J. Fischel, 'The Spice Trade in Mamluk Egypt', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 1 (1958), 157-74.

the beginning of the sixteenth century.²³ The appearance of the Portuguese in the region stimulated such changes which had already been set in motion. Gradually a change occurred in the configuration of the Malabar maritime trading world which swung in favour of the native Mappila Muslim merchant magnates.

It is notable that the initial Portuguese attempt to control the maritime spice trade of Kerala did not conflict with the interests of the local Mappila Muslim traders who dominated the local and coastal trade networks.²⁴ The Portuguese were able to distinguish between *mouros da terra* and *mouros da mecca*, and it was the latter who were identified as their commercial enemies and the target of their attacks. The *Estado*, in fact, depended on Mappila traders as intermediaries to supply the *carreira* with spices from the hinterlands of Malabar, which was lying beyond the reach of its power to control. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Mappilas were able to override *paradesi* prominence in the spice trade of Kerala and, at the same time, were gradually extending tentacles of control out over the regional spice trade. Hence, the initial years of the Portuguese presence in Malabar witnessed a more or less cordial relationship between these two groups which were mutually beneficial to each other. The predecessor of the Ali Raja, Mamale Marakkar of Cannanore, was not ready to antagonize the Portuguese by openly joining hands with the Muslim traders of Calicut, and the Marakkar traders of Cochin even unequivocally supported the Portuguese against the interests of the Calicut merchants.²⁵

The honeymoon period was brief. The increasing influence of private Portuguese *casados* in Cochin forced the local Mappila trading magnates to migrate to Calicut and that point marks the beginning of the second wave of the anti-Portuguese struggle in Malabar.²⁶ Nevertheless, the role of the Cannanore Mappilas in this struggle continued to be rather sporadic and surreptitious. Instead of opting for open conflict with the *Estado*, members of the Cannanore Mappila elite were assiduously trying to link themselves with the emerging alternative spice route from South-East Asia to the Red Sea and Gujarat ports.²⁷ The attempt of Asian merchants to circumvent the Portuguese control system along the Malabar Coast lent a crucial importance to the Maldives. The most overwhelming evidence for this is the fact that the Portuguese attempt to establish control over the Maldives elicited a violent reaction from Gujarati traders who were trying to recoup for the loss of Malacca.²⁸ The

²³ M. N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 10.

²⁴ Ashin Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade, 1740-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 8.

²⁵ Pius Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500-1663* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 151-52.

²⁶ This Mappila counterattack was carried out mainly by the Calicut Merchants under the Zamorins, though the Cannanore merchants also participated in it. See, Jorge Manuel Flores, 'The Straits of Ceylon, 1524-1539: The Portuguese-Mappila Struggle over a Strategic Area', in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Sinners and Saints: The Successors of Vasco da Gama* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 57-74. O. K. Nambiar's work is an example of a hero-oriented and nationalistic narrative of the Portuguese-Mappila conflicts. Nambiar, *Kunjalis: Admirals of Calicut*.

²⁷ Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*, 118.

²⁸ 'Simao Sodre to Dom Joao III, Cochin, 28 Dec. 1526', *Documentos sobre os Portugueses em Mocambique e na Africa Central (1497-1840)*, VI (Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1969), 270.

control of Mamale Marakkar over the Maldives assumes a special significance in this context. It appears that its uncontrollable labyrinth of atolls enabled the Maldives to develop as an important outlet for Malabar pepper which found its way along the developing alternative Indian Ocean spice route to various destinations, including the Red Sea.²⁹ In addition, the mounting pepper export from Canara to the Red Sea during the third decade of the sixteenth century may have been stimulated by the flow of Malabar pepper, especially from the northern regions, that avoided Portuguese vigilance along the coast.³⁰

Obviously the Cannanore Mappilas proved highly successful in their efforts to adjust themselves to and benefit from the changing commercial constellation in the Indian Ocean during the sixteenth century. This adaptability proved to be the strength behind the emerging Mappila ascendancy in Cannanore which had reached a decisive point with the rise of the Ali Rajas by the middle of the sixteenth century. Whereas in Calicut the Portuguese challenge was held up by the Mappila traders under the leadership of the established local political power—the Zamorins—, in Cannanore there was a shift in the local power alignments. The Kolathiris were deprived of their control over the maritime space of the region, especially over the port town of Cannanore. Around the same time, Mappila commercial and political interests in Cannanore focused increasingly on the Arackal Ali Rajas who suddenly emerged as the real champion of the cause of the Mappila Muslims' trade interests in the region.³¹

At first glance, by and large the emergence of Arackal Swarupam appears to have been an indigenous response to the *Estado da Índia's* claim to supremacy in the Arabian Sea spice trade. A closer examination shows that it was the culmination of a long-term process of socio-economic change which the local Mappila society had been subjected to throughout at least two centuries. The growing affluence of the Mappila Muslims in the region, sustained by the expanding maritime commercial opportunities, culminated in the emergence of a new power centre in the region under the Ali Rajas. The Arackal Swarupam can be credited with the first Muslim *taravadu* which achieved the status of a swarupam in Malabar. Moreover, the Arackal House is also one of the very few examples in South Asian history of a mercantile elite family which openly claimed political power for itself.

²⁹ 'Alvaro Fernandes to Dom Manuel', Jose Ramos Coelho (ed.), *Alguns Documentos do Archivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo acerca das Navegações e Conquistas Portuguezas* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1892), 453.

³⁰ The re-direction of the Malabar pepper supply through the Canara port of Bhatkal has already begun in the second decade of the sixteenth century. Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, I, 189. For an alternative view see, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 128-32.

³¹ The Portuguese source mentions the Ali Rajas' leading role in the Mappila resistance to the Portuguese commercial interests as early as 1557. Manuel de Fariya y Sousa, *The Portuguese Asia: Or the History of the Discovery and Conquest of India by the Portuguese*, II, tr. John Stevens (Republished; Westmead: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1971), 197. Zain-ud-Din also refers to the active participation of the Ali Raja in the anti-Portuguese struggle of the Malabar traders during the second half of the sixteenth century. Panikkassery, *Keralam Pathinanchum Pathinarum Noottandukalil*, 113, 119.

The Cannanore bazaar

By the beginning of the seventeenth century the port town of Cannanore was divided into two power zones. One was Fort St Anjelo, representing the European economic interest in the port. The other was the Cannanore bazaar under the control of the Mappila Muslims of the region who played the dominant role in the commercial fortunes of the town.³² The Bazaar was situated along the shore of the Bay of Cannanore (now known as 'Mappila Bay') which provided anchorage for ships and boats. It rose to prominence at the end of the sixteenth century. Van Linschoten gives an interesting picture of a Mappila-dominated market functioning near the Portuguese fortress. His comparison with the European weekly markets is especially noteworthy.

The Malabars without the fortresse have a village with many houses [therein, built] after their manner; wherein there is a market holden everyday, in the which all kindes of victuailes are to be had, which is wonderfull, altogether like the Hollanders markets. There you find Hennes, Egges, Butter, Hony, Indian Oyle, and Indian Figges [that are brought from] Cananor, which are very great, and without exception the best in all India: of the which sorts of victuailes, which other such like they have great quantities: also very faire and long mastes for shippes, such as better cannot be found in all Norway, and that in so great numbers, that they furnish all the countries round about them.³³

François Pyrard of Laval, who visited the Malabar Coast in the beginning of the seventeenth century, also noticed the functioning of the daily market of the 'moors' in Cannanore and its great trade.³⁴ By the seventeenth century, Cannanore had developed into a middle-sized port town inhabited by around 20,000 people.³⁵ The Dutch chaplain Canter Visscher's letter amply testifies to the structural development from a daily bazaar in the early seventeenth century to that of a fortified port town with definite political connotations by the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Ali Raja has a large and handsome bazaar, where most of the Moors in his domains reside. This bazaar extends on one side nearly to the bay, and on the other is within reach of the Company's fort and canon. It is itself sufficiently fortified with walls and artillery to enable it to resist the attacks of the heathens.³⁶

³² Alexander Hamilton noticed this structural opposition between the Dutch fort in Cannanore and the Mappila bazaar of the Ali Rajas. Hamilton, *New Account of the East Indies*, I, 291-2.

³³ Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies: From the Old English Translation of 1598*, I, ed. Arthur Coke Burnell (London: Hakluyt Society, 1885), 67.

³⁴ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 448.

³⁵ R. J. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas, 1640-1700* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1998), 54.

³⁶ Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, II, 55.

The prosperity of the port town depended mainly on its commercial links. The maritime commerce of the Ali Rajas and the Bazaar men who conveyed the products of the land away in their vessels to different parts of the Indian Ocean and returned with wares in local demand invigorated the economic life of the entire region.³⁷ While spices constituted the most important commodities for international markets, trade in such bulk commodities as coconut products, areca, rice and the like was crucial to the local socio-economic life—perhaps even more than the spices. While the European interest in Cannanore was mainly in pepper, the Cannanore bazaar constituted the core of the actual economic life of the port town where all the commodities were traded in response to the demands of the market.

The Cannanore bazaar was the heart of the economic activities of the port town, the link which connected both the maritime and hinterland channels of trade together. Consequently, this bazaar was transformed into the powerhouse of the Arackal family, whose source of revenue depended primarily on maritime trade. Though we do not have many details about the administrative set-up of the Bazaar, there is no doubt that the extensive trade activities of which it was the hub necessitated a moderate system of management without which its smooth functioning would not have been possible. Though in a somewhat dramatic fashion, Alexander Hamilton described the presence of various administrative functionaries in the Bazaar under a loosely defined authoritative set-up of the Arackal Ali Rajas.

His government is not absolute, nor is it hereditary; and instead of giving him the trust of the treasury which comes by taxes and Merchandize, they have chests made on purpose, with holes made in their lids, and their coin being all gold whatever is received by the treasurer, is put in those chests by these holes; and each chest has four locks, and their keys are put in the hands of the Rajah, the Commissioner of trade, the Chief Judge and the Treasurer; and when there is occasion for money, none can be taken out without all these four be present, or their deputies.³⁸

There is little doubt that the political and commercial interests of the Arackal House predominated in the day-to-day functioning of the Bazaar. But this is not to say that the Bazaar was the strictly closed domain of the Ali Rajas. It certainly also represented the economic interests of the other Mappila commercial magnates in Kolathunadu who ran their operations from there. In another sense, there was a kind of merchant syndicate led by the Arackal Ali Rajas which controlled the day-to-day functioning of the Bazaar.

³⁷ 'Memorandum by Adriaan Moens, 18 Apr. 1781', in Galletti, *Dutch in Malabar*, 143, 147.

³⁸ Hamilton, *New Account of the East Indies*, I, 294.

Reports of the Dutch Company officials also illustrate a picture of the collaborative functioning of a 'bazaar government' in Cannanore. The Arackal Swarupam, as did other swarupams of Malabar, often presented multiple power centres within the family. The correspondence between Dutch officials and Arackal Swarupam reveals that the *Karanavar*³⁹ of the family often actively participated in the affairs of the Bazaar in conjunction with the Ali Raja.⁴⁰ The *Karanavar* occupied the immediate second rank in the power hierarchy of the family, just below the Ali Raja and acceded to the 'rajaship' after the death of the ruling Ali Raja.⁴¹

By and large, it seems that the uncle-nephew or brother-brother power dichotomy in this matrilineal succession system was usually cordial and the occupiers complemented each other. It also seems that the assumed structural opposition between the rajas' sons and his nephews did not seriously challenge the traditional power relations within the family.⁴² The *Karanavar* actively engaged in the affairs of the Bazaar along with the Ali Rajas. The *Karanavar* freighted his own ships to different parts of the Indian Ocean, which naturally put him in an influential position within the power structure of the bazaar government.⁴³ Interestingly, in the eyes of the Dutch officials at Cochin the *Karanavar* was the actual 'head of the merchants' of Cannanore.⁴⁴ Political as well as commercial responsibilities were shared between the members of the Swarupam. In a commercial deal signed between the VOC and the Ali Raja in 1686, such other family members as the *Karanavar* and one Coycoetiali Crauw appear as co-signatories, which lends credibility to such an assumption.⁴⁵

The influence of the 'bazaar government' was not confined to Cannanore alone. The Ali Rajas were able to exercise sway over neighbouring Mappila ports like Maday, Baliapatanam, and

³⁹ *Karanavar* is a particular hierarchical status position usually enjoyed by the eldest male member of a Malabar joint family or *Taravadu*. He is considered the highest authority in the family. However in the Arackal House, the *Karanavar* was the second most senior in the line of succession and occupied a status just below the Ali Raja. The position of the *Karanavar* was usually occupied by the eldest nephew or the younger brother of the Ali Raja, who was the senior most in the matrilineal succession line.

⁴⁰ 'Memorandum by Commander Isbrand Godske to Commander Lucas van der Dussen (1668)', in s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 73-4.

⁴¹ VOC 1519, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 10 Oct. 1692, fo. 640v.

⁴² Margaret Frenz suggests this structural opposition was an important cause of the weakness of Malabar royal power. However, this postulation is questionable on the grounds that most of the Malabar *swarupams* did not witness any serious strife among kings' sons and the nephews, but among the members of various lineages claiming seniority in succession. Even in the eighteenth-century Travancore, the struggle between Marthanda Varma and the sons of his predecessor was only an external expression of the real power struggle between the kingship and the *Pillamars*—the nobles of the land. Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest*, 145-7; Lannoy, *Kulasekbara Perumals of Travancore*, 45-53.

⁴³ The maritime commercial ventures of the *Karanavar* of the Arackal House appear regularly in the reports of the Malabar commandant of the Dutch East India Company. For example, see, VOC 1694, Extract postscript from the letter by the Company's servants at Cannanore to the Commander Abraham Vink and the Council, 24 Oct. 1703, fo. 148. VOC 1993, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Cochin, 26 Mar. 1723, fos. 540r-540v.

⁴⁴ VOC 1425, Trade contract concluded between the Company and the Ali Raja of Cannanore on Mar. 2nd 1686, Cochin, 13 Dec. 1686, fo. 109r.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* fo. 109r.

Dharmapatanam by means of their commercial influence. At times, this influence could also be political. The Ali Raja's success in controlling Dharmapatanam by assuming the position of *karthavu* in 1680 can be perceived as an attempt in this direction, which was thought could permanently integrate this important Mappila port to the core: the Cannanore bazaar.

Nevertheless, despite its dominance, the looming presence of the Arackal family hardly stopped other Mappila merchants from claiming their share in the commercial activities of Cannanore. On the contrary, their continuing presence, in spite of their subordinate status to the Ali Rajas, contributed to the accentuation of the central position of the Cannanore in an expanding maritime network. The letter sent by the Ali Raja to Cochin in 1715 mentions one Chekutty Pokker, who had sent his ship to Jaffnapatanam with a freight belonging to the Ali Raja.⁴⁶ He is described by the Dutch officials as a 'subject' of the Ali Raja.⁴⁷ This event suggests the composite nature of the commercial enterprise in Cannanore in which the superior status of the Ali Raja was not transposed into an absolute control over the trade affairs. It is also an affirmation of the presence of a ship-owning Mappila trading class in Cannanore alongside that of the Ali Rajas.

The thriving commercial activities pursued in the Bazaar necessitated the concentration of a large number of common folk in and around the port city to serve as artisans, and ordinary shopkeepers, sailors, manual workers and such like. As the geographical features of the region prevented the development of a dynamic agricultural sector, the employment opportunities provided by maritime commerce turned out to be crucial to the political economy of Kolathunadu. The Mappila Muslims, who had been familiar with the Indian Ocean commerce for centuries, had tended to settle in the market towns along the coastal belt of Malabar. The British officials of the early twentieth century also noticed this trade-oriented occupational tendency of the Mappila Muslims of Kolathunadu, which was strikingly different from that found in the southern districts of the British Malabar.⁴⁸ The popular image of the Mappilas which can be extrapolated from the folk traditions of this region also supports this assumption.⁴⁹ Naturally the Bazaar and the opportunities of a livelihood related to trade attracted Mappilas from different parts of the region. Consequently it presented the Bazaar as the seat of Mappila economic power and the symbolic expression of the Ali Rajas' political ambitions. However, as already hinted at, it would be wrong to assume that the Bazaar was devoid of other people but the Mappilas. The people in the lower strata of the society also took advantage of the employment opportunities provided by the booming maritime commerce at the port. Pyrard of Laval

⁴⁶ VOC 1866, Translated letter sent by the Ali Raja to Barent Ketel, Cochin, 23 Mar. 1715, fos. 572v-576r.

⁴⁷ *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VII: 1713-1725, ed. W. Ph. Coolhaas ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 184-5.

⁴⁸ R. H. Hitchcock, *Peasant Revolt in Malabar: A History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921*, introduction by Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., repr. (New Delhi: Usha Publications, 1983), 8.

⁴⁹ In *Vadakkan Pattukal* or the Northern Ballads of northern Kerala, *Jonakas* (another local term used for the Mappilas of the region) appears mainly as merchants residing at the *angadis* or bazaars of the region. M. C. Appunni Nambiar (ed.), *24 Vadakkan Pattukal* (Malayalam) (Kollam: Modern Books, 1965), 160, 191, 230, 245, 316.

mentions that the Mukkuvas, Tiyyas and other lower class people were employed as day labourers in the port town.⁵⁰

Exercising control over a substantial population in and around the city required a modest form of law and order mechanism at work under the auspices of the Ali Rajas. Nevertheless it is doubtful that the Ali Rajas presided over a systematized judicial configuration or bothered themselves with the Islamic *Sharia* law. Certainly, the British colonial administration assumed the existence of an Islamic judicial system in operation under the Ali Rajas.⁵¹ However, this supposition is open to question. According to Barbosa, distinct from the *paradesi* or foreign Muslims who were allowed to follow their own legal systems, the Mappila Muslims of Malabar were under the jurisdiction of the local rulers.⁵² However, the evidence points to the fact that the emergence of a new power centre in Cannanore under the Ali Rajas created a distinct legal hierarchy among the Mappilas of Cannanore, in which the former became the centre of justice. There can be no question that this new hierarchy in any sense conflicted with the existing local conceptualisation of 'justice'—a term which had more to do with the manifestation of an existing power structure in the realm than a particular 'judicial system' *per se*. Though the Brahmins and other privilege sections of the society claimed special consideration in the judicial procedures by reference to the Brahmanical *dharmasastras*, the dispensation of justice in medieval Kerala, especially its northern regions, appears to have been more of a matter of power than a system defined by Manu's law or the system of any other law-givers.⁵³

There is no reason to suppose that the 'judicial' procedure among the Cannanore Muslim would have deviated from this general picture of the region. It does not appear that Muslim lawyers played any role in the administrative set-up under the Ali Rajas. Pyrard of Laval explicitly indicated the exclusion of Muslim clerics from the judicial administration among the Malabar Muslims.⁵⁴ The Ali Raja exercised judicial authority over his subjects and dispensed justice as a means to reify his power in society. This is apparent from the account of Alexander Hamilton, who witnessed such an exercise of 'justice' by the Ali Raja over his servant who had committed a transgression.⁵⁵ In short, the Ali

⁵⁰ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 444.

⁵¹ *Report of a Joint Commission from Bengal and Bombay, Appointed to Inspect into the State and Condition of the Province of Malabar in the Years 1792 and 1793* (repr., Madras: Government Press, 1862), 165.

⁵² Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76. Pyrard observed that the Mappilas as did other people of the land 'speak same language, obey Nair kings and pay tribute to kings for their land'. This indicates the emerging ethos of a 'Malayalar' identity in medieval Malabar with political and cultural connotations as opposed to a *paradesi* or foreign identity. This could explain the attempt of the Ali Rajas to justify their newly acquired political identity in relation to the existing political structure of Malabar. Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 444.

⁵³ A peculiar system of the execution of justice existed in the northern region of Malabar known as *ankam*—a duel in which two hired 'chekavars' of the opposing parties fought with each other to decide the case. The main theme of the folklore of the region (Northern Ballads) exemplifies this spirit of the region.

⁵⁴ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 342.

⁵⁵ Hamilton, *New Account of the East Indies*, I, 294-5

Raja's perception of jurisprudence has to be sought not in his Islamic identity, but in the regional conceptualization of justice.

The Cannanore thalassocracy

Given the geographical constraints imposed on it, Kolathunadu did not provide much scope for extracting a substantial agricultural surplus sufficient to maintain an enduring state structure.⁵⁶ This having been said, although the Ali Rajas' activities had to concentrate on the sea, they did manage to establish control over a fairly sizeable strip of land along the coast. The primarily sandy coastal ground was not suitable to any cultivation except coconut groves. Though we do not have much information about the land improvements carried out under the Ali Rajas, this does not obviate the fact that their control over land might certainly have added up to their general commercial income. In 1717 the Dutch reported the endeavour of the Ali Raja to plant young coconut palms on the piece of land lying between the Bazaar and the Dutch fortress. Admittedly the Dutch did interpret this as more of a strategic move on the part of the Ali Raja who was trying to impede the view of the Bazaar from the fortress, to say nothing of obscuring a clear line of fire from the cannons.⁵⁷ Despite such desultory attempts to cultivate the coastal strip, it has to be borne in mind that the bulk of commodities sought after by international trade from the region, such as pepper and cardamom and most other merchandise, were produced in the highlands, situated far from the direct control of the Ali Rajas. This picture becomes more lucid only by the end of the eighteenth century when the British administrators tried to calculate the income derived from the landed property of the ruling authorities in British Malabar. Their findings support the assumption that the agricultural sector played only a secondary role to maritime trade which remained as the main source of income for the Ali Rajas.⁵⁸

To understand the rise of Cannanore as an important maritime emporium fully, it is crucial to highlight the close association between the Arackal Swarupam and the Maldives and Lakshadweep. Politically as well as economically, the latter formed an integral part of the maritime state of the Ali Rajas until it was transferred to the British in 1908.⁵⁹ There is not much source material from which to reconstruct the evolutionary stages of the Ali Rajas' relationship with these islands. All that we know comes from legendary sources and colonial materials, not untinged by political and ideological undertones. The *Keralolpathi* tradition makes a point of stating that the Lakshadweep Islands were granted to the Ali Rajas by the Kolathiris, the traditional rulers of Cannanore.⁶⁰ Here

⁵⁶ See the First and the Second Chapters.

⁵⁷ VOC 1891, Missive from Cochin to Cannanore, 14 Dec. 1717, fo. 59r-v.

⁵⁸ OIC, Mackenzie Collection: General, vol. 50, Report by the Bombay Commission of Malabar to the Madras Board of Revenue, Calicut, 28 July 1801, fo. 31r.

⁵⁹ Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore*, 118-21.

⁶⁰ Hermann Gundert (ed.), *Keralolpathi* (repr., Trivandrum: Balan Publications, 1961), 123-4.

some caution should be observed as we have to bear in mind that the Kolathiris had never been in possession of even a rudimentary naval force by which to exercise direct control over the Lakshadweep. It is probable that even earlier, the islands, inhabited by Mappila Muslims, had been under the influence of the mainland Mappila Muslim traders. The Kolathiris could have had only an indirect influence there through the presence of these mainland subjects. Consequently, the legend of the 'grant' turns out to have been more of a ritual claim to superior status over the Ali Rajas by the former, than the relinquishment of actual control over the islands.

Considering the significance of the Lakshadweep in the Ali Rajas' trade, it is not difficult to deduce that an efficient mechanism was necessary to maintain such a control over a long period.⁶¹ The Ali Rajas' authority over the Lakshadweep Islands was maintained by *Karyakkars* (administrators) with civil and criminal powers and the latter were helped in this regard by a local body of elders (*Karanavars*).⁶² The system was obviously constituted to support the Ali Rajas' commercial interests in the islands. Naturally, a sort of economic exploitation was inbuilt in the system. Whatever the nature of the Ali Rajas' control over the islands, as described by the British officials, it has to be analysed with caution.⁶³ Crucially, the Mysorean occupation of Cannanore and the subsequent British colonial rule fundamentally altered the political economy of the region. The enormous economic liabilities imposed on the Ali Rajas by the British interlopers could have compelled the former to preserve a more severe economic policy in the islands. Furthermore, it is natural to expect such negative images from a colonial power which was striving to usurp the islands from the Ali Rajas.

The Maldives in particular played a key role in the rise of the Mappila power in Cannanore during the early decades of the sixteenth century. Kanara rice was the principal key which opened up the atolls to the Cannanore traders. But far from being a poor commercial periphery, both the Maldivian and the Lakshadweep groups served as wonderful natural staging posts between the monsoon systems of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The Cannanore Mappila merchants launched their domination of an emporium which attracted traders, mainly from Gujarat, Bengal and Aceh as they were not able to cross the Indian Ocean during one monsoon. The Portuguese attempt to wrest control of the pepper trade of Malabar in the early decades of the sixteenth century enhanced the strategic importance of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean trade. The Maldivian atolls, lying beyond the control of the Portuguese, were transformed into the hub of an alternative trade route for the Asian traders connecting the western and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean. The ships from Gujarat, Bengal and West Asia, which were not able to approach the Malabar ports because of the Portuguese presence, began to seek shelter in the Maldives. Hence, the islands assumed much of the earlier intermediate role of the southern Indian port towns of Calicut and Pulicat.⁶⁴ This

⁶¹ See below.

⁶² Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore*, 84-5.

⁶³ Theodore P. C. Gabriel, *Lakshadweep: History, Religion and Society* (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1989), 54-7

⁶⁴ Bouchon, *Regent of the sea*, 152-4.

increasing importance of the Maldives after the coming of the Portuguese strengthened the control over the islands of the Cannanore traders. The Portuguese records reveal that the Cannanore trader Mamale obtained a considerable income in tribute and duties from the king of the Maldives.⁶⁵ This indicates that Mamale acted as an overlord of the islands, keeping the local king under his control. As apparent from the report of Pyrard of Laval, the immediate political control exercised over the Maldives by such Cannanore Mappila merchant magnates as Mamale Marakkar continued more or less till the end of the sixteenth century.⁶⁶ However, it seems that this influence gradually faded away during the seventeenth century, when the local ruling lineage re-ascertained its power over the islands.⁶⁷

Apart from obtaining access to an important maritime crossroads beyond European control, it appears that the prevailing influence of the Ali Rajas over the Lakshadweep and some of the Maldives islands ensured them a privileged hold over local produce. The Ali Rajas monopsonized such Lakshadweep products as coconut, copra, coir, cowry, ambergris, dried fish and the like which formed a significant part of the merchandise traded by the Cannanore merchants. It is notable that coir was also in high demand in the ship-building technology of the region.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the amount of the income extracted by the Ali Rajas from the Lakshadweep Islands is obscure. In 1702, the Dutch reported the toll the Ali Rajas had been paying annually to the Kolathiri Rajas on their income from the islands when the latter were still able to maintain their power over the Ali Rajas. If it were true, the huge amount cited by the Dutch indicates the importance of these islands to the Ali Rajas.⁶⁹

A report of the Joint Commission (1792-3) appointed by the British Government to inquire into the income of the Arackal House from the islands stated that, prior to the Mysorean onslaught, the Ali Raja would have earned 60,000 rupees profit annually from the coir trade alone, the produce of which they usually sold in the markets of Bengal and the Gulf.⁷⁰ According to their calculations, the Ali Rajas would have earned a profit of around 5, 00,000 rupees annually from their trade relations with the islands.⁷¹ Whatever the rationale behind such assumptions on the part of the colonial

⁶⁵ Ibid. 160.

⁶⁶ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 445.

⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that the Ali Raja tried and failed to solicit the support of the VOC to regain his control over the Islands from the King of the Maldives in 1652. This indicates that the previous control of the Ali Rajas over the Maldives had been weakened by this time. VOC 1195, Missive from van Serooskercken to Batavia, 16 May 1652, fo. 697v.

⁶⁸ For details of the traditional ship-building technology in Malabar see, K. K. N. Kurup, 'Indigenous Navigation and Ship-building on the Malabar Coast', in K. S. Mathew, *Ship-building and Navigation in the Indian Ocean Region, A.D 1400-1800* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 20-5.

⁶⁹ It has been reported that the Ali Rajas annually paid 18,500 *fanums* or 2,312 ½ *Rixdollars* as tolls to the Kolathiris in order to enjoy their control over the islands. VOC 1679, Missive from Commander Abraham Vink and the Council of Cochin to Batavia, 13 Nov. 1702, fos. 41-2.

⁷⁰ *Report of a Joint Commission from Bengal and Bombay*, 159.

⁷¹ For a discussion on this subject see, Ibid. 160-3

authorities, it indicates the importance occupied by the island in the general economic prosperity of the Ali Rajas during the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Although the Ali Rajas' control over the Maldives was less than secure, it makes sense to investigate to what extent Cannanore was able to continue its commercial grip over the islands. For example, in 1690, the Dutch reported the arrival at Dharmapatanam of two vessels belonging to the Ali Raja loaded with coir from the Maldives and other carried other island goods such as coconut, *cumblamas*, and amber.⁷² *Cumblamas*, a kind of dried fish from these islands, formed a major part of the merchandise that the Ali Rajas exported to Aceh in 1718.⁷³ As far as the cowry trade is concerned, it seems that in the seventeenth century this became a royal monopoly of the Maldives Sultanate. The Dutch received most of their cowries directly from the islands through the Sultan.⁷⁴ At the same time, though, more than once the Dutch were able to trade in this commodity with the Ali Rajas. For instance in 1707, the Ali Raja supplied 20,000 lbs. cowries to the Dutch Company.⁷⁵ It is possible that the Ali Rajas traded the bulk of their cowry stock with such other regions of the Indian Ocean as Bengal, where cowries were in great demand. The Bengal shipping lists offer ample evidence to prove that it was a regular trading commodity for the Ali Rajas with Bengal. Overall it seems that the Ali Rajas remained a political and commercial power to be reckoned with, both in the Lakshadweeps and, to a lesser extent, also in the Maldives.

Cannanore and the commercial world of the Indian Ocean

Being a part of the Indian Ocean trade networks, the merchants of the Cannanore bazaar, particularly the Arackal Ali Rajas, actively engaged in both the coastal and oceanic branches of maritime trade. The Mappila merchants of Cannanore maintained a complex network of trade relations with different parts of the Indian Ocean. The Red Sea ports, the Persian Gulf, Surat, Canara, the Maldives, Lakshadweep, Ceylon, Coromandel, Bengal, and Aceh figure as prominent regions of trade in their network system. Although we lack any quantitative data to calculate the value of the trade conducted by the Ali Rajas and the Cannanore bazaar, the scattered references which appear in various European sources give some sort view of their trading world. Their trade contacts extended from short-distance coastal trade, linking the small ports along the west coast of India, to those traversing long distances across the seas. Obviously it was a network involving the exchange of both essential

⁷² The Dutch officials in Malabar, who were not well informed about these islands, usually considered the Lakshadweep to be a part of the Maldives Islands. VOC 1474, Missive from Isaack van Dielen to the Commissioner Van Mydrecht, 20 Mar. 1690, fo. 592v.

⁷³ VOC 1905, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Johannes Hertenberg, 6 Apr. 1718, fos. 293v-294r. VOC 1881, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Barent Ketel, 10 Apr. 1716, fo. 1012v.

⁷⁴ F. M. Klinkenberg, 'De Kaurihandel van de VOC' (Doctoraalscriptie Geschiedenis, Leiden University, 1981); Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 85.

⁷⁵ VOC 1740, Letter from the Commander and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 23 Apr. 1707, fo. 102v.

and bulky freights, and also valuable commodities. This points towards the existence of an intrinsically build-up structure, which evolved through a long-term process, consisted of a chain of merchant networks and multi-capital investments.

These complex trade relationships established over centuries proved to be the greatest asset of the Cannanore traders, offering them indispensable assistance in overcoming the stiff competition posed by such big European companies as the VOC which appeared on the scene equipped with enormous capital and remarkable naval power. To construct a vivid picture of the trade network operated by the Mappila merchants of Cannanore across the Indian Ocean, I will try to categorise their commercial arena into different trade 'zones'. Among these trade 'zones', the Arabian Sea undoubtedly occupied the prime position on the commercial chart of the Cannanore traders.

1. *The Arabian Sea*

The Arabian Sea trade was the backbone of the politico-economic power of the Ali Rajas and other traders in the Cannanore bazaar. The presence of a strong commercial class in Cannanore was already observed by many European travellers and officials in the early sixteenth century.⁷⁶ Cannanore had developed strong commercial connections with various Arabian Sea ports by the time of the Portuguese appearance in the region.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, thanks to the presence of a vibrant *paradesi* or foreign Muslim trading class who frequented West Asian maritime cities, the nearby port town of Calicut continued to enjoy an advantage over other Malabar maritime cities. At the first glance, there seems to be significant continuity in the Arabian Sea trading networks operating from the Cannanore port between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, even though as a whole there could have been fluctuations in the frequency and volume of its trade. Certainly there was an undercurrent of change in the commercial world of the port town during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century. The most significant alteration was in the role of the local Mappila merchants in the commercial activities of this maritime town.

Although Cannanore and its satellite ports like Baliapattanam, Dharmapattanam, Maday and others were prominent centres of the local Mappila Muslims, unquestionably their role in maritime trade was much more limited during the first half of the sixteenth century than in the subsequent decades.⁷⁸ The travel account of Tomé Pires reveals that the trading sphere of the Mappila merchants of Malabar during the early years of the sixteenth century was limited to as far as Cambay on the west coast and to Pulicat on the east coast of India.⁷⁹ It is likely that they did not participate directly in the most profitable branches of spice trade with the Red Sea-Persian Gulf areas, so obviously the domain of the *paradesi* Muslim traders. Although these foreign merchants continued to play a crucial role in

⁷⁶ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 80-1.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 81.

⁷⁸ *Dagh-Register Gehouden int Casteel Batavia: Vant Passerende daer ter Plaetse als over Geheel Nederlands-India [1664]*, ed. J. A. Van der Chijs (s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1893), 172-3.

⁷⁹ Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 82.

the international trade of Cannanore during the first half of the sixteenth century,⁸⁰ the evidence available demonstrates that, simultaneously, such local traders as Mamale Marakkar began to claim a greater part in the commercial life of the port town.⁸¹ Gradually the local Mappila traders overshadowed the foreign commercial elements in Cannanore and the neighbouring port towns. Ineluctably, the trading horizon of the Mappila traders in the Arabian Sea appears to have expanded considerably during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century when the Red Sea-Persian Gulf cities became the regular ports of call for the Cannanore trading ships—a change which marked the end of the dominance of the *paradesi* Muslim traders in that branch of trade.⁸² The second half of the sixteenth century witnessed the emergence of the Ali Rajas as the main politico-economic force in the port town. More generally speaking, this reflected the growing control of the Mappila merchants in the maritime affairs of the region. Emerging from the shadow of the foreign traders at the port, the Mappilas of Cannanore established an independent commercial identity in the intra-ocean maritime trade and the surplus accumulated from their extensive trade activities ultimately ended up in Cannanore itself, inevitably creating repercussions in the balance of power in the region.

Although the Mappila traders of Calicut engaged in fierce competition with the Portuguese trade control mechanism in place along the western coast of India during the second half of the sixteenth century, the Cannanore merchants under the Ali Raja largely stood aloof from these troubles and gradually established their suzerainty in the regional trade.⁸³ It seems that, instead of adopting an all-out opposition to the Portuguese State, the Arackal Swarupam essayed a cautious path apposite to its commercial interest. The gradual eclipse of the *Estado da India*'s maritime power by the beginning of the seventeenth century and the increasing degree of Portuguese private trading interests induced a rather placid atmosphere in which the local commercial interests could thrive. Sinnappah Arasaratnam has noted this comparative freedom enjoyed by the Northern Malabar port towns such as Cannanore and Calicut by the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁸⁴ By this time the influence of

⁸⁰ Varthema, *Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema*, 51. Also see, K. S. Mathew, 'Khawaja Shams-ud-din Giloni of Cannanore and the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century', Paper presented in the International Seminar on Portuguese Factories, Fortresses and Settlements in India with Special Reference to Cannanore, 20-24 Feb. 2005, Cannanore.

⁸¹ 'If your Highness had not taken this kingdom [Cannanore] under your rule, it would be Moorish by now, because a certain Mamalle Mercar was beginning to be very powerful'. Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 77. For more details about Mamale Marakkar see, Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*.

⁸² The foreign accounts on Cannanore merchants during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries particularly emphasized their commercial relations with the West Asian port towns, especially in the Red Sea. Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 448. François Valentyn, *Beschryving van 't Nederlandsch Comptoir op de Kust van Malabar, en van Onzen Handel in Japan, Mitsgaders een Beschryving van Kaap der Goede Hoop en 't Eyland Mauritijs, met de Zaaken tot de Voornoemde Ryken en Landen Behoorende*, vol. V, part II (Dordrecht: Joannes van Braam, 1726), 8. Padmanabha Menon, *A History of Kerala*, II, 55.

⁸³ However, this does not mean that the relationship between the Ali Raja and the Portuguese were always peaceful in the second half of the sixteenth century. There are indications of conflict between the two in both the Portuguese and the indigenous sources. See, footnote number 31.

⁸⁴ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 95.

the *Estado da India* in Cannanore had been considerably reduced. The political and commercial affairs of Cannanore fell largely under the control of the Ali Rajas and the Bazaar Mappilas. Despite these changes, the Ali Rajas, accepting the *cartazes* issued by the Portuguese authorities, continued to send their ships to such Red Sea ports as Jeddah even in the first decade of the seventeenth century.⁸⁵ The occasional appearance of English and Dutch vessels along the coast of Malabar did not have much impact on the Malabar trade during the first half of the seventeenth century. The vessels of the Bazaar merchants, with or without Portuguese *cartazes*, continued to ply the seas. The capture of the Cannanore fort by the VOC fleets in 1663 did not fundamentally alter the existing situation, but only signified the replacement of one of the players in the big game of the spice trade in the region.

The advent of Dutch settlements along the Malabar Coast did not cut off the existing West Asian trade links of the local Mappila traders either. Cannanore traders actively engaged in the Persian Gulf spice trade alongside other Malabar merchants. Probably Cannanore sailors usually took the coastal route, linking various port towns along the west coast of India to reach the Persian Gulf, rather than heading off across the sea. This choice not only reduced the risk of the voyage, it also increased the profit from retail trade at various stops along the way. In 1670, the Dutch officials noticed the appearance of two Cannanore ships at Daman bound for Muscat, loaded with pepper and cardamom.⁸⁶ Malabar merchants undoubtedly engaged in South Asia's impressive trade relations with the Persian Gulf ports. As early as 1666 the VOC factory at Gamron complained that because of the excessive trade pursued by the Malabar ships in pepper and other Malabar merchandise at Muscat, Basra and other Persian ports, it was not possible for the Company to gain any benefit from the spice trade.⁸⁷

If the Persian branch of the Malabar trade network was under the observation of the Dutch factory at Gamron, the Red Sea trade passed fairly unnoticed by the VOC. Mocha was one of the main destinations of the Cannanore merchants. In 1644, the English encountered a great Cannanore ship returning from the Red Sea, carrying around 500 men on board and with a cargo worth 200,000 Mughal rupees.⁸⁸ The situation remained unchanged despite the assiduous attempts by the Dutch to control the spice trade of the region. They duly noticed that the Cannanore merchants derived considerable profit from their commercial transactions with Mocha.⁸⁹ The Red Sea trade was so important that the capture of some return ships sent by the Ali Raja and other Bazaar traders to Mocha by pirates in 1706 greatly affected not only the local traders but also the transactions of the

⁸⁵ M. N. Pearson, *Coastal Western India: Studies from the Portuguese Records* (New Delhi: Concept, 1981), 145. Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy of Commerce*, 242, footnote number 283.

⁸⁶ VOC 1274, Original missive from Ceylon to *Heren XVII*, 30 Nov. 1670, fo. 23r.

⁸⁷ VOC 1259, Missive from Gamron to Batavia, 14 June 1666, fo. 3354. Also *see*, VOC 1255, Missive from Gamron to *Heren XVII*, 6 Aug. 1667, fo. 1106.

⁸⁸ *The English Factories in India: A Calendar of Documents in the India Office, Westminster: 1642-1645*, ed. William Foster (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 179, 213.

⁸⁹ *Dagh-Register [1681]*, 686.

Company in Cannanore.⁹⁰ The Red Sea ports seem to have been the regular meeting centres of Malabar merchants. The ship of the Ali Raja which returned from Aden in October 1698 brought on board here the *nachoda* (ship-owner) of the ship of Chego Marakkar of Calicut.⁹¹ Another ship of the Ali Raja which returned from Aden in the same year carried on board the crew of the ship of the Calicut trader, Secsia Marca (Sacria Marakkar?), who had sold his ship at Mocha.⁹²

Steadily and surely, the commercial entrepreneurs from Cannanore knitted a network of trade links along the western coast of India, linking both bigger and smaller ports towns in their commercial operations, and covering a variety of merchandise in their transactions. The Mappila traders along the Malabar Coast acted as a kind of loosely knit co-operative body which made it extremely difficult for the European powers to control the regional trade.⁹³ Cannanore merchants operated comfortably within this framework until the close of the eighteenth century. The entire coastal belt extending from Gujarat to Bengal was encompassed in this Mappila system of trade.

In European sources, Cannanore traders in this trading zone are often hidden behind the more general category of 'Malabar merchants'. In 1636 the English reported the 'frequent resort of Malabar merchants to Dhabol' with pepper.⁹⁴ The Dutch also mentioned the availability of Malabar pepper in Surat. The Dutch factory in Surat noted the departure of an English ship from there bound for England laden with Malabar pepper.⁹⁵ Leaving aside the European preoccupation with spices, their trade contact with Surat was not restricted to spices. Other such local commodities as coconuts, coir, betel nut and the like also appeared as a part of their regular cargoes.⁹⁶ Malabar trade with Gujarati ports had attained such a magnitude by the seventeenth century that the Mughal Emperor derived an income of 1, 40,000 *mahmudis* in revenue from Malabar merchants in the ports of Broach and Cambay.⁹⁷ The Dutch official at Wingurla, Pieter Paets, also observed the regular visits of the Malabar traders to the Bijapuri ports with coconut and rice.⁹⁸ In 1636, the Dutch reported the appearance of 300 Malabar vessels loaded with pepper and other things before Goa.⁹⁹

Even after the permanent establishment of the Dutch in Cannanore, local traders persisted in their 'illegal' trade with different port towns along the coast.¹⁰⁰ In 1691 the Cochin commandant

⁹⁰ VOC 1757, Original Missive from Willem Moorman and the council in Cochin to Batavia, 12 Nov. 1708, fos. 13r-14r.

⁹¹ VOC 1625, Missive from Cochin to Batavia, 31 Dec. 1698, fo. 14.

⁹² VOC 1627, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 29 Sept. 1698, fo. 279r.

⁹³ VOC 1261, Instructions to the Assistant Merchant Gelmer Vosburg, 11 Jan. 1668, fo. 307r.

⁹⁴ *English Factories in India [1634-36]*, Instruction from Surat to Thomas Pitt proceeding to Dhabol, Mar. 5 1636, 176.

⁹⁵ *Dagh-Register [1624-29]*, 336. Entry is dated as 28 June 1628.

⁹⁶ *English Factories in India [1637-41]*, President Fremlin and Francis Breton at Surat to the Factors in Persia, Mar. 31, 1641, 297.

⁹⁷ Santha Hariharan, *Cotton Textiles and Corporate Buyers in Cottonopolis: A Study of Purchases and Prices in Gujarat, 1600-1800* (Delhi: Manak Publications, 2002), 155.

⁹⁸ VOC 1128, Missive from Pieter Paets to Adam Westerwolt, 28 Oct. 1637, fo. 210r.

⁹⁹ *Dagh-Register [1636]*, 273.

¹⁰⁰ VOC 1690, Missive from Cannanore to the Commission of Mydreght, 12 Feb. 1690, fos. 573v-574r.

reported to *Heren XVII* about the complete freedom enjoyed by the Ali Raja and the Cannanore traders, who sailed the high seas without Dutch passports. This free trade pursued by the Cannanore bazaar was supported by five or six heavily armed frigates riding at anchor in front of the eyes of the Dutch fortress at Cannanore.¹⁰¹ The Company servants were well aware of the fact that the Cannanore traders enjoyed an important share in the annual trade in the Gujarati ports of Surat and Broach. They reported that the Malabar traders used to send no less than forty or fifty strong frigates to Gujarat—probably every year.¹⁰² All these bear witness to the thriving Arabian Sea trade of the local Mappilas during the seventeenth and the eighteenth century.

2. *Ceylon, Coromandel, Bengal and South-East Asia*

In comparison with the Arabian Sea, the other half of the Indian Ocean does seem to pale into insignificance in the trading network of the Ali Rajas. However, there is little doubt that Cannanore merchants maintained links with the important trading centres in the eastern hemisphere of the Indian Ocean. Ceylon undoubtedly figured as an arena of strategic and economic importance in the Mappila struggle against the Portuguese *Estado* during the early half of the sixteenth century.¹⁰³ Mannar pearl fishery was under the powerful influence of the Marakkar traders of Calicut, but we do not have much information about the trade relations of the Ali Rajas with Ceylonese ports in the second half of the sixteenth century. The strong Portuguese presence in Ceylon could have hindered any smooth commercial relations of the Cannanore Mappilas with Ceylonese ports.

It seems that the situation changed after the capture of Ceylon by the Dutch in 1658. The VOC reports suggest that the merchants from Cannanore engaged in commercial transactions with Ceylon, with or without the consent of the Dutch officials. It seems that Cannanore traders had a particular interest in fetching elephants from the island as there was a great market for these in South India. The unwillingness of the Dutch to satisfy the demands of the Cannanore traders for Ceylonese elephants gave the local traders opportunities to become directly involved in this branch of trade. Although the Dutch were not inclined to carry elephants for the Bazaar traders on Company ships,¹⁰⁴ they were well disposed to the request of the *Karanavar* of the Bazaar when he wished to send his own ship to transport elephants from Ceylon.¹⁰⁵ Another Dutch report mentions the capture of a ship belonging to the Ali Raja by the Dutch authorities in Manapaar which was carrying elephants and tobacco from Jaffnapatanam.¹⁰⁶ In a letter sent to Cochin [1717], the Ali Raja refers to one of his

¹⁰¹ VOC 1474, Original missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1691, fos. 503v-504r.

¹⁰² VOC 1519, Missive by Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Council in Cochin to Batavia, 10 Oct. 1692, fo. 685r-v.

¹⁰³ Flores, 'The Straits of Ceylon, 1524-1539', 57-74.

¹⁰⁴ VOC 1410, Original missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 28 Nov. 1685, fos. 616v-617r.

¹⁰⁵ VOC 1406, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council in Cochin to Batavia, 11 Apr. 1684, fo. 790r.

¹⁰⁶ VOC 1866, Translated letter written by Paya Kandi Cadry, accountant of the Ali Raja's ship, to Cochin, 15 Jan. 1715, fos. 312v-318r.

ships which he had sent to Jaffnapatanam.¹⁰⁷ It might be possible that on their return journey towards the Coromandel Coast, the merchant ships from Cannanore also visited Ceylonese ports to carry out various trade transactions.

Coromandel ports were already within the ambit of Cannanore merchants' trade contacts by the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁸ This commercial interaction between the two maritime zones of the Indian Sub-Continent continued unabated during the subsequent centuries. In 1644, besides other Indian Ocean ships, the VOC men noticed the presence of a Cannanore vessel in Pulicat.¹⁰⁹ In 1666, the Dutch officials in Cannanore reported that the two frigates belonging to the 'moors' of Baliapatanam—a satellite port of Cannanore—loaded with cotton and iron, were preparing to sail to Kayal.¹¹⁰ In 1704, the Company responded favourably to the request of the Ali Raja to send his ship to South Coromandel with his merchandise.¹¹¹ The capture of the deposed Sultan of Maldives by the two sons of the Ali Raja from Coromandel indicates the close connections maintained by the Arackal family with the Coromandel Coast.¹¹² Interestingly, a Cochin shipping list of 1699 mentions the appearance of two ships owned by a Cannanore trader named Conje Ause Craauw (Kunju Hassen Craw?) near Cochin which were outward bound to Tutucoryn and Porto Novo.¹¹³

Farther along the East Coast, the Ali Rajas had established their commercial relations with Bengal ports by at least the seventeenth century, if not earlier.¹¹⁴ Om Prakash is of the opinion that the trade between Malabar and Bengal was overwhelmingly in the hands of merchants from the former region.¹¹⁵ The appearance of ships owned by the Ali Rajas in the Bengal shipping list of the Dutch East India Company supports this assumption. It is even possible that, in spite of the Dutch refusal to grant sea passes to Malabar merchants to trade with Bengal, the direct trade between Cannanore and Bengal increased in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ VOC 1905, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Cochin, 2 Dec. 1717, fo. 248r.

¹⁰⁸ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 81, Tomé Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 76.

¹⁰⁹ *Dagh-Register [1643-44]*, 293.

¹¹⁰ VOC 1256, Letter from Isbrand Goske to Van Goens, 12 Nov. 1666, fo. 410r. Tomé Pires describes Kayal as the first port on the Coromandel Coast. Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 271.

¹¹¹ VOC 1725, Resolution taken in the Cochin Council, 4 Dec. 1704, fo. 831v.

¹¹² According to the report the Ali Raja's son Mamaly Crauw, and his brother, Conje Coyamoe, kept the Sultan of Maldives, who had escaped to Coromandel from the Maldives, in their custody in Kariapatanam near Cape Comorin. VOC 1773, Secret letter from Commander Willem Moerman to Batavia, 28 Dec. 1708, fo. 445r-445v.

¹¹³ VOC 1638, Cochin shipping list, dated from 3 January to 23 Dec. 1699, fo. 94.

¹¹⁴ Malabar had commercial relations with Bengal as early as the seventeenth century. Rice was imported to Malabar from Bengal. Pyrard of Laval noticed the appearance of a Calicut ship as far away as Chittagong. Considering this long-term contact between the two regions, it is probable that the Ali Rajas were acquainted with the region before the eighteenth century. Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 326-7.

¹¹⁵ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 29

¹¹⁶ See, Appendix III.

The assumption of the expanding maritime links of the Cannanore traders is also bolstered by the frequent references in the VOC documents to their trade with Aceh in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Aceh, which functioned as a doorway to the China Sea became one of the most important Islamic port cities in the Indian Ocean during the early modern period, because the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese [1511] provoked repercussions in the Indian Ocean Islamic trade networks.¹¹⁷ By the middle of the sixteenth century, Aceh had emerged as a counterpoise to Portuguese Malacca.¹¹⁸ As a part of this re-arranged trade system of the Asian traders, the Ali Rajas maintained commercial relations with Aceh. The *Dagh-Register* of Batavia [1625] reported the appearance of a Cannanore ship in the company of other Moorish ships at Aceh.¹¹⁹ This commercial relationship continued unabated even after the establishment of the Dutch at Cannanore. The Dutch noted in 1708 the appearance of a shattered ship belonging to the Ali Raja which was returning from Aceh.¹²⁰ Again in April 1712, the VOC officials in Madurai reported that a ship owned by the Ali Raja on her homeward voyage from Aceh had dropped anchor near Tutucorin.¹²¹ In 1716 the Ali Raja requested the Dutch Council at Cochin the granting of a sea pass for his Aceh-bound ship.¹²²

In another letter written to the commander, Johannes Hertenberg, the Ali Raja pleaded for protection for his homeward-bound vessels from Aceh 'if they happened to come across the VOC ships'. This letter seems to have the character of an anticipatory bail, designed to save ships, which were not protected by the Dutch sea passes, from an accidental encounter with Dutch ships.¹²³ The following year (1718), the Ali Raja requested another sea pass from the Company as he planned to send his ship to Aceh.¹²⁴ In 1720, Ali Issoeppoe, a trader from Ponnani, reported the capture of one of the Ali Raja's ships which was on her way back from Aceh.¹²⁵ Again in 1723, the Ali Raja wrote to Cochin requesting a pass be granted to an Aceh-bound ship of 400 *bhar* belonging to the *Karanavar* of the Bazaar.¹²⁶

From a perusal of various Dutch reports, it appears that the Cannanore traders maintained almost regular commercial relations with Aceh with or without the benefit of sea-passes from the VOC and, in doing so, incorporated the two halves of the Indian Ocean trading world into their commercial network system. Although we do not have any quantitative and value-wise details of

¹¹⁷ For a description of this Malacca conquest see, F. C. Danvers, *The Portuguese in India: Being a History of the Rise and Decline of their Eastern Empire*, I (London: Allen, 1894), 220-9.

¹¹⁸ C. R. Boxer, 'A Note on Portuguese Reactions to the Revival of the Red Sea Spice Trade and the Rise of Atjeh, 1540-1600', *Journal of South-East Asian History* (1969), 415-28.

¹¹⁹ *Dagh-Register* [1624-29], 129.

¹²⁰ VOC 1757, Letter from Cochin to Batavia, 5 May 1708, fos. 230v-231r.

¹²¹ VOC 1825, Letter from Cochin to Batavia, 13 May 1712, fo. 86v.

¹²² VOC 1881, Translated letter from Ali Raja to Cochin, 10 Apr. 1716, fo. 1012v.

¹²³ VOC 1905, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Cochin, 2 Dec. 1717, fo. 248r.

¹²⁴ VOC 1905, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Cochin, 6 Apr. 1718, fos. 293v-294r.

¹²⁵ VOC 1943, Translated letter from the Ali Ali Issoeppoe from Ponnani to Cochin, 13 Feb. 1720, fo. 633r.

¹²⁶ VOC 1993, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Cochin, 26 Mar. 1723, fo. 540r-v.

these commercial transactions, the continuity and expansion of such an extensive trade network system is ample evidence of the significance enjoyed by the Cannanore traders, especially the Ali Rajas, in the Indian Ocean trading world. This prominence had enormous ramifications in the socio-political life of Cannanore.

3. *Asian Traders in Cannanore*

In addition to the intensive trade carried out by local traders, Cannanore attracted merchants from different parts of the Indian Ocean. This foreign presence considerably augmented the economic activity in the port city. Although the rise of the local traders under the Ali Rajas had quashed the previous influence enjoyed by the West Asian traders in the port town, other Asian merchants, especially the Gujarati traders who occupied a prominent position in Indian Ocean trade history, continued to flock to the Mappila markets along the Malabar Coast. In a letter dated 11 March 1680, the Dutch commissioner Marten Huijsman reported the presence of five '*vyf vreemde schepjes*' (five foreign ships) at anchor in Cannanore Bay and another seven in its satellite ports of Dharmapatanam and Vadakara.¹²⁷ The *Dag Register* from Malabar [1698] reported that the Banjara merchant Caljardas, *nachoda* of a Surat ship, traded cotton worth around 2,000 rupees in Cannanore.¹²⁸ Obviously the Dutch maritime control mechanism did not produce the desired effect of preventing such traders from visiting the Malabar Coast. It was natural that the Dutch Company was worried about the 'daily increasing shipping' of the Gujarati and other Asian traders in Cannanore and the neighbouring port towns.¹²⁹ Unfortunately there are no Dutch shipping lists from Cannanore from which the regularity of such commercial visits can be assessed. However, it is more probable that the Dutch were not able to give an exact picture of this Asian trade in Cannanore and its satellite Mappila ports, confounded by the mutual co-operation between the local traders and other Asian merchants who conspired to hide their activities from Dutch vigilance.¹³⁰ Asian shipping not only enhanced the magnitude of commercial transactions in Cannanore, it also enriched the exchequer of the Ali Rajas in the form of tolls and taxes. Although theoretically the Kolathiris were entitled to such tithes and tolls on transactions at the Bazaar, the undermining of their claims to sovereignty and the strengthening of the Ali Rajas' control over the trade and commerce of the region gave the latter the opportunity to appropriate this income.¹³¹

¹²⁷ VOC 1352, A report on the content of the letter written by Commissioner Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fo. 367r.

¹²⁸ VOC 1607, *Dag Register* from Cochin, 1 Dec. 1607 to 15 Apr. 1608, entry dated 3 Feb. 3, 1698, fo. 272r.

¹²⁹ VOC 1519, Missive by Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Council in Cochin to Batavia, 10 Oct. 1692, fo. 685r.

¹³⁰ VOC 1731, Missive from Commander Willem Moerman and the Council of Cochin to Batavia, 19 Nov. 1705, fo. 82.

¹³¹ VOC 1619, Extract letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 14 July 1699, fos. 433v-434r.

4. Cannanore Exports

Spices, especially pepper, constituted the most sought-after merchandise in the intra-regional and oceanic trade offered by the Malabar port towns. Cannanore was no exception to this general image. However, given the peculiar geo-climatic character of the sub-regions within Malabar, the qualitative and quantitative aspects of these spices varied considerably. Kolathunadu pepper, though quantitatively less in comparison with the supply from the hinterlands of Cochin and Calicut, enjoyed a reputation for its superior quality.¹³² The Chirakkal and Kottayam regions constituted the main production centres of pepper which reached the port of Cannanore.¹³³ According to the report of the VOC council in Cochin (1689), pepper production in Kolathunadu was around 20, 00,000 pounds per annum.¹³⁴ Pepper figures prominently among the commodities exported by the Ali Rajas and other Cannanore traders to Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Gujarat.

Cannanore was also famous for its high quality cardamom which was in great demand in West Asian markets and was exported in large quantities by Cannanore traders.¹³⁵ The large amount of cardamom captured by the Dutch officials from a Mocha-bound ship of the *Karanavar* of the Bazaar supports this fact.¹³⁶ This spice enjoyed great demand not only beyond the Indian Sub-Continent, but also within its boundaries. The Dutch reported that Bijapur and Golkonda absorbed the best quality cardamom from Malabar and its trade by both land and sea routes were overwhelmingly under the control of Cannanore traders.¹³⁷ Because of their great demand in the Indian Ocean trade, pepper and cardamom gave to the Ali Rajas their highest profit margin.¹³⁸ Wild cinnamon which grew profusely in and around Cannanore and Calicut posed a great threat to the high quality Ceylonese cinnamon on offer in Asian markets.¹³⁹ Malabar merchants enthusiastically marketed this

¹³² VOC 1245, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 9 Jan. 1665, fo. 479. S. Botelho, *O Tombo do Estado da India in Subsídios para a Historia da India Portuguesa* (Lisboa: Academia Real das Sciencias, 1868), 247.

¹³³ Jan Kieniewicz, 'Pepper Gardens and Market in Pre-Colonial Malabar', *Moyen Orient and Ocean Indien*, 3 (1986), 1-36 at 2.

¹³⁴ VOC 1448, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Council in Cochin to the *Heren XVII*, 17 Jan. 1689, fo. 396v.

¹³⁵ Even though Southern Malabar also produced cardamom, its quality was inferior to that of the Cannanore Cardamom. Jacobus Canter Visscher, *Mallabaarse Brieven: Behefzende eene Naukeurige Beschryving van Jacobus Canter Visscher van de Kust van Mallabaar: Den Aardt des Landts, de Zeden en Gewoontens der Inwoneren, en al het Voornaamste dat in dit Gewest van Indie valt aan te Merken* (Leeuwarden: Ferwerda, 1743), 126.

¹³⁶ Besides pepper, this ship which was captured by the Dutch official in Cannanore, Daniel Joncktus, on 8 Mar. 1678 also contained around 16,000 pounds of cardamom. VOC 1349, Report from Merchant Steven Schoen to Batavia, 17 July 1678, fo. 1573r.

¹³⁷ VOC 1321, Letter from Commander Hendrick van Reede and the Council in Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 9 Dec. 1675, fos. 911v-912r.

¹³⁸ VOC 1474, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and Council in Cochin to the *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1691, fo. 504v.

¹³⁹ VOC 1352, A report on the content of the letter written by Commissioner Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fo. 375r.

cheap substitute throughout Asia, particularly in West Asian markets. In 1679, a Dutch report states that Cannanore merchants conveyed a quantity of 187, 500 lbs wild cinnamon to Mocha alone.¹⁴⁰

Another of bulk export product was arrack. Though we have less information about the arrack trade in Cannanore, there are indications which imply its importance in the local economy. The Dutch were aware of the widespread production of this commodity in Kolathunadu and of its large-scale export across the Western Ghats.¹⁴¹ The merchants of the Bazaar also engaged in the trade in arrack and transported it on their vessels to distant markets. It was reported in November 1689 that Koykuttiyali, the *Karanavar* of the Bazaar, had sent his heavily armed ship from nearby Dharmapatanam laden with 'uncooked' arrack (toddy?) in a northerly direction.¹⁴² Besides these products the Cannanore bazaar indubitably traded in a range of such other local commodities as coconut and coconut products, areca, ginger and the like, though such merchandise failed to catch the eye of the European Company men who usually treated them as 'trash'.¹⁴³

5. *Cannanore Imports*

Extensive mercantile connections with specific parts in the Indian Ocean region helped the Ali Raja and his men to improve their profit margin by engaging in a remarkable import and transit trade. Being a part of a complex maritime network, they handled an array of both bulk and precious commodities. A fraction of such import was intended for local consumption. However, a share was also destined for trans-regional markets and transported either via land routes into the interior or re-distributed by sea. Their strong commercial relationship with West Asia was also reflected in their imports from there. As the West Asian ports were not able to offer much to the Malabar markets, it seems that what was returned was mainly in precious metals in the form of coins and bullion. The Cannanore ship captured by the Dutch in 1621 contained 2,000 gold ducats.¹⁴⁴ Another Dutch account from the first half of the seventeenth century reported the appearance of a Malabar ship near Goa carrying a very large treasure from the Red Sea. Even though the ship came under the attack by the Dutch ships near Goa, the Malabaris were able to salvage their treasure which amounted to eight tons of gold, mainly in the form of Moorish ducats.¹⁴⁵ It is no accident that the Dutch, as the proud descendants of Piet Hein, set their sights on those ships of the Ali Rajas returning from Basra and

¹⁴⁰ *Generale Missiven, IV: 1675-1685* (1971), 396.

¹⁴¹ VOC 1474, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Council at Quilon to the Commissioner van Mydreght, 8 June 1689, fos. 225v-226r.

¹⁴² VOC 1690, Missive from Cannanore to the Commissioner Van Mydreght, 12 Feb. 1690, fo. 573v.

¹⁴³ *English Factories in India [1637-41]*, President Fremlen and Francis Breton at Surat to the Factors in Persia, Mar. 31, 1641, 297.

¹⁴⁴ Om Prakash (ed.), *The Dutch Factories in India, 1617-1623: A Collection of Dutch East India Company Documents Pertaining to India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984), 232.

¹⁴⁵ *Dagh-Register [1644-45]*, 42.

Mocha 'being usually loaded richly with content'.¹⁴⁶ There are suggestions that the Cannanore ships returning from Aceh also brought home gold specie along with other commodities.¹⁴⁷ The Ali Raja's control over the supply of precious metals put him in a position to mint his own coins in Cannanore by the seventeenth century.¹⁴⁸

Opium and cotton were in great demand in Cannanore.¹⁴⁹ The Ali Rajas engaged in both the wholesale and retail trade in these commodities. This substantial opium trade in the local market was noticed by the VOC men as early as the initial years of their settlement at Cannanore.¹⁵⁰ Gujarat ports appear as the main source of opium and cotton for the local market.¹⁵¹ Opium, cotton, and cotton clothes figure prominently among the merchandise which the Cannanore merchants brought back to the local market from the ports of North.¹⁵² Cannanore traders engaged intensively in the retail trade of opium along the western coast and reaped substantial profits from it.¹⁵³ They also retailed the imported opium in the markets of South Malabar. The *Dagh-Register* of Batavia of 1663 reports the appearance of two or three vessels from Cannanore carrying ten *kbandil* (5,000 lbs) opium in Kayamkulam, where the Dutch maintained a factory.¹⁵⁴

Cotton and cotton clothes were in high demand in the local markets of Malabar. Consequently, Cannanore ships usually carried back raw cotton and cotton clothes from the northern markets on their homeward voyage. In 1673 the Cochin Council reported the arrival of three Cannanore frigates from the North laden with 70 *kbandil* of raw cotton, some coarse cotton clothes and other such products.¹⁵⁵ However, it seems that all these cotton and cotton products imported from afar were not destined strictly for local consumption. Some of these products were available in the Bazaar for retail at a higher price. In 1682, because of their failure to acquire the required quantity of cotton yarn for the European market from Wingurla on time, the Dutch tried to buy it from Cannanore. This attempt failed because of the excessive price and low quality of the commodity in Cannanore.¹⁵⁶ The Cannanore traders also engaged in the transit trade in other commodities. In 1716, the Ali Raja requested a sea-pass from the Cochin commandment to re-export half of the amber (?) which had been brought by his ship from Muscat to Aceh.¹⁵⁷ It is also likely that on their distant voyages, the Cannanore merchants engaged in mercantile transactions at their ports-of-call. Hence, the Cannanore

¹⁴⁶ VOC 1352, Letter from Commissioner Marten Huijsman from Cochin to Batavia, 11 Mar., 1680, fo. 374v.

¹⁴⁷ *Generale Missiven, VI: 1698-1713* (1976), 559-560.

¹⁴⁸ VOC 1825, Translated letter from the Vazhunnavar of Vadakara to Barent Ketel, Cochin, 2 June 1712, fo. 334r-v.

¹⁴⁹ Roelofs, *De Vestiging der Nederlanders ter Kuste Malabar*, 104.

¹⁵⁰ VOC 1239, Missive from Cannanore to Cochin, 11 Feb. 1664, fo. 1058v.

¹⁵¹ The English refer to seven Malabar ships in Broach seeking cargoes of cotton. *English Factories in India [1624-29]*, 245.

¹⁵² VOC 1690, Missive from Cannanore to the Commission of Mydreght, 12 Feb. 1690, fos. 573v-574r.

¹⁵³ VOC 1349, Missive from Marten Huijsman and the council in Cochin to Batavia, 13 Feb. 1679, fo. 1459v.

¹⁵⁴ *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 573-4.

¹⁵⁵ VOC 1295, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Council of Cochin to Batavia, 22 Apr. 1673, fo. 272v.

¹⁵⁶ VOC 1373, Missive from Marten Huijsman and the Council in Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 13 Mar. 1682, fo. 355r.

¹⁵⁷ VOC 1881, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Barent Ketel, 10 Apr. 1716, fo. 1012v.

ship which appeared in Aceh in 1625 carried on board cotton procured in Masulipatanam.¹⁵⁸ This transit trade in a range of commodities acquired from different parts of the Indian Ocean must have helped a great deal not only to spread the risk involved in volatile Asian market situations, but also to improve the profit margin.

There are suggestions about the import of horses from West Asia and South-East Asia by the Ali Rajas. Although there is not much evidence to assess the volume of this trade, it would be fairly safe to assume that the great demand for horses among the South Indian ruling elites would have prompted the involvement of the Ali Rajas in this branch of trade. The Ali Rajas engaged in the horse trade with Muscat where they paid as much as 120-140 *pagodas* for each horse.¹⁵⁹ It has been reported that once, at the behest of the Dutch Commander Johannes Hertenberg, the Ali Raja imported an Arabian horse to Cannanore.¹⁶⁰ It is also remarkable that the return cargo of the Ali Raja's ship from Aceh also included horses.¹⁶¹

Malabar has always been a rice deficit area, even though this cereal is the staple food of the locals. Consequently, the rice trade constituted an important basic branch and as such served as a kind of *moedernegotie* for Malabar in general, but for Cannanore in particular. Rice was imported into Malabar mainly from the nearby Canara and Coromandel regions.¹⁶² Any trouble in these rice supply lines would have stirred up considerable agitation among the local people. In one of such incident, the Dutch officials in Cannanore reported that the Nayars and the other common people had to resort to *pinnak* or coconut cake to sustain their lives.¹⁶³ The people were relieved of their plight only after the arrival of the Bazaar vessels in the bay loaded with rice.¹⁶⁴ The Dutch in Cannanore were passive witnesses to the regular sailing of the Bazaar vessels towards the Canara ports to fetch rice.¹⁶⁵ In another letter to *Heren XVII*, the Malabar Commandement commented on the arrogance of the Ali Raja and his fellow merchants who had brought huge quantities of rice from Canara without the consent of the VOC.¹⁶⁶ The Bazaar consequently had a great influence in sustaining the rhythm of the daily life of the region.

¹⁵⁸ *Dagh-Register [1624-29]*, 129

¹⁵⁹ VOC 1360, Letter from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council in Cochin to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fos. 1756v-1757r.

¹⁶⁰ VOC 1925, Letter from the Ali Raja to Cochin, 10 Apr. 1719, no. folio numbers. VOC 1925, Letter from Johannes Hertenberg to the Ali Raja, 22 Apr. 1719, not foliated.

¹⁶¹ VOC 1943, Letter from Johannes Hertenberg to the Ali Raja, 13 Feb. 1720, fos. 633v- 634r.

¹⁶² Tomé Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 76-7

¹⁶³ VOC 1627, Extract of the letter written from Cannanore to Cochin, 11 Aug. 1698, fos. 278v-279r.

¹⁶⁴ VOC 1627, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 29 Sept. 1698, fo. 279r.

¹⁶⁵ VOC 1454, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Council of Malabar to Batavia, 25 July 1688, fo. 1239v.

¹⁶⁶ VOC 1474, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Council in Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 10 Jan. 1690, fo. 15r-15v.

Conclusion

The Ali Raja's rise to prominence in the political economy of Cannanore was not an accident in the annals of the region. In a region where the geographical factors limited the possibility for producing a considerable agricultural surplus, maritime trade was the most lucrative area of resource mobilization for the local elites. During the sixteenth century, the coming of the Portuguese and the decline of the *paradesi* Muslim commercial presence along the Malabar Coast opened the door for the emergence of Cannanore as the new hub of an extensive commercial network which dominated the various regional and long-distance maritime routes. At the interface of land and sea, the Mappila trading class in Cannanore under the Ali Rajas gradually made its mark as a new elite group who had accumulated power for themselves by the second half of the sixteenth century. Situated along the narrow coastal strip of northern Malabar and on the Maldiva and Lakshadweep islands, their trading empire was a true thalassocracy: a highly informal realm, based on the commercial resources of the sea, dominated by the Ali Raja but also ruled by highly competitive mercantile co-sharers. The European trading companies were neither fundamentally altered the existing networking system of the indigenous Mappila traders nor were they able to destroy it. Instead, both were able to adjust themselves according to the situation created by a complex process of changes occurring within the existing system of trade.¹⁶⁷

The Arackal Swarupam presents a unique case in Indian history. The Ali Rajas' principal portfolio remained to be one and the same, namely maritime trade.¹⁶⁸ Their control over the sea helped them to achieve political significance in the regional power configuration by exerting their influence over the Mappilas of Cannanore and Lakshadweep who were linked to Arackal Swarupam through commerce. In a nutshell, the Ali Rajas' political dignity was a by-product of the wealth derived from their control over trade and the fluctuations in commercial fortunes ineluctably had an impact on the political aura of the Arackal House. The achievement of such a commercial house in transforming its acquired wealth into political status seems to have been a pertinent indicator of the flexibility of the political culture in the region—a situation which bears a close resemblance to the Malay political culture in South-East Asia.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Mitigating his earlier 'revolutionary' stance, Niels Steensgaard accepted this existing compromising spirit in the Indian Ocean world during the seventeenth and the eighteenth century in one of his later articles. See, Steensgaard, 'Indian Ocean Network and the Emerging World Economy', 125-50.

¹⁶⁸ In a letter to the Dutch East India Company, the Ali Raja explicitly conveyed the importance of maritime trade to the economic life of the Arackal house. Tamilnadu State Archives, Chennai (TSA) Dutch Records, vol. 103, Translated letter from the Ali Raja to Willem Backer Jacobz., 30 Nov. 1717, fo. 265-66.

¹⁶⁹ A. C. Milner gives a detailed account of the importance of commercial wealth behind the emergence of new 'rajas' as well as for the maintenance of political power in the Malay world, where many of the political leaders were described as 'great traders'. He argues; 'trade was not only the object of Malay political activity: the kingdom was, in the final analysis, a commercial venture'. A.C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1982), 14-28.

The Arackal Swarupam presents the closest example of a 'maritime state' constituted mainly of markets, merchants, and ships. The Ali Rajas' control over the Lakshadweep and their frequent attempts to dominate over the Maldives had more to do with their commercial interests than territorial ambitions. Control over a trade network stretching across the Indian Ocean formed the core idea of an 'administration' in which dominion over a territorial kingdom did not seem to be crucial to their sovereignty claims. The hermetically defined sociological identities of 'merchants' and 'kings' becomes irrelevant in this context. These two conceived identities were combined in the Ali Rajas, in whom the realms of the king and the merchant were fused. As the scope of the possibility of accruing an agricultural surplus was limited in Malabar, particularly in the northern regions, the power basis of the traditional political centres in the region was invariably weak.¹⁷⁰ In this circumstance, a thalassocracy such as that of the Ali Rajas was in a position to survive both internal and external challenges for a relatively long period of time, until it succumbed to the inevitable doom of such an indigenous system under the colonial power by the last decade of the eighteenth century. A fate it shared with other *swarupams* of Malabar.¹⁷¹ Against this background of a well-established, long-standing trade system functioning under the Ali Rajas that I would like to analyse the political and commercial presence of the Dutch East India Company in Cannanore during the period between 1663 and 1723.

¹⁷⁰ K. K. N. Kurup, *History of the Tellicherry Factory* (Calicut: Sandhya Publications, 1985), 7.

¹⁷¹ Even at the close of the eighteenth century the English noticed the strong, though uncertain, presence of the Ali Rajas in the Indian Ocean maritime trade. OIC, Tellicherry Factory Records G/37/10, Report to the Joint Commissioners by Robert Taylor, Tellicherry, 8 Mar. 1793, fo. 50.