Analysing the Contributions of Early Travellers in the History of Kerala

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“Man’s curiosity for things and enquiry for food and shelter from one place to another gave birth to travel and travel led to tourism.”¹ From time immemorial man’s thirst for journeying is unquenchable, which has resulted in the spread of Human civilisation to all parts of the globe. Travels in the more advanced stages of our civilisation was done with an intent on Exploration, Diplomacy, Commerce, Knowledge etc. With Trade and Commerce being the main motivation behind travel rather than for pleasure in the early ages, the travellers were mostly consisting of Merchants, Pilgrims or Scholars.

Conscious travels were undertaken to explore and see the world as it had progressed. And a new phenomenon of travelling in pursuit of leisure came to being and in course of time the concept of tourism got new meaning and acquired importance, as travelling exclusively for pleasure constitutes the main theme of tourism in these days.

“The concept of pleasure travel as it existed in the west can be associated with the Roman Empire…medieval baths and seaside resorts…were very popular with the Romans.”² Rapid Industrialisation which gave way to the change in economic and social systems around the world, which gave rise to an Industrial society. And by the turn of the 20th century, there arose a change in the mental attitude towards pleasure seeking, and other attitudes like travel for education, the growing need to find relief from working routine and an increase in material wealth and improvements in transport etc. resulted in creating a fertile ground for the development of tourism around the world. “After the second world war, tourism became a global phenomenon due to two main reasons. First, developments in the field of Air transportation and the advent of leisure in modern world.”³ “Today tourism is the world’s second largest industry after oil industry.”⁴

In the pursuit of trade, education and pilgrimage, people belonging to India and Abroad had been travelling all over the nation and abroad from time immemorial. Thus the
phenomenon of Tourism is not new to the nation. As this paper tries to portray and pay homage to the early travellers that had ventured on to this distant land, and made permanent footprints on the historical narration of the land that is now called upon as Kerala. A brief narration on to how their interactions that were written down plays a prominent part in the reconstruction of early Kerala History.

Numerous travellers had visited Kerala in the distant past from faraway lands. “Like elsewhere the intention of most of these travellers to Kerala was also largely based on trade and commerce.”\(^5\) Countless volumes had been written on these adventurers and travellers who had spent their time in Kerala who had come here with the intention of expanding their minds and enlarging their wealth. These accounts of the foreign travellers who visited Kerala during the ancient periods, provide the major source of information that is used to reconstruct the history of Kerala.

References of Kerala can be seen in accounts of Classical writers of Greece and Rome. “The anonymous author of the Periplus of the Erythraean sea, (1\(^{st}\) Century AD) was the first traveller that provided information about ancient Kerala.”\(^6\) “The periplus refers to the rulers of Kerala as Keprobotrus and the land he ruled over as Limurike.”\(^7\) “Periplus gies a very valuable account of Kerala’s trade and commerce in the 1\(^{st}\) Century A.D. Plinny (1\(^{st}\) Century A.D) and Ptolemy (2\(^{nd}\) Century A.D) are the classical geographers whose accounts have been of great help in recapturing the outline of Kerala History. One of the ports of Kerala as described by Pliny as the first emporium in India. That was in the first century AD and the port has now been identified as Kodungallur.”\(^8\) These writings provide with detailed information about the thriving trade between Kerala Coast and the Roman Empire through the ports of Muziris, Tyndis, Barace etc.

It was in 851 A.D that the Arab Traveller Sulaiman had visited Kerala. “He observed that Quillion was the important port in south india at that time.”\(^9\) The accounts of Arab travellers and Geographers form an important source for recreating the History of Kerala. As it was in the 10\(^{th}\) century A.D that another famous Arab traveller named, Mazudi, had made references to Kerala.

First to have landed at Quilion, Marcopolo the famous Venitian traveller visited Kerala on his return journey from China in 1294.\(^10\) “In the pepper country he refers to its pepper and its indigo. He has given a very detailed account of the ancient Kerala, its people and its natural resources.”\(^11\) His work shines light on a treasure-trove of information about
Kerala’s social and political life during that period. His descriptions of the animals and birds that were encountered here reveals the likes of a modern day tourist diary.

Another famous traveller who wrote interesting accounts on Kerala was Ibn-Buttuta. He had “wrote a detailed diary of his travel experiences. He was the first explorer to travel to almost every part of the known world.”12 Born in Tangier, Morocco in 1304 A.D, he had left his home and had reached India after having passing through various centres of importance. He had visited Calicut six times and has left an interesting account of the port of Calicut, its King and People. He had dedicated his experience under the title of Tuhfat-um-Nazzar fi Ghara’ ib ul-Ansar Wa’Ajab-ul-Afsar or Rehla.13 This work contain valuable information on the political and social conditions of Malabar during the period. His professional interest in men and matters can be seen on nearly every page of his work. He describes Mulayabar a pepper country in India, as he refers to pepper trade and the huge amounts of Chinese Junks he had found in the Ports.

Some other travellers whose names need special mention are Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveller from Spain who had arrived in Kerala between 1159 and 1173 A.D, John De Marignodin of Florence and Nicolo Conti from Italy, who had visited Kerala between 1440 and 1441 A.D, these travellers were impressed by the flourishing trade in ginger, pepper and cinnamon which were carried on at the ports of Kerala especially at Quilon. Abdul Razzak who gives ample information about Kerala in the 15th century had visited Calicut in 1442. While Ludovico De Varthema and Dwarte Barbosa who had visited during 1502-1508 has left with valuable records of Calicut, its government and People. Afterwards, a Dutch priest named Canter Fisher who had visited Kerala in 1723 A.D provides valuable information about Temples of Kerala.

R.D Mayer, has defined tourism as “a collective term for human movement and its attendant activities caused by the exteriorisation and fulfilment of the desire to escape that is more or less latent in everybody.”14 Which can be applied to the type of tourism that the nation or the world now welcomes into their own, as Tourism has been transformed into an Industry. This was not the case as seen in Kerala prior to the 17th century, as the purposes of travel to this exotic land cannot be summed up to just one notion. The type of tourists or travellers that Kerala had been host to had their intentions set to Trade, Commerce, Pilgrimage or for the expansion of one’s own knowledge. And with is the records that they
had produced through their travel diaries have now come to help create a vivid picture of the Social, Economic and Political scenario that was in play in Kerala at the time.

End Notes

2 Prannath Seth., Successful Tourism Management, Sterling Publication, New Delhi, 1985, p.3.
3 Lajipathi Rai H., opcit. p.4
4 Premnath Dhar, Development of Tourism and Travel Industry: An Indian Perspective, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, p.3.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
13 Ibid.