

# History on/of Oars: Contextualising the Genesis of Aquatic Networks in British Malabar

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**Abstract:** *Malabar, which was a part of colonial Madras Presidency, had adorned an important position in the mercantile history of the British in the West Coast. The region, once ruled by mutually competing petty ruling houses, came to the imperial yoke of the British in the backdrop of Mysorean and English conflict. Even before the coming of the British in the region, it already had a space in the mercantile activities. The agricultural production in the eastern part of the district had attracted Westerly attentions and even the Portuguese anchored this littoral tract to reap the fruits of the trade fortunes. The British too had followed those footsteps and they made it as a trade emporium in the western coast. The British could make substantial profit from Malabar trade. In the initial years they had used the then prevailed riverine channels for commodity transportation. There were hue and cry for the strengthening of these riverine channels into aquatic networks for the smooth and easy flow of commercial products. Despite their initial hesitation, the colonial state made certain remarkable construction in Malabar. Such constructions made Malabar as an epitome of aquatic network. Certain British officials and bureaucrats have played a crucial role in the emergence of aquatic networks in Malabar.*

**Keywords:** Aquatic networks, British, H V Conolly, Malabar, Trade

## INTRODUCTION

The 18th century made its deep and crucial imprints in the history of Malabar. Like other places in India, Malabar too had witnessed significant socio-economic changes in the 18th century. In Malabar, the British had significantly expanded their trade operations, and it often facilitated by various treaties signed with the local rulers. Such mercantile-cum-political measures helped them to bring the balance of trade in their favour. In due course of time, they realised the necessity to bring the area under their political heyday. The British made use of Mysorean campaign as a golden opportunity to extend their political domination. With the accession of Malabar, as a consequence of Third Anglo-Mysore War, the British now enjoyed political sway over a large tract of land stretching from Chetwai in the South to Kavvai river in the North.

Such a situation, led to the next stage of British supremacy in Malabar, where they sued to expand networks of commercial transactions for the smooth flow of commodities. In the initial years, they focused on strengthening the riverine networks of Malabar for commodity transportation. The aquatic networks in Malabar, provided a cost-effective channel of commodity exchange. In course, of time, Malabar experienced the turbulences of agrarian nature, especially in the northern part of the district, which occasionally turned into communal flavour. To manage such 'pricking disturbances', the British state had to ensure the commutation of troops even into the interiors of Malabar, especially in the southern part. In such a historical juncture, the strengthening of aquatic networks in colonial Malabar, offers an epitome of colonial governmentality coupled with mercantile aspirations.

## BRITISH IN MALABAR: INITIAL TRADE FORTUNES

The year 1792, marked a special year for the British in Malabar as they acquired the political control of the region from the Mysoreans. It paved the way for the bringing the land under the direct control of East India Company (EIC). Being the principal supplier of spices to the EIC, Malabar, witnessed certain fundamental changes in the functioning of colonial state. They devised certain strategies in the procurement spices. To prevent the loss of profit, they brought the procurement of spices directly under the Company. They did not want the profit to be drained at any cost and to make the endeavour a lucrative, they devised strategies to ensure the free flow of spices from interiors of Malabar to the warehouses in the western coastline. Being skeptical of the viability of the fortunes of spice trade from the western coast, the EIC did not resort to invest much on the development of transportation networks. However, the British decided to make use of the then prevailing rivers of

Malabar to transport the spices and other items required for the European market. In due course of time, they urged and engaged in the exercise of transforming such rivers of Malabar into an aquatic network which could ensure the easy flow of commodities in the region.

Traditionally, aquatic channels constituted a cheap, but risky way of commuting in India. Riverine channels could broadly be categorized as navigable rivers, navigable canals and coastal navigation (Weld, 1920, p. 52). Malabar during the pre-colonial times and after, provides the instances of all such categorizations. When it comes to the commodity transportation, the British, in the beginning of their innings in Malabar, favoured the use of the then existing riverine channels. The British were motivated to use the riverine channels, through which they hoped to maximize their profit. They were not ready to engage in 'unwanted investments' in Malabar. The traditionally structured riverine ways were the nucleus from which the aquatic networks of the later period began to emerge. The aquatic networks can be defined as interconnected systems of water bodies, such as rivers, streams, rivulets, backwaters and lakes, that function cohesively to support ecological process, hydrological connectivity and commodity movement.

### **TOWARDS AN AQUATIC NETWORK IN MALABAR**

In the beginning of their mercantile enterprise in Malabar, the British could go ahead without many difficulties by using the riverine channels. They had to handle a meagre volume of trade in the initial years of Company rule, but it began to increase in the years to come. They convinced the difficulty in carrying out extensive trade through the riverine channels prevalent in Malabar. They had to invest in the materialization of aquatic networks in Malabar with the intension of expanding trade and enhancing profit. As the first step, the Company people involved in dredging the aquatic channels. There were ample instances of dredging and removing unwanted mud and stone deposits from ports in Malabar coast like Ponnani, Valapattanam, Beypore etc. Unlike earlier, such initial interventions helped the big ships to enter the shore of Malabar.

The increased trade and accumulated profit motivated the Company authorities in Madras to pay more attention to strengthen the aquatic networks in Malabar. The officials at the Madras Presidency had delivered timely instructions to the colonial authorities in Malabar to involve in the effective utilization of riverine channels. They further received specific instruction from Madras to investigate the expansion of aquatic networks in Malabar. There was specific instruction to do the surveying of a water transport from Beypore to Karkur (G O No.1073, 1861). To fulfil that government directive, Captain J. Bean led a survey, and the report came to be recognized as the earliest sincere attempt by the colonial state to document the emergence of aquatic networks in Malabar.

The Company authorities in the Madras Presidency headquarters were eager to consider the Report as an eye-opener about the development of aquatic networks in Malabar. They reconsidered the project of expanding aquatic channels in Malabar. But when it came to the execution, they faced certain pragmatic difficulties. For instance, water transport through Malabar's inland waterways was hazardous because of the many rocky jungles stream. Captain J Bean himself noted in his report that the navigation from Areacode to Beypore was not convenient in entire climatic conditions

due to the rocky nature of streams. Then it was directed to drop the project due the practical difficulties. The authorities at Madras Presidency were not in position to continue with the project (G O No.356, 1862). But at the same time, they passed governmental directives to utilize the tolls generated from the ferries for the strengthening of aquatic networks in the region. It underlines the ambivalent nature of colonial state in the development of aquatic networks in Malabar. They were vague about the commercial growth achieved through aquatic networks developed by utilizing state funds. The Company authorities in Madras had eyed at the large sums of money collected as tolls from the ferries in Malabar. Certain statistics would prove that substantial amount was taken over by the colonial state from the revenue collected as tolls from the ferries of Malabar. During the period from 1832 to 1852, it is estimated that the total tolls collected through the ferries in Malabar was Rs. 7,02,416 (Report of PWD, 1852). Out of it Rs. 3,11,664/- (44.37%) was utilized for the improvement of aquatic networks in Malabar. (Report of PWD, 1852).

Significant to the development of aquatic networks in Malabar, one must investigate the interiors of the colonial state. There was a conflict of interests between the Court of Directors of East India Company and the Company authorities in the Madras province. The Court of Directors, being the supreme governing body of the English East India Company had frequently reminded the authorities to use tolls collected from the ferries for the improvement of aquatic networks. In one instance, they even worried that the tolls from the ferries might be exhausted if was used for the construction of roads and bridges. However, the Company authorities in the Madras province took no positive action. They were of the view that water transportation does not need much improvement, and the balance amount collected from ferries could be used for the strengthening of other transportation modalities in Malabar (Extract of Minutes of Consultation No.388, 1855). The Company authorities in the Madras provincial headquarters had taken such a view because the region of Malabar had shown a substantial profit from trade and merchandise even without much investment in the development of aquatic networks.

A further data on balance of trade from Malabar would underline the reason behind the neglect of the development of aquatic networks. In the first half of 19th century, Malabar had shown considerable growth in trade receipts, and it was achieved without many investments on aquatic networks. For instance, in 1804, the value of exports and imports from Malabar was Rs. 17,63,426/- and it to Rs. 62,48,412/- in 1836-37 (Clementson, 1914, p.13). It underlines that within the initial three decades of Company rule on Malabar, the value of exports and imports from Malabar rose substantially. It further made clear that Malabar had substantially contributed to the balance of trade of Madras presidency and that too was achieved by utilizing then existing channels of commodity transportation. The authorities in the Provincial headquarters did not feel the necessity to improve aquatic networks in Malabar and the amount earmarked could be utilized for strengthening the land transport.

The inner circle of colonial state was often engaged in heated but healthy discussions about the feasibility of projects and programmes they were about to implement in India. One must remember the famous controversy between the Anglicists and Orientalists on the implementation of

of modern education in India (Moir and Zastoupil, 2015). The same was the fate of British involvement and initiative in the development of aquatic networks. Certain serious discussions had taken place in the inner circle of the Madras Presidency headquarters on the river management in Malabar. One group stood in favour of letting the aquatic channels remain as they were, because the British could make considerable profit by relying on them. However, another group strongly opined that the huge profit the English East India Company could make from the underdeveloped aquatic channels could be doubled, if provisions were made for their development. It would enhance the catchment area of the aquatic networks in Malabar and, thereby increase the lucrativeness of trade as well. That perspective gained widespread appreciation and acceptance among the Madras Provincial authorities.

### ON WEST COAST CANAL IN MALABAR

The proposal to set up the West Coast Canal (WCC) should be seen at this juncture. The plan envisages the creation of a network of artificial canals by interlinking the rivers in Malabar. WCC was a robust aquatic transportation infrastructure network that linked the waterways of the British Malabar, and the princely states of Cochin and Travancore. In the materialization of the project, the British possession of territories located in between Kavvayi in the north and Chettuva in the south was proved to be fatal. Along with the British, the heads of the princely states of Cochin and Travancore extended their backing to the project. The idea of connecting the regions from Kavvayi to Chetwai via aquatic networks was the brainchild of Mr. Graeme, who "as the Special Commissioner of Malabar" had prepared a report on 'Slavery in Malabar Coast' (Buckingham, 1833, p.446). To materialise the plan of Mr. Graeme had deputed Lt. Proby. As a prelude to his execution plan, Lt. Proby conducted an extensive survey. In addition to Mr. Graeme's plan to link the rivers of Malabar, Lt. Proby specifically emphasised connecting the market centres in the district. This was a clear indication that the project aimed to harness the commercial potential of the region. His proposal included to connect littoral markets like Chavakkad, Ponnani, Tanur, Beypore, Calicut, Badagara, Tellicherry, Cannanore and Valapattanam. The colonial authorities at the provincial headquarters had accorded sanction to it (G O No.417, 1857). Contrary to their previous position, the provincial authorities now had taken a positive stance on the development of aquatic networks in Malabar.

After receiving nod from Madras, the PWD proceeded with the construction of the WCC, and they perceived four stretches in Malabar alone. The first one was from Azhikkal to Kavvai and it passes through Valapattanam, Mattul and Ezhimala rivers. The stretch from Kadlundi to Badagara was perceived as the second stretch. It consisted of three canals: Badagara canal, Kallai-Elathur Canal and Chaliyar-Kadalundi Canal. All these canals made an effective aquatic network in Kozhikode alone. The third stretch is made of Tirur-Kadalundi canal, and it traverses Pooraparamba and Kadalundi rivers. The fourth stretch is from Ponnani to Tirur and it connects prime places around Ponnani. The implementation plan of WCC highlights that the British were driven by the motive to transform Malabar into a colonial emporium by establishing aquatic networks (Iyyangar, 1936).

Unlike their initial stance, the British were now serious about materializing aquatic networks in Malabar and the WCC epitomized of this new vigour. They demonstrated

commitment to complete the construction of a canal connecting Ponnani and Chettuva in the southern parts of Malabar district in the Madras Presidency. Money was not a matter of concern for this large-scale project, and during 1854-55, Rs. 14,500/- was allocated for the construction of Ponnani-Chavakkad canal (Minutes of Consultations, 1857). One could also witness the application of British technical knowledge to facilitate the process of river networking in Malabar. In 1853 a new dam was constructed at Chettuva with the direction of Captain Selby. Dam construction was an important aspect of hydraulic management that the British had devised it in other parts of India (D'Souza, 2006). A canal to link Ponnani and Chettuva was also executed as it was significant for the British to maximize the trade revenues through these two commercial gateways of Malabar. Further, the British anticipated the crucial role that Chettuva was going to play in the westerly trade from the Malabar coast. On one occasion William Robinson, the acting Collector of Malabar, reported to the Chief Engineer that the more than 8000 boats were in the canal (Letter from Robinson, 1857) and it endorses the brisk trade carried through the canal. The steps taken by the colonial masters to integrate the riverine channels of Malabar and to create an aquatic network was highly anticipated gesture in the commercial history of the region.

### COLONEL HENRY VALENTINE CONOLLY AND WILLIAM ROBINSON

Though the colonial administrators and officials had gone to a great length with the construction of WCC, they faced some practical difficulties. To resolve these issues, certain officials played crucial roles, with the most prominent being Colonel Henry Valentine Conolly. His farsightedness in developing aquatic networks in Malabar is apparent in the making of Kallai-Elathur stretch of the Western Coast Canal which immortalized his name and became popularly known as Conolly canal. After his posting as the District Collector of Malabar in 1840, Col. H. V. Conolly decided to increase the pace WCC making and for that a detailed project report of the Elathur-Kallai stretch of WCC was submitted to Madras in 1845. After obtaining administrative sanction in 1846, the work was commissioned in 1848. This stretch would integrate two important rivers of the region, Korapuzha and Kallai rivers. Further, it was intended to link Badagara and Payyolli. The canal covers an area of 16 kilometers, and it flows through the Calicut city by linking Kallai river and Korapuzha. The canal flows through places like Mankavu, Muriyad, Puthiyara, Ernhipalam, Karaparamba, Eranhikal and Edakkad and most of these places were renowned local exchange centres. The British believed that once the Canal was constructed, they could easily collect commodities required in Europe. The assassination of Col. H. V. Conolly in 1855 stalled the further extension of the canal project. After a brief hiatus, the extension was resumed in 1860 and eventually reached Badagara, becoming known as Badagara Canal.

Some other British officers too had taken initiative to make possible a powerful aquatic network in Malabar. When a discussion on the history of the aquatic networks in Malabar is undertaken, William Robinson is a heroic figure who went into oblivion. Though categorical mentions were made on his leading role in expanding in Malabar's aquatic networks exist, no serious attempts have been made to study him in detail. Certain references of his activities are found in the Gazetteer of Nilgiris (Francis, 1908, p.371). As part of the WCC, the Kootay-Tanur Canal that links Venjolly and

backwater was completed in 1855. Using an allocated amount of Rs.5,020/-, the Public Works Department completed the extension up to Keeranellur, a shore near Parappanangadi (Report, 1856, p.28). Furthermore, Robinson, decided to construct Pooraparamba Canal to link Pooraparamba with Kadalundy and Beypore. For that an amount of Rs. 19,920/- was allocated and it was a crucial stage in the development of aquatic networks in Malabar.

The Malabar district administration, with support from the Madras provincial headquarters, gave special attention to the development of aquatic networks in the region. The colonial supervision and the timely allocations made the aquatic networks possible. The construction of canals was an area in which the English demonstrated some path breaking works. The foregone analysis has shown that their managerial skills and technical know-how contributed significantly to developing aquatic networks in Malabar. The colonial state invested substantial capital in canal development across Malabar. During 1856-57 to 1873-74, the amount spent on canal construction in Malabar was Rs.32800/- and it was only Rs.19167/- during the period from 1851 to 1855 (Statistics of Malabar, 1874, p.71).

### CONCLUSION:

To conclude, Malabar-a region crisscrossed by rivers, rivulets, streams, and lakes- had only a rudimentary system of aquatic connectivity. In the initial years, the British utilized these riverine channels and generated significant profits. However, they hesitated to invest further in developing aquatic networks, as the existing riverine channels already provided substantial trade revenue. In due course of time, there emerged a strong feeling among the Provincial authorities at Madras to strengthen the aquatic networks. The tolls collected from the ferries were allocated to strengthen the aquatic networks. Consequently, significant allocations were made from the provincial exchequer for the strengthening of aquatic networks. The colonial technical knowledge was also used for it. Certain colonial officials too had played a role in the making of a strong aquatic network in Malabar.

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