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Glimpses of Dutch Micro-Slavery from Cochin in the Indian Ocean World

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This paper delves into a series of historical incidents involving both successful and unsuccessful attempts at enslavement and the slave trade within the princely state of Cochin in Kerala, during the period when the Dutch East Indian Company held a degree of authority. These occurrences are meticulously documented in the unpublished government archives of the region. The paper is structured into three sections, each focusing on distinct aspects of this complex history. The initial section presents cases that highlight the presence of African slaves within Dutch Cochin. The second section conducts a detailed analysis of select documents, emphasizing the power dynamics at play during these events. The third section places three instances of enslavement within the broader context of publicly available information. The paper underscores the underappreciated extent of enslavement in Kerala, revealing it as a widespread practice that implicated individuals from all social strata to varying degrees. Furthermore, it illuminates how acts related to slavery were intricately entangled with power struggles, illustrating how the slave trade acted as a gauge for assessing the fluctuations in imperial influence. Ultimately, this study posits that the records of slavery shed light on the more obscure episodes of Kerala's historical narrative.

Key words: Cochin, Kerala, Dutch East India Company, slavery, African, Jesuits, justice

Introduction

Cochin, a former princely state and part of the present Kerala in India, is one territory successively and substantially dominated by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British from 1500 to 1947 C.E. By the time the Portuguese reached the coast of Kerala in 1498, the contemporary polity was characterised by two traits. One: the entire length of Kerala was a congeries of kings, barons and chieftains who presided over major and minor principalities. This 'feudal nobility which considered warfare a hobby and changed sides to suit the occasion'[1] indulged in internecine combat over issues like ownership of land and resources. The fragmented polity, however, exerted a salutary influence on trade: for the warring rulers income in the form of transit dues from passing merchants was essential and thus they did everything possible to bolster and facilitate commercial activities in their lands.[2]

Two: social formation had manifested itself in the form of ossified caste groups, discriminatory practices and coercive labour. The state of loose communal affiliations, occupational mobility and flexible identities that characterised the preceding millennia had long been expunged by Brahminical grids[3]. By the 12th century Kerala society had shed all its former features and had transformed into a system based on extensive cultivation of paddy under Brahmin settlements.[4] That Duarte Barbosa was able to enumerate castes such as the Thiyyas and Parayas as serfs or slaves and as polluting in a work published in 1516 shows the extent to which caste-based social stratification had percolated into societal interstices.[5] In short, caste was systemic and each aspect of life was overdetermined by it.

Before the Portuguese, slavery in Kerala was geographically restricted, demographically closed and ethnically delimited. That is to say, slaves originated (or were created) from specific areas, castes and racial groups. Occasionally freeborn citizens would be relegated to slave status as punishment.[6] The diverse group of slaves imported to other parts of India[7] did not penetrate Kerala. The Portuguese, who through unprecedented investment of large capital [8] and creation of a major politico-military impact[9] produced a commensurate increase

in slave trafficking, ended this isolation and fluidified the social structures. By converting masses of coastal population into the Roman Catholic Church via Padrado[10], the Portuguese saved thousands of humans from potential enslavement and produced a new religious community. It is likely that the Portuguese imported slaves, including Negroes, to Cochin. At any rate Goa, the Portuguese capital of India, became a thriving slave market.

Recent archival studies cogently demonstrate that under the Dutch East India Company (VOC), free-burghers and local private traders, the seaboard of Cochin evolved into a hub of salve trade and an important slave exporting region.[11] Transactions were carried out with the active involvement of influential castes/communities of the land and with the connivance of the native government. Less studied are the ways in which VOC officials and traders remained invested in slave trade at the micro-level. By integrating the indigenous slaving practices with transnational networks, they explored and exploited all available avenues for their monetary advantage. Such activities were greatly helped by the VOC which gave birth to 'a legal slave trade that operated in combination with a legal network that created laws of slavery for the purpose of utilizing slave labour in the Company's empire'.[12] While high-ranking VOC officials sometimes fitted out their private ships to engage in the slave trade, lower- and middle-ranked personnel used the opportunity of their voyages in Asia on board Company ships to transport slaves.[13]

The present paper analyses a few instances of actual and abortive acts of enslavement and slave trade in three sections against this background. Together they invent how the local circuits of slavery crucially intersected with larger structures of domination at many points. The first set of cases illustrates the presence of African slaves in Dutch Cochin, the second analyses a few documents in terms of power dynamics and the third contextualises three instances of enslavement already available in the public domain. The paper demonstrates that a) the scale of enslavement in Kerala was much greater than is widely accepted, b) it was a pervasive practice in which all social strata were stakeholders in varying degrees and measures, c) acts related to slavery were interwoven with power tussles, d) slave trade

functioned like a seismograph in gauging the imperial earthquakes and e) annals of slavery shed light to the darker episodes of Kerala history.

Princely Penchant for African Slaves

Most studies project the Dutch period in Cochin (1660-1795) as characterized by regular enslavement of the freeborn and sale of slaves into domestic service or export to overseas destinations like Ceylon, Batavia and the Cape of Good. The roadstead of Cochin thus appears as a point of transit and exchange, not a place where slaves where imported. However, there is clear documentary evidence showing that African Negros (*Kappiris*) were imported to Cochin during the Dutch period through the mediation of high-ranking VOC officials and prominent merchants. Sakthan Thampuran, who ruled Cochin from 1790 to 1805, evinced great interest in procuring adolescent Negro children. Notably the king procured African slaves as exotic human specimen signifying prestige as they did not belong to the normal work force.[14] One may argue that these Negro children were the progeny of the African slaves that the Portuguese had imported and left behind. But if these slaves were assimilated Negroes, the king would have obtained them without the intervention of the Dutch Commander. In point of fact these children were supplied by the Dutch from foreign lands and from Goa. By examining a few pertinent letters we can attain a productive perspective into the affair.

In 1792, the Dutch Commander of Cochin, Johan van Angelbeek, sent Sakthan Thampuran a note updating the latter on his request to procure a Negro boy and a girl. The Commander, through enquiries made in Cochin and its environs, and was able to locate two slaves fitting the king's requirements. A boy was (aged between 16 and 18 years) and a girl of 14-15 were offered for sale by their legal owner. But the Commander did not clinch the deal as he found the asking price exorbitant—rupees[15] 300 each. In this situation he advises the king to wait for seamen from Mocha who would bring in Negro children at lower prices[16]. It is revealing that the king approached the Commander himself to get African slaves and the latter not only took lively interest in the process but guide the king as how best to go about it.

Mocha was known for coffee and had consistent connections with the Dutch. It figures in the list of the Chief Factories of the VOC in 1650. Most of these locations were at that time merely commercial residences; in the revised list of 1725, Mocha is mentioned as a factory under a chief, which means that the place was not very important in the VOC pecking order.[17] It was a place where slaves captured from Africa would converge and remained so till the 19th century.[18] Ships sailing between Mocha and Batavia regularly touched Cochin to replenishment[19] and thus had constant contact with the land. Though the VOC trade with Mocha collapsed by the mid-18th century[20], informal trade seems to have continued uninterrupted well into the closing decades of the century.

That a colonial officer who owned scores of slaves, some of who were apparently leased out to private individuals[21], assisted a native ruler in obtaining a few is hardly surprising. But what renders such actions historically significant is the fact that they were performed within a conceptual locus wrought by apparently incompatible ideational streams. On the one hand, biblical passages and references supplemented by the writings of Greco-Roman authors were the main justification of slavery in Dutch moral universe[22], resembling how slavery was recognized in Ethiopia on the basis of Mosaic law.[23] On the other hand the exhortations of inalienable freedom, glorification of human dignity and denouncement of slavery, eloquently articulated by Dutch prosecutors in the Council of Justice were also predicated on biblical books like Moses, Deuteronomy and Moses.[24] This, however, need not necessarily be construed as a contradiction as the Dutch found legal slavery permissible. The VOC slave laws stipulated that it was ethically indefensible to enslave freeborn indigenes but there was nothing wrong in buying and selling already enslaved people.[25] Thus in the context of Cochin, people who were born into slave castes like the Pulayas, sold into bondage by their lawful owners and those who sold themselves into slavery because of insolvency were treated as legally and formally enslaved. All that the participants of a legal transaction had to possess was a deed proving the slave status of the persons sold. What enraged the VOC was not slavery as such, but the practice of trapping freeborn individuals and slyly selling them off

as slaves, mostly on the basis of forged deeds, spurious claims and false testimonials. African slave, obviously, fell into the category of legal slaves and the Dutch officials did not feel qualms in this regard.

Soon after we come across a letter (in all probability written during the first months of 1794) in which the king expresses disappoint over not getting five Negro Children promised by the Commander. The king chanced to know that five Negro children had reached Cochin and the Commander had purchased them all. Of these, he had promised to send two to the king. But this promise was never kept. Now he is given to understand that these two Negro children have been auctioned off and that the Commander can deliver them only after receiving formal orders from Batavia. The king is peeved because he had hoped to get all the five. In these circumstances the king despatches his agent to the Commander with the hope that the latter would be good enough to send all the five Negro children with him. In order to ensure that the deal does not go awry, the king sends rupees 150 per each, and expresses his willingness to pay more if the money falls below the expected price[26].

In response to this a Dutch official (a translator or interpreter) wrote to the king on 17 March 1794, describing the prevailing scenario in the Dutch office. Appreciating the king's desire for Negro slaves, he along with two 'others', interceded on his behalf and painstakingly persuaded the Commander to send at least three to him. The request was granted but it led to emotional moments: the wife and children of the Commander had grown so fond of the Negro children and parting was heart-rending. However, considering the mutual trust and love between him and the king, the Commander eventually managed to get the Negroes sent over.[27]

The presence of these 'others' indicates the closeness and cooperation between Dutch officials and indigenous merchants. One of these others is Boganta Chetty, a VOC merchant.[28] The other is mentioned as 'Meru Paradesi.' *Paradesi* in Cochin parlance means a white or foreign Jew. *Meru* can be the local form of Meyer Rabbi, the son of the influential merchant Ezekiel Rabbi. Meyer too had been rich and prosperous but by the 1790s his fortunes had begun to wither.[29] Another possibility is that Meru is the corruption of Meira, a

white Jew, who name frequently figures in administrative records in the early British period. However more than specific identities, what matters is the degree to which these businessmen were involved in slave transactions.

On 16 November 1794, the same Dutch official entered into correspondence with the king apropos a Negro child who had fallen gravely ill. The king sends the sick Negro back to the Commander. He also expresses his desire to have more slaves of this ethnic stock and in order to ease the deal, he is willing to put half of the actual price as advance.[30]

This official once again intimated the king about his latest inquiries regarding Negro slaves On November 25, 1794. A Dutch Captain[31], who had brought two Negro salves for sale was summoned by the Commander. After prolonged negotiations, they were acquired for 250 rupees per head and subsequently dispatched to the king. The seller, Captain, sought to ascertain the king's additional requirements for Negro slaves. The king has already made his specifications clear: he needs a few boys in the age bracket of 12—20 and girls of 10-16 years, provided the price is fair. The Captain expressed his willingness to procure slaves who met his specified criteria from Goa, with the cost being 200 rupees for a boy and 180 rupees for a girl. He further offered to accept payment in kind and made a request for the king to provide copra and coconut oil at subsidized prices. The Commander himself has expressed willingness to supply suitable and trustworthy intermediaries to facilitate the transaction. Furthermore, the Captain asked the king to arrange vessels for transporting the cargo to Goa. Alternatively, if the king found this proposal uncomfortable, he could send the copra and oil directly to Goa. In that case, the Captain would sell these commodities in Goa and use the proceeds to purchase the slaves. For overseeing and managing this task, the Captain requested a 5% commission on the total amount.[32]

The biographer of Sakthan Thampuran provides snippets of his passion for Negros. In 1793, the merchant Philippe sold him a Negro slave called Screep. In 1795, the king bought four horses from a European named Montgomery for his Negroes to ride on. The next year, Salem Sadiyya Levi sold a Negro named Subali to the king. In

1799, Abraham Elijah of Basra sold two Negro children named Joan and Prasista to the government of Cochin. In 1801, the Muslim merchant Kadar Marakkar gifted a Negro child named Nasiba; in the same year another merchant—Mohammed Ali—sold a Negro child named Sala to the king outright. Thampuran, in an unspecified year, brought Nubi, Warums, Mathuvan, Naseef, Sanguri and Imbarin with title deeds proving their enslaved status[33].

The royal patronage extended to Negro slaves ended neither with the collapse of the VOC in 1795 (as evidenced from the last paragraph) nor with the demise of Sakthan Thampuran in 1805. In 1813, a high official of Cochin government issued a written directive to the supervisor or manager of the government eating house (*oottupura*) to feed the king's African slave Ambady with sufficient rice twice a day. The letter clarifies the rationale behind the decision: the slave was bought on cash payment by the king, the present ration is not enough to satiate his hunger, and it is the policy of the government to protect slaves of this category.[34]

This body of correspondence is revealing. For one thing, the corpus sheds light to the way in which the VOC officials worked in tandem with the king and indigenous agents in facilitating the import and trade of slaves. Secondly it shows that the VOC officials maintained contact with overseas ports and local markets like Goa where slaves could be purchased freely. The Portuguese, we have to remember, were in the practice of importing slaves from Africa, especially Mozambique in exchange of linen and other commodities.[35]

Thirdly it points to the curious fact that the Negroes were not intended as servants but as a visual spectacle that would enhance the king's stature. It is also notable that we know nothing about what happened to these prized slaves. Did they have offsprings? Were they absorbed into local communities? Are there material remains which help us understand more about their life in the British period? Indications are few and far between. For instance, Whitehouse describes six of them as domestic servants in the 19th century.[36] In all probability these Negroes died a natural death.

Fourthly, the aforesaid import and sale of African slaves was taking place in the twilight of the VOC in Kerala. Adriaan Moes in his 1781 memoir wistfully reminisced about the bygone halcyon days when the VOC 'was regarded with awe and laid down the law to everyone' and philosophically added that every human enterprise was bound to experience vicissitudes 'like all other sublunary things which must have their periods of rise, prosperity and decline'.[37] While the Dutch obsession with monopoly and resultant restrictions had rendered trade a lacklustre affair[38], what aggravated the situation was the presence of the British East India Company which had better economic might, high purchasing power, political clout and a logical policy in acquiring territorial possessions.[39] By this time, Cochin had become a mere base of the VOC for internal trade and the Dutch chief and his council made great private profits because of the complete control of the town and the fort and by charging fees and commissions on the import and export of cargoes of every ship that visited the port.[40] Very soon the Company would go out of business and by the time the British took it over in 1795, the Malabar Commandment had been 'living for some time past on what loans it could raise in the Cochin town'.[41] While it would not be logical to suggest that the increasing involvement of Dutch officials in slave trade, as we witness in their dealings with Sakthan Thampuran, was a directly proportional to the shrinking role of the VOC in international spice trade, the overall impoverished state of the VOC may have prompted them join micro-circuits of slavery which invariably got linked up with the larger networks of African slavery.

Slaves and State

While the passion displayed by Sakthan Thampuran and the assistance rendered by others can be understood as actions incentivised by personal gains, incidents discussed in this section point to the way in which slaves of various social status and ethnic background got entangled in the power dynamics between the VOC, the king of Cochin, regional aristocrats and feudal lords.

Jan Lambertus van Spall, the Commander of Cochin from 1793 to 1795, wrote a letter to the king in 1793 requesting the latter to intervene in a slave trade gone wrong. A European bought two slave

children from a Muslim. The seller, however, absconded soon leaving the European in a lurch as the children had no regular title deeds. Naturally he is unable to keep them legally; the absence of deeds precludes the later sale of the children too. In this situation, the Commander sends the children to the king who is expected to ascertain their status through comprehensive interrogation. If they prove to be genuine slaves, the king is requested to prepare new title deeds and to send them back. On the contrary, if they are free citizens stolen by the absconding seller, they are to be set free. The Commander, on his part, promises to expedite the search for the fugitive and implores the king to mete out exemplary and deterrent punishment to him.[42]

During the tenure of Johan van Agelbeek as the Dutch Commander of Cochin (1781-1793) a similar incident is seen. On 29 January 1784, he wrote to the king of Cochin responding to the latter's request to probe the actions of Payanchery Nair who allegedly sent his henchmen to abduct slaves (owned by the government as well as private slaves attached to gardens or fields) from Cochin. The Commander directed the Captain of Kodungalloor Fort to look into the matter and to make sure that none kidnaps slaves in the future. The enquiry, however, partially exonerates the accused. The slaves, it is true, were taken to the land where the Nair presides over as the chieftain. But they do not belong to Cochin but to some landlords and a few individuals who reside in the VOC territory. When these owners approached Nair on learning about the abduction, they were offered money as the price of the slaves; alternatively, they could repossess slaves. The owners, however, declined the offer and approached a high official of Cochin, who in turn appraised the king of the matter. The Commander makes it clear that neither the king nor the official has a say in the matter for the simple reason that the slaves belonged elsewhere.[43]

The accused in this case, Payanchery Nair, was an important proprietor who lorded over Chettuva which was strategic in warfare and where was located a key Dutch fort. Divided into collaterals and caught in constant disputes, the family's allegiance swayed between Cochin, Calicut and the VOC depending on the political weather.[44] It needs to be remembered that illegal trafficking and abduction of slaves

along with unlawful enslavement of free individuals was seriously looked down upon by the VOC, as already mentioned. We see dramatic and eloquent declarations which denounce these practices and emphatic exhortations of the fiscal (prosecutor) for capital punishment, open flogging and long-term banishment (or a combination of the last two) to persons convicted of such crimes; the prosecutor on one occasion described any attempt at enslavement as atrocious and detestable, which attract heavy penalties including death.[45] It is worth speculating if the VOC would seek to inflict the same harsh punishment on Nair had he been found guilty. In all probability the Company would have exercised restraint. Nair was a powerful baron and the Company's grip on the land had been deteriorating for some time.

The next instance shows the humiliating treatment that a Catholic Christian endures at the hands of a Cochin government official. In a letter dated 15 May 1786, Johan van Angelbeek narrates the event. A Christian convert named Antony purchased Chakki, a Vettuva woman, from a Nair and lodged her in the VOC precincts. But an official of the king took her away and demanded Antony pay poll tax if he wanted to establish his ownership over the slave. The aggrieved Antony complained to the VOC forthwith. The Commander sent a letter to the arrogating official demanding the return of Chakki. Antony even took the trouble of bringing the first owner (Nair) to the palace. He testified before the administrative authorities about his former claim over Chakki and her subsequent transfer to Antony. This too failed to produce the intended result. Now the official began to insist Antony bring a letter from the Nawab's representative, if the slave woman is to be released. Taking all these into consideration, the Commander states that the official has no right to harass humble Christians like Antony. The king is requested to issue notices to all officials directing them to abstain from harassing humble Christians and also to take measures to send the slave woman to Antony forthwith.[46]

The incident throws light to the larger aspects of governance and the relations between the VOC and the king. a) By this time the VOC had amassed considerable land holdings in the forms of gardens and islands and emerged as a landlord; income in the form of tax from such assets was considerable[47] b) The VOC was committed to

protecting all Christians except St Thomas Christians. Antony belonged to that section of Catholics who followed the Latin liturgy and thus commonly called Latin Catholics. Most of them or their ancestors belonged to lower social strata and variously referred to as Markakkar (people of the path, that is, true religion) and Mundukar (people who wore dhoti). They were widely looked down upon as inferior by the dominant Syrian Christians.[48] By this time the Cochin king's was antagonistic to Latin Catholics; he would evict many families from their land and they would seek asylum in the Dutch fort.[49] The document describes folk like Antony as 'humble'. But for the support and jurisdictional protection extended by the Company, their existence would have been imperilled. c) The action of the Cochin official is an open challenge to the suzerainty claimed by the VOC. This is unsurprising: by this time the debilitating wars with Travancore and invasions of Hyder Ali of Mysore had become visible to everyone.[50] e) The 'Nawab' alluded to here is Tippu Sultan who ruled the northern parts of Kerala till 1792. Antony was from Chettuva which was under the power of Tippu in 1786. The demand of the Cochin official for a letter from Tippu's representative signifies his enhanced political stature and the fall of prestige that the Company suffered in popular perception.

In 1792, we see the Dutch Commander's sympathetic intervention in a case of suspected illegal enslavement. A slave boy, purchased from a place in Travancore, was sold to a resident of Fort Cochin and within a few days the boy was resold to a Dutch captain. Now the king of Cochin has informed that the boy is the younger brother of a peon of his, and thus could not be a slave. The Commander is sceptical of the claim but he has neither the time nor the inclination to carry out a detailed investigation into the matter. He suggests the king (or someone responsible) pays the price of the boy—rupees 108—and the boy can be returned to the palace. The Commander's action is influenced by the fact that the king (like the VOC) also has prohibited illegal sale and trafficking of slaves in his country. The Commander promises to adhere the royal policy, and states the VOC has awarded exemplarily rigorous punishments to those convicted in similar cases. However the commander expresses reservations in extending a

blanket ban on the sale of slaves to Christians under the Company jurisdiction as it would be against customary practices and usages.[51]

These four cases of enslavement and allied practices show the spread of commercial slavery into the social marrow of the contemporary society. It stands to reason that they are merely the tip of the iceberg. Contemporary allusions and later records indicate slavery was rampant. The government of Cochin was lax in comprehensively recording slave transactions, associated protocols and resultant litigations. Probably slavery and all its concomitant practices, especially those emanating from caste, were a part and parcel of the social life and the court clerks and officials thought it was redundant to commit them to writing. This indifference must have trickled down to generations and prevented later historians from conceptualizing slavery as a powerful and autonomous institution with its own logical modalities and transactional mechanisms. It is this archival lacuna that the next section tries to overcome.

Roots and Shoots of Enslavement

The instances of enslavement which we have examined are enlightening in that they are intertwined with regal prerogatives, pretensions of the VOC to suzerainty and interests of private traders. All of them, however, are narrated from a single viewpoint which is always formal/bureaucratic and tend to gloss over nuanced aspects of slavery. As an entrenched social practice with wider ramifications, fuelled by monetary considerations and vitalized by transnational networks, the process of enslavement was multi-layered. It showcases how a spectrum of players were involved and demonstrates the mutating forms of slavery, jurisdiction and perceptions. In order to overcome the limiting conditions of these narratives, we analyse three instances of enslavement here with a view to connecting the individual cases with the organizing principles and material conditions of Kerala in the first half of the eighteenth century. The cases, in the form of legal proceedings in the Council of Justice in Cochin, are taken from Mathias van Rossum and others *Testimonials of Enslavement* (2020).

The Dutch Council of Justice, undergirded by civil-criminal laws and regionally negotiated treatises, regulated its subject populations by dividing them into categories and by differentially redressing their

grievances.[52] It supplanted the local system of jurisprudence which was predicated on customs and carried out viva voce by rulers in consultation with Brahmin scholars.[53] The Dutch legal infrastructure was periodically updated and streamlined by incorporating ideas from new books and extracts from similar bodies located elsewhere in the Dutch empire.[54] Though the system was established primarily for the VOC servants and inhabitants of the Fort in Cochin, it was widely used by the greater population for many legal needs.[55]

a) The Enslavement of Barrido (1737)

This case pertains to an abortive act of fraudulent, and thus punishable, attempt to enslave and sell Barrido, a freeborn Christian. A Muslim named Seido lured him to Cochin de Sima (that is, Mattancheri) with the promise of employment and handed him over to the Jew Abraham Assuri who later took him to a house inhabited by a white man and a white woman. Barrido sensed the danger he was in and on the first available opportunity took to his heels and managed to report the matter to the Dutch Commander. The seller Seido is missing—apparently he has absconded to avoid punishment—and Abraham Assuri claims that a) Barrido admitted he belongs to the *Chego geslagt* (Ezhava caste) and was raised by the aforesaid Seido, b) he did not know anything about the provenance of the sold person, c) he insisted the seller produce proof of enslavement, and d) be brought the sold person 'into the city to show him to the honourable lord commander to see if the mentioned honourable wanted to use him for the honourable company.'[56] Though the prosecutor pleads for ten years of banishment to Abraham Assuri, he is eventually exonerated, but has to bear the 'burdens and expenditure' of the trial.[57] Two of his accomplices, who are Pulayas by caste, are also released from detention.

The case is interesting because it throws into relief a few aspects of contemporary society and identity. Barrido, the abducted freeman, is the Dutch spelling of Vareed or Vareeth, which is a localized pronunciation of Varghees; and Vargheese is the shortened form of Geevarugheese, a derivative of Greek Geôrgios. His cousin Jaco (Chacko, a vernacular form of Jacob), is a Lascorin of the Dutch barracks. Lascorins were a constantly growing body of native converts

to the Catholic Church, some of who are employed by the VOC and others are farmers.[58]

What astonishes one most is the secular and inclusive nature of the incident: two Christians, a Muslim, two whites, a white Jew, two Pulayas and a black Jew are involved in it. It is the Pulayas who transport Seido and Barrido to Cochin. Given the topography of the region in the eighteenth century, they were rowing a country boat or a canoe. It is the black Jew who takes Barrido to a place 'to hide him and hold him, until the occasion presented itself to sell the slave.'[59] Pulayas were the biggest single caste of agricultural labourers in Kerala and belonged to the lower ranks of the untouchable castes; till the middle of the nineteenth century they remained agrestic slaves who were owned, bought and sold like any other property by their landlords and masters.[60] The black Jews were considered as the manumitted slaves of white Jews.[61] The involvement of the Pulayas can be interpreted as meaning that slaves themselves were agents of enslavement. But it is more probable that they, being enslaved, were unable to perform agential acts. In the 16th century Barbosa found Pulayas to be living miserably, segregated from the mainstream and respectable population.[62] After a few centuries Saradamoni described them as devoid of agency: they lived, worked and even procreated for the sake of their masters.[63] We have no reason to believe that they, as a community, enjoyed greater rights and freedom in the 18th century. Visscher describes Pulayas as born slaves, absolutely owned and cared for by their master and primarily employed in the cultivation of rice.[64] In fact, the testimony of two Pulayas point to this possibility: they claimed that they played their subordinate part for money, knew nothing about Barrido and came to learn the actual intentions of Seido belatedly.

b) The Falsification of an Ola

This case, also recorded in 1737, points to the degree to which slave trade nullifies close relationships and the pervasive practice of forging documents to facilitate enslavement. It describes how Itti, in collusion with his brother and another person, brought his own brother-in-law (Comen) to Cochin and sold him to Barki (Varki, Vargheese) for 150 *fanums*. But a native soldier named Marcellino de Rosario

with a help of a Lascorin clerk found deed the certificate of enslavement (*ola*)to be a forgery. The event was reported to the Commander and at the end of the elaborate trial all the three convicted were 'handed over to their lawful lord and competent judge the king of Cochin for such punishment as their heathen laws will dictate.'[65]

All the main players in the case belong to the caste of Kaniyan. Barbosa writes about them thus: 'they learn letters and astronomy, and some of them are great astrologers, and they foretell many future things, and form very accurate judgements upon the births of men. . . They are great diviners, and pay great attention to times and places of good and bad luck, which they cause to be observed by these [local] kings and great men, and by the merchants also.'[66] Edgar Thurston provides a long description of the caste with their hereditary occupations, endogamous groups, kinship relations, origin narratives, pollution norms and social standing.[67] Both the accounts indicate that the Kaniyans enjoyed a better position in the past than they do today.

The Judicial Council's decision to hand over the convicted to the regional ruler does not signify the moral or ethical aversion that the VOC felt towards slavery per se but is symptomatic of the formal policy that the Company had adopted vis-à-vis this institution. Itti and his associates were found 'fully guilty of disgraceful human theft'[68], but not slavery as such. The verdict implies that they—whatever be their caste, creed and relative position in the social hierarchy—were permitted to buy and sell slaves as long as their activities remained within the legally laid down framework. The forged *ola*, which is 'discordant in every respect regarding a lawful slaveable ola'[69] implies the existence of a standardised and widely accepted format of deed proving one's slave status and saleability.

c) From Bondage to Conversion

This eventful case (1743) illustrates how the freedom to religious conversion offered by the Jesuits, whose presence was fiercely resented by the Dutch, turned out to be instrumental in saving an individual from the prospect of being sold off as a slave. The details are as follows. Joan Diaz was a Topasse of 53 years old, who had been with the VOC for 24 years. Now he was a soldier posted at the

Dutch fort at Chettuva. He used to employ a Vettuva girl named Kali, 15 years of age, as a domestic servant. She was legally a slave of Chettuva Payanchery Nair, the territorial magnate whom we have already met. Apparently he leased her out to Diaz. After eight years Diaz found her inefficient and dismissed her from service. She soon learned that Payanchery Nair had plans to sell her to Jan Doorn, the commander of the said fort. In order to thwart this possibility, she absconded and reached an interior village known as Puthenchira and let herself be baptised by the Jesuit Bishop Antony Pimentel under the name of Francisca. Meanwhile on learning her absence, Nair complained to Doorn. The latter suspected Diaz had taken her way and threatened him with corporeal punishment unless he brought her back soon. A frightened Diaz spent two whole days looking for her between Chettuva and Cochin but in vain. For fear of punishment he approached the Dutch Commander in Cochin asking for justice and legal protection. Kali, now rechristened Francisca, in the meantime was located by Diaz's wife and was brought to Cochin so that she could depose in the Council of Justice and clear the matter up. She unwaveringly and emphatically stated that her departure from Chettuva and conversion to Christianity was voluntary. On the strength of her testimony Diaz was acquitted and Doorn condemned for his improper behaviour; he was directed to compensate Diaz with his actual pay while he was absent from work. The case of Francisca was referred to higher authorities and on the basis of their considered opinion she was not to handed over to Nair but was permitted to search for a livelihood because a) as a Christian she was under the jurisdiction of the VOC and it was also the responsibility of the company to protect Christians, and b) the Council feared that her former owner 'out of revenge and hate for Christianity[70] shall try to torture shall try to torture her in all kinds of ways'.[71]

The reference to Christians as a community that has incurred the wrath of prominent personage like Nair is revealing. The church that Kali enters under the name of Francisca is not the elite Syrian but Latin which was ethnically heterogeneous.[72] It is the same congregation that Antony (discussed in section II) and other 'humble Christians' belonged to. The antagonistic attitude of Nair to Christianity faithfully

reflects the general attitude of upper caste members towards religious conversion: they forcefully argued that conversion would lead to the loss of real and potential slaves, and would decimate the massive human force required in the labour-intensive cultivation of paddy. In the 19th century we see the same arguments raised against Anglican Missionaries who converted slaves en masse.[73] This attitude was natural: it was the large scale reclamation of wetland and establishment of paddy fields that stabilised a crucial phase of social formation in Kerala and resulted in the ossification of occupation groups into castes and creation of slave populations.[74] In the 18th century conversion to Christianity meant, and continued to mean for a long time, reprieve from the ordeals of caste and associated slavery.

The possibility of emancipation through conversion was marred by political friction and social resistance. While it was the right and responsibility of the VOC to protect Christians of the Latin rite (a legacy that the Company inherited from the Portuguese), officials knew all along that most natives embraced Christianity not out of theological convictions but because of purely practical considerations like evading tax and escaping from the harsh penal regimes of indigenous polities, and that if the rate of conversion adversely impinged on the king's revenues the present liberal policy would be revoked.[75] In fact Martanda Varma, who developed Travancore from a tiny principality to the most extensive kingdom in Kerala,[76] had found this arrangement irksome and asked the Dutch to desist from extending protection to Christians.[77]

Revealingly it is a Jesuit bishop who received Kali into the Christian fold. In 1743 Jesuits were still in the field though they had been formally supplanted by the Carmelites in the administration of Christians of Kerala as decreed by the Vatican. It will be remembered at this juncture that all Catholic priests and prelates were expelled from Cochin in the wake of the Dutch conquest of 1663. Though the VOC granted Carmelites permission to resume their activities in Kerala except in the town of Cochin in 1698 and they actually returned to the Malabar Coast in 1701[78], Jesuits were kept at bay. The latter, however, returned without the VOC's consent, settled themselves at Ambazhakkatu (also known as Sampaloor, derived from St Paul Ur,

ur being the Malayalam for village) and exercised their power whenever possible.[79] The Jesuit bishop resided at Puthenchira most of the time. When Antony Pimentel, a Spanish Jesuit directly appointed by the king of Portugal and confirmed by the Pope[80], assumed the office of archbishop in 1719, the Dutch commander sought to imprison him and to deport him to Batavia; he somehow escaped captivity and managed to reach Puthenchira.[81]

Van Gollenesse found the presence and ministering of Jesuits galling and described them as 'mischievous rabble' who needed to be gotten rid of by 'determined measures'as there were 'mighty reasons' to do so. [82] The sentiment was understandable: Jesuits not only welcomed VOC deserts[83] and but also apparently erected hurdles in the smooth procurement of products.[84]

Vettuvas are a backward caste in Kerala. Barbosa describes them as makers of salt and tiller living miserably in secluded areas; they also are slaves of the king and of the Nayars who keep aloof from them, and speak to them from a great distance.[85] Thurston describes them as agricultural serfs, hunters and collectors of forest produce, who live in jungles; they are not exactly slaves but their social position justifies their being classified as slaves and they live on the cocoanut plantations of the Nairs, and other well-to-do- classes.[86] In Cochin they are also called Vettuva pulayas who are pure agricultural labourers.[87] Pillai considers Vettuvas as originally having belonged to the Veda (hunters) tribe.[88] Payanchery Nair figures in another case discussed in section II. Of course that is a different individual but belongs to the same family and territory.

In the case of Kali, the provision for or possibility of religious conversion, however unethical it be theologically and socially, made all the difference in the world. The right to convert and the facilities to do so were, and continued to be, central in the amelioration of slaves in Kerala. From 1816, missionaries of the CMS and the LMS addressed the question of slavery seriously and ensured the government prohibited the practice. They even went out of their way to intervene in the issue, often incurring the displeasure of the British East India Company in the process. But for the missionaries, slavery would have continued unchecked and unabated in Kerala for some for time. The

liberation of Kali also points to a rare facet of proselytization carried out by the Jesuits. As a rule their activities were confined to upper and middle caste groups; rarely did they consciously tried to convert members of the lowest social strata.

Conclusion

The reconfiguration of slavery brought about by the direct and indirect interventions of the VOC were unique. Most importantly the VOC reformulated forms of slavery by doing away with the personal, religious, and/or judicial connections that characterised indigenous forms of bondage in the Indian Ocean; as a result the social dimension of slavery and the lived experience of being a slave in the intersection of colonial and indigenous slave networks of the Indian Ocean grid also underwent radical changes.[89]

The three sets of archival material discussed above, despite being different in orientation, time and jurisdictional space, signify these paradigm shifts and the extent to which slavery (both as a caste-generated practice and as a mercantile commodity or cargo necessitated by the emergent economic order) had saturated the social fabric of Cochin and adjacent places in the 18th century. Nobody was immune to it. The practice had the ability to erase, negate or transcend traditional usages, modalities of differentiation and affinal relations. More importantly one has to remember that these are only cases that were formerly reported, followed up, addressed and recorded (either in the Judicial Council of the VOC through the correspondence between the king of Cochin and the Dutch officials of the day). We have no means to find out and quantify the number (and other details like gender and age) of people who were purchased, exchanged, sold or transported through the traditional circuits of slave trade.

Together these sets also demonstrate that slavery was an embedded and complex, something interwoven within the minutest social cells of the day. It was not an institution confined to commercial spaces and individual households. Far from it. Slavery had percolated to all social interstices and the practice was regulated, textualised and legitimized within elaborate jurisdictional discourses and shifting power relations. While indigenous ideational sources explained, justified and sanctified slavery as an institution, it is colonial forces that expanded

it. This means a close reading of slaves and allied aspects like their mobility, value and utility, would enlighten us on the obscure aspects of colonial regimes. This is all the more relevant in the case of the Dutch period. Unlike the Portuguese and the English, the Dutch left no material remains behind in the forms of religious communities and mixed populations. That perhaps is why until recently Dutch period remained understudied. Recent studies are changing things. And what else can enrich and broaden out conceptual prisms better than the lives of the people on the spot?

End Notes

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2 Ashin Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade 1740-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967), 32; M.N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 28.

3 E. Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History* (Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1958), 16-28, 121.

4 Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier, *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2022), 51.

5 Duarte Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar*, trans. Henry E.J. Stanley (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1866), 137-44.

6 Barbosa, *A Description*,118; Pillai, *Studies in Kerala*, 251.

7 Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-54* , trans. H.A.R. Gibb (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 205,209,234,244; Ineke van Kessel 'Conference Report: Goa Conference on the African Diaspora in Asia', *African Affairs* 105, no. 420, (2006), 461-2; J.E. Harris, *The African Presence in Asia* (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1971), 34.

8 Gupta, *Malabar in Asian,* 8.

9 Pearson, *Portuguese in India*, 11.

10 *Padrado* (patronage) was a privileged bestowed on Portugal by the Vatican to protect the Christians in the regions wherever Portugal would establish itself.

11 Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum, 'Private slave trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean world: a study into the networks and backgrounds of the slavers and the enslaved in South Asia and South Africa', *Slavery & Abolition*, 38:, no 1 (2017), doi:10.1080/0144039X.2016.1159004, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0144039X.2016.1159004

12 Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 21.

13 Mbeki and van Rossum, 'Private slave trade', 98.

14 Vinil Baby Paul, 'Local Networks of the Slave Trade in Colonial Kerala' in *Slavery and Bondage in Asia, 1550–1850* , ed. Kate Ekama, Lisa Hellman and Matthias van Rossum (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2022), 207.

15 Rupee was the currency of the Mughals and was used in many parts of India; in Cochin the state currency was *fanam*. See https://www.dema-coins.com/2022/04/fanam-coin-Cochin-India.html

16 Series I, 375/219, Kerala Archives (Regional Centre, Cochin).
17 A. Galletti, 'Introduction' in *The Dutch in Malabar*, ed. A. Galletti (Madras: Government Press, 1911),3-4
18 Harris, *African Presence,* 27, 36.
19 Jacob Canter Visscher, *Letters from Malabar*, trans. Major Heber Drury (Vepery: Gantz Brothers, 1862), 20, 39.
20 Gupta, *Malabar in Asian,* 92-93.
21 Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 100.
22 Markus Vink, 'The World's Oldest Trade: Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of World History*, 14, no. 2 (2003): 152-23 .
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24 Matthias van Rossum and others, *Testimonies of Enslavement: Sources on Slavery from Indian Ocean World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 257, 297.
25 Ward, *Networks of Empire*, 21.
26 P.R. Menon, *Sakthan Thampuran* (Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 1958), 500.
27 Series I, 380/2, Archives (Cochin).
28 Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 55.
29 Gupta, *Malabar in Asian*, 122, 126-27.
30 Series I, 380/5, Archives (Cochin).
31 The term 'Captain' is ambiguous; it can refer to the captain of a ship or a Dutch official, ranked second to the Commander.
32 Series I, 380/4, Archives (Cochin).
33 Menon, *Sakthan Thampuran*, 501.
34 Series II, 1159/7, Archives (Cochin).
35 Visscher, *Letters*, 37; Harris, *African Presence*, 18, 56
36 T. Whitehouse, *Some Historical Notices on Cochin in the Malabar Coast* (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1869), 24
37 Adriaan Moens 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar*, ed. A. Galletti, 104
38 Visscher, *Letters*, 19
39 Singh, *Fort Cochin,* 62; Visscher, *Letters*, 42-43.
40 Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 116
41 Gupta, *Malabar in Asian*, 124.
42 Series I, 376/20, Archives (Cochin).
43 Series I, 375/42, 375/43, Archives (Cochin).
44 Julius van Gollenesse 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. A. Galletti, 64; Panickar, *Malabar and the Dutch*, 31-5, 43-4; Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 80; T.I. Poonen, *Dutch Hegemony in Malabar and Its Collapse* (Trivandrum: University of Kerala, 1978), 70, 82, 126
45 Mathias van Rossum and others, *Testimonies*, 93.
46 Series I, 375/84, Archives (Cochin).
47 Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 72-88; Moens 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. A. Galletti, 253.
48 Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2022), 16.
49 Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 133.
50 Right from its establishment in Cochin, Company officials knew their success in trade, specifically their monopsony of pepper, directly depended on their ability to subdue local rulers through might. Van Gollenesse writes: "What can

you do with men who, when they are embarrassed or beaten, willingly submit to the terms and conditions of the conqueror, but who have no intention of observing them except as long as they feel the force to which they must bow, and whose good faith and obedience vanish as soon as it is withdrawn from this coast?" (Galletti, 51). See also Ward, *Networks of Empire*, 68; Gupta, *Malabar in Asian*, 32; Panikkar, *Malabar and the Dutch*, 68.

51 Series I, 375/209, Archives (Cochin).
52 Ward, *Networks of Empire*, 18.
53 Visscher, *Letters*, 67.
54 Van Gollenesse in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 80
55 Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 134-136.
56 Mathias van Rossum and others, *Testimonies*, 94.
57 Ibid,105
58 Van Gollenesse 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar*, ed. Galletti, 90
59 Mathias van Rossum and others, *Testimonies*, 94
60 K. Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980), 2, 10.
61 Adriaan Moens 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 197-98.
62 Barbosa, *A Description*, 142-3.
63 Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste*, 53.
64 Visscher, *Letters*, 70-71
65 Mathias van Rossum and others, *Testimonies*, 126
66 Barbosa, *A Description*, 139.
67 Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol.III* (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1909), 178-199
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69 Ibid, 125
70 A few decades later Adriaan Moens echoes this fear: "…as the Christians are much despised by the heathen they would have to suffer too much humiliation and ill-treatment if we do not protect them" (*Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 121).
71 Mathias van Rossum and others , *Testimonie*s, 206
72 Francis Day, *The Land of the Perumals* (Madras: Gantz Brothers, 1863), 231
73 Jeffrey, *Decline of Nair Dominance*, 22-5, 35-45.
74 Gurukkal and Varier, *History of Kerala*, 76-80.
75 Adriaan Mones, 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 121-22.
76 For a succinct and critical description of this growth see K.M. Panikkar, *Malabar and the Dutch*.
77 Gupta, *Malabar in Asian,* 56.
78 Van Gollenesse, 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 91
79 Ibid, 91
80 Visscher, *Letters*, 110.
81 Poonen, *Dutch Hegemony*, 210.
82 Van Gollenesse, 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 91.
83 Singh, *Fort Cochin*, 120.
84 Van Gollenesse, 'Memorandum' in *Dutch in Malabar* ed. Galletti, 61.
85 Barbosa, *A Description*, 140-141.

86 Thurston, *Castes and Tribes, Vol. VII,* 395-397.
87 Ibid, 400
88 Pillai, *Studies in Kerala*, 16
89 Ward, *Networks of Empire*, 81

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