

REMEMBERING THE ARAKKAL DYNASTY: MUSEUM, MEMORY AND REGIONAL IDENTITY OF KERALA

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Abstract:

Museums play a crucial role in understanding the history and cultural heritage of a region. Regional history in India provides valuable insights into the country's diverse socio-economic, cultural and political landscape, highlighting local identities and different historical experiences. By incorporating indigenous sources, oral traditions and regional records, it helps to reassess the past and broadens the scope of historiography. The Arakkal Museum in Kannur, established in 2005 after the restoration of the Durbar Hall, preserves the legacy of the Arakkal dynasty—the only Muslim royal family in Kerala. Dating back to the 16th century, the dynasty played an important role in maritime trade, regional politics and interactions with European and Mysore powers. The museum displays royal furniture, weapons, documents, family seals and traditional utensils that provide insights into the socio-economic life of the Malabar Coast. The Arakkal rulers maintained strong links with Indian Ocean trade networks and controlled the Lakshadweep Islands for centuries. Their political alliances and conflicts with the Portuguese, Dutch, Mysore rulers and the British shaped regional history. Exploring the Arakkal Museum therefore offers a window into Kerala's maritime past and the historical transformations of the region. By preserving artefacts and local narratives, the museum significantly contributes to strengthening regional historiography and enriching the broader understanding of India's diverse historical heritage.

Keywords: Museum, Regional history, Artefacts, Arakkal Dynasty, Heritage.

Introduction:

Museums often play a crucial role in understanding the history of a region. They function not merely as repositories of artefacts but as a dynamic space where history is preserved, interpreted and communicated to diverse audiences. In the context of India, regional history assumes particular significance, as it provides crucial insights into the country's vast socio-economic, cultural and political diversity. Unlike a centralized historical narrative that often prioritizes dominant perspectives, regional history foregrounds localized experiences, thereby offering a more nuanced and layered understanding of the past. By emphasizing local identities and regional power structures, regional history enables scholars to examine how different regions experienced and responded to major historical processes, including ancient state formation, medieval political transformations and colonial interventions. This localized approach highlights variations in social hierarchies, economic systems and cultural practices which are often obscured in broader national histories. Furthermore, regional history contributes significantly to the preservation of cultural, religious and linguistic traditions, all of which are essential for maintaining community identity and continuity.

An important aspect of regional historiography is its role in re-evaluating the past through the incorporation of indigenous sources, oral traditions and marginalized narratives. Such an approach challenges the dominance of colonial and elitist interpretations of history, thereby contributing to the ongoing project of decolonizing historical discourse. In this broader framework, museums emerge as crucial institutions that facilitate the preservation and dissemination of regional histories. As noted by Almed et al. (2019), museums-including children's museums- constitute an integral part of the global cultural landscape, serving educational as well as cultural functions. Some of the world's most renowned museums, such as the Louvre Museum, the National Museum of China, the British Museum and the National Gallery, exemplify how museums act as custodians of human history and artistic achievement. As reported by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), over 55,000 museums are functioning across more than 202 countries and territories worldwide, underscoring their crucial role in preserving, interpreting and disseminating cultural heritage on a global scale.

It is often argued that regional historiography in India has been significantly influenced by the nationalist school of thought and its writings. Modern Indian

historiography, if not mistaken, has often been influenced by Western intellectual traditions. In many parts of the country, regional history is now taught as an important component of the history curriculum. Therefore, while understanding preliminary research on any historical topic, a historian must pay proper attention to the geographical setting of the region under study. Regional history, when applied to the study of Indian history, can play a catalytic role in understanding historical developments. So, careful analysis of the historical patterns of a particular region is essential. The foregoing discussion gives rise to several significant questions that warrant further investigation and critical analysis.

Research Questions:

Several important research questions emerged during the course of this study. These questions have guided the investigation and helped in understanding the broader historical significance of the Arakkal Museum and the dynasty. First, how is regional history linked to museums, and in what ways do museums contribute to the preservation, interpretation and dissemination of regional historical narratives? The question seeks to examine the role of museums as repositories of cultural memory and their importance in safeguarding local heritage for future generations. Second, what is the significance of the Arakkal dynasty in the history of Kerala? As the only Muslim royal dynasty in Kerala, the Arakkal family occupied a distinctive position in the political, social and cultural landscape of the Malabar region and understanding its historical role and provides valuable insights into the diverse character of Kerala's past. Third, what are the contributions of the Arakkal dynasty to the social and economic development of kerala? This question explores the dynasty's involvement in maritime trade, commercial networks, political administration and interactions with local as well as foreign powers. It also examines the dynasty's influence on regional society, cultural exchanges and economic activities that shaped the historical development of the Malabar Coast.

By addressing these questions, the study aims to highlight the importance of the Arakkal museum as a source of historical knowledge while also assessing the wider contributions of the Arakkal dynasty to the regional history of Kerala.

Objective:

The primary objective of this research is to explore the significance of the Arakkal Museum and its contribution to understanding the history of Kerala. This study is largely based on fieldwork, although efforts have also been made to examine the relevant historical documents and secondary sources. As part of the field work, I interacted with the caretaker and some staffs of the museum, local residents, auto drivers and the staffs of the hotel Canoe whose insights contributed significantly to understanding the local history and heritage of the region. Throughout the paper, emphasis has been placed on highlighting the historical importance of the Arakkal dynasty, particularly its extensive trading networks and its role in the socio-economic development of the region. In addition to examining the dynasty itself, the study also focuses on regional history and demonstrates how museums serve as a valuable source of information, preserving local heritage and providing important insights into the historical development of specific regions.

Methodology:

This study of the Arakkal museum is primarily based on field surveys and interactions with local residents. One of the major challenges encountered during the research was the scarcity of primary source materials relating to the history of the Arakkal dynasty and the museum. The research relies largely on field work observations and secondary sources, which have been critically examined to reconstruct the historical background and significance of the museum. The combination of field based data and documentary sources has enabled a comprehensive understanding of the subject despite the limitations of primary archival materials. One of the major challenges encountered during the survey was language and communication. As many local residents in Kerala were not comfortable with Hindi or English, it was often difficult to communicate effectively and explain the purpose of the study.

Literature Review:

Although I was unable to consult all the original Portuguese, Dutch and Malayalam sources, I examined a number of reliable contemporary writings and documents available in English concerning Portuguese and Dutch interactions with this ruling house. Works such as *Tuhfat-ul-Mujahiddin*, *A Survey of the Rise of the Dutch Power in Malabar, 1603-1678* and *Dutch Hegemony in Malabar and its Collapse, 1663-1795 AD* by T.I.Poonen, *Malabar and the Dutch* by K.M.Panikkar, indigenous sources like *Keralolpathi* etc. are helpful for my

research. Indigenous source materials are limited. Nevertheless, *Keralolpathi* provides a basic framework of historical information. It is a traditional Malayalam chronicle that narrates the mythical origin and early history of Kerala. Although it contains many legends and is not considered a fully reliable historical source, *Keralolpathi* is important for understanding the cultural traditions, social structure and historical consciousness of Kerala.

Tuhfat al Mujahiddin written by Zainuddin Makhdum in 1583 CE, is an Arabic chronicle that narrates the history of Malabar, the arrival of the Portuguese and the resistance led by the Mappila Muslims and the Kunjali Marakkars. It remains one of the most important primary sources for the study of sixteenth century Kerala. The two books written by Poonen is very useful for understanding the relationship between European trading companies and the political and economic history of Kerala in the 17th century.

Although this study has discussed the history of Malabar, its extensive trading networks and the role of the Arakkal dynasty, its primary focus remains the Arakkal dynasty. The museum has emerged as an important repository of regional history preserving the historical legacy, cultural traditions and heritage of the Arakkal family and the Malabar region. The preservation of local museums is crucial for understanding the social, cultural and historical development of a region as they serve as vital institutions that connect communities with their past and safeguard heritage of future generations. Through its collections, the Arakkal museum contributes significantly to the documentation and dissemination of local history and cultural memory. Apart from these books mentioned above I have consulted some books on museums which would enrich my paper and understanding. *Directory Museums of India* by Usha Agarwal and *Museums of India* by Muhua Chakraborti are also very useful.

One of the principal challenges of the study has been the lack of sufficient and continuous source material relating to the principality. The available evidence is scattered across various records, and every effort has been made to bring these fragments together into a coherent narrative. Now we would come to the main discussion and history of the Arakkal dynasty.

Discussion:

The primary aim of modern museum is to collect, preserve, interpret and exhibit objects of artistic, cultural and scientific significance for public education. Historically institutions such as the Smithsonian were envisioned through the bequest of James Smithson to promote “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Therefore, museums serve not merely as storehouses of artefacts but as dynamic spaces that promote critical engagement with history, facilitate knowledge dissemination and strengthen connections between the past and the present. Through exhibitions, narratives and public outreach, they contribute to shaping historical consciousness and enabled a proper understanding of identity, memory and culture. In doing so, museums play a vital role in strengthening regional historiography.

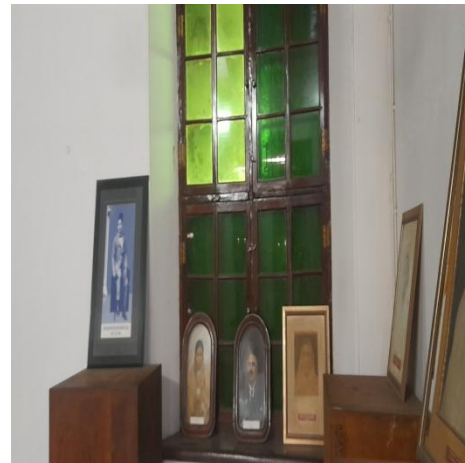
While highlighting the historical importance of museums, the Arakkal museum occupies a prominent place. During my visit to Kannur, I had the opportunity to glimpse this remarkable museum, which preserves the rich history of Kerala and the legacy of the Arakkal Dynasty dating back to the 16th century. The museum also reflects the socio-economic conditions of the region from that period through the colonial era. The museum not only preserves artefacts related to this unique matrilineal Muslim ruling family but also reflects the broader socio-economic conditions of the region across pre-colonial and colonial periods. Its collection illuminate trade networks, maritime connections, cultural exchanges that shaped the Malabar coast, thereby situating local history within wider transregional framework.

History:

The Arakkal Museum, established in July, 2005 after the restoration of the Durbar Hall, preserves the rich legacy of the Arakkal rulers. The museum highlights their role in regional politics, maritime trade-particularly the spice trade and their alliances with European and Mysore powers. Its exhibits include royal furniture, weapons, artefacts, family seals, antique telephones, telescopes, copies of the Holy Quran, official documents and traditional utensils offering a vivid glimpse into royal life and Kerala’s coastal history. The palace architecture reflect a harmonious blend of traditional Kerala and Indo-Islamic styles, featuring laterite walls, wooden floors, stained glass windows and spacious halls.



Royal furniture



Glass windows



Spacious Hall

Before the establishment of the British rule in India, Kerala was divided into more than a hundred small principalities, each functioning with a largely independent system of production, distribution, trade and commerce. Many of these kingdoms followed a matrilineal system shaped by Kerala's distinctive socio-political and economic conditions. Unlike other matrilineal dynasties, where the senior most male member ruled, the Arakkal dynasty was headed by the oldest member of the family, irrespective of gender. A male ruler was known as "All Raja" while a female ruler bore the title "Arakkal Beevi."

Several traditions surrounded the origin of the Arakkal family, among which the story of Cheraman Perumal's pilgrimage to Mecca holds particular prominence. Regardless of these legends, family records trace the dynasty's continuous existence to the 12th century AD. In its early phase, it remained subordinate to the Kolathiri and later the Chirakkal rulers.

From the 15th century onward, however, the Arakkal house emerged as an independent and powerful maritime force. With the arrival of the Portuguese and their capture of Kannur fort, the Arakkal ruler eventually negotiated peace and entered into an agreement with the English.

The Arakkal dynasty was compelled to surrender Kannur fort and pay a substantial compensation. The English also laid claim to the Laccadive Islands, which had been under Arakkal control since the 15th century. This dispute continued for over a century and was finally settled on 15th December 1908, when an agreement granted the family an annual allowance of Rs 23,000 “Malikkhan” and the ruler was accorded the honorary title of “Sultan.” The dynasty’s rule formally ended on 15th August, 1947, though the annual Malikhan continues to be paid to the Arakkal family.



Cooking utensils



valuable things



Swords



Weapons

The Arakkal Dynasty traces its lineage to the legendary figures of Cheraman Perumal and Muhammad Ali, claiming a succession of 39 rulers ending with Adi Raja Fathima Muthu Beevi of Thalassery. However, historians argue that such genealogies were likely constructed in the 17th and 18th centuries to legitimize the family's rising political authority as it moved from vassalage to semi independence. Alternative traditions also explain the dynasty's origin. One narrative recounts that a princess of the Kolathiri Royal family was rescued from drowning by a Muslim man. When he covered her with his garment after her mundu was swept away, the act symbolically enacted the marriage custom known as Sambandham, whereby the acceptance of cloth signified marital union. This union, according to the legend, led to the establishment of Arakkal by principality.

The strength of the Arakkal dynasty largely derived from its access to maritime trade networks and its control on the Lakshadweep. The family maintained extensive commercial links, initially trading with Arabia and Persia. However, the arrival of European maritime powers disrupted this trading sphere. During the 16th century, Arakkal frequently clashed with the Portuguese empire, including the assassination of an Arakkal prince while travelling to Mecca. In the 17th century, conflicts also arose with the Dutch East India Company, culminating in a confrontation in 1665 in which the Adi Raja reportedly killed around 200 Dutch soldiers.

Despite these conflicts, the Arakkal rulers maintained diplomatic relations with the Adil Shahi dynasty of Bijapur, a significant Deccan power known for its military and cultural influence and later with the Maratha naval power led by Kanhoji Angra. These alliances were not merely symbolic but reflected pragmatic efforts to secure political stability and economic advantage in a competitive environment. Subsequently, the Arakkal rulers also engaged with the rising Maratha naval force under Kanhoji Angre, who dominated the Western coast of India in the early eighteenth century. This association underscores the Arakkal dynasty's recognition of shifting power dynamics in the Indian Ocean littoral and their willingness to align with influential maritime actors to safeguard their interests.

Economically, the Arakkal state was deeply embedded in the vibrant networks of the Indian Ocean trade system. Their commercial activities extended beyond local exchanges and were part of a larger transregional economy. The export of high valued spices such as pepper and cardamom- both crucial commodities in global trade- positioned them within lucrative circuits connecting South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Additionally, their involvement in the trade of Arabian horses, a prestigious and strategically important commodity, reflects their connections with West Asian markets. Taken together, these diplomatic and commercial engagements illustrate the Arakkal rulers' dual strategy of political negotiation and economic participation. Their ability to maintain alliances across diverse powers while actively contributing to Indian Ocean trade networks demonstrates a dynamic approach to statecraft in a period marked by both regional rivalries and expanding global interactions.

European domination gradually reduced trade, yet much of the prestige of the Arakkal family derive from its control over the Lakshadweep islands. These islands were originally under the authority of the Kolathiri Raja, who in the 17th century delegated their administration to his feudatories, the Arakkal rulers. However, the Adi Rajas rarely visited the islands; instead their policies were largely driven by profit. This approach generated significant local resentment. In the 1760s, islanders were prohibited from selling coir to the outsiders. The administration purchased it at prices far below market value and resold it on the mainland for substantial profit. The family reportedly earned nearly 400 percent profit from cowries and up to 1000 percent from tobacco. Such exploitative practices provoked resistance, and in the 1780s four islands revolted and aligned themselves with Tipu Sultan of Mysore.

The Arakkal family played a notable role in facilitating the entry of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan into Kerala. As their power expanded by the early 18th century they were able to mobilize nearly 20,000 troops. Seeking to challenge their former overlords, the Kolathiri Raja, the Arakkals looked for external support. This strategy was not unprecedented, earlier Marthanda Varma of Travancore had extended an invitation of Hyder Ali in 1754.

Arakkal's foreign policy often appeared inconsistent, being shaped more by immediate political needs than by a coherent long-term strategy. In 1783, for example, the Beevi formed an alliance with Tipu Sultan. In response, the English forces captured her fort at Kannur and plundered several valuable items, including elephants' gold chains, a silver umbrella, two silver kettle drums adorned with gold and a silver table. Subsequently, she sought peace and was compelled to pay an indemnity of 2, 60,000 rupees, of which a lakhs was paid unofficially to satisfy the English authorities.

With the advent of colonial rule, the Adi Raja was compelled to surrender most of the territories he had previously seized in Malabar. The Arakkal family however was permitted to retain its share of Lakshadweep, though it was now required to pay tribute to the Company. While the Beevi claimed that her annual revenue amounted to only 20,000 rupees, an English inquiry estimated the actual income to be nearly six times higher. Ultimately, the tribute was fixed at 15,000 rupees. This arrangement marked the beginning of prolonged disputes and negotiations between the Arakkal family and the company.

The situation led to a renewed phase of negotiations with the colonial authorities. The tribute had fallen into arrears, and the weakening of political authority left the Arakkal rulers with little choice but to come to terms with the British. Even by 1900, these discussions continued without resolution. In one instance, the collector of Malabar wrote to a deputy, asking him to make the Adi Raja understand that the issue was not whether he would be dispossessed, but merely to consult him on the manner in which it would occur. Ironically, the Adi Raja passed away before the matter could be settled and the responsibility of reaching an agreement passed to his successor, Imbichi Beevi. Eventually, the Arakkal family relinquished all claims over Lakshadweep in exchange for an annual pension of 23,000 rupees, a freehold of about 1,420 acres of land on the mainland, the privilege of exemption from court appearances, and the hereditary title of "sultan" for the head of the family.

This settlement marked the culmination of a prolonged chapter in the region's history. Despite the loss of territorial authority, the Arakkal family continued to retain a degree of prominence in Kerala. British recognition of its status ensured its position as the leading Muslim family on the Malabar coast, a prestige that remained associated with the name. Moreover, during the Mappila Rebellion of 1921, the family supported the colonial authorities. According to the scholar K.K.N.Kurup, the influence of the Arakkal family played a role in preventing the rebellion from spreading to Muslim communities beyond Southern Malabar. So, Arakkal Dynasty made a notable contribution to the region's political history. Moreover, the museum plays a significant role in preserving and interpreting the social and economic history of Kerala while also enriching the understanding of the region's historical and cultural heritage.

Conclusion:

The Arakkal museum not only preserves the legacy of the remarkable ruling family but also offers valuable insights into the socio-political, economic and cultural life of Kerala from the 16th century onwards. By safeguarding artefacts, documents and artificial heritage, it enables visitors to engage directly with the past and understand the region's historical transformations. Furthermore, such institutions play a crucial role in strengthening regional historiography by highlighting local narratives that often remain overlooked in mainstream national histories. By preserving, documenting and interpreting the heritage of the Arakkal dynasty, these institutions contribute meaningfully to a more inclusive understanding of India's diverse historical landscape. In this way, museum does not merely display relics of the past; rather, they actively enrich and reinforce the collective historical consciousness of India. By situating regional experiences within the wider national narrative, they help bridge the gap between local and national histories, fostering a more comprehensive and interconnected understanding of the past.

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