

Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the '*Committee on Publication Ethics*'

Online ISSN:2584-184X



Research Article

The Role of Keyis in the Mercantile Activities in Malabar

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20280797>

Abstract

The mercantile history of Malabar occupies a significant position in the socio-economic history of Kerala. Among the indigenous merchant communities that emerged during the colonial period, the Keyis of Tellicherry played a decisive role in shaping maritime commerce, pepper trade, and colonial economic networks in Malabar. This article examines the origin, growth, and mercantile activities of the Keyi family and analyses their contribution to the commercial transformation of Malabar under the English East India Company. The paper also discusses the family system, architecture, social customs, and political influence of the Keyi community in North Malabar. The study highlights how local merchant groups adapted to colonial capitalism and contributed to the economic transformation of the Malabar Coast. The study also explores the maritime networks of the Keyis, their relationship with colonial powers, social organisation, architectural contributions, and their influence on the political economy of North Malabar. Using historical sources, travel accounts, colonial records, and secondary studies, this paper argues that the Keyis represented an indigenous mercantile elite that successfully adapted to the changing structures of colonial capitalism.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2584-184X
- Received: 04-04-2026
- Accepted: 17-05-2026
- Published: 19-05-2026
- MRR:4(5); 2026: 181-185
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- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

K K D, The Role of Keyis in the Mercantile Activities in Malabar. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(5):181-185.

Access this Article Online



www.mrrjournal.in

KEYWORDS: Keyis, Malabar, Tellicherry, Maritime Trade, East India Company, Mercantile History, Colonial Economy

1. INTRODUCTION

Malabar occupied a unique place in the commercial history of the Indian Ocean world because of its strategic location and abundant production of spices, especially pepper and cardamom. Since ancient times, Arab traders, Chinese merchants, and European colonial powers have been attracted to the Malabar Coast due to its lucrative maritime trade. The arrival of the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English intensified the commercial competition in the region. During the colonial period, Tellicherry (Thalassery) emerged as one of the major trading centres of the English East India Company.

The rise of Tellicherry also led to the emergence of several indigenous merchant communities that collaborated with European trading companies. Among them, the Keyis of Tellicherry became one of the most influential mercantile families in North Malabar. Their commercial activities extended from Malabar to Bombay, Gujarat, Arabia, and other regions connected through maritime trade networks.

The Keyis were not merely traders; they were financiers, political intermediaries, ship owners, landlords, and cultural patrons. Their rise reflected the transformation of Malabar society under colonial capitalism. The family accumulated wealth through the pepper trade, maritime commerce, and collaboration with the English East India Company. Over time, they emerged as an aristocratic Muslim mercantile family with significant influence in the political and economic affairs of Malabar.

This article examines the historical role of the Keyis in the mercantile activities of Malabar with special reference to their maritime trade, commercial networks, social organisation, architectural contributions, and political influence.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several historians and scholars have examined the commercial history of Malabar and the role of indigenous merchant communities in colonial Kerala. William Logan's *Malabar Manual* provides valuable insights into the political and economic conditions of Malabar during the colonial period. Francis Buchanan's travel accounts also contain important observations on the pepper trade, maritime commerce, and the commercial significance of Tellicherry.

Many eminent scholars like William Logan, Francis Buchanan, Churiya Vasudevan, K. K. N. Kurup, E. Ismail, M.P. Mujeeb Rahman, Santhosh Abraham, etc. have contributed much to this topic. The book 'Thalasseryile Keyimar. Charithravum Samskaravum', written by K.K. N. Kurup and E. Ismail, is an important work related to the history of the Keys of Malabar. The works of William Logan, like 'Malabar Manuel' and 'A Collection Of Treatise, Engagements and Other Papers of Importance Relating To British Affairs In Malabar', etc., were considered as the authentic documents which helped the study of Keyis and the British relations. It also deals with the commercial activities of Chovvakaran Moosa and his predecessors. Francis Buchanan's work 'A Journey From Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar' gave information about the trade relations of the English East India Company in Tellicherry.

A.P. Ibrahim Kunju has extensively discussed the socio-economic condition of Mappila Muslims and highlighted the contribution of mercantile families such as the Keyis in the economic development of Malabar. K.K.N. Kurupp and E. Ismail's studies on the Keyis remain among the most significant scholarly works dealing with the history, family system, architecture, and commercial activities of the community.

Santhosh Abraham analysed the cosmopolitan character of the Keyi merchants and examined their role in the development of coastal trade networks in the Indian Ocean world. Arun Thomas also discussed the rise of Tellicherry as a major commercial centre under the English East India Company.

However, despite these studies, there remains a lack of detailed academic analysis focusing specifically on the mercantile activities of the Keyis and their contribution to the colonial economy of Malabar. This study attempts to fill that gap by analysing the economic, maritime, and socio-political role of the Keyis in a comprehensive manner.

Historical Background of Tellicherry

The emergence of Tellicherry as a commercial centre was closely connected with the expansion of European colonial trade in Malabar. The English East India Company established its factory at Tellicherry in the late seventeenth century because of the availability of pepper and other spices in the hinterlands of North Malabar.

Malabar had enormous significance for spices, especially pepper. Hence, it attracted people from other areas throughout the ages. The colonial period witnessed its peak due to the competition between European companies that tried to establish their settlements in suitable centres of the eastern world. In Malabar, the English East India Company selected Tellicherry as an appropriate trade centre in the late 17th century. It resulted in the growth of Tellicherry as a trade centre, which gradually became the major market of the Malabar Coast. The main reason for the settlement of the English was their great treasury of pepper and cardamom, which was in great demand in foreign markets.

In the 18th century, Malabar witnessed several changes. In the middle of the century, the Dutch power in Malabar had declined. Therefore, the English and French compete with each other to monopolise the pepper trade of Malabar. At last, the English became victorious. In Malabar, the French settlement at Mahe was merely a shadow of an English factory. Thus, by the 18th century, the English trade and political power in Malabar were concentrated at Tellicherry. In fact, the history of 18th-century Malabar was mainly related to the English East India Company's factory at Tellicherry.

European travel accounts describe Tellicherry as a prosperous commercial centre. Alexander Hamilton referred to the English factory at Tellicherry as a fortified trading settlement. Francis Buchanan also described the importance of Tellicherry in the pepper trade of Malabar. According to colonial records, the English East India Company preferred Tellicherry over Calicut because of its better quality pepper and lower customs duties.

The political condition of Malabar also helped the English establish their commercial dominance. The decline of Dutch

power and the rivalry between the French and the English enabled the English East India Company to strengthen its position in Tellicherry. Through treaties with local rulers such as the Kolathiri Raja and the Zamorin, the Company secured commercial privileges and monopolistic control over the spice trade.

The growth of Tellicherry encouraged the migration of merchants, traders, artisans, and labourers into the region. Indigenous merchants became intermediaries between European companies and local producers. In this context, the Keyis emerged as one of the most influential merchant groups in Malabar.

Emergence of the Keyi Family

The history of the Keyi family begins with Aluppy Kakka, a small trader from Chovva near Kannur. Due to the political disturbances in North Malabar and the growing commercial opportunities in Tellicherry, he migrated to the English settlement during the eighteenth century.

The term “Keyi” is believed to have originated from a Persian or Urdu term meaning “owner” or “master,” especially the owner of a sailing ship. Since the family owned ships and engaged in maritime trade, the title became associated with them.

Aluppy Kakka initially worked as a supplier of pepper, cardamom, and other spices to the English East India Company. The Company advanced money to local merchants for procuring commodities from the hinterlands. Through honesty, efficiency, and commercial intelligence, Aluppy Kakka gained the confidence of the English Company.

The success of Aluppy Kakka laid the foundation for the rise of the Keyi mercantile house. His nephews, especially Moosa Kakka, expanded the family’s commercial activities and transformed the family into one of the richest mercantile groups in Malabar.

Maritime Activities of the Keyis

The maritime activities of the Keyis formed the basis of their economic prosperity. The family owned ships and maintained trade connections with Bombay, Surat, Calcutta, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. They exported pepper, cardamom, copra, timber, and other commodities from Malabar.

Moosa Kakka emerged as the most dynamic figure in the commercial history of the Keyis. He expanded trade networks beyond Malabar and established business centres in Bombay and Alleppey. He also maintained trade relations with Gujarati merchants and Arab traders.

The maritime activities of the Keyis reflected the cosmopolitan character of the Malabar Coast. Through shipping networks, they connected Malabar with the wider Indian Ocean trade world. Their commercial success was based on indigenous entrepreneurship combined with collaboration with colonial powers.

The English East India Company depended heavily on indigenous merchants like the Keyis for procuring spices and transporting goods. The Keyis acted as mediators between local

producers and foreign markets. Their warehouses near the Tellicherry port became important centres of trade and storage. The family also played an important role in supplying provisions and financial assistance to the English East India Company during periods of war and political instability. Colonial records indicate that Moosa Kakka provided loans to the Company and supported British military operations in Malabar.

Relationship with the English East India Company

The relationship between the Keyis and the English East India Company was mutually beneficial. The Company required local merchants for procuring commodities, while the Keyis benefited from Company patronage, capital, and political protection.

The Company provided advances to merchants like Aluppy Kakka and Moosa Kakka for purchasing pepper and cardamom. In return, the Keyis ensured a steady supply of commodities to the Company.

The political influence of the Keyis increased because of their close relationship with the British. During the Mysorean invasions under Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan, the Keyis supported the English East India Company. They provided financial aid, transportation facilities, and logistical support.

Moosa Kakka also acted as an intermediary between the British and local rulers, such as the Arakkal Beebi. His diplomatic role enhanced his prestige among both colonial authorities and indigenous elites.

The collaboration between the Keyis and the English illustrates how indigenous merchant families adapted to colonial economic structures and used colonial patronage to strengthen their commercial position.

Political and Social Influence

The wealth accumulated through maritime trade enabled the Keyis to become influential figures in the socio-political life of Malabar. They acquired extensive landed properties in different parts of Kerala and transformed themselves into aristocratic landlords.

The family maintained relations with local rulers, British officials, and other merchant communities. Their influence extended into revenue administration, trade regulation, and local politics.

The Keyis also contributed to the development of urban culture in Tellicherry. Their houses, warehouses, and mosques reflected a combination of indigenous and colonial architectural styles.

The family followed the matrilineal system of inheritance known as Marumakkathayam, which was common among certain Muslim families in North Malabar. Though Islam traditionally follows patrilineal inheritance, the Keyis adopted matrilineity under the influence of local customs.

The social life of the Keyis combined Islamic traditions with local cultural practices. Their ceremonies, rituals, and architectural patterns reveal the syncretic nature of Malabar society.

Architectural Contributions of the Keyis

One of the most visible contributions of the Keyis was in the field of architecture. Their warehouses, residences, and mosques represented a unique blend of Kerala, Islamic, and colonial architectural styles.

The Odathil Palli in Tellicherry remains one of the finest examples of traditional mosque architecture in Kerala. Constructed mainly with teak wood and copper roofing, the mosque reflects indigenous craftsmanship combined with mercantile prosperity.

The Keyi warehouses near the coast were designed both as residences and storage centres. These buildings reveal the commercial orientation of the family and their adaptation to maritime trade.

Their houses also displayed elements of European bungalow architecture while preserving traditional Kerala features such as nadumuttam, wooden carvings, and tiled roofing.

Through these constructions, the Keyis contributed significantly to the urban and cultural landscape of Tellicherry.

Although the commercial dominance of the Keyis declined, their social prestige and cultural influence continued in Malabar society.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyse the emergence of the Keyis as a mercantile community in Malabar.
- To study the maritime activities of the Keyis in the colonial economy.
- To examine the relationship between the Keyis and the English East India Company.
- To evaluate the socio-cultural contributions of the Keyi family in Malabar.
- To understand the role of indigenous merchants in the transformation of colonial trade networks.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical and analytical methodology. Both primary and secondary sources have been utilised for the preparation of the article. Primary sources include colonial records, travel accounts, administrative reports, and historical documents related to the Malabar trade. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, and scholarly studies on the economic and social history of Kerala.

The research adopts a socio-economic approach to analyse the role of indigenous merchants in colonial Malabar. Both primary and secondary sources have been used. Travel accounts, colonial records, local histories, and scholarly works related to Malabar trade and the Keyi family form the basis of the study. The study also follows an interdisciplinary approach by integrating socio-economic, political, and cultural perspectives.

5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study reveals that the Keyis emerged as one of the most influential indigenous merchant families in colonial Malabar through their strategic collaboration with the English East India

Company. Their economic success was primarily based on maritime trade, pepper commerce, and shipping activities.

The Keyis played a vital role in connecting Malabar with larger Indian Ocean trade networks. Their warehouses, ships, and trading centres facilitated the export of spices and other commodities to foreign markets. The family also functioned as financiers and political intermediaries in the colonial economy.

The research further indicates that the socio-cultural influence of the Keyis extended beyond trade. Their architectural contributions, urban development activities, and patronage of religious institutions significantly shaped the cultural landscape of Tellicherry.

At the same time, the decline of the Keyis demonstrates the transformation of indigenous mercantile capitalism under direct colonial domination. The emergence of modern commercial systems and internal fragmentation weakened the traditional mercantile structure of the family.

Decline of the Mercantile Power of the Keyis

The decline of the Keyis as a major mercantile power began in the nineteenth century. Several factors contributed to this decline.

First, the changing nature of colonial trade reduced the importance of indigenous intermediaries. The English East India Company gradually established direct control over commercial networks.

Second, internal divisions within the family weakened their commercial unity. The family was divided into several branches, leading to the fragmentation of wealth and property.

Third, the transformation of maritime trade and the rise of modern commercial systems reduced the relevance of traditional merchant houses.

6. CONCLUSION

The history of the Keyis represents an important chapter in the mercantile history of Malabar. Their rise demonstrates how indigenous merchant families adapted to the changing political and economic conditions created by colonialism.

Through maritime trade, pepper commerce, ship ownership, and collaboration with the English East India Company, the Keyis accumulated immense wealth and influence. They played a crucial role in connecting Malabar with wider Indian Ocean trade networks. The Keys also contributed to the socio-cultural transformation of Malabar through architecture, urban development, and patronage of religious institutions. Their story reflects the emergence of a cosmopolitan mercantile elite in colonial Kerala. The study of the Keyis helps us understand the complex relationship between indigenous merchant communities and colonial capitalism in South India. It also reveals the dynamic role played by local actors in shaping the economic history of the Malabar Coast.

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