

## MAIN SECTION

# Challenging the Cosmopolitanism and Resilience of the Port city of Kochi through N.S Madhavan's novel *Litanies of Dutch Battery*

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## ABSTRACT

Maritime India has been exposed to transformations in terms of both political and social processes due to the exchange of commodities, men and material. The main focus of the article is on the port city of Kochi, and the consequent encounters in the past in Indian Ocean for black gold (pepper). These encounters have led to a shaping of a unique maritime consciousness and cosmopolitanism of the city that we see even today. As against the popular Eurocentric representations, the article probes into the formation of a community-based 'world view' of the varied conquests, and reclamation of a historic past embedded in the imagination of indigenous people. It helps to pose larger questions about how the Empire is variously constructed by the agents who have alternately articulated it from different socio-cultural contexts. Through a critical reading of the acclaimed Malayalam author N.S Madhavan's novel *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, it is argued that although these encounters have resulted in the creation of a unique maritime consciousness, a closer examination of the silences and representations in these literary narratives reveals the exclusionist strategies and vulnerability of natives who were coerced to align with state envisioned projects. While deliberating on the resilience which has been enacted in these port cities, this article simultaneously looks at the genuine bonds of collaboration and solidarity which has been formed as a result of these trans-oceanic encounters.

## KEYWORDS

*Port-City; Maritime Consciousness; Trans-Oceanic Encounters; Kochi*

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## **Memories of a Port City Beyond the Rulers and Invaders: Analyzing the Discourse of Resilience in the Novel *Litanies of Dutch Battery* by N.S Madhavan.**

Identified with silence and boundlessness  
 My spirit widens clasping the universe  
 Till all that seemed becomes the Real,  
 One in a mighty and single vastness.  
 (Sri Aurobindo, 47)

Kerala, the southernmost state of India, had been the hub of maritime trade since 8<sup>th</sup> century and it enjoyed the unique privilege of having three major ports namely in Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. Around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the local rulers realized the importance of ports as centers of trade and commerce and thereby shifted their attention from the consolidation of the power along terrestrial land, to gaining exclusive monopoly over the port cities. It is this well understood importance that led to the fortification, town and arsenal building, establishment of places of worship for its new and old inhabitants. These port cities became a vortex of political contestations with Vasco-da Gama's entry to Malabar in 1498. As a result of these infiltrations, the culture of port cities like Kochi which functioned as a staple port, underwent a rapid change in long standing values, practices and mindset. Most of the maritime histories and fictional narratives on the power politics in these port cities were written from the point of entry of the Portuguese into the spice trade. Ironically, these narratives conveniently ignore the presence of the Arab and Chinese traders who arrived in Malabar from the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, much earlier than the Portuguese. It is interesting to note how the exclusive focus was on what the colonial powers were engaging with; the locals along these pepper highways were mentioned only when they seemed to threaten colonial expansion.<sup>1</sup>

Myths and legends, as represented in regional literature unearth the palimpsest layers of colonial history buried deep within and helps the reader to comprehend the incongruences that lie beneath the sugar-coated claims of cosmopolitanism of the port cities. The historical narratives focus predominantly on trade strategies, globalization, political and cultural transformation as a result of trans-oceanic contacts, whereas the literary narratives express these historic events creatively; reflecting the social memory and aspirations of the people along the littoral.

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<sup>1</sup> The best variety of pepper was grown north of Cochin to Chettuvay (Malabar). The highway used to transport pepper from the plantations in the hinterland to the coast via numerous rivers and backwaters is called 'pepper highways.' (Singh 55)

Therefore, rather than looking at historical and fictional narratives as two separate and compartmentalized watertight sectors; a complementary reading of both the narratives can help in comprehending the wide-reaching implications of maritime trade relations on a port city like Kochi and how memories of imperial belonging facilitate identity formation ranging from an all-encompassing cosmopolitanism to exclusionist jingoism.

It is interesting to note how new research in Indian Ocean World (IOW) Studies have opened up new debates and challenged the epistemic validity of Eurocentric claims. Indian historians like K. M Panikkar and O.K Nambiar have focused on the narratives of indigenous locals around the port cities of the Malabar coastal belt, which are replete with accounts of shock and trauma that resulted from Portuguese atrocities. Indian Ocean Studies scholar and curator, Neelima Jeyachandran's extensive work on the sacred geographical spots like the *Kappiri* shrines in Kochi, offer fresh insights into the slave trade and the lives of Kappiris or African slaves brought by the Portuguese as deckhands.<sup>2</sup> In addition, historians like Mahmood Kooria and Michael Naylor Pearson engage with literary productions since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and assert that "Among the European sources, Portuguese materials have claimed the lion's share in the existing studies."<sup>3</sup> They argue that many war songs in Arabi-Malayalam still continue to be circulated amongst particular communities of Malabar, awaiting the attention of scholars.<sup>4</sup> Anjana Singh, a noted historian on Dutch regime in India, concurs with this view and expresses a deep concern over the obvious lack of anything close to a social history of the Dutch in India.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarships have opened up new challenges to the existing Eurocentric discourses on human relationship with the oceanic world, mobility and cultural exchange. This essay analyzes how, indigenous voices are challenging long-held assumptions of resilience and introducing a greater complexity to histories of cultural exchanges and encounters. Drawing on the regional fictional narratives and historical research available in the area; it is argued that although these encounters have resulted in the creation of a unique maritime consciousness, a closer examination of the *silences* and representations in these literary narratives reveals the exclusionist strategies and vulnerability of natives who were coerced to align with state envisioned projects. While deliberating on the resilience which has been enacted in these port cities, this essay simultaneously looks at the genuine bonds of collaboration and solidarity which have been formed as a result of these trans-oceanic

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2 Neelima Jeychandran, "Kappiri Shrines and Memories of Slavery in Kerala," ALA (അല), March 30, 2019, <http://ala.keralascholars.org/issues/issue-7/kappiri-shrines-slavery/>.

3 Mahmood Kooria and Michael Naylor Pearson, *Malabar in the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism in a Maritime Historical Region*, 2018.

4 *ibid.* 143

5 Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu*, vol. 13 (Martinus Nijhoff: BRILL, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004168169.i-317>, 6.

encounters. The theoretical frame-work used to approach the problem of incongruence between certain historical and literary narratives on port cities and to understand the nexus between the ruler and the trader in the formation of the social character of the port city has been borrowed from Indian Ocean scholars like Pius Malekandathil, Stephen Mueke, Ferdinand Rosa, M.O. Koshy, Anjana Singh, Sebastian R. Pranje, and post-colonial theorists like Ashis Nandy, Arjun Appadurai, and J. Devika.

## Historical Background: Kochi as the Epicenter of Spice Politics

The popular notion of the beginning of the spice trade can be dated back to the Arabs entering Kodungaloor (Malabar province) as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The ruler of Malabar called Zamorin or *Samoothiri* in the local language (translated as the king of oceans) whole-heartedly received them.<sup>6</sup> When the Portuguese fleet reached the shores of Kappad beach (Kozhikode, Malabar province) in 1498, the Arab traders were displeased as the former slowly started encroaching and demanding a monopoly of the spice trade which ruined the Arab trade considerably. The Portuguese fleet was armed with cannons, which were unknown in the Indian Ocean. French historian Fernand Braudel is of the view that the maritime customs of the Indian Ocean "had always been extremely pacific."<sup>7</sup> Michael Pearson corresponds with the same view and adds that "the Portuguese introduced politics into the Indian Ocean."<sup>8</sup>

The aggressive tendencies of the Portuguese marked the beginning of a fierce combat between the Zamorin and the Portuguese that lasted for almost three centuries. The narratives that surround the Indian Ocean are marked with several disgraceful historical events like the Portuguese seizure and the burning of ten Arab ships and crew in the harbor in full view of the people ashore.<sup>9</sup> They bombarded the Muziris port for three full days and even forced the Zamorin to flee from his own palace.<sup>10</sup> Although defeated, the Zamorin and his closest allies- the Marakkar troops (the Muslim merchants and sea pirates) who were experts in guerilla warfare provided a tough resistance to the Portuguese. This prompted the Portuguese to drift further south towards and explore the port of Cochin. Unlike the Zamorin of Malabar, who fought back aggressively, the kings of Cochin

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6 Fernando Rosa, *The Portuguese in the Creole Indian Ocean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 73.

7 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th - 18th Century*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

8 Michael Naylor Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 106.

9 Gurukkal Rajan and Raghava Varier, *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2018), 195.

10 The narratives that surround the Indian Ocean are marked with several black historical events like the Portuguese seizure and burning of ten Arab ships and crew in the harbor in full view of the people ashore. (Gurukkal & Varier 2018, 195)

were weak and took support from the Portuguese to fight their internal wars against each other. Slowly, under the pretext of extending protection, the Portuguese demanded exorbitant trade concessions and exclusive ownership of land to build their pepper-warehouses. Later in October 1604, the arrival of the Dutch turned the tide against the Portuguese. The Dutch VOC (The United East India Company) was formed in 1602 with the aim of establishing commercial relations with India.<sup>11</sup>

In post-colonial India, Cochin has attracted the attention of several scholars because of its religious tolerance and cultural resilience. Indian sociologist and political psychologist Ashis Nandy, in his book *Warps of Time: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*,<sup>12</sup> heralds Kochi's "alternate cosmopolitanism" as a model worth emulation in the wake of religious fundamentalism and hardcore assertions of ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> The port city of Kochi has been home to many refugees, including the Jews, Konkani, and Kutchi Muslims, and is a place where as many as seventeen languages are spoken.<sup>14</sup> In Nandy's terms, "it presents a different concept of dissent, wherein borders must be crossed not only from outside but also within."<sup>15</sup> According to Ashis Nandy, a major factor that contributed to Kochi's cosmopolitanism was the docility and open-mindedness of the Kochi kings who 'took everything in their stride without much resistance.'<sup>16</sup> He points out that they spent much of their time in religious and spiritual activities, begetting them the image of kings who were known for their piety and scholarship, making them poor stakeholders in the project of empire-building. The next section of the essay shows how beneath the veneer of sugar-coated cosmopolitanism and assimilating tendencies of both the king and the natives of Kochi, the fictional narratives establish the vulnerability of the subjects to maintain respectful relations and enact a state envisioned reconciliation.

## **Recreating Kochi through the Paranki Lens in *Litanies of Dutch Battery***

*Litanies of Dutch Battery* by N.S Madhavan, an Indian writer of Malayalam literature is a riveting account of the Portuguese, Dutch and British influence on Kochi. The novel is set in Lanthan Battery (Fort Kochi) and the historic events traverse four centuries: from the arrival of Vasco-da-Gama in 1498 to the communist regime in the 20th C. It reflects how the natives

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11 Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrims: Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others.*, vol. 20 (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1907), 206

12 Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*, 2002.

13 *ibid*, 162

14 Fearing coercive conversion by the Portuguese Empire to Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> C, the Konkani Saraswat Brahmins from the Konkani Coast fled to Kochi where the king gave them refuge.

15 *ibid*. 162

16 *ibid*. 134

have responded to, complied and creatively reproduced the colonial underpinnings through their inter-generational memory. It is written from the perspective of Jessica, who belongs to the creolized community of Parankis.<sup>17</sup> Postcolonial writers negotiate and recover multiple histories from the oeuvre of their historic past to wean off from the shackles of Eurocentric past and retrieve an alternative narrative which is of equal significance in understanding the maritime history of the place. Several Indian English writers like Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy have brought unmediated responses from the locals in their novels like *The Hungry Tide* and *The God of Small Things* and transported them to a global audience. These stories of repression and resistance decenter privileged historical accounts and subvert institutional history. Using myths, legends and hear-says which have been circulating in Kochi, author N.S Madhavan takes us through the lives of protagonist Jessica, her great-grandfather Louis, who stole the ship building calculus from his master and settled in Lanthan Battery, her uncle- Edwin, who learnt the art of making Biryani from his father, Santiago chettan a neighbor who is passionate about reviving the nearly extinct art form called *Chavittunatakam*. N.S Madhavan places Lanthan Battery at the crossroads of global culture and ideologies. Throughout the novel, an insinuation is made as to how, unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch were a little more considerate while handling the cultural beliefs of the Hindus and Muslims. The following quote from the novel sums up the overall attitude of the Parankis towards the European colonizers:

Imagine history of western conquerors of Kochi as a pie. Divide it into three roughly equal wedges, each comprising one hundred fifty years. If the first piece had the hot peppery taste of the Portuguese, the second had the tangy sourness of the Dutch, and the last piece, that of English, could conjure up nothing but the bland taste of drinking water.<sup>18</sup>

The above post-imperial memory subtly points out the plight of the voiceless natives who were nothing but mute and passive spectators to the multiple invasions and political liaisons formed by the Kochi kings. In the novel, N. S Madhavan foregrounds the political disunity of the kings as one of the main reasons for the Portuguese 'to establish their hegemony over Kochi' (34). The locals had neither the agency nor support to challenge these imperial conquests. This challenges the notion of Kochi's cosmopolitanism exhibiting a happy co-existence devoid of conflicts and welcoming attitude of the natives to foreign intrusions put forth by critical thinkers like Ashis Nandy.

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17 Parankis are the progeny of Portuguese sailors and local women.

18 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 15.

A close examination of the historical accounts of Kerala might possibly help in deciphering the reasons for the vulnerability of Kochi's citizens. The kingdom of Kochi was ruled by Rajas, who belonged to one of five *thavazhis* or households and the area was a constant field of contest for power and territories.<sup>19</sup> To further their political ambitions and escape the vituperative takeovers by the Zamorin of Malabar, the Cochin kings entered into an alliance with the Portuguese and sought protection from the former. In his work, *Perumals of Kerala*,<sup>20</sup> noted Indian historian and political commentator Prof. M.G.S Narayanan points out as to how, with an increase in dependence on the outsiders (i.e Portuguese), an alienation was created amongst the elite subjects like the Brahmin leaders and the Nairs (warrior community) within the kingdom, which resulted in a lack of support, conspiracies and intrigues.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Madhavan's literary imagery insinuates the reader to closely relook at the impact Portuguese and Dutch created in the public imagination. The Portuguese regime is perhaps denoted as 'hot and peppery', perhaps due to their fiery wars with Zamorins and Arabs to monopolize the spice trade, militarize and fortify their settlements and also spread their religious beliefs through forcible conversions. The imagery used by Madhavan for the Dutch is that of 'tangiiness', contradicting the popular view put forth by several historical sources. For instance, historians like Anjana Singh, in her book *Fort Cochin in Kerala (1750-1830): The Social Condition of a Dutch community in an Indian Milieu*<sup>22</sup> highlights the fact that the Dutch were the "friendliest of all Europeans."<sup>23</sup> Their concern for the locals can be exemplified by the institutions they established like a school, a hospital in Fort Kochi and a leper house called the Lazarus House outside Fort Kochi.<sup>24</sup> This draws attention to the fact that on the whole the Dutch were much more 'bearable' than the Portuguese to certain sections of the society (like Hindus and Muslims) as they did not bring about much harm to the natives due to their non-intrusion policy. In addition, historical sources also point out how the political trysts of the Dutch were targeted towards the Portuguese who wielded power and control over the spice trade. They were cordial with the local rulers and entered into political treatises with the Zamorin of Malabar and King of Cochin in 1608 and 1610. In an essay titled "Native assistance in the Foundation of Dutch Power in Kerala", Indian historian M.O Koshy, reveals the strategy of the Dutch who "posed as liberators of the Indian people from the tyrannies of the Portuguese; and were hailed

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19 Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu*, vol. 13 (Martinus Nijhoff: BRILL, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004168169.i-317>, 26.

20 M. G. S Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala* (Thrissur: Cosmo Books, 2018).

21 Ibid. 133

22 Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu*, vol. 13 (Martinus Nijhoff: BRILL, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004168169.i-317>

23 Ibid. 242

24 Ibid. 148

by the people and the princes alike for developing industrial and financial resources."<sup>25</sup> Except for the sporadic temple raids and plunders on temples like Guruvayoor and Trikkannamathilakam in 1716 and 1757, which were essentially meant to destabilize the rulers (as temples were the power centers holding wealth and culture), the Dutch were not keen to forcibly entrench their culture or religion onto the natives; it was strictly mercenary and economic motives, which governed their enterprise. However, N.S Madhavan's novel challenges the above-mentioned popular notion and brings forth an alternate narrative of the Dutch being an equally despotic power like the Portuguese. In fact, there are several instances in the novel where the Dutch are shown ruthlessly chasing the Parankis and other converts. Father Pilathose's warning to the natives echoes the Dutch inconsistencies. "Remember the Dutch had already charred ten churches in Kochi. They were the ones to convert our Santa Cruz Church into a warehouse for spices."<sup>26</sup> It is also important to note that despite the Portuguese leaving Lanthan Battery, the Paranki allegiance towards the Portuguese never shifted to the Dutch and in fact, the readers can decipher the same display of loyalty in characters like Santiago and Edwin.

The most significant aspect which can be inferred through Madhavan's fictional narratives is that the Dutch aspirations were inclined towards acquiring indirect economic control rather than forcible annexations and social control as carried out by the Portuguese. Historical sources also point out the covert strategies which the Dutch employed to gain control. By crowning the Kochi king, Vira Kerala Varma as the king of Cochin, the Dutch became the 'king-makers' of the kingdom of Kochi, which gave them the right to place a crown bearing the insignia of the Dutch East India Company on the head of the prince, whereby the company was accepted as the "guardian and benefactor of the kingdom of Cochin."<sup>27</sup> Thus, it can be observed that it was not just the mercantile aspirations of the Dutch which crusaded their maritime mission, but they also employed clever ploys to unobtrusively establish their hegemony and influence popular imagination in India. Folk stories and legends too have played a significant part in enhancing the respectability and esteem of the Dutch. Several folk stories and books of legends like *Aithihyamala* (written by court scribes of Kerala like Kottarathil Sankunni) which were patronized by the local rulers, cast the Dutch in a favourable position because many of these kings were recipients of the Dutch protection. Thus, the indirect control of narratives was one of the methods by which the Dutch gained esteem amongst the natives (Hindus, Syrian Christians and Muslims). N.S Madhavan's *Litanies of Dutch Battery* subverts the official history to provide the readers with an

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25 MO Koshy, "Native Assistance in the Foundation of Dutch Power in Kerala," vol. 49 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 1988), 197.

26 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 174.

27 MO Koshy, "Native Assistance in the Foundation of Dutch Power in Kerala," vol. 49 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 1988), 197.



alternative version which encompasses the lives of the excluded non-privileged section i.e Parankis who had to face several adversities as a result of the Dutch supremacy.

## Bridging the Gaps

Leading Indian Ocean scholar Pius Malekandathil in his book *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*<sup>28</sup> identifies geography of the sea as one of the main reasons behind the resilience and accommodative tendencies of people along the long littoral stretch of India. He posits: "The fury of the sea, as well as the oddities and adversities waiting for them behind fatal waves and winds, were so common that these people had to discipline their wills and shape their behavior in ways very different from those of agrarian or urban spaces."<sup>29</sup> The maritime camaraderie between islanders belonging to different faiths of the Lanthan Battery is exhibited not just during a political crisis or invasion; rather it is well displayed in their personal lives too. During the precarious labour pains that Matilda experiences, the entire neighborhood gathers outside their home to chant clarion calls of 'Ailasa', 'Heave ho', 'Give a hand'<sup>30</sup> to uplift her spirits. Here, it becomes very interesting to note that all the above words are typically uttered in unison to encourage each other during the process of embarking or disembarking cargo from a ship. The use of the above words shows the maritime mindset of 'lending a helping hand' which was ingrained in the psyche of the islanders of Lanthan Battery. Here, the personal and political lives assume a distinct fluidity, transgressing the hardwired boundaries drawn by the State and regimes. Due to their susceptibility to uncertainty, supporting each other through precarious situations, joys and sorrows, and sharing whatever little resources that they had, became a part of their larger collective consciousness. In *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, Edwin wholeheartedly contributes his money for the festivities, especially towards buying the ingredients of Biryani. Despite the 'lack' and 'dearth' that they undergo in their personal life; at the dusk, people belonging to different religions like Raghavan Master, Pushpangadhan Master, Santiago, Prangi chettan etc. come together to join at the Ponjikkarra Toddy shop to sing, dance and share their woes, which displays the accommodative tendencies of these islanders.

The process of construction of infrastructure around the port cities slowly ebbed the gap between civilizations. The British Empire with Lord Willingdon at the helm was keen to improve connectivity between disjointed islands for better movement of men and material across shores. Sir Robert Bistrow, the chief British harbour engineer was appointed by the East India Company to spear-head the re-development project of Kochi

28 Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*, 2015.

29 *ibid.*, xi

30 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 41.

port. N.S Madhavan's *Litanies of Dutch Battery* shows the commitment of Sir Robert Bistrow towards his work against all adversities. In the process, he gets to understand the city and people of the island better. He becomes so engrossed in the process of reclaiming land from sea and clearing hurdles that stood in the way of 'building the port' that he forgets his own position as a British officer stationed in Raj. Postcolonial writers would classify this behavior as cultural amnesia, a condition peculiar to natives who were in close contact with the colonial masters. Here the readers can situate Robert Bistrow in the same state, where he loses the sense of self and past to become a hybridized Robert Parashuram Bistrow.<sup>31</sup> In a state of drunken stupor, he claims in the presence of Edwin that he "was the one who reclaimed more land from the sea."<sup>32</sup> His involvement in breaking sand bars across Cochin, formation of islands and making of the two land bridges, negotiating and controlling flow of labour and building of Mattancherry wharf-ware became so intense that it took a toll on his health and he had to undergo a treatment in London. In his conversation with another colleague Sir Gordon Hearn, the engineer who built a railway line linking Peshawar to Durand Line, he says: "Madness is the wage for being creative in India."<sup>33</sup> Unlike the East India Company officers posted inland, the relationship which officers like Robert Bistrow (who worked in the port cities) had with natives were more compassionate as it was fraught with uncertainties. This fractured identity of Robert Bistrow might be an outcome of constant negotiations and re-imaginings to tame the untamable and chaotic sea. N.S Madhavan's character of Robert Bistrow holds a close resemblance to Joseph Conrad's character of Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* who goes 'mad' while exploring the heart of Africa and attempting to civilize the indigenous natives. Empathy, shared solidarity, and the guilt of having to play a controlling officer to get his tasks executed- all might have led Bistrow to lose a grip over his identity assigned to him by various social constructs. However, a Patiala peg poured by his cook Edwin makes Bistrow voice out his aspirations and deep rooted fears. Here, the master-servant boundary becomes fluid revealing how the fears and uncertainties associated with the sea are universal irrespective of class, caste, race or gender.

Sir Robert Bistrow's autobiography, *Cochin Saga* was the major reference material for the author while conceptualizing and writing *Litanies of Dutch Battery*. The *Cochin Saga* sums up the long history of Cochin port and also offers a sneak peek into the social life of the British in Cochin. In the book, Robert Bistrow nonchalantly states his love for the land and its inhabitants. He generously praises Kerala as a 'fertile place of waving palms and green valleys, wild hills and flowing waters and not without an early history

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31 According to the Hindu legends, Sage Parasurama, was a warrior sage and an avatar of Mahavishnu, who threw an axe into the sea to reclaim the land of the Western coast.

32 *ibid.* 44

33 *ibid.* 45

and culture of its own.<sup>34</sup> He also gives credits of his success to the co-operation of all involved in the project. Unlike a stereotypical officer stationed in the Raj who unabashedly picked faults with his native staff, Bistrow accords his staff lavish praises. He describes the latter's efficiency in the following manner:

As to qualifications and aptitude, I found my indoor and outdoor staffs quite efficient and loyal, the indoor superior staff, mostly Hindu, the ship's crew mostly Moslem, the labour mostly Christian. So far as my personal staff were concerned, I regarded them collaborators rather than subordinates, and I was richly rewarded. I learned from them and I think they would be the first to acknowledge that the debt was reciprocal. It was a partnership in ideal proportion of self-discipline, mutual respect, and mutual assistance, and if from time to time, we had our differences, they too, were signs of life and kinship, not of cold blooded indifference.<sup>35</sup>

Yet another interesting example of shared solidarity and amicable negotiations that Madhavan points out in his novel is that of the Dutch Governor General, Van Rheede.

Unlike other colonizers who dismissed oriental knowledge as esoteric and lacking reason, the Dutch evidenced an inclination and appreciation towards traditional forms of knowledge. N. S Madhavan's novel, draws the attention of the reader as to how the Dutch Governor of Cochin, Henric Adriaanne Van Reed gets completely disillusioned and falls out of the territorial conquest after being introduced to the various botanical herbs in the region of Malabar by a Caramalite priest.<sup>36</sup> This unique interest resulted in renunciation of territorial claims and was replaced by the passionate drafting of a twelve volume book called *Hortus Malabaricus* which till date is one of the finest books available on the medicinal properties of the plants in Malabar.<sup>37</sup> Another significant fact of this book is that unlike most colonizers or historians of the 16<sup>th</sup> C and 17<sup>th</sup> century, Van Reed never erased the names of the local collaborators. The contributions of Itty Vaidyan, the native physician is reverently mentioned in Vol I of the book.<sup>38</sup> A power subversion can be observed here, highlighting the fact that, for the Dutch VOC in India, intellectual activities were as important as their imperial expeditions.

Thus, as against the image of ruthless and plundering colonizers, the novel brings forth subversive characters like Sir Bistrow and Henric Adriaanne

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34 Robert Bristow Sir and James Grigg Sir, *Cochin saga* (London: Cassell, 1959), 139.

35 *ibid.* 231

36 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 173.

37 *ibid.* 35

38 K. S Manilal, *Botany and History of Hortus Malabaricus* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1980), 56.

Van Reed who recalibrate their energies and envision a world which is inclusive of the Orient. French art historian and Nobel prize winner Rolland described the trances and mystical states experienced by Ramakrishna and other mystics as an “oceanic sentiment”, one which Rolland had also experienced.<sup>39</sup> Particularly, Robert Bristow’s representation in *Litanies of Dutch Battery* and the *Cochin Saga* resonates what Romain Rolland points out as: “a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded”, a “feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps, it is this oceanic sense which drove several colonizers to develop a kind of empathy, emotional bonding and shared solidarity with the people of littoral.<sup>41</sup>

## Culinary Transformations in Kochi as a Result of Maritime Trade

Food is one of the earliest aspects introduced by the colonizers into a port city. Collective consumption of certain food items is a part of the process of identity formation of a community or a place. It is very interesting to note how a precious food ingredient like pepper which opened up borders and forged solidarity was also the reason behind colossal dissents, and clash of cultures and conflicts. A lot of cultural exchanges between the locals and the traders in terms of food, language and rituals contributed to the calibration of multicultural plurality of the port city of Kochi. The cultural transactions were not limited to lending and borrowing from the food platter; it also resulted in a perforation of language and etiquettes of the Arabs, Portuguese, and Dutch into Kochi’s indigenous culture. Just as pepper was a great discovery in the European markets, the Portuguese introduced the large onions called *sabola* in Indian markets. The Parankis of Lanthan Battery fondly remember how their ancestors gave the land the first taste of big onion called *savala*, which is a word borrowed from the Portuguese term *sa-bo-la*.<sup>42</sup> The Parankis of the land also proudly claim how it was not just onion, which got shared from the Portuguese casket, but also dried chilies. Even today, this legacy of the red chilies introduced by the Portuguese continues in the local Kerala cuisine.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Edwin, goes to the extent of subverting the popular notion regarding biryani and claiming vehemently: “Who gave the biryani to the Arabs? Malayali Muslims, who else?”<sup>44</sup> The above statement also reflects the faith and pride of Parankis in their association with the Portuguese and the

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39 Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy*. (Knopf, 2013), <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=458628>, 11

40 Ibid. 12

41 See *Primitive Passion: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* by Marianna Torgovnick University of Chicago Press, 1998

42 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 62

43 Ibid. 62

44 Ibid. 61

quintessential disdain of Arabs who were arch rivals of the Portuguese in the spice trade.

The native acceptance and preference of certain food items like *kappa* also known as *tapioca* or *cassava*, so much that it has become the culinary icon of the state of Kerala, shows the colossal impact of Portuguese on Kerala as compared to other regimes. This tuber, a favourite with all the natives across and beyond Kerala, was brought by the Portuguese sailors (from Brazil) during their maritime expeditions. It was introduced by Vishakhram Thirunal (1880-1885 AD), the ruler of Travancore who attempted to replace the staple diet of rice with tubers of *cassava*.<sup>45</sup> In fact, many fruits and plants like guava, breadfruit, cashew, pineapple, and custard apple were brought to Kerala by the Portuguese from South America. This shows the nature of unequal relationship which existed between the Portuguese and Kochi kings who were obligated to acknowledge and assimilate the Portuguese culinary preferences. Macaroni was another food item which was brought by the traders of Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, some of these interventions proved lifesaving during the times of a devastating crisis. For example, in postcolonial India, in the wake of food shortages, the communist government of Kerala, headed by E. M. S Namboothiripad resorted to providing free macaroni gruel in 1958 to avoid deaths caused by starvations. It is very interesting to note how the food items brought in by the Portuguese like *kappa*, red chilies & cashew have become the most influential or key ingredients in Kerala cuisine as compared to macaroni or *kadala* brought by Arabs or the Dutch.<sup>46</sup> This reflects the colossal impact of the Portuguese as compared to other European invaders and the vulnerability of the natives who succumbed to the acculturation process.

N.S Madhavan also draws the reader's attention to Portuguese introduction of western dining by bringing the *pinjannam* (plate) and *koppa* (mug) which got adopted seamlessly in the native lifestyle.<sup>47</sup> Thus, although the process of glocalization is not free from conflict, it has been advantageous at critical junctures as it bestowed a sense of privacy when adopted in the native lifestyle. The notion of family as a cohesive singular unit was introduced by Dutch. The very idea of constructing private toilets (*Kakkus* pronounced in both Dutch and Malayalam alike) helped to rusticate the idea of open defecation thereby ushering better health. Both these brought about a herculean change in the social dynamics of Lanthan Battery. It also shows the determined efforts of Europeans to create a home-like ambience, standardize cultures and assimilate themselves in an alien port culture. Every culture needs a catalyst to seamlessly perforate into an alien culture. In *The Litanies of Dutch Battery*, Edwin, the cook plays

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45 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 143.

46 *Kappa* is the local term for tapioca and *kadala* refers to Bengal gram.

47 Before the Portuguese advent, food was mostly served in plantain or banana leaves.

the role of a catalyst by introducing, explaining and utilizing food products and cooking new and exotic dishes for the Parankis of Lanthan Battery, by which the Parankis establishes their own linkages and forges their collective identity.

## Unearthing the 'Historical Silences' through Fictional Representations

Ashis Nandy's proposition that it would be rather safer to rely on the mythic or local narratives of Kochi, rather than falling back solely on the Eurocentric historical accounts can be partially agreed; however, there are aspects like political ambitions of the Kochi kings, shrewd manipulation of local kings by the Dutch, the practice of appointing foreign merchants as governors of major ports to mobilize and attract overseas commerce in the face of intensification of Indian Ocean trade, giving excessive liberty to foreign sailors to marry local women (both Hindu and Muslim), and reducing of cess tax from the nominal 6% to 3.5% for Portuguese cassado traders<sup>48</sup> which hardly gets reflected in both the local/folk narratives as well as fictional narratives such as of N.S Madhavan. The conspicuous absence of the above-mentioned events in the local narratives signify the fact that the indigenous crowd were just a silent witness and un-informed spectators to the process of cosmopolitanism, political operations, and expansion strategies undertaken by their own kings as well as the European powers.

Public silence is a common characteristic of a community's discourse, emerging from the failure of political leaders to disclose all that they know about a national crisis, to an embarrassing hesitancy when one person speaks to another about a socially taboo topic.<sup>49</sup> Historical research may have extensively drawn the reader's attention to the lacunae on part of the Cochin kings. However, historiographies of established Indian historians like K.P Padmanabha Menon's *Kochi Rajyacharitam*, K.M Panikkar's *The History of Kerala*, Dr. N. M Namboothiri's *Kerala Samskaram* or C. Achyutha Menon's *Kochi State Manual: Kerala State Gazetteer* fail to resonate the mode in which this trauma got embedded into the native's subconscious and registered in their memory. Madhavan re-creates history through social memory or the past experiences (communicated or repressed) within a given society. His memories of this port city is a shared and long lasting memory. While the social format of memory is built on inter- generational communication, political and cultural forms of memory are designed for trans-generational modes of communication. The stories witnessed and narrated by the patriarch of *Kanakkukatta*

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48 Pius Malekandathil, *Mughals, the Portuguese, and the Indian Ocean: Changing Imageries of Maritime India*, 2015, 89-93.

49 Charles B Stone and William Hirst, "(Induced) Forgetting to Form a Collective Memory," *Memory Studies* 7, no. 3 (2014): 314.

family, Valia Louis Asari to his subsequent generations formed the collective imagination and social memory of the Parankis. Shared memory embraces both that is remembered and that which is not remembered. The events remembered by Jessica and Santiago establish the presence of certain silences about past events and people. Madhavan retrieves the buried past of lesser known luminaries like Italian voyager, Nicholas Conti, Archbishop Ludovico Martini and the Vicar Bernardini Baccinelli who built churches for Christians in Lanthan Battery. The naval might of the Ming Dynasty and colossal ships of Admiral Zheng Ho are brought to the reader's attention to signify the possibility of challenging a monolithic version of history. The tendency of Western scholarship to oversimplify, overemphasize and homogenize select historic events is highlighted through the examples Madhavan cites in the novel. The author, also draws the reader's attention to a lesser known fact of the presence of a Chinese settlement and sprawling Buddhist temple in Fort Kochi. The Portuguese act of dumping the idol of Buddha in backwaters<sup>50</sup> once again suggests that they came with a rigorous project of not just imperial expansion but also a religious expansion. This leads to the ontological question, whether it was the accommodative tendencies inherent in natives around the coastal rim or was it the fear of being erased and being cast away that gave birth to this highly lauded cosmopolitanism of Kochi?

Another historical event which is overshadowed by the European discourses and which has remained dynamic in social memory is the African presence in Kochi. In Madhavan's narrative, Santiaguchettan highlights the manner in which Kappiris or the black African slaves who were brought by the Portuguese to Fort Kochi. When the Dutch seized Kochi, Portuguese hoarded all their gold and diamonds in huge jars and buried it. A lot of Kappiris or African slaves were buried along with the treasure with a belief that they would safeguard these treasures. Several natives imbibed the belief unwittingly that if these Kappiri spirits were pleased, the former would be bestowed with wealth and hidden fortunes. It is due to the perpetuation of this myth that Santiaguchettan advises Gomeschettan to offer a pot of toddy (alcohol) and a plateful of chicken for the Kappiri Muthappan (or the African grandfather) and this belief still remains uncontested amongst the locals who offer the same as their token of respect to Kappiri Muthappan. This is symptomatic of the deification of suppressed subalterns and integration of retributive justice in mainstream society. Thus, myths encoded in social memory possess the power to subvert the process of codification, canonization and crystallization of history perpetuated by the Western empirical scholarship.

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50 N. S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 235.

## Re-interpreting Kochi's Resilience Beyond the Canonical Representations

Literature has always been a vehicle of memory and although it is often a partial representation of reality, it helps in articulating an ambivalence within the popular discourses. Madhavan's fictional narrative uses cultural memory alongside social memory to unearth this ambivalence, subvert the canonical frameworks and reproduce true sentiments of the Parankis towards the Kochi kings. Public memories expressed through art productions like *Chavittunatakam* (an opera designed by the natives of Lanthan Battery) become functional to decode the inherent meanings and concealed power relations and also foster healing. Originally written by Chinnathambi Annavi, in the 16th century in Tamil and pidgin Latin, the opera is a re-fabrication of Ludovico Aristo's 16th c play *Orlando Furioso*. *Chavittunatakam*, resonated the exasperation of the natives towards the Kochi kings. For instance, in the opera, various rulers like the Scindia of Gwalior, King George V, Queen Mary of England commands awe and respect from the natives; however, the king of Kochi is referred to as a "diminutive Koch"<sup>51</sup> which reflects the insignificant position he occupied in the Paranki's hearts. *Chavittunatakam* brings out the inherent and abstract fear of the natives of being weak and victims of political barter. This led to the creation of a local hero like Karalman who undertakes crusades to save his countrymen. The Opera player Santiago's statement that "Loners rig history"<sup>52</sup> shows the desperation rooted deep within their subconscious psyche to procure an effective leadership. Art forms and theatre in the 16th and 17th Centuries were highly patronised by the Kochi kings and these performances were strategically used to glorify their image, reinforce the divine rights theory and tilt the public imagination towards certain hegemonic ideologies. Santiago's statement that they would not make their Karalman stomp their feet like Kathakali dancers reveals the contempt natives held for this highly patronized dance form. Thus, cultural productions like *Chavittunatakam* became a medium to challenge and mock the existing hierarchical art productions like Kathakali and the patronisers of the art form—that is—the Kochi kings. The jubilation, and the act of setting Kochi Raja's blue conch and palanquin flag on fire the moment independence was declared suggests the change and stability the people of Lanthan Battery were aspiring for. Correspondingly, the narrative is interspersed with references to the rulers of Travancore who would go to any length to defend their kingdom against the European invaders. Madhavan brings to limelight events in indigenous historical records like the diplomatic tact of Marthanda Varma, who not only defeated and captured De Lannoy, the commander of Dutch army in the Battle of Colachel but also convinced him to accept the position as his naval commander.

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51 *ibid.* 29

52 *ibid.* 90



Madhavan also remarks on the initiative taken by the Queen of Travancore, Sethu Parvathy Bai who herself got vaccinated first to help her subjects to overcome the fear of getting vaccinated.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Madhavan's narrative engages and contests the historical reality presented by European strictures and opens up a history full of alternative possibilities.

Madhavan's fiction intertwines personal memory and social memory to show its implications on each other. The agony caused to Jessica (addressed as Koch) by Pushpangathan Master's encroachment on her body, and her final act of transgression by feigning and embracing *madness* to survive in a chaotic world can be metaphorically read as Kochi's and the native's vulnerability to enact 'resilience' as a tool for survival and to maintain sanity amidst multiple infiltrations. Although Edwin feels that people would forget all that has happened in the past; Jessica's final question to her cousin Johnson, "who made up the history that we study in school?"<sup>54</sup> interrogates the fashionable garb of cosmopolitanism cast over the port city of Kochi. Thus, Madhavan's fictionalized 're-telling' of the history becomes a means to recuperate and unburden the multiple layers of trauma (both personal and political) and subjugation faced by the natives down the generations. It brings to the attention of readers the criteria of 'history making process' which practices the politics of selection and exclusion of a historical event or memory.

## Conclusion

*Litanies of Dutch Battery* highlights the value of contemporary fiction in attending to the historical events in 15<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> BC. It helps the reader in empathizing significant aspects beyond the popular ascriptions of the cosmopolitan past. The historical past of Kochi which has been called into question by a regional novelist like N.S Madhavan displays three modes of indigenous re-construction: a) employing methods like contestation of established stereotypes and discourses b) retrieval of buried histories c) presentation of local stories that perform and aid these contestations. Through N.S Madhavan's novel on the port city of Kochi, we understand how society constructs and maintains mnemonic practices and artifacts that exhibit "selective representation and selective forgetting."<sup>55</sup> N.S Madhavan challenges the codification of history and shows the reader the importance of history being dynamic and open to subjective narration of losses and gains achieved by a community. This paper leads to an ontological inference that the cosmopolitanism that emerged in Kochi was not merely due to the accommodative tendencies and resilience practiced down centuries but also due to the fact that they were

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53 *ibid.* 8

54 *ibid.* 280

55 Charles B Stone and William Hirst, "(Induced) Forgetting to Form a Collective Memory," *Memory Studies* 7, no. 3 (2014): 320.

coerced into enacting cosmopolitanism in-order to synchronize with the policies of the state. N.S Madhavan's narrative also displays development of a unique inter- personal relationship and maritime mindset amongst both the people on the littoral as well as of the European officers stationed in these port cities who wrestle a host of unforeseen circumstances, natural disasters and political dictums.

The augmented maritime consciousness of both the categories made them better equipped to incorporate a fabric of inclusivity in their attitude. So, beyond the internal contentions and wars, it was also the impulses and churn of the ocean which played a colossal role in moulding a port mindset and bestowing a temporality which helped both the settlers and locals to re-calibrate and adapt according to the transformations around them.

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