

Relationship of Foreign Powers with Travancore

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to trace the dealings of Western countries with Travancore in the period 1600 – 1805 in a summarised version. As Travancore is comparatively a modern political expression and entity, the creation of King Marthanda Varma who ruled between 1729 and 1758, the activities of those petty kingdoms which were independent prior to 1729 and which later constituted parts of modern Travancore have been sketched. This study tries to highlight the importance of the relationship in the history of Travancore, thus discussing two aspects which complement each other. Though in the period of study (1600-1805), the Dutch and subsequently the English rose to prominence, the Portuguese power was in the ascendant prior to 1600. Therefore, Portuguese relationship had been traced with a view to maintaining a sequence of events and providing the necessary background. This study brings out the nature and important features of the relationship of Portuguese, Denmark, Netherlands, France and England on one hand and the state of Travancore on the other with respect to general and trade and commerce transactions between them.

KEYWORDS: Travancore, Portuguese, English, Trade, Commerce, Dutch

INTRODUCTION

Travancore was one of the premier princely states of preindependent India. That Kerala (previously Travancore) was in touch with the major centres of civilisation from time immemorial through her commercial activities has been established beyond doubt. Even before Christ, people of this part of India realised the commercial importance of the various products of the country. Compared with the early foreigners like the Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, Chinese, etc. who traded with the south-west coast of India, a marked difference in the trading practice was felt soon after the advent of Europeans starting with the Portuguese. While the earlier traders were purely commercially motivated, the Europeans evinced a general tendency to interfere with local politics and religion. Travancore had to pay dearly for this game of European traders which later developed to the extent of even risking the sovereignty of the state.

Review of Literature

Unlike other studies, where the knowledge of physical world alone is involved, in history there are four different meanings. It refers to a kind of knowledge, a kind of literature, an actual sequence of events in time and space and their cumulative impact on human behaviour, which may lead to progress, civilization it is called (B Sheik Ali, 2010).

The previous studies on erstwhile princely state of Travancore (now Kerala) include the following:

George Philip, (2005) explored the mission, vision and modus operand of Col. Munroe in the direction of modernising as well as preparing the ground for reducing/minimising the inherent social hatred and discrimination that existed amongst various jathis. Col. Munroe was an officer of the East India Company in the early decades of 19th century. He became instrumental to modernization efforts of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin.

Noorjehan (2005) conducted a study for a period of 1817 to 1947. It was to trace the genesis of present day educational development. It tried to get evidences of the introduction of the system of grant in aid and to trace the background of the state control over education, administrative measures and legislative enactments developed to control the private sector in education. It also traced the stages of developments of education in Travancore during the reign of a lineage of rulers in Travancore.

Suresh Kumar(2002) undertook a comprehensive analysis of the social legislation in the princely state of Travancore for a period of 31 years from 1925 to 1956. The society of Travancore was ripe for a drastic change by the second quarter of the last century. It was a transition face which witnessed the enactment of a series of legislations in the realms of community, land, society education, and culture for the welfare of the toiling and moiling millions of Travancore.

Abraham Kunju (1977) wrote that the English asserted their power and convinced Travancore that the latter can neither act independently nor thwart British paramountcy which had become a reality. The policies and future prospects of Travancore was at the mercy of the English and they made use of this situation to stabilise their position through political, religious and commercial activities to which Travancore had to get along with

Edwin (1972) conducted a study on Marthanda Varma's relations with the French. It explained the troubled internal affairs and the political interference of the Dutch. It also narrated how the King Marthanda Varma was compelled to seek the assistance of the English. They availed themselves of this opportunity to safeguard their commercial interests by securing additional favours through treaties they made with every successive sovereign.

Ananda Ranga Pillai (1902) observed that the French tried to exploit the situation in Travancore in their favour; they once again raised the issue of establishing a settlement in Kulachal. Also they sent five ships to Malabar coast with instruction to seize all English ships cruising the area. The French had succeeded in seizing almost all areas which were under the possession of the English and the Dutch.

Reader (1896) recorded that under the inspiring and untiring royal guidance of Prince Henry, the Navigator, Portugal conducted several voyages, which ultimately resulted in the arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut on 17th May, 1498. By discovering the sea-route to India, Vasco da Gama made Lisbon the emporium of world trade. The Portuguese were the first European nation to attempt and succeed in discovering a regular sea-route to India and thereby repairing the damage done to the age-old commercial route by the Turks.

Abbe Raynal (1760) recorded the plight of the Kulachel settlement. The factory of the Danes at Kolachel is nothing more than a small store house where they might nevertheless be supplied with two lakhs weight of pepper. But such is their indolence or poverty that they made but one purchase and that of a very small quantity these ten years. Their trade depended largely on the willing co-operation of Travancore and the connivance of certain English officials who had clandestine dealings with the Danes.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to examine the nature, pattern and the important features of the relationship of foreign powers with Travancore who had come to India establish relations of varied nature. The foreign powers include Portuguese, Denmark, Netherlands, France and England.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research Methodology adopted for the study is given as under:

Method of Study

It is a Historical Research method of study. It involves a critical inquiry of the previous age of Travancore with the aim of reconstructing a faithful representation of the past. Detailed investigation was made to examine all the transactions of foreign powers with

Travancore and establish facts in order to arrive at conclusions concerning past events or predict future events.

Type of Study

The purpose of the study is mainly descriptive, aiming to understand the specific transactions and developments during the period 1600 – 1805 in that particular culture. It is holistic, comprehensive in nature and is similar to the interpretive approach.

Sources and Types of Historical Data

There are two sources and types of Historical Data for the Study which are given below:

Primary Sources

Primary sources are tangible materials that provide a description of the trade and commercial relationship of foreign powers with Travancore and were produced shortly after such event happened. They have a direct physical relationship to the event being studied and reconstructed. Most of the documentary evidences are available from State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram and from other authentic and reliable sources including Madras Archives.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources do not have a direct physical relationship with the event being studied. They include data which are not original. Examples of secondary sources include textbooks, biographies, encyclopedias, reference books, replicas of art objects and paintings and so on. Libraries in and around Thiruvananthapuram is a major secondary source and so also libraries in erstwhile Travancore State area.

Evaluation of the Historical Sources

The data of historical sources is subject to two types of evaluation which are stated below:

External Criticism of Data:

This reveals whether the historical source of data is authentic or not. It tries to determine whether (a) the information it contains was available at the time the document was written, and (b) this information is consistent with what is known about the author or the period from another source.

Internal Criticism of Data

Internal Criticism focuses attention on the accuracy and worth of the data contained in the historical documentary evidences. Internal criticism is concerned with the meaning of the written material. Internal criticism also includes establishing the credibility of the author of the document. It is also known as higher criticism of data.

Synthesis, Analysis and Interpretation of Historical Data

Data was synthesised, analysed and interpreted. Analysis of data was done on the basis of valid assumptions. Interpretation is necessary of the facts which were derived from documentary evidences in the light of the of the trade relations of foreign powers with Travancore. Wherever necessary, suitable concepts from other social and behavioural science disciplines, historical time and space etc. were used in analyzing and interpreting data. Conclusions were drawn from the analysis and interpretation of data

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

A brief and concise discussion about the relationship between various foreign powers and Travancore are given below along with the results of the study.

The Portuguese

In spite of the conducive political climate the Portuguese failed to make capital out of it by winning the goodwill and confidence of Travancore. It was the Queen of Quilon, who took the initiative to extend a friendly hand to Vasco Da Gama while he was staying at Cochin (Danvers,1966). This gesture should have been properly used to develop strong political bond between Travancore and the Portuguese; instead, they interfered with the local

politics and intrigued with all those disgruntled subjects of the state for strengthening their influence. Playing one power against another they achieved temporary gains. This selfish and opportunistic attitude ultimately made them enemies of all and hastened their way out. Had they befriended Travancore, which was cordial in political dealings and rich in pepper-stock, they would have had a stable ally south of Cochin (Panikkar,1929). Despite opposition from the people—a situation developed by a multiplicity of factors like the manipulations of the Moors, influence of the Zamorin over some of the petty chieftains and the general discontent caused by the high-handed action of the Portuguese—the Queen of Quilon gave them continued support, but in return received only disgrace and treachery. The Portuguese had neither any plan nor perspective to take into confidence the local rulers and the inhabitants. (Ley, 1953)

The Portuguese failed in Kerala mainly because of their interference in the political quarrels of the country, which necessitated constant fighting against the enemies of their friends. Similarly, the performance of Alexis De Menezes as the political agent of the Portuguese at Quilon was quite unsuited to the position he held in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. No foreign power, other than the Portuguese, had indulged in such sordid manipulations, which helped only lower their political stature in the estimation of people and rulers in Kerala (Shungoony Menon, 1878). In matters of religion also, no other foreign power in Travancore had evinced so much of bigotry and high-handedness as the Portuguese. They were at loggerheads with the Muslims from the very beginning which resulted in a prolonged struggle between the two. The Christians of Kerala who had earlier considered them as patrons and protectors soon found their mistake and began to break away because of their extreme fanaticism (Poonen,1967).

The Dutch

In the case of the Dutch it was the succession question at Cochin which gave them a stable foothold in Malabar. Of course this was the only course they could pursue to gain mastery over the trade of the country. Even if they were disinterested in the political affairs of the country circumstances were such as to pull them into the vortex of local politics. Those who controlled military power alone could compel the Rajas and local chieftains to provide trade facilities in the country. Therefore, the Dutch availed themselves of the first opportunity to stabilize their position by expelling the Portuguese first from Cochin and later from Travancore. The invincibility of the Portuguese was exploited by the Dutch and soon the latter came to be held in high esteem among the princes of Malabar (Galletti, 1911). The hostility of the princes to the Portuguese owing to their fanatical religious policy and meddlesome political dealing was an additional factor which made Dutch attempts in Malabar a complete success.

It was the expansionist policy of Martanda Varma of Travancore which prevented the attempts of the Dutch to monopolise the trade and to interfere in the political affairs of the country. The phenomenal progress of Travancore under Martanda Varma was viewed with awe and intolerance by the Dutch, who wanted weak figures on the thrones of local kingdoms—a situation which alone could serve their purpose unhampered (Nagam Aiya, 1906). The successful implementation of Martanda Varma's policies was directly connected with the elimination of the Dutch influence in Malabar politics.

The Dutch followed in the footsteps of the Portuguese, and assumed imperious postures, in making and unmaking kings. Their interference in the internal politics of Eledathu Swarupam, Quilon and Kayamkulam against Travancore was most unwise, the result of which culminated in their defeat at Kulachalin 1741. However, such an interference was inevitable from the point of view of the Dutch, because it was directly linked with their commercial predominance. The internecine struggles among the local rulers were blessing in disguise to the Dutch, for, the weaker among the combatants invariably turned to them

offering the maximum concessions for trade in their dominions. Therefore, interference in local politics was inevitable even though it was unwanted from the point of view of pure trade. This in turn brought heavy political responsibilities and unbearable mihtaiv and financial commitments, under the weight of which Dutch trade broke down later (Radwan, 1978).

The Danish

The Danes were traders, pure and simple. Though of a limited extent, in comparison with the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English trade, the Danish trade in Travancore is conspicuous for its peculiar features (Ole, 1895). While all other foreigners indulged in political interference and territorial acquisitions, the Danes kept aloof from all and concentrated their attention on commercial activities alone. Never did they think it expedient or necessary to side with one native power against another, and make capital out of it—a practice successfully followed by all others. They never poked their nose in intrigues so as to spread dissatisfaction and disaffection among the local people (Wilson, 1803). Never did they pose or claim that they were the best friends and benefactors of Travancore. There was neither flamboyance of posture nor excess of cordiality. Likewise, the Danes could never be accused of religious bigotry and propaganda; they never bothered for religion. Hence, they left little imprint on Travancore either as traders or political fortune makers (Hunter, 1899)

The French

Like the Danes the French were also treated as a counterpoise to the English; Travancore had no real intention of making any stable friendship with the French at the cost of the English. The French were, no doubt, active in Travancore, especially in the court to which the English strongly protested (Das Gupta, 1967). But Travancore Kings had only ulterior motives in keeping them in the court friendly, for this could augment the bargaining power of the former with the English and thereby extort maximum from them in war materials. However, if the French had come to the help of Martanda Varma in 1741, in his war against the Dutch, the latter relations between the two would have been, perhaps, totally different, for the former was badly in need of a powerful ally at that time. At the time of this decisive crisis, it was the English who came to the help of Martanda Varma (Shungoony Menon, 1878). The delay in coming to the assistance of Travancore by the French, whether inadvertent or deliberate, proved to be fatal for their future existence and survival in the land as traders. Prestige made a deep adverse impact on the local people and sovereigns, who ceased to look upon them as a dependable ally for their future designs on the political chessboard of Kerala. Gradually they gave way to the English, surrendering their hard-won commercial fortune which they enjoyed for less than a century (Day, 1940).

The English

The English had a humble beginning as traders. Their attempts for trade in Purakkad were incessantly impeded by the Dutch. The patience and perseverance evinced by Grisby and Hornby, the English Factors at Purakkad, in the face of the domineering attitude of the Dutch, were commendable (Hamilton, 1919). In the early period English fortunes were determined by the Dutch sufferance, for, the former were no match for the latter either in military preparedness or financial resources—the factors which determined the course of trade of the time.

The English policy towards Travancore was conspicuously different to the one pursued by the Dutch; while the latter desired the weakening of Travancore, the former wanted a strong king, even at the expense of the local chieftains of the country (Jayne, 1910). The English helped Travancore with munitions of war and at one or two times with gunners in exterminating the feudal nobles and conquering the petty principalities of the North.

In Travancore the power and influence of the Ettuvittil Pillamar, the Nair noblemen of eight families, was considerable and they always preferred a weak sovereign on the throne so that they could enjoy unrestrained freedom in the affairs of the country. These Pillamar hated the English for their support to the King against them. The English therefore wished to have the feudal nobles wiped out at the earliest for which they decided to assist Martanda Varma “in spite of money expenses.”(Logan,1951). This they did on their realisation that only if “the Kings will get the full power in their hands that then the Company will enjoy a free and full trade.” The Pillamar were completely rooted out and Martanda Varma came out as the strongest sovereign who ever sat on the throne of Travancore.

Of course at the time of the foundation of Anjengo settlement the English were guided purely by commercial interests; they cherished no political designs, much less any idea of conquest. However, they soon stepped into the path of political involvement just like the Portuguese and the Dutch. While the latter two powers helped one local power against another and made capital out of it, the English had to assist Travancore against the onslaught of a non-Kerala power, the Mysoreans under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan (Edmundson,1911). In spite of his adherence to the traditional policy of Martanda Varma in matters of trade, Kartika Tirunal Rama Varma could not but gradually give way to the English predominance—the inevitable outcome of his dependence on them for military assistance and political survival. (Day,1940). As the power of Kartika Tirunal hung in balance and the only assistance available was that of the English, the latter could exploit the situation in their favour—be it in trade or in politics. It was this peculiar circumstances which culminated in the treaty of 1805 that raised a hue and cry and turned the then Dewan, Velu Tampi extremely unpopular with the masses as well as the sovereign. Since this treaty, Travancore ceased to exercise any political or commercial power (Hunter,1899).

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that each foreign power has established relationship with Travancore on their own way, transacted trade dealings, interfered in administration of the state, made unwise decisions and made enemies, destroyed the relation and finally moved out of the state. Also, within less than half a century since the time of Martanda Varma, the trade monopoly of Travancore organised by him disappeared along with the political power of the country. The monopoly which he organised and developed brought immense benefit to the country. The attempt was novel; its success was enviable. Had it not been for the adventure of the Mysore Sultans against Travancore the country could have survived as a small but powerful state in the southwestern portion of India.

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