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## Wood industry of Calicut- economical and cultural developments

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**Abstract**

Calicut has an important place in Kerala history. This paper intends to make an analytical work on the rise and growth of economical importance of Calicut and mainly focus on the wood industry of the area. Kerala has traditionally been enjoying a high degree of political freedom as it was never ruled by foreigners for a long period before the colonial rule. The rulers of various states were deeply committed to the economic progress of their perspective territories. So Kerala enjoyed traditionally a favorable political climate for industrialization. Timber industry got greater economic importance gradually. The forests of the South Wayanad and Nilambur produced immense quantities of magnificent timber. They reached at Kallai and Beypore and were mainly floated through the Chaliyar River or Beypore River.

**Keywords:** Wood industry, Calicut- economical, cultural developments

**Introduction**

Kozhikode district represents one of the economically advanced areas of the state. Several industries have been flourishing here from early days. These old time industries were mostly run on a small scale in the cottage of artisans themselves. Calicut became famous for wood industries. The Malabar District Gazetteer observes as “the forest that clothe the western ghats from head to foot, and cover a greater part of the Wayanad plateau, besides making Calicut one of the most important timber mart in India, with the support of thousands of carpenters, sawyers and wood cutters and their numerous progeny <sup>[1]</sup>.

Timber industry got greater economic importance gradually. The forests of the South Wayanad and Nilambur produced immense quantities of magnificent timber. The trees after being felled and roughly squared are dragged by the elephants to the nearest road or river to be carried or floated to the depots of the timber merchants on the coast. Road transport required more expensive than floating timbers on the river, because it needed loading and unloading workers. They reached at Kallai and Beypore and were mainly floated through the Chaliyar River or Beypore River. Comparatively low cost river transportation became the backbone of the wood industries of Calicut. The river is navigable for timber logs from June to January. It is very easy that the largest raft can be managed by a single man <sup>[2]</sup>.

A feature of the wood industry in this district is the concentration of the units in and around kallai. Its localization here is pre-eminently beneficial to the industry as water, rail, and road transport facilities are easily available. Kallai became the second largest timber yard in the world map. Writing in 1903, Innes observed: “in the season the river atkallai is a wonderful sight. The water being scarcely visible for the thousands of logs floating on its surface. The logs are left in the water until they are sold; and eventually they are exported by sea’ and rail to Bombay, madras, Kolar and other parts of India <sup>[3]</sup>. This shows the growing demand of timber not only from India, but also from the foreigners during the early medieval period onwards.

Furniture making also sprung up in this district as a corollary to the establishment of saw mills, firstly appeared on the river banks of Kallai. The principal raw materials required for furniture making finished timber is easily available, and that too in abundant quality from the neighbouring saw mills and timber merchants. There is only one large scale factory solely engaged in the making of furniture.

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The standard furniture companies located at Kallai, nearly 500 workers were employed here. Different and attractive pieces of furniture are made and products find ready and responsive market all over in India and south East Asia. The observation made by CA Innes in the Malabar District gazetteer “Next to Madras city, Calicut has the largest business in furniture making in the presidency. Every important town in the district has its own furniture shops, where tables, chairs, almirahs, shelves, and cots are made and sold. Malabar wood work is known favorably throughout the southern India [4].

Teak in Malabar got worldwide attention. There was a strong tradition which required non Brahmins to strictly desist from using fine timber like teak for their house construction. According to this tradition teak was to be used only for the construction of temples. Teak was more suitable to wood carvings for temples. Some Namboothiri houses, Illams or Manas and a few of aristocratic houses of privileged class also used teak for construction [5]. But with the establishment of saw mills, this tradition became changes.

The requirements in respect of timber for local consumption and for use abroad are met from the timber worked down from the government owned and private forests. The local market of the timber are the sea ports like Thalassery, Calicut, Beypore, etc. it has been established that 60 percentage of timber marketed at the west coast and goes by sea to Arabia, Karachi, Kutch, Varaval, Ratnagiri, and Bombay and some 30 percentage is railed over land to districts east of the western Ghats and the balance, 10 percentage being consumed locally. Teak in Malabar got worldwide attention during the colonial period. Chief timber logs are sold in round logs.

Teak (*Tectona Grandis*), veeti (*Dalbergia latifolia*), Karimarudu (*Terminalia tomentosa*) Ainipilav/Anjil (*Artocarpus hisuta*) etc were the chief timbers from the Malabar forests. These hard woods catches wide demand. Most of these woods were mainly used for the purpose of house construction, sleepers for railway line construction, bodies for ship and boats, reapers etc. Teak poles are also excellent for transmission of electric lines. Before the coming of concrete posts, teak woods are widely used as electric posts. The strength and durability of teak was the chief factor behind this. Hence a good market arisen for them. The teak wood and rose wood were largely used for railway sleepers [6]. Large quantities of sleepers were made from Kallai saw mills and supplied to the various centers of its demand through railways. However large quantities of natural resources and easy transportation facilities made Calicut as the center of wood trade and capture a better place in world map of trade.

**Beginning Of Industrialisation in Malabar**

Kerala has traditionally been enjoying a high degree of political freedom as it was never ruled by foreigners for a long period before the colonial rule. The rulers of various states were deeply committed to the economic progress of their perspective territories. So Kerala enjoyed traditionally a favorable political climate for industrialization. The state possessed rich natural resources like plentiful supply of the river water, thick forests, comfortable climate and transportation, etc. All these provided the basic infrastructure for the industrial development of Calicut, Beypore and Feroke.

Large scale industrial concerns sprang up only in the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The important large scale industries of Kozhikode district included Textile mills, saw mills, match factories, umbrella manufacturing, tile factories, soap making, brick making, printing, furniture making, beedi factories etc.

Basel mission and mission trading activities were mainly influential in the development industries in Malabar region. They made capital investment for industries; commonwealth tile factory of Feroke became the best example. The establishment of these industries had contributed much towards the improvement of the economy of the district. A large percentage of population drives their livelihood from these industrial pursuits.

Basel mission played an important role in the development of industries in Malabar area. Mission activities and foreign capital took initial steps to the development of modern factory system. The German Basel mission brought handloom mills to Kerala at Cannanore in 1864 and tile factory at Feroke near Calicut. The mission trading company is an important branch of Basal mission, made capital investment in Malabar. Their main area of capital investment focused on weaving, tile industry and coir industry. The industrial activities of the mission are considered not only to be a supportive activity, but as mission work in itself [7].

Malabar has a historical, cultural and commercial importance, which is unique, it being the first district to establish relation with the modern west [8]. In the year 1974-75 there were 966 factories in Kozhikode district. Kozhikode has the second place in the numbers of factories. Registered wood factories are

Factories	1974	1979
Saw mills	102	120
Ply wood	56	90
Matches	11	26

The early decade of the British domination over Malabar saw significant changes in the nature of the appropriation of forest resources. Colonial forest policy was decided by the great demand on timber, especially teak, which was becoming an important raw material for colonial infrastructural development: the railway. There was a growing demand on teak wood, which was substitute to oak as a crucial raw material for ship building, was largely available in the forests of Malabar in the wake of the increasing demand for teak, Malabar as a colony, integrated to the British capitalist production process experienced intense exploitative extraction of teak forest which in its turn to the administrative control of the forest and the development of forest management in India.

**Colonial Forest Policy**

With the coming of western powers, the political history of Calicut became turbulent. Vasco-da-Gama landed at Kappad (16 kilometers north of Calicut) in May1498 as the leader of trade mission from Portugal and was received by the Zamorin of Calicut. This incidence became the mile stone or the turning point in the history of Calicut. The global competition for the domination over the world required the control over the sea. Trade was their main purpose. Calicut attained a good position in the trade of pepper and other spices, which made India’s emporium of international trade. The global traveler Ibn Batuta (AD1342-47) notes: “ we came next to Calicut city, one of the great port of the district of Malabar, and in which merchants of all parts are found [9].

Malabar played an important role in the trading activity of ancient and medieval world. The Malabar Coast was not only famous for the spice trade, but also timber trade as well. After the third Anglo-Mysorean war in1792 English East India Company got the political and administrative power of Malabar [10]. First of all, companies gave importance to

overcome the challenges from neighboring countries and try to make the administration economically available.

The colonial government did not follow a clear cut ideology during its early days. The policy involved by the East India Company was extra ordinarily slow. Company did not try to alter the practice of extending cultivation by clearing forest. Their main attention was concentrated at first in increasing revenue. Later their attention was moved on to forest produces like pepper, ginger, turmeric, areca nut etc. Among the spices pepper got the world wide attention and has more demand in the world market<sup>[11]</sup>.

They also undertook the repair of ships besides the construction of the small vessels. By 1790s the construction of the large vessels became imperative. These early chapters of ship building activity were closely related to the attempts of the company to control and utilize the great timber lands of India, beginning with the teak plantation of the Malabar Coast.

The British wanted to dominate the seas which they thought that the only way to control the whole world. With this in view they brought the forest and timber resources in South India under their firm control. When the supply of oak became scarce in Europe, the Indian teak played a prominent role in the ship building activities of the Great Brittan. They used high grade timber mainly teak and Rose wood for the construction of gun carriages. Large volume of timber needed for naval ship as well as merchant ships. for these purposes they even started a plantation in Malabar known as "Connolly teak plantation" named after the then district collector of Malabar.

The first step towards forest conservation was an order issued by the Bombay Bengal joint commission appointed in 1792 to enquire the internal Circumstances of Malabar. The report was only concerned about the continual availability of teak to meet the requirements of the company. The report also suggested the prohibition of felling teaks timber of less than 24 inches girth. This report did not take any serious alarm from the authorities of the East India Company because their primary interest was vested in spice trade. However they were aware of the future commercial potential of timber trade.

Another report was William Thackeray's report, who was investigating the revenue matters of the Malabar and Canara. He also referred to the nature of the ownership of Malabar forest and suggested that the government should get control over the forest before the private owners get the real value of the forests. He advocated for the establishment of companies monopoly in timber trade.

The report of Ward and Corner came next, refers the luxurious growth of forest and the magnificent dimension of teak trees found in the eastern part of Malabar. They also described the cutting of teak trees and their transport to Calicut. Dr: Francis Buchanan who had undertaken an exploratory journey through Mysore, Canara and Malabar<sup>[12]</sup>. In Malabar, he has been seen some of the finest forest he was ever seen. He records that many of the valuable trees of which teak was the most valuable.

H.S Graeme's report of 1822 reflects the colonial concern of timber trade. Graeme detailed the pros and cons of the monopoly established over timber trade during the period of 1807-1822.

In 1823, Thomas Manroe, the governor of madras was instrumental in abolishing the timber monopoly established by the East India Company in Malabar and Travancore. He believed in the timber market and hoped that better prices for

timber would be enough incentive for private owners of forest to improve their timber stock.

Lord Dalhousie laid down the outline of the permanent policy of forest conservancy in India. He declared in this regard was considered as the 'first real step towards the scientific conservancy of the forest'

Forest conservation in India and in Malabar was not all a part of the knowledge of forestry and the importance of the preservation of forest. But the material need of the company was ironically when the knowledge on forest resources occurred in Malabar during the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Wood Industries of Kallai

The wood industries of Kallai have a history of centuries. Kallai, one of the biggest centers in India is situated in the banks of Kallai River. The word Kallai which derived from 'kallazhi', means 'stone paved path'. Kallai became the second largest timber trading center in the world. The river has the origin in the middle of Cherukulathoor village in Kozhikode district<sup>[13]</sup>. It is connected with the Chaliyar and Korapuzha by artificial canals even though the river is very small. The river after its origin passes through Cherukulathoor, Kovur, Olavanna, Kallai and finally joins to the Arabian Sea, after travelling a total distance of 14 miles. Kallai River created a basic infrastructure for the development Kallai wood industries.

Due to the facilities and cheapness of water transport, road and railway transport, Kallai achieve the principal timber market of Malabar from centuries onwards. Innes observed as three steam saw mills were working at Kallai, later the number of saw mills increased rapidly. The main feature of Kallai was hundreds of saw mills spread over to the banks of the river<sup>[14]</sup>. Hundreds of Lorries loaded with woods, day night workers, sawyers; saw dust sellers, lorry workers, and tea coffee sellers were regular scenes of Kallai<sup>[15]</sup>. Woods were exported from Kallai to different parts of India like Bombay, Madras, Kolar, etc and foreign countries by rail or sea. Teak timber was the chief exporting item. During the British period large quantities of sleepers were exported through the Kallai railway station. It is assumed that British authorities permitted a station at Kallai, was mainly for the exportation of railway sleepers. The railway tracks were made enough to enter the railway wagons to the compound of the companies to take sleepers.

The golden age of Kallai was from the beginning of the World wars to 1970, i.e., the era before passing of forestation bill. The large cement yard between the Kallai station and bridge was once timber yard. The old aged famous saw mills were situated at west and east of this yard. The first one was Pyari and Company. With the coming of electricity, steam engines were replaced by motor engines. With the construction of Conolly canal more and more wood were reach at Kallai. Most of the timbers came from Wynad and Nilambur region through Chaliar River. Cannolly canal was connected with Chaliyar. This made the easy transportation of woods to Kallai and that led to the emergence of a number saw mills.

Majority of the saw mills were owned by the Muslim industrialists. Khan Behadoor Arakkal Koyotti Haji, Khan Sahib Unnikkammu Sahib, Kamantakath Kunjahammed Koya, Jifri and Company, Baramies etc were the famous wood industrialists of that period. With the contacts of Arabs, Muslim industrialists were established in this sector<sup>[16]</sup>. There were hundreds of saw mills in and around seven kilometers distance from Mooriyad to Eranhipalam and from Pallikandy

to Mankavu. Kallai was bound by the sound raised by them. Thousands of workers were engaged in wood work at Kallai and got earnings. This contributed to the economic stability of the people<sup>[17]</sup>.

Centuries ago wood had reached at kallai from the forest areas of Nilambur and Wayanad. Kallai has unique facility to receive big logs of wood brought by river, that too at comparatively low coast. Besides the facility to transport, specified timbers made to size are also available at Kallai. The facility of the saw mills adjacent to the river at kallai and was an added advantage that paved path for prosperity<sup>[18]</sup>. Moopans were the most noted persons, whose duty was to protect the woods reached at Kallai. There will have ten or twenty laboures to guard the woods under each Moopan. Sleepers required for railway were largely made and sent. Teak and rose wood were chiefly used for it. The Arabians, who engaged in trade with Zamorin of Calicut, wanted woods instead of gold.

Just like Kallai, Feroke, Beypore, and Chaliyam had played important role in shaping the wood industry of Calicut. Later these remote regions have their contribution in shaping the economy and life of the people. Beypore became famous in trade with Arabs and uru building. Chaliyam became the depot of timbers brought by the Chaliyar River. Large number of saw mills for furniture works were the features of Feroke.

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