

Slavery in Colonial Malabar: A Socio- Historical Study

Dr Saritha KS

Assistant Professor, Department of History, SSV College, Valayanchirangara, Perumbavoor,
Ernakulam

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700929>

Received: 22 July 2026; Accepted: 31 July 2026; Published: 17 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to understand slavery in erstwhile Malabar, which was a part of former Madras Presidency. Madras Presidency was one of the earliest Presidencies formed by the British along with Bombay and Calcutta. Malabar district was annexed to Madras Presidency in 1800. As an interface between Europe and India, Malabar – henceforth to be understood in its strict sense, i.e. the northern part of today's Kerala – had to go through major transformations during the transitional period from pre-colonial to colonial rule. In the Indian context, the region of Malabar exhibits particularities in its socio-political, social and economic structure. The society was highly stratified on the basis of caste system. All the social evils like untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability existed in the society. Along with this, oppressive taxes, forced labour and slavery was part of the social structure. Slavery, one of the most inhuman institutions of human history, appeared in different forms and continued for several centuries among many nations. Malabar was not an exemption to this. The characteristic features of Malabar society permitted the growth of slavery. This study will address the issue of slavery in Malabar district in then Madras Presidency.

Keywords: Slavery, Caste system, Social evils, Madras Presidency, Malabar, Jenmi

Spices that were native to India and which are still harvested along the coast of Malabar have, to great extent, created the 'myth of India'. Since ancient times, merchants from across the globe had been drawn to pepper, 'black gold'. During the 'age of discovery' Vasco da Gama arrived near the town of Kozhikode which resulted in change in the previous relations in the Indian ocean and on the coast of Malabar.

The trade that had been maintained on a personal level between individual merchants up until this point, became institutionalized and geared towards long-standing trade relations. The Europeans – particularly the Portuguese, The Dutch, The French and the British – were the driving forces behind this development.¹ Besides attempting to secure trade monopolies, they also increasingly sought to gain control over goods production and political make-up of Malabar. It is in this way that the spice trade presents Malabar as an important gateway, rich in tradition, between India and Europe. Yet despite Malabar's prominent role in the history of India, relatively little academic study has been undertaken on this region.

As an interface between Europe and India, Malabar – henceforth to be understood in its strict sense, i.e. the northern part of today's Kerala – had to go through major transformations during the transitional period from pre-colonial to colonial rule. In the Indian context, the region of Malabar exhibits particularities in its socio-political, social and economic structure.² The society was highly stratified on the basis of caste system. All the social evils like untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability existed in the society. Along with this, oppressive taxes, forced labour and slavery was part of the social structure. This study will address the issue of slavery in Malabar district in then Madras Presidency.

Malabar had to go through many invasions from abroad. The first such invasions to be addressed are those of the rulers of Mysore, Hyder Ali (1728-82), and Tipu Sultan (1750-99), who had been making repeated attempts to gain hegemony over Malabar since the mid-eighteenth century.³ The British had been seeking to convert their trading posts, which had been in existence on the Malabar coast since 1684, into permanent territorial rule since the last decade of eighteenth century.⁴ Consequently, fundamental social, economic and political changes occurred in Malabar, which have endured through colonial times and are still perceptible to the present day.

Structural changes occurred in Malabar society due to colonial administration in contrast to the princely states of Travancore and Kochi. A close study of the changes brought by colonial administration to the institution of slavery is looked upon.

The British colonial domination of Malabar dates back to the last decades of 18th century.⁵ The district of Malabar was ceded to the English East India Company in 1792 by Tipu Sultan of Mysore according to the Treaty of Srirangapatnam.⁶ The administrative control of the area was under the Bombay Presidency until 1800 and afterwards it was made a part of Madras Presidency.⁷ At its greatest extent, Madras Presidency included much of southern India, including the present-day Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Malabar region of North Kerala, Lakshadweep Islands, the Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh, Brahmapur and Ganjam districts of Orissa and the Tulu Nadu region as well as Bellary district of Karnataka. The presidency had its capital at Madras (now known as Chennai). The district of Malabar consists of 9 taluks, viz., Chirakkal, Kottayam, Kurumbranad, Calicut, Wynad, Ernad, Walluvanad, Ponnani and Palghat with the total area of 5795 sq.miles.⁸

Sir Henry Maine, in his classical work *Ancient Law*, speaks of slavery as being as old as human nature, its institution being, as it were, “part of man’s original sin”. If the discovery and practice of agriculture is regarded as the beginning of the civilization, then it can be averred that slavery and civilization go together. When civilization enters the range of history, slavery is found to be an established practice in all cities, kingdoms and empires.⁹

In common with other parts of the world, slavery prevailed in India, in all its intensity. Saintsbury, cited several ‘authoritative’ works of contemporary Orientalist scholars and colonial officials in order to describe slavery, among other things, as an integral part of the Hindu caste system, as an institutionalized form of treating lower castes as ‘sub-human’. Slavery was furthermore depicted as hereditary, received from one generation to another, as existent in India from time immemorial and as being “beyond imagination deplorable.” Saintsbury finally asserted that “throughout India, Slavery prevails: India is therefore a slave territory.”¹⁰

Slavery, one of the most inhuman institutions of human history, appeared in different forms and continued for several centuries among many nations. Malabar was not an exemption to this. Slavery in Malabar took its rise historically from the conquest of the aboriginal inhabitants by the invaders and settlers from the north. Several strata of population are easily discoverable – the earliest composed of the lowest castes, and perhaps also the hill tribes – next the Dravidians, who now form the mass of the respectable Hindu population – and overall, the Aryan Brahmans, few in number but clever, intelligent, and possessed of great religious and social authority. For thousands of years these lowest castes have continued in a state of servitude and abject poverty, exposed to the caprice or brutality of the owner, and disposable according to his pleasure; too abhorrent, at the same time, on account of caste pollution, to be touched or closely approached by their superiors, or to be admitted to any of the privileges or amenities of religion. Every wealthy man, and even individuals of inferior castes, had a number of bondsmen born in slavery.¹¹

When European mercantilism extended its activities in Malabar Coast, the slaves were widely exported by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French to the west. On account of the lacuna of statistical data of the slave trade with foreign countries, it is not possible to get a clear picture of slave trade by the foreigners. However a few Dutch records reveal that an export duty had been realized by the Dutch on slave trade from their port at Cochin.¹²

Regarding the slave trade in Malabar in the 18th century native documents are very rare. However the factory records of Tellicherry left by the English bear a good testimony of slavery in Malabar.¹³ These documents do not reveal the salient features of the contemporary slavery, but only the existence of that great social evil. Small children were stolen and sold at different places.¹⁴ “One of the horrors of Malabar”, Day recorded, “which the British first endeavored to put an end to, was the kidnapping of children by gangs of Moplahs, more especially to the French at Mahe and the Dutch at Cochin”.¹⁵

The characteristic features of Malabar society permitted the growth of slavery. The varna system which was prevailed in all other Indian village societies had never been in existence in Kerala in the same pattern.¹⁶ Kerala had a distinct ‘caste’ formation from the rest of India. Instead of the four fold stratification, the absence of vaisyas

and kshatriyas was notable in the social structure of Kerala¹⁷. However, the brahmanas, who wanted to establish their ritual status and dominance, were willing to provide a higher social status to the rulers and their relatives. Accordingly the ruling families were elevated and accepted as kshatriyas and their militia, nayars as sudras.¹⁸ Though the nayars had a lower position in the caste hierarchy, they enjoyed a higher position as the militia of the rajas and due to their special relationship with the namboothiris through sambandham.¹⁹

The namboothiris remained as the socio- spiritual aristocracy of Malabar, and, as the traditional landlords, they were held in great reverence.²⁰ They included landed aristocrats, priests, and scholars. Below the Brahmins there were ‘foreign’ Brahmins who came from Tamilnadu and Karnataka, called pattars. But they had only an inferior status for they were not landlords.²¹

The Nayars stood next in hierarchy to all varieties of Brahmins.²² They consisted of several ‘sub-castes’ and some of the sub-castes did not enter into matrimonial relations with the upper section within the Nair group. They were non cultivating tenants,²³ but gradually the lower among them resorted to cultivation.

Izhavas or tiyas was another major caste group in Malabar.²⁴ But they were outside the four fold caste system and had a lower position in the social hierarchy. Agriculture,²⁵ toddy tapping and animal husbandry were the main occupations.²⁶ They were regarded as a polluting caste for the Brahmins and they had to keep a distance of at least forty eight feet from a Brahmin.²⁷

In the lower strata of the society were the cherummar, pulayas, parayas and artisans groups like the kammalar. The cherummar, pulayas and parayas were hereditary slaves attached to the soil.²⁸ Thackeray stated “they are generally but not always sold with the land. A pair of slaves may be worth four pairs of buffaloes. They are also let out and pledged. They get an allowance of rice and cloth”.²⁹ They were the people who were directly involved in the agricultural operations but stood in the periphery of the Brahmin dominated agrarian society.

Slave labour was an integral part of the production system in Malabar. The agrarian system in this region was anchored on attached agrarian slaves. Donation of lands along with hereditary slave’s parayas and pulayas to the temple and Brahmins was a common practice in pre- kulasekhara and kulasekhara periods.³⁰ Slave labour continued as the vital component of the process of production in the medieval and modern periods.

The janmis and nayars utilized the services of cherummar –slaves- for agricultural operations.³¹ They even resorted to sale of cherummar for the payment of arrears of revenue.³² Pulayas and cherummar were brought to nearby towns from the villages and sold to the highest bidder to fulfill their revenue obligations.³³

There are three modes of transferring the usufruct of slaves.³⁴ The first is by ‘jennum’ or sale, where the full value of the slave is given, and the property is entirely transferred to a new master. A young man with his wife will sell for from 250 to 300 fanams.³⁵ The second manner of transferring the labour of slaves is by ‘canum’ or mortgage. The proprietor received a loan of money, generally two thirds of the value of slaves; he also received annually a small quantity of rice, to show that his property in slaves still exists; and he may reassume this property whenever he pleases to repay the money borrowed, for which in the mean while he pays no interest. In case of any of the slaves dying, he was held bound to supply another of equal value. The lender maintained the slaves, and had their labour for the interest of his money, and for their support. The third manner of employing slaves was by letting them for ‘patom’, or rent. In this case, for a certain annual sum, the master gave them to another man; and the borrower commands their labour, and provides them with their maintenance. The annual hire was 8 fannams for a man, and half as much for a women. These two tenures were utterly abominable: for the person who exacted the labour, and furnishes the subsistence of the slave, was directly interested to increase the former and the diminish latter as much as possible.³⁶ The slaves were severely treated. “There is no race or people in India in a condition so utterly wretched as the slaves of Malabar and Wayanad”, Sullivan reported in 1841.³⁷ According to the census of 1838 there were 1,44,371 slaves in Malabar. The slave population increased by birth, purchase and sale. The children born to the slaves were also slaves destined to lead the same miserable life of their parents.³⁸

The number of persons originally reduced to a state of slavery was increased by the sale of children in time of famine and distress. Other additions had been made from time to time by petty princes carrying away captives

in their wars, by the fraud or violence of kidnappers, as a judgment on criminals, as a punishment on females of the higher classes who had fallen, and cast out to associate with the lowest of the population.³⁹

When Malabar was ceded to the English in 1792, the immediate arrangement of the territory was carried out by the joint commissioners. They decided to check the centuries old infamous practice of traffic of slaves and regulations were formulated to restrict this custom. It was one of the progressive administrative steps taken by the English in Malabar. According to the wishes of the commissioners the chief of Tellicherry issued a proclamation prohibiting the private trade in pepper and traffic in slaves.⁴⁰ In 1793, the English granted the freedom of trade in all articles except arms and slaves.⁴¹ In spite of all these restrictions, private trade in slaves continued in Malabar.

During the 19th century the impact of utilitarianism upon the colonial British government in India was considerable force which compelled the company's government to take drastic measures to abolish slavery along with so many other social evils in Malabar. The government of India thereupon passed Act V of 1843.⁴² It abolished slavery.

On the passing of the Act, its provisions were widely published throughout Malabar by Mr. Conolly, the collector, and he explained to cherummar that it was their interest as well as their duty to remain with their masters if treated kindly.⁴³

Though the slavery was abolished by the act of 1843, agrestic slavery continued in Malabar. Though a cherumman can consequently sell his labour wherever he chose, he still continued in the same condition as before, cultivating the lands of his janmi and receiving from him, such returns as he was pleased to give.⁴⁴ In 1852 and again in 1855 the fact that traffic in slaves still continued was brought to the notice of the government, but on full consideration no further measures for the emancipation of the cherummar were deemed to be necessary.⁴⁵

Traffic in slaves continued but the transactions were kept secret for fear of the penalties provided in the IPC which came into effect in 1862.⁴⁶ However the act did not bring any considerable change in Malabar. Generally the slaves remained with their former masters. The census report of 1871 says, "in Malabar Slavery no longer exists in the eye of the law, but practically the inferior tribes of Malabar are in the bondage of their masters".⁴⁷

For the case of slavery in colonial India, Gyan Prakash argues in his book *Bonded Histories* that the British – by abolishing slavery in 1843 – presented themselves as a force of reason and progress, when in reality they refashioned slavery as debt-bondage. Yet far from being removed, slavery was reconstituted as voluntarily entered bondage, with the agrarian relations severely altered and the definitions and terms of slavery made suitable to market needs and court proceedings.⁴⁸

Tanika Sarkar sees that the Abolition Act of 1843 did not signify "a remarkable departure in labour relations" and points on the contrary to the fact that the economic changes within colonialism "led to the development of a huge sector of agricultural proletariat, very often in bondage."⁴⁹ While acknowledging the fact of slavery being existent in India in pre-colonial times, Sarkar does not diminish the role, which British rule played in reinforcing forced labour.

Here it is important to note the fact that other laws like the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act were already installed in 1837,⁵⁰ while slavery was abolished only in 1843. What can be made of this fact? This would have meant to first establish other means and devices than slavery in order to further ensure the existence and the supply of forced labour. And similarly then Sarkar argues that under the impression of possible negative effects on the group of slave-owners and "their political loyalty and revenue paying capacity"⁵¹ The British policy was to support a particular form of slavery. It was thus a highly selective continuity in favour of particular trends.

Under the aegis of the British government reforms and changes were introduced in the administration bringing it into line with modern concepts of government. Humanitarian measures like – abolition of slavery profoundly altered social relationships in Malabar. It must, however, be mentioned that most of these reforms undertaken

by the British government were not based on purely disinterested motives. In fact they were intended to strengthen the foundations and hold of British power in Kerala. But the positive impact of the reforms should not be overlooked. Reforms necessarily entailed changes in the conditions and outlook of the people, and changes in turn necessarily led to further reform, and so on in a Hegelian strain they went hand in hand. Thus, underneath the political placidity, Kerala was on the whole undergoing a gradual and a steady transformation. It was the awakening of the masses, the lower orders in the Hindu society, against social evils and injustices and evils existing for a long time.

REFERENCES

1. Margret Frenz, *From contact to conquest*, Delhi, 2003, p.1.
2. *ibid.*, p.5.
3. William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, (translated), V.Krishnan, Kozhikode, 1985, pp.267-290.
4. Margret Frenz, *op.cit.*, p.5.
5. S.C.A.Innes, *Malabar and Anjengo*, Madras, 1908, pp.2-71.
6. William Logan, *op.cit.*, p.308.
7. S.Raimon, (ed.), *The History of Freedom movement in Kerala*, Vol.III, Kochi, 2006, p.286.
8. C.A.Innes, *op.cit.*, p.72.
9. L.A.Krishna Iyer, *Social History of Kerala- The Pre-Dravidians*, Madras, 1968, p.57.
10. Stefan Tetzloff, *Legislative Redress Rather Than Progress? From Slavery to Bondage in Colonial India*, June, 2008. p.3.
11. Samuel Mateer, *Native life in Travancore*, Delhi, 1991, p.297.
12. K.K.N.Kurup, *Aspects of Kerala history and culture*, Trivandrum, 1977, p.71.
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*
15. Francis day, *The Land of Perumals*, Madras, 1963, p.183.
16. P.J.Churian, *Essays on the cultural formation of Kerala*, Trivandrum, 1999, pp.7-8.
17. D.R.Gadgil, *Origins of Modern Business Class*, New York, 1959, p.9.
18. Mathew Kurian, *The Caste Class Formations*, New Delhi, 1986, p.9.
19. K.T.Thomas, 'Caste groups, social classes and land ownership in Malabar-A preliminary survey', in Dr. V.kunjali, (ed.), *Kerala society historical perceptions*, Calicut, 2002, p.109.
20. Edgar Thurston & K.Rangachari, *Castes and tribes in southern India*, Vol.V, Madras, 1909, p.152.
21. K.T.Thomas, *op.cit.*, p.110.
22. M.Sahadevan, *Towards social justice and nation making – A study of Sahodaran Ayyappan*, Trichur, 1993, p.5.
23. William Logan, *Malabar*, Vol.1, Trivandrum, 1981, p.670.
24. C.K.Kareem, *Kerala District Gazetteers – Palakkad, Ernakulam*, 1976, p.164.
25. A.Ayyappan, *Social Revolution in a Kerala village*, Bombay, 1965, p.116.
26. C.K.Kareem, *op.cit.*, p.165.
27. K.N.Ganesh, *Keralathinte Innalekal*, Trivandrum, 1990, p.197.
28. K.P.padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, New Delhi, 1984, p.477.
29. William Thackeray, 'A Report on the revenue affairs of Malabar and Canara', dated 7 September 1807, M.17, p.2, cited in K.T.Thomas, *Op.cit.*, p.111.
30. K.T.Thomas, *op.cit.*, p.111.
31. *Proceedings of the Board of Revenue (hereafter PBR)*, Vol.1649, 21 Feb 1839, p.2850, Tamil Nadu Archives (TNA).
32. PBR. Vol.845.B, 3 Jan 1820, p.141. (TNA).
33. Extract from the proceedings of the provincial court in the western division under date 12. nov.1819. in no.26, p.147, cited in K.T.Thomas, *Op.cit.*, p.111.
34. Francis Buchanan, *Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol.II, Delhi, 1988, p.370.
35. *ibid.*
36. *ibid.*, p.371.
37. Sullivan, *Report on the Province of Malabar and Canara*, Calicut, 1916, p.5.

38. K.T.Thomas., op.cit., p.112.
39. Samuel Mateer, op.cit.,p.297.
40. K.K.N.Kurup, op.cit., p. 73.
41. ibid.
42. William Logan, op.cit., p.119.
43. ibid.
44. K.T.Thomas, op.cit., p.112.
45. William Logan, Malabar ...,p.152.
46. ibid.
47. Report of Imperial census of India , Madras, 1872, p.352, cited in K.T.Thomas, op.cit., p.112.
48. Stefan Tetzloff, op.cit., p.4.
49. Tanika Sarkar, 'Bondage in the colonial context'. In: U. Patnaik and M. Dingwaney (ed.), Chains of servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India, Delhi, 1985,p.116.
50. ibid.
51. ibid., p. 117.