

INFLUENCE OF ARABS ON SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the impact of Arab rule on South India. This paper meticulously studies the effect of Arab rule in South India and the extent of its influence on the language and culture of the natives who were mostly Hindus. This paper explains the wealth of Arabic language and culture and its continued influence on South India in the present as well. The paper explains in detail the reasons for the influence of Arab rule on South India. With numerous examples the paper tries to explain the foray of Arab language and culture on South India.

Keywords: Arabs, Islam religion and Malabar Muslims

Full Paper

How Arabs entered and established themselves in India even before they conquered Sindh in North India is an issue discussed at length by many scholars. The antiquity of Arab traders in India seems to be very remote indeed. P. N. Chopra's quote Amarkosa which clearly alludes to the presence of Arabs¹ and we know from other sources like Bana's Harsacharita about Arab horses in the army of King Harsha; these clearly show that Arabs had trade links with India since long past. As aptly observed by Miller, the pre-Islamic Arab traders prepared the ground for later Arab traders to establish themselves easily and to start propagating their new religion of Islam². Miller also clearly records the fact that Kerala is the province where Islam sowed its first seeds in India³.

As noted by Tarachand, the Arabs started either from the coast of the Red sea or from the southern coast of their land to disembark either at the mouth of the Indus, in the Gulf of Cambay by sailing along the coast, or on the Malabar coast⁴. S. Magbul Ahmad calls the period between the rise of Islam in the 7th century A. D. up to about the 10th century A. D. as the 'Golden Age'⁵. S. M. Mohammad Koya gives the place Muzris, the modern Kodungallur, as the meeting place of the East and West. He says that from the western side came the Arabs, Phoenicians, Romans, Persians and the east Africans⁶. Tarachand quotes Rowlandson who clearly states that Muslim Arabs for the first time in India settled on the Malabar Coast about the end of the 7th century A. D.⁷. He also gives the account of Sturrock who claims that from the 7th century onwards Persians and Arabs settled in the western coast of India and contracted marriage alliances with the women of that area⁸.

V. Kunhali explains how Islam entered India in the wake of trade relations that were existing between India and Arab world⁹. He clearly mentions Kerala as the place of entry which also adds strength to the surmise that Islam entered India most probably through South India and not through northern India when Sindh was conquered by Arabs¹⁰. As they entered, the attention of the Arabs was obviously drawn towards what was new and unfamiliar to them, but was common in this country¹¹.

Sayid Athar Abbas Rizvi holds that the Arab traders who came as mere merchants, brought priests also along with them. Although in the daily practice of Islam, an official preacher or priest is not necessary, every Muslim being able to perform his own prayers, either lonely or in congregation, nevertheless, mariners and traders brought along with them

adventurous preachers and mystics¹². These preachers must have cooperated with the traders to improve cordial relations between the local people and the traders. One interesting feature is that by the time Arabs established firm trade relations with India, the religion of Islam had spread militantly all over the Mediterranean world. India was an exception as it firmly stuck to its age-old religious convictions and forms of worship. It was in order to shake the Hindu pantheistic ideas and to infuse into them the new monotheistic religion of Islam, that the religious preachers or Imams journeyed along with the traders to India. It may also be noted that the preachers exercised such powers as they could bring about a compromise when clashes occurred between the local authorities and the traders¹³. Tarachand gives the traditional account of how the last of the Cheraman Perumal Kings of Malabar who ruled over Kodungallur (the main port for Indian sea trade) became a convert into Islam¹⁴. According to the tradition he had a dream in which he happened to visualize the splitting of the moon which was interpreted by one Shaikh Sekke Uddin who ultimately admitted Cheraman Perumal into the Muslim fold¹⁵.

The tradition goes on to say that Cheraman Perumal settled in Arabia and later sent some representatives to his native place who, in their turn, propagated Islam to the extent possible¹⁶. The result of it was the establishment of eleven mosques at different places on the Malabar coast after the death of Perumal in Arabia¹⁷.

Even though the architectural style of the mosques constructed by the Arabian representatives, was not outstandingly impressive, the mosques appear to have attracted a lot of devotees and to have received necessary protection from local kings. We hear of people ready to sacrifice even their lives to protect the mosques and the tenets of the religion of Islam which was actually brought by foreigners into India and was established¹⁸.

In course of time, gradually Islam spread itself almost all over South India¹⁹. By the 12th Century Islam had penetrated still deeper due to the fresh Muslim invasions and by the 13th Century it had become a predominant religion even in South India. In fact Tarachand speaks of a Muslim saint Nathad Vali who came from Turkey travelling all through Arabia, Persia and Northern India, settled at Trichinopoly and how he converted a large number of Hindus to the religion of Muhammad²⁰.

It can be surmised that even before the invasion by northern powers several groups of Muslims had settled in the Deccan and Islamic religion was practiced by them and later on this trend was further quickened and continued by the Bahmanis and the other Muslim rulers.

The Muslim traders, besides establishing their trade contacts and spreading their religion of Islam, also formed marriage alliances of some sort with the local tribes, whether permanent or temporary on the Malabar coast. The Muslim communities on the west coast of India are the offshoot of these unions. The children of Arab sailors, whether brought forth by lawful wives or concubines, were all treated as Muslims. The result of these unions formed the Indo-Arab communities²¹.

Thus the descendants of such mixed marriages were known as 'Mappillas' in the Kerala region. Tarachand gives the example of 'Ravuttans' and the 'Labbes' also²². Mohammad Koya explains how different scholars, even though they slightly differ in defining Mappillas, mostly agree that the Arab sailors contracted alliances with the local women of Malabar²³.

The Mappilla population soon increased in numbers as the Arab traders in those days came to India in large numbers. The population of Mappillas spread fast almost all over the coastal region, from Cape Comarin in the South to Mangalore in Karnataka. Some were living in Laccadives Islands also and it is said that the whole of the population in Laccadives were Mappillas. There are evidences of Mappillas settling in Coorg area of Karnataka also²⁴. In their way of life and in social manners, most of the customs and practices of Mappillas resemble those of Arabs²⁵. Mohammad Koya divides the Mappillas into two types, one "the descendants of Arabs through local women whom Logan calls Malyali Arabs" and the second, "the converts from among the local people²⁶." He records in another place about the Konkani Muslims of the coast of Konkan and the "Navayats" of Kanara (Karnataka) as the two other sections of the 'Mappillas' of the Malabar coast²⁷. He also mentions about the 'Markkayara' of Tinnevely and 'Jogans' of Tanjore²⁸. He also writes how the Mappilla songs were written in the Arabic script²⁹. Apart from all these facts, we find that the Mappillas have a college at Ponnani, which is the chief seat of their religious organizations, where men are specially trained in religious practices.

The trade contacts between the Malabar coast and Arabs, strengthened the position of Muslims in the whole of South India. This resulted in the appearance of Muslim settlements in the whole of South India noticed by Ibn Batuta much before the political establishment of Muslim dynasties. It can also be observed that in many of these places some of the Islamic religious practices were in vogue. They are Honavar, Malabar, Mangalore, D'ley, Dharmapatam, Budfattan, Fandarina, Calicut, Quilon, Maldives, etc.³¹

Abdur Razzaq was another traveler who came to India as an ambassador of the Persian emperor Shah Rukh to the Zamorin. He visited Calicut in 1443 and describes the Muslim communities who were the followers of Shafi's school in his accounts. Besides this, he also notices two Jama'at mosques in the Calicut city³².

The above study of the numerous ways in which Islam set foot on the west coast of India and developed Mappillas into a major community is included here though it may seem, at first sight, that it is irrelevant or unrelated to the impact of Islam on the Bahmani territories, lying far away in the interior of the peninsula. Though one must admit that these Muslim traders had not much of a direct access to Bahmani courts or Kingdoms, the fact remains that they were very zealous in their own way and were the only middle men who transacted business in horses, and goods from Europe, Egypt and West Asia which was in great demand by the Bahmani sultans. Being clever at influencing the simple tradesmen who approached them, they were circulating wondrous tales of miracles connected with the Quran³³; and were trying to win new converts throughout peninsular India. These Arab traders mostly came here single; and besides the coastal native women, they also tried to marry others in the interior by their show of wealth, religion, prestige etc. That is one of the reasons which would partly explain the wide proliferation of Muslim communities in the remotest interior villages of South India. The possibility of political clout was much stronger in the Bahmani states for even converted Muslims; and it is no wonder if the Bahmani kingdom must have claimed a goodly share of the attentions of the coastal Mohemmadans.

Notes and References

1. P. N. Chopra, "India's Cultural Contacts with the Arab World", *Oriental Journal of Historical Researches*, (July-Dec. 1982). P. 41.
2. Miller, Mappilla Muslims of Kerala – A study in Islamic Trends, Madras (1976). PP. 39 and 42.
3. Ibid.
4. Tarachand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, Allahabad (1936). P. 31
5. S. Magbul Ahmad, Indo-Arab Relations, New Delhi (1969). P. 81.
6. S. M. Mohammad Koya, "Muslims of the Malabar Coast as Descendants of the Arabs", *Indian History Congress*, (1976).
7. Tarachand, Op. Cit. P. 32.
8. Ibid.
9. V. Kunhali, "Advent of Islam in Kerala: Special Features". *Indian History Congress* (1975). P. 327
10. Cf. "The coming of Muslims into India is generally associated with the first Arab invasion of Sindh early in the eighth century, but the part that the pre-muslim Arabs played in the commerce between the East and West had brought them into India long before Islam was born. . . The rise of Islam freshened up this intercourse which had previously been more commercial than cultural in character. . . The new faith of Islam opened up new possibilities and India began to enter largely into the thoughts of the Caliph. . . Omar was against making any attack on India, since he believed that the followers of Islam as of their religions, were of fact, he rejected every proposal that was made to undertake an expedition to India by sea".
Sisir Kumar Mitra, The Vision of India, Calcutta (1949). PP. 221-222 and V. kunhali, Op. Cit. P. 327.
11. Tarachand, Op. Cit. P. 9-10.
12. Sayid Athar Abbar Rizvi, A History of Sufism, Vol. I, New Delhi (1978). P. 403.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., P. 34.
15. Cf. "According to one version of the story of the Perumal, Cheraman Perumal dreamt that the full moon appeared at Mecca on the night of the new moon, and that, when on the meridian, it

split into two, one half remaining in the air, and the other half descending to the foot of a hill called Abu Kubais, where the two halves joined together. Shortly afterwards, a party of pilgrims, on their way to the foot-print shrine at Adam's peak in Ceylon, landed in Cheraman Perumal's capital at Kodungallur, and reported that by the same unbelievers to his religion."

16. A. P. Ibrahim Kunju, "Islam in Kerala", Journal of Kerala studies, Vol. V, part. V, part. V, (December, 1977). P. 598.
17. V. Kunhali, Op. Cit., P. 328.
18. Thurston, Op. Cit., P. 470.
19. Tarachand, Op. Cit., P. 33.
20. Ibid., P. 34
21. S. M. Mohammad Koya, "Muta Marriage and Malabar Muslims," Indian History of Congress (1978). PP. 547-548.
22. Tarachand, Op. Cit., P. 43
T. W. Arnold observes: "A class of Indian Mussalmans, also known as Djonals (Skt. Vavana, 'Greek, Western') supposed to be descended from Arab immigrants who intermarried with native women, but now having nothing to distinguish them from the aboriginal people, except their mode of dress and manner of shaving the head and trimming the beards. In 1911 they numbered 40,703 found chiefly on Eastern coast of Southern India. Most of them are Sunnis of the Shafi Madhahab, and their headquarters at Nagore. . . "
- Encyclopaedia of Islam, London (1938). Vol. III, P. 1
23. S. M. Mohammad Koya, "Muslims of the Malabar Coast as Descendants of the Arabs", Indian History Congress, (1976). P. 196.
24. Ibid., PP. 197-198.
25. Ibid., PP. 197.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.

30. Thurston, Op. Cit., P. 462.
31. K. A. N. Sastri, Foreign Notices of South India, Madras, (1939). PP. 233-255.
32. R. H. Major, India in the Fifteenth Century, London, (1857). P. 17.
33. Bounting and Williams, Four Pilgrims, P. 138 and K. A. N. Sastri, Op.Cit., PP. 240-241 and 254-255.

