



Cover Page



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THE LOCAL EXCHANGE NET WORKS AT CHAVAKKAD IN HISTORICAL OUTLINE

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Local social collective is the aggregate of the human relationships formed among the people of particular geographical area who make their subsistence by utilizing the resources available in the area. A study of local history must include different factors such as economic, political and cultural aspects of society. The local history perspective is interested more in the basic units of economic production that came into being spontaneously as a response to the needs and potentials of the locality. It is the study of history in a local context often concentrating an event that affected a local community, people or places of a particular village or town.¹ Oral History and Oral traditions are to identify the locality, its geographical landscape the nature of soil, availability of water, flora and fauna etc all that is there without human intervention.

The location of Chavakkad was highly conducive to the development of a trade centre. Trade and commerce constitute a vital aspect of the economic system. Agricultural commodities and fish were the main trading items. It had achieved remarkable progress in the realms of internal and external trade. Peculiar geographical feature of the coastal area were much favorable for the development of extensive net work of water ways in the Chavakkad region. People belonging to different periods in history will have their own impressions and understanding about their past, which they retain document and transmit using the resources available to them.² The term regional history signifies an awareness of the fact that the region is fragment of whole. When we take up, for instance history of Karnataka or Andhra or Tamil Nadu or Kerala or part of any regions, it is naturally understood that these regional cultures form part of the sub-continental civilization of India.³ The evolution of regional cultural patterns has its own history. Regional history has produced a wealth of historical information. Thus, it is really necessary for a proper study of regional history. As studies of a wider scope naturally exclude diverse and minute aspects of each locality, the intensive micro level studies can only offer an inclusive historical approach. This paper is concentrate upon the local exchange network of Chavakkad and its influence on the natives.

The sea has been a permanent and decisive factor in the history of Malabar. In the ancient and the early medieval periods the contacts by sea between Malabar and the outside world had been mainly commercial and cultural in character. The major spices like pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves etc. were very much in demand in the countries of West Asia and they found their way by boat and caravan to the leading markets in the region. Thus, Malabar remained the emporia of world trade and commerce. Being the international centre of the commercial transactions Malabar commanded a pre-eminent status among the territorial units of Indian subcontinent.⁴ The most important seaports of ancient Kerala through which commercial and cultural contacts were kept up with foreign countries were Muziris, Tyndis, Baric and Nelcymda. Chettuvai and Ponnani were the main seaport in South Malabar. We have a large corpus of inscriptions and literature which shed light up on the extensive trade net work from the very ancient times onwards. Margaret Frenz wrote on Malabar ports that “the ports located along the Malabar coast line differ from one another in their geographical features and have been of varying significant over the centuries to the trade around the globe”.⁵ The trade routes, land and water were essential components of development of any trading settlements of medieval period. The trade routes connected hinterland markets to the trading settlements and the ports. The pattern of production developed in Kerala was production for use and production for exchange which was the prime cause of the internal developments in the various sub regions which led to the growth of trade and trading centers. Ponnani taluk at one time comprised the three ancient nadus of Vettanad, Kuttanad and Chavakkad and a portion of Cheranad.⁶

Chavakkad the most Southern Taluk of the Malabar Collectorate, occupies narrow tract of country stretching from Kodungallur on the South to vicinity of the town of Ponnani on the North. The intermediate space measuring about 37 miles, a line of sea coast limits it on the West for the whole of this distance, pressed on the East by the Cochin boundary, running along its precincts for nearly 30 miles.⁷ The region of Chavakkad was well known for its agrarian and commercial economy supported by the network of trade. The modes of transportation, networks, river line and land routes traffic created the linkage between the port and hinterlands. The hinterland and their relation with the port was an important factor in the development of this region. The existence of water transportation facilities that connected hinterland with the Chettuvai port city was an important factor for the expansion of trade at Chavakkad. The permanent navigation of the Chettuvai ends at Manathala, but during the rains here is a connection between that place and Ponnani. They are united however only by a shallow and contracted channel merely capable of floating the lesser boats. Conolly canal was constructed under the orders of Mr. Conolly, the Collector of Malabar, and was completed in the year 1848.⁸ It connects Chavakkad with the famous trading centers like Kozhikkodu, Ponnani and Kodungallur. The main purpose of this canal is easy transportation, industry and movement of goods from one place to other. Hundreds of boats and thousands of changadams flew through this canal. Sheaf of corn from paddy field to courtyard, and to carry coir to Cochin market were through this canal.⁹ The Enamakal back water is flowing at Elavathur is navigable only a few miles beyond its mouth. These streams Southern extremity joins



Cover Page



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the Chettuvai river. The networks of routes were highly significant in trade active due to the lack of good transportation facility through the land route.

Exchange of goods ultimately leads to the formation of town. In those days road transport was not developed. Therefore, people depend on rivers for transporting goods. The economic activity that has expanded in past decades has been trade and commerce. People of neighbouring villages depended on these rivulets to transport their commodities for trading purpose. Trade, the main social activity of man started when he began to produce beyond his immediate needs. Money was not used as a mode of exchange. Wages were given in the form of goods. Agriculture, fishing, coir making and toddy taping were the main occupations of this region. Agricultural products were brought here by head loads. Chavakkad was considered as a main centre of trade.

. In olden days, there were only mud roads here. The main vehicle for transport was the bullock cart. The journey was so difficult especially in the rainy season. Till the middle of the eighteenth century there were no roads in this locality suitable for wheeled traffic or even the pack bullocks. Buchanan, who inspected this country between 1800-1801, testifies: "In Malabar even cattle are little used for transportation of goods which are generally carried by porters".¹⁰ The rivers and backwaters were the main channels of communication and trade. An important feature of the area was that there flowed a number of rivers and small water outlets called thodus. Even though there were such rivers all of them were not used for constant traffic. But for the movement of certain commodities or articles such rivers and thodus were inevitable. Thus, products from the inland regions were carried over to big towns and coastal areas through such rivers like Cochin frontier thodu, Kumpully canal, canoly canal etc. As a result, such places as Manathala, Guruvayur, Enamakal, Mullassery, Elavathur, Chittattukara, Palayur Kottapady developed considerably as a market centers.

Articles of trade accumulated in the kadavus (ferries) were carried to distant places either via water or through land. It was through such a congregation that kadavus got its prominence as trading centres. Commodities like hay, rice, vegetables, fish, and other immediate necessities of life exchanged through these kadavus. Thus, merchants and occupational groups from different places and to certain extent from urban centers flocked to Chavakkad and did their business.¹¹ Consequently, in medieval times itself, the kadavus like Vanchikadavu, Enmakal kadavu, munakkakadavu, Pulikkakadavu, Kundukadavu etc., became flourished as meeting place of merchants and people who could available articles brought from urban centres.

Several kinds of locally made cargo and passenger boats were in use. The villagers from Enammakal and Palayur arrived here to buy and sell their products. Circulation of products within and outside the locality is also important. There were many angadis and cantas grew on the places, which connected both resources places and the coastal area.¹² Some of the products, may be such that they are distributed mainly within the locality and others are transported over long distances. The location of the habitat and locality in such circulation networks and transformation of the networks are of crucial concern. Concepts of reciprocity and re-distribution can be applied to the pre-modern system of exchange in our society.¹³ It was a fair, where people came together only for buying and selling things on specific days. Majority of the people lived outside the market.

There were two kinds of local markets, one was 'periodic market' and the other was 'regular local market'. The periodic market or weekly market was known in Malabar as 'Canta' summoned once in a week, which was visited by local merchants, town merchants and the cultivators. The areas serviced by weekly markets seems to have varied from market to market, many having more than a purely local reputation. It was a feature of rural areas and considered as a traditional institution. Kuttingal canta (market) was usually conducts on Tuesday. Two thousand and five hundred persons were attending this market at every week.¹⁴ Mainly the lower caste people came here, and purchased goods from Kuttingal canta. At the same time upper caste people sent their servants for purchase. These two types of markets functioned as the focal points of local trade. The regular local market was known as 'bazaar' or 'angadi'. The spread of the local bazaars was apparently concomitant with the spread of agriculture outlined earlier. As settlements grew up in the interior areas, local bazaars became inevitable and similarly local artisans who met the needs of people also grew up. Angadi was a place, where the villagers sold their agricultural products and bought goods which they need. The natives says that here different types of markets were existed. i.e., evening markets, weekly markets, daily markets and cattle markets. Usually, the common people depend these kinds of markets for exchange their goods. Paddy, areca nut, pepper, plantain fruit, betel leaf, clothes, coir, fish etc. were the selling goods in these markets. A market can be taken as a sociological phenomenon in which various social groups perform differentiated functions. As an institutional definition trade was a method of acquiring goods which were not available locally.

Chavakkad, the place has a long tradition in the field of fishing industry. It offers enormous natural facilities for both marine and inland fisheries. The coast line and flow of tide are favourable for fishing except the monsoons. Fishing is the main occupation of



Cover Page



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a large number of people.¹⁵ Coastal region must have been a productive unit which existed on the river banks, where the fishermen settlements were also developed. Majority of the Muslims found in Chavakkad taluk, and some of them were boatmen and fishermen. Kadapuram, Blangad and Puthenkadapuram are the major fishing centres of this locality. Fishes like kanambu, prayi, karimeen, poomeen, kora etc. are available in this locality. Fish is usually brought to the local markets by head loads. Most of the fresh fish taken to the market are bought by the local people themselves. When fish available plenty, the surplus quantity is cured and sent to different markets in the state. Fish is preserved by the conventional methods most of the catches are sold in fresh condition for edible purposes. Fish is preserved usually when the catches cannot be disposed in fresh condition. The traditional methods of curing (a) sun – drying without salt and (b) salt curing either by dry process or by wet process. Fishing industry makes sizeable contribution to the wealth of this region and is the main source of income of a large section of the people inhabiting the coastal areas. It is interesting to note that Kuttingal canta, a historically and culturally important marketing center has disappeared and has been replaced by the marketing centers.

Palayur is also named Paloor is a small village situated one mile away from Chavakkad. Ptolemy a famous historian who lived in the 2nd century mentioned the place name Paloora. Palayur Church, which is noted as being one of the seven original churches of Malabar.¹⁶ The Jewish connection with India through the settlement of small Jewish communities on the west coast. Before long, they assumed a leading role in the trade and commerce. The Jewish settlers achieved a large measure of economic prosperity and secured several valuable privileges from the native rulers. The Jews established coastal settlements. As the part of this, some Jews settled Palayur for their trading purposes. This area is known as Joothakunnu. There was an Angadi near Joothakunnu. At present this area called Joothan bazaar.

The ‘coir’ is rope which was manufactured from the fibrous bark of the coconut, which was also an important export item from here. Extracting coconut fibre and fending them to produce coir products was a household occupation in most parts. The terrain was suitable for this as the clay sand regions favourable for coconut cultivation. The indigenous method consists in soaking the husks in water for a certain period. A common method is to soak the husks in basin shaped pits. The pits are dug so as to be within the reach of gentle tidal action of the back water waves alternately, they are providing with channels to allow water to flow in and out with the rise and fall of the tide.¹⁷ Ordinarily the bottom of the pit is sandy. Otherwise, a layer of sand is placed at bottom and the sides of the pit are lined with coconut leaves. After the husks have been fielded in, they are covered with coconut leaves and mud and weighted down with mud. Another method which is in vogue in the Chavakkad taluk is to place the husks in coir-nets. These are kept in the backwaters for a few days and then covered with coconut leaves and weighted down with mud so has to gradually sink under water for slow degradation. These bundles of husks are known as Kollis or Mallis. After being taken out from the pits or staked enclosures, the retted husks are washed with water to remove the adhering mud or slime and outer skin is then peeled off. The washed husk are then placed on wooden blocks and beaten with wooden mallet to separate the fibre from the cork and pith. The fibre may then be further cleaned by hand or washed a second time and beaten lightly to separate the pith still adhering to the fibre. The wet fibres are then spread out to dry. Coir yarn is prepared by pinning the fibre either by hand or the help of spinning wheels. Hand spun yarn always has a soft twist while machine spun yarn has usually hard twist and is not so even hand spun.

Chettuvai was the most important seaport in the Malabar Coast which became the part of the world trade, with the advent of the European companies. This place is five miles south of Chavakkad. The place name was originated as it indicates, Chettuvai is laid on the edge of the mud bank.¹⁸ The Chettuvai river and connected backwaters find an outlet to the sea and island of Chettuvai or Manapuram (sandy land), to give it its more ancient and appropriate name begins. On the coast near Chavakkad a small mud bank is reported to occur near the mouth of the Chettuvai river. Several banks which constitute the off-shore barriers have provided anchorage for ships along the coast. They form during the rainy or monsoon seasons when they acquire their stature and the shape. During the dry season, the banks flatten out and are less conspicuous.¹⁹ The growth of a port city, depends upon the volume of trade it carried out with the outside world. A port city invites the attention of the outside world through the good quality of commodities it provides to the outsiders. Its chief trade is in salt-fish, coconut etc. carried in small craft. Average tonnage 4,987 per annum. Imports Rs. 671, exports Rs. 31, 927.²⁰ This place was a trading center south of Chaliyam which turned out to be bones of contention between the Zamorin and the European merchants and also among the European merchants themselves. Commodities like pepper and other items attracted the attention of the Dutch, French and English.

The fortunes of the Malabar trade was linked with the fortunes of the Indian ocean trade network. Both land and water were essential components of development of trading centres of the medieval period. The works analyzed do make a contribution to our understanding of the early medieval trade and trading network. In early time Chavakkad was a good trading centre. Rivers and canals make the town most beautiful in the world. William Logan’s Manual on Malabar gives ample evidence to prove this Geographical peculiarity of this place led to this status. Geography of a region is an integral part of its history. One reason was that, the Chettuvai



Cover Page



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port city is near to Chavakkad. Another reason is that this region was surrounded by small rivulets. The river system and backwater system of this locality are peculiar and have bearing on the development of its economy. These rivulets were very helpful to transport the goods from one place to another place. The region gave importance not only to agriculture but also promoted trade such as fishing, coir industry and so on. Among the natives of this locality, the wealthy section engaged in trading activities and the others in fishing industry. These have a profound influence on the formation of settlement and agricultural production which have a corresponding impact upon the pattern of trade of region. Jews and Muslims came to this region and settled here for trading purpose. As a part of the internal trade several markets developed in this area. The marketing centers were called 'angadis'. Commodities produced here were not so important in the view of regional and international trade to the exemption of certain articles like coconut and areca nut. Other articles were chiefly consumption oriented such as oil, pinnakku, copra, ola, coir and coir ropes, toddy and painga (tender form of areca nut) were familiar.

At same time port cities also came up in the coastal areas with the development of foreign trade. These port cities were developed form of the port centers of the classical period. Chettuvai port city boasted an extensive involvement in long distance trade networks. Laymen also played a remarkable role in the expansion of trade in this locality. But with the introduction of modern means of transport and communication the importance of Chavakkad got faded in the coming years. During the last decades of the 20th century, gulf migration has been the dynamic force that shaped the economy of this region.

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