Antecedent of Inland Navigation System in Travancore

Soumya.R.S

- Antecedent of Inland Navigation System in Travancore

Antecedent of Inland Navigation System in Travancore

Antecedent of Inland Navigation System in Travancore

Soumya.R.S

Research Scholar, Department of History University of Kerala, Trivandrum.

Received: May 6, 2018 Accepted: June 2, 2018

ABSTRACT *Lines of transport are aptly known as 'corridors of development' and 'arteries of change'. Much of the early trade and traffic was carried on by means of water communication in places which had almost an uninterrupted line of natural communications in rivers and backwaters. In Travancore the heavy annual rainfall and the broken nature of the country sloping from the Ghats towards the west have resulted in a large number of streams and rivers, most of which flow down to the Arabian Sea or into the backwaters along the coast. Many of these rivers by themselves are navigable during the monsoon. Inland navigation suffered a setback with the beginning of the 1930s and several factors were responsible for this, the most important being the imperialist designs of the Britishers and the lack of sincerity on the part of the rulers. Inland navigation system virtually faded into insignificance especially with the development of railways.*

Keywords: *Vallam, Vanchi, Kayal, Azhi, Pozhi.*

Introduction

Transportation system has been considered as one of the major strategic infrastructures of the socio-economic development all over the world. Simply this system has been defined as the movement of persons and things from one place to another. Lines of transport are aptly known as 'corridors of development' and 'arteries of change'.

Travancore, an integral part of India stretches along the Arabian Sea and a peculiar feature of this state is the natural existence of almost a continuous chain of lagoons and backwaters separated from the coast only by a narrow strip of land varing from 11.3 to 0.4 km. The heavy annual rainfall and the broken nature of the country sloping from the Ghats towards the west have resulted in a large number of streams and rivers, most of which flow down to the Arabian Sea or into the backwaters along the coast. Many of these rivers by themselves are navigable during the monsoon

and some are navigable at their tidal reaches all the year around. Naturally this system of communication was improved in the past by constructing artificial canals inter-linking the lagoons, backwaters and the mouth of the rivers to provide a continuous waterway for inland navigation from Parur in the north to Trivandrum in the south.

Transport by water appears to have been vogue from very early times.[1]Almost all of the rivers of this part of the state were widely used for navigation purposes. The timber for exportation is dragged into the rivers by elephants and floated to convenient places. The Karamana and Vamanapuram rivers were rented for six months in the year as they were favourable for floating down the valuable timber cut down from the hills to the district.[2]But in some rivers especially in some seasons the great velocity and the falls in them preclude the possibility of floating timber. Timber which is floated down the Neyyar river to the depot at Poovar was exported to distant ports. Small vessels were hauled up into the riverfor repair and extended along the beach were a number of machines for twisting coir ropes. Poovar was a flourishing town and there were a number of merchants there. The Pampa river which was very wide and deep at its mouth was bardly ever navigable except during the monsoon. The people widely used the Periyar which is the largest and most important river on the west coast for navigation purpose. ‘Vallams’ and rafts were employed in conveying grain and other commodities as well as passengers from place to place.

One of the most important feature of the traditional system of inland navigation of this region was the rise of villages and towns on the banks of rivers and very nearer to backwaters. The commerce of the market towns was principally carried on by water communication. Indeed there were few places in the inhabited tracts very distant from a navigable stream. Inland navigation facilitated the exchange of goods on the ‘angadis’ or markets situated on the banks of rivers and backwaters. There were certain stations on the water route between Cochin and Kollam where customs duty had to be paid. The inland navigation facilities added to the glory of Kollam. It was a centre of great commercial significance.[3]The boat jetty at Kollam was the finest in India.

Transport on water was by means of boats of several kinds and made in several ways.[4]It is interesting to note that the societal division reflected well in the nature of the vessels used by the different sections of the society. It is believed that the people used ‘vallam’ or ‘vanchi’ from time immemorial.

Till the beginning of the nineteenth century there had never been a planned development of inland navigation in Travancore and whatever developments occurred in the system were the legacy of the past. The reason was the lack of geographical and topographical knowledge which was regarded as a jealously guarded secret. “The dependence of Travancore on the English East India Company led to the interference of the British in the affairs of the state”.[5] The company found it

imperative to have maps and geographical knowledge of different regions for civil, military and commercial needs. The survey of the Travancore and Cochin states (1816-1820) was a part of such an all India endeavour.

The 'Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States' written by Lts.Ward and Conner enriched the topographical and geographical knowledge of Travancore and Cochin regions. It served the purpose of a Gazetteer, a census document and a socio-economic survey of the society. These surveys increased the geographical knowledge of the various regions of Travancore. Even though these surveys were conducted by the British, it helped the Government of Travancore to identify various problem areas. Thus the beginning of the nineteenth century was an important land mark in the history of inland navigation in this part of the country. Many measures were taken by the Government to improve river and backwater navigation and the policy of canal construction was initiated. The construction of canals revolutionised the field of inland navigation.

Navigation in Rivers

Travancore is blessed with water in an abundant measure. It is her topography and hydrology that make Travancore rich in water potential.[6] The Western Ghats form a continuous barrier all along the eastern border of the state. In fact the watershed or the ridge line along the ghats is itself the eastern boundary of the state except at a few places. These hills causes the heavy monsoon rains. The high intensity of rainfall and undulating nature of the country have been both responsible for the presence of numerous rivers both big and small in the state. In absence of other means of transport and communication in the early periods some improvement was effected in the inland navigation system of Travancore by the construction of link canals between backwaters and rivers. The most important rivers of Travancore are the Periyar, Muvattupuzha, Meenachil, Manimala, Pampa, Achencovil etc.

One of the major factors which contributed to the high density of population along the river valleys was the facilities for transport and communication. Industries developed on a large scale in the river valleys. Inland navigation system acted as the backbone of the industrial development of Travancore. The collection of raw materials from rural areas and the transportation of finished products to distant markets were performed by this mode of transport. In addition to industry and agriculture, river navigation played a remarkable role in the development of trade and commerce also especially in those places where there were no backwaters. The most common form of river navigation was vallam (canoe) transport. With the coming of the stream and motor vessels more vallams came to be used in rivers. In Travancore there is necessity as well as scope for the improvement of river navigation facilities.

Navigation in Backwaters

One of the striking features of Travancore is the continuous chain of lagoons or backwaters running parallel to the sea coast receiving the waters of the streams and rivers that originate from the ghats. The backwaters or 'kayals' as they are locally called, are inlets from the sea which run in a direction parallel to the coast. This backwater system stretches from Thiruvananthapuram to Parur, extends through Cochin and further onto Ponnani, a distance of over two hundred miles. "The total area of this backwater system amounts to two hundred and thirty seven square miles of which one

hundred and fifty seven are in Travancore. The backwaters are connected to the sea through many outlets. The places where the backwaters established connections with the sea are called ‘Azhis’ or ‘Pozhis’ according to the nature of the opening, whether it is permanent or temporary.[7]

The backwaters are used for fish culture and coconut husk retting and their shores for coir manufacture. The main backwaters in the Travancore area are the Vembanad lake, the Kayamkulam lake, the Ashtamudi lake, the Paravur kayal, the Anjengo lake etc.

With the development of other faster means of transport such as roads and railways, backwater transport began to show signs of decline. But backwaters play a major role in the economic life of the state. A number of industries were concentrated along the backwaters.

Canals

The natural existence of a number of rivers and backwaters led to the construction of canals. The canals are the intermediate links of the line of lakes. A series of canals unite the different lakes which run

IJRAR- International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews **Research Paper**

[VOLUME 5 I ISSUE 2 I APRIL – JUNE 2018]	**e ISSN 2348 –1269, Print ISSN 2349-5138**
http://ijrar.com/	**Cosmos Impact Factor 4.236**

more or less parallel to the coast thus forming a waterway along the entire length of the country from Thiruvananthapuram northwards.[8]The idea of connecting the backwaters of Travancore by canals was taken up by Dewan Venkitta Rao (1821-1829). Most of the links of this line of communication were executed during the reign of Queen Parvahi Bayi.

The backwaters have been linked by canals in most places. The whole area is navigable by canoes and steam or motor boats during all the seasons of the year. The canal is a very busy line of communication. Small boats pushed by men with poles and also motor boats are frequently seen hurrying through carrying men and material. Numerous branch canals take off from the main canal leading to places in the interior. Small bridges are provided at important places to facilitate crossing.

The development of river navigation led to many sided changes in the social life and economic conditions of people. It was blessing to the farmers, industrialists and traders. Commercial establishment sprang up in the neighbourhood of important ferries. Almost all the markets were connected by internal waterways. By the beginning of 1930’s this traditional system of navigation began to lose its importance due to a variety of factors.

Prior to the development of roads and railways, water transport was the main means of communication. In Travancore roads were developed by the colonial power with an aim to meet their commercial and administrative needs and to provide greater mobility to their military forces. In the 1940’s roads emerged as the chief means of communication in South Travancore where there were practically no navigable rivers or lakes.9Inland navigation system virtually faded into insignificance especially with the development of railways. Lack of systematic planning of the total transport system has also caused the deterioration of this mode in Travancore.

References

1. T K Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual Vol-III, Trivandrum, p.465.
2. Ward and Conner, Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States Vol-II, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Trivandrum, 1994, p.56.
3. A Sreedhara Menon, Kerala History and Its Makers, Madras, 1990, pp.58-63.
4. P T Srinivasa Aiyangar, Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture, New Delhi, 1985, p.56.
5. Samuel Mateer, Native Life in Travancore, New Delhi, 1991, p.250.
6. Water Resources of Kerala Advance Report: 1958, Trivandrum, 1958, p.111.
7. K N Ganesh(Ed), Kerala State Gazetteer Vol-III, Trivandrum, 1989, p.646.
8. T K Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual Vol-I, Trivandrum, p.65.
9. Census of India: 1941, Travancore Vol-XXV, Trivandrum, 1942, p.6.