
SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL IMPORTANCE OF MALABAR COAST, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The history of Malabar Coast is an important phase of the history of Kerala. It has a rich geographical history and the discovery of sea voyages. In this paper I have focused on the geographical importance of the Malabar Coast, how it connected India to the entire world. The next part is focused on the St. Thomas Christians and their Socio cultural life.

Keywords: Malabar Coast, St. Thomas Christians, Socio-cultural life, Geographical importance.

I. INTRODUCTION

For ages, Cochin is an important place for commercial trade and shipping. It has witnessed the cultural fusion of Indian, Dutch, English and even Chinese influences. Cochin had history of invasions, first by traders, then the foreign conquerors, who tried to control the crucial Eastern spice route. Almost three thousand year ago the spice as well as peacocks and apes attracted the King Solomon's merchant to the shores of Kerala. From that time the connection between Jews and Israelites continued. At the time of fall of Jerusalem in 70CE, Kerala became one of the safest heavens for the Israelites. Their first major settlement was at the port of Cranganore, also known as Shingly, which is 20km. north to Modern Cochin.

Malabar coastline has a long dated history. It was the place, where first merchant Jews made their permanent home. There were two different groups of Jews based on their skin complexion. They were Black Jews, who were come from the line of King Solomon and the White Jews; they were more recent hailing from Europe. The White Jews were experts at cask making and book-binding. The white Jews are traditionally land-owners, businessman or traders of Muslin and Perfume. The Black Jews were also traders as well as artisans: mason, sawyers and carpenters. From both of the communities few individuals acted as the money lenders.

The history of Kerala can be divided into three parts: Malabar and the Dutch, Kerala and Mysore and Malabar and the Portuguese. The second half of fifteenth century was famous for great sea voyages of discovery. Main motive behind these voyages were to find out sea routes to India for the purpose of trade. The famous traveler Marco Polo first provided a trustworthy account on India. At this time Europe came to know about the people, the wealth of India. In 1498 Vasco Da Gama reached India near Calicut in search of Christians and spices and the age of Portuguese was started. K.M. Panikkar, the famous historian in his book A History of Kerala, 1498-1801 has made clear that the political apparatus of Portuguese was not enough competent to establish the authority in India. Soon they were replaced by Dutch, Dutch captured Cochin in 1663. They were also failed to establish their political supremacy over Malabar. According to Panikkar, Dutch connection with Malabar was beneficial. After this British found India and we all know the rest.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL IMPORTANCE OF MALABAR COAST

In the beginning of the study we have to understand the geographical area of Malabar Coast. The southern part of India's western coast, from the state of Goa by the southward that is bordered on the east by the Western Ghats range. Sometimes the name refers to the entire western coast of Peninsular India. Now Malabar Coast includes most of the states of Kerala and coastal region of Karnataka state. It consists of continuous belt of sand dunes. Many lagoons are parallel to the coast and they are linked by canals. Rice and spices are the principle crops. Fishing is another important livelihood of the inhabitant of this place. Kochi or the modern Cochin had importance from the very ancient period; the large part of the Malabar Coast was under the ancient kingdom of Keralaputra that was under Chera dynasty.

Malabar Coast has an important place in Indian history because it linked the ancient world to the ancient India. The link was established by the trade route and the silk route. It was recorded in history from 3000

B.C and it became the major centre of commerce. It had commercial relation with Mesopotemia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Jerusalem and Arab world. It was not limited to commercial relation among the nations but also they shared their ideas among them.

The coastal area of Malabar Coast is basically dominated by Malayalam speaking people. The term 'Malabar' was not often mentioned in the Indian literatures. It is not an indigenous term. Al-Beruni was the first person who first used the term. Some other foreigner also named the place. Those are- Minibar, Manibar, Melibar, Mulaibar etc. Popular trading commodities of this rich trade area were- ginger, pepper, cinnamon, cardamoms, beetle, areca nut, coconut, copra, coconut oil, fine timber for ship building, furniture, rice, butter, sugar and cotton cloth, all off above were exported. At the time Calicut was important trade centre as well as most important kingdom under Zamorin. Zamorin was most powerful prince of Malabar at the time of arrival of Portuguese. The famous parts of Malabar Coast were Naura(Kunnur), Balita(Vizhinjam), Kochi(Cochin), Calicut, Mangalore and most popular one Moziris. Because of the commercial advancement of Malabar Coast, the cosmopolitan cities developed in this place, from the very old period. It attracted the very first group of Jews, Syrian, Christians, Muslims and Anglo-Indians in India.

Fall of Constantinople in 1493 made European to look for alternative sea routes for the purpose of trade. The writings of foreign travelers on India, about the fabulous wealth of India and the spices of Malabar attracted the Europeans. They started finding the sea routes to India. That led to discovery of India by Vasco Da Gama, he reached Kappad near Calicut on 20th May 1498.

III. SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECT OF INDIAN-CHRISTIANS AT MALABAR COAST

In the early centuries, even before Christian era Malabar was the museum of race and cultures. The early inhabitants of Malabar Coast were mainly Dravidians, with their unique religious practices. It was believed that, Brahmins migrated to Malabar around 300-400 B.C. they were named as Nambudiris. Next to Nambudiris, Nairs were second to the social status of Kerala; they were the ruling class and military men of Malabar. All other castes are considered as lower castes of Kerala. The main religions of Kerala were Hinduism and Buddhism. On the coming of Christianity, Tamil Nadars and Ezhava of Kerala converted to Christianity in order to upgrade their social status.

There are two different views regarding the origin of Christianity in India. The first group says it is with the coming of St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostle of Jesus Christ. Another group says it is with the arrival of Christian merchants and missionaries, who belongs to east Syrian and Persian Church. There were so many stories regarding relation between the Christians in India and the Church of Persia. According to the NEB reports:

“The origin of Christians of St. Thomas is uncertain, though they seem to have been in existence before the 6th century AD and probably drive from the missionary activity of East Syrian(Nestorian) church... despite their geographical isolation, they retained the Chaldean liturgy and Syriac language and maintained fraternal ties with the Babylonian(Bagdad) Patriach: Their devotional practices also included Hindu religious symbolism vestiges of Christians to their early religion.”

St. Thomas Christians

When West discovered the Thomas Christians, they were Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and oriental in worship. From the beginning St. Thomas Christians accepted the caste system of India and its hierarchical order, which was against the brotherly concept of Christianity. The Thomas Christians considered themselves as superior to any other lower castes and they even avoided the company of the New Christians of Kerala. Caste was never been a problem in Syrian Church. For the Thomas Christians caste system has no religious implications, rather than it is a social phenomenon. During the end of 18th

century, there was a demand in Kerala for the Mukkuvans or fisher caste boys into the local seminary as their eventual ordination as priest. At that time there was a great opposition from the higher castes. Even Propaganda Fide was came into discussion, where it was said St. Peter, the first Pope of Christianity was a fishermen. But it could not change the mind the higher caste Christians and the rule of Propaganda Fide was not followed by the Bishops. The reaction of Christians of Kerala towards Indian caste system was very different from the other places of India, just because of the presence of the Syrian Christians. The reaction of Syrian Christians to egalitarian pressure and aspiration of low castes converts were varied. The original group of St. Thomas had undergone through a course of time, a decline. It was revived by the group Christian who came from Persia.

In the second half of 15th century Portuguese came to India for the purpose of trade. With the coming of Portuguese a new era of Roman Catholic mission was started. Portuguese considered the life-style of Indian Christians as inferior to them. They believed every Christian should conform in order to be perfect Christians. St. Thomas Christians had a different view; they could not even imagine that the Latin form of Christianity as the only true form of Christianity. They accepted there were certain differences among them, that may caused by the different customs of the apostles. They were ready to accept from Latin Missionaries, what they lack in instructions, for a better discipline but they were not ready to accept the Latin Missionaries. Portuguese always tried to destroy the Indigenous custom and tried to Europeanize them. Portuguese asked new converts to give up their caste and asked to drink wine. This made Christianity a hated and untenable religion for the higher castes.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Syrian Christian Church is the oldest Christian Church in India and one of the oldest Churches of the world. There are very less material available regarding Syrian Church. St Thomas Christians were not at all good at preserving their history. The history is only available as the form of folk-tales; there are no written documents by their ancestors. There are several variations of stories regarding coming of St. Thomas Christians. St. Thomas had built seven Churches and they are: Palur (Palayar) near Chavacud, Maliankara near Cranganore, Kottaikal (Kookayal) near north Parur, Kokamangalam or South Pallipuram in north Travancore, Niranam near Tiruvalla and Nellakal near Chayal. St. Thomas was martyred by one of his enemy at 68 A.D. it is said that St. Thomas was died near Mylapore. On the memory of him the St. Thomas mount became the place of pilgrim nowadays.

We have seen Kerala had witnessed a huge cultural diversity. The Malabar Coast had attracted the foreigners with its spices and many other aspects, but no one could sustain in the place. Initially most of them came for the purpose of trade but later they tried to interfere in to the socio-cultural life of the inhabitants and they could not sustain. The example of which is Portuguese. It was the St. Thomas Christians who sustained for the longest time. The secret of their sustainability is, they didn't try to change the life-style of the original inhabitants, rather than they adopted different aspects of the local culture.

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