FactsDid you know

Boiling oil ordeal settled trade disputes in 1710 Malabar

In traditional Malabar, trials by ordeal were so firmly part of the law that even European trading companies formally used them for commercial disputes. In 1710, the Zamorin of Calicut made an official treaty with the English East India Company's factors at Tellicherry to settle contested financial accounts.

The Tellicherry Factory Diary records the treaty. It established: "A grant that any Mallabarr having accounts with us must put his hand in Oyle to prove the verity thereof, given Anno 1710." When an Indian merchant or supplier disputed the balance of money received against goods delivered, the fire ordeal (kaimukku) settled the matter. The claimant had to reach into a cauldron of boiling oil to extract a submerged coin. Officials immediately wrapped his arm in bandages and sealed it with the official seal. They inspected it three days later. If the skin showed no ulcers or burns, officials declared the merchant innocent of fraud. The law then required the British Company to pay his full disputed claim. It also had to repay the costs he had paid to take the oath.