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Medieval Arab Trading Centres of Coastal South India: A Study on Calicut and Kayalpatnam

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Sullivan Retirement and Last Day

During his final days in the district (1835 – 1840), Sullivan kept on recommending tea cultivation and even sent some good samples of cured tea to Madras. But it was only after 1865 that tea became commercially important for the Nilgiris. Sullivan had special interest about the natives. He retired from the service in 1841 and returned to his home England a dejected and lonely man. He died 16 January 1855. A native oak tree which Sullivan planted in 1823 in front of his Stone House, presently Government Arts College in Ooty is still standing

for proving the name of Sullivan, the great collector. Inside St. Stephen's Church, Ooty there are a font and a plaque in memory of Sullivan.

Finally the social and economic lives of the indigenous groups are changed. Their traditional cultivation is mingled with western pattern to Horticultural. The British collector John Sullivan was mainly responsible for such changes. He introduced number of new crops in the Nilgiris with model farming. The new type of Agricultural and Horticultural development started in the Nilgiris.

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MEDIEVAL ARAB TRADING CENTERS OF COASTAL SOUTH INDIA: A STUDY ON CALICUT AND KAYALPATNAM

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Calicut, the headquarters of the Zamorins,¹ lies on the Malabar² coast of south-western India. The history of Zamorins begin only after the disintegration of the Kulashkara empire or the second Chera kingdom in the first quarter of 12th century and their centre became most powerful among all other kingdoms prevailed then in Malabar. It is more plausible, as the travellers' accounts prior to Ibn Battuta

did not provide any mention, that the city of Calicut would not have grown as a pivotal centre of trade before the fourteenth century A.D.³ Apparently in the succeeding century, we had seen ships frequented to this port as far as from China for procuring the spices, for which the Coast of Malabar was, and is, known everywhere. Likewise, Kayal⁴ which means lagoon opening to the sea, was a

celebrated port during the medieval period in the Tamrapani delta of Coromandel coast, which forms a part of modern Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu. It is generally believed that, the port was identical with the famous ancient port and trading centre of Korkai. The early medieval foreign travelers signified that Kayal was a principal port of *Ma'abar*, (means 'passage' or 'ferry') that extended from Kulam (Quilon) to Nilawore (Nellore).⁵ This port came into prominence under the second Pandyas and served as the chief emporium of trade. However, in the beginning of fourteenth century, this region was conquered by the ruler of Delhi Sultanate and it was followed by the establishment of an independent sultanate in Madurai who ruled over it for about forty seven years (1323-1370 A.D). Consequently, the region came under the control of Vijayanagara empire, even though the Pandyas continued as a dependency under them but their self sufficiency never regained. The port was referred to for the first time by Marco Polo in his accounts as Cail. Later on, travelers started using various names such as Kabil, Kabal, Cahila, Chayal, Cael and so on to indicate the same⁶. During the medieval period, both Calicut and Kayalpatnam had maintained brisk trade contacts with the foreign countries particularly with the Arabs. Moreover, the patronage extended by rulers to the trade and traders resulted in the establishment of large scale Muslim settlements in the Malabar and Coromandel coasts. In this paper a modest attempt has been made to locate the position enjoyed by the Muslim traders in general, with ample space being devoted to Muslim merchants under the Zamorins of Calicut and the rulers of Kayalpatnam in the pre-colonial period.

There is, perhaps, nothing erroneous to say that the spread of Islam and the prosperity of the cities of Calicut and Kayalpatnam had a complementary relation with each other. At the formative stage of its development, the Karimi

merchants of Egypt⁷ have played very remarkable role in the fortunes of Calicut until the close of fifteenth century, under the aegis of Mamluk sultans. No doubt, Calicut was the principal centre of trade for the Al-Karimi merchants from Cairo.⁸ After the decline of Abbasid Caliphate the Persian Gulf lost its predominance at the cost of Egypt under the Mamluk sultans, which resulted in the Arabs' taking over of the sea route with newly emerged port of Calicut.⁹ Thus, as early as fourteenth century, the famous traveller Ibn Battuta attributes Calicut as one of the largest harbours of the world and the merchants as far as from China, Sumatra, Maldives, Yeman and Fars (Persia or Iran) frequented to this port.¹⁰ Mithqal was one such wealthy merchant and ship owner of the period and lived in Calicut.¹¹ It was this merchant who has been credited for the construction of the famous Mithqal or Misqal mosque at Kuttichira near Calicut, highly regarded its wooden architecture, in the early fourteenth century. The same mosque, it is believed, was later destroyed by the Portuguese.¹²

It is well known from the foreign as well as Indigenous sources that great consideration was given to merchants by the royal authorities in order to maintain a favourable trade atmosphere, and it could be well understood from the accounts of AbdurRazzak, *Keralolpathi* tradition, Sheikh Zainuddin etc. Abdul Razzak also mentions about the security extended by the king and his men even to the long distance traders and their cargoes.¹³ Similarly, *Keralolpathi* has also highlighted the security provided at Calicut to a Setti merchant from the eastern coast on his way to Mecca.¹⁴

The patronage extended by the Zamorins to the Arabs needs special attention. Indeed, this could be best understood from a thirteenth century inscription deciphered from the Muccunti Mosque in the vicinity of Calicut.¹⁵

Thus, the patronage extended by Zamorins resulted to the establishment of a number of Muslim settlements in these areas. It should also be noted that, the Zamorins appointed these Arab Muslims to higher administrative posts; hence, Qadis were given charges of justice to be done in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁶ It is worth mentioning, the most powerful Muslim officer under the Zamorin was Shahbandar Koya or Kozhikkottu Koya, who was in charge of the overall happenings at the port of Calicut.¹⁷ Moreover, the Zamorins bestowed him the most coveted right to stand on his right side at the eve of Mamakam festival, besides many other privileges.¹⁸ Tura Marakkar was yet another influential officer placed in charge of the safe anchorage of the ships arrived at each small port under the Zamorins of Calicut.¹⁹

Similarly, as early from Christian centuries the Arabs were also used to ride at Ma'bar and later Kayalpatnam (Kayal) emerged as the nucleus of early Islamic settlements in the Coromandel Coast.²⁰ Marco Polo whom the first reference about the name of Kayal came in 1292 A.D reveals that, the active role of traders from the different parts of the world particularly from Arabia. He characterizes that at Kayal ships as far as from the west, Hormus, Kis, Aden and all Arabia came with horses and other things for sale and great business was done in this harbour.²¹ In addition to this, Rashid-al-din a contemporary of Marco Polo also puts that the Chinese merchandise were brought into this ports in junks and exchanged them with Islamic world.²² The horse trade carried on by the Arabs at Kayal is worth mentioning. The Pandyan rulers had huge demand for good quality war horses due to their continuous struggle with the neighboring states. Here, the Arab merchants were largely responsible for the supply of horses to this kingdom. As a result, the Pandyas emerged as the supreme military power in South India during the second half of the thirteenth century and

they could even successfully extend their kingdom even to the northern areas of Sri Lanka. Wassaf, another contemporary of Marco Polo narrates that thousands of horses bordered every year at Ma'bar in a great some of money, even a died horse also paid by the ruler while importing to his country.²³

Besides the horse trade, the port of Kayal had been known for its pearl trade. The perfectly rounded pearls of Kayal had great demand in the east as well as the west and later emerged as the head quarters of pearl fishery in the Gulf of Mannar.²⁴ The Arabs also played an important role in the development of pearl fishing and its trade. It is worthy of being mentioned that the Arabs were given, sometimes, the charges of the pearls trade by the Pandyan rulers.²⁵ Even in the colonial period the Muslim traders of Kayalpatnam had acquired much wealth and many of them turned gem and pearl dealers and also become the controllers of trade networks as far as Java, Sumatra, Ceylon and Malay peninsula.²⁶ Besides, they believed to have controlled the spice trade of Indonesia also.²⁷ Apart from these, Kayal was known for its extensive import of Arab potteries as well.²⁸ Thus, as a result of the Arab contacts with Coromandel Coast, a well-established Muslim community has been flourished in Tamil Nadu. Likewise in the Malabar Coast, these merchants had integrated with indigenous community by following local language and customs and marriage. These newly established Tamil speaking Muslims of Coromandel Coast have referred to as Lebbais. Interestingly, the principal colony of Lebbais, have been appeared for the first time at Kayalpattanam. The Lebbais were generally styled as Tuluklar (Turks) or Jonagar (Yavanas), who did bear various titles like Marakkayar or Marakkan (boatman) and Ravuttan (a horse soldier) etc. Among them the Marakkayars needs special notice, as they considered themselves better than other Lebbai Muslims and also believed as the original

descendants of Arab merchant settlers who possessed separate Islamic cultural characteristics mixed with a few those, of the Tamils. The original descendants of these Arab Muslims belonged to the *Shafi'i* madhab (School of Quranic Law) while all other groups of Labbais were the followers of *Hanafi's*, who were dominant in North India and Deccan.²⁹

The religious patronage extended by the Pandya rulers of Madurai to the early settlers of Kayalpatnam seems worthy of being mentioned. On account of their trade interest, these Hindu rulers had always tried to maintain cordial relations with them. While discussing this port Marco Polo says that "The King maintains great state and administration in his kingdom with great equity, and extends great favor to merchants and foreigners, so that they are very glad to visit his city".³⁰ As a result, Malik-I Islam Jamaluddin the chief importer of horses was settled at Kayalpatnam in 1284 A.D. and later Pandya ruler SundaraPandi appointed Malik Taqi-al-Din the son of his brother Taqi-u-udinAbdurahman as the governor of Kayal. During the same time his al-Tayyibi family was the rulers of Persian Gulf and southern Iranian province of Fars.³¹ Subsequently, these Muslim trade contacts and settlements led to the establishment of Sufism at Kayalpatnam and a large number of copper plate inscriptions found in the graveyards of various tombstones, which contains the records of death and burials of some persons of local importance have undoubtedly proved the importance of Kayalpattanam as one of the early centers of Sufi culture in south India.³²

The Marakkars emerged as the leading merchant group on the Coasts of Coromandel and Malabar during the early decades of sixteenth centuries. However, the advent of the Portuguese and their hard policies reduced their power in these areas. They were engaging trade in spices, rice, textiles etc. They had trade

contacts not only with the ports of Malabar and Coromandel but also with Gujarat, Malacca, Ceylon and so on. It is generally believed that, the word *Marakkayar* is derived from the Arabic word 'Markab' which indicate, a boat and known *marakalarayars* in Tamil language which means 'king of the wooden boat'.³³ In both regions they were initially good terms with Portuguese and later become mutual rivals to each other. As far as the genesis of these Marakkars is concerned it has been a matter of concern among the scholars. Some believe that the Marakkars were the followers of those merchants who came to Malabar from Arabia during the eighth century. They settled first at Cochin from where they migrated to Ponnani; later on, due to the unforeseen circumstances they had to shift their headquarters to Pantalayani, north of Calicut and finally settled at Puduppattanam or Kottakkal.³⁴ Meanwhile, at Coromandel it is ascertained that the earliest evidence of their settlement dates back to ninth century which indicate a Tamil copper plate granted to them by the ruler of Madurai.³⁵ It might be plausible that they were came from Arabia and firstly reached at Malabar coast and then bifurcated into two in which one group settled at Malabar and the second one at Ma'bar respectively.

At Calicut, It was in the beginning of Portuguese intervention, the Marakkars had maintained good relations and helped them in their trade. Since 1513 Muhammad Marakkari a leading merchant of Calicut and CojaByqui, a resident of Calicut but hailing at Hormuz are the examples of these good relations with the Portuguese.³⁶ However, Portuguese hostility with Zamorins necessitated the demand for a powerful navy under them which was accomplished by the KunjaliMarakkars or the so called 'naval chieftains' of Calicut kingdom. It was these powerful naval chieftains of Calicut who held responsible for the introduction of the fast-moving *Paraos* or small ships in large

amounts, which could operate easily by all the time and, if possible, save themselves from their Portuguese counterparts by moving into the shallow waters since these large Portuguese ships were unsuccessful to pursue them any further.³⁷ Mainly, there were four major KunjaliMarakkars who acted as the naval chieftains of the Zamorins in sixteenth century. KuttiahammedKunjali was the first among these powerful KunjaliMarakkars hold the post from 1501-1531. He was succeeded by his son, Kunjali II who adorned the post till his death in 1579. Third in this list was the PattuMarakkar and was succeeded by his son-in-law Muhammed alias Kunjali IV in 1595. Owing to the Portuguese conspiracy against the Kunjali IV, the Zamorins attacked Kunjali fort with the support of the Portuguese and handed over the KunjaliMarakkar to the latter in 1599.³⁸ This was a dark episode in the history of Kerala which not only exhausted the political strength of the Zamorins, but also disturbed the long drawn out communal harmony between the Hindus and Muslims in the years to come.

Likewise, at Pearl fishery coast the Marakkayars emerged as the major trading group and they have regular trade contact with Malabar and South- East Asia. They brought rice to Malabar (the food deficit region) from Coromandel in return they Carries spices to Coromandel and from where they procured textiles which they sent to south- east Asia.³⁹ The Portuguese remained the mercantile collaborators with Marakkars at Kayalpatnam too in the beginning, but soon become their relationship got strained around 1520's. The reason behind these gloomy relations was more or less attached to Portuguese attempt to controlling pearl trade, which was so far controlled by them at the pearl fishery coast. Along with, the regular fight at Calicut by their counterparts with the help of the ruler also accelerated these worst relations and they were

organized under KunjaliMarakkar and started guerilla techniques against the Portuguese those who travelling the eastern coast particularly along the pearl fishery coast.⁴⁰ Even, the Zamorins also helped them and sent his fleets to Kayalpatnam in solidarity with the Marakkars.⁴¹ Ultimately, these fights between Marakkars and Portuguese led to the mass conversion of Paravas (fisher's community) of Punnaikayal to Christianity in which they believe that this new religion rescue them from the recurring attacks and raids. It accelerated the Marakkars wrath against Paravas because they feared themselves the newly converted Christians no more supply pearls to them henceforth giving all pearls to Portuguese. Gradually, they started to attack theParavas and the Portuguese came to rescue them from the Muslims. As a result, the Portuguese successfully ended the threat posed by Marakkayars and beheaded the two leading Marakkar fighters of Pate Marakkar and KunjaliMarakkar to Ceylon in 1539.⁴² Eventually, Kayalpatnam and its nearby areas fell under the hands of the Portuguese.

In nutshell, Calicut and Kayalpatnam acted as the two leading Arab trading ports on the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal during the medieval period. Both centers as well as their rulers had maintained good relations with the Arabs who brought vast Muslim settlements in these areas. As they were established traders, their age long experience and networks brought about stimulation to the trade and thereby several urban centers across these coasts. This can be understood from the words of K.N.Choudhuri "Whenever Islam made its presence felt as an indivisible combination of power, communication and exchange, urbanization flourished and expanded".⁴³ However, after the advent of Portuguese the Muslim communities in general and the Marakkars in particular, were targeted and virtually reduced their power and influence by the former in the cities of Calicut and Kayalpatnam.

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3. Marco Polo writing about the close of 13th century failed to make any mention of Calicut. In fact, it was not earlier than Ibn Battuta who is believed to have mentioned Calicut (Calecut as spelt by him) for the first time, somewhere in 1340's. See, Mahdi Hussain, *Rehla*, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1953, p. 188.
4. The actual location of Kayal has been disputed among the scholars. Bishop Caldwell who excavated this region identified Kayal with Palayakayal (old Kayal). Although, some other historians equated Kayal with Kayalpatnam which situates its close vicinity. However, we can infer that both these regions were mutually interconnected. For details see Bishop Caldwell, *A History of Tinnevely*, AES, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 282-288; Jorge Manuel Flores, 'Cael Velho, Calepatanão, and Punical, The Portuguese and the Tambraparni Ports in the Sixteenth Century', *Bulletin de l'Ecolefrancaised'Extreme Orient* (hereafter *BEFEO*), Vol. 82, No. 2, 1995, pp. 9-25; MehrdadShokoohy, *Muslim Architecture of South India*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, pp. 67-68; S. Jeyseela Stephen, 'Medieval Trade of the Tamil Coast and its Hinterland A.D. 1280-1500', *The Indian Historical Review* (hereafter *IHR*), Vol. 25, No. 2, 1999, Note. 45,
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14. *Keralolpathi* states that a Setti merchant from east coast went to Mecca along with his cargoes mainly contained with gold. But, when he reached at Calicut his ship was sunk and then he took shelter under Zamoins. After kept his full cargoes with Zamorins, he sailed to his home country. After some times he returned to Calicut in order to collect cargoes and Zamorin was returned his whole treasure to him. He was extremely excited because of the honesty of Zamorin and he offered half of his treasures to the ruler but the ruler were denied to receive it. See *Keralolpathi*, as cited by K.V. Krishna Ayyar, *The Zamorins of Calicut- From the Earliest Times to A.D. 1806*, Calicut, 1938, p. 85.
15. M.G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1972.
16. Under Zamorins the administration of justice for Muslims were conducted in accordance with the Islamic Jurispudence.

17. S.M. Mohammed Koya, *Mappilas of Malabar-Studies in Social and Cultural History*, Sandhya Publication, Calicut, 1983, p. 50. Shah Bandar is a Persian term and believed to have used to denote the 'harbour master' throughout the medieval Islamic world while the title Koya was a local addition given by the Zamorins. For details, see, W.H. Moreland, "Shahbandar in the Eastern Seas" in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 4, October, 1920, pp. 517-33.
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19. *Ibid*, p. 269.
20. Bishop Caldwell, *op.cit*, p. 36.
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37. A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, *op.cit.*, p. 48.
38. For details on KunjaliMarakkars, see the chapter Rise and Fall of the Kunjalis in A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, *op.cit.*; P.P. MammedKoyaParappil, *op.cit.*, pp. 61-66.
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