

Muslim Trade Networks and Islamisation in Kayalpattanam

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The history of South India's trade contact with the Arab world, particularly Arabia, Persia, Egypt and Syria, goes back to ancient times, long before Islam came into foothold in the region. The growth of Islam in the seventh century led to a large-scale movement of maritime Muslims that accelerated a massive expansion of the Muslim trade in the thirteenth century. It ultimately paved the development of numerous Islamic communities across the Oceanic rim. One such predominant Muslim community has been shaped at Kayalpattanam on the Coromandel Coast, which flourished into a unique Muslim diasporic community in Tamil Nadu. These Muslims of Kayalpattanam stood instrumental in the process of Islamisation that has reflected in its affiliation to Shafi'i *madhab*, Sufism, Arwi and Arabic languages and the construction of numerous Islamic monuments.

Key words: Horse trade, Pandyas, Rasulids, Taqî al-Dîn Tibi, Marakkayars, Arwi.

Introduction

Arabs carried intensified trade contacts with the Indian littorals from very ancient times and they remained the actors of lucrative Indian trade until their expulsion by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Literary and archaeological evidence indicates the brisk overseas contacts of the Arabs with the Western Coast of India in general and the Malabar Coast in particular, owing to its near monopoly

of the most sought-after commodity of the Indian Ocean trade, spices, especially black pepper. Besides, by virtue of physical centrality, the Malabar Coast also flourished as the axis of East-West trade in the vast stretching Indian Ocean. Though Malabar Coast operated as the first port of call by international merchants, ports situated along the Bay of Bengal also played a remarkable role in trans-oceanic trade owing to the availability of high value commodities like pearls and textiles.¹ This vibrant overseas traffic resulted in the development of many well-known port cities along the coast, important of which were Korkai, Puhar, Kaveripumpattinam and Arikamedu. The rise of Islam in the seventh century gave a new fillip to Arab trade with different parts of the world, which attained momentous during the first quarter of the second millennium C.E. Over time, Kayal (later Kayalpattanam) emerged as the pivotal centre of Muslim maritime exchanges on the Coromandel Coast that culminated in numerous Islamic diasporas and cultural integrations. The present article aimed to delve into the wide trade networks organised by the Muslim merchants of Kayalpattanam and the process of Islamisation, thereby highlighting the uniqueness of Kayalpattanam from other Muslim townships of Tamil Nadu.

The study also attempted to examine Sebastian Prange's argument of 'Mansson Islam' and contextualise its applicability in Kayalpattanam. In his study on the medieval Muslim merchant communities of Malabar, Prange argued that the Muslims of Malabar has shaped by monsoon winds or trade winds that prompted a massive expansion of Muslim trade and settlements in the turn of thirteenth century. He also explores the rich literary tradition of the Malabar Muslims and highlights its acceptance among other Indian Ocean Muslim communities, especially those who lived outside the purview of Islamic rule.²

Although the maritime expansion of the Muslims across the Indian littorals attracted much interest from modern scholars, the diasporic Muslim community of Kayalpatnam attained lesser attention than other parts of India, particularly from the nearby Malabar Coast. However, some serious studies on the Muslim community of Kayalpattanam have been conducted by scholars like Mehrdad

Shokoohy, Susan Bayly, Susan E. Schomburg and Elizabeth Lambourn, whose discourse are mostly confined to trade, Sufism, literature and Islamic monuments.³ The present article is an endeavour to compile these previous scholarships and provide a peep into the process of Islamisation in Kayalpattanam.

Maritime Exchanges of the Muslims in Kayalpattanam

Kayal is a celebrated medieval port town located at the Tamirabarani river delta on the Coromandel Coast, which forms a part of the modern Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu. This region has been known by different names over different periods of time, such as Coromandel Coast, Malabar Coast, Pearl Fishery Coast, Tamil Coast and al-Suliyyan. The port Kayal appeared in travelogues as Cail, Kabil, Cahile, Cael and so on.⁴ In fact, ports situated along the estuaries of rivers alone provided safe anchorage for large sized ships on Coromandel Coast. Hence, owing to the geophysical setting, Kayal, which means ‘backwater having an opening to the sea’ or ‘lagoon opening to the sea’, located near the estuary of river Tamirabarani provided safe anchorage for large sized vessels. The port came into prominence under the Second Pandyas, the rulers of Madurai in the thirteenth century and subsequently flourished as their chief emporium. However, the subjugation of Pandyas by the Delhi Sultanate at the beginning of the fourteenth century paved the birth of an independent Madurai Sultanate, which ruled only a short span of forty-seven years (1323-1370 C.E.). Then, the region fell under the Vijayanagara empire, where their feudatory Nayaks ruled the Tamil country.

It can be said, with some degree of certainty, that the evolution of Kayal as a trade emporium of international repute inextricably intervened with the Arab and Persian Muslims on the one hand and the patronage extended by the Pandyas on the other. Noticeably, the Arabs did not take active participation in the Coromandel trade; instead, treated the coast as an intermediary stopover between their way from Malabar to China and vice-versa.⁵ Despite this, Kayal flourished as the principal emporium of Arab and Persian merchandise on the Coromandel Coast, wherein expatriate Muslims sailed as horse dealers. Contemporary travellers Marco Polo and Abdullah Wassaf highlights the tremendous horse trade carried at the port of Kayal and its immense

demand among the Pandyas. During the medieval period, war horses treated as an integral element among the Indian armed forces, and they were also treated as an effective symbol of power and prestige. Therefore, cavalry necessitated a massive import of horses to the Indian subcontinent since its breeding was conspicuously absent in India, and the best quality of them breed in the Arabian Peninsula and Persia Gulf.⁶ Thus, the West Asian merchants frequently carried large number of horses as a part of their cargoes to India and in the deep South, the Pandyas stood out its avid purchasers. The brisk trade of this equine animal also associated with the proliferation of regional powers in South India in which the Padnyas engaged in protracted struggles with their neighbouring kingdoms.

Marco Polo, who mentioned Kayal as Cail for the first time sometimes around 1290s, observes ships from West Asia, such as Hormuz, Kish and Aden arrived at Kayal laden with enormous quantity of horses and other things for sale, therefore great business was done at the town.⁷ Similarly, the Yemeni Rasulid chronicle, *Nur al-Ma'rif* also confirms that Coromandel was most curious to purchase horses from the port of Aden and the Pandyas stood as its large buyers.⁸ Both Abdullah Wassaf and Marco Polo had expressed their amazement by seeing the demand for horses in the Pandyan kingdom. Wassaf describes thousands of horses annually imported at Malabar for a great sum of money (220 dinar per horse), and the Pandyas paid even a dead horse while in transit.⁹ Marco Polo remarks the war horses had an enormous demand among the Pandyan king and his brothers; therefore, they purchased more than 2000 horses annually.¹⁰ Discussing the enormous demand for horses in the Pandyan polity, modern historian Elizebeth Lambourn described it as 'horsemania'.¹¹ With the procurement of such an immense quantity of war horses, the Pandyas reached the height of their splendour during the second quarter of the thirteenth century and they extended their influence in the territories of the Cholas, Hoysalas and even in Sri Lanka.¹²

The intensified trade contacts of the Arab and Persian merchants culminated Kayal to grow as a centre of Islamic diasporas. Describing the Muslim settlement in Kayalpattanam, Mehrdad Shokoohy remarks, "In Tamil Nadu, small Muslim communities are

present in many villages, the position of Kayalpattanam as an entirely Muslim town in South India somewhat unique and no other site in the vicinity is enrich with numerous Islamic monuments”.¹³ Though we have evidence for the early Muslim diasporas in the town, the most prominent settlement of the Muslims took place under Malik Taqî al-Dîn al-Tîbi in 1284 C.E. He was settled during the time of Sundara Pandi II (c. 1276-1293) and flourished as the most influential merchant in the Pandya country owing to his wide networks in horse trade. Taqî al-Dîn, along with his bother Shaykh Jamâl al-Dîn al-Tîbî, the influential merchant-ruler of the Island of Kish, emerged as the prominent horse dealers in the Western Indian Ocean and controlled both the end of horse trade in the Persian Gulf and Pandyan kingdom.¹⁴ His influence in the Pandyan kingdom was so high, thus his agents and factors had given the first choice than any merchandise arrived at the Pandyan ports.¹⁵ Noteworthily, the name of Taqî al-Dîn appeared at the forefront of Yemeni Rasulid Sultan al-Muzaffar’s (1249-95 C.E.) gifts and stipends granted among Muslim preachers and influential merchants along the Indian littorals in the 1290s. He was the most celebrated merchant among all the recorded individuals whom the Rasulids conferred their honour.¹⁶ It indicates that Taqî al-Din was acknowledged as the chief mercantile ally of the Rasulids. Through him, the Rasulids extended their maritime frontier up to the Coromandel Coast in India.

The Islamic diasporas of Kayal is also well evident from epigraphical records, such as numerous tombstone epitaphs and copper plate inscriptions from the mosques.¹⁷ The tombstone reveals a large number of early maritime settlements in the town, which reflects the heterogeneity of the Muslim population that contains the Arabs, Persians, Egyptians and local converts. Significantly, most of these early tombstones belonged to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Along with literary evidence, the epigraphical records also reveal the massive expansion of the Muslim community in Kayalpattanam during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The religious patronage extended by the Pandya rulers was an external stimulus for the early settlements and Islamisation in Kayalpattanam. The Pandyas encouraged the expatriate Muslims to settle in their kingdom and entrusted them with some key

administrative responsibilities. Marco Polo remarks the king had maintained great administration and equity in his kingdom and extended great favour to all merchants, so that they were glad to visit his kingdom.¹⁸ Owing to the influential trade contacts, then the Pandya ruler Sundara Pandi II appointed Taqî al- Dîn al-Tîbî' as his deputy, minister, advisor and entrusted the governorship of his three celebrated ports of Kayal, Fatan and Mâlifatan.¹⁹ Another influential Muslim merchant, elder Abu Ali, received imperial favour from the Pandyan rulers and earned the designation as the sixth brother of the Pandyas.²⁰ Sayyid Ala al-din was another prominent foreign Muslim appointed as the *qazi* in Kayal. Besides, sometimes, the Pandyas entrusted their diplomatic missions with the Muslim merchants to distant places. Jamâl al-Dîn, the brother of Taqî al- Dîn was sent by a Pandyan subordinate to the Mongol Khanate in China to seek their help from the domestic feuds that prevailed in the Pandya kingdom.²¹ Therefore, it can be inferred that the Arabs and Persians have not only remained as mere itinerant traders in the Pandyan kingdom; instead incorporated in administration and diplomatic embassies as well.

Islamisation in Kayalpattanam

The fall of the Second Pandyas in 1311 culminated in the decline of Arab trade with Kayal, wherein the local Marakkayar Muslims attained prominence. The Marakkayars were the offspring of foreign settled Muslims with local Hindu women. The Arabs were integrated with the indigenous community by following their local language and customs. Eventually, the Marakkayars flourished as the principal merchant group in the town by obtaining the lease ownership of the lucrative pearl fishery.²² Kayal, which developed as the heartland of the Marakkayar trading community, later turned became the base of their resistance against the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Interestingly, the Marakkayars considered themselves better than the other segments of Tamil Muslims and believed themselves to be the original descendants of the Arabs, who possessed separate Islamic cultural characteristics mixed with a few of those of the Tamils.²³ They laid great emphasis on religious, linguistic and ethnic contrasts that distinguished them from other Tamil Muslims. Thus, the Marakkayar society was elite, endogamous, and Arabic language

centred in the religious arena and cosmopolitan in orientation since they maintained a wide range of cosmopolitan trade networks historically and even today. Interestingly, unlike other segments of Tamil Muslims like Rowthers, Lebbais and Pattanis, who belonged to the Hanafi school of Islamic law, the Marakkayars follow Shafi'i school as similar to the other coastal societies of India.²⁴

The Arab integration with the Coromandel Coast spearheaded the evolution of a unique language known as Arwi or Arabu-Tamil, a hybrid of Arabic and Tamil languages in which Tamil is written in Arabic script. It is widely believed that Arwi evolved as a local lingua-franca between the seafaring foreign Muslims and local converts for communication.²⁵ Although the actual date of origin of this indigenous dialect is a matter of concern among modern scholars, they unanimously agreed that Kayalpattanam was the birthplace of the Arwi language. The Arwi might have originated in the early years of Islam, but the credit for the development of a full-fledged Arwi script was associated with Hafiz Amir Wali Appa, a sixteenth century Sufi saint from Kayalpattanam. He systematised and standardised the Arwi language, which was purely colloquial before him.²⁶ The *Ayira Macâla* (1572) and *Mirâj Mâlai* (1589) are regarded as the two earliest Arwi literature from Kayalpattanam.²⁷ Apparently, the learned Marakkayar scholar saints from Kayalpattanam contributed immensely to the further expansion of the Arwi language. As a result, the town produced a large corpus of Arwi literature in prose and poetry that varied subjects like commentary on Quran, jurisprudence, history, Sufism, medicine and so on. This Arwi literature from Kayalpattanam has accomplished serious recognition among the Tamil muslim communities of Sri Lanka. Apart from Arwi, the Muslim community of Kayalpattanam also immensely contributed to the field of Arabic literature, perhaps larger than any other Muslim town in Tamil Nadu. This Arabic literature produced in the town has profound impact, some of which became the popular texts of Kerala's *dars* (Islamic education attached to mosques) curriculum.²⁸

Regarding the process of Islamisation in Kayalpattanam, the role played by the Sufi saints needs to be a special attention. The town developed as an early centre of Sufism in Tamil Nadu, where the Qadiriyya Sufi order attained prominence in the sixteenth century. This close adherence to the Qadiriyya order made Kayalpattanam a unique centre of Sufism in Tamil Nadu. Remarkably, the Qadiriyya saints played a crucial role in the Islamisation of the region through their high standard of Islamic knowledge, pious behaviour and mystical attainments. The Qadiri Sufi order of the town is believed to have originated from Sheikh Sadaq Ibrahim Marakkayar (1547-1618), who played a significant role as a religious teacher and spiritual guide. His legacy was also attached to the mobilisation of public support in the long run anti-Portuguese struggles during the sixteenth century. Noticeably, many Qadiri Sufi saints from Kayalpattanam became noted scholars in both Arabic and Arwi literature.²⁹ Today, the town is embellished with many Sufi shrines than any other places in its vicinity in which people from far-off places comes to Kayalpattanam to seek the blessings from Sufi saints.

The presence of large numbers of mosques in the town also explicit the process of Islamisation. Presently, Kayalpattanam is adorned with thirty mosques, many of which have rich heritages. One of the oldest mosques in the town is *Kutba Periya Palli* (Big Juma Mosque), which bears an inscription indicating the construction of the mosque in 1336-37. The inscription highlights the construction of the mosque by Sultan Jamaluddin and the completion of the mosque by his son after the death of his father.³⁰ The other historical mosques in the town are *Khutuba Siru Palli*, *Naninar Palli*, *Siru Nainar Palli* and *Maqdam Palli*. Although the actual construction of these mosques is unknown, their architectural style and dated epitaphs of the tombstones attached to mosques are helpful in establishing the historicity of these mosques.³¹

Conclusion

The Muslim community of Kayalpattanam was shaped by the brisk maritime contacts of the town with the Arab and Persian merchants, in which Kayalpattanam developed into a unique centre of Islamic diaspora in Tamil Nadu. As observed by Sebastian Prange in the case of the Malabar Coast, we can contextualise the trade diasporas of the Muslim community in Kayalpattanam and their massive expansion in the late thirteenth century. Similar to the Muslims of Malabar, the Islamic community of Kayalpattanam also made a significant contribution to the Arabic and Arwi literature, which circulated among the Muslim communities of Malabar and Sri Lanka. The religious patronage extended by the Pandyas stimulated the peaceful settlements of the Muslims, in which they remained not only as itinerant traders but maintained a mixed career of trade and administration. The Islamisation and uniqueness of Kayalpattanam are well evident from the town's Shafi'i adherence, development of Sufism, construction of numerous mosques and its contribution towards Arabic and Arwi language and literature.

Notes

- 1 Champakalakshmi, *Trade Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 B.C to A.D 1300*, O.U.P., Delhi, 1996, pp. 182-185.
- 2 Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast*, C.U.P., Cambridge, 2018.
- 3 Mehrdad Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture of South India*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003; Susan Bayly, 'Islam in Southern India: 'Purist' or 'Syncretic'?', in C. A. Bayly and D. H. A. Kolff (eds.), *Two Colonial Empires: Comparative Essays on the History of India and Indonesia in the Nineteenth Century*, Leiden, 1986; Idem, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings-Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society* (1989); Susan E. Schomburg, "Reviving Religion": *The Qādirī Sufi Order, Popular Devotion to Sufi Saint Muhyīuddīn 'Abdul Qādir al-Gilānī, and Processes of "Islamization" in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka*, Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, 2003; Elizabeth Lambourn, 'India from Aden: Khutba and Muslim Urban Networks in Late Thirteenth Century India', in K.R. Hall (ed.), *Secondary Cities and Urban Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c. 1400-1800*, MD: Lexington Books, Lanham, 2008; Idem, 'Towards a Connected History of Equine Cultures in South Asia: Bahri (Sea) Horses and "Horsemania" in Thirteenth-Century South India', *The Medieval Globe*, Vol. 2, no.1, 2015; These are some seminal works on Kayalpattanam.
- 4 Anas Babu T, *Urbanisation in Coastal Peninsular India: A Case Study of Calicut and Kayalpattanam (1200-1600 A.D.)*, Ph.D. Thesis, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, pp. 65-66, 73.

- 5 Andre Wink, *Indo-Islamic Society, 14th–15th Centuries*. Vol. 3 of *Al-Hind: The Making of Indo-Islamic World*, Brill, Leiden, 2004, pp. 208-209.
- 6 Marco Polo, *Travels, The Book of Ser Marco Polo - The Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, (trans. & ed.) Henry Yule and Henry Cordier, Vol. 2, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1993, p. 342.
- 7 Ibid, 370.
- 8 M. ‘A. Jâzim (ed.), *Nûr al-ma‘ârif fi nu‘um wa-qawânîn wa-a‘râf al-yaman fi al-‘ahd al-mu‘affarî al-wârif*, Vol.1, Sana’a, 2003, p. 190. I thank Muhammed Shameem K.K. for translating me the original Arabic manuscript.
- 9 Wassaf, *Tazjiyatu- l Amsar Wa Tajriyatu- l Asar*; Elliot and Dowson (trans. & ed.), *The History of India as Told by its own Historians, The Muhammadan Period*, Vol. 3, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1964, pp. 32.
- 10 Marco Polo, *op. cit.*, p. 340.
- 11 Elizabeth Lambourn, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-100.
- 12 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom, From the Earlier Times to the Sixteenth Century*, Swati Publication, Madras, 1972, pp. 139-165.
- 13 Mehrdad Shokoohy, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
- 14 Matanya Gill, ‘Jamâl al-Dîn al-Tîbî: The Iraqi Trader Who Traversed Asia’ in Michal Biran, *et.al* (eds.), *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, Intellectuals*, University of California Press, California, 2020, pp. 175-181.
- 15 Wassaf, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- 16 Elizabeth Lambourn, India from Aden, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Besides gifts to merchants, the Rasulid Sultan conferred stipends to Muslim judges and preachers who served the Muslim communities in various coastal regions of India in lieu of reciting his name in their *Khutubas* (congregational Friday and Eid prayer).
- 17 Ziyaud-din A. Desai, *A Topographical List of Arabic, Persian and Urdu Inscriptions of South India*, ICHR, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 93-95; Mehrdad Shokoohy, ‘Epitaphs of Kayalpatnam’, *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, 1995, pp. 121-128.
- 18 Marco Polo, *op. cit.*, p. 370.
- 19 Wassaf, *op. cit.*, p. 33. Fatan is not identified, whereas Mâlifatan identified as Periyapattinam
- 20 Tansen Sen, ‘The Yuan Khanate and India: Cross Cultural Diplomacy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries’, *Asia Major*, Third Series, Vol. 19, No. 1/2, 2006, pp. 316-18.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 George Schuruhammer, *Francis Xavier-His Life, His Times*, Vol. 2, M. Joseph Costelloe (trans.), The Jesuit Historical Institute, Rome, 1977, pp. 258-59. Kayal was the headquarters of pearl fishery trade under the Pandyas.
- 23 Susan Bayly, Islam in Southern India, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.
- 24 Ibid, 34-73
- 25 Tayka Shu'ayb Âlim, *Arabic, Arwi and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu: A Study of the Contributions of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu to Arabic, Arwi, Persian and Urdu Languages, Literature and Education*, Imâmûl ‘Arûs Trust, Madras, 1993, pp. 84-107.
- 26 Ibid, 87. It is said that Amir Wali Appa is credited with the reintroduction of Arwi after local cultural devastation was wreaked by the Portuguese.

- 27 Susan E. Schomburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-263.
- 28 Muhammed Noushad, Ma'bar-Malabar Ties: How Kayalpattinam Shaped in Malabar, *The Site*, 2021. Available at <https://www.thesite.in/mabar-malabar-ties-how-kayalpattinam-shaped-islam-in-malabar>. It highlights the popular texts of Kerala's *darses* like Meezan, Ajnasul Sugra and Ajnasul Kubra are written by Muhammed Lebbai al-Qahiri of Kayalpattanam.
- 29 Susan E. Schomburg, *op. cit.* p. 255.
- 30 Mehrdad Shokoohy, Muslim Architecture, *op.cit.*,76-87. Shokoohy assumes Sultan Jamaluddin might have Jalal al-Din Ahsan, the founder of the Madurai Sultanate.
31. *Ibid*, 87-104.

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