

## Sea-Trade and Muslim Merchants: A Study of South India (c. 1000- c.1500)

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**Abstract:** *It is erroneous to think that Islam expanded in India only through sword or spirituality. Indian sea trade remained an important constituent of this expansion. Rulers of south India were beset with great challenges around eleventh century when the Hindu scriptures abhorred sea trade and the Christian and Jew communities were unable to control the huge volume of Indian sea trade. As a result, Muslims from western Asia were invited and encouraged to settle down in the coastal areas. These merchants married with local women and new class of Indian Muslims namely Mapillas and Lubbais emerged. These Indian Muslims were even differentiated from the foreigners (pardesis) in contemporary records. It is therefore wrong to study these Indian Muslims as Diasporas or foreigners. The expansion of Islam in Africa, Asia and Europe helped these communities to link their trading networks to distant areas, expanding the revenue basis of south Indian rulers. Indian Muslims in south India denotes important constituent of foreign (sea) trade policy until European introduced state sponsored piratical activities to control the Indian sea trade after 1498 AD.*

**Keywords:** *Sea trade, Merchants, South India, Mapillas, Lubbais*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Islamic expansion in India has undergone restructured thinking in recent times. Influence of Islam in Indian subcontinent is no longer traced within the ambits of political persecutions of non-Muslims (*kafirs*) or religious piety of various Sufi Saints. New generation of historians has attempted to study the role of trade in Islamic expansion. D. S Richards edited work, *Islam and the Trade of Asia: A Colloquium* (1970), has highlighted various aspects of the Indian Ocean trade in expanding Islam into various countries of southeast Asia. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs' research paper, *Trade and Islam in the Malay Indonesian Archipelago Prior to the Arrival of the Europeans*, has studied how various communities were brought within the ambits of Islam owing to the trading benefits of the sea. Pase was converted to Islam to obtain pepper (1: 148). On the contrary, various hinterland communities were less responsive to Islamic appeal realising their minimal orientation towards sea trade. After D.S Richards, there are many other works which have attempted to study the economics of Indian Ocean sea trade. K Kenneth Mcpherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (1973), M. N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat* (1976), K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the India Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (1985), Satish Chandra, ed., *The Indian Ocean: Exploration in History, Commerce and Politics* (1987). V.K. Janaki, *The Commerce of Cambay from the Earliest Period to the Nineteenth Century* (1990), K.S. Behra, ed., *Maritime Heritage of India* (1999). R.J. Barendse, *The Arabian Sea: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century* (2002) Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and Decline of Surat (1700-1750)* and *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchants 1500-1800* (1994): *Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (1994 and 2001 respectively) highlighted the various characteristics of Indian maritime trade to underline the general socio-political process in Indian history. Unfortunately, no work has managed to study the role of Indian Muslims in Indian maritime trade. Historians like Andre Wink considered *Mapillas* and *Lubbais* as constituting Muslim Diasporas in India [2]. The word 'Diaspora' denotes the settlement of groups far from their original home. This perfectly describes the search of the Jews for their original home. Can this term be applied to the Muslims of India? Islam was not attached with any specific region. It was a cosmopolitan religion that believed in mobility and expansion. Conversion was also permitted. When the first generation of merchants brought this new creed into India, it found ready acceptance among the lower classes existing at the fringes of social hierarchy. Fishing communities benefited from the new religion. Muslim merchants married native women. The children of such unions and converts constituted a new element in Indian Islam. No doubt, these communities sometimes traced their origin to Arabia, yet Arabia did not act as a promised land to them. Their beliefs and rituals displayed a considerable amount of fusion with local customs and practices. Contemporary travelers were fully aware of this composition. Ibn Battuta remarks that the *Pardesis* were from Persia and

Arabia, whereas as the *Mapillas* were clearly recognised as the natives of Malabar. The *Mapillas* and *Lubbais* displayed marked fusion of local traditions in their beliefs and usages. Secondly, study of mercantile communities and their associations, operating in the Indian Ocean, presents several challenges. These groups displayed both flexibility and rigidity. The associations and guilds of merchants included members of different ethnic groups. We also have numerous references in the contemporary sources pointing towards the separate quarters of people of different faiths or coming from different regions. These groups sometimes specialized in particular commodities. *Lubbais* mostly dealt in pearls and textiles, whereas *Mapillas* controlled spices. The merchants resided in separate quarters with their own *shahbanders* (leaders). They decided the disputes of the merchants as per their own customs and cultures. Thus, mercantile groups, operating in the Indian Sea trade, displayed a peculiar mixture of flexibility and rigidity. This was perhaps a necessity for successful trading ventures

## II. OBJECTIVES

In the present work, an effort is being made to study the composition of the Muslim merchants with reference to their regional mooring and religious affiliations in south India. This broad framework may help to analyze the various characteristics of Indian Muslim merchants in south Indian sea trade.

It has been observed that the emergence of Islam and its subsequent expansion provided considerable impetus to mercantile activities. It heralded a period of economic recovery. Prophet Muhammad was a trader. Merchants were thus not relegated to the lower rung of social hierarchy. They enjoyed equal sharing of economic prosperity, several privileges, a considerable amount of mobility and ample respect. Muslim merchants and adventurers displayed equal zeal for expansion. In fact, the Muslim merchants often managed to penetrate distant markets much before the arrival of the Muslim armies. By twelfth century, Muslim armies overran large parts of Asia, Africa and Europe, creating *Pan Islamica*. It was characterized by more security, better mobility, increased consumption and mercantile activities. The Arabs had already conquered Persia and inherited navigational skills from them. These navigational skills helped the Arab merchants to dominate the sea trade of the Indian Ocean upto the arrival of the Europeans. They were found operating right upto Africa, India, southeast Asia and even China by the tenth century.

India always enjoyed close trading relations with Persia and Arabia. Indian ports were in touch with the western world. Ships from Arabia regularly sailed upto Malabar and Ceylon to obtain spices. The *Periplus* records that the ports of Muziris (Cranganore) abounded with ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia and by the Greeks. Similarly, Pliny refers to the large number of Arab settlers in Malabar [2: 68]. Indian rulers also remained quite accommodative towards the sea traffic. They invited and encouraged the settlement of foreigners in their areas. These early settlements of the Arabs and Persians brought the first seeds of Islam into India. A merchant named Misqal in Calicut was rich enough and fellow merchant congregated in his house to take his advice [3:189]. The sultans of Maldives assigned 'a third of the taxes of the islands as alms to traveling foreigners in recognition of his reception of Islam' [4: 14-16].

## III. MUSLIMS MERCHANTS IN MALABAR

Duarte Barbosa believed that the Portuguese discovery of Indian routes helped in curbing the expansion of Islam. Otherwise, Malabar would have definitely been ruled by a Moorish King [5: II, 74]. Muslims were indeed very influential in Calicut when Vasco da Gama reached Calicut. They formed groups to exert pressure on the rulers to force the foreigners to leave the port. To the European eye, it was a Muslim conspiracy to obtain power and control over the entire trade. They clothed the event with religious and ethnic colours. Local traditions however point towards a different scenario. Perumal was a respected ruler of Malabar around eighth century. He met some Muslim saints after their visit to Adam's Peak. Teachings of Islam so impressed him that he decided to visit Arabia in their company. Perumal was not destined to return and died on the sea (thus came the word *al-Samuri*, the Zamorin) [2: 77]. However, he sent the last word that the Muslims should always be cordially welcomed in Calicut. Malabar presented an interesting example of peaceful co-existence to reap the fruits of maritime trade. Interestingly, unlike Malacca, the nobility here was not forced to adopt the new religion (Islam) [6: I, 239]. Hinduism remained the religion of the rulers and the masses.

From the twelfth century onwards, the *Mapillas* emerged as influential sea traders of Malabar. Along with the *Pardesis*, they controlled a large chunk of maritime trade towards western Asia. Duarte Barbosa states that *Pardesis* (foreigners) were the natives of Arabia, Gujarat, Persia, Khurasan and Deccan. In reality, they were foreigners who traded in Malabar. On the contrary,

*Mapillas* were the natives of Malabar. They constituted one-fifth of the total population of Malabar. [5: II, 74-75]. The word *Mapilla* is formed with two native words *ma* (big) and *pilla*(child). They were the offsprings of the union of Muslim merchants with local women. The revival of Hinduism during ninth century AD, with strict adherence to the concept of pollution, forbade the contacts of upper class Hindus with Muslims. Thus, the merchants acquired their wives from fishing communities. Such marriages were legalized under the provision of *muttah*. The phenomenon worked in favour of the *Mapillas*. They inherited both sailing and trading skills. They specialized in maritime traffic towards the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. They played an important role for the ruling classes owing to their control over the supply of *bahri* horses (coming through sea routes) from western Asia. The Cholas and Vijayanagar empires were acquiring horses from the Malabar. It was perhaps the result of *Mapilla* monopoly over the supply of war horses. Their contacts in western Asia (Arabia and Persia) enabled them to emerge as intermediary of horse trade in India. The *Mapillas* enjoyed several privileges and became economically well off. They were provided autonomy and religious protection. They appointed their leaders. The rulers were very accommodative towards them. When the friends of Ibn Battuta demanded the son of a local ruler as a hostage in their ship as long as they stayed in the port of Mangalore, the *qazi* Badr-ud-din convinced him that the ruler of Mangalore could do no harm to them because ‘the sultan fears us’ [3:185]. ‘The fear’ might be the threat of mass migration by Muslim merchants from his ports, resulting in the decline of revenues. The natives however still avoided contacts with them. The Hindus of Malabar did not let them inside their homes. [3: 183]. This practice again confirms their plebeian origin.

*Mapillas* were helped by various social factors. During the ongoing movement of Hindu revivalism Shankaracharya, a Namboordari Brahman, radicalized Hinduism. Namboordaris and Nayars became the custodians of both religion and politics in Kerala. These two communities were oriented more towards agriculture. Trading activities, especially maritime commerce were not suitable to the new found gentry. Sea journey resulted in contact with the *mlecchas* (foreigners) and avoidance of one’s religious practices. Aversion to the sea journey was so strong that any member of the high caste was sure to lose his caste if he happened to cross the seas. He was declared *apantakya*, i.e. no longer able to enjoy community lunch [2: 73]. When captain Gabral held some Nayars on board in his ship to guarantee his success and safety, the Samuri at once requested the replacement of these Nayars with others ‘because they were *gentilhommes*(*dwijas*) and could neither eat nor drink on board’ [2:73]. *Mapillas*, professing Islam, derived benefits from such a situation. They became indispensable to the local ruling elites who wanted to exact their share in prosperous maritime trade of the Indian Ocean.

Global developments helped the *Mapillas*. Towards the end of the twelfth century, the Karimis overtook the trading activities of the Jews in the Red Sea. Saladin established a fanatic Sunni dynasty (the Ayyubs in 1173 AD) in Egypt displacing the Shia Fatimids. The Ayyubs also evicted the Jews from their areas because of their trading links with the Christians during the Crusades. Trade to Aden came into the hands of the Karimis around the thirteenth century. The Karimis specialized in Indian pepper and clothes, mostly sought after in western Asia and Europe. Fischel has studied one important aspect of the Karimis. According to him, the Karimis commercial organization was based on religious affiliation and they were all Muslims [7: 166]. Arabic and Persian provided uniform languages to all the Muslim merchants throughout the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the religious and linguistic affiliation of the *Mapillas* with the Karimis would have enabled them to have better control over the supply of commodities from India.

#### IV. MUSLIM MERCHANTS IN COROMANDEL

The *Lubbais*, a corrupt form of the word *Arabi*, were influential sea merchants of Tamilnadu [2: 78]. The Chola expansion and subsequent interest in maritime trade attracted merchants from distant areas. The *Lubbais* traced their origin to an earlier branch of merchants from Arabia. They boasted of their pure Arab blood and professed the Shafite school of Islam. They continued with their old traditions even after the influx of the Turkish power in south India under Malik Kafur. Interestingly, the *Lubbais* of coastal areas (*Marrikayars*) abhorred the *Lubbais* of interior because of their mixed blood. This abhorrence also benefited them in one respect. *Lubbais* of coastal areas often preferred to marry their children to the Shafites of Ceylon and southeast Asia. In this way, trading relations could be easily established in far off countries. Thus, they formed their trading world in association with the larger network in the eastern sector of the Indian Ocean. *Marrikayars* were extremely rich and they owned big ships. They made Kayal their headquarters; a step which strengthened their dominance over the supply of pearls. Indian pearls were eagerly sought after in

the trading world of the Indian Ocean. They also managed to extract a good deal from the local rulers. In Kayalpattinam, a Muslim was allowed to levy a tax upon the collection of pearls [2: 78]. He even executed judgments and dispensed justice. It was again a custom in Kayalpattinam that 'the catch (pearls)' of Friday would go to the ship owners (normally *Marrakayars*) [2: 78]. Though the *Marrakayars* boasted of their purity of blood and remained exclusive, yet their mosques displayed a kind of hybrid culture. Their mosques, with lotus and other local symbols, point to the impact of Hindu culture in their constructions. Again, in the face of onslaught by the Portuguese, these *Lubbais* were readily helped and protected by the local Nayars who recognised their importance to the local economy.

The Muslim merchants also sought the protection of guilds. An important guild of south India, the Manigramam was noteworthy in this regard. Originally, it was a guild of Christians, who had settled in Qulion after the death of Saint Thomas. The guild was extended various privileges. It formed alliances with Anjuvannan and other mercantile organization. Meera Abraham opines that Arab Muslims were also the members of this guild[8: 25].

## V. CONCLUSION

From the present study, it is clear that the emergence of Islam contributed to the revival of Asian markets. Muslim armies captured huge amount of hoarded precious metals from the Byzantine empire and Egyptian pyramids. The situation improved further when China witnessed a huge agrarian expansion under the Tangs and the Sung. Demand for exotics and foreign products grew in China. The eleventh century witnessed the rise of powerful commercial empires in different sectors of the Indian Ocean. The Fatimids in the Red Sea, the Cholas in south India, the Sailenderas in southeast Asia and the Sung in China constituted maritime trade into an integral element of their state policies. The new founded prosperity played an important role in the cultural habits of people in different regions. Muslim armies were successful in ensuring the circulation of precious metals in the markets with their continuous raids in prosperous regions. The second wave of Muslim invasions of India around eleventh and twelfth century was motivated with the same desire to capture hoarded reservoirs of precious metals and bring them into circulation. Prosperity and conquests created an expanding class of nobility and ruling elites in areas under Islamic influence, especially in western Asia. These nobles wore expensive and finely woven clothes. Their diets included many exotic spices and herbs brought from India. They used perfumes and expensive timbers in their houses. All these phenomena encouraged Indian exports, given the shortage of these luxuries in western Asian barren lands.

It is not possible to agree with the view that Indian sea trade went through regression between the eleventh to sixteenth centuries. It has been repeatedly asserted that Indians remained indifferent towards the sea in medieval period [9: 226]. Hindu scriptures are quoted to prove that Indians remained aloof from maritime activities. Lallanji Gopal suggests, "in the beginning religious feelings were not against sea voyage...But, in the early medieval period we notice that there was definite growth of taboo against sea voyage" [10:96]. He quotes *Baudhayana Dharmasutra*, *Manusamhita*, *Naradsamihita* and *Brhannaradiya Purana* to prove Indians' abhorrence towards the sea. And with the help of these scriptures he concludes that, "There are clear indications of the decline in Indian shipping in one respect at least. For people away from the coastal areas it had ceased to be of much concern [10: 97]. Andre Wink quotes *Manava Dharamasastra*, which declares a Brahman crossing seas to be *apankteya*, i.e. not fit for community dinner [2: 69]. He comes to the conclusion that 'Muslims participating in the Indian trade were either Arabs or Persians'[2 : 67]. Hindu scriptures might not be in favour of sea trade, yet there were many other ethnic groups inhabiting India, which had equal claim to be Indians. The *Mapillas*, *Lubbais* and *Bysiras* were Indian Muslims. Their participation must be seen as the representation of the Indians like that of the *Chettis* (Hindus) in Tamilnadu. Repeated use of the word *Pose* and *Tashi* must have contributed to the confusion. It must be understood that these word *Pose* (corrupt form of *Farsi* meaning Persian) and *Tashi* (corrupt form of *Arbi* meaning Arabic) were applied not always for the nationalities. Many a time, these words signified the languages of the merchants. It would be appropriate to quote few lines from the work of V.K. Jain to highlight a kind of confusion regarding the Indian participation in sea trade. It is not known how and when Indian participation meant only Hindus' activity? He argues:

"Ibn Battuta informs us that Indian ships from Thana, Quilon, etc. called at the port of Aden which contained permanent colony of Indian merchants. From Marco Polo we learnt that Indian ships visited Fu Chau in China and Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. These authorities, however, do not specify the religion of the Indian traders going to China or the Middle East. It is possible that while some of them were Hindus from western India, the majority of them were Muslims who, after having settled in the port towns of India, claimed a lion's share in Indian foreign trade." [11: 82]

Now the above paragraph has an undertone that excludes the Muslims activities from Indian participation. The author is unwilling to recognize that the Muslims could also be Indian converts and not foreigners. He, somehow, reaches the conclusion that the people who settled on the Indian ports must be foreigners. Nevertheless, in the very next line, he himself

quotes a reference from Ibn Buzurg that there was a famous Hindu who converted to Islam and earned a good name as a pilot [11: 82]. Indian converts to Islam were an important constituent of Indian participation in the sea trade. Perhaps in the Indian Ocean trading world (1000- 1500 AD), religion did not arouse as much emotions as it does in present Indian scenario. We find frequent references, where there is clear indication that the Muslims were welcomed in a particular principality though the ruler, at the same time, might be at war against the Muslim kingdoms. The Rashtrakutas were extremely accommodative towards the Muslim merchants. The Samuri of Calicut was always eager to welcome and grant permanent residence to the Muslim merchants in his kingdom. These contradictions have long confused the historian as to why these merchants were welcomed even when their presence could be perceived as a threat to the very existence of native kingdoms. The answer lies in the study of maritime trade of India. This trade was guided by the simple logic of profit.

One finds that in the ancient time, Buddhism was instrumental in the expansion of maritime empire of India. Collapse of the Roman empire resulted in the decrease of flow of merchandize towards the west. But, by that time the Buddhist missionaries, guided by their strong missionary zeal, had started exploring southeast Asia and China. Hindu merchants followed them and colonized southeast Asia. The result was the diversion of trade towards the east. Marco Polo, seeing the vast magnitude of export from India to China and other southeast Asian countries, candidly remarked that Indian merchandize towards the west did not constitute even one tenth part of the merchandize that flowed towards the east.

When Hiuen Tsang visited India, he found many religious sites of Buddhism in decline and a simultaneous revival of Hinduism. The Buddhists took part in Hindu processions. By the ninth century, Buddhism appeared more like a branch of Hinduism and began to lose its earlier distinctive character. Under the Pallavas, Hinduism displayed marked orientation towards the land. The foreigners (*mlechchas*) were despised and looked down upon. Caste system became rigid and a new class of outcaste (*antayajas*) emerged. Thus, a void was created in the Indian participation in the sea trade. Around the same period, Islam had not yet consolidated in India. The void was filled temporarily in south India by the Christians and Jews of India. The Christians and Jews, however, failed to monopolize the commodity structure of the Indian maritime trade. Besides, their number never swelled to such figures as could enable them to dominate the scenario. The rulers were, therefore, in search of communities or social groups that could contribute in the expansion of maritime empire of India. The realization brought them closer to the Muslims who were suitable owing to their freedom in economic matters and international presence. By the eleventh century, Islam had penetrated Europe, Africa and Asia. Muslims traded right from the Mediterranean to China. Indian rulers, therefore, could not ignore their presence. They wanted to derive benefits of sea-trade through the Muslim presence and participation. Muslim merchants settled and married in India. Thus, we encounter a new class of Indian Muslims (*Mapillas* in the Malabar and *Lubbais* in Tamilnadu) actively trading and monopolizing Indian sea trade by the thirteenth century. The contemporary records testify the positive role played by Muslim merchants in developing the maritime world of south India before the European trading companies infused piratical and state sponsored tyrannical policies in the Indian Ocean trading world.

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