

The Politics of Sovereignty and Commodity Control in Eighteenth-Century Travancore: Marthanda Varma and Pepper Diplomacy

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Abstract

The politics and economy of Kerala saw significant transformations in the 1700s. This was notably true when Marthanda Varma (r. 1729–1758) started Travancore. Historians have primarily concentrated on his military triumphs, particularly the Battle of Colachel. This paper contends that his enduring success was predicated on a strategic methodology in pepper diplomacy. Marthanda Varma turned pepper from a simple crop into a tool for diplomacy, making money, and running the country by controlling its production, changing trade patterns, and fighting European monopolies. This thesis situates Travancore's pepper diplomacy within the framework of early modern global trade, examines its impact on Dutch dominance along the Malabar Coast, and asserts that economic statecraft, rather than military success, formed the foundation of Travancore's political unity. The work enhances the historiography of South India and the Indian Ocean by demonstrating the resilience of local economies against European corporate imperialism. "Pepper diplomacy" is when a government uses its power over growing, pricing, distributing, and trading pepper to gain more political and diplomatic power. By controlling the pepper trade in his kingdom, rewriting contracts with Europeans, and only working with certain foreign companies, Marthanda Varma changed the way business and the monarchy worked in Kerala. The Malabar Coast, Travancore, Marthanda Varma, the Dutch East India Company, economic diplomacy, building the state, and the pepper trade are all things that come to mind.

Keywords: pepper, economy, production, Marthanda Varma, trade.

Introduction

People in the early modern age thought that pepper was a highly essential way to make money. People used pepper in cooking a lot, but it was also a high-profit, low-bulk item that transformed trade routes, imperial aims, and political alliances all across the world. It was hard for European enterprises to receive this vital spice from the Malabar Coast of India in the 1500s. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English all forged secret agreements and said they would use force

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to take over the pepper trade. But the leaders of the local people didn't just sit back and do nothing. One of the most famous people to utilise pepper in politics and diplomacy was Marthanda Varma, the king of Travancore. The Dutch East India Company wanted to create unfair deals so that they would be the only ones who could have pepper. Dutch businesses were doing quite well in Kerala at this time.

Scope

The author of this article says that Marthanda Varma's success over the Dutch wasn't just a fluke or a military win; it was the product of a calculated strategy of centralising the economy and using trade to get what he wanted. People in Europe required pepper to stay alive in the 1600s, and it was a big element of trade. If you could control the supply of pepper, which was quite popular in Europe, you could control the economy and politics. European businesses didn't simply want to acquire pepper; they also wanted to decide where it was grown and sold. The Malabar Coast, especially the sections that Venad and other adjacent lords ruled, was a fantastic place to get pepper to export all over the world.

Research Questions

1. How did Marthanda Varma make Travancore strong in the 1700s by being in charge of growing and selling pepper?
2. How did Travancore use pepper to do commerce with European companies like the Dutch East India Company?
3. How did putting all the buying and selling of pepper in one spot help Travancore grow from a tiny group of states to a big one?
4. How did Marthanda Varma's pepper policy affect European businesses that worked on the Malabar Coast?
5. How did Travancore's control of pepper money help its army and government?

Objectives

- To examine how Marthanda Varma wielded his authority over pepper cultivation and commerce as a political and diplomatic instrument in Travancore during the 1700s.
- To find out how pepper changed Travancore's trade with European companies, especially the Dutch East India Company.
- To find out how the state's control over pepper influences Travancore's political centralisation and growth of its territory.
- To find out how pepper money helped the government and the military work together while Marthanda Varma was in power.
- To evaluate the extent to which pepper diplomacy compromised the European trade monopoly on the Malabar Coast.

Review of the Literature

Historians of the Indian Ocean have long thought that the spice trade, especially pepper, had a big effect on trade around the world in the early modern age. K. N. wrote a book about trade and culture in the Indian Ocean. Chaudhuri's book is important because it talks about how

pepper is part of a broad economic network that connects Europe, South Asia, and West Asia. Chaudhuri believes that spices were valuable items that people could trade for money over long distances. This is why the military sought the Malabar Coast and the area around it. M. N. Pearson also argues that Europeans shouldn't advise people from other countries what to do in the Indian Ocean. He also talks about how people who own businesses and work in Asia have a say in how things are done. These studies show that pepper is important all over the world, but they don't say how it is used for political and diplomatic purposes in some places. To fill this gap, we need to do a complete geographical study of Travancore during the time of Marthanda Varma.

Historians such as Om Prakash and Holden Furber have undertaken comprehensive research on the functioning of European trading enterprises in India prior to colonisation. In his book *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*, Prakash talks about how companies like the Dutch East India Company tried to build monopolies by employing fake contracts, pricing manipulation, and military power. Furber also claims that European commercial imperialism relied heavily on taking advantage of the political conflicts between Indian governments. These studies elucidate the dynamics of European power; nonetheless, they frequently depict local leaders as reactive rather than proactive. This story isn't accurate because Marthanda Varma spearheaded the fight against it in Travancore. This means we need to reconsider how indigenous people changed trade networks during the time of colonisation.

P. and other historians, such as Menon and A. Shungoony Sreedhara Menon talk a lot on the political history of Kerala, such how Travancore came to be. Shungoony Menon's *History of Travancore* is still one of the best books on the past. It talks about the challenges Marthanda Varma had and how he made things better. A. Sreedhara Menon builds on this by illustrating how Travancore's growth fits with the split political situation in Kerala. But these studies don't usually look at the pepper trade as the key issue. This is why traditional Kerala history doesn't do a good job of conveying how crucial pepper was for negotiating deals and growing the state.

Recent scholarly investigations have increasingly focused on the economic underpinnings of pre-modern state formation. Rajan Gurukkal and Irfan Habib emphasise the interconnection between tax systems, military organization, and governmental centralisation. Habib's research on agricultural surplus illustrates how monarchs maintained their armies and bureaucracy over prolonged periods via efficient resource management. This theory is helpful, however it largely talks about farming and doesn't explain very well how economies work when they rely on commerce with other countries. The dependence of Travancore on pepper revenue illustrates an alternate paradigm of state expansion that enriches and diversifies conventional notions centred exclusively on land revenue.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Sugata Bose, two historians from the last few years, believe that we should look at early modern Indian kings in light of how world history has altered. Subrahmanyam's research on political economics looks at how trade and power affect each other. Bose's "A Hundred Horizons," on the other hand, talks about how Asian people move over the world and change networks. These different points of view give us additional knowledge about Marthanda Varma, portraying him not just as a regional leader but also as a savvy economic planner in the Indian Ocean area. Nevertheless, a comprehensive examination

of "pepper diplomacy" as a strategic and systematic initiative has not yet been undertaken. This essay seeks to rectify the historiographical shortcoming by highlighting pepper as an instrument of diplomacy, sovereignty, and resistance.

Methodology

The research utilised a historical methodology to examine the evolution of pepper trade policy in Travancore throughout time. It achieves this by looking at how the state's aims changed before and after big political and military events, like the Battle of Colachel and the state's expansion. We also utilise a comparison method to explain how Travancore's economy, which is built on pepper, is different from the economies of other Indian states, especially Mysore, at the same time. This is done to highlight how different states use goods to run their governments. The study utilises a critical interpretative methodology by conducting a thorough examination of both colonial and indigenous sources, recognising the inherent biases in European commerce records and later colonial historiography. Historians employ several sources to assess the veracity of historical narratives and the equity of interpretations. People don't see military conflicts and diplomatic exchanges as separate events; instead, they look at them in the larger context of their economic and commercial effects. This makes it possible to rethink the stories that are already out there about Marthanda Varma's political and strategic successes.

Content

By the middle of the 1600s, the Dutch East India Company owned all of Kerala. It started in 1602. The Dutch established strong settlements, had a better fleet, and negotiated deals with local governments that only they could accomplish to keep prices high and competition low. Most of the time, these deals made kings and queens sell pepper for a lot less than it was worth on the open market. The economies of the countries that were harmed. Politics separated Kerala in two before Travancore took over. A lot of small kingdoms fought over land and money. European traders could trade with other kings and queens without having to work together. This made people depend on each other and fight each other. It didn't make the states stronger; it made them weaker because European companies leveraged the fact that they were different to their advantage.

In 1729, Marthanda Varma became the king of Venad. A lot of powerful feudal lords and other people who aspired to be king were quite furious about this. At first, he had trouble with the Ettuveetil Pillamar and other nobles who held land and managed companies on their own, without any aid from the government. Marthanda Varma halted these powerful people, which let the central government take over. This merger was incredibly important since it was about more than just politics. It was also about commerce and creating pepper, which are both quite vital for the economy. Marthanda Varma came up with a new way to be king that was based on being financially independent instead of the ceremonial legitimacy that other kings used. He thought it was vital to keep track of the money that came in from trade so that he could construct a permanent army and a government. So, pepper was no longer only a way to make money; it was also a necessary thing.

Marthanda Varma did a number of important things, but one of the most essential was making the state the sole place to get pepper. He took over surrounding kingdoms like Quilon and

Kayamkulam and made Travancore better by adding crucial sites where pepper could grow. This got away of the intermediaries who had been working directly with Europeans. The king now knew how to choose, store, and sell pepper. Marthanda Varma didn't flood the market with pepper; instead, he kept prices high by making it hard for people to send it to other countries. The Dutch had problems striking deals, and their business strategies didn't work out because they were skilled at keeping costs down. European markets didn't have enough pepper, which helped Travancore achieve what it wanted in talks.

The Dutch assumed that Travancore would maintain its word to minor kings and queens who had to form treaties when they were in danger. Marthanda Varma didn't like this idea because he thought it was unfair to make bargains like this. The Dutch economic empire in Kerala didn't work like way. The Dutch suggested they would use violence if the talks didn't go well. Marthanda Varma sold pepper and made enough money to employ a professional army. This meant that he didn't require as much aid from the soldiers from Europe. The Dutch lost the battle of Colachel in 1741. This made Europe's moral and economic might weaker. Many people think that the Battle of Colachel was the first battle of its kind in history. People that think this way say that this was the only thing that could happen after a long time of fighting the economy. Without pepper, Dutch forts and ships couldn't stay open. Things became worse after the setback in Colachel. Marthanda Varma didn't stop Travancore from trading with other countries. He let more people talk to each other instead. He permitted traders from England and the area trade with each other, but only if they followed some regulations. This stopped one business from getting too big and made sure that money kept trickling in.

One of the most important things that came out of pepper diplomacy was the creation of a military state that could protect itself. Marthanda Varma was different from other kings and queens because he didn't tax the land or engage soldiers for short periods of time. Instead, he used pepper money to pay for a permanent army. The state paid this army directly, educated them how to fight like Europeans, and gave them modern weapons. When feudalism changed to paid military duty, the rich lost their power and soldiers were more loyal to the king. They could buy guns, erect forts, and pay their workers on time with the money they made from pepper. To keep both rebels from within and invaders from outside out, vital locations near ports and where pepper is grown were built stronger. The army didn't merely fight; it also supported the economy.

If you wanted to employ pepper diplomacy, you had to come up with new techniques to get things done. People who worked in royal warehouses verified the pepper before it was sent out to make sure it was good and that there was plenty of it. These processes made it tougher to smuggle products in and made sure that taxes were paid on time. The first stages in changing from family control to government rule were to set up tax offices, keep records, and make sure that everyone obeyed the same regulations. People didn't think of pepper as a common present anymore. They thought marijuana was a good that could be taxed and assisted the state's economy instead.

Marthanda Varma did the Thrippadidanam in 1750. This made Padmanabha Swamy the god's servant and awarded him the kingdom. Many people have thought about this event in terms of religion, but it also has a major effect on politics and the economy. Marthanda Varma believed

it was his divine obligation to manage the economy, asserting the necessity of preserving sovereignty. People believed that the god, not the king, owned the money from the pepper. People were less likely to criticise the government because they considered that monopolies were good for society and that making the economy more centralised was fair. People started to think that the illegal pepper trade was terrible for both religion and the economy. People think differently now, so it's tougher to recognise the difference between political power and religious responsibility. This is why Travancore's moral economy includes utilising diplomacy to get pepper. Farming made the Mughal Empire a lot of money. It didn't do a lot of business with other countries. Marthanda Varma was in charge of Travancore, which leveraged its connections to markets in other countries to make itself more independent. This disparity illustrates that people in different parts of India did commerce in different ways during the early modern period.

Marthanda Varma was correct in asserting that the rulers of Mysore, such as Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, would primarily govern the region through trade. Mysore, like Travancore, used sandalwood and spices to dominate trade and fight against European power. Travancore was one of the first places in South India to worry about economic nationalism. The Dutch slowly stopped getting involved in politics in Travancore after numerous failed attempts to force monopoly contracts. The state set the rules, yet business continued on as usual. This shifted the balance of power a lot between Indian leaders and European companies.

Findings

The economy of Travancore was centred on diplomacy with pepper, and it finally became known as one of India's most stable and well-run royal realms. The centralised tax system, trained army, and controlled trade network that were passed down from one monarch or queen to the next lasted until the 1800s. Some historians of the colonial period said that Marthanda Varma was a local tyrant who always won fights because he was lucky, especially at Colachel. Recent academic discourse challenges this viewpoint, emphasising indigenous agency, economic rationalism, and strategic diplomacy. Historians of the Indian Ocean assert that non-European groups were not solely victims of European imperialism; they also significantly contributed to the progression of early modern globalisation. This study on pepper diplomacy supports that viewpoint.

Conclusion

Pepper diplomacy by Marthanda Varma is a significant element of India's history as a country. He turned pepper from a tool that foreign firms used to take advantage of into symbol of independence. This means that taking care of the economy might be a good way to get along with other countries. His work ended monopolies across Europe. This made trade a moral and political aspect of the monarchy, and it gave the government and the military more money. Historians should re-examine the interplay of trade and power in early modern India, particularly given Travancore's prosperity under Marthanda Varma. Not only was pepper diplomacy a method to make money, but it was also a tool for native people to stay free throughout European conquest, display their might, and fight.

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