

# Economic significance of Port of Alappuzha: A study on past and present scenario

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## **Abstract**

The port of Alappuzha held a significant place in the history of Kerala with its role in trade activities during the midst of twentieth century. The port was built by Raja Keshawa Das, who was the Dewan of erstwhile Kingdom of Travancore and was opened in the year 1762 mainly for the export of coir and coir yarn. The port had taken the Kingdom of Travancore to glory since all major trade activities took place from this port. However, the port lost its importance due to various reasons. Presently, one who visit the Alappuzha port can only see remains (which includes materials and partly destroyed buildings) of 'the once busiest port of Kerala'. Even though, revival of the port for carrying out trade activities is not economically viable, since all major trades in Kerala happens from port of Kochi and Vizhinjam respectively, revival of the port with a focus on improving tourism holds considerable importance. Towards this, various initiatives have been taken by the government of Kerala for changing the face of Alappuzha port. This project will undoubtedly increase the economic benefits in the tourism sector of Alappuzha.

**Keywords:** Port of Alappuzha, Export-import matrix, coir, tourism.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Alappuzha or Alleppey is a coastal district in the Southern state of Kerala. Alleppey was given the title '*Venice of the East*' by Lord Curzon due to her typically pleasing backwaters, lagoons, picturesque canals and beaches. The rise and fall of Alappuzha is closely linked to the history of the port. Port is the main factor which propelled the region to dizzying heights and later to the depth of stagnation and backwardness with its downfall. Alappuzha was the commercial metropolis of the erstwhile Kingdom of Travancore. It was with the construction of the Alappuzha port that Alappuzha gained a coveted place in the international trade map. Monopoly in the global coir market was just one of the feathers in the crown of this port town those glorious days. Even though the royal period of Alappuzha port lasted only till 1989, the port gained an inevitable role in the economic history of Kerala through these years. Now the government of Kerala is planning to revive Alappuzha port on the wings of tourism.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme 2010, "tourism's economic benefits relates to foreign exchange earnings, tourist's expenditures, the export and import of related products and services generate profit to the country and can stimulate the investment necessary to finance growth in the other economic sectors". Based on the report of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) 2017, India is the world's seventh largest economy in terms of the total contributions to the country's GDP. Presently, Kerala is recognized internationally as a tourist destination. Tourism sector is the principle contributor of the state's economy and has emerged as a major propeller in the economic development of Kerala. Alappuzha is an important tourist destination of Kerala. Even though no trade activities can happen in the present port of Alappuzha, developing the port in order to make it a famous tourist attraction is going to happen or in other words the tourism sector have come to rescue the historically and economically important Alappuzha port. *In this background the present study intends to analyse the scope of Alappuzha port in terms of tourism.*

## **II. OBJECTIVES**

1. To study the economic history of the Port of Alappuzha.
2. To analyze the contributions and achievements of the old Port of Alappuzha.
3. To analyze the factors that reduced the importance of the Port of Alappuzha.
4. To study the status of present port of Alappuzha.
5. To examine the likely contributions and benefits in tourism sector of Alappuzha after reviving the old Alappuzha port.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Present study intends to analyse the economic history of the old port of Alappuzha and to examine the scope of the revived Alappuzha port on the basis of secondary sources of data. Data from government records collected from Alappuzha port office are used for the study.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

#### A) History of Alappuzha port and transformation of Alappuzha into a port town.

Alappuzha was a part of the Kingdom of Travancore and was ruled by the Rajas of Travancore before India's Independence. The village of Alappuzha was developed during the reign of Rama Varma also known as Dharma Raja. During the period, the Kingdom of Travancore was in need of a port which was completely independent from the Portuguese and Dutch dominance. Raja Keshava Das, who was the Dewan of Travancore, took various steps to develop Alappuzha port into a leading business port of Travancore. He constructed two parallel canals called the 'Vadai canal' and the 'Commercial Canal' to transport commodities from Vembanad lake to the Arabian sea port. There were also ten rivers which connects Vembanad lake to the hinterland where the spices and other items were produced for the external markets. The products of the hinterland were transported in 'Tonis' (riverine boats) and 'Kettuvalloms' to the lake Vembanad and were directly brought to the ocean going vessels which anchored off the coast of Alleppey.

Raja Keshava Das offered all infrastructural facilities to merchants and traders from Surat, Mumbai, Sindh and Kutch to start the industrial enterprises, trading and cargo centers in the newly setup port town of Alappuzha. The port was opened in the year 1762, mainly for the export of commodities. The first ship embarked at Alappuzha in 1786. Keshava Dasan got three ships built for trade with Calcutta and Bombay. Alleppey afforded a convenient depot for the storage and disposal of goods produced in Travancore. A few ware houses and shops were opened. Alappuzha became the centre of trade for coir, copra, ginger, cardamom, rubber and tea. The Gujarati's who were traditionally considered the merchants of the first order, contributed a lot towards the meteoric rise of the port of Alleppey. Merchants were brought from various places especially from the rich provinces of Sindh and Kutchh and were given every facility for carrying on good trade relations. To make their stay permanent, a Hindu temple and a building were built in the town. Tamil brahmins, vellalars, radyars, chettiyars, gauda saraswathars, kachi memans and halayi memans were the some of the other famous traders in Alappuzha. Some of the rich and influential merchants of the present day Alleppey are descendants of these traders. Gujaraties gave preference to the trade of rice, spices and tobacco. English companies dominated the coir industry and increased the exports and imports.

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden piers were constructed at the port. A pier to load and unload commodities to and from the ocean going vessels was also added to the infrastructural facilities of Alleppey which got later changed with iron pillars. A light house was built in 1862 in the Alleppey coast. The light house spreads light to a distance of 20 Kilometers. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rails were constructed for the movement of goods.

Famous Indian traders who played important role in the development of Alappuzha port were Thachan MathuTarakan and Naoroji. Mathu Tharakan, who belonged to Kuthiathodu, moved to Alleppey and started his career as an exporter especially of timber and spices. Besides being a strong financier to the kingdom of Travancore, he rose to the position of Minister of Commerce in the government of Travancore from 1798 to 1810. Two commercial organistions during the time were Travancore Chamber and Alleppey Chamber. Travancore chamber was under the control of Europeans. Alleppey chamber was an organization of Indian merchants. These organisations helped for the improvement in trade activities of Alappuzha port.

#### B) Export-Import Matrix at Alappuzha Port

Going through the past records, Alappuzha was a thriving port till late sixties. During those glorious days, nearly 600 steamers used to call at the port annually. The main export commodities were coir and coir products, spices, tapioca powder, turmeric, pepper etc and the import items were food grains on government of India account. The details of tonnage cargo which were handled annually are tabulated below:-

Table 1- Tonnage of cargo handled from 1956 till 1968

Year	Import (Tonnes)		Export (Tonnes)		Total
	Coastal	Foreign	Coastal	Foreign	
1956-57	628	2487	2494	22827	24839
1957-58	395	-	-	29847	30242

1985-59	642	-	-	32398	33040
1959-60	802	12514	-	36921	50238
1960-61	942	-	-	29700	30642
1962-63	-	575	-	31567	32142
1963-64	-	7150	-	29256	36406
1964-65	-	47686	-	25825	73511
1965-66	-	6753	-	24166	30919
1966-67	-	8216	-	21121	29387
1967-68	-	7103	-	20645	27748

C) *Decline in trade exchanges at Alappuzha Port.* The intensity of trade exchanges at the Port of Alappuzha saw a drastic decline after the rise of port of Kochi. While only 390 vessels called at the port in the year 1935, the number came down to 366 in 1939. In 1966, the number further declined to 150. The figure dropped to 105 in 1966, forty in 1971, six in 1975. It dipped to just one in 1979. After 1979, one vessel came in 1982 for exporting coir. Following the departure of the ship, the port again fell into the drowse till November 1989 when a ship called with 17000 tonnes of rice from Thailand for the Food Corporation of India (FCI). On 19 February 1989, two more ships called at the port with 21000 tonnes of rice and 25000 of wheat respectively. The last time a ship came to the port was a steamer in 1991. After that the trade activities in Alleppey fell into a slumber.

D) *Reasons for Loss of Importance of the Alappuzha Port.* The following are some of the reasons which led to the loss of importance of the port of Alappuzha:-

1. *Establishment of the modern Port of Kochi.* The development of port of Kochi was a major factor which contributed to decline of the port of Alappuzha. At Kochi port, a deep wharf, a rail bridge and a road bridge were constructed which connected to the mainland Kochi and therefore provided valuable infrastructure at the port for trade activities when compared to the port of Alleppey. Moreover, port of Kochi offered far better facility for navigation especially for ships of large volumes with innovative technology.

2. After the merger of the two princely states i.e Kingdoms of Travancore and Kochi in the year 1949, the foreign trade gradually centered at Kochi. Moreover, unlike Kochi, there was no railway transportation facility available in Alappuzha during that time. This fact also gave dominance to port of Kochi over Alappuzha.

3. The decentralization of coir industry was another reason which led to the decline of Alappuzha port.

4. Interport trade conventions during mid 19<sup>th</sup> century also paved way to the rise of the port of Kochi and reduced the importance of the port of Alappuzha.

E) *Information about present Port of Alleppey*

- Alappuzha is a roadstead harbour. The port of Alappuzha is situated about 48 Km south of the major port of Kochi. It is located in 09 Deg 30 Min North Latitude and 76 Deg 19 Min East Longitude. The port can also be identified in chart no 750. During fair weather, moderate sized vessel can anchor off Alleppey with light house bearing 077 at a range of 2 to 4 Km from the light house. The anchorage depth varies from 7.1m to 9.1 m. The port limits of Alappuzha are as follow: -

(a) North - A line drawn from the north boundary pillar to 7 fathoms of water.

(b) South - A line drawn from the south boundary pillar south west to 5 fathoms of water and from the west to 7 fathoms of water.

(c) West - A line running North to South joining the northern and southern boundary lines.

(d) East - By the beach road from the North boundary pillar to a stone on the beach road 35 metres East of the South boundary pillar.

- Navigational Aids and Communication Facilities.* The light of Alleppey light house is placed at an elevation of 33 meters at a visibility of 25 NM. A red light is exhibited throughout the year from the end of the pier at the port. Even though there are no wireless communication sets in the port, there is a port signal station available. Moreover, there exist telephone connections between the port office and the signal station.

• *Port facilities.* One pier 387 meters in length having 12 boat stages exists for handling bags and light cargos such as pepper and other spices. The pier is equipped with three pairs of trolley lines with necessary crossings, two numbers of 2.5-ton steam cranes and two numbers of 3 tons' electric cranes for handling heavy cargos like coir yarns and food grains. There is a canal ending at the port premises linking it with the Trivandrum- Shonur canal system of inland navigation by which cargo from the interior can be brought to the port by means of canal boats. To facilitate handling of heavy cargo from the canal boats there are two hand operated cranes fitted at the canal side. There are two godowns on either sides of the pier for transit of goods at the canal side and for stocking cargo. In addition, there are four godowns owned by the Central Excise Dept and the State Civil supplies department. The godowns of the Food Corporation of India close to the port have a stocking capacity of 12500 tonnes of food grains in bags.

• The trolley line running right from the pier to the godowns of the port premises are now extended to the Central Storage depot to facilitate quick transport of food grains landed at the port. There are a 100 trolleys each of one ton carrying capacity for transporting cargo from pier to godown and vice versa. There are two diesel motor tugs in the name of 'Alleppey' and 'Venad' having one 66 HP twin Kelvin diesel engine and two 44 HP twin Kelvin diesel engines respectively. These tugs are intended for towing loaded lighters from shore to steamers and vice versa. The lightage work at the port is carried by the cargo boats owned by the private parties, the tonnage of which ranges from 30 to 50. These boats are without sails and therefore towage by tugs is absolutely necessary. The port has a small workshop with limited staff and minimum equipment to carry out minor repairs to the port equipment like trolley lines, trolleys, cranes etc. The cargo handling capacity of the present Alleppey port is approximately 1200 tonnes per day.

F) *Present day Tourism in Alappuzha.* Tourism is the earmark of Kerala's economic development and a principal contributor to the state's economy. Kerala witnessed 10.94 % increase in tourist arrivals in 2017, both domestic and foreign compared to the previous year figure of 142.10 lakhs. In case of foreign tourists, the state has recorded a consistent growth in the number of tourist arrivals in the past two decades except during the crisis period of 2008-09. In 2017 the number of foreign tourists who visited Alappuzha were 75,037 and the number of domestic tourists were 4,33,456. According to the district wise ranking of tourist arrival in the year 2018 till the month of September, Alappuzha ranked eighth position in the number of foreign tourists in Kerala. In the number of domestic tourists in Kerala, Alappuzha achieved eleventh position. According to the tourist statistics 2018 till September, the number of total tourists who visited Alappuzha were 4,29,268. Among this, the number of foreign tourists were 67,935 and the number of domestic tourists were 3,61,333.

G) *Upcoming Tourism projects in Alappuzha Port.* Alappuzha port has wide potential for tourism. The government of Kerala has decided to convert Alappuzha port into a major tourist destination. Various meetings and discussions in this regards have already been held. The construction activities are on its way and is likely to achieve its full pace very soon. The aim of the project is to convert Alappuzha to a heritage tourism city and to change the face of present day tourism of the district. As a part of this programme, it has also decided to build a port museum. The museum will showcase the history of Alappuzha port.

## V. CONCLUSION

Tourism plays an important role in the growth of the economy of Kerala. There are number of tourist destinations in Kerala among which Alappuzha is a major destination. During its golden time, the port of Alappuzha had brought laurels to the Kingdom of Travancore through trade activities. However, knowledge about the historical significance of Alappuzha and contributions of its port are only known to a few. Presently, the initiative taken by the state government to revive the Alappuzha port is considered as an appreciable one since it can add on to the existing tourism of the district. Setting up of a port museum and showcasing the historical connections played by the port makes way to enlighten the present and future generations. Moreover, cleaning and developing the inland waterways or the canals systems which were earlier used to transport cargos from the inland villages can facilitate water trips to inland villages. The scope of connecting Alappuzha with Kochi through a sea voyage for the tourists can also be examined. Since the port of Alappuzha is not commercially important due to the stoppage of trade activities, tourism alone can only economically empower the district. The increase in percentage of contribution in the tourism sector after development of the port is expected to be very high and can be witnessed in the years to come.

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