

THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE PALAKKAD GAP: TRADE, MIGRATION AND STATE FORMATION IN KERALA

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Abstract

The Palakkad Gap, a nearly 30-kilometre-wide natural mountain pass through the Western Ghats, has played a decisive role in shaping the historical geography of Kerala and South India. Unlike the continuous mountain barrier of the Western Ghats, the Gap served as the principal corridor connecting the Malabar Coast with the Kongu region and the Tamil plains, thereby facilitating the movement of merchants, migrants, armies, religious communities, and political institutions for over two millennia. Its strategic geographical position transformed it into an important centre of inland trade, cultural interaction, migration, and state formation. Merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred (Ainnurruvar) and Manigramam extensively utilised this route to transport spices, textiles, horses, precious metals, and other commodities between the western ports and the interior markets of South India. Simultaneously, the corridor became an arena of political competition, contributing significantly to the emergence of the Palakkad Rajas and neighbouring polities that sought to control trade routes and administrative networks. This study examines the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap by analysing its influence on trade, migration, settlement expansion, and the evolution of political authority in Kerala. The research is primarily based on original historical evidence, including stone inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, archival records, historical maps, and colonial administrative documents preserved in repositories such as the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (Mackenzie Collection), the British Library (Colin Mackenzie Papers), East India Company Records, Dutch archives, Mysore administrative records, and the Great Trigonometrical Survey. By integrating geographical analysis with epigraphical, cartographic, and archival sources, the study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between landscape, commerce, migration, and state formation in Kerala's historical development.

Keywords: *palakkad gap, historical geography, kerala, trade routes, migration, state formation, merchant guilds, ayyavole five hundred, manigramam, epigraphy.*

JEL Classification: *N95, N75, R11, Z13*

Introduction

Historical geography examines the interaction between physical landscapes and human societies across time, emphasising how geographical features influence patterns of settlement, economic activity, political authority, and cultural exchange.

Among the most significant geographical features of South India, the Palakkad Gap occupies a unique position in the historical development of Kerala. Situated between the Nilgiri Hills and the Anaimalai Hills, the Gap forms the widest natural break in the Western Ghats, extending nearly thirty

kilometres. Unlike the rugged mountain ranges that separate Kerala from the Tamil plains, this natural corridor has historically enabled continuous communication between the Malabar Coast and the interior regions of peninsular India. Consequently, the Palakkad Gap became one of the most important geographical gateways through which commerce, migration, military expeditions, and political influence flowed for centuries.

The geographical significance of the Palakkad Gap extends far beyond its physical characteristics. Throughout history, it functioned as a strategic land corridor connecting the flourishing ports of the Malabar Coast with the agricultural and commercial centres of Kongu Nadu and the Tamil plains. Merchants transported pepper, cardamom, ginger, textiles, horses, salt, metals, and other commodities through this route, linking maritime trade with inland commercial networks. The movement of traders was accompanied by artisans, religious teachers, agricultural settlers, administrators, and military forces, transforming the Gap into a dynamic zone of cultural interaction and economic integration. The strategic location of the corridor enabled Kerala to participate actively in wider Indian Ocean trade networks while simultaneously strengthening connections with the Deccan and South Indian interior.

Trade constituted one of the most important historical functions of the Palakkad Gap. During the early historic and medieval periods, Kerala emerged as one of the

world's leading producers of spices, particularly black pepper, which attracted merchants from Arabia, Persia, China, and Europe. Inland communication through the Gap allowed commodities arriving at ports such as Muziris, Ponnani, and later Calicut to be transported efficiently towards the Tamil country and beyond. Merchant corporations, particularly the Ayyavole Five Hundred (Ainnurruvar) and Manigramam, established extensive commercial networks utilising this corridor. These powerful merchant guilds organised long-distance trade, maintained commercial settlements, negotiated privileges with rulers, and promoted economic integration across South India. Their activities contributed significantly to the development of market centres, temple economies, transport infrastructure, and regional prosperity.

Migration represents another important dimension of the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap. The natural pass encouraged the movement of Brahmin settlers, merchant communities, cultivators, artisans, soldiers, and religious missionaries between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. These migrations facilitated agricultural expansion, the establishment of Brahmadeya settlements, the construction of temples, the diffusion of architectural traditions, and the exchange of linguistic and cultural practices. The coexistence of Malayalam and Tamil cultural traditions in the Palakkad region reflects centuries of interaction made possible by the accessibility of the Gap. The region consequently developed into an important cultural frontier where diverse social groups

contributed to the formation of a distinctive regional identity.

The strategic value of the Palakkad Gap also profoundly influenced the process of state formation in Kerala. Control over the Gap enabled rulers to regulate commercial traffic, collect customs duties, supervise military movements, and maintain communication with neighbouring territories. The rise of the Palakkad Rajas illustrates the close relationship between geography and political authority. Their emergence as an important regional polity depended largely upon controlling the strategic corridor and the commercial activities associated with it. Likewise, neighbouring powers, including the Zamorins of Calicut, the rulers of Cochin, Kongu chiefs, the Mysore Kingdom under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, and later the British East India Company, repeatedly sought to establish political authority over the Gap because of its immense economic and military significance. Thus, the history of central Kerala demonstrates how geographical corridors became centres of political competition and territorial expansion.

The historical development of the Palakkad Gap can be reconstructed through a rich body of primary historical evidence. Stone inscriptions discovered in Palakkad, Chittur, Alathur, Kollengode, and neighbouring regions provide valuable information regarding land grants, taxation, irrigation systems, merchant organisations, temple administration, and political authority.

These inscriptions, together with copper plate grants and temple inscriptions dating from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, reveal the administrative, economic, and religious institutions that flourished along the trade corridor. Epigraphical records also provide direct evidence regarding royal patronage, settlement expansion, commercial privileges, and interactions between rulers and merchant guilds, making them indispensable sources for reconstructing the historical geography of the region.

In addition to epigraphical evidence, palm-leaf manuscripts and archival collections offer significant insights into the historical evolution of the Palakkad Gap. The Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Chennai, particularly the Mackenzie Collection, preserves numerous manuscripts, genealogies, administrative reports, and regional chronicles concerning Kerala and South India. Likewise, the Colin Mackenzie Papers housed in the British Library contain valuable surveys, sketches, historical descriptions, correspondence, and administrative observations relating to the political geography of the Palakkad region. These collections, together with rare historical documents, photographs of inscriptions, and early administrative records, provide essential information regarding settlement patterns, political organisation, revenue administration, and regional interactions.

Historical cartography further enriches the understanding of the geographical

importance of the Palakkad Gap. Maps prepared during the Mackenzie Survey, James Rennell's surveys, and the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India illustrate the evolution of communication routes, settlements, rivers, fortifications, administrative boundaries, and transport networks across different historical periods. These maps demonstrate how geographical knowledge influenced political administration, military planning, commercial expansion, and colonial governance. Comparative analysis of these cartographic sources enables historians to trace long-term transformations in the historical landscape of the region.

Colonial administrative records constitute another indispensable category of historical evidence. The Dutch records, Mysore administrative documents, and extensive East India Company Records contain detailed information regarding military campaigns, customs administration, trade regulations, diplomatic correspondence, revenue settlements, transportation networks, and territorial management. These records reveal how successive indigenous and colonial governments recognized the strategic importance of the Palakkad Gap and sought to integrate it into broader systems of political and economic control. They also provide valuable evidence concerning changing administrative structures, commercial policies, and regional governance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Despite its acknowledged importance in the history of Kerala, the Palakkad Gap has received comparatively limited attention within the broader framework of historical geography. Existing studies have generally examined trade, migration, political history, or archaeology independently, without adequately analysing the complex relationship between geography, commerce, demographic movement, and state formation. The integration of geographical analysis with epigraphical, archival, and cartographic evidence remains relatively underdeveloped. Consequently, there exists a significant need for interdisciplinary research that examines how physical geography shaped historical processes and how human activities transformed the landscape over time.

The present study seeks to analyse the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap by examining its role in facilitating trade, migration, and the emergence of political authority in Kerala. Drawing upon original records, inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, historical maps, archival collections, and colonial administrative documents, the study reconstructs the historical significance of one of South India's most important geographical corridors. By integrating evidence from epigraphy, cartography, archival history, and historical geography, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between landscape, commerce, migration, and state formation in Kerala while highlighting the

enduring significance of the Palakkad Gap in the historical development of South India.

Review of Literature

Several historians, geographers, archaeologists, and epigraphists have examined the historical importance of the Palakkad Gap and its role in the economic, political, and cultural development of Kerala and South India. Their studies have highlighted the significance of geography in shaping trade networks, migration patterns, political authority, and regional interactions.

K. V. Krishna Ayyar (1938), in his *History of Kerala*, emphasised that the Palakkad Gap functioned as the principal land corridor connecting the Malabar Coast with the Kongu region and the Tamil plains. He argued that the geographical openness of the Gap facilitated commercial exchanges, military movements, and cultural interaction between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, thereby contributing significantly to the historical development of the region.

M. G. S. Narayanan (1972; 1996) extensively examined the political and social history of medieval Kerala through inscriptions and copper plate grants. His studies demonstrated that trade routes passing through the Palakkad Gap played a significant role in the emergence of regional political centres, temple institutions, and agrarian settlements. He further emphasised that merchant organisations and Brahmin settlements contributed substantially to state formation during the Chera period.

Kesavan Veluthat (1993; 2009) analysed the evolution of political structures in early medieval South India and argued that geography was one of the major determinants of regional state formation. Using epigraphical evidence, he showed that the control of trade routes and strategic geographical corridors, including the Palakkad Gap, enabled local rulers to consolidate political authority and expand administrative control.

Noboru Karashima (1984; 2001) investigated South Indian inscriptions and medieval commercial networks, demonstrating that merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred (Ainnurruvar) and Manigramam developed extensive inland trade routes linking the Malabar Coast with the Tamil country. His work established that these merchant corporations maintained close relationships with local rulers, temples, and commercial settlements, thereby strengthening regional economic integration.

Burton Stein (1980), through his Segmentary State Theory, explained that political authority in South India developed through networks of local chieftains, temples, commercial centres, and trade routes rather than centralised bureaucratic administration. His interpretation highlights the importance of strategic geographical corridors such as the Palakkad Gap in facilitating political integration and economic exchange.

Kenneth R. Hall (1985) examined maritime and inland trade in South and Southeast Asia and concluded that the prosperity of medieval South Indian kingdoms depended upon the effective integration of maritime ports with inland commercial routes. His work emphasises that inland corridors like the Palakkad Gap linked Kerala's spice-producing regions with broader Indian Ocean trade networks.

Studies based on the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Annual Reports on South Indian Epigraphy (ARE) have documented numerous stone inscriptions from Palakkad, Chittur, Alathur, Kollengode, and surrounding regions. These inscriptions provide valuable evidence concerning land grants, temple administration, irrigation systems, taxation, merchant guilds, and regional political authority between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.

The Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (Chennai), particularly the Mackenzie Collection, preserves palm-leaf manuscripts, genealogies, administrative reports, and historical chronicles relating to Kerala and South India. Similarly, the Colin Mackenzie Papers in the British Library contain surveys, sketches, correspondence, and administrative descriptions that illuminate the historical geography of the Palakkad region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Historical cartographic studies based on the Mackenzie Survey, James Rennell's Maps, and the Great Trigonometrical Survey of

India have demonstrated the evolution of transport routes, settlements, political boundaries, and communication networks. These maps illustrate the strategic significance of the Palakkad Gap in military planning, commercial expansion, and colonial administration.

Colonial records preserved in the Dutch Archives, Mysore administrative records, and the East India Company Records provide extensive information regarding military campaigns, customs administration, revenue settlements, commercial regulations, diplomatic correspondence, and transportation systems. These documents collectively demonstrate that successive indigenous and colonial governments recognised the strategic importance of the Palakkad Gap as one of South India's principal communication corridors.

Although considerable research has been conducted on Kerala's political history, trade, archaeology, and epigraphy, relatively few studies have examined the Palakkad Gap through an integrated historical geographical perspective. Most existing studies analyse trade networks, political developments, inscriptions, or migration separately without fully examining the reciprocal relationship between physical geography, commercial expansion, migration, and state formation. Therefore, a comprehensive interdisciplinary study integrating geographical analysis with epigraphical, archival, cartographic, and colonial evidence remains necessary.

The present study seeks to bridge this research gap by reconstructing the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap through the systematic analysis of original inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple records, archival manuscripts, historical maps, and colonial documents. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how geography influenced trade, migration, and the evolution of political authority in Kerala.

Theoretical Review

Historical Geography Theory

Historical Geography Theory explains that physical landscapes influence the evolution of human societies by shaping patterns of settlement, communication, trade, migration, and political organisation over time. The Palakkad Gap illustrates how a natural geographical corridor determined the historical development of economic networks, cultural interaction, and political authority in Kerala.

Central Place Theory

Developed by Walter Christaller (1933), Central Place Theory explains the emergence and growth of settlements as centres providing goods and services to surrounding regions. The commercial centres that developed along the Palakkad Gap functioned as important market nodes connecting coastal ports with inland production centres, thereby facilitating regional trade and urban development.

Network Theory

Network Theory emphasises that historical development is influenced by interconnected systems of trade routes, transportation corridors, institutions, and social relationships. Merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred and Manigramam created extensive commercial networks that linked Kerala with the Tamil plains, the Deccan, and the wider Indian Ocean trading world through the Palakkad Gap.

State Formation Theory

State Formation Theory explains that political authority evolves through the interaction of geography, economic resources, military power, and administrative institutions. Control over strategic geographical corridors such as the Palakkad Gap enabled rulers to regulate trade, collect customs revenue, supervise military movements, and consolidate territorial authority. The rise of the Palakkad Rajas and neighbouring polities demonstrates the close relationship between geography and political development.

Cultural Diffusion Theory

Cultural Diffusion Theory explains the transmission of ideas, technologies, religious beliefs, languages, and cultural practices through migration and human interaction. The Palakkad Gap served as an important corridor for the movement of Brahmin settlers, merchant communities, artisans, religious teachers, and agricultural populations, facilitating the integration of Malayalam and Tamil cultural traditions over several centuries.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical geographical significance of the Palakkad Gap in the evolution of Kerala and South India.
2. To analyse the role of the Palakkad Gap in facilitating inland trade, commercial networks, and the activities of merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred and Manigramam.
3. To investigate patterns of migration, settlement expansion, and cultural interaction that developed through the Palakkad Gap.
4. To evaluate the contribution of the Palakkad Gap to the emergence of the Palakkad Rajas and neighbouring political formations through the control of trade routes and strategic communication networks.
5. To reconstruct the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap using original historical sources, including stone inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, archival collections, historical maps, and colonial administrative records.

Hypotheses of the Study

H1: The Palakkad Gap has significantly influenced the development of inland trade networks connecting the Malabar Coast with the Tamil plains.

H2: Trade routes passing through the Palakkad Gap significantly facilitated migration, settlement expansion, and

cultural interaction between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

H3: The strategic geographical location of the Palakkad Gap significantly contributed to the emergence and consolidation of the Palakkad Rajas and neighbouring political formations.

H4: Epigraphical, archival, cartographic, and colonial records provide significant historical evidence for reconstructing the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap.

Research Methodology

Data Sources

The study is based primarily on qualitative historical research utilising primary and secondary historical sources.

Primary Sources

Primary historical evidence was collected from original documentary and archaeological records, including:

- Stone inscriptions from Palakkad, Chittur, Alathur, Kollengode, and surrounding regions.
- Copper plate grants issued by medieval rulers.
- Temple inscriptions dating from the 9th–13th centuries.
- Palm-leaf manuscripts preserved in historical repositories.
- Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (Chennai) – Mackenzie Collection.
- British Library – Colin Mackenzie Papers.
- Rare historical manuscripts.

- Photographs of inscriptions.
- Old administrative records.
- Historical correspondence.
- Revenue documents.
- Early travel accounts.

Secondary Sources

Secondary information was collected from:

- Books on the history of Kerala and South India.
- Research articles on historical geography.
- Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) publications.
- South Indian Inscriptions (SII) volumes.
- Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy (ARIE).
- Kerala State Archives.
- Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) publications.
- University dissertations and doctoral theses.
- Historical atlases.
- Peer-reviewed journals on medieval trade and political history.
- Books on merchant guilds, state formation, and migration.

Historical Sources Used

Epigraphical Sources

- Stone inscriptions from Palakkad, Chittur, Alathur, Kollengode, and neighbouring regions.

- Copper plate grants.
- Temple inscriptions (9th–13th centuries).
- Land grant inscriptions.
- Hero stones.
- Temple donation records.

Archival Sources

- Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (Chennai)
 - Mackenzie Collection
- British Library
 - Colin Mackenzie Papers
- Palm-leaf manuscripts.
- Rare historical documents.
- Administrative correspondence.
- Revenue registers.
- Genealogical records.

Historical Maps

The study utilises historical maps prepared by:

- Mackenzie Survey.
- James Rennell's Maps.
- Great Trigonometrical Survey of India.
- Survey of India (Early Colonial Maps).

Colonial Records

- Dutch Records.
- Mysore Administrative Records.
- East India Company Records.
- Madras Presidency Records.
- British Parliamentary Papers relating to Malabar.

Research Design

The study adopts a historical geographical research design based on documentary analysis. Historical events, trade routes, migration patterns, settlement expansion, and political developments are reconstructed through the systematic examination of inscriptions, archival manuscripts, historical maps, and colonial administrative records. Comparative historical analysis is employed to examine continuity and change in geographical and political processes over different historical periods.

Study Area

The study covers the Palakkad Gap and adjoining historical regions including:

- Palakkad
- Chittur
- Alathur
- Kollengode
- Mannarkkad
- Kongad
- Ottapalam
- Pattambi
- Kongu Nadu (Tamil Nadu)
- Bharathapuzha Valley
- Malabar Coast

These regions collectively constituted the principal communication corridor linking Kerala with the Tamil plains.

Variables Used in the Study

Dependent Variable

HG = Historical Geography of the Palakkad Gap

Independent Variables

- TR = Trade Networks
- MG = Migration Patterns
- SF = State Formation
- EG = Epigraphical Evidence
- AM = Archival Manuscripts
- HM = Historical Maps
- CD = Colonial Documents

Model Specification

The analytical framework is specified as

$$HG_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 TR_i + \beta_2 MG_i + \beta_3 SF_i + \beta_4 EG_i + \beta_5 AM_i + \beta_6 HM_i + \beta_7 CD_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where

- β_0 = Constant
- β_1 – β_7 = Regression Coefficients (Analytical Relationships)
- ε = Error Term

Table 1. Variable Description

Variable	Description
HG	Historical Geography (Dependent Variable)
TR	Trade Networks
MG	Migration Patterns
SF	State Formation
EG	Epigraphical Evidence
AM	Archival Manuscripts
HM	Historical Maps
CD	Colonial Documents
β_0	Constant
β_1 – β_7	Analytical Coefficients
ε	Error Term

Table 2. Distribution of Primary Historical Sources

Source	Number	Percentage
Stone Inscriptions	28	28.0
Copper Plate	10	10.0
Grants		
Temple	18	18.0
Inscriptions		
Palm-leaf	12	12.0
Manuscripts		
Archival	14	14.0
Manuscripts		
Historical Maps	8	8.0
Colonial Records	10	10.0
Total	100	100.0

Interpretation

Stone inscriptions constitute the largest category (28%), indicating that epigraphical evidence forms the principal primary source for reconstructing the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap.

Table 3. Distribution of Historical Periods Covered

Historical Period	Frequency	Percentage
Early Historic Period	12	12.0
Early Medieval (9th–12th Century)	42	42.0
Late Medieval (13th–16th Century)	24	24.0

Early Modern (17th–18th Century)

14

14.0

Colonial Period

8

8.0

Total

100**100.0**

Most historical evidence belongs to the Early Medieval period (42%), reflecting the expansion of trade, temple institutions, merchant guilds, and regional political authority during this period.

Major Historical Factors Influencing the Development of the Palakkad Gap**Trade Networks**

The Palakkad Gap served as the principal inland trade corridor linking the Malabar ports with Kongu Nadu and the Tamil plains. Merchant guilds such as Ayyavole Five Hundred and Manigramam extensively used this route for commercial activities.

Migration

The Gap facilitated the movement of Brahmin settlers, merchant communities, artisans, soldiers, religious teachers, and agricultural populations, contributing to demographic growth and cultural interaction.

State Formation

Control over the Gap enabled rulers to regulate trade, collect customs revenue, supervise military movements, and consolidate territorial authority. The rise of the Palakkad Rajas was closely associated

with the strategic importance of the corridor.

Epigraphical Evidence

Stone inscriptions, copper plates, and temple inscriptions provide direct evidence regarding land grants, taxation, merchant guilds, irrigation systems, and political administration.

Archival Records

Palm-leaf manuscripts and archival collections preserve valuable information regarding administrative organisation, settlement expansion, trade, and genealogy.

Historical Maps

Historical surveys illustrate the evolution of communication routes, settlements, administrative boundaries, and military infrastructure.

Colonial Documentation

Dutch, Mysore, and British administrative records document trade regulations, military campaigns, customs administration, diplomatic correspondence, and regional governance.

Table 4. Descriptive Analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Trade Networks	4.56	0.52
Migration Patterns	4.28	0.67
State Formation	4.49	0.58
Epigraphical Evidence	4.71	0.41

Archival Manuscripts	4.37	0.63
Historical Maps	4.18	0.70
Colonial Documents	4.26	0.66
Historical Geography	4.62	0.49

The highest mean score is recorded for Epigraphical Evidence (4.71), followed by Historical Geography (4.62) and Trade Networks (4.56). These findings indicate that inscriptions constitute the most reliable primary source for reconstructing the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap. The relatively lower mean score for Historical Maps (4.18) reflects their complementary role in supporting epigraphical and archival evidence.

Correlation Analysis

The analysis indicates that:

- Trade networks exhibit a strong positive relationship with the historical development of the Palakkad Gap.
- Migration patterns significantly contributed to settlement expansion and cultural interaction between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- State formation is strongly associated with the strategic geographical importance of the Palakkad Gap.
- Epigraphical evidence provides highly reliable documentation regarding trade, administration, taxation, and political authority.

- Archival manuscripts complement inscriptions by documenting genealogy, administration, and regional history.
- Historical maps significantly assist in reconstructing historical transport routes and settlement patterns.
- Colonial documents provide comprehensive evidence regarding administrative changes, military campaigns, and commercial regulation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The study concludes that the Palakkad Gap has been one of the most influential geographical corridors in the historical development of Kerala. Its strategic location facilitated inland trade, migration, cultural exchange, and political integration between the Malabar Coast and the Tamil plains. Merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred and Manigramam transformed the corridor into a major commercial artery, while successive rulers—including the Palakkad Rajas, the Zamorins, the Mysore Kingdom, and later the British East India Company—recognised its military and economic importance. The combined analysis of stone inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, archival records, historical maps, and colonial documents demonstrates that geography played a decisive role in shaping trade, migration, settlement expansion, and state formation. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interaction between landscape and historical processes, highlighting the enduring

significance of the Palakkad Gap in Kerala's historical geography.

Findings of the Study

1. The Palakkad Gap has historically functioned as the most important natural corridor connecting the Malabar Coast of Kerala with the Kongu region and the Tamil plains, facilitating continuous movement of people, goods, ideas, and political influence over several centuries.
2. The geographical location of the Palakkad Gap significantly contributed to the development of inland trade networks linking Kerala's maritime ports with the commercial centres of South India. The corridor enabled the transportation of spices, textiles, horses, metals, salt, and agricultural products, thereby strengthening regional and international trade.
3. Merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred (Ainnurruvar) and Manigramam extensively utilised the Palakkad Gap as a commercial route. Their activities promoted market integration, commercial settlements, temple economies, and long-distance trade between the Malabar Coast and the Tamil country.
4. The study reveals that the Palakkad Gap played a significant role in facilitating migration, settlement expansion, and cultural interaction. The movement of Brahmin settlers, merchant communities, artisans, soldiers, and religious teachers through the corridor contributed to the

spread of agriculture, temple institutions, language, architecture, and socio-cultural traditions.

5. The emergence and consolidation of the Palakkad Rajas were closely associated with the strategic geographical importance of the Palakkad Gap. Control over this corridor enabled regional rulers to regulate trade, collect customs revenue, supervise military movements, and strengthen political authority.
6. Epigraphical evidence, including stone inscriptions from Palakkad, Chittur, Alathur, Kollengode, together with copper plate grants and temple inscriptions dating from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, provides substantial evidence regarding land grants, taxation, irrigation, merchant guilds, religious institutions, and political administration.
7. Archival collections such as the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (Mackenzie Collection) and the British Library (Colin Mackenzie Papers) preserve valuable historical manuscripts, administrative reports, genealogies, and regional chronicles that enhance understanding of the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap.
8. Historical maps prepared through the Mackenzie Survey, James Rennell's Maps, and the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, together with Dutch, Mysore, and East India Company records, provide important evidence regarding transport routes, settlement patterns, military strategy, administrative boundaries, and

colonial governance. The integration of epigraphical, archival, cartographic, and colonial sources enables a comprehensive reconstruction of the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap.

Suggestions

1. Conduct systematic documentation, digitisation, and preservation of stone inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, and palm-leaf manuscripts relating to the Palakkad Gap.
2. Establish a comprehensive digital archive integrating epigraphical records, archival manuscripts, historical maps, colonial documents, and archaeological evidence for future historical research.
3. Encourage interdisciplinary research combining historical geography, archaeology, epigraphy, cartography, anthropology, and digital humanities to reconstruct the historical development of the Palakkad Gap.
4. Promote archaeological surveys and epigraphical documentation in Palakkad, Chittur, Alathur, Kollengode, and neighbouring regions to identify undocumented historical sites and inscriptions.
5. Strengthen collaboration among the Archaeological Survey of India, Kerala State Archives, Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR), universities, museums, and international archival institutions for preserving and studying historical records related to the Palakkad Gap.

6. Improve public awareness of the historical significance of the Palakkad Gap by developing heritage tourism initiatives, interpretation centres, museums, educational programmes, and historical exhibitions.
7. Encourage the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), remote sensing, and historical cartography for reconstructing ancient trade routes, settlement patterns, political boundaries, and migration corridors.
8. Promote further research on merchant guilds, inland trade, migration, political institutions, and state formation using original inscriptions, archival manuscripts, historical maps, and colonial administrative records to strengthen the historiography of Kerala.

Conclusion

The Palakkad Gap occupies a unique position in the historical geography of Kerala and South India. As the largest natural pass through the Western Ghats, it served for centuries as the principal corridor linking the Malabar Coast with the Kongu region and the Tamil plains. The study demonstrates that the geographical characteristics of the Gap significantly influenced inland trade, migration, cultural interaction, and the emergence of political authority, making it one of the most strategically important landscapes in the historical development of Kerala.

The findings indicate that the prosperity of medieval Kerala was closely associated with

the commercial networks that passed through the Palakkad Gap. Merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole Five Hundred and Manigramam transformed the corridor into a major inland trading route connecting maritime ports with interior markets. Simultaneously, the movement of merchants, Brahmin settlers, artisans, soldiers, and religious communities contributed to agricultural expansion, settlement formation, temple development, and the diffusion of cultural traditions across regional boundaries.

The study further reveals that political authority in the region evolved in close association with control over this strategic geographical corridor. The rise of the Palakkad Rajas, together with the political interests of the Zamorins, the rulers of Cochin, the Mysore Kingdom, and later the British East India Company, illustrates how geography shaped military strategy, administrative organisation, revenue collection, and territorial expansion.

The integration of stone inscriptions, copper plate grants, temple inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, archival collections, historical maps, and colonial administrative records demonstrates that original historical sources provide a reliable foundation for reconstructing the historical geography of the Palakkad Gap. Epigraphical evidence documents land grants, taxation, merchant guilds, irrigation systems, and political authority, while archival manuscripts and colonial records illuminate administrative structures, commercial policies, and

changing territorial boundaries. Historical maps further reveal the evolution of communication routes and settlement patterns, highlighting the long-term interaction between geography and human activity.

The study therefore concludes that the historical development of Kerala cannot be fully understood without recognising the central role of the Palakkad Gap as a geographical corridor that facilitated trade, migration, and state formation. By

integrating geographical analysis with epigraphical, archival, cartographic, and colonial evidence, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between landscape and historical processes in South India. The findings provide valuable insights for historians, geographers, archaeologists, heritage managers, and policymakers engaged in the preservation and interpretation of Kerala's rich historical heritage.

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