

Mercantile Activities of Saraswatbrahmin Merchants in the Late Medieval Malabar

MARTIZ KURIAN

Assistant Professor

Department of History, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry (Kerala) India

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INTRODUCTION

Medieval history of Malabar presents valuable insights into the evolution and development of trade and commerce and its impact on various mercantile communities. The members of Saraswat Brahmin community were initially attracted to the region by the profitable spice trade. The progenitors Konkani Brahmins or Saraswat Brahmins settled on the South Western Coast of India and spoke Konkani language. Subsequent Saraswats who were traders and merchants settled in the port towns of Malabar Coast around the thirteenth century. From here they pursued their mercantile activities, for which the local rajas and chieftains willingly extended all facilities. The Saraswat Brahmins as a mercantile community wielded enormous power in the courts of the local rajas, and donned the role of administrators as well. They first conducted trade with the Portuguese and later with the Dutch and the English. The adaptability of a people to changing political and economic circumstances even as maintaining cohesiveness within the group was what made the Saraswat Brahmins distinctive and remarkable. It is extremely difficult to reconstruct the mercantile history of Saraswat Brahmins of medieval Malabar due to the lack of source materials. However in this paper an attempt has been made to reconstruct the space created by Gowda Saraswat Brahmin merchants in the commercial history of Late Medieval Malabar.

Several interesting studies have been done on the origin and evolution of the business communities like Jews, St. Thomas Christians and Muslims of Malabar. But the studies on the history of the Gowda Saraswat Brahmins are always very rare in South India. The works of Shungoony Menon¹ William Logan,² T.K. Velu Pillai,³ V. Nagam Aiya,⁴ P.K.S. Raja,⁵ K. P. Padmanabha Menon⁶ and A. Sreedhara Menon⁷ have not given any importance to the contribution of Saraswat Brahmins of Malabar. Some significant works which give an account of Saraswat Brahmins are *The Land of the Perumals or Cochin* by Francis Day,⁸ *The Cochin State Manual* by C. Achyuta Menon⁹, *Kochi Raja Charitram* by K.P. Padmanabha Menon,¹⁰ and *Caste and Tribes* by L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer.¹¹ A study or review of the writings on Saraswat Brahmins reveals that various analyses concerning them have always been attempted within the perspective

of their religion and language.

Both primary and secondary sources are utilized for the completion of this study. For the purpose of the study, primary sources like copper plate inscriptions, *Theetturams*, *Cadjan* records, petitions, letters etc. have been sourced from the Kerala State Archives, Regional Office, Ernakulam. Besides, a large number of secondary sources too are utilized for this study. The present study is based on the original documents, and critically analyses the primary and secondary data available to the researcher.

The mercantile community which is the focus of this study has its origins steeped in obscurity, but a brief survey of historical sources provides necessary background to the Saraswat Brahmin identity in mercantile activities. The port city of Cochin attracted very diverse and complex merchant groups from different parts of the Indian Ocean world. The discovery of an oceanic route to India paved the way for the establishment and expansion of European trade in the soil of India. The Portuguese were the first to take advantage of the newly discovered sea-route and monopolised the traffic of the Indian Ocean for a century and half. The centralised administration of medieval Malabar came to an end after the decline of Chera Perumals of Mahodayapuram in 1124. Thereafter political fragmentation took place in Malabar which paved the way for the emergence of several *Swarupams* and *nadus*. The bitter rivalry between *Nediyiruppu Swarupam* on the one side and the *Perumpadappu Swarupam*, *Kolathunadu* and other minor chieftains on the other side created a favourable condition for the Portuguese. The *Perumpadappu Swarupam* who was smarting under the yoke of the Zamorin saw in the arrival of the Portuguese on the port of Cochin a golden opportunity to get the assistance against his traditional enemy and build up his political strength. In 1500 the Portuguese Captain Pedro Alvarez Cabral was warmly received by the ruler of Cochin. The Portuguese were given all facilities for trade at Cochin. The Raja also entered into an informal treaty with Portuguese granting them permission to build a factory at Cochin. During the sixteenth century the Muslim domination of commerce retreated because of the Portuguese impact. As if to fill the vacuum the Saraswats Brahmins who had deserted their ancestral home near Goa spread out all over the South-western coast of India.

The political climate and the commercial facilities of Cochin were conducive for the realisation of Saraswat merchants' aim. In 1627 Vira Kerala Varma ruler of Cochin gave the Saraswats certain rights and privileges such as exemption from payment of *Purusandara* or succession fee, permission to construct houses with bricks, mortar and wood, and also to conduct business from Cochin with foreign countries. This is considered as the *Magna Carta* of the Saraswats Brahmin community in Malabar.¹² After this the Saraswats became supreme in trade and commerce. Again in 1648, Vira Kerala Varma (1646-1650) gave the Saraswat community civil and criminal powers, to be exercised by them within the well-defined boundary of their settlement called *Sanketam*.¹³ The Saraswats could secure all these privileges in Cochin because of their skill and ability as brokers. Broker was an inevitable factor in the market of Cochin at that time. The Portuguese and Dutch merchants who had no access to the hinterland markets had to depend entirely on the trading communities of Malabar Coast.

During the period of the first Dutch attack on Cochin in 1662, the Dutch made an unsuccessful attempt to capture the Fort at Cochin from the Portuguese.¹⁴ The Saraswats who rendered assistance to the Dutch were tortured by the Portuguese and their houses, markets and Tirumala Devaswom temple were plundered.¹⁵ When Cochin was under the Dutch supremacy the Dutch gave protection to the Saraswat Brahmins. The decline of the Portuguese power in the east towards the end of the sixteenth century gave the Dutch the opportunity they had been a long awaiting.¹⁶

The Indo-Dutch trade contact began after the formation of the VOC on 20th March 1602.¹⁷ Within a short span of time VOC signed several trade treaties with the local chieftains of Malabar. According to the *Grandavari* records in Cochin Archives, the Dutch company had secured in 1663 the privilege of extra-territoriality for the Saraswats and Saint Thomas Christians in the kingdom of Cochin. The privilege permitted the Saraswats, Jews and the Saint Thomas Christian subjects of the Cochin prince to pursue trial of all suits filed by these people or against these people in the Courts of the VOC.¹⁸ They secured this privilege because: (1) Saraswats were the people whose help the Dutch needed the most for their commercial transactions; (2) and the local Christians because they were the co-religionists of the Dutch. The Saraswats competed with the Jain traders and the Muslim traders on the West Coast in their overseas trade.¹⁹ The Europeans especially the Dutch and the Portuguese, who disliked the local Muslims for their close alliance with Arabs who were the rivals of these Europeans in oceanic trade, maintained special relations with the Saraswat Brahmins and Saint Thomas Christians in their commercial transactions. The Dutch who founded their factory at Cochin and monopolized the trade of the port relied on the Saraswats for securing goods like pepper, rice, forest products etc. The Dutch had settled in Cochin at the full tide of Saraswat Brahmins predominance. The Dutch had given them the right to collect income from Mattancherry and Amaravati and to conduct the affairs of Gowda Saraswat Brahmin temples in Cherthala and Mattancherry. In the agreement made in 1772 with the Raja of Cochin, the Dutch had also stipulated that the Raja shall impose no new demand on the Saraswats, that they shall have full liberty to complain to the Dutch Governor if aggrieved, and that the Raja shall not interfere in any matters of the temple without the knowledge and consent of the VOC.

The Dutch also established their monopoly of trade after assuming political power in Malabar. The new system of commerce was put into force in the kingdom of Cochin and a few other states that also came under the supremacy and protection of VOC. By the treaties with the rulers of Cochin, the Dutch gained monopoly of trade. Saraswats were initially attracted to the region by the profitable spice trade. They first conducted trade with the Portuguese and later with the Dutch.²⁰ The Dutch had settled at the full tide of Saraswat Brahmins predominance in Cochin. Saraswats rendered substantial service to Dutch for furthering their commercial activities, and were often employed as their chief agents or brokers. The Europeans needed the merchants to be their intermediaries with local economy. The trade of Saraswat Brahmin merchants had figured prominently in the papers of Malabar Council.²¹ The Saraswat Brahmins were mostly involved in wholesale trade. Some of the Saraswats became brokers to the European merchants. They were also powerful in court-politics.²² This hampered not only the grip of the Dutch on Raja but also that of the princes and local chieftains.²³ Mattancheri was the area of many merchant-settlements and markets.²⁴ In Mattancheri, the Saraswats were often seen as courtiers rather than merchants. An adjoining area was called Canara Bazaar. One of its streets was called Jew Street as it was home to many Jewish merchants. This area was also the dwelling place of the indigenous merchants who had trading contacts with the VOC. They became notable in the local trade and society only in their capacity as private agents of the Portuguese, whereas in the earlier period, the private role of these merchants had tended to be less visible. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, the Saraswat merchants built on their relationship with the Dutch to further their economic and social power. The Saraswat Brahmin, Babba Prabhu, Mala Pai and Callanga Prabhu were served the Dutch in Malabar as merchants, broker and envoy for many years.²⁵ Babba Prabhu was the foremost among the Saraswat merchants, had almost monopolized the company's commodities.²⁶ He was believed to have enough

political influence to bring about a war between the Zamorin and the Dutch. However, in the nineties of the seventeenth century, Babba's son Nannoe Prabhus did not maintain this kind of association for long; Saraswats henceforth remained important merchants in Cochin.²⁷

The markets of Cochin had achieved some sort of an international character because of its experience with many nationalities and people with different languages. The Saraswats were the earliest among the trading communities from India who had established their space in port cities of Malabar. They had the unique experience of having direct contact with all the business communities who had been to Cochin all these years. Saraswat Brahmins enjoyed the monopoly of all retail trade in Cochin town. During the Portuguese period, the Saraswat merchants played a significant role in the mercantile activities of the Malabar Coast. Saraswats Brahmins had fled from the Portuguese inquisition in Goa; later they collaborated with the Portuguese in the flourishing export-import they had established in Cochin. Saraswats also acted as the private agents or intermediaries of the Portuguese and Dutch for purchasing pepper and other agricultural producers in the hinterlands and the local merchants. In the early decades of the eighteenth-century shipping became an important medium of international trade; Saraswats emerged as outstanding shipping agents. Thus Saraswat Brahmin community indisputably enjoyed supremacy in the hinterland and the trans-oceanic trade in the late medieval period.

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