

Laymen in Medieval Kerala: Insights from European Travelogues

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History's fad on textual source is almost like an obsession. Though textual sources seem to be important, the texts should undergo proper hermeneutical process. This is more so in the case of medieval travelogues in relation to the construction of Kerala History. Many European and non-European travelers visited Kerala in the medieval Period and they had left their travel experiences and insights about medieval Kerala society. On line with the observations of the European travelers, historians reconstructed the medieval Kerala society on the pattern followed by the travelers. Therefore, whatever subjectivities and prejudices by which European travelers looked at the native people of Kerala, it crept into the mainstream history. The present paper examines critically some of the observations that European travelers made; and incorporated into the history of medieval Kerala society.

Key words: Travelogues, hermeneutics, veracity, laymen, spectacle, subjevticity

Travelogues, especially of European travelers had been considered as a source of immense value for the construction of medieval Kerala history. For this reason, construction of the history of Medieval Kerala society depended heavily on the observations left by European travelers for its construction. There was a flood of European travelers into Kerala from the 15th century onwards. The travel accounts of Europeans about oriental countries were welcomed very well in Europe. Therefore, a simple visit of a European would end up in a travelogue. It would indeed widen the source base of the

society about which they write; but gives historians the responsibility of an in-depth analysis of the sources. The travelers except Duarte Barbosa, the Portuguese traveler, most of the European travelers' had a temporary stay in Kerala and had little familiarity with its culture. The passing reference they made about Kerala subsequently incorporated into the construction of medieval Kerala without a recourse to an hermeneutical approach. The article arises some doubts about relying on the unprocessed source in the form of European travelogues for the construction of medieval Kerala, especially, an analysis of the caricature of laymen in medieval European travel literature is attempted here.

There is a general conviction shared by the students of Kerala history that European sources are more valid compared to indigenous and non-European travelogues. The observation of Eugenia Vanina in her article on medieval travelogues on India undoubtedly corroborates the value that historians accorded to European travelogues in the construction of history of India. She opined that, for many decades if not a century and to a certain extent up to nowadays, travelogues, especially European ones, have been viewed, along with the company documents, as most reliable source material on late medieval and early modern India.¹ For this reason, even archival sources of colonial period are treated as sources beyond textual criticism. The ensuing researches on travel literature produced in the medieval period have brought out the subjective nature of the Travelogues left by the medieval European travellers. Nevertheless, as a textual source, history still hangs on the travelogues as valid source of information. Anything which arose the curiosity during the travel was found a place in their travel accounts, irrespective of class, caste or creed. While the indigenous sources confined to the life of the upper class/caste or affluent strata of society because of their familiarity with the society in which they are a member; travellers being outsiders were free from many predilections which influenced the indigenous observers.

Velayudhan Panikksser's attempt to publish the Malayalam translations of European travelogues in the beginning of 21st century familiarized and popularized European travelogues among the scholars of Kerala history. Before this, historians like K.P. Padmanabha Menon

had composed Kerala history² based on the accounts of Europeans. K.S.Mathew is one of the prominent historians who made use of the accounts of the travelogues in Portuguese to construct medieval Kerala society. Though there is plethora of information available in the travel accounts, it did not lead into the explorations of the sources from the point of view of laymen. Thus medieval Kerala society was basically served as a window to the life of the Nairs and Nambutiris; and the untouchable castes' life is in oblivion as European travellers' description of laymen is scanty. They remained under shadow as they were treated in the Travelogues. A radical digression from this kind of history was brought out by the exceptionally brilliant scholar P.K.Balakrishnan whose work *Jathivyavsthayum Keralacharithravum* (1983) shattered the shallow reproduction of travellers' observation on Medieval Kerala society. When he looked at the European travellers' observation from the point of view of laymen with his sharp point blank critical analysis, a drastically different Kerala society emerged. He expressed his doubts about the authenticity of the accounts of European travellers when they described the life of the untouchable castes. In one occasion he raised his doubts thus- though the travelogues describe the caste, occupation and homesteads of the downtrodden, it is doubtful whether they ever had any direct contact or ever had the chance to come across the settlement of these downtrodden whose dwellings were always away from the public.³ The epithet, 'homesteads of these natives' the travellers used to describe the houses of people implied upper caste and not of course the downtrodden in the opinion of Balakrishnan.

For the travellers, both poor and rich are spectacles. While the description of the rich and powerful were given in detail, sometimes, the narration continued at length too; but laymen's life is confined to two three lines. Ludo Vico De Varthema, traveller from Bologna who visited Calicut in 1503 left his observation of the laymen's life thus- the houses are very poor.,. People of this country live miserably.⁴. Only a passing reference was left by Varthema about the culinary culture of the natives. They ate rice, fish, flesh and nuts-he scribbled. How the laymen organized their life was not the least concern of Varthema. At the same time, Varthema described the gentlemen castes

like Nairs and Nambuthidirs, at length. No elaborate description followed while depicting the laymen's life. It may be due to the unfamiliarity of the traveller with the natives with whom communication was not possible. This drawback of travelogues was pointed out by Eugina Vanina in her in-depth study on the medieval travellers. She observed that the absolute majority of European travellers who had visited India in the fifteenth-seventeenth century commanded no Indian language.⁵ Her observation is accurate in the case of Duarte Barbosa, the Portuguese who travelled the length and breadth of Kerala between 1500-1516 and left *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar*. The narrative is described by Velayudhan Panikkasseri as the 'treasure box of historical facts'.⁶ He learnt Malayalam, the language of Kerala and made an in depth study of the socio-economic and political life of Kerala prevalent in the 16th century. For this reason, Panikkasseri counted the narrative of Barbosa as the finest account of the sixteenth century Kerala.⁷ In addition to it, the socio-economic-political institution called caste is particularly problematic as this was not fully under the sociological comprehension of the Europeans. A traveller may not make out to which caste a person whom he happened to come across had belonged to. Not only that caste is alien to the European society, but, dialogue with the natives in their language to understand the nuances of caste also acted as impediment. Travellers' intension was not to study the demography of the regions they visit; but geographical exploration of the unknown places with its flora, fauna, monumental buildings, maritime activities, religious practices at a glance etc. Moreover, the itinerary of the travellers in a place in medieval Kerala is decided by the upper caste or some prominent local bureaucrat. As a stranger to the geography of the locality, traveller would have definitely sought the advice and assistance of the prominent caste men in the locality about the route to recourse. The local upper caste would have given him directions which guide him to travel safely without the least chance of spotting the presence of untouchable castes. Naturally, the possibility to spot an untouchable caste or homesteads of untouchable is distant. In fact, even the travellers' itinerary was within the caste structure. No doubt, one could come across very few description of the laymen in the travelogues.

European travelers preferred to travel along the Coast and their particular intension was a visit to few buzzing port towns like Calicut and Cannanore. From the account of Varthema, it is clear that he mainly used waterways for travel and he found either banks of the lagoons spectacularly beautiful. He might have had a glance of the untouchable castes on such travels. He described the Thiyyas who were artisans, fishermen (mukkuva) and Pulayas who collected pepper, wine and nuts and engaged in various occupations. Other craftsmen who worked away from the waterways like blacksmiths, carpenters, and pot makers were not mentioned by him. On the other hand, there is every possibility that the three castes namely Thiyyas, Mukkuvas and Pulayas whom he mentioned could be seen on move due to the nature of their occupation. Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, the Dutch traveler who visited Kerala in the 16th century also did not seem to have any direct contact with the laymen. He gave a fairly good account of Nairs but left a passing reference about the untouchable castes. He said that there are many castes below Nairs. The bottom class was Pulayas whose profession was agriculture and, their life was miserable.⁸ He did not give anything specifically about the untouchable castes and it is a clear indication that he was not able to see untouchables. As a matter of fact, travelers could see only laymen/ labourers on move; most of the commoners who were not required to move for occupational purpose were not entered into the travel accounts. In addition to it, unseeability and untouchability had not allowed the laymen to travel freely in public roads. Thus, even though travelers wanted only a cursory view of the life of natives, the caste system also kept the laymen out of the gaze of travelers. Thiyyas were the porters on the coastal along with Mukkuvas. Since Mukkuvas were confined to the sea shores, they cannot be seen carrying loads from the interior rural to port towns; but Thiyyas could be seen moving from rural to port towns carrying head loads of goods to be shipped. Most of the travelers visited the Malabar Coast mentioned the Thiyyas and with the progress of the European maritime trade on the Malabar Coast, Thiyyas being the head load workers frequented more between port and hinterlands. P.K.Balakrishnan also pointed out with a tinge

of sarcasm that no beasts of burden were seen in Kerala, instead, human labour was used to carry goods.

Labourers who were on move were mentioned by the travelers. The lively trading activities in the sixteenth century with the entry of European traders had increased the number of natives particularly laymen; and their frequency in the to and fro trafficking of trade commodities between rural and port towns. Joy Varkey's article *Port-hinter Land Relations of Cannnaore in the Context of Portuguese Trade* describes in detail the buzzing inland and overseas trading activities in the port of Cannanore in the 16th century. In the preindustrial period, majority of the Indian ports were inextricably linked with the surrounding hinterland, because the surplus of agricultural products and forest produces procured from the hinterland were the commodities for commercial exchanges at the port.⁹ Various kinds of commodities were exported from the port like pepper, ginger cardomoam, cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, mirabolans, canafistula, zerumba, zedoary, anacardi and medicinal commodities produced in the interior were brought to the port of Cannanore for export. Most of these things grew naturally in the forest and collected by local people.¹⁰ Thus, laymen who were engaged in carrying the head loads were spotted by the European travelers.

Merchant vessels usually purchased sufficient quantity of coir before leaving the port of Cannnaore for distant places. Coir was a special item required for shipbuilding and repair at Cannoanore.¹¹ A lot of human labour had to be harnessed for making coir, but, no coir workers were mentioned as the laymen and women engaged in making coir were in the interior. With the growth of urban centres, different classes of tradesmen came to Cannnore. The masons, gunpowder manufacturers, rope makers, saltpeter refiners, blacksmiths, carpenters, shipbuilders and other workers, recruited mainly from local areas, were employed in various production centres-observed Varkey.¹² This live commercial activities with the coming of Europeans brought more occupational groups from the interior. But, other than, port towns, the presence of occupational groups/laymen was not recorded by the travelers and thus most of the immobile occupational caste groups were not found their place in the travelogues.

India was not the sole destination of the European travellers. It was part of their bigger non-European explorations. At the same time, European travellers wanted to impress their native readers with their eye witness depiction of the land of spices well known in Europe. The observation, for this reason shrank into passing reference in their travel account. The profundity of the travel narratives also depended on the acumen and interest of the travellers. The motivation behind the travellers vary from person to person. This determines the nature of the content of the travel narratives. In the case of Varthema, pure curiosity about unknown lands motivated him to venture into world exploration. The query raised here is does it anyway influence their narratives. A perusal through their narratives indicates that the travellers' motivation had its impact on their narratives. It is amply demonstrated in the travel descriptions on Malabar Coast in the medieval period, particularly in their depiction of the life of laymen. Many travellers were driven by interest in trade; naturally, almost all European travellers left an intact account of the buzzing towns, commodities and transactions on commodities. Even Duarte Barbosa who stayed in Kerala for more than 15years was not free from the blemish. For this reason laymen who involved in the transportation of commodities were given place in their narratives. Their travelogues were like a cartography of trade; and as a matter of fact, many European travellers had set out to unknown places in search of trading activities for themselves and also to please their rulers in Europe by giving an eyewitness accounts of the prospects of trade in the places visited by them. Laymen in the interior who were stuck to their locality and engaged in various occupations were not described in the travelogues. In fact, the travellers did not seem to be interested to take the risk of visiting the interior and, for them, visiting the interior and depicting the life of laymen was not their intension and not part of their itinerary. Interior life as in Europe did not seem to be attractive to the travellers. Here is the major departure of medieval travellers from modern or contemporary travellers. While contemporary travellers make intimate contact with the people and culture of the places they visit; and more interested to give a real life like sketch of the hitherto unknown rural life, the intension of medieval travellers

was not to sketch the rural life of the unknown places. They carried the legacy of European geographical explorers of 14th and 15th centuries and; travelogues reflected the imaginations which shaped them in Europe. They were looking for their own images in the places visited by them. The travellers, thus had limited access spatially and demographically to medieval Kerala society and their own prejudices about the ‘other’ constrained their insights.¹³

Endnotes:

1. Eugenia Vanina. Roads of (Mis)Understanding: European Travellers in India (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century in *Indian Historical Review*. Delhi, Sage, 2013. P.270.
2. History of Kerala (1910) based on the works of Caner Visschur
3. P.K.Balakrishnan . *Jativyvasthuym Keralacharithravum*. Kottayam: DC, 1983. P.117.
4. Hakluyt Society. *Travels of Ludovico de Varthema*. London,1863. P.132.
5. Eugenia Vanina. Roads of (Mis) Understanding: European Travellers in India (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century in *Indian Historical Review*. Delh: Sage, 2013. P.274
6. Velayudhan Panikkasseri. *Sancharikalkanda Keralam*. Current books, 2001. P.240.
7. Velayudhan Panikkasseri. *Sancharikalkanda Keralam*. Current books, 2001. P.240
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9. ‘Port-hinter land relations of Cannnaore in the context of Portuguese trade’ Joy Varkey in K.S.Mathew and Joy Varkey. eds. Winds of spices. Essays on Portuguese Establishments in Medieval India with Special Reference to Cannanore. Tellicherry: IRISH, 2006.P.128
10. Joy Varkey, 2006.P.128
11. Joy Varkey, 2006. P.129
12. Joy Varkey, 2006. P.133

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