



THE HISTORY OF THE PERUMPADAPPU SWAROOPAM - THE INTERNAL DISSENSIONS WITHIN THE ROYAL FAMILY IN THE COCHIN STATE AND THE EARLY COLONIAL INTERVENTIONS, A SAGA OF THE 16TH AND THE 17TH CENTURIES

Dr..Hema K R

Associate Professor

Department of History

St.Peter's College Kolenchery

Ernakulum, Kerala, India

Abstract: The *Perumpadappuswaroopam* is the traditional name of the Cochin royal family. It is commonly believed that the family derived its name from the village of Perumpadappu in Vanneri, located in North Kerala. Due to pressure from the Zamorins of Calicut, they relocated their headquarters first to Mahodayapuram and later to Cochin. This paper discusses some of the major political developments in the state that hindered its progress. Since the Periyar River flooded in CE 1341, the port at Cranganore lost its significance, and a new natural port emerged in Cochin. However, the state could not take advantage of the situation for its benefit. This study focuses on the issues that rendered the state of Cochin weak and vulnerable. An in-depth discussion addresses several key internal and external problems faced by the state such as the continuous invasion of the state by the Zamorins of Calicut, the internal strife within the royal family which made the entire political institution unstable and shaky and the entry of the Europeans powers such as the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, a brief sketch is developed on the intervention of these European powers in the internal affairs of the state of Cochin. Thus, the varied aspects of the history of Cochin from the 16th to the 17th century have been analysed with the help of literary sources and archival documents.

Key Words: *Perumpadappu Swaroopam, Zamorins, Swarupis, Madampis, Gangadhara Thiru Koil Adhikarikal, Cheraman Perumal, Mahodayapuram*

Introduction

The Cochin Royal family was traditionally known as the *Perumpadappu Swaroopam*. The state was also known as *Bahuvyapita*, *Mada Rajyam*, *Gosree Rajyam* and *Kuru Swaroopam*. The rulers of Cochin also held glorious titles such as *Madabhupathy* and *Gangadhara Thiru Koil Adhikarikal*. The term *Swaroopam* indicates the kingdom of an independent ruler. There is no universally accepted opinion regarding the origin of the state. Traditional literary sources that discuss the genesis of the state are *Keralolppathy*, *Kerala Mahathmyam*, and *Perumpadappu Grandhavari*. However, historians have denounced the historical validity of these texts. The *Sivavilasom*, composed by Damodara Chakyar in the late 14th century, references the *Perumpadappu Swaroopam* and identifies the ruler of this family as *Kerala Chakravarthy*. It is generally believed by scholars that, in its earlier period, the state encompassed the regions of Kochi, Trissur, Malappuram and Palakkad. However, gradually they lost their control over these regions. Although they were politically insignificant, they traditionally held their former prominence due to their maternal link with the Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram and their control over the important temples of Kerala as *Koil Adhikarikal*. Roughly, the geographical boundaries of the State had the Malabar province in its north and the northeast, the Arabian Sea

in the west, and the state of Travancore in the south. The history of the Cochin state reflects its rich and thriving trade and commerce.

The Early History of the *Perumppadappu Swaroopam*

The early history of the Cochin royal family is traceable to the period of the Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram, believed to have reigned over Kerala from around the 9th century to the 12th century. It is also believed that the first ruler of the *Perumppadappu Swaroopam* was the son of the sister of the last Perumal ruler, Cheraman Perumal. The sister of Cheraman Perumal was married to a *Namboothiri* in the Perumppadappu, and after the death of the *Namboothiri*, his lineage became extinct. This led to the merging of the property of the Perumppadappu *Namboothiri* with the Cochin royal family, and thereafter the royal family came to be known as the *Perumppadappu Swaroopam*.

Another version of the origin of the title suggests that the earliest headquarters of the royal family was in the village of Perumppadappu, located in the Ponnani taluk. The Perumppadappu Mooppil had his headquarters at the Pazhayannur and later in the Perumppadappu village in Vanneri of Ponnani taluk. The coronation ceremony of the Cochin rulers took place here until the 17th century.

Thus, from the 12th to the 13th century, the Cochin royal family was located at the Chitrakootam palace in the Perumppadappu village at Vanneri. The threat from Zamorins of Calicut with the latter's aggression to the Valluvanad in the latter part of the 13th century compelled the Cochin royal family to shift their headquarters to Mahodayapuram. Mahodayapuram remained their centre of administration and power until the 15th century. In CE 1405 they shifted to Cochin.

There were compelling political and economic reasons for the Cochin rulers to shift their headquarters to Mahodayapuram. First of all, the continuous threat from Zamorin forced them to move southward to a safer location. Besides, Mahodayapuram was well known as a prosperous trade centre and was the headquarters of earlier Perumal rulers. These were the factors which made Cochin rulers to move to Mahodayapuram.

But, as mentioned earlier, Cochin rulers could continue here only until the beginning of the 15th century. The historical flood in the Periyar River in CE 1341 caused heavy havoc to the famous Cranganore port. The floodwaters filled the ancient Cranganore port with silt, rendering it useless. But the same flood led to the emergence of the renowned port in Cochin. Thus, gradually, Cranganore lost its economic significance, and thereafter Cochin emerged as a great centre of trade and commerce. This was one of the economic reasons which made the monarchs of Perumppadappu Swaroopam shift their headquarters to Cochin. The troubles faced by the Cochin rulers from the Zamorins led them to seek a safer location, resulting in their settlements in Cochin. Here, the cities of Njarakkal, Udayamperoor, Palluruthy, Vellarappilly, and Trippunithura were made as their headquarters.

By the year 1500 CE, the kingdom of Cochin encompassed an area of 10,360 square kilometres. In CE 1550, Duarte Barbosa noticed that Cochin was only a small province and its ruler was not a king in the real sense of the word. Besides, they were always under the threat of the Zamorins of Calicut. K.M. Panikkar in the *History of Kerala* rightly observes that the Cochin ruler's claim to complete autonomy in earlier times had entirely disappeared by the end of the 13th century. As has been pointed out by the historian, the Zamorin was the lord and the master over the Cochin state. Another pitiable condition was that even in the domains that immediately surrounded the Cochin, the power was shared between the Raja and different Nair barons. Thus, from the overall analysis, it is very clear that the Cochin state by the early 15th century existed merely as a nominal entity, but it had a rich heritage due to its close connection with the early Perumals of Mahodayapuram, a connection which was recognized and accepted by the people in general and other *Naduvazhis* of Kerala in particular.

N.M. Namboothiri made another observation regarding the status of Cochin in his work, *Kerala Samskaram: Akavum Puravum*. The subservient political status of the Cochin State continued until the European arrival when the Portuguese reached the shores of Cochin by CE 1500. Replacing the port of Quilon, Cochin port became a flourishing centre of the pepper trade during this time.

General Political Trends in Kerala

There were numerous major and minor kingdoms in Kerala during the arrival of the Portuguese. A place blessed with all the bounties of nature, but politically, chaos and confusion led to its instability. There was incessant warfare between neighbouring principalities, leading to the emergence of a military culture. This ultimately led to the general decadence in every aspect of politics, society, culture and economy.

K.M. Panikkar, in his book *Malabar and the Portuguese*, also refers to some minor Rajas of Kerala. Those were the Rajas of Tanur, Cranganore, Cochin, Mangat, Edappalli, Vadakkumkur, Procaud, Kayamkulam and Quilon. The political conditions that prevailed here were highly chaotic as the effective power in these states was handled by local chieftains such as *Kaimls*, *Karthas* who were Nair feudal chieftains who enjoyed their traditional prerogatives and maintained their separate armies and often displayed their allegiance to more than one sovereign. In the context of the Cochin state, the presence of Edappalli Raja within the kingdom proved highly dangerous as the Edappalli Raja always sided with the Zamorin during the latter's invasions of Cochin. Barbosa, who visited the state during this time openly reports that the Cochin ruler was powerless comparing the Zamorins of Calicut.

The *Perumpadappu Swaroopam* and the Internal Dissensions Leading to the Political Instability

One major problem faced by the *Swaroopam* was the lack of fixed rules and regulations concerning succession to the throne. On several occasions, it led to political crises and war between the members of the royal family resulting in internal instability, lawlessness and disorder. Moreover, the feudal nobility ruled their provinces as independent rulers with little respect for the Cochin ruler and his traditional status.

The Swaroopam was divided into five *thavazhis* (branches) such as the *Moothathavazhi*, the *Elayathavazhi*, the *Muringoorthavazhi*, the *Palluruthithavazhi* and the *Chazhiyurthavazhi*.

The eldest male member had the right to succeed to the throne, but later, the *Elayathavazhi* became more prominent and began to assert their claim to the throne. The eldest male was honoured with title *Perumpadappu Mooppinnu*. But later there began to emerge great discord regarding the right for rulership.

As K.M. Panikkar observes, the Cochin state had a peculiar custom of forcing the elder member of the royal family to retire, on the pretext of religious meditation. This led to a division within the court and there emerged two factions: one taking orders from the abdicated ruler and the other from the reigning sovereign. The situation brought nothing beneficial to the state, encouraging interference from the ruler of Calicut and later, European powers.

Cabral, the Portuguese commander also noted this weak tradition of the state regarding the succession to the throne. His report depicts the brittle nature of the institution that reigned over the state of Cochin when he visited during the early part of the 16th century. As per the custom of the state, the elder Cochin ruler would retire to any temple as an ascetic. When the next ruler ascended the throne, he required consent from the Zamorin.

C. Achyutha Menon in his Cochin State Manual mentions that Zamorin took advantage of these dissensions to extend and consolidate his power and dominion. In several of his wars against the Cochin rulers, the members from one or more of these branches supported him against the ruling head of their own family. Regarding this practice he wrote, that if the ruling chief grew old or feeble, he would retire as a religious recluse, entrusting the administration to the rightful heir or the next eldest male member of his branch of the family. In the latter case the regent, who was bound on the death of the retired chief, had to not only make way for the rightful heir but also to retire from the world and become a religious recluse. This was to prevent him from using power against the succeeding ruler as he might otherwise be tempted to use the power and prestige that he had gained when he was acting as the *de facto* sovereign of the state.

The monarchical form of government is dependent on the personality of the ruler. However, in the state of Cochin as there was not any clear pattern to be followed in the question of succession led to chaos and confusion which ultimately led to the weakening of the state, letting outside powers intervene in the internal affairs of the state of Cochin. R.S Whiteway in *The Rise of the Portuguese Power in India 1497-1550* also referred to this complex system. This chaotic situation enabled the Zamorin and the Europeans to achieve their respective ambitions of controlling the state and resources of a wealthy place like Cochin.

The practice of adoption from other royal families also created a lot of issues regarding the succession to the throne. *Perumpadappu Grandhavari* gives details about this complication. As the *Elayathavazhi* is the *Perumpadappu Swarropam*, if no male member was to succeed to the throne the adoption was made from the other four *Thavazhis*. During the reign of Godha Varma of *Elayathavazhi* (1637-1645), when the question of extinction emerged, he adopted from the *Moothathavazhi*, the *Palluruthithavazhi* and the *Chazhiyurthavazhi*. On the question of succession, the *Moothathavazhi* and *Palluruthithavazhi* quarrelled with each other.

The European Arrival and their Interventions

During that period, there was a significant necessity for a robust government to effectively manage the population and allocate resources. But the administration in Cochin was as C. Achyutha Menon has noted. "government based more or less upon the principles resembling those of feudal system of Europe during the Middle Ages." The power of the king was loudly challenged by the local power centres such as *swarupis* and *Madampis*.

The prevalence of weak and unstable government in Cochin attracted the attention of European powers. They reached the shores of Kerala with the sole purpose of trade, but gradually began to intervene in the internal affairs of different kingdoms. The state of Cochin became so fragile that there was an occasion when one of its rulers had to accept his crown from foreign hands.

The Portuguese were the first group of Europeans to reach the shores of Cochin. They were followed by the others such as the Dutch and the English. As E.M.S Namboothirippad has observed, it was the Cochin ruler who made all provisions for the establishment for the Portuguese supremacy with the construction of forts and the maintenance of the army.

These European powers competed with each other and also with the native people to establish their supremacy over the people and the resources of the state. The European powers, by this time, were far more advanced than the people of the rest of the world in matters of modern science, technology, advanced military techniques and above all had stable governments.

The European traders were eager to exploit the natural resources and monopolize the pepper trade of Cochin. They were also eager to impose their culture upon the local population. They enforced a policy of religious persecution.

As the earliest European country to trade with the East, the Portuguese followed the doctrine of mercantilism, they strongly believed that the colonies were to be exploited for the benefit of their mother country. They regulated the trade to the extent that the metropolitan should enjoy an excess of exports over imports. As per this theory, the national wealth was to be measured by the amount of bullion in the state treasury. So, the precious metals must be accumulated at any cost.

Following the Portuguese, the other European powers also continued with the exploitative trade policy, aggressive religious policy and suppressive political domination of the native population.

Thus, during the 17th century, 58 Portuguese families were residing in Cochin. It has been reported that there were more than 1,065 residents in the last decade of the 17th century in Cochin. Among the residents, there were about 200 white Portuguese, 500 *casados* (mixed race), 200 converted Indians, and approximately 65 officials living in Cochin state. This indicates the thriving European trade.

Conclusion

The study centres around the history of the state of Cochin between the 16th and the 17th centuries. The instability in politics caused widespread suffering and tumult. It has been observed in the study that it is internal strife within the royal family over the issue of the succession to the throne was one of the grievous problems affecting the political institutions in the state. This weakness led to the emergence of powerful *swarupis* and *madampis*, dominating even the monarch, and making the entire system very explosive. Although the state was rich in natural resources, the lack of strong institutions to protect the lives and property of the people made their lives intolerable. This aided the European powers, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English to enter the scene as traders and gradually began to play the role of the kingmakers of the state and finally became the colonial masters powerful enough to determine the destiny of the state.

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