

The Konkani Merchants in Malabar during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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Abstract:

This article examines the commercial and political role of Konkani merchants in Malabar during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with particular attention to Cochin under Portuguese and Dutch influence. Following their migration from Goa, Konkani merchants became prominent in wholesale and retail trade, credit, revenue collection and financial administration. Their commercial networks connected Cochin with Calicut, Kayamkulam, Cannanore, Travancore, Gujarat and other Indian Ocean ports. Through the careers of Perimbala Shenai, Babba Prabhu and Kalaga Prabhu, the article demonstrates how Konkani merchants moved beyond trade to serve as treasurers, advisers, brokers and diplomatic intermediaries. Their access to capital and regional markets made them indispensable to both the Cochin rulers and the Dutch East India Company, while also exposing them to political rivalries, commercial litigation and changing state policies. The article concludes that their influence depended upon their ability to negotiate between competing authorities, but declined as Dutch power weakened, royal intervention increased and warfare disrupted Malabar's established commercial order.

Keywords: Konkani merchants; Gaud Saraswat Brahmins; Cochin; Malabar; Dutch East India Company (VOC); Perimbala Shenai; Babba Prabhu; merchant networks; political intermediaries; Indian Ocean trade.

The history of the Konkani in Kerala begins with their migrations from Goa during the 16th century. N. Purushottam Mallya, Chandrakant Keni and V. N. Kudva, referring to an 1858 letter of the Cochin Diwan, claim that Konkani reached Cochin as early as 1294 following disturbances caused by Alauddin Khalji's campaigns in the Deccan. According to this account, they obtained land and protection from the Cochin ruler and formed the Cochin Konkanaatha Mahajanam.ⁱ Although this claim is difficult to verify from such a late source, a limited Konkani presence in Malabar before the sixteenth century remains plausible because of the mobility associated with western Indian Ocean commerce.

Following the Portuguese conquest of Goa in 1510, its Hindu population experienced increasing religious pressure. A royal order attributed to João III instructed Portuguese officials to destroy Hindu images, prohibit their manufacture and worship, suppress Hindu ceremonies and punish those who sheltered Brahmins or continued non-Christian practicesⁱⁱ. Approximately 12,000 Saraswat families reportedly left Goa. Some moved towards Maharashtra and Indore, while others travelled southwards to Karwar, South Kanara, Calicut, Cochin and Travancoreⁱⁱⁱ. Ashin Das Gupta places this migration within a broader commercial transition. The decline of the Muslim mercantile elite under Portuguese pressure created room

for Konkani Brahmans, who dispersed along the coast and rose to commercial prominence before the arrival of the Dutch^{iv}.

Portuguese maritime power redirected much of Malabar's commerce towards Europe, while the growing demand for pepper transformed Cochin into the western coast's most important commercial centre after Goa. The Cochin ruler's promise to exempt the Konkans from poll tax further encouraged their settlement^v. **K. M. Panikkar** observes that the "Canarenes," or Konkans, became commercial agents of the Portuguese and later rendered similar services to the Dutch^{vi}. Lucrative spice trade that Cochin region did induce Konkani brahmans to migrate and they did participate extensively in the wholesale trade with both Portuguese and Dutch.^{vii}

About 360 Saraswat families settled at Cochin and became prominent because of their capital, commercial ability and family connections^{viii}. They called their settlement Gosripuram and spread into sixteen *gramams*, including Ernakulam, Tripunithura, Thuravoor and Alleppey. Collectively, they came to be known as the "Konkanas" and the "Mahajanam"^{ix}. Hugo s'Jacob identifies them as Gaud Saraswats who migrated through Kanara into Malabar. Since they lacked an established position in landed property, many depended upon trade and lived in concentrated settlements around markets and commercial villages^x.

As their economic importance increased, the Konkans received formal privileges. A copper-plate *Thitooram* of **1627** exempted the Cochin Mahajanams from the succession fee called *Purushantharam*, permitted them to construct substantial houses and authorised overseas commerce^{xi}. Another *Thittooram*, granted in **1648**, gave the community civil and criminal jurisdiction within the Tirumala Devaswom Sanketam and allowed it to elect an *adhikari* to administer internal affairs. The Raja retained the authority to impose or pardon death sentences, while property left by persons without heirs was divided between the royal treasury and the Tirumala temple^{xii}. Their financial assistance to Vira Kerala Varma contributed to the confirmation of their privileges and Brahman status^{xiii}.

Saraswat merchants became wholesalers, retailers, money changers and providers of credit. Their involvement in retail commerce was so extensive that their services were considered indispensable even for minor domestic commodities^{xiv}. The Mahajanam also assisted the Cochin rulers financially during political crises. These relationships enabled particular merchants to become advisers, treasurers, tax collectors and intermediaries between Indian rulers and European companies.

The Dutch captured Cochin in January 1663 from the Portuguese, displacing the Vettattu branch of the royal family and installed Vira Kerala Varma of the Mutta lineage. In **1663 Treaty between** Cochin king and VOC, "Konkans" are mentioned to be under disposal and discretion of General^{xv}. During the Dutch period, Saraswats frequently served as the VOC's principal Indian merchants and agents. The Company depended upon their ability to obtain pepper but regarded their commercial independence and influence at court with suspicion^{xvi}. Their power and influence rose to such extent that they were considered more courtiers than merchants in Mattancherry.^{xvii} Since Malabar rulers lacked both the means and incentive to enforce the Dutch pepper monopoly, the VOC depended heavily upon its dealings with Indian merchants^{xviii}.

Perimbala Shenai was one of the most influential Konkani merchants at the Cochin court. As a close adviser of Vira Kerala Varma, he assisted the Raja's efforts to strengthen control over Cochin's revenues. This brought him into conflict with the royal princes, Paliyath Achan, regional Nayar chiefs and sections of the Dutch administration. In 1670, Perimbala occupied lands in Parur with Nayar provided by the Raja. Regional chiefs threatened to abandon the campaign against the Zamorin or kill him if he was not removed. Following the killing of a Company servant by one of his bodyguards, the Dutch seized and burned his house. Vira Kerala Varma also granted the collection of tolls and other dues in Mouton to Konkans and Pattars. Opposition from regional chiefs culminated in the Union of Mouton on 15 December 1673. Through this alliance, local rulers, Cochin princes and Paliyath Achan resisted the entry of immigrant merchants into their territories. Van Reede supported them, obstructing the Raja's attempt to collect revenue through Perimbala and other merchants^{xix}.

An administrative settlement of 1674 ordered Perimbala to confine himself to trade unless he obtained written permission to participate in political affairs. Van Reede also removed him as Company merchant and transferred his contracts to a rival Kayamkulam group. Perimbala accused his competitors of smuggling commodities to Tanur, Ponnani and Calicut, while they complained that Dutch failed to honour agreements concerning imported goods. He recovered the contracts in 1679^{xx}.

The agreements of May and June 1681 formally dismissed Perimbala from the treasurership, required him to submit his accounts and directed him to operate as an ordinary merchant. These provisions were never fully enforced. By 1684, he had returned as treasurer and continued to obtain pepper contracts. Together with Babba Prabhu, he offered the Company more pepper for its opium than rival merchants, although Perimbala remained approximately 200,000 pounds of pepper in arrears on his contract for 1683. **After** Vira Kerala Varma's death in 1687, Perimbala lost his principal patron. He was eventually interned on suspicion of communicating with the English at Attingal but was released in January 1690 on Babba Prabhu's surety. He subsequently supported the restoration of the Vettattu lineage and attempted to secure the Zamorin's assistance. After the rebellion failed, he lost his lands in Parur and was banished with his family. He died in March 1692 while travelling towards Pondicherry^{xxi}. His career illustrates the close connection between commerce, credit, revenue administration and political authority in Cochin.

Babba Prabhu operated within an even wider geographical field. Born at Cannanore, he first appears in a letter from the Kayamkulam Raja received by the Dutch on 8 April 1662, in which he was described as a skilled merchant. Van Goens likewise regarded him as experienced but warned against trusting him without reservation^{xxii}. Das Gupta describes him as the foremost Konkani merchant of his time, claiming that he nearly monopolised the commodities handled by the Company. Dutch commanders dealt cautiously with him even when his payments were delayed because of his commercial and political influence^{xxiii}.

The Dutch factor at Kayamkulam advanced money to Babba and Wammena to secure pepper deliveries, but both accumulated debts. Babba was suspected of importing opium from Cannanore and trading with Muslim merchants outside the Dutch network. When Van Goens ordered his imprisonment in 1664, the Kayamkulam Raja retaliated by prohibiting commerce with the VOC. Babba remained at Kayamkulam under local protection and travelled with approximately twenty-armed retainers. In 1675 and 1677, he and Poelicar received pepper contracts to the exclusion of other merchants but failed to deliver the agreed

quantities. Huijsman calculated their combined debts at 124,330 guilders, although Batavia preferred a conciliatory policy. Babba expanded his operations towards Cannanore and maintained a garden at Calicut and a shop at Ponnani. He traded with Dutch, Muslim, English and French merchants, adapting to the growth of English commerce at Tellicherry. When the VOC attempted to recover its advances, he sought refuge with the Zamorin in 1684^{xxiv}. His family nevertheless remained important in Company commerce. Das Gupta mentions Rama Prabhu in Dutch service in 1688, as well as Baboecca Prabhu, identified as Babba's brother. Babba's son Nannoe or Nanu Prabhu entered Company service during the 1690s^{xxv}.

From 1687, Babba again worked for the Dutch as an intermediary with the Cochin Raja and the Zamorin. During a mission through southern Malabar in 1689, he arranged audiences and conducted preliminary negotiations. His efforts assisted the reaffirmation of an agreement with the Rani of Attingal, who honoured him with a horse and ceremonial gifts. In 1691, he secured the Zamorin's cooperation against the Vettattu rebellion. His position was considered so important that Dutch soldiers were retained at Mattancherry to protect his house. Van Reede intended to employ Babba in cloth production, trade with Madurai and negotiations in Canara. He granted him exceptional honours, including the right to sit in the presence of Dutch officials, approach their houses in a palanquin, use a parasol on a silver staff, and retain Dutch and Indian guards. Van Reede's death in December 1691 deprived Babba of his strongest patron. In 1693, Batavia authorised his arrest over unpaid debts, but he again obtained refuge with the Zamorin at Ponnani. Commissioner Paulus de Roo ended his exclusive position in 1695 and directed the Company to divide contracts among several merchants. Babba retained the dignity of a VOC merchant until his death on 4 April 1696. Nanu subsequently assumed his father's debt of 61,095 guilders, balanced against securities held by the Company^{xxvi}.

Babba's commercial connections also linked the Prabhus with Cochin's Jewish merchants. Ezechiel Rahabi migrated from Aleppo to Cochin in 1647. His son David arrived in Malabar in 1664 and had become one of Cochin's wealthiest merchants by 1686. In 1695, David appeared before the Malabar Council as Babba's attorney to settle his outstanding Dutch accounts. The relationship between the Prabhus and Rahabis became sufficiently close for David's son Ezechiel to receive his early commercial training through the Prabhu family. After David's death in 1726, Ezechiel Rahabi became the VOC's chief merchant. By 1737, he was the principal purchaser of the commodities sent from Batavia. Van Gollennesse later praised his reliability but retained the Konkani merchant Pinna Poy as a commercial counterweight. Pinna Poy and another Konkani reportedly assembled a fund of 100,000 rix-dollars to undersell Ezechiel and weaken his position. Naga Prabhu also provided commercial advice and services to the Company, although his capital was more limited. These rivalries demonstrate that commercial communities were internally divided and that Dutch officials deliberately encouraged competition among them. Konkani merchants also participated in customs farming and long-distance projects. In 1745, Santa Poy offered more for the Cochin customs farm than the amount previously collected, indicating confidence in expanding commerce. In 1747, Cochin merchants offered to assume the Mocha trade abandoned by the VOC. Their business was organised primarily through individual houses and temporary partnerships rather than permanent companies. Wealthy merchants-maintained correspondents, brokers, agents and attorneys at different ports. These representatives provided commercial intelligence, assisted vessels, procured cargoes, handled money and discounted bills of exchange. Such networks linked price movements in Malabar with developments in Gujarat and Bengal^{xxvii}.

Political protection was essential to these networks. A ruler benefited from a prosperous merchant population because commerce generated customs revenue. Merchants, however, could respond to excessive demands by moving to another port or ruler. Their mobility allowed wealthy traders to bargain with smaller political authorities and helps explain how Babba could move between Kayamkulam, Cochin, Calicut, Ponnani and Cannanore when faced with Dutch pressure^{xxviii}.

Konkani influence extended to Purakkad. A Konkani merchant named Pimbula Naik who left the cochin kingdom after being mistreated in 1728 but returned four years later and planned a harbour that alarmed the Malabar Council. Govinda Poy, another leading merchant, succeeded Poko Moessa as *regadore* or chief merchant. He later accompanied Haidar Ali's representatives in their search for the fugitive Zamorin's treasures in Cochin^{xxix}. Das Gupta places their experience within Travancore's growing control over trade. Merchants who had previously operated independently were gradually absorbed into the state administration, while the royal commercial department assumed direct control over pepper procurement^{xxx}.

The relationship between Kalaga Prabhu and Ezechiel Rahabi provides further evidence of collaboration and conflict across communal boundaries. Their association began in 1752 and involved several joint ventures without a common commercial fund^{xxxi}. By 1770, Kalaga owed Ezechiel Rs. 10,000. Ezechiel took possession of one of his warehouses as partial payment, but Governor Senff ordered him to return the keys. A group of merchants attempted to mediate, yet Senff rejected their compromise and enforced the return of the property. Kalaga also benefited from changes in the VOC's sales policy. In November 1770, the Dutch demanded that Cochin's merchants purchase the entire annual cargo of Indonesian commodities at a predetermined price rather than select goods after assessing seasonal demand. Ezechiel refused, but Kalaga Prabhu, Bhagwan Chetty, Anta Chetty and Daniel Cohen accepted the proposal and were recognised as the Company's merchants. This arrangement protected the VOC from fluctuations in Asian markets but transferred the danger of unsold goods and bankruptcy to Cochin's merchants. After Ezechiel's death in October 1771, his sons sued Kalaga for unlawful possession of a warehouse and an unpaid debt exceeding Rs. 6,000. Several Konkani merchants, including Baba Saraf, Aloe Saraf, Bikoe Kienic and Ramo Sinaij, testified in support of the Rahabis. The Dutch court ruled against Kalaga on 19 August 1772. In January 1773, the VOC separately sued him for approximately Rs. 4,000. Facing financial and legal ruin, Kalaga corresponded with Haidar Ali's generals in an attempt to weaken both the Cochin Raja and the Jewish merchants. The plan was discovered before he could escape, and he and his eldest son, Chorda Prabhu, were deported to the Cape of Good Hope^{xxxii}.

A separate jurisdictional conflict arose from the Cochin ruler's attempt to increase customs at Mattancherry, Chellayi and Amaravati. The settlement negotiated by Adrian Moens in 1772 recognised Cochin's authority to collect specified revenues and administer the Konkans and their temple. The Raja, however, could not impose new demands, interfere in temple affairs without Company consent, or prevent the community from appealing to the Dutch commander^{xxxiii}. This protection became increasingly fragile as Dutch political and military strength declined.

The crisis reached its peak under Rama Varma, popularly known as Shaktan Tampuran. After assuming the throne in 1790, he demanded a contribution of jaggery from the Konkans and imposed customs duties

that they regarded as violations of the 1772 agreement. Individual merchants were arrested, while armed Nayar were sent into their neighbourhood. The community requested permission to enter the fortified European town but was initially sent back with assurances of protection^{xxxiv}.

On 12 October 1791, royal troops attacked the warehouse of Devarsa Kini at Mattancherry. Devarsa was restrained and killed, while Krishna, Gaga Kamati, Manaku Shenai and the son of Ranga Pai were also murdered. Sastri Pai and Marthya Pattar were seriously wounded, while Baboden escaped. The Dutch retaliated by attacking the Raja's palace but were repulsed. The Konkani population fled into the European town, and many subsequently left Cochin. Their settlement and temple were plundered, with the temple's losses alone estimated at more than Rs. 160,000. The Travancore ruler was particularly angered because Devarsa and Nagendra, the son of Ranga Pai, had acted as his agents and managed substantial sums on his behalf. English intervention, however, prevented a larger conflict. These events occurred amid the devastation produced by Tipu Sultan's campaigns. Refugees entered Cochin, commerce was disrupted and a severe smallpox epidemic caused extensive mortality. The security that had sustained Cochin's merchant communities did not return. In December 1793, Meyer Rahabi and Bhagwan Chetty made a final attempt to preserve the town's commerce by offering to purchase substantial annual quantities of sugar, cloves, Japanese copper, mace and nutmeg. They did not know that Batavia had already decided on 14 November 1793 to abandon the Company's trade at Cochin. Das Gupta regards this withdrawal as the end of the commercial system that had supported Cochin's independent merchants^{xxxv}.

The history of the Konkani in Malabar therefore extended well beyond ordinary mercantile activity. Migration encouraged them to enter commerce, but their accumulated wealth, credit and regional knowledge enabled them to become tax collectors, treasurers, advisers, brokers and diplomatic intermediaries. Their networks connected Cochin with Calicut, Kayamkulam, Purakkad, Travancore, Cannanore, Gujarat and ports across the Arabian Sea. At the same time, their commercial position depended upon political protection and access to competing markets. The careers of Perimbala Shenai, Babba Prabhu and Kalaga Prabhu demonstrate both the influence achieved by Konkani merchants and the vulnerability of that influence when royal authority, Dutch policy and regional warfare changed the conditions under which they operated.

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