

## Economic History Of 18th Century Malabar:A Historiographic Critique

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### Abstract

*The 18th century stands as a pivotal period in the history of Malabar, marked by significant transformations in trade, political power, and social dynamics. The economic history of 18th-century Malabar is deeply intertwined with the region's shifting political landscapes, evolving trade networks, and the role of various merchant communities. This study offers a historiographic critique of the existing scholarship on 18th-century Malabar, focusing on the aspects of economic history such as portrayal of merchant communities, trade networks, the impact of colonial interventions and the influence of local agencies in negotiating control over trade and resources. It also seeks to uncover biases and gaps in the prevailing narratives that shaped the historical understanding of this era. The paper examines how different historians interpreted the role of local merchants and political authorities in the regional and global trade systems, and how these interpretations have evolved over time. By engaging with recent interdisciplinary approaches, the study seeks to offer a more nuanced view of the economic history of Malabar, highlighting the interplay between indigenous merchant strategies, colonial appropriations, and the global context of trade. This critique aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Malabar's complex economic dynamics in the 18th century highlighting the indigenous attempts for capitalism and the need for a re-evaluation of established historical perspectives and a more inclusive and balanced historical narrative.*

**Key Words:** Spice trade, Indian Ocean trade, Little kings, Colonial capitalism

### Introduction

The 18th century in India was a period of significant transition, often discussed by scholars for its transformative impact on various regions, including Malabar. This period in Malabar's history cannot be viewed in isolation, as it shares many characteristics with other parts of Kerala. Hence, the present study does not focus solely on the Malabar district under British rule, but rather extends beyond its geographical boundaries. During the period under consideration, Malabar experienced substantial changes in its socio-economic and political landscape, influenced by the growing interaction between local dynamics and broader global forces. The rise and growth of European colonial powers like the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British brought about shifts in trade patterns and economic life.

A number of studies have attempted to examine this transitional phase of the society in different parts of India. This period has been examined through various lenses, including Colonial, Nationalist, Marxist, Neo-Cambridge perspectives. Though such serious attempts are comparatively scanty with regard to the history of 18<sup>th</sup> century Malabar, there has been a considerable scholarly interest, with historians offering varied interpretations of the period's events and trends. Some of these studies focused on trade and economy, others concentrated on political aspects and another set of studies surveyed both trade and politics of the period. However, much of the existing scholarship has been shaped by the availability and perspective of colonial records, often leading to narratives that prioritize colonial viewpoints and understate the influence of indigenous communities, particularly the merchants who played a crucial role in the region's economy. For instance, the role of Mappila merchants,

who have been central to Malabar's trade networks, has often been overshadowed by broader discussions of colonial impact. Indigenous merchants, other than the Mappila traders, were rarely mentioned in these writings. The economic aspects of history as a driving force during this period were largely ignored by these authors. This study aims to critically assess the existing historical literature on 18th-century Malabar, exploring different viewpoints and highlighting the need for new interpretations based on the local attempts for appropriation of balance of trade and developing capitalism

This study will explore the evolution of scholarly interpretations, from early colonial histories to contemporary analyses, highlighting the need for more inclusive and nuanced approaches to studying the history of Malabar. In doing so, the paper will not only reassess the contributions of local merchants to Malabar's economic development but also enquire about the extent to which colonial records have shaped historical discourse. By bringing to light the complexities of 18th-century Malabar's socio-economic fabric, this study aspires to contribute to a more balanced and comprehensive historiography that better reflects the diverse experiences and influences that shaped this pivotal period, its political authority, and the structure of local economies, deeply affecting the region's traditional merchant communities.

### **Historiography and the Economic Landscape of 18th Century Malabar**

Literature on the economic history of India during the eighteenth century has hitherto been largely concerned with developments on the Coromandel Coast and in Bengal. William Logan's *Malabar Manual* is regarded as a foundational work in the study of Malabar's history, particularly from a colonial administrative perspective. He is often praised for its detailed account of the region's geography, social customs, and legal systems, yet it falls short in adequately addressing the economic history of 18th-century Malabar. Though Logan provides substantial information on land tenure, agricultural practices, and trade routes, his analysis is limited by a colonial administrative lens. His work tends to overlook the complex economic transformations that took place in Malabar before colonial rule, particularly the significant role played by local merchant communities in shaping regional and international trade. The contributions of indigenous merchant groups and the influence of intra-Asian trade are also underrepresented in his narrative.

*Barriers to Economic Development in Traditional societies: Malabar a Case study* (1959) article by Thomas W Shea discusses the obstacles to economic development in traditional societies, with a focus on Malabar as a case study. It offers a detailed analysis of the factors contributing to Malabar's economic stagnation, identifying issues such as the rigid caste system, traditional occupational roles, complex land tenure patterns, population growth, and a lack of systematic government policy. It effectively links these barriers to the region's economic backwardness despite its long history of trade and agricultural activity. The exploration of how social segregation, limited labour mobility and the lack of entrepreneurial spirit among the elite stifled innovation is particularly strong. The article is missing a more in-depth examination of how external trade connections historically shaped local economic practices and the potential for local agency within these constraints. A comparative analysis with other regions that faced similar economic conditions but overcame stagnation could strengthen the argument. While it highlights the need for further research into Malabar's economic development, it could be more specific in areas like the potentiality of capitalist development in indigenous economy.

Ashin Das Gupta's *Malabar in Asian Trade 1740-1800* (1967) is a seminal work that delves into the trade dynamics of the Malabar coast during the 18th century, drawing on Dutch and British sources to reconstruct the region's economic history. His analysis highlights key political and economic shifts, including the decline of Dutch East India Company dominance, the rise of Martanda Varma in Travancore, and the monopolization of pepper production. Das Gupta also explores the impact of Mysore's incursions under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan on regional trade networks. While his focus on political changes and monopolistic practices provides important insights, the work tends to overlook broader socio-economic narratives, particularly the experiences of local merchant communities and laborers. Furthermore, the absence of a comparative analysis with other previous

studies diminishes the potential to understand local attempts to develop a more capitalist economy within broader Southern Indian and Southeast Asian contexts.

*Malabar Under Bombay Presidency: A Study of the Early British Judicial System in Malabar, 1792-1802* (1969) by T.K. Ravindran is an important early examination of British colonial administration in Malabar, focusing specifically on the initial judicial reforms during the region's governance under the Bombay presidency. By concentrating on the decade from 1792 to 1802, he meticulously outlines the introduction of colonial legal frameworks and the significant changes they brought to the local judicial landscape. However, while the work is valuable in tracing the evolution of the legal system, it tends to disregard the broader socio-economic implications of these reforms. The focus on judicial reforms, confined to a single chapter with an introduction and conclusion, limits the depth of analysis regarding how these changes impacted the local economy and society. The absence of a detailed exploration of the social and economic consequences of British administration is a notable gap in the work. Understanding how colonial legality affected trade practices, property rights, and the local people's economic activities would enrich the historical narrative and provide a more comprehensive view of Malabar's transformation during this period.

Pamela Nightingale's *Trade and Empire in Western India 1784-1806* (1970) is an insightful exploration of British imperial interests and the spice trade in the late 18th century, particularly the political and economic dynamics surrounding pepper in the Western coast of India. Two chapters of this work dealing with Malabar, highlighted varied problems. While her analysis of the British-French rivalry, East India Company traders, and figures like Murdoch Brown is detailed and engaging, the book's narrow focus on individual traders and key commodities limits its scope. It minimizes the broader socio-economic transformations in the region and the impact of colonial policies on local communities. Moreover, the lack of integration with wider Indian trade networks and the broader economic context reduces the work's ability to offer a comprehensive view of Malabar's economic history. A deeper engagement with these aspects would have enriched the study, making it more relevant for understanding the complexities of Malabar's economy in the 18th century.

*Kerala under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan* (1973) by C.K. Kareem offers valuable insights into the economic reforms and political changes introduced by Mysore's rulers in 18th-century Kerala, making it a useful resource for studying the economic history of Malabar. He highlights the restructuring of land revenue systems and the control of key trade routes, especially in the spice trade, which shaped the region's economy. However, his portrayal of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan as progressive reformers tends to overlook the economic disruptions and resistance from local communities, particularly the impact of heavy taxation and the decline of traditional trade networks. This narrative is primarily focused on political and military aspects, with less attention paid to how these changes affected agriculture, labour, and local industries in Malabar. For a comprehensive analysis, his work needs to be supplemented with other studies that explore the broader socio-economic impacts of Mysore's rule on the region.

*The Ali Rajas of Cannanore* (1975) by K.K.N. Kurup offers a detailed and distinguished history of 18th-century Malabar by focusing on the rise of the House of Arakkal and their dominance in maritime trade across the Arabian Sea. The book highlights the strategic role of the Ali Rajas in controlling key trade routes and negotiating with European colonial powers, emphasizing the significant contribution of indigenous rulers to Malabar's economy. The author's over reliance on English records limits the exploration of local economic systems and the impact of the Ali Rajas' activities on various social classes within Malabar. A more detailed analysis of the broader economic implications of their decline, particularly under British colonial policies, would shed further light on their early commercial and capitalist efforts.

The doctoral thesis of Bonaventure Swai, titled *Trade and Politics in Eighteenth Century Malabar* (1979) attempts to unravel the intricacies of the eighteenth century political structure as well as the colonial intervention in spice trade. It examines the roots of the British merchant capital in the hinterland of Malabar which may be the first attempt of its kind. Swai's work draws from a variety of primary sources, which enriches his analysis and

provides a foundation for understanding the dynamics of trade and politics in the region. However, like many other foreign authors, he fails to analyze the complexities of the deeper socio-economic factors in the region. He does not sufficiently analyze how the dynamics of colonialism affected local communities and their economic practices and how they lost their trade advantages which they enjoyed earlier, thereby missing a crucial aspect of the economic historical narrative.

*"Notes on Colonial State with Special Reference to Malabar in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries"* (1978), and *"East India Company and Moplah Merchants of Tellicherry, 1694-1800"* (1979), *"From Kolathunad to Chirakkal: British Merchant Capital and the Hinterland of Tellicherry, 1694-1766"* (1985) articles by the same author, examine the ways in which the Company integrated military and diplomatic strategies to dominate Malabar's economic landscape, particularly the spice trade. Swai criticizes the manipulation of local political dynamics, such as exploiting rivalries within the fragmented Kolathunad polity, arguing for a closer connection between capitalism and imperialism rather than treating them as separate phenomena. He highlights resistance movements, like Kerala Varma's revolt, and explores the local merchants' responses, particularly the Moplahs' involvement in regional trade. Despite the strengths of his analysis, Swai's work would have benefited from a more thorough examination of how indigenous merchant networks functioned before British intervention and how these networks adapted to or resisted colonial policies. His focus on the East India Company's dominance often overshadows local strategies and economic resilience, particularly those of rulers like the Kolathiri. Additionally, while Swai provides valuable insights into the impact of colonial capitalism, his work lacks a more detailed exploration of the effects on different social classes, such as laborers and small traders. Moreover, he misses opportunities for comparative analysis with other colonial contexts, which would have enriched the understanding of Malabar's distinct economic landscape. Though Swai's scholarship offers a critical perspective on the intersection of imperialism and commerce it leaves space for deeper engagement with indigenous agency and broader comparative contexts.

*Establishment of British Power in Malabar 1664 to 1799* (1979) by N. Rajendran is a general description of the initial phase of establishment of British power in the coast of Malabar. The book is based upon a strong archival source and it offers a valuable political and military history of British expansion in Malabar. It provides a solid foundation on the geopolitical factors shaping the economy of Malabar, particularly during key phases such as the Mysorean invasions and the Anglo-Mysore Wars. While the work offers a detailed political and military narrative of British expansion in Malabar, it notably misses important economic aspects that are essential for understanding the region's transformation in the 18th century. The book fails to adequately address the direct economic consequences of British policies, such as the restructuring of land revenue systems, which significantly affected local agrarian practices and land ownership. Moreover, the author does not sufficiently explore the labour conditions that arose in response to British interventions or the decline of traditional industries and trade networks that were integral to the economy of Malabar. By concentrating primarily on territorial and geopolitical developments, the work misses an opportunity to analyze how these shifts directly affected local communities, their livelihoods, and the broader economic landscape, resulting in a somewhat incomplete picture of Malabar's economic history during this pivotal period.

*History of Tellicherry Factory* (1985) by K.K.N. Kurup provides a detailed examination of British colonial activities in Malabar, specifically through the operational history of the Tellicherry factory from its inception until 1794. It offers valuable insights into commercial practices of the factory, trade networks, and the interactions between British traders and local communities, effectively highlighting the strategic significance of the factory within the broader context of British imperial expansion. The reconstruction of this early phase of colonial enterprises in Malabar is commendable, as it sets the stage for understanding the complexities of British influence in the region. While the book excels in detailing the establishment and operations of the factory, it inadequately addresses the long-term socio-economic impacts of British imperialism on the region. The analysis falls short in exploring how British policies affected local economies, agriculture, and traditional industries, as well as the social and cultural consequences of colonial rule on Malabar society. A more comprehensive

examination of these aftereffects would enhance the understanding of how British activities at the Tellicherry factory not only shaped trade but also fundamentally transformed North Malabar's socio-economic landscape.

*Colonial Trade and Price Manipulation: A Study of Late 18th Century Malabar* (1988) by Sebastian Joseph examines how European colonial powers, particularly the East India Company, monopolized trade and manipulated prices in Malabar, leading to the exploitation of local producers and a dual-price market. After the fall of Tipu Sultan, the East India Company secured total control over Malabar's resources, worsening the economic situation for the region's merchants and producers. From a historiographic perspective, while this article provides valuable insights into the colonial manipulation of trade it focuses heavily on external exploitation and lacks a deeper exploration of the agency of local merchants or their strategies for adapting to these economic pressures.

*House by the Sea: State Formation Experiments in Malabar, 1760-1800* (2000) by Dilip M. Menon Offers an important perspective on state formation in 18th-century Malabar, focusing on how trade profits, rather than agrarian revenues, drove political restructuring during a period of warfare. By examining the interactions between coastal rulers, land-owning households, and the intrusions of Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, Menon highlights the dispersal of political authority in the region. However, in terms of economic history, his analysis is limited by its focus on the political consequences of trade rather than the mechanics of process trade itself. The book does not provide detailed insights into specific trade networks, commodities, or the role of indigenous merchant communities like the Mappilas in navigating economic and political shifts. This leaves a gap in understanding how local actors adapted to these changes and how European colonialism affected Malabar's trade structures. While Menon's work is valuable for its political analysis, it lacks a deeper exploration of the broader economic dynamics of the region.

*From Contact to Conquest: Transition to British Rule in Malabar-1790-1805* (2003) by Margret Frenz offers a comprehensive analysis of the early colonial period in South India, focusing specifically on the region of Kottayam in North Kerala. The book probes into the complex transition from indigenous to colonial administration, providing insights into the underlying concepts of statehood that shaped local governance. It explores how the British reconfigured local governance and highlights the conditions that allowed for economic exploitation and restructuring in the region. While Frenz's analysis is valuable for contextualizing the socio-political conditions of the time, it does not deeply explore the economic dimensions, such as the transformation of trade, labour, or land revenue systems that were central to Malabar economy.

*Lord of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar (1663-1723)* (2011) Binu John Mailaparambil provides an important contribution to the historiography of 18th-century Malabar by highlighting the central role of maritime trade, particularly the spice trade, in shaping local political authority. His analysis of the Ali Rajas' rise to power, replacing the Kolathiri, underscores the shift from agrarian-based revenues to trade-based wealth as the foundation of regional political control. While the work critically engages with European sources that often misinterpret local political and economic contexts, it lacks a thorough exploration of indigenous attempts at capitalism. The focus on Ali Rajas and limited attention to other merchant communities or local agencies in navigating and adapting to evolving economic conditions results in missing out examining how indigenous traders may have actively pursued capitalist strategies.

*Sharing Sovereignty: The Little Kingdom in South Asia* (2015), edited by Margret Frenz and George Becker, presents a significant contribution to the historiography of 18th-century Malabar by focusing on the dynamics of power and legitimacy among the region's little kings. While Margret Frenz's chapter *Virtual Relations: Little Kings in Malabar* provides valuable insights into the political structures of 18th-century Malabar, it fails to address the economic aspects of the period. Frenz's focus on political legitimacy, ritual practices, and the decentralization of power through the 'virtual great king' framework is significant, but the economic consequences of these dynamics remain underexplored. The chapter touches on the control of land and resources,

which are essential components of economic history, but it does not delve into key issues such as trade networks, taxation systems, or the impact of colonial economic policies on local industries and agrarian production.

*Malabar in the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism in a Maritime Historical Region* (2018), edited by Mahmood Kooria and M. N. Pearson offers a rich exploration of Malabar's historical significance from the 16th to 18th centuries, with a focus on diverse topics such as Muslim inscriptions, interactions between Saint Thomas Christians and European missionaries, and cultural conflicts during the Portuguese-Dutch period. He used a wide range of indigenous and foreign sources in multiple languages and provided a more inclusive and nuanced view of the history of Malabar beyond Euro-centric perspectives. However, the volume falls short in addressing key economic structures, trade networks, and the role of merchant communities. While it offers valuable insights into cultural and political exchanges, it lacks detailed examination of trade mechanisms, commodities, and the broader economic transformations that are essential to understanding Malabar's economic history during this period.

*Maritime Malabar: Trade, Religion and Culture* (2022) by Pius Malekandathil offers valuable insights into the region's maritime trade and cultural connections within the Indian Ocean world, but it failed to address the economic history of 18th-century Malabar, particularly regarding indigenous attempts to develop the region into a core of the global economic system. While the book skilfully links trade, religion, and societal processes, it tends to overlook the specific strategies that local rulers and merchants employed to navigate colonial pressures and assert economic agency. It highlights the movement of commodities and ideas but does not delve deeply into how these exchanges shaped long-term economic structures or class dynamics. However, the book fails to explore the economic implications of colonial policies and how local entities responded to or resisted these changes, leaving a critical gap in understanding Malabar's economic role within the global system.

## Conclusion

The historiography of the economic history of 18th century Malabar reveals a complex interplay of local, regional, and global forces that shaped the region's trade and economic structures. The existing scholarship on this topic highlights key themes such as the role of European colonial powers, the monopolization of trade, and the exploitation of local producers. They have provided significant insights into the impact of political authority, colonial control, and trade profits on Malabar's economy. However, these works often emphasize external factors, such as colonial manipulation and state formation and give less importance to the agency of indigenous merchant communities and their strategies for navigating economic change. Moreover, the analysis of trade practices, taxation systems, and the decline of local industries, the broader processes of capitalist development and the adaptation of local merchant groups remains underexplored. A balanced approach that looks at both outside influences, like colonial policies, and local factors, such as resistance and adaptation, would give a clearer understanding of Malabar's economic changes in the 18th century and explain what happened to local attempts at building a capitalist economy before this period. This critical assessment of existing scholarship not only highlights the gaps but also points to the potential for future studies to deepen our understanding of the region's economic history.

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