



The Commonwealth Trust Tile Factory in Feroke

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Summary: *The Commonwealth Tile Factory in Feroke, Kerala, founded by German missionaries in 1905, played a pivotal role in the region's industrialisation, social transformation, and architectural development. Through a study of the challenges it faces today due to the paucity of raw materials and labour, and changing market preferences, this article highlights the precarious future of this historical landmark.*

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“For us, the company (the tile factory as it is known locally) is a very important part of our lives, identity, and livelihood. It is one of the things that Feroke is known for.”

- Sreekumar, the Executive Director of the Commonwealth Trust India Ltd’s tile factory in Feroke, is also a native of the place and has been associated with the establishment for over three decades.

Besides the Chaliyar River, which has witnessed the ebb and flow of the history of Malabar and its people, stands the Commonwealth Tile Factory, better known as the *odu* company (tile company) amongst the locals. Soaring red chimneys, some spurting smoke into the sky, others not, greet anyone travelling across the Chaliyar River. The many tile factories stand as a historical landmark, weaving multitudes of histories of caste, colonialism, class, religion, and the daily ordinary lives of uncountable people and their existence affected by these. The Commonwealth Tile Company occupies a central role in these factories, being the earliest and now the only existing one.

The tile factory's compound is reminiscent of European buildings during the Industrial Revolution, with structures made of unplastered red brick and tall red chimneys, which are representative of European factories in all kinds of literature. The history of the Commonwealth Tile Factory starts with and is closely associated with the German missionaries of the Basel Mission Society who came to Malabar. The tile factory had an instrumental role in affecting the architecture in the surrounding areas by replacing thatched buildings with tiled roofs; it also brought considerable changes in the lives of people of the region, modernising their lifestyle. Also, the tile factory was one of the early factories in the region, which meant the formation of a new labour force, detached at least theoretically from caste and the caste-based occupational division, unleashing new social forces. The missionary links of the tile factory brought new order and food habits into the lives of labourers and their families.

The Factory, as reflected in Sreekumar's words, holds immense importance in the area's economy and stands as a landmark that has multiple implications for the lives of the people of Feroke. Along with this, the tile factory faces numerous challenges today, which are crucial to its existence. The tile factory industry, with the Commonwealth Tile Factory as a point of focus, exists as a centre of convergence of many multitudes and as a living space. Attempting to understand the establishment is sure to elevate the curiosity of all those who are interested in people's history and the processes that shape the worlds of ordinary everyday people.



Figure 1: A view of the factory from outside.



Figure 2: A view of the tile factory from the inside.

The Setting Up of the Tile Factory in Feroke: The Background

Feroke, located at the southern shore of the Chaliyar River in Kozhikode, is of immense importance for trade and commerce and was a part of the kingdom of Parappanad during the mediaeval period. During the late 18th century, it became part of the Mysore Kingdom. Tipu Sultan wanted to convert the area as his headquarters in Malabar, and he named the village Farooqabad. A part of the laterite fort built by Tipu remains at Feroke. Later, following the Third Anglo-Mysore War and the subsequent Treaty of Seringapatam, Farooqabad became a part of the Malabar District under the British Raj. It was renamed Feroke by the British. Feroke, owing to its geographical position on the banks of the Chaliyar, proximity to Beypore port, and the British development of the railways, was and continues to be a critical location for trade and commerce.

Understanding the history of the Basel Evangelical Mission (BEM) in southern India is key to understanding the background of the tile industry at Feroke. The BEM was founded in 1815 in the city of Basel, located at the German-Switzerland border, by a few young Protestant men to work for the development of humanity across the world; three missionaries from Basel landed in coastal Calicut on 21 August 1834, following the revision of the British Government's East India Company Act, which enabled the functioning of non-British missions in India.

After landing in Calicut, they moved to the Karnataka region, where the mission began functioning. With the start of the mission's activities, a station was established around the Kannada- and Tulu-speaking regions of South Canara and Coorg, their initial area of influence. They did not return to Calicut till 1842. Unlike Cochin and Travancore, Malabar had not been under the sphere of missionary societies such as the London Missionary Society (LMS) and Church Missionary Society (CMS). The BEM also spread their activities to Bombay and Karnataka, where Kannada and Marathi

influence was strong. The mission, a Protestant mission, was deeply embedded in the Calvinistic tradition. As the classical sociologist Max Weber points out, it was guided by the principle that work is worship and labour was seen as an intrinsic factor for their liberation. They argued that the factories had an important pedagogical role in instilling a Protestant work ethic in local communities. In other words, this also meant greater control over converts.

Factory work as a means of devotion was often used as a litmus test to interrogate the 'authenticity' of their Christian employees. 'A good worker is a good Christian', and vice versa was trumpeted by mission managers who elected a council of 'elders' from among its employees. Prayers were regularly held, and supervisors could dismiss Christian and non-Christian workers for any signs of laziness and unproductiveness. The factories were also the spaces for the building of the community.

Another factor that made the need for economic institutions necessary for the BEM was the prevalence of the caste system, under which a person could only be employed in a traditional occupation assigned to the caste, i.e., the occupation was assigned by caste. Those who converted to Christianity faced social ostracization, especially those who were members of marginalised castes, but the lower castes formed the majority of the converts. The Basel Mission had to provide jobs for the new converts who faced violence and social boycotts at the hands of the landlords and upper castes; this was a prerequisite for BEM's goal of setting up independent Christian congregations, which would be impossible till agriculture bondage was abolished. This assumed utmost importance because, even though there were converts from varied social backgrounds, the members from the Thiyya and Billava communities formed the majority of the converts.

It was these reasons that necessitated the company to pursue economic activities. The

company aimed at creating gainful occupations for the converts. Initially, the Mission was keen to settle their converts in agricultural settlements but found them unfeasible in the long run. German artisans sent to these stations also attempted to introduce cottage industries such as cuckoo clock-making and carpet weaving, which soon shut shop. These activities summarise the first phase of the missions' economic pursuits, which was not very successful.

In 1852, under the chief inspectorship of J.F. Josenhans, an industrial commission was set up. This formalised BEM's involvement in the industrial sector. The initial industries were weaving units, the first one being established at Mangalore in 1851. These were followed by weaving units at Kannur and Kozhikode. In 1864, Basel missionary George Plebst, who had studied the process of clay treatment, glazing, construction of kiln and baking process in Germany, experimented with a locally made kiln in Mangalore with the help of a local craftsman. The following year, a tile factory was established at Jeppo in Mangalore on the banks of the Nethravathi River, kickstarting the industrial-level production of clay tiles in Kerala. The Mission subsequently established seven tile factories either near seaports or railway stations.

The period also saw an increased acceptance of clay tiles instead of thatched roofs since these were safer and needed less maintenance. The increased demand for the roofing tiles and bricks took place alongside the increased competition from the British weaving units, which resulted in lessening profits from BEM weaving units. The Mission then bolstered its tile production by setting up a tile factory at Feroke. The natural availability of high-quality raw materials, especially the clay on the flood plains of Chaliyar, abundant availability of water, and a double advantage in terms of proximity to both railway and waterway meant that the location was ideal for setting up the factory. The construction of the Feroke Bridge increased the connectivity by road which aided the

transportation of finished tiles. Also, the lack of missionary activity in the Malabar region attracted the Mission to set up the factory and establish a station there. As the British railway project progressed and the British constructed various establishments, demand for the bricks and tiles from PWD and railways increased, and so did the production of tiles and bricks from the factory.

The Factory Through the Years

“The history of this place is so vast. Even after so many years, I still come across something, some interesting historical fact or learn something about the factory's past now and then.”

-Jijo Valsan, Production Officer

The factory, built by the German missionaries in 1905, was taken over by the British when they forced the German missionaries to leave India as the two nations were adversaries during the First World War. For the German missionaries, the process of community building was necessary. Jijo, a historian by training, mentions how the British converted the factory into one whose primary aim was commercial success. While men and women worked in the factory, they sent their children to the nearby school operated by the missionaries. They also established the Weaving Factory in the middle of modern Kozhikode town to foster a sense of community and provide jobs to the new converts and local people, mentions Jijo.

However, the British took over and ran the factory in an autocratic manner. Guards or officers were responsible for spying on the workers to identify and quell any labour movements or unrest, which were common, and the workers were subjected to much harsher conditions than before. With the declaration of India's Independence, the British transferred the ownership of the factory to the Commonwealth Trust, which has been operating the factory since. Some British Engineers and Officers had stayed

back even after 1947, calling Feroke home and working with the factory.

The Trust used to pay annual royalties till 1970 to the British. Under the Trust, the factory has flourished even though it had to battle many difficulties. Feroke, according to Jijo and Sreekumar, had around 10 to 20 tile companies after the BEM missionaries' endeavour became successful. Although these were also initially successful, the growing unavailability of suitable soil and labour led to them closing down. Currently, the Commonwealth Tile Factory is the only one left standing. The workers here attribute it to their unique process of making the tiles, which has been the same since 1905 and has gained the goodwill of the clientele.

The Process of Making the Tiles

“Yes, there are modern methods that are easier, but we believe that the quality of the tiles we make using this century-old method can never be achieved using those modern methods.”

– Vinod, a labourer at the Factory

The eight-acre compound has two main production units, administrative units, other ancillary buildings, a mission bungalow, loading bays, and clay pits. The architecture of the production unit is no accident; it was indeed one of the strategies used by the mission to popularise its products. Laterite was the primary production material that was used at the time. The mission was to establish that the bricks produced were as good as or even better production material for building immense structures. So, the company started producing bricks and the bricks produced at the site were used for the construction of the buildings of the factory. This resulted in European-style architecture and techniques, with the building made entirely of red bricks and wood and overlaid with clay roof tiles. The walls are load-bearing structures and use arches, semi-arches, etc., typical of the European style. The mission's strategy was

successful, and that type of architecture and materials became sought after in the area, even by the British colonialists.



Figure 3: Soil stored for being manufactured into tiles.

The process of making the tiles itself is fascinating, and it has many steps and requires expertise at every level. Two grades of clay are used in the process of tile making. The first one is lean clay, which has about 25% sand content and is coarser than the second type, i.e. plastic clay, which has only 6% sand content and is a better quality of clay. Both these are added in a 2:1 ratio into the speeder, after which it is ground through a roller known as a pan mill. The resultant clay is again ground using a high-speed roller to create a nicer consistency.



Figure 4. The speeder used for mixing the clay at the beginning of the manufacturing process.

Now, the clay is transferred for de-airing and mixing. Then, all the air is removed from the clay, mixed thoroughly, and comes out as slabs. The slabs are hand cut into required sizes and are applied with a mixture of rice bran oil and kerosene before being inserted into moulds to shape. After this step, a worker cuts the excesses from the sides and removes the tile from the mould.



Figure 5. Bricks that are yet to be baked are kept outside the area where they will undergo the baking process.



Figure 6. A view of the furnace which is used to bake the tiles.

The tile is then shifted to the drying area with long parallel shelves reminding one of a vast library. And in between shelves, there is a trolley-like system for moving the tiles

to and fro. It is dried here for at least eight days before it is shifted to the furnace. The furnace built using bricks and *surkhi* mortar is one of the most important parts of the factory; it is connected to the chimney. The stove is burnt around the clock using local firewood. The furnace is filled with dried tiles, which are then burned; this process ensures the strength and durability of the product. After burning, the product is sorted and shifted to the loading bay from where it is transported.



Figure 7. Conveyor belts transporting the clay shaped into tiles for the next stage of manufacturing.

One of the main features of the entire production unit is how it is planned. The floors are paved with wood and there is a conscious provision for slits in between to ensure airflow and to make sure that the heat is not trapped inside. Similarly, there are glass tiles on the roof which makes sure that sunlight is used to light the rooms. The sparing use of cement and steel is also noticeable with steel only used for the machinery. This production technique has not only stood the test of the time but the workers here reiterate that it has also ensured optimal conditions for those who work inside.

The Factory, Feroke and the Future

The Feroke tile factory has been the central point of the city of Feroke. It has taken Feroke from a small village to an important industrial hub that ships Feroke tiles far and

wide. It was one of the first factories to come up in the district of Kozhikode and has had a vital role in transforming the economy of Feroke. It has transformed the lives of many thousand people who were employed there. For the earlier generations, it meant a break from feudal slavery to a system where they were seen as individuals for the first time. The factory and the mission educated their children and paved the way for modern education and employment; in this, they found self-respect and freedom.

The factories also modernised the lifestyle of the workers; in place of the feudal system where working hours were decided by the masters' wish, it became a fixed time with food and rest provided in between. Customers' trust and goodwill are paramount, with them keeping faith in the production process from 1905, which has been unchanged for all these years. Feroke Tiles has existed for over a century and has made a name for itself and Feroke as a tile-producing hub.

However, there is uncertainty about the future of the tile factory; it once employed over 650 workers and has only 350 workers now. The main reason for the decline of the industry and the factory in Feroke has been the unavailability of soil suitable for making tiles. While Feroke had an abundance of this soil earlier, rapid industrialisation led to the fast depletion of this natural resource. Now, the factory acquires soil from Tamilnadu and Karnataka at exorbitant rates to keep the factory functional. Also, sticking with the older production methods meant they could not avail themselves of the benefits of the cheaper modern methods, resulting in financial loss. Moreover, the unavailability of labourers and the competition from Chinese tiles, which are in vogue, along with the spread of concrete as the preferred choice of roofing, has also negatively impacted the demand for their products.



Figure 8. A view of the storage area.



Figure 9. The machinery used for the production of tiles.

“The factory is the lifeline not only of our families but also of the whole area. We are the last people who are here, I cannot say if the next generation will be able to see the factory alive and working. If it shuts down it will negatively impact the whole area.”

- Vinod, a worker at the factory

More recently, innovation in the factory's products with more artistic tiles has attracted new customers to a limited extent. Increased awareness about the positives of terracotta in roofing, has also given the factory a foothold. The ability to increasingly popularise the use of terracotta

products and improve the cost-effectiveness of the production process will be crucial for the factory to thrive, along with finding newer sources of raw material.

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