

A HANDBOOK ON KERALA

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
GOVERNMENT OF KERALA

INTRUSION OF FOREIGN POWERS

The loss of political unity did not lead to the loss of political independence in Kerala. The ghost of the Chera kingdom haunted the destiny of Kerala as a guardian deity for many centuries to come. Each minor chieftain claimed the gift of the last Cheraman Perumal as the sanction behind his throne. The Kshatriya rulers of Cochin professed to be the direct descendants of the Cheraman Perumal according to the matrilineal order. The rulers of Venad, on the other hand, traced the foundation of their kingdom back to the son of Rama Kulasekhara and even adopted his coronation name of Kulasekhara as their hereditary title. There were the governors of Ernad, who became the masters of Calicut city later and the Raja of Valluvanad and also the chiefs of a number of other small principalities.

It was essentially a game of power politics. Within a generation of the decline of Chera power the governors of Ernad shifted from their interior headquarters at Nediyruppu to the coastal strip of Kozhikode. They successfully drove out the Porlatiri chief in the neighbourhood and managed to "capture" the trusteeship of the Kozhikode Tali temple by liquidating the Brahmans who put up a resistance. Gradually, the Eradis (rulers of Ernad), now known to the world better as the Zamorins of Calicut, grew in prosperity and power. The locational advantage enjoyed by their new headquarters with its proximity to Calicut port was a decisive factor in attracting a growing number of Arab traders. The rulers also exhibited a measure of statesmanship in guaranteeing religious tolerance to all sects and creeds in the big international mart at Kozhikode. In due course, they roped in the chieftains of Parappanadu and

Vettattunadu in the south as well as Kurumbranadu and Puranadu (Kottayam) in the north within their sphere of influence.

The Zamorin set about to capture Tirunavay region from the Valluvanadu rulers. He ultimately succeeded in this venture. This victory brought the Zamorin directly into contact with the rulers of Cochin. It opened up a long chapter of protracted Calicut-Cochin wars. The stake was supremacy over Kerala, and the contest could not stop until one of the powers could eliminate the other. The support of Arab wealth and equipment favoured Calicut against Cochin during the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, until this was counter-balanced by the Europeans — Dutch and Portuguese—on the otherside. Not only the princes and princelings of Kerala but the entire population had to take sides. In fact, the big Brahman community split into two, with the Panniyur faction supporting the Zamorin and the Cokiram faction throwing its weight in favour of the Raja of Cochin.

The central portion of Kerala, over which the rulers of Cochin held sway, was the seat of Namboothiri (Brahman) orthodoxy and Nair aristocracy which it had inherited from the days of the Perumal. Though the Raja of Cochin was respected all over Kerala as the direct descendant of the Perumals and the noblest representative of the Kshatriya race, the inhibiting weight of tradition made him incapable of initiating new strategies and policies to suit the changing times. He remained the highest patron of Brahmanical ritual and scholarship. In the process, wealth and power slipped out of his hands to give place and made way for art and literature.

In the southern part of Kerala, Venad was the rising star. Geographically and culturally, the kingdom of Venad remained partly in Keraladesa and partly in Pandyadesa.

In the immediate post Chera period, its territorial expansion was mainly in the direction of the south. The capital itself was shifted from Kollam to Trivandrum. The fertile fields of Aynad and Nanchinad were a source of irresistible attraction to its rulers. A good part of their energy and time was spent in wars for the conquest and retention of these areas. The Venad area was definitely at a disadvantage in the absence of the original settlements of Tulu-Kerala Brahman whose leadership and dominance had been responsible for the distinctive character of Kerala society and culture. However in course of time, the immense wealth of the Venad kings could attract some of the Kerala Brahmans (Namboodiris) to settle down at Trivandrum. Nevertheless, excessive involvement in Tamil politics weakened the impact of Venad on the rest of Kerala.

The post Chera period witnessed a gradual decadence of the Namboodiris, until by about the 16th century they were more or less finished as a forward looking dynamic force. They came to leave more and more of their affairs in the hands of their Nayar secretaries. A Nambudiri-Nayar alliance came into being. Another feature of this period was the widening gulf between the Nambudiri-Nayar upper class and the Tiyya-Pulaya lower class. In order to accommodate the class differences properly, the four-fold caste system came to be sub-divided with infinite gradations, based on real occupation, habit and political influence. New dimensions of distance-pollution were invented, with unapproachability and unperceivability added on the scale. With increasing rigidity of caste, the worst sufferers were the Parayar, Pulayar, Cheramar, etc. They were attached to plots of cultivable land and unceremoniously exchanged along with the plots without any right to family or children.

This feudal society however, was prosperous and content. With agricultural and commercial prosperity on the increase, festivals like Onam and Vishu, which began

as mere sectarian religious observances, acquired the character of popular celebrations. They were fixed up at a time when the tenants had to pay their feudal dues to the owners of land. The enthusiasm of the tenants transformed Onam, a Vaishnava sacred day commemorating the Vamana incarnation, into a broad-based harvest festival.

At this point of time, feudal society was blissfully ignorant of the Afghan, Pathan and Mongol invasions which uprooted ancient Hindu society in most parts of India beyond the Sahya, the great sentinel of Kerala. This coastal area had, along with the rest of Tamilakam, remained outside the big empires in the past. This time also, it escaped the catastrophe of Alauddin Khilji's campaign which pushed southward straight to Rameswaram.

The Kings and People were so immersed in their own petty feuds that the appearance of Portuguese naval power on the not-so-distant horizon of the Arabian sea did not open their eyes to the advent, the perils and prospects of the modern age. Vasco da Gama laid anchor off Calicut on May 21, 1498. This historic event marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Kerala. It also opened a new chapter in the relations between the different States in Kerala. The declared aim of the Portuguese was monopoly of the trade with the country to the exclusion of all others. The Portuguese captain demanded the expulsion of all Muslim traders. The Zamorin explained that for centuries Calicut had been a free port and that the Portuguese were welcome to trade as any one else.

This incensed the Portuguese who let loose a reign of terror along the coast. The political set up characterised by innumerable principalities in the area was ideal for their machinations to set the weak against the strong and the subordinate chieftains against their sovereigns. They supported the Cochin Raja against the Zamorin who claimed

rights over Cochin. The Zamorin retaliated with his resources at his disposal. The Malabar fleet was inferior to the Portuguese fleet. The Zamorin sought to rectify this imbalance by reorganising his fleet under the able leadership of Kunhali Marakkar. The attacks under the Marakkar soon snowballed into a threat to Portuguese trade and shipping. They were unable to keep regular fleets to convey their ships, but of course they could still fight against the wily tactics of the Marakkars.

In a bid to humble the power of the Portuguese, the Zamorin launched an attack against Cochin. Though his attempts failed to drive the Portuguese out of Cochin, he disrupted the defensive arrangements of the Portuguese outposts and dislocated their shipping and trade. The Zamorin even attempted to forge a coalition of the States bordering the Arabian sea and adversely affected by Portuguese activities. There was a coalition of Egypt, Gujarat and Calicut, an attempted confederacy of Turkey, Calicut, Gujarat and yet another coalition consisting of the States of Bijapur and Ahamedabad and the Zamorin. All these attempts either fizzled out or at the best met with limited success in the engagements with the Portuguese.

The threat from the Malabar sea men under the Kunhali Marakkar to Portuguese trade and shipping reached menacing proportions. The Zamorin, in the meanwhile, had fallen out with the Kunhalis. The Portuguese now joined the Zamorin in a united thrust against the Kunhalis. After two sieges the new allies were able to reduce Kottakkal, the headquarters of the Kunhalis. But neither the fall of Kottakkal nor the death of Kunhali brought the Portuguese any respite from the attacks of the Kunhalis, who now began to harass Portuguese shipping and trade with a vengeance. The advent of the Dutch and the English placed the Portuguese at a further disadvantage.

The Dutch had come to the East in a spirit of competition with the Portuguese. Their main strategy was to drive out the latter. By 1663, they had finally overthrown the Portuguese power on the Malabar coast. The treaty which the Dutch concluded with the rajas of Malabar clearly showed that their monopolistic tendencies were less ambitious than that of the Portuguese whom they supplanted. They tried to entrench themselves by interfering unabashedly in local politics. The Cochin Raja's dependence on the Dutch went to such lengths that the latter acquired an effective voice not only in the administration but even in Cochin succession. This interference naturally brought stiff opposition from the Cochin princes and nobles. The second quarter of the 18th century witnessed a diminution and gradual erosion of Dutch supremacy. The scene was set for the ascendancy of the English on the Malabar coast.

The English secured their first foothold in Kerala in 1682, when they obtained from the Vadakkilamkur Prince of Kolattunad permission to settle at Tellicherry. In 1694 they settled at Anjengo in Travancore. It was from these settlements that the English were able to extend their influence over Kerala.

In the initial stages the English were inclined to take a lesson from the experiences of the Portuguese and the Dutch and keep themselves aloof from local quarrels. But in time this resolution was watered down, and the East India Company began to provide assistance to local powers to fight against their common enemies, but without at the same time entangling themselves directly in the conflicts. Thus the Company assisted both Martanada Varma, King of Travancore and the Zamorin in their quarrels with the Dutch and other local powers. The Mysorean invasion of Malabar provided the Company further opportunity to strengthen its grip on the local rajas and chieftains. Both Hyder and Tipu had evolved a pincer movement aimed at squeezing out the English from South India. But the English were

back to sense this strategy and in pre-emptive move canvassed support from local rulers and forged alliances with a view to containing the territorial expansion of Mysore and possibly overthrowing the power of Hyder and Tipu.

The Treaty of Mangalore (1784) terminated the second Anglo-Mysore war. Estrangement between Tipu and the Raja of Travancore had already started to manifest itself. Tipu's grouse was not only Travancore's alliance with the English but also her covert action in granting refuge to the rebels of Malabar, who when they found their position not safe in Malabar, escaped to Travancore. Yet another complaint of Tipu was that the Raja of Travancore had purchased the two Dutch forts of Kodungallur and Ayyakkatta which really belonged to the Raja of Cochin who was a tributary of Mysore. Soon matters came to a head. Tipu marched his troops to the neighbourhood of Travancore in the hope that a show of force might induce the Raja to fall in line. But the troops concentration sparked off skirmishes on the frontier, which inevitably led to a full scale war in April, 1790. By the time the news of the invasion of Travancore reached the Governor General, he had succeeded in organizing a coalition of the Marattas and the Nizam against Tipu. He followed with a declaration of war against Tipu. The Governor General also advised the Bombay Government to encourage the Malabar Chieftains to rebel against Tipu and promise them support.

The English forces, with the support of native troops supplied by the Rajas and Chiefs attacked Mysorean strongholds and captured them. By the treaty of Sreerangapatam (March 1792) which concluded the Third Anglo Mysore war, all the possessions of Tipu in Malabar passed under the rule of the Company.

But the whole of the Malabar Province came under the direct control of the Company only by 1802. This

change-over was by no means smooth. There was vehement opposition from the Chieftains as well as the people. The continuous disturbances complied with the failure of the Rajas and the Chiefs to remit revenue collections in time persuaded the Company's Government to take over the administration of the different territories in their own hands after paying them *malikhana*.

Of the several rebellions that broke out during this period, the Pazhassi Rebellion was the most serious and it so strained the resources of the English authorities that they had to seek the assistance of the "Iron Duke", Arthur Wellesely, in an attempt to quell it. Kerala Varma, popularly known as Pazhassi Raja, was the Prince who organised this rebellion. He was one of the very few Princes of Malabar who refused to flee during the Mysorean occupation of Malabar. From his mountain fortress in the Kottayam country he continued to oppose the Mysorean administration and provided assistance to the Tellicherry Factory with men and materials. But when permanent arrangements were made in 1793 for collection of revenue, Kerala Varma felt that he was by-passed with regard to his claim on Kottayam country by the Company's officers. He thereupon turned a rebel and created havoc in the country, with the support which he received from the Kurichiyar and other hill tribes. English arms failed to contain the Pazhassi Raja. The Company's authorities then agreed to restore the treasure captured from the Pazhassi Palace by the English force and to bestow a pension on the rebellious Raja. Peace was thus restored but only for the time being.

On the cession of Wynad to Malabar after the conclusion of the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War (1799) trouble broke out again. The English took direct control of the administration of the Kottayam and Wynad districts. The Pazhassi Raja also laid claim to the district of Wynad. Hostilities ensued. Arthur Wellesely was named the Commander of the English forces. The campaign was a long

drawn-out process, culminating only in December 1805, when Pazhassi and a number of rebels were annihilated on the banks of the Mawilla Todda in Wynad in an encounter with the English forces.

Important political developments had taken place in Cochin and Travancore during the Mysorean invasions. Dutch influence in the politics of these two States kept declining with British influence correspondingly on the increase. In the wake of the Mysorean threat they began to depend more and more on British help. In 1790, the Cochin Raja openly repudiated his allegiance to Mysore and joined the English side. In return for a graduated tribute, the Company agreed to assist the Cochin Raja to regain possession of the territories wrested from him by Tipu Sultan.

The Raja of Travancore was asked by the Company's officers to meet the entire expenditure of the Third Anglo-Mysore war on the plea that the war was undertaken in defence of Travancore. The Raja appealed to the Governor General who agreed to withdraw the additional demand for money from Travancore, but at the same time insisting on the conclusion of a new treaty. The new treaty of 1795 practically reduced Travancore from the position of a friend and ally of the English East India Company to that of a protected ally. The Raja was forced to entertain a subsidiary force far beyond his capacity to subsidise. The Company also claimed a monopoly in the pepper trade of the country. The natural outcome of all these developments was to drag Travancore into the vortex of a major financial crisis. The Raja was forced to raise loans from bankers and merchants.

The Company's authorities insistently demanded the clearing of arrears of tribute. The Raja was in a quandary. Velu Tampi, the newly appointed Dalava tried to put the State's finances in order by reducing expenditure and

increasing revenues wherever possible. One measure of economy was the scrapping of the field allowances paid to troops in times of peace. This led to a revolt by the Travancore troops. The insurrection was put down by the exertions of the native troops alone. But the Company's authorities were visibly disturbed. The Madras Government insisted on a modification of the treaty of 1795 so that British troops be used to aid the Raja in quelling internal commotions as well. Thus a new treaty of perpetual friendship and alliance was signed in January 1805.

The new treaty was not well received, especially by Velu Thampi Dalava. The Dalava began concerted moves for an open rebellion against the British in defence of the king and the country. He began to recruit soldiers and collect arms. This move had the whole-hearted support from all sections of the population. The insurrection that followed was a formidable one. But it was short-lived. On January 16, 1809 Velu Thampi issued a historic proclamation at Kundara calling upon the people to rise *en masse* against the British. The response was wide-spread and in many places British troops were put in imminent peril.

But as British contingents began to converge on Travancore from different directions, the rebels lost heart and the revolt began to peter out. The Raja, who was anxious about the safety of his throne, wrote to the Resident requesting for the cessation of hostilities. Peace was concluded in March 1809. Velu Thampi who was hiding in the Mannadi Temple, committed suicide. A new treaty was imposed upon Travancore with the same clauses as were found in the treaty of 1805.

The natural consequences of fighting with the British and losing the fight overtook Cochin and Travancore. British control over these states increased in inverse proportion to the decrease in the power of the Rajas. By 1812

British control was effectively established all over the three regions of Kerala—Malabar, Cochin and Travancore.

The expansion of British powers in Kerala was by no means a smooth affair. There were occasions of stiff and violent resistance against them well upto the second decade of the 19th century by which time consolidation of British power had more or less been achieved. There were organised revolts of the native population at Anjengo in 1695 and 1721 and at Tellicherry in 1704. But it must be stressed that these uprisings were not merely sporadic and local but singularly lacking in that spirit of nationalism which was animating the nations of Europe at that time. The ruling dynasts and the politically powerful elements in Kerala did not even dimly perceive that the English Company was the entering wedge of European imperialism.

As distinct from these sporadic, localised revolts, the one that showed the characteristics of a popular insurrection was the Kurichiya revolt of 1812. The Kurichiyas and Kurumbans were a fairly numerous tribal folk inhabiting the mountains of Wyanad in Malabar. Led by their chieftain Talakkal Chandu, they constituted the main prop of Pazhassi Raja's militia and earned for him many victories in his guerilla warfare against the British. After the suppression of the Pazhassi rebellion the British brought Wyanad under their strict surveillance and subjected the Kurichiyas to untold abuses and misery. The new revenue settlement by virtue of which the tribals were to pay the revenue in cash rather than in the traditional mode of kind brought havoc to their simple, rustic life. Defaulters were cruelly mistreated, properties seized, tenants forcibly evicted from lands, personal effects distrained, privacy of houses molested and the like.

The rebellion broke out on March 25, 1812. It speaks much for the unity of the tribals that they kept all preparations a closely guarded secret until the rebellion began.

12 2250 MC.

Though confined to a limited area in north Malabar, it was truly a mass uprising triggered off by economic grievances and official high-handedness. The Kurichiyas took possession of all important passes leading to Wynad and cut supplies and reinforcements to the ambushed British troops in the valley. The magnitude of the insurrection is revealed by the fact that the Sub-Collector of the division had to frantically requisition troops from Canara and Mysore as the local British regiment was insufficient to deal with the uprising.

For a few days at least British administration ceased to function in the Wynad area. The failure of the revolt was a foregone conclusion, for tribal heroism was ill-matched with the sophisticated military machinery of the English Company. Early in April the British troops moved into the jungles, combed out the guerilla bands and suppressed them. By the beginning of May 1812 the revolt was effectively crushed. Quiet returned to Wynad.

The Kurichiya uprising represented the last of the early organized revolts against British power in Kerala. A period of political acquiescence, extending for almost a century ensued. The only exception was the series of violent disturbances known as the "Moplah Riots" in Malabar from about 1835 to the close of the century. Though the riots occurred in different parts of Malabar, they were mostly confined to the Eranad and Valluvanad taluks. Agrarian unrest among the Mopplas, their general economic backwardness and the low level of education have been mentioned as the fundamental factors behind these outbreaks.

Barring these sporadic outbreaks, political tranquility prevailed over the whole of Kerala for roughly a century since the suppression of the Velu Tampi and Kurichiya revolts. A sense of helplessness against British authority, an awareness that British rule had come to stay, became the

dominant note in the popular mind. With Malabar directly administered by the British as part of Madras Presidency and Cochin and Travancore under princely rule, controlled and guided by the paramount power, Kerala enjoyed perhaps the longest span of relative peace in her history. It was, moreover, the period when she felt the full impact of the West which helped lay, what were, the foundations of a New Kerala.

Under the aegis of the British Government and the enlightened rulers of Travancore and Cochin, substantial developments took place in the administrative, social, economic and cultural fields in three units of Kerala. Reforms and changes were introduced in the administration. The judiciary and the legal systems were completely reorganised. Humanitarian and welfare measures—abolition of slavery, removal of the ban on the wearing of upper-cloth by the low-caste people, to mention only a few—were undertaken. Public works like roads, irrigation and communication received special attention. Above all, the 19th century saw the introduction and spread of Western education in which a very significant role was played by the English Christian missionaries. Through the medium of English education, Kerala was exposed to the full blast of Western civilization. Her intellectual isolation was broken.

Reforms necessarily entailed changes in the conditions and outlook of the people, and these changes in turn necessarily opened the floodgates of further reforms. In fact, from 1812 until almost the close of the century, though social life was characterised by inactivity and society presented an outward calmness, underneath forces were working and developing. Kerala was in ferment. It was, as a whole, undergoing a gradual and steady transformation. This current of social transformation gradually leading Kerala to move with the mainstream of the national struggle for freedom and responsible government in the 20th century.