

## BOOK REVIEW

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**M.P Mujeebu Rehiman, ‘Malabar in Transition: State, Society and Economy in Malabar 1751-1810’, New Delhi: Gyan Books, pp.1+192, Rs.720.**

The transitional phase of eighteenth century is a rather un-explored area in the historiography of Kerala. Though the debates have been very lively with regard to the eighteenth century India, it has not been seriously addressed by the historians of Kerala, with exceptions of a very few names. The period is significant as it marks the clear shift from the pre-colonial state, social structure, economy and relations of production and indigenous resistance in the context of colonization process. Interestingly, the scholars are very much comfortable to follow the already established ‘truths’ of colonial writers or the so called nationalist historians rather than asking new questions and finding fresh answers. In such a way, M.P.Mujeebu Rehiman’s recently published book titled, *Malabar in Transition: State, Society and Economy in Malabar 1751-1810*, becomes a significant contribution to the history of eighteenth century Kerala. In this exhaustive work, Rehiman critically examines existing perspectives and different stances on the eighteenth century Malabar region of Kerala and bring forth a rich account on the society and economy of Malabar with a specific focus on the British interventions and changing land relations. The book is divided into five chapters apart from introduction and conclusion, along with a list of Maps including that of Malabar in eighteenth century and storm centres of Pazhassi insurrections. The first chapter, which is the background chapter, actually surveys the pre-colonial social and economic structure of Kerala. The author provides a detailed account of how the land became the central force of the process of production which determined the relations of the production in society. He is successful in offering interesting insights on the role of caste, class and other regional power relations involved in the economic process in the pre-colonial society. Further, the chapter also sheds light into the emergent trade relations of the region with other parts of the world.

The second chapter, ‘Battle for ‘Pepper State’: Mysore State’s Interventions and Transformation of Society’, starts with a critical analysis of

the nationalist historiography (as a more convenient term for indigenous historians) and their assumptions on the invasion of Mysore state during the eighteenth century. By critiquing the existing strands, Rehiman explores interesting sources and compels the readers to rethink the nationalist position on the invasion of Mysore state in the eighteenth century. He argues that the nationalist writers influenced by the colonial historiography reiterated the ‘religious bigotry’ image of the Mysore rulers and popularized the idea that Malabar in the eighteenth century witnessed massive religious persecution by Mysore rulers. The author contests these conventional assumptions as baseless and devoid of any critical analysis on the political and economic aspects of the Malabar during that period. For example, by referring a Brahmin chronicle of eighteenth century named ‘Vellayute Charitham’, he asserts, “of course, Hydar Ali was an ambitious ruler whose prime motive behind the invasion of Malabar was purely economic”(p:56). This prompts us to understand how historians have misinterpreted the pre-colonial Malabar history and followed a communalized narrative. This chapter also explicates on the political and social context of Malabar; the struggle of the Mysoreans to claim their monopoly over the spice trade; the influential role of Muslim traders; and the resistance of Muslim traders and British company officials to the monopoly and establishment of Tipu Sultan and his attempt to establish a capital city for Malabar region. He also reminds us that the Mappila rebel leaders such as Gurukkals of Manjeri and Hydros Kutty of Chavakkad and Mappila merchants were also the staunchest enemies of Hydar and Tipu Sultan. The author characterizes eighteenth-century Malabar state as a ‘pepper state’. In his view, the whole political activities which later termed to be ‘pepper politics’ involved by influential Mappila traders, Rajas and the Nairs of Malabar, and the political invasion in the Malabar state during the eighteenth century was mainly for the monopoly of this pepper state.

In the third chapter, “The British Power in Malabar: Genesis of Transition to a Colonial Structure”, the author carefully examines the first phase of the establishment of the colonial state in Malabar by critically examining the existing theories of ‘conquest’ and ‘intrusion’ of the British annexation of the Malabar. While scholars such as Pamela Nightingale, K.K.N.Kurup, N. Rajendran, Margret and others argue that the British conquered Malabar during the year of 1792, Rehiman rejects this view and shows that Malabar was neither conquered nor consolidated by the British in the year 1792, and the British could only make some arrangements for the fulfillment of the spice trade. The author demonstrates that the British failed to claim the legitimate authority over Malabar with the

Srirangapatanam treaty in the year of 1792 that forced British to imitate the *Jamabandy System* of the Mysore state instead of introducing their revenue policy. The author notes factors such as the immaturity of the company policies often characterized as ‘policy of mild language’, and nullification of once declared pepper monopoly in Malabar as lack of confidence of British offices in claiming their monopoly over the Malabar. He also points out how the British used the new establishment of the courts of justice to legitimize their new class of collaborators, a new landed aristocracy called *Janmis* in Malabar. The author also states that “the British were puzzled as they failed to tackle with the claims of Tipu over Waynad and intermittent challenges posed by Pazhassi raja and other rebels”.(p:103). This chapter also provides a detailed description of East India Company during this period including details about the appointment and dismissals of their officials, their interests, dismissal of second Malabar commission and so on. All these historical factors are used to substantiate that the British failed to establish their sovereign power in Malabar in the year 1792.

The fourth chapter entitled, “Land Rights and Relations in Malabar: Problematizing British Perceptions” analyses the land ownership rights and land tenure reforms introduced by British in Malabar and carefully observe the ideological influences and various theoretical and knowledge foundations that influenced and provoked the British to frame their policies in various parts of India. The author highlights that the British revenue legislation during the nineteenth century is moulded by the ideas such as utilitarianism, liberalism and the Doctrine of Rent by Malthus, James Mill and Ricardo. The ideological debates on the property rights in Europe revolved around the writings of Physiocrats, Hobbs, Locke and mercantilists too have a heavy influence on British policies. A detailed account of the various land settlements such as *Zamindari*, *Mahalwari*, and *Ryotwari* systems established by the British in India deserves a special mention. The author demonstrates the exploitative nature of the British land settlements with a new concept of ownership of land and land relation as these were assured by the introduction of a strong judiciary of British origin. The author observes “Declaration of the right of property to *Zamindar* was a gesture towards the capitalization of land relations.”(p:130). The work shows how the British had transformed land to a commodity with the help of their administrative class under the protection of the colonial legal system. Further, it shows the existence of land tax in the form of land rent which was a share of rent divided between the landlord and state in pre-modern Malabar. This point is highlighted to prove that the colonial interpretation of the absence of the tax system in Malabar during the

pre-colonial Kerala is a misguided one.

The final chapter of this book, “Anti-colonial Resistance and Consolidation of British Power” critically scrutinizes the nature of the protests against the British state led by the indigenous chiefs such as Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja and Mappila Chiefs of South Malabar such as Athan Gurukkal, Unnimootha Moopan, Chemban Pokker and Hydros Kutty during the eighteenth century. To understand these revolts and their leaders, the author first offers an account on the available perspectives and theories in the prevalent literature. Colonial historians have studied these revolts and leaders with the utmost contempt. For example, the colonial records referred the Mappila leaders as bandits and robbers, colonial commission reports mention them as ‘jungle Mappilas’ and ‘robbing Mappilas’. While the colonial commissions epitomized Pazhassi Raja as the most intractable and unreasonable of the rajas, the indigenous authors portray him as the ‘Hindu peasant nationalist’ (K.K.N. Kurup) and his revolt as the first war of Independence. The author challenges both of these positions, and argues that there were no traces of the idea of nationalism during that period and how could then be one referred to ‘a nationalist’.

The author reminds us of the historical fact that Pazhassi Raja initially joined with the British to fight against Tipu Sultan with an expectation that he would be reinstated as the ruler of Kottayam with the help of British. The author also refutes the theory of ‘restorative revolts’ established by Kathleen Gough as he states “the revolt led by Pazhassi and others were not aimed at restoring the previous system as such; instead they were fighting for maintaining their position under the British revenue regime”. (p:149). He also warned against the communal theory as it wrongly propounds the idea that only Hindus supported the Pazhassi’s revolt, but the Mappilas did not act in favour of such anti-British uprisings. The work brings evidence of the history of Mappila chiefs and Mappila merchants who have extended their support to Pazhassi Raja in terms of soldiers, arms, money and food. On the other hand, Revisionist historians argue that ordinary people were the collaborators of the British colonial state and never fought against the colonial power. However, this theory is challenged as the author notes that there were uprisings in almost every locality of Malabar and people irrespective of caste, class and religion participated in it. For him, the British state in its initial phase was a ‘vulnerable state’.

To be precise, this book is marked by scrupulous accuracy and comprehensive knowledge. The monograph is a very relevant contribution to the study eighteenth-century Kerala, remarkably significant as it is the first work which deals with the transition process of Malabar during the period. By using original sources

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and following a critical analytical lens, the author demands the readers, especially the young historians, to rethink the existing understanding about the colonial history of Malabar. The work is crafted with a critical Marxist framework which enables the readers to understand the local dynamics of colonial time in Malabar from a broader political economy perspective. Considering the historiographical significance of the themes deliberated, the present work is a potentially powerful to flare-up a debate on the transition process of eighteenth century Malabar, the northern part of Kerala. #