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Early Arab trade with India: With special reference to Kerala

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was an attempt to sketch out the early Arab trade with India-special reference to Kerala. Traversing far distances and waters of miles, the trade ships brought not only goods and commodities, but it has carried the ideas, knowledge, cultures and customs that later influenced the coastal places including Kerala. Thus, the study is intended to delve into the deep effects of coming of Islam to the region and along with this; it will try to depict the present socio-cultural state of the Muslim community in Kerala. With historical underpinnings of earlier maritime contacts, later peaceful spreading of Islam in the region, and the consequent socio-cultural changes, the study brings out socio-cultural inner currents of present Muslims of Malabar.

Keywords: Early Arab trade, early Kerala Muslims, maritime contact

Introduction

The geographical proximity of Arab countries along with other environmental factors that made the movement of ships easier to south-eastern points, the maritime trade relations with India's southern parts has been flourishing since centuries. Among these trade points of Indian Ocean Sea, Southern state of Kerala has gained the attention of old travelers and traders as a connecting node of trade between east and west. The trading ships from China of east passing through Malay Archipelago found a calm and peaceful halt at Malabar ports, like the Arab ships that carry the exported goods of Mediterranean Sea and Western countries found it an amiable shore to anchor. According to Roman-Greek writers and historians, this relationship emerged since the time of 'King Solomon', and many mythical notions are seen they were exporting Teak timbers from Malabar through Arabian Sea routes. Historical evidences record that Arabs from Yemen, Oman, Egypt and others were expert in utilizing the western wind to export natural spices of Malabar and other goods to their land to the far west and to become successful trade tycoons.

"The region was in a period of economic prosperity and there was brisk trade between Kerala and Arabia. For more than thirty centuries, India maintained its position as one of the foremost among the Martine nations. Spices, precious stones, animals and hill products of Kerala attracted traders from all over the world. The port cities of Kerala naturally became important trading centers. India had colonies in Cambodia, Java, Sumatra, and Burma and trade settlements in south china, Malaya, Arabia, Persia and along the east coast of Africa. The sea route was well charted. Trade winds were known to Indians before the 18th century BC. Even at that time, they used to travel across the oceans. They maintained friendly relations with other countries and in consequence trade and commerce flourished. Cultural and scientific exchanges between the nations culminated in mutual enrichment." (Bahahudeen, 1992)

As Arabia is surrounded by seas from three sides, they naturally engaged with sea-borne trade from the very beginning of international trade. As India faces Arabia, the Arabs could easily establish trade relations with India from time immemorial. Perhaps as early as the time of Moses and King Solomon (1000 B.C) this commerce existed". The Old Testament is the oldest book, which gives us information about this trade. There are also a lot of well establish evidences to show the Sabaeans and Nabataeans had engaged in trade with India. (Hunter, 1997)

"It was in such a condition that the Arab Muslim traders arrived and started their missionary work.

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The brotherhood, equality, justice and exemplary practices of the early Muslims attracted the low class people, who enter the haven of freedom and self-esteem which Islam presented to them. This process of conversion continued unabated during the later centuries, constant conversion by peaceful methods was made to Islam from among the low castes such as *Tiyans, Parayans, Pulayans, Cheramans, Mukkuvans* (Fisherman), as well as from the farmers and other serf- castes to whom Islam brings deliverance from the disables attached to the outcastes of the Hindu social systems.” (Bahahudeen, 1992) ^[13, 14].

This trade relation, which started from the period of Prophet Solomon, as we read it from old testaments about the trade relation with Kerala. It describes that goods like timber, spices, gold, monkeys, ivory and peacocks were exported from Beypor port to Jerusalem.

The Kings 10:11 of old testaments; “Hiram’s ships brought gold from Ophir; and from there they brought great cargoes of almug wood and precious stones.”

Chronicle 9:10 “The servants of Hiram and the servants of Solomon brought gold from *Ophir*; they also brought *algum* wood and precious stones.”

The *Ophir* mentioned in the verses is Beypore, the place near to Calicut. Historians and scholars confirmed this with historical and geographical arguments. Encyclopedia of Britannica states about *Ophir*;

“On the other hand, the Jewish historian Josephus and St. Jerome evidently understood that India was the location of Ophir. The Hebrew words for the products of Ophir may be derived from Indian languages; furthermore, sandalwood and peacocks are commonly found in India, whereas, at least in modern times, they do not exist in East Africa.”

These floating ships across the Arabian Sea did not only bring goods and wealth but reciprocally it exchanged cultures, religions, languages and customs through many years. The present culture and religions of coastal regions are by product of these intense trade networks that stretched out through ocean waters. In India, the language, culture and religions of major coastal ports like Surat, Camabay, Konkan heights, Coromandal regions, Malabar, Nagercoil, KayalPattanam and Hyderabad developed as intermixtures centuries old trade contacts. The present study is intended to trace out the extension of this maritime trade contacts in the development of a host Mappila community in Malabar along with arresting their socio-cultural features in emerging as a distinct community of Kerala.

The present study is an attempt to move from the traditional mode of analyzing the community by taking single aspects. The scope of the present study is very wide and it also will be its real limit and merit. It intends to look into the current socio-cultural settings of Mappila community along with analyzing the historical dimension of maritime trade and advent of Islam in a peaceful and reciprocate way.

Methodology

Primarily the study present study follows a literature review based analytical method to sketch out the historical development of the society. It will utilize both primary and secondary literatures in understanding historical dimension of the study. The present study based on the Early Arab trade with India-special reference to Kerala. The present study covers the geographical are of Kerala, advent of Arabs and trade with Kerala. The first written historical work not only on Muslims but also on the history of Kerala itself is of

Sheikh Zainudden’s ‘*Tuhafathul Mujahideen*’. Written in the wake of Portuguese invasion of fifteenth century, it gives strong account of this colonial invasion but also on the Kerala after the advent of Islam. Besides, these the colonial rulers reports and archival sources also will be a strong data source for the study. Besides of these primary works, there were intense researches on Muslims of Kerala like of Miller’s work on *Mappila Muslims of Malabar*, and Stephen Dale’s *Muslim Society on the South Asian Froniter: Mappilas of Malabar* are some of the mention worthy works. Rigorous studies also have done on various aspects of Mappila Muslim history and society like of Malabar Rebellion by K.N. Panikkar, M. Gangadaran and Conrad Wood.

Geography of Kerala

Kerala is located in the southwest of India. It shares its borders with Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the Arabian Sea to the west and Indian Ocean to the south. ‘Kerala stretches north and south between the latitude 8°18` and 12°48` north for a distance of 576 kilometers (360 miles), and between the longitudes 74°52` and 77°24` east, never exceeding 112 kilometers (70 miles) in width. Bounded on the east by the Western Ghats Mountains and on the west by the Arabian sea.’ Kerala’s coast is totally 580km in length from north Kasargodu to south Thiruvananthapuram. The state totally comprises of fourteen districts, Thiruvananthapuram is the capital city of the state. The major geographical conditions of Kerala is characterized by three climatically divisions. They are the eastern highlands having cool and rugged mountainous terrain, the western lowlands. The Arabian Sea is the major geographical part of the state, which is influenced in its historical manifestation. The maritime traditions of Kerala attract visitors and traders from Arabia, Europe and other parts of the world from the ancient period itself.

The ancient ports of Kerala like Muziris, Tins, Barecca, Nelikinda and the later ports like Quilon, Kochi, Kozhikode, all these helped Kerala to emerge as a trade centre in the large Indian Ocean sea trade route. These trade connections also brought major religions to the region. The religious communities like Jews, Christians and the Muslims reached Kerala through the Arabian Sea coast. Their major missionary groups arrived in the coastal parts of the state like a group of Jews and Christian with their families arrived in a big ship in Kodungallur, the port city of Malabar. Kodungallur was the capital city of the king in the early period. The king offered them security and granted lands and they settled there.

Advent of Arabs to Kerala

The advent of Arabs to Kerala is related to Arab trade with India. Kerala’s spices was very famous in all over the world in the ancient times. Malabar Coast was the major port town of the state. Many traders, especially Arab traders traveled to Malabar Coast. ‘The geographical contiguity of Arabia to the traditional coast of Malabar by sea had made Arabia an effective partner in a flourishing sea- trade through centuries. The rich spices, timber and other valuable products of Malabar were exported to various port cities of Arabia’. Moreover, the Arabian rich product imported to the Malabar Coast. The Arab traders came to Malabar from the early century. Malabar was the great maritime center of the world controlled the sea trade from Kerala. Kerala was

known as the land of spices during those times. The Arab attention was concentrated to major trade nodes of India like Calicut in Malabar, Cambay and Surat in Gujarat or Masulipatanam on the Coromandel. The important Kerala ports, which are mentioned in the travel accounts are, Ezhimala, Valapattanam, Panthalayani Kollam, Kappad, Kozhikodu, Bepore, Chaliyam, Kodungallur, Kochi and Kollam.

The Kerala's famous spices are pepper, ginger, cardamom, cloves, nutmegs, cinnamon, and sandalwood etc. The Arabs were in great demand of these spices. 'The trade in spices has a history that goes back to the third millennium B.C. Among the spices of Kerala which were in great demand in the countries of west Asia and elsewhere. The spice trade was a major business in the city of Babylon.' Afterward this trade relation came new faith of Islam from Arabian Peninsula to the Malabar Coast.

The historical accounts provide potential evidences to argue that that Kerala had overseas trading relations with Arabs since ancient times. Other historical contacts of the Arabs with Kerala had their own cultural characteristics. Along with traders, the religion of Islam also came to Kerala. The people of Yemen and other communities from Arabia who came to Kerala were traders. They also overspread this new faith of Islam in the state. Islam introduced in Kerala peacefully with people-to-people contact and not accompanied with any political invasions. It reached Kerala coast along with the Arab merchants. It is also reasonable to believe that in the first flush of enthusiasm they tried to spread Islam in this state also. 'The growth of Islam in Kerala during the first eight centuries was peaceful and steady. The trade with Arab world brought prosperity and each state vied with the other to attract the Arabs.

The Arab contact with Kerala was entirely and their amiable contacts had been responsible for economic, cultural and social development of Kerala. These contacts of Arabs with Muslims of Kerala influenced their cultural characteristics. Along with trades, the religion of Islam also came to Kerala. The people of Arabia who came to Kerala were traders. As they belonged to cultured tribes of Arabia, a new culture and religion of Islam was firstly introduced very peacefully. The Arab travelers and traders had visited the Western Coast of India in a much earlier period. The arrival of Islam to Kerala was through these Arab contacts and the spread of Islam in Kerala much earlier period. The Persian and Arab traders settled in large numbers in different part of the Western Coast of India and married the women of the local people and those settlements were especially large and important in Malabar in the early century.

The people of Kerala were enjoyed peace and prosperity in the early centuries. The trade winds were used for travel across oceans. The relations with states overseas were friendly and the trade mutually beneficial. Muslims were an essential part of the state. The relationship between different communities was convivial and there is no record of any conflict between communities before the arrival of the Europeans. 'The Muslims brought a commercial economy to the state, and Kerala products were in very demand in the global market. Religious tolerance, peaceful atmosphere and reciprocity marked the relationship between communities. The Muslims lived in peace, prosperity and in co-operation with others.' Islam arrived in southern India with Arab traders from southern Arabia. They established trading

outposts along the Konkan and Malabar coasts as part of the wider Indian Ocean trades system in the early century. These traders received guarantees of security from local Hindu rulers and intermarried with the local population of Malabar.

Arab Trade with Kerala

Indo-Arab trade relations started at the ancient period. It can be summarized that Arabia had trade relations with West Indian ports long before the establishment of the Roman Empire. The dealings are clear that the Arabs had close commercial relations with Kerala ports, and the spices of Kerala must have fascinated them to the Kerala ports. In addition, the Arabs had continued their relation with Malabar region for centuries. There were established trade routes and settlements of these people in the trading centers of Kerala. Similarly, Indian trade settlements existed in different parts of the Arab world. Trade relation between Kerala and the Arab world preceded the advent of Islam by centuries. The major port town of Kerala is Malabar, this port was very famous across the world. Kerala holds an all-important position on the trading map of the ancient world. Its port of Muziris was one of the great commercial emporia of the world, challenged in India only by Quilon, which lay 110 miles southward on the same coast. Muziris was the ancient meeting place of traders. Indo-Arab trade that has a pre-historic history mainly began and grew up with Kerala. Kerala was famous for its spices, timber and other goods. They have been settled in Kerala and other regions of India. In the Gazetteer of Bombay presidency, Khan Bahadur Fazalullah Faridi mentions the settlement of pre-Islamic Arabs in Chaul, Kalyan and Supara.

The Arab monopoly over trade in Malabar region was verily explicit and they were successful until the Portuguese invasion 'The Arab trade with Quilon in southern Kerala must have developed by the 9th century. The Tharishapalli copper plate grant of the A.D. 849 had mentioned some of the prominent Muslim merchants of the port town. Their names are written in *Kuffi* Character.' In addition, the great voyager Ibn Batuta, who had visited Kerala during the 14th century, had given a detailed account of the foreign trade of Kerala. He had visited several places in Malabar region. He has recorded that many foreign Muslims had made their settlements at the coastal area of Malabar. Dr. Tara Chand states in his book "Influence of Islam on Indian culture" that the first Muslim fleet appeared in the Indian waters in 636 A.D four gold coins issued by the *Umayyad* Caliphs (661-750 A.D). This testifies the existence of Arab trade with Kerala during the period."

Malabar was the most important port with which the Arab engaged in trade from very ancient time. Hunter records that the king Solomon obtained, gold, silver, ivory, and apes from *Ophir*. The '*Ophir*' of King Solomon's time was none other than modern Bepore, an important port of Malabar. Rowlandson, Francis Day and Sturrock are of the view that the Arab traders settled in large numbers at the different ports on the western coast. The Arabs used to buy Indian goods such as pepper, ginger, cardamom, coconut etc. Which were the rich products of Kerala. However, the historical record has proving this relation as the large number of Arabic words of Indian origin shows the antiquity and consistency of Indo-Arab trade. Even in Holy Qura'n three words of Indian origin i.e., *Misk*, (Musk), *Zanjabil* (Ginger), and *Kafoor* (Camphor) are used. Imrul

Quis, one of the outstanding poets of pre-Islamic Arabia, used the word *fulful* (pepper) in his poetic lines and Ka'b-ibn-Zuhyr, one of the Companions of the Prophet and a well-known poet, in his poem '*Banat Suada*' compares the Prophet to the Indian sword '*Saifun Muhannad*' which means a sword forged in India. These evidence clearly establish the Arab's deep relationship with India, especially Kerala, much before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him). The early Muslims came as traders and settled themselves mainly in the coastal regions. They also built mosques across the state and gradually embrace to Islam.

After the advent of Islam in Arabia it came to a new phase too, the Arab traders became missionaries of this new religion with their trade relations. During the *Ummayyad* period, (661-750) Arab trade with the west coast must have gone as before without interruption. There is no reason to believe that commerce was stopped due to Arab conquests because Islam was a force to activate the lift of the people. 'Rowlandson expressed the view that the Arab immigrants established themselves in Malabar in the time of the *Ummayyid* Caliph Walid (705-715) and engaged in trade.' This relation of centuries in trading through maritime trade continued in a cordial and peaceful atmosphere with full of respect to the custom and tradition of Kerala rulers and kings until the 1498AD; the day Vasco de Gama along his Portuguese crew anchored at the land of Malabar. 'They in receipt of them integrated within the larger commercial alliance of the Indian Ocean, they acquire spices, rice and textiles from Malabar.' After the invasion of Europeans Arabs gradually retrieved from their trade after a long period of struggles and resistance against Western colonialism.

Conclusion

The Arab traders came to India by the maritime relation for trade. The first Arab settlement was on the eastern and western coast of south India. Islam spread in India through Arab traders. Arabs came to Kerala for exporting spices and other valuable products of Kerala. The Indo-Arab relation as a pre-historic, which is still going on with trade and cultural relations and the traditions of Cheraman Perumal and the work of missionary movements by Malik bin Dinar and companions. They built mosques in all over Kerala including Cheraman mosque the first mosque in India.

Kerala's trade relation with the Arabian countries started from the early period and it is agreed by scholars that it backs to the period of 'Prophet Solomon' (970 to 931 BC). The Islam emerged in Arabia Islam came to Kerala through these Arabian traders. The advent of Islam to Kerala was in the period Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) itself, even the scholars differ in point of view. After this new religion has entered to the earth and heart of Kerala, Islam spread out peacefully. The Arab traders established marital relationship with local natives and a new community was born.

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