

Dynamics of Rural Trade: A Historical and Socio Economic Analysis of Weekly Markets in Malappuram District, Kerala

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Abstract

The history of exchange systems in South India dates back to the Sangam period. Marketplaces and weekly bazaars have historically played a vital role in resource distribution and sociocultural interactions. Originating primarily alongside the growth of the agricultural economy in medieval Kerala, these trading centers served as more than mere economic hubs; they functioned as dynamic spaces for social congregation. This paper examines the pivotal role of weekly markets in the 20th century commercial history of Malappuram district. By focusing on prominent weekly markets such as Vengara, Kottakkal, Manjeri, Malappuram, Edakkara, and Chelari, this study analyzes their influence on the rural economy and traces their evolutionary changes over time. The primary objective is to underscore the relevance of weekly markets within the broader scope of local historiography.

Keywords: Local Trade, Weekly Markets, Trade Practices, Barter System, Cattle Markets.

INTRODUCTION

Marketplaces have traditionally stood as central nodes for the exchange of resources and broader sociocultural interactions. Historical records indicate that structured exchange systems in South India gained prominence during the Sangam era. Sangam literature contains numerous references to the exchange of goods between different geographical zones, or Thinais. Evidence of the barter system, wherein goods were exchanged directly for other goods, is also prevalent in records from the Perumal administrative period.

Following the decline of the Perumal state in Kerala, the emergence of the Swaroopam period witnessed the expansion of an agrarian economy characterized by parambupurayidam (homestead farming), leading to increased agricultural output. This surplus necessitated the systematic collection and redistribution of resources, which subsequently led to the institutionalization of numerous markets and trading centers.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The medieval markets of Kerala are extensively documented in Manipravalam literature. While maritime trade in Malabar has been the subject of numerous studies, local inland trade has arguably received insufficient attention in mainstream historiography. Influenced by medieval market systems, various types of weekly markets continued to operate across different regions of Malabar well into the 20th century. A comprehensive study of these local commercial centers relies on diverse sources,

including ancient Tamil Sangam poetry, medieval Manipravalam texts, travelogues of foreigners, toponymy, settlement registers, and Malabar Gazetteers.

Significant academic contributions have shaped the understanding of Kerala's agrocommercial history. In Kerala Charithram, Dr. Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal detail the revolutionary impact of iron tools on agriculture, which spurred the rise of markets, merchant guilds, and both inland and maritime trade. Similarly, Dr. Raghava Varier's *Madhyakala Keralam: Swaroopa Neethiyude Charithrapadanghal* highlights the growth of local trading centers driven by agricultural surplus and their integration into the Indian Ocean trade network. Dr. Vijayalakshmi's study, *Trade and Trading Centres in Kerala 800-1500 A.D.*, critically analyzes medieval commercial hubs and local trade routes. Furthermore, Dr. Greeshmalatha's dissertation, *Historical Geography of Valluvanad*, elucidates the geographical nuances of inland agrocommercial zones, the historical significance of cattle markets like Vaniamkulam and Perumpilavu, and the traditional systems of weights and measures.

THE NATURE OF WEEKLY MARKETS

Generally, markets are designated locations where individuals gather at specific intervals to buy and sell agricultural goods, nonagricultural commodities, and livestock. Periodic markets, operating at fixed intervals—such as weekly, monthly, or annually—were inherently temporary in nature. Historically, these markets assumed various forms and names, including Pallichantha (church/mosque markets), Ulsavachantha (festival markets), vegetable markets, cattle markets, fish markets, and evening markets. In medieval Kerala, markets were categorized temporally; morning markets were termed Nalangadi, while evening markets were known as Allangadi.

These trading spaces were typically set up in easily accessible open areas or under thatched-roof structures. Weekly markets operated on specific days, with itinerant traders moving between regions (e.g., Monday market, Tuesday market). Goods were transported via boats if near a river, or by bullock carts and headloads in other areas. Infrastructure such as Athanis (resting stones for load bearers), market sheds, warehouses, and soup kitchens naturally developed around these centers. Rural farmers brought their agricultural produce, particularly vegetables, to the market and returned with household necessities ranging from salt to camphor. Local selfgovernments or regional elites facilitated these markets, often levying a market fee or rent known as Chanthappanam from the traders.

WEEKLY MARKETS IN MALAPPURAM DISTRICT

During the early decades of the 20th century, weekly markets formed the backbone of the rural economy in Malappuram district. Beyond commercial transactions, they were vital centers for social life and cultural exchange. Below is a detailed overview of the prominent weekly markets that were deeply interwoven with Malappuram's agrarian culture.

1. VENGARA WEEKLY MARKET

Operating on Mondays, the Vengara market was the commercial nerve center for spices and hill produce in the district since the early 20th century. The market created a festive atmosphere for the entire region. Geographically, it spanned nearly twenty acres, originally located in the extensive compound where the V.M.C. Hospital and Post Office currently stand. Smallscale vendors lined up for almost two hundred meters along the road leading to the main market, an area later known as Chanthappadi.

- **Meat and Livestock:** The market was renowned for buffalo meat, alongside abundant supplies of poultry, goats, and cattle.

- **Daily Necessities:** Commodities included salt, jaggery, coriander, chili, turmeric, tobacco, and dry fish.
- **Stationery and Apparel:** Local readymade garments, bangles, mirrors, combs, and soap were widely available.
- **Agricultural Implements:** Tools such as hoes, axes, and knives were sold.
- **Miscellaneous:** Religious texts (Mushafs), pappadam, and coir products were also traded.

A quasibarter system persisted here, where farmers sold their produce to finance their weekly household purchases. Notably, the sale of poultry and eggs was a primary income source for housewives, highlighting active female economic participation. The presence of magicians, circus performers, and traditional medicine vendors selling their wares through song transformed the market into a popular festival. Historically, the concept of a market in Vengara materialized with the arrival of merchant caravans from Kozhikode. Goods transported up to Panampuzha were carted to Vengara, from where traders continued to Malappuram and Oorakam. Following the Monday market in Vengara, traders typically moved to the Chelari market on Tuesdays. Ultimately, the Vengara market exemplified a paradigm of mutual aid and community solidarity beyond mere commerce.

2. KOTTAKKAL WEEKLY MARKET

Contemporary to Vengara, the Kottakkal market operated on Saturdays at the site of the presentday Kottakkal bus stand. Owned by the Kottakkal Kizhakke Kovilakam, its foundational infrastructure was built during the reign of Eralppadu Thampuran between 1859 and 1878. Demonstrating strategic foresight, the rulers invited Muslim traders from Parappanangadi and Tirurangadi to settle there to expand commerce.

- **Currency and Measurement:** Financial transactions predominantly used the Ana system (4 Anas = 25 paise, 16 Anas = 1 Rupee), along with Rupees and Paise. Grains were measured using traditional units like Nazhi, Edangazhi, Uriya, Para, and Changazhi.
- **Trade Dynamics:** Large merchant contingents from Kozhikode arrived via bullock and buffalo carts bringing dates and rice, and returned with local produce from Kottakkal.
- **Commodities:** The market prioritized household needs, offering betel leaves, vegetables, seeds, plows, and yokes. It was particularly famous for various types of areca nuts, including Neettadakka (watersoaked) and Pokkadakka (ripe). Cottage industry products like palmleaf hand fans and earthenware, alongside materials for traditional cattle races (Kalappoottu), were also in high demand. Although the rise of permanent shops diminished its former glory, a smaller version of the Saturday market continues today, underscoring its foundational role in Kottakkal's early economic development.

3. MANJERI WEEKLY MARKET

Gaining prominence in the latter half of the 20th century, the Manjeri market functioned on Wednesdays. It was divided into two distinct sectors: a general market opposite the Manjeri Girls School dealing in vegetables and daily goods, and a cattle market situated at Nelliparambu.

Given the extensive cashew cultivation in the region, Manjeri became a focal point for cashew trade. It was equally celebrated across Malabar for its betel leaves and Nendran bananas. A unique characteristic of this market was its alignment with the agricultural calendar, with commodities fluctuating according to sowing and harvesting seasons. Today, remnants of this heritage persist in markets held at Aanappamkundu on the Kozhikode road every Wednesday. This enduring traditional market remains a

vital lifeline for rural farmers to sell their produce directly, eliminating middlemen.

Furthermore, the cattle market at Cherani holds a distinct place in Manjeri's commercial lineage. Hundreds of livestock were brought weekly from border villages like Vazhikkadavu, as well as Kondotty, Areekode, Wandoor, and Perinthalmanna. Despite modern technological and lifestyle shifts impacting traditional trade, these continuing markets serve as living historical monuments to the region's socioeconomic evolution and commercial legacy.

4. MALAPPURAM WEEKLY MARKET

The Malappuram market convened on Thursdays north of the old bus stand. Due to the demographic composition, the majority of traders and consumers belonged to the Muslim community. Operating from early morning until late at night under thatched roofs, the market relied heavily on lanterns, Panees (glass lamps), and Choottu (palm leaf torches) for illumination. While Kottakkal was known for areca nuts, Malappuram was renowned for its dry fish trade. Agricultural tools like hoes and plows, along with books and beedis, were also sold. Goods were predominantly transported via bullock/buffalo carts and headloads.

5. EDAKKARA WEEKLY MARKET

Situated in the Vazhikkadavu Panchayat, the Edakkara market operated on Saturdays with a primary focus on cattle trading. Strategically located near the confluence of the Punnappuzha and Kalakkanpuzha rivers along the GudalurKozhikode route, the riverine proximity facilitated water transport and the bathing of livestock.

Besides agricultural produce like rubber and black pepper, it was a crucial market for residents of Vazhikkadavu, Moothedam, Pothukallu, and Chungathara panchayats. Livestock, including goats, buffaloes, cows, and pigs, were predominantly brought from Tamil Nadu regions such as Masinagudi, Gudalur, and Gundlupet. The market rivaled the fame of the Vaniamkulam and Kuzhalmannam markets. The sale of pork was a distinct feature here. Originally a cattle market that diversified into seeds and household goods, Edakkara eventually reverted to functioning strictly as a cattle market following the development of modern towns.

6. CHELARI WEEKLY MARKET

The Chelari market was a premier cattle market in the district, active on Tuesdays. It functioned as an essential sociocultural exchange platform, drawing people from distant locations for various needs. Goats, cows, and buffaloes—often sourced from neighboring states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu—were the primary commodities. The market provided a space for locals and traders, many of whom arrived from Vengara's Monday market, to interact and exchange ideas.

The management of the market was auctioned, requiring license holders to pay a fixed annual sum to the Taluk boards. This fee was calculated based on market footfall, the number of sheds, and sales volume. Taluk board representatives oversaw daily operations. Although the original Chelari market has lost its former prominence, its legacy continues through the active cattle market currently held at Parambil Peedika under the name Peruvallur Market.

In addition to the aforementioned centers, active markets existed in Tirur (betel market), Valanchery, Ponnani, Nilambur (night markets), Wandoor, Pandikkad, Koottilangadi, Tirurangadi, Randathani, Kalpakanchery, and Chattiparambu (cattle market).

CONCLUSION

Weekly markets exerted a profound influence on the socioeconomic life of rural populations, serving as

the primary hubs for the collection and distribution of village produce. Transcending financial transactions, they acted as public spheres fostering communication and interaction among people from diverse locales. Therefore, the weekly markets of Malappuram district must be viewed as institutions that decisively shaped the local economy and social structure.

As the backbone of the rural economy, these markets ensured liquidity for farmers who sold surplus produce to meet their weekly household needs. The cyclical operation of these markets moving from Vengara on Monday to Chelari on Tuesday facilitated highly efficient resource distribution. Geographically, their locations were often dictated by proximity to rivers or major roads. In an era of limited mass communication, these spaces doubled as informal forums for sharing news and political discourse.

Crucially, the markets highlighted women's economic participation; rural housewives sustained a microeconomy by selling poultry and eggs to purchase daily necessities like soap, combs, and bangles. The vibrant presence of entertainers and musical medicine vendors infused these commercial spaces with a festive spirit. Operating before the adoption of the metric system, these historical trading centers relied on traditional measurements and currency, offering a wide array of goods from agricultural tools to household items. Although the advent of modern supermarkets has diminished the relevance of these traditional systems, studying weekly markets remains academically imperative for comprehending the region's historical and cultural trajectory.

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