



THE SPACE IN BETWEEN: A SOCIOPOLITICAL MAPPING OF KERALA COASTAL BORDER IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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Abstract

The geographical location of a land has a pivotal role in determining the developmental path of that place. The case of Kerala, a land lying near the southern part of peninsular India is an excellent example that illustrates the role of location in a place's history. The paper is an attempt to have a spatial analysis of Kerala's coastal border and how the nature of the borderline, hinterland and the spaces in-between played a major part in shaping the developmental pattern of the place. The arrival of imperial powers and their interference had a geographic orientation that changed with time and their motives and this aspect of imperial influence is also analysed with the aid of centre-periphery model of power distribution. The study, thus mainly concentrates on the point of their entry- the coastal areas, and ponders on the changes that happened in this particular space, over a period of time.

Keywords: Kerala history, spatial analysis, heterotopia, centre- periphery model

The geographical position of Kerala and the multitude of natural wealth possessed by the land played a major role in attracting foreign powers to this land since time immemorial. Coastal areas and ports were the primary agents that facilitated transactions with foreign lands and so, these spaces along the costal borders assumed a vital position in developing the history of the land. The border between the sea and the mainland thus has a long history which can be studied and analysed with the help of border and spatial theories and centre/peripheral models, and the same is attempted in this paper. A spatial analysis of these border spaces is developed from a Foucaultian perspective; and the centre-periphery model is used to study how the notion of 'power' operated in the medieval, stratified society who occupied the coastal borders and were ruled over by the higher authority who inhabited the hinterlands.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the hinterland of Kerala witnessed the growth and development of major cities and social settlements. The coastal border was left almost vacant by the people of higher strata, and these areas served their purpose as spaces of trade and transactions. Though this border space was the backbone of the economy at that time, the high social groups who controlled power and had political dominance never preferred the coastal border as a place of inhabitation, but left the place for the

marginalized and native seafaring community. In all the native port cities that appeared prior to the arrival of the Europeans, there was an increasing tendency to keep the waterfront vacant and make the cities grow and develop from the port area more towards the direction of the hinterland. Studies that deal with the general features of Indian port-cities that appeared before the arrival of the Europeans says: “the service staff was near the ware-houses then came the merchants’ city dividing according to faith and origin. Brahmins and Nairs were in the estates. The low castes and the untouchables were on the coast, well out of the sight of Brahmins and Nairs” (Arasaratnam 353-54).

Historians point out various reasons for such a social stratification along the borders. For instance, the caste system that existed in Kerala society demanded such a demarcation between high and low caste societies. Another reason for this separation could be the vulnerable geographic nature of these spaces. Coastal belts are more vulnerable to external attacks as well as natural calamities and such risks associated with sea made the coastal border least preferred area for inhabitation. Also, the medieval era held a belief that sea is a polluting agent, and that people engaged in sea-related agents are source of such pollution (Malekandathil). This also led to the spatial stratification along coastal borders. Availability of fertile lands and the variety of plant species that could be grown in the mainland was also another interest that made the socially powerful class leave the borderlands.

HETEROTOPIC NATURE OF COASTAL BORDER:

From the above observations, one can see that the maritime border was a space that was included, and at the same time excluded from the social setup in medieval Kerala. The need to have a working-class community, who can act as facilitators were necessary to have a proper trade relation, but this working class, sea-faring community were excluded from the mainstream society. Incorporating spatial theory to border studies, one can argue that the coastal border of Kerala acted as ‘heterotopia’ of multiple functions. Heterotopia is a concept elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe certain cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow ‘other’: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming (Delago). In the case of medieval Kerala, coastal borders and natives were always ‘othered’, as the social stratification always excluded them from mainstream society. With the discussion of possible reasons for this othering done earlier, one can see that these maritime borders incorporated various layers of meaning and purpose that those meet the eye.

Being ‘othered’ doesn’t necessarily mean that the inhabitants of the coastal borders were ignorant or even a repressed category. Their knowledge regarding sea, astronomical data, trade routes etc. often made them naval chiefs and informants of kings, during the colonial era in Kerala. The owners of these heterotopic spaces had expertise in sea-faring and navigation that the hinterland inhabitants never had. Thus, these coastal borders transformed into a space of knowledge, which the hinterland-dwellers can never possess.

Foucault also adds that “there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias”, and the statement remains quite true in the case of medieval Kerala culture. The coastal border thus became a space of multiple functions and underwent transitions with time. However, with the arrival of European powers, the heterotopic nature of these maritime borders became more complex and problematic. The establishment of forts and observatories gave the Imperial community power over the local rulers and community. The heterotopic nature of the coastal border became more surveillance oriented, diminishing the power of knowledge possessed by the natives.

CENTRE-PERIPHERY MODEL ANALYSIS OF COASTAL BORDER:

Studying the stratification along coastal borders in the light of centre-periphery model of power, one can gain new insights to the economic and social changes that happened in the particular period. The centre-periphery model suggests that the economy is characterized by a structured relationship between economic centres which, by using military, political, and trade power, extract an economic surplus from the subordinate peripheral regions (“Economic Development”). In the case of Kerala, the mode of power exerted on the peripheral- border region underwent various changes with the arrival of imperial powers.

Before the arrival of foreign power, the centre-periphery relations in Kerala were maintained with the help of military power, trade monopoly, religion etc. For instance, the Zamorin of Calicut, who had his original home at Nediyruppu near Kondotti in the interior Eranad, wanted an outlet to the sea from his

landlocked domain. The Perumpadappu swarupam shifted their headquarters to Cochin only during the 1400s. The kingdom of Travancore had its capital at the hinterland region of Venad near the port of Kollam. Thus, the power located in the centre made its presence felt in the peripheral coastal borders by establishing new political power settlements near the ports. Also, they effectively manipulated the inhabitants in the coastal border, who belonged to other religious categories. Jewish, Christian and Muslim settlements along the coastal borders enjoyed a privileged position as compared to the local inhabitants and they were provided with trade opportunities, and often chosen as facilitators for the same. Thus, rather than creating a division, the coastal border of Kerala acted as a porous membrane that facilitated a symbiotic relation between the foreign lands and the mainland.

However, with the arrival of European power, the concept of 'centre' shifted in various levels. The Portuguese occupied the waterfront areas and developed their own urban centres along the sea-side with sufficient distance from the native towns. They also built various structures like ports and houses on the coastal border that were architecturally unique and reinforced their notion of sovereignty and power exercise. With the arrival of the Dutch and the British following them, the coastal border became a space of experimentation and exponential development. The interference of these foreign elements resulted in a mosaic culture in the border region, as compared to the hinterland areas.

Hence the analysis taken up makes it evident that the coastal border of Kerala is a space that evolved with time, and various social factors. From a place that was isolated and left behind for the 'othered' the coastal space became an urbanized space of great economic influence and impact, with imperial influence. The maritime border of Kerala, thus has played an inevitable role in the history of this land, and is a space embedded with multiple layers of meanings.

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