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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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CONCLUSION

This study has started by raising doubts about two dominant tendencies in Kerala historiography. First there is the anachronistic approach of a so-called religious frontier that divides Kerala between Muslim Mappilas and a more indigenous, ‘Hindu’ local society. A closer examination of the developments which took place in Kolathunadu between 1663 and 1723 demonstrates the ineffectuality of analysing the events from such a perspective. The Mappilas of Malabar in general and Kolathunadu in particular did not constitute a single political interest group organized under a distinct ‘Islamic’ identity, but were segmented into various factions functioning as intrinsic components of the regional socio-political order. Secondly, another approach has too one-sidedly analysed kingship in Kerala as a problematic concept that necessarily needs external legitimacy beyond itself, in particular as provided by Brahmins. In my view, both tendencies have led to a serious decontextualization of the existing early-modern regional identities. This is not to argue that trans-regional social identities did not exist or were wholly insignificant in Malabar, but I would like to suggest that they were not the sole or, putting it in another way, the dominant factors which shaped the history of the region. In Kolathunadu, the regional cosmological concept of *sakti* exerted an enormous influence on the power relations, in which ‘community’ identities do not seem to have accrued any particular importance. In fact, the Arackal Swarupam and the Mappila Muslims of the region constituted an integral part of this socio-political framework.

The dissemination of Islam in the region was a slow process. Moreover, a large-scale ‘conversion’ effectuated by Islamic institutional mechanisms was absent in pre-colonial Malabar.¹ Traces of any such development are even weaker in Kolathunadu. The Mappilas of Kolathunadu were mainly, though not exclusively, traders by profession and thereby make up a trading ‘caste’ in the society. It is notable that Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese official who was acquainted with the local language and spent long years in Cannanore and Calicut, classified the ‘heathen’ not according to the Brahmanical four-fold *varna* order, but according to the way in which he observed these social groups functioning in the society. Such social components were more akin to professional groups constituted in the form of communities with their own ritual systems.² Among these communities, the Mappilas should not be conceived of as a segregated ‘religious’ group, but as a professional commercial *jati* that fitted rather well into the social structure. ‘Mappila’ and ‘Jonaka’—the two common denominations by which the local Muslims were referred to in local Malayalam sources—do not seem to have had any particular ‘religious’ connotations. In spite of a

¹ Richard M. Eaton pointed out the conceptual flaws in the application of a term ‘conversion’ to denote the spread of Islam in early South Asia. Richard M. Eaton (ed.), *India’s Islamic Traditions, 711-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14-20.

² Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 7.

long tradition of contact with the Islamic world across the Indian Ocean rim and having gained political clout under the Ali Rajas, Cannanore was not transformed into a hub of Islamic learning.³ It seems that *ulama* exerted no substantial influence among the Muslim folk of Malabar until the nineteenth century when the local political system was eliminated under the colonial system.⁴ It is therefore not surprising that the Malabar Muslims were considered ‘corrupted Muslims’ by their more puritan counterparts in West Asia.⁵ In brief, the socio-political actions of the Mappila Muslims of Kolathunadu in general and the Ali Rajas in particular can be satisfactorily explained only from the local perspective of *sakti*.

All this does not mean that the regional political economy remained static until the advent of the colonial occupation. There was indeed growing tension in the power relations in Kolathunadu attributable to various reasons. Geographical and demographic factors limited the possibility of any expansion in agricultural output. Consequently, the alternative resource mobilization possibility was centered on maritime trade. However, the prospects for the local elites to appropriate surplus from maritime trade were restricted by the dominance of the Arackal Swarupam in the regional trade, commanding resources and considerable control over the merchants, mostly Mappilas, and over the hinterland markets in the region. Having been an integral part of a complex Indian Ocean trading network for centuries, it was very difficult for other local elites to replace this well-constructed system. The growing power of the Ali Raja in the regional political economy remained almost unchallenged until the VOC, the English East India Company, and English private traders began to assert their presence in the regional market and set about appropriating a share in the local trade.

Even though the VOC was initially poised to challenge the dominance of the Ali Raja in Cannanore, it soon transpired that this was an unprofitable and unsuccessful proposition. The aspirations of the Dutch Company to control the regional pepper trade in order to regulate the European market proved unattainable without paying a heavy cost. With the limited manpower and resources it had at its disposal in Cannanore, the Company was never in a position to demolish the extended commercial network run by the

³ It is probable that the changing pattern in the commercial interaction between Malabar and West Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries played an important role in this development. The formidable presence of the Portuguese in Cannanore and later the emergence of a strong Mappila commercial entrepreneurial group under the Ali Raja limited too much direct interaction of the West Asian traders and religious functionaries with Cannanore. We have no evidence about the presence of a considerable number of West Asian traders or Islamic ‘missionaries’ in Cannanore. It seems that the prime destinations of such West Asian traders and religious functionaries in Malabar were the port cities, especially Calicut and Ponnani, under the control of the Zamorins. These remained the commercial hubs of Asian traders in Malabar till the end of the eighteenth century. Consequently, it is no wonder that Ponnani developed as the centre of Islamic learning in Malabar.

⁴ At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Pyrard of Laval mentioned that the Muslim clerics did not exercise any judicial authority over the Mappilas in Malabar. Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 342

⁵ Dale, *Islamic society on the South Asian Frontier*, 53.

Ali Rajas, encompassing both the hinterland and the coastal belt of Malabar. By the 1680s, the influence of the VOC in Kolathunadu was increasingly confined to the physical limits of the fortress. Because of the irregularity of their appearances, patrols by VOC armed ships along the Malabar Coast did not have any lasting impact on the local trade network in Kolathunadu. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the VOC had to withdraw from the pepper market in Cannanore altogether.

The weakening of the VOC influence in Kolathunadu in the 1680s was also exacerbated by the changing commercial policy of the Company in Malabar. The aggressive commercial policy combined with active interference in regional political affairs promoted by Van Goens and also followed to an extent by Van Reede in Malabar yielded to a more compromising attitude. The failure of Van Reede either to strengthen the 'rajaship' in Kolathunadu on the lines of the Cochin model or to make effective inroads into the regional trade with the help of the Kolathiri by the expedient of marginalizing the Ali Rajas may have influenced subsequent VOC policy, which was to adopt a more co-operative attitude towards the latter. The failure of the commercial venture of the Company in Mysore, contrived in an endeavor to usurp the Mappila commercial control in the region, could have also been a factor which inspired this policy change.

At precisely the same period, the growing presence of the English, especially the private traders, along the coast gave the commercial and political presence of the Europeans in the region a new dimension. In spite of initial setbacks in its efforts to take root in the northern part of Malabar, the influence of the English East India Company grew rapidly after the establishment of the Tellichery factory in 1682. Above all, the success of the English in attracting local trade depended on their ability to build up a close rapport with the local elites and trading classes. Unlike the VOC which claimed its right to trade in Cannanore as an independent political entity by virtue of its conquest of the port from the Portuguese, the English traded within the confines of the existing power set-up in the region. Their willingness to pay tolls on merchandise and to supply war materials on demand was a great incentive to the local elite whose members were constantly striving to enhance their power in the regional political structure.

This elite support undoubtedly facilitated the English Company easy access to the regional trade. The English readiness to purchase at market prices with ready cash and give advance payments before delivery proved very attractive to the small-scale local traders. Moreover, the presence of a strong English private trade interest in the regional trade gave the English Company's commercial presence more flexibility. English privateers, who traded principally in low value, bulk agricultural products, paved the way for a close association between the local suppliers and the English Company. This inevitably helped the English Company to grab more control of the spice trade in the face of mounting Dutch antagonism.

The growing English and French presence in North Malabar was the matter of great concern to the VOC. Its officials were afraid that these European rivals would appropriate a considerable share in the Malabar pepper trade and consequently destabilize the pepper market in Europe. This, combined with the political and commercial disappointments mentioned above, forced the VOC to revamp its commercial

policy in Cannanore by the closing decades of the seventeenth century. In place of offering the Ali Raja unrelenting opposition, the Company entered into a strategic co-operation with him in its endeavors to check the increasing English and French influence in the regional trade.

The growing competition between the European companies had repercussions on the elite power relations in Kolathunadu. The strong presence of the European companies in the regional trade opened up new avenues for the local 'men of prowess' to claim a share in the profit from the burgeoning maritime trade in the region. As the companies were keen to prevail over the formidable trade network operating under the Ali Rajas in order to penetrate the hinterland supply lines, they had to win the assistance of the local elites at all costs. Some of these local elites successfully exploited this opportunity to forge closer relations with the companies, a move which eventually helped them to enhance their position in the regional power relations. The comparative technological superiority of the European companies in the employment of firearms and navigational techniques encouraged a growing demand from the local elites.⁶ While the VOC was hesitant to heed the requests of the elites to provide such assistance, the English had no such qualms about satisfying their demands. Consequently, as the last chapter reveals, the English Company emerged as a crucial player in the constantly shifting power relations galvanizing the regional political economy.

The success of some of the local elites in taking advantage of this situation to carve out their own niche in the regional trade in alliance with the European companies, especially the English, clashed directly with the interests of the Ali Raja. The intensifying competition to control the hinterland production and supply system, which had long been the virtual sole preserve of the Ali Raja, reflected the power structure in the region. Ineluctably the fluctuations in the power relations between various 'men of prowess' in the region intensified during this period. Seizing upon it, the centrifugal forces operating within the Kolaswarupam gained considerable strength under the changing circumstances. Although at first glance this appears to have been a clash between two opposing dominant lineages in the Swarupam, namely the Palli and Udayamangalam Kovilakams, a closer look at the sources reveals a much wider canvas of change. As is revealed in the last chapters, the struggle for power transcended the structural boundaries of *korilakams* and the Kolaswarupam and encompassed the entire regional cosmos. The Ali Rajas' close involvement in the struggle among the Kolathiri princes and other 'men of prowess' was an integral part of this struggle for power.

The intensifying competition to gain access to the surplus generated by maritime trade also set off centrifugal tendencies in the 'informal' maritime state of the Ali Raja. The attempt by the Ali Raja to assume direct control of the neighboring Mappila port of Dharmapatanam was strenuously opposed by the

⁶ C. R. Boxer indicated the superiority of European artillery was crucial to their success in maritime Asia. For a discussion on this subject see, C. R. Boxer, 'Asian Potentates and European Artillery in the 16th-18th Centuries: A Footnote to Gibson-Hill', in *id., Portuguese Conquest and Commerce in Southern Asia, 1500-1750* (London: Variorum, 1985), 156-72.

local Mappila elite family which possessed the status or *stanam* of the *Kartharu*. Later, the rise to prominence of the Mappila trading house of the Keyis of Tellichery, in alliance with the English, can be perceived as an outcome of this trend.⁷ Likewise, the growing determination of the local elites to make their mark in the maritime trade offered the Mappila merchants along the coast new opportunities. The success reaped by the Vazhunnavar of Vadakara in the maritime commerce would not have been possible without the assistance of the local Mappila traders. These new alliances helped to ignite a new round of conflicts between the Kolathiri princes and the Ali Raja in the third decade of the eighteenth century.

The conflict which erupted between the Ali Raja and the Kolathiri princes in 1721 was thus the outcome of the mounting pressures within the power structure of the region. The strivings of the Ali Rajas and other local elites to enhance their power status in the regional political order by expanding their resource base ultimately led to an open clash between these interest groups. If at all, religious consciousness hardly affected this development. As is revealed in the letters sent to the Company by the members of the local elites, the latter were concerned with the contravention of the social order by the Ali Raja and his entourage. None of the correspondence to the VOC from either the Ali Raja or his opponents contains any references to the religious distinction between the two engaging factions.⁸ The conflict - an offshoot of both 'internal' and 'external' stimuli - was confined to the question of the reproduction of the social order within the region.

The staunch support rendered to the Ali Raja by the VOC and the willingness of the English to endorse the princes had not much to do with this internal power struggle. In both cases these were strategic moves to spoil any intention the other might nurture to gain a stronger foothold in the regional trade with the assistance of the local elites. In spite of their intimate involvement in the struggle, the English and the Dutch looked at the developments from a different angle from that adopted by the local elite and consequently each participated with their own distinct agenda. Apparently, it was not the Mappilas, but these European company men who formed a 'frontier' group which remained at the periphery of the local socio-political system.

⁷ For a brief description of the rise of this family to prominence see, A. P. Ummarkutty, *History of the Keyis of Malabar* (Cannanore: Edward Press, 1916).

⁸ The only reference which can be interpreted as 'religious' is one mention in the 'forged' letters written to the Company by the Vazhunnavar of Vadakara in the name of Kolathiri, in which the Ali Raja is accused of maltreating Brahmins and desecrating temples. However, how far this reference can be taken as an indication to the existence of social tension based on 'religious' differences must be considered dubious. It is more probable that the stress in the accusation lay more on the atrocities committed by the Ali Raja than on the religious difference between the two sides. VOC 1852, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 5 Dec. 1713, fos. 198v-200r.

