

**PEASANT MIGRATION FROM TRAVANCORE- AN ECONOMIC ANALYSIS**

**Ajesh George**, Research Scholar, PG& Research Department of History, Holy Cross College (Autonomous) Tiruchirappalli, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu  
**Dr.P.Rajakumari**, Assistant Professor, PG& Research Department of History, Holy Cross College (Autonomous) Tiruchirappalli, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu

**Abstract**

Travancore was one of the local Kingdoms existed in the southern parts of modern Kerala prior to the linguistic reorganization of the states in India. 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed large movement of the people from Travancore towards the high lands that is the Iddukki region and to the Malabar area due to various economic, social, political, and cultural reasons. The paper specifically looks into the economic scenario behind the migration of people from Travancore. The fundamental economic activities of the people of Travancore were agriculture and the trade of the agricultural products including the export of the surplus and the import of the deficient. The changes in the global scenario as well as local situations has paved way for an economic crisis and that forced people to search new avenues for livelihood and sustenance which resulted in migration. The paper examines how the changes particularly in the economic scenario pushed the people to the new areas.

**Key Words:** Migration, High Ranges, Economic Depression, Agriculture, Population, Patrilineal Inheritance

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**Introduction**

“Movements of living beings in search of better environment are natural phenomenon; and man is no exception.”<sup>i</sup> “People migrate because for search of food, escape from natural calamities, threats of enemies, to seek adventure and lack of social and economic opportunities.”<sup>ii</sup> The movement of people from one place to another is part and parcel of human life since man is a forward looking being. Normally when people feel some kind of discomfort in their current place of living or knowing about better circumstances for prosperity in a new place, people think of moving from the current place to a new one. The people lived in Travancore were also moving internally within the borders of the Kingdom. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed two large scale movements of the people especially peasants from Travancore to the highlands of the state that is the Idukki region and to Malabar in the British state of Madras. The decision of the people to move from their place of origin to a new place was the outcome of the economic, social, political, agricultural, geographical and cultural factors. The effects of the first and Second World Wars, the aftermaths of the great depression of 1930s, the economic drain due to the colonial regime in India, the effects of the exploitative economic policies of the British colonial government etc. created an economic crisis all over India in particular at Travancore. The paper specifically looks into the economic situation of the Travancore in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and how that paved way for the migration of the peasants from Travancore.

**Travancore State**

“The Local Kingdom of Travancore was an Indian Kingdom from 1729 to 1949 was ruled by the Travancore Royal Family, with its capital at Padmanabhapuram and later at Thiruvananthapuram. “The victory of Travancore at Colachel against the Dutch in 1741 and in the battle of Purakkad against the Zamorin in 1775 shows that they were very powerful.”<sup>iii</sup> On July 1, 1949, Cochin and Travancore merged to form the state of Travancore- Cochin or Thiru-Kochi and on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956, the Travancore- Cochin state joined with Malabar district of Madras State to form the new state of Kerala.”<sup>iv</sup> “Agriculture was the main source of livelihood to bulk of the population with trade and industry playing practically no significant role.”<sup>v</sup> Since agriculture being the main economic activity the changes in the agricultural scenario definitely reflects in the economic life of the state. The economic crisis emerged in Travancore due to various global, national and local problems

disturbed the people. People in Travancore started thinking of extending agriculture for solving the economic issues and for gaining more income for a better life. This basic idea of the expansion of the agriculture leads to the Migration towards Idukki and Malabar.

### **Economic Situation of Travancore**

The economic situation of Travancore in beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not very secure. The economic crisis that has affected Travancore was an effect of the world-wide economic depression which is described as a first class disaster by economists. There was no single cause behind the crisis instead it was the whole atmosphere of tendencies and the general temper of the post-world war that largely account for it. Economists have identified various causes like the disturbed equilibrium of demand and supply, loss of balance between the price of raw materials and the finished goods, over production, falling purchasing power of the people, lack of consumption etc. The main features of the economic crisis are the phenomenal fall in wholesale commodity prices and fall in prices much heavier in agricultural countries etc. Coming to the Indian scenario the economic well-being of the country those days was totally depending upon the increased foreign trade via the export of the raw materials and some food stuffs. Due to the fall of the demand for agricultural products all over the world especially among the nations who were importing products from India a crisis situation emerged. The substitution of the Indian goods in the world market with much cheaper goods from other countries reduced Indian exports and added fuel to the situation.

The state of Travancore was also affected very much by this economic crisis. "The entire world over economic depression prevails and Travancore has not escaped its effects."<sup>vi</sup> The production and export of the agricultural products faced severe crisis and that has affected more than 80% of the Travancore population who were completely depending on agriculture for their survival. "The price of essential commodities rose. Many people suffered from poverty, hunger and unemployment. During the time of the Second World War Burma came under the control of Japan and this led to the stoppage of rice from Burma from where Travancore was importing rice, increased the price for food grains."<sup>vii</sup> In 1930's adding to the woes of the people, depression gripped the economy of Travancore. A fall in food prices combined with inflation broke the back bone of the peasants. The price of cash crops like pepper and other spices took a down turn. Fall in agricultural prices, agricultural indebtedness, severe unemployment, famine, nutritional diseases etc. became the order of the day."<sup>viii</sup> All these have adversely affected the lives of the poor people in Travancore. A detailed analysis of the various dimensions, causes and the outcomes of this economic crisis in Travancore will help to understand how migration of people emerged as an outcome of it.

### **Agriculture- Major Economic Activity in Travancore**

The economy of the Travancore depended completely on agriculture and the import and export of agricultural products. There was large scale cultivation of both cash crops and staple food crops. The variations in the production, consumption, price, demand for goods etc. have considerable impacts on the life of Travancore.

**Table 1 :Population Supported by Agriculture**

S.No	Year	Percentage of Population supported by Agriculture
1	1881	69.6
2	1901	63.8
3	1911	53.6
4	1921	51.7
5	1931	54.3
6	1941	57.4

**Sources: 1. Census of India 1901, Vol.26, Travancore PP 414-420**

**2. Census of India 1941, Vol.25, Travancore, P.38.**

**Table 1.2 :Population Supported by Occupation**

S.No	Classification of Population	1891 Census (Percent)	1901 Census (Percent)
1	Pasture and Agriculture	41.37	47.54
2	Unskilled Labour	28.19	16.43
Total Agriculture		69.56	63.88
3	Government	2.00	1.63
4	Personal Services	3.14	2.14
5	Preparation and Supply of Material Substance	16.85	25.86
6	Commerce, transport and storage	6.41	3.59
7	Profession	1.72	2.58
8	Means of independent Occupation	0.32	0.32
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Source: Census of India 1901, Vol.26, Travancore PP 414-420**

The above two tables give us a clear picture of the role of agriculture in the life of the people of Travancore. The economy of Travancore had all the features of an agriculture economy. There are about 70 percent of the people depend on agriculture for their survival. One of the important economic issues faced by the Travancore economy was the fall of price of Agricultural products.

#### **Low Price of Agricultural Products**

The most important reason for the economic crisis of the Travancore in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the fall of the price of the agricultural produce. "The heavy fall in the prices of our principal articles of export is the most outstanding fact about the present situation in Travancore."<sup>ix</sup> The quality of the life of the people of Travancore was depended on the price of the agricultural produce they were receiving. During those years the prices of the staple articles of local produce as paddy, pepper, coconut, rubber and tapioca were falling down. These crops were widely cultivated in and around Travancore and the people used it for their survival and the balance of their produce was sold out in the markets and thus they were gaining income also.

**Table 3 :Average price of Paddy for one Para in 12 years in Travancore**

S.No	Year	Rupees <sup>x</sup>	Chuckrams	Cash
1	1095 (1919)	1	9	6
2	1096 (1920)	0	23	7
3	1097 (1921)	0	25	13
4	1098 (1922)	0	23	12
5	1099 (1923)	0	23	2
6	1100 (1924)	0	26	0
7	1101 (1925)	0	24	5
8	1102 (1926)	0	24	4
9	1103 (1927)	0	24	8
10	1104 (1928)	0	20	10
11	1105 (1929)	0	18	12
12	1106 (1930)	0	15	10

**Source: Travancore Economic Depression Committee Report of 1931, p 39-40**

During the years the import of rice from Burma was at its peak at a lower price because of the huge surplus stocks of paddy in Burma. Burma has lost its European markets due to the increase of production in their homelands. In the Madras Economic Depression Committee Report it is mentioned that "Burma has in recent years been ousted from her export markets in Sian and Indo-China." Because of the loss of markets Burma could dump rice into the Travancore at prices ruinous

to the agriculturalists here. The surplus availability of the rice at lower price imported from Burma compelled the local farmers to reduce the price of paddy and rice. They were forced to sell their products even at a very low price which brought severe loss for them. The Burmese intervention in the trade of rice and paddy was a blessing for the poor landless people because of the availability of rice and paddy at a very cheaper rate but it was a curse for the farmers.

Simultaneously there was a situation of the decrease of the price of all agricultural products produced in Travancore because of the effects of the worldwide economic depression and the consequences of the same. The decrease of the price of the agricultural products paved way for an economic crisis. Along with the fall of prices the cost of production was increasing on the other side that also added fuel to the economic crisis situation in Travancore. The economic crisis situation emerged in Travancore became a source for many other problems pertaining to the life of the people.

**Table 4 Price of Agricultural Products in Travancore from 1921-1931**

Year	Copra			Coconut Oil			Pepper	Lemon Grass oil			Rubber	Cardamom	Tapioca
	Rupees Per Unit	Anas	Paisa	Rupees Per Unit	Anas	Paisa	Rupees Per Unit	Rupees Per Unit	Anas	Paisa	Rupees Per Unit	Rupees Per Unit	Rupees Per Unit
1921	95	15	4	152	11	6	150	NA	NA	NA	43.75	20	NA
1922	100	10	8	156	13	0	150	NA	NA	NA	35.75	20	NA
1923	112	8	9	175	13	0	150	NA	NA	NA	75	30	NA
1924	112	10	8	171	7	8	250	NA	NA	NA	68.50	40	NA
1925	105	2	6	163	12	2	512	2	4	0	93	50	NA
1926	89	14	4	141	13	0	390	2	2	0	206	60-90	23
1927	110	12	8	168	13	8	630	2	0	0	125	60-90	20
1928	95	3	10	145	6	1	500	1	14	0	72.13	40-50	15
1929	75	8	1	120	2	5	250	1	11	0	47	30-25	17
1930	57	8	5	92	5	4	150	1	4	0	34.07	12-17	8
1931	50	8	7	82	3	6	120	0	14	0	31.23	10-8	11

**Source:** Compiled from The Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Committee Report of 1931.

From the above table we can understand that the fluctuations in the price of various crops producing in Travancore. The price of each product was decreasing gradually and it reached at its lowest peak in the 1930's during the time of great depression. The farmers were not getting adequate value for their products in monetary terms and made their life more miserable. The widening gap between the cost of production and the price of products made the situation worst.

**Table 5 : Volume of Export and Income of the Agricultural Products in Travancore 1925-1930**

Year	Pepper		Rubber		Tea		Cardamom	
	Quantity	Values	Quantity	Values	Quantity	Values	Quantity	Values
1925	37471	7570041	6,27,932	1,11,29,992	25,602,045	2,51,85,085	NA	
1926	53184	1,31,70,743	76,56,306	90,70,631	25,215,064	2,49,14,614	15,034	52,17,30
1927	34124	1,66,18,119	77,79,844	83,13,903	31,186,423	3,08,58,759	16,378	14,11,30
1928	38432	1,87,59,186	92,91,799	58,34,344	30,452,556	3,04,35,768	38,529	22,35,366
1929	43887	1,79,82,774	1,01,85,818	51,21,879	28,583,181	2,72,60,724	14,949	25,88,776
1930	48516	9463617	96,65,45	34,94,453	27,621,187	2,21,46,342	14801	24,33,195

**Source:** Compiled from the Travancore Economic Depression Committee Report 1931

The above table gives us an idea about the income through the export of various agricultural products. The income from the exports also shows a downward movement. In majority cases except the Cardamom there was a steady increase in the quantity of import but there is no simultaneous

increase in the income. The price of the product per unit was going down. There was an inverse relation between the quantity and the price of the product. This is another dimension of the economic crisis affected in Travancore. People were working hard and producing the crops but they are under remunerated and that brought people in trouble. Other crops like Ginger, cashew nut, bleached Ginger oil etc. which are not mentioned in the table also had the same downward movement regarding the export income.

The income from the agriculture is the back bone of agricultural economy. The fluctuations of the agricultural income decide the fate of the Travancore economy because it was an agrarian economy. The analysis based on the above two tables it is evident that the economy of Travancore shows a downward movement and facing a crisis situation.

### **Scarcity of Land- A Problem for Agricultural Economy**

Land, Labour, Capital and Entrepreneurship are the basic factors of production. A perfect equilibrium of all these factors makes a healthy production system and an efficient economy. In the case of Travancore the scarcity of fertile cultivable land was increasing and due to that expansion of agriculture was not possible. The increasing population and the increasing density of population forced people to convert their agricultural land to habitation sites.

**Table 6 :Growth of Population of Kerala 1901-1961**

S.No	Year	Population in Millions	Decennial Variation
1	1901	6.34	
2	1911	7.12	+12.33
3	1921	7.81	+0.97
4	1931	9.51	+21.76
5	1941	11.03	+15.98
6	1951	13.55	+22.84
7	1961	16.90	+24.67

**Source: An Economic Review of Kerala 1962**

The above table shows the increase of population in Kerala. There was considerable increase in the population of Kerala especially in Travancore. This increase in the population and the Patrilineal<sup>xi</sup> inheritance system existed among the Syrian Catholics of Travancore created the problem of the scarcity of land. The division of the land according to the inheritance system reduced the amount of agricultural land for each one possess and that was not sufficient for the maintenance of the family. The insufficiency of the cultivable land in Travancore was a great threat for the agricultural economy of Travancore.

### **Unemployment**

According to the report of the economic Depression Committee of Travancore of 1931, unemployment was a major problem of Travancore during those years. "The problem of unemployment which was already acute in the in the state in our opinion is aggravated by the present controversial economic situation. The disbandment of labour force on the rubber and tea estate is very considerable. Manufacturing firms have made appreciable reductions in the number of hands employed by them."<sup>xii</sup> In the field of agriculture also there was large scale curtailing of the labour force or the postponement of the works which were not very urgent. Employees have been disbanded from commercial and industrial firms without any criteria. Unemployment was also increasing among the skilled workers also. Many young men who might have been absorbed by the plantation commercial and industrial establishments were lost their chances of employment. "Further a large number of Travancorians who were employed in Burma, Malaya, the straits settlements, Ceylon and other countries have been turned out of their jobs and have come home to swell the ranks of unemployment."<sup>xiii</sup> This situation of unemployment also increased the calamities of the emerging economic crisis.



### **Commercialization of Agriculture**

Export of the agricultural products was a source of income for the farmers in Travancore. There have been ups and downs in the income especially a downward movement in the earnings during the time of great economic depression and world wars. These earnings from the export of the cash crops inspired the people in Travancore especially in the midlands to extend the cultivation of these crops. "The income of the peasant farmers of the midland region increased to an unprecedented levels as a result of the increase in the export earnings."<sup>xiv</sup> This increase of the income through export earnings had a very positive impact on the life of the farmers. Initially it provided an incentive for the farmers to increase the cultivation. The scarcity of land was a hindrance for the expansion of agriculture. The demand for land reached at its peak during these years. The demand and the consequent search for the land paved way for the process of migration. People who were in search of agricultural land heard of the availability of fertile uncultivated land in the high ranges of Travancore and the Malabar so automatically people decided to move to those areas. The economic situation necessitated more income and that lead to migration.

### **Migration**

The economic crisis and other conditions existed in Travancore inaugurated a new epoch in the history of Travancore that is the era of migration. The migration of the peasants there was with a proper economic and social perspective and aim. There were two important lines of migration from Travancore, one was to the high ranges of Travancore that is the Idukki region of present Kerala and the second one was to the Malabar district of the then British state of Madras. The economic crisis in Travancore necessitated new measures, policies and plans in the economic life of the people. The fundamental economic activity of Travancore was agriculture and because of that the people of Travancore begun to think of extending agriculture to overcome the economic crisis. The expansion of agriculture, cultivation in the fertile and uncultivable land, cultivation of the cash crops and the staple products were the measures chosen for solving the economic issue. For these they need more agricultural land and that is possible only through migration towards the untamed areas. The encouragement given by the government for the same in the following years in the name of various projects also accelerated the process of migration. The solution to the problem of the scarcity of land was the migration towards the uncultivated areas. Migration and the expansion of agriculture definitely creates number of employment opportunities and also it can make the landless workers to land owning cultivators. The emergence of plantations and the human settlements attached to the plantations and the newly migrated areas also created number of employment opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy also. "The inflation of the money due to the world-wide economic depression increased the price of land in Travancore and that enabled the people to sell their land at a high price and buy more land in the Malabar and Idukki."<sup>xv</sup> The economic crisis in Travancore thus pushed the people from Travancore to the untamed areas of Idukki and Malabar for better life, prosperity and surplus of production.

### **Conclusion**

Migration from Travancore is one of the significant epochs in the history of Kerala. The Travancore migration was one of the first peasant migrations in the globe. The economic context was the prime reason for the Travancore migration. Economic well-being is the back bone of any society and a crisis in the economic field puts the whole system down. Here in Travancore there was an economic crisis in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in order to overcome the crisis situation people begun to migrate to Idukki and Malabar for the expansion of the agriculture. Thus the economic crisis became the primordial reason for the movement of the people. A look into the demographic profile of Idukki and Malabar from 1940's gives us a clear picture of the volume of migration took place. The disturbing economic condition of Travancore pushed the people to the new areas and the fertile uncultivated land, the dream of becoming a land owning peasant attracted the people towards those areas.

- <sup>i</sup> Francis Cherunilam, **Migration Causes Correlates and Consequences, Trends and Policies** (Trivandrum: Himalaya Publishing House, 1987) p 23.
- <sup>ii</sup> Kumar Chaudhary, **Migrant Women** (Jaipur: Ritu Publications, 2007) p 41.
- <sup>iii</sup> Shangunny Menon, P, **A History of Travancore from the earliest Times**, (Madras: Higgins Botham and Co Publishers, 1878), p 162.
- <sup>iv</sup> Nimmy Kurian, **Joining Hands**, in The Hindu News Paper, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2016.
- <sup>v</sup> K.V.Joseph, **Migration and Economic Development of Kerala**, (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), p 34.
- <sup>vi</sup> **Report of the Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Committee- 1931**, p 1
- <sup>vii</sup> Sebastian Valloppilly, **Malabarile Kudiyettathinte Kadaha-Kulathuvayal Bhootha Varthamangal**, (Mal) Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Kulathuvayal St. George Forane Church, 1992, p 23.
- <sup>viii</sup> V.J. Varghese, **Land, Labour and Migration: Understanding Kerala's Economic Modernity**, Working Papers Series 420, p 44.
- <sup>ix</sup> **Report of the Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Committee- 1931**, p 17.
- <sup>x</sup> I Travancore Rupee is equal to 7 *Panams*, 1 *Panam* is equal to 4 *Chuckrams*, 1 *Chuckrams* is equal to 16 *Kasu*.
- <sup>xi</sup> Patrilineal inheritance system was prevalent in Travancore especially among the Syrian Catholic community. According to this system the assets especially the land was divided equally and given to the sons of a father. The girls were given certain amount of money and gold as *sthreedhanam* during the time of their marriage and with that they lose their rights over the property of the father.
- <sup>xii</sup> **Report of the Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Committee- 1931**, p 20.
- <sup>xiii</sup> **Report of the Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Committee- 1931**, p 20.
- <sup>xiv</sup> K.V.Joseph, **Migration and Economic Development of Kerala**, p 81.
- <sup>xv</sup> Kuravilangadu Joseph, **Kudiyettathinte Vazhiyile Chadhikuzhikal** (Mal), Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Koodaranji Parish 1949-1999, p 43.