Historical Factors That Contributed the Ship (URU) Building in Beypore

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This work is an attempt at understanding the historical factors that contributed the Urū (wooden ship) building in Beypore. The history of ship building in Beypore goes back to 2000 years before. The ship building has been an impulse to trade in Malabar with overseas regions. Many attempts have been made by many scholars to study the history of ship building. The significance of ship building is closely related with trade, both native and foreign, prosperity of land, water transportation etc. The present attempt is a micro level study about the historical factors that contributed the ship building in the port of Beypore in Kozhikode. Studies on some aspects of ship building in Beypore have appeared along the history of the locality. It is an exclusive study on the ship building in Beypore. The scope of the present work is limited to the study of ship building in a particular area only. Sources for this study are mainly secondary sources. Primary sources like Gazetteers, interviews, news papers etc. have been used for this study. Descriptive and analytical methods have used in the preparation of this work.

The age old tradition of the ship building in Beypore goes back to 2000 years before. According to some historians, there are references about Beypore in the history of Solomon, Israeli emperor (C. 900 BC). His sailors and traders used to have precious goods from Malabar. This references deserve study. After that, Romans came here for trade. From ancient period, even today, teak timber of the region of Kerala has it’s own peculiarity. Teak and other timbers are found abundantly grown in the forests of Malabar and its transportation through rivers, management of skilled labours, etc contributed the ship building. The trade relations with Arabs have been an impulse to ship building in Malabar. The ship building of Malabar has attracted scholars, studies on the history of trade and oceanic voyages.

The important factors that contributed the development of ship building in Beypore are estuarine port, availability of timber, river transportation of timber, attitude of local rulers towards trade and traders, trade relations with the Arabs and the Portuguese, growth of skilled and non-skilled labours, etc.

I. BEYPORE AS AN ESTUARINE PORT

Why did Beypore become a ship building port?. The most remarkable answer is it is an estuarine port. A port and an estuary has it’s own peculiarities. ‘A port is a location on a coast or shore containing one or more harbors where ships can dock and transfer people or cargo to or from land. Port locations are selected to optimize access to land and navigable water, for commercial demand, and for shelter from wind and waves. Ports with deeper water are rarer, but can handle larger ships1. Like that ‘an estuary is a partially enclosed coastal body of brackish water with one or more rivers or streams flowing into it, and with a free connection to the open sea. Estuaries form a transition zone between river environments and maritime environments. They are subject both to marine influences—such as tides, waves, and the influx of saline water—and to riverine influences—such as flows of fresh water and sediment. The inflows of both sea water and fresh water provide high levels of nutrients both in the water column and in sediment, making estuaries among the most productive natural habitats in the world2. The Beypore port in the Malabar is an estuarine port, where Beypore river discharges into the Arabian Sea. ‘Beypore port is a Sub-port of Kozhikode port and is situated approximately 10 km south of Kozhikode. It is 180 km North of Cochin and 391 km away from Trivandrum. Beypore port is the second biggest port in Kerala after Cochin. Beypore port is one of the oldest ports in Kerala from where trading was done to the Middle East3. Moreover, Beypore and Chaliyam locates at the mouth of the Chaliyar (Beypore) river, where it joins with the Arabian sea. ‘Chaliyam (Shaliyat), the modern Beypore was known to Romans as Phohar. Ibn Battuta describes Shaliyat as a most beautiful town in which the fabrics called by its name are manufactured. AbulFida mentioned it as one of the cities of Manibar (Malabar)4. Located at the mouth of the chaliyar river, Beypore, one of the prominent ports and fishing harbours of ancient Kerala was an important trade and maritime centre. Ancient Beypore was much sought after by merchants from western Asia, for its ship building industry. The boat building yard here is famous for the construction of the Urū, the traditional Arabian trading vessel5.

II. MOSOON WINDS

The Monsoon winds also helped the ship building industry in Beypore. The monsoon winds have been regular, and the extreme regularity of the seasons in Kerala has been noticed by even ancient and medieval writers and modern foreign administrator-scholars such as William Logan6. These monsoon winds have profoundly influenced the economy and society of Kerala. Direct voyage to and from Kerala along with these winds was a regular feature of medieval period. ‘Travellers set sail for India with the advent of the south-east
wind and upon entering the Red Sea they got the south-west or southwest. The traders from the west (especially the Arabs) who came to Kerala could go back only with the return of the winds and had to stay here waiting for the same. This led to the emergence of foreign cultural diasporas in Kerala. 

‘By 14th century A.D., the Muslim traders in Calicut got prominence, they had their own fleet and international business links’.

III. AVAILABILITY OF TIMBER

One of the main criteria for the establishment of ship building centre was the proximity to the timber-yielding forest and the connection to the forests by the river. The procurement of timber was a laborious time-consuming process in the olden days as against the modern day selection from the timber market. For the particular type of log, the master-carpenter needed to go the forest area where they are available. There he needed to looked for the necessary timber and its maturity. ‘Even on the Malabar coast ship building centres emerged due to the easy availability of timber from its forests. The different varieties of timber used on the Malabar coast are; karimaruthu (terminaliacrenulata), karivaka, bentake (largestromelanceolata), pilavu (artocarpsingrifolius), teak (jactonagrandis), ayini or anjili (artocarpushirsutus), and cini (samaneasaman).’

Coconut tree or coconut was used for making rope and stitching of planks. A well-matured trunk of coconut tree was used for making paddle or thuzha. Ludovico Di Varthema who visited Malabar in the first decades of sixteenth century noted the various uses of coconut tree like making of firewood, coarse for making coir, drinking sweet water in the nut, making oil and for preparing toddy, an intoxicating drink. It is grown in the two hundred miles of the county and lasts for twenty five years. Linschoten attested the use of coconut tree making boats, products like ropes and cables for parts of the crafts and the leaves for sails on the Malabar coast.

Timber for the ship building yards of Beypore were obtained mainly from the Nilambur forests, 150 kms. upstream, where teak grew in abundance along with the rest of the forest trees necessary. The quality of the Nilambur teak was realized by the British administration who promulgated a series of M.P.P.F Acts, for the preservation of certain trees. The British government started a teak plantation in Nilambur during the tenure of H.V. Conolly in 1850s as Malabar collector and in that plantation now stands the biggest teak sighted in the world. Timber was cut by contractors from marked boundaries in olden days when the Nilambur Rajas were the owners of the forests. The government auctioned the marked plots, ‘coops’ as they were called, to the highest bidder. These contractors, hereafter called ‘timber merchants’ employed wood cutters from country side on daily wages.

Teak is considered as the most valuable of all known timbers. This wood which was mainly used for ship building was one of the chief items of Arab trade. The Konkan supplied a massive amount of teakwood which during the early conquests seem to have been indispensable to the Arabs for construction purposes especially ship building in Iraq and Arabia. As the Gulf area lacked durable timber, the merchants of Siraf had to import teak from India and South East Asia for their shipyards at al Ubullah and for their own residences and warehouses. Ibn Jubayr says that the timber for ship building at Aydhab was imported from India and al Yaman. ‘Malabar had economic importance to the Moslems, as the source of that teak wood with which not only the houses of Siraf but also ships were built’.

The Beypore river which flowed through the excellent teak forests of Malabar brought teak wood to Beypore which was either exported to other countries as logs or used for building the ships. It was the teak of Malabar that gave pre-eminence to Beypore in ship building. ‘The timbers used for building these ships were karimaruthu (terminaliacrenulata), karivaka, ben teak (lagerstrofolius), cini (samaneasaman), ayini (artocarpushirsutus), pilavu (jack tree), pali (palaquim Elepticum), punna (callophyllum Inophyllum) and teak (Jactona Grandis). Ben teak (lagerstromelianceolata), cini (samaneasaman) and ayini (artocarpushirsutus) were used only for single dug out conoes. These were rarely used for building plank built ships since the portion around the iron nails would easily corrode. Only pilavu (jack tree) and rarely teak in the required size were available in the country side. The rest of them were procured by felling forests’.

IV. REVERINE TRANSPORTATION

This was one of the main reasons for the development of Beypore as a shipbuilding centre, due to the transportation channel leading to the Nilambur forests. ‘This is very peculiar to the situation on the Malabar coast. For the most part it is bordered by the mountain ranges and on the other side the long line of seaboard, made it more dependent on the sea and rivers. In a situation in which the pull of the sea was more than that of the land, the men had to devise ways and means to use the same for his livelihood. His acquaintance with the water basically started with the navigable rivers and lagoons, which Malabar was gifted with most. Thus the development of maritime skills can be traced from the early times where men depended on rivers and ocean for his livelihood and his movement. Timber used for plant built ships, longer in size had always to be brought by river. ‘After procuring the necessary timbers from nearby forests, especially from Nilambur forests, the logs of timbers are then tied in-groups with hundreds of bamboos and then floated in the river. This structure is known as therappam. Elu (track) was prepared for this purpose, along which big logs were dragged through by elephants until they reached maraelu (wooden track), where from either men could drag them to water by elephants and in recent times upto the loading places. ‘Many numbers of therappams are connected one after another and moved in the river with its flowing. There will be one or two persons on the wood with a bamboo poll to

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direct the flowing timber to the shipyards. Sometimes they are tied with tonis (wooden boat). In places with currents and shallow water, therappams are prepared with less number of logs\textsuperscript{21}. ‘In the lower reaches two or more such smaller therappam were joined together and required lesser labour. It took two to three days for a therappam to reach the building yards or mills from the starting point’\textsuperscript{22}. ‘When the number of logs is brought to the shipyards, the kings officers used to measure, count, seal and passes were issued for those who are buying the timber’\textsuperscript{23}

‘There is a reference about the renting of river by the contractor or shipbuilder to transport the timber. There were also traditions of seasoning the timber by wetting in seawater or if not even in the rivers. To carry the timber to other parts of Malabar where there is no river getting connected, bullock carts used to carry them. It was not possible to carry very big logs. A loading frame and a massive wooden plank were used for loading the logs on the bullock cart\textsuperscript{24}.

‘Hundreds of timber mills were there in the river side of Kallayi river. It was a world famous river side for timber trade. The Arabs, who dominated in the trade of timber in early days. They took timber from Malabar to Arabian peninsula. Later Chinese traders, the Portuguese, the French and the English came to Kallayi for timber\textsuperscript{25}. ‘During the British rule, some Muslim timber merchant companies emerged. These companies made contract with the British Railway authorities to construct several railway tracts of timber. Some of these native timber companies were the Khan Bahadur Arakkal Kooyatty Haji’s timber company, Kamantekath Kunhahammed Haji’s timber company, Khan Bhadur V.K. Kunhikkammu Haji’s timber company, etc\textsuperscript{26}.

V. ARAB TRADE RELATIONS

The trade relations of the Malabar with the Arabs were also a boost in the development of ship building in Beypore. From ancient times, the Arabs had trade links with Kerala. ‘Trade diasporas of the Arab Muslims were developed on the coast of Malabar, which were perhaps to render support to the Arab traders. The main role of merchants in sea port towns was to act as intermediaries between the producing class and the consuming markets which actually were widely scattered in space\textsuperscript{27}. ‘From 9\textsuperscript{th} to 14\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. is known as the Golden Age of Arab trade. This has been proven by the travelogues of Sulaiman (A.D. 851), Ibn Khordadhbeh (A.D. 820 – 911), Al- Biruni (A.D. 913 – 1048), Ibn Faque (A.D. 902), Ibn Rusta (A.D. 903), Abu Sayyid (A.D. 915), Al Masudi (A.D.945 – 955), Al Idrisi (A.D.1100 - 1165), Ibn Battuta (A.D. 1304 - 1378), Abdul Razzakk (A.D. 1442), etc\textsuperscript{28}. After the coming of the Portuguese and British imperialists, there was a slow down of Arab trade in Calicut and other parts of coastal Kerala. ‘The revival of Arab trade with Malabar coast can be seen after the decline of the Safavid empire of Persia in 1722 A.D. There was an end of trade with the Persian empire by all over the world. The other world markets especially Persian Gulf markets turned towards further east. Calicut became a trading post of the Persian Gulf countries. Massive trade again started in Malabar\textsuperscript{29}.

VI. THE PORTUGUESE

The Portuguese, they had many orrurances in Chaliyam near Beypore, war with Kunjali Marakkar, relations with the Zamorins and so on. ‘In 1513 A.D. the Portuguese signed a treaty with the Zamorin to build ships at Chaliyam. By 1515 A.D. with the help of the local and native labourers, the Portuguese had built several ships from Chaliyam near Beypore. There after, they made Chaliyam as their ship building yard\textsuperscript{30}.

VII. SKILLED LABOURERS

Odayis (Mesthiris)

The Uru is the famous example for Keralite carpentry, technical importance and manual skill. ‘The prominent peoples among them are Odayis. They manage the technical matters of the ship building. They have high position among the asari (carpenters) caste. Their family name odayi may be come from odam (a type of small ship using interaction between Malabar coast and Lakshwadeep). Although, they belong the asari jati\textsuperscript{31}, ‘Malabar coast known for its active maritime ventures was also known for superior craftsmanship expressed by its skilled men for many generations. The carpenters or Mestheris of Malabar mainly belonged to the Viswakarma branch of Odayi caste. They are also called as thachan or asari. ‘The engineering work of a vessel they have done with lot of skill, imagination and intelligence\textsuperscript{32}.

There is a legendary story behind the name Odayi. ‘Cheraman Perumal, Sarama Perimal according to Linschoten, the last of the Chera rulers, when he was beginning his voyage to Mecca, the carpenters of Beypore gifted him an Odam. Pleased with it , he in tern gave them gifts as well as the title Odayi. They are also known as Cheraman Odayi. It is suggested that the carpenters of Malabar engaged in shipbuilding had their unique identity from then onwards’\textsuperscript{33}.

We do not find the shipwrights of Malabar writing down or drawing the designs and the process of shipbuilding, instead the skill was passed from generation to generation through oral tradition. There was also a secret intention in it, that of not divulging the skill to anybody else to same family Members, mostly their own sons. The hereditary knowledge remained within the community for many years\textsuperscript{34}. In the northern Malabar region they settled in locations like kallai, Beypore, Panthalayani Kollam, calicut and Madayi and in the southern region they are found in coastal Trivandrum and Kayamkulam. Ludovico di Vartheima praised the work of shipbuilding in Calicut, who did planking even without using oakum, which was unheard in Europe\textsuperscript{35}. Since the entire family takes to the job, wages are fixed according to labour output. They keep a drawing on joined
planks in one side of the *chappa* (shed). Odyai tradition required to be free from vice, so that mind and memory should always be clear.

The prominent meisteris, belong to odayis, are Edathumpadikkal Chathukutti, Pachu Mesteri, V. K. Nrayanan, Edathumpa dikkal Shivasankaran, Antikutti Mesteri, Goguldas Mesteri etc.

**Khalasis**

The Mappila Khalasis are the prominent class in the ship building after the odayis. The khalasis are unique in lifting loads through pulleys and chains. They are the menial workers of a ship in making, Khalasis, who launched the ship. Many foreign accounts have description of the use of elephants for launching. It was a festive occasion for the natives. All the assembled will gave a helping hand. The use of elephants was therefore discontinued. Cabral noted in 1501, “A great number of people who launch them”. Abulfazal says that Khalasis were a category of sea-men whose chief was called *Gumti* and their duty was to bail out water which had leaked through the seams or collected in the ship during a storm. The word khalasi was got from the contact with the Arabs. The khalasis are a particular Muslim class and they live in the Chaliyam and Beypore regions. ‘The meaning of the Arab word Khalasi is ‘the mixture of black and white’. It means their mothers may black and fathers may Arab and visa versa, the word khalasi is said to have the child born from such couples.

The main works of the khalasis include to bring closer the timbers to the work area, smear the fish oil in ships, cover the gaps in sides of a ship with cotton, smearing *vettuneyyu* from top to bottom. The driving out of uru to sea and it’s return to port are the important works like the building a ship. Their tools are wooden traps or snares like *davar*, *dhawwal*, *beencha* etc. *Davar* is a wooden winch fixed on a wooden platform which was installed on the ground which again was firmly tied to some steppers deposited a few feet deep into the ground and covered with soil to add weight. This was done to prevent the winch from getting displaced. Two long wooden bars called ‘*kazhas*’ went through two holes in opposite directions near the top end of the winch. The *kazhas* when passed through these holes made four hands. An iron rope that is attached in *davar* and is rounded in ship that iron rope becomes tight. This rope goes through different pulleys. The age-old pulley-wheel mechanism works here. *Ottappullikkappi* and *irattappullikkappi* (types of pulleys) increase the efficiency of the *davar*. Rolls of timbers are attached in the two sides of the ship. *Poovath* (a timber wood) is used as rolls. ‘*Galoos*’ (a tool) is attached by ‘*makkidi*’ (another tool) in the upper side of uru. *Makkidi* is made by a long timber wood. There have timber bolds in the upper side of the gallos. The ship is moved by touching in the rounds of rope attached in the ship. When the uru is driven out in to sea, the khalasis sing native songs, related with their life moments and social life. Eg. for such native songs are :

\[
\text{Hele maali ..... yaa Allah} \\
\text{O balamaale ... aisaa} \\
\text{anaramathattikkodu ... aisaa} \\
\text{randukoodihiikkodu ... aisaa} \\
\text{porattangane ... aisaa} \\
\text{O’ thinabe ... aisaa} \\
\text{aalaaithhangale ... aisaa} \\
\text{othorumepiddikka ... aisaa42.}
\]

Another one is :

\[
\text{AllahuRabbee ... ya Allah} \\
\text{Ya Rabbi swallee ... yaaAllaass} \\
\text{ Swalleeswalathee ... yaaAllaass} \\
\text{Moosabhayee ... yaaAllaass} \\
\text{Aalathlingaru ... yaaAllaass} \\
\text{hele maaled ... yaaAllaass} \\
\text{Aaleemaalee ... yaa Allaass}^{33}.
\]

One more is :

\[
\text{Jorsee ... yaaAllaah} \\
\text{Jallaa ... jorsee} \\
\text{Jallaaajorse... maalee jorsee}^{44}, \text{ etc.}
\]

The *davar* with khalasis are rotating. The iron rope becomes tight and ship begins to move. Then the ship drives out to sea.

The leader of the khalasis is known as kammalimooppan. The prominent leaders among them were Imbichibappu, Muhammed, Mammadkoya, JahuMooppan etc.

**Other Labourers**

After the Odayis and Khalasis, others, included in ship building works are ‘carpenters, *Burmakkar, Kayyaravakar*’, etc. The carpenters, they saw timbers in any size as planks for ship building, the Bumakkar, they are the skilled workers in making nails and anchors, the kayyaravakar are workers, their works are determined by mesteris.

**VIII. THE BERAMIES AND KOYAS**

During the early 18th century A.D. some Arab – Muslim families travelled from southern part of Arabian peninsula, especially from Yemen, they came in Calicut and settled here. They were commonly known with their sur names, such as Beramy, Jifry, Ba-Alawi and Sayyids. ‘The beramies came to Calicut from Mukhalla in Yemen around 1741 A.D. The first Baramy member, who came to calicut was Shaik Ali Beramy. He married and his family lived in Calicut. Members of the Baramy family worked as agents and *dvibashi* (interpreter) among natives and Arab traders. Prominent traders among them were Hassan Beramy, Moosa Beramy, Umer Beramy, Mammad Beramy etc. The 19th and 20th centuries appeared a boost in ship building in Beypore. So many Arab and Gulf nationals came here with orders to build ships and they lived here for several months. The Beramies and the Koyas worked as agents of ship building in Beypore among the mesteris of Beypore and the Arabs.”
 IX. CONCLUSION

The ship (uru) building in Beypore near Calicut was not a sudden industrial development, instead it was a gradual historical development. ‘How did Beypore become a ship building yard’ was the prime concern of this study. It was influenced by the geographical factors such as estuarine port, monsoon winds, availability of variety of timbers and river transportation. The other factors that contributed the ship building in Beypore were the Arab trade relations with Malabar, development of skilled labours like Odayis (mesthiris), Khalasis, carpenters. And in the modern period, the agents like Baramies and Koyas also played a great role in the development of ship building in Beypore.

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