

HISTORY OF MARAKKAYARS IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

It will be seen that in the later part of the Portuguese's stay in India, their animosity towards the Muslims cooled down to a certain extent. But it was too late for the Muslims to recoup and readjust, since most of them were driven to despair and had started to change their occupational trends. Muslim trade declined not due to the lack of commercial expertise but because it was faced with the use of force based on superior technology and the lack of support of the local ruling powers. The Coromandel Muslims were lacking in warfare technologies and also had no aptitude to counter the attack. Thus, the shattered trade of the Muslims became subservient. The Muslim could not match the Portuguese naval power. This key factor enabled the other European powers especially the Dutch and the English to encroach the further areas hitherto left out in Muslims' hands. The Portuguese oppression of the Coromandel Muslims is not the end of the story and it was continued by the Dutch.

KEY WORDS, Coromandel, Labbais, Rawthars, Prophet, Caliph

INTRODUCTION

In India, Muslims were called by different names. In the west they were known as Mappilas and in the Chola land they were called as and Marakkayars. The Muslims were not content with trade alone. They also participated in politics and social life. Apart from their supremacy over the Maritime trade, especially horse trade with Arabia, the Muslims also enjoyed a prominent role in the political realm of the fishery coast. According to the Tamil copper plate inscription, a group of Muslims migrants started from Egypt under the hegemony of Mohammad, a descendant of Abdullah who was a direct descendant of Abu-Bakar, the dedicated companion of Prophet, and the first Caliph of Islam.

The Arab Muslim traders and preachers preached Islam in different parts of Tamilagam in different periods of time and converted quite a large number of the native population to the faith of Muhammed. These local converts were called by different names like the Ravuttans, the Marakkayars, the Sonagans and others. They were scattered all over Tamilagam, and clusters of Muslims were to be found in places like Melur, Palani, Pettai, Pallapatti and in the districts of North and South Arcot, Tiruchirapalli, Ramnad and Madurai. As a result of conversions, there was a sizeable population of Muslims in Tamilagam before the fourteenth century A.D.

MARAKKAYARS DURING THE SOUTH INDIA RULE

The anchorage of the galley of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese adventurer, at the port city of Calicut in 1498, marks the first European presence in the Indian sub-continent. It led to the establishment of an overseas empire of Portugal in India. The Portuguese said that they came to India in search of Christians and spices. In the words of W.H.Moreland, in the sixteenth century, the Indian ocean was a Portuguese lake in which the absence of any serious opposition made it possible to control the seas" The Portuguese became the masters and monopolists of spices trade in India. Indian rulers, at that time did not enter into trade, so there was no claim on the part of the rulers for monopoly over trade in Indian Ocean. Hence, they extended all facilities to the Portuguese to attract them to their ports. The diversion of the maritime trade of India to the hands of the Portuguese destroyed the trade of the Arabs and the native Muslims and also delivered a

mighty blow against Islam.

The maritime Muslim community of the western coast could not view the arrival of the Portuguese with sympathy. But against the strong opposition of the Arabs and other Muslim traders the Portuguese rapidly expanded their power and gained mastery over the trade in Malabar. They participated in the Indian Ocean trade as much as they could. They built the first fortified factory in 1503 at the mouth of the river Edappalli (Cochin). Thus, the first European fortress on the Indian soil came up as the harbinger of the future. The Portuguese pressurised the native rulers for commercial monopoly to the exclusion of everyone. Spices, gold and silver were declared as royal monopoly. They exploited the Christian faith of the Christians for trade and persuaded them not to sell pepper to the Muslims. Slowly the Portuguese went far and wide to conquer territories and establish fortresses to circumvent the Arabs and Turks to trade with India. Ceylon was made their tributary state in 1507, Goa was conquered in 1510. The control of Goa gave them a better point to prevent the Arab merchants entering the Malabar emporium. Control of Ormuz, the key to east and Persian Gulf by 1515, stopped the flow of spices from Malabar coast through Persian Gulf. Malacca was compelled to agree to a commercial treaty in 1511. The Portuguese establishments became Portuguese territories.

Cartaz system was enforced by the Portuguese for shipping that operated in the Indian seas. Cartaz (from Arabic Certaz, meaning, a document) can be defined as a pass. for navigation to the merchant ships so that they could navigate and enter the ports without any trouble. Ships without Cartaz could be captured. This compelled the merchants and rulersto be friendly with Portuguese. Rulers of Malabar who supported the trading activities of the Portuguese also had to obtain Cartaz. Even the Mughal emperor Akbar obtained Cartaz for his ships to Red Sea. Available Evidences show that the Portuguese made their way to Coromandel only after 1505. Lodovico de Varthama who visited Nagapattanam in 1505 mentions the presence of Christians but not the Portuguese. As early as 1506, some of the Portuguese during their trip to Investigate their prospects in Malacca, had landed purely by accident in the vicinity of Nagapattanam where they received a hostile reception from the Muslim traders. Sewel points out that the governance of the seas east of Cape Comerin was also in the hands of the Portuguese by 1509. From that time onwards the Portuguese made Pullicat as an important trading centre since there was good hope for the collection of hinterland textiles of the area. These textiles were exported to Malacca

According to Portuguese chronicler Corriea, one Manual de Frias was appointed as the first Portuguese captain of the Coromandel and Fishery Coast in 1521 with headquarters at Pulicat. Frias had authority to issue Cartaz. Cartazes were obtained by Muslims and other navigators and traders. The ships without Cartazes were captured. By 1530, the Portuguese had two important centres on the Coromandel: one was Pulicat with satellite Sao Thome and the other was Nagapattanam. Nagapattanam was a busy coastal commercial centre in rice trade to Ceylon and other southern ports and Malabar bringing back areca, timber, cinnamon and pepper. Pullicat was a textile centre. By about 1530, Nagapattanam became an important trading centre with the outside world. It is noteworthy that in essence, the Portuguese settlers, operated side by side with the other principal groups in Nagapattanam, the Marakkayars; both typically functioning with small profit margins and small Individual consignments in the trade. The trading activities of the Portuguese at Pullicat declined by 1580. But trade from Nagapattanam was on the rise.

When the Portuguese arrived in India the whole of Tamil Country was under the sway of the Vijayanagar Empire, though this hold was feeble. The Portuguese did not seek the permission of the native potent to settle in their settlements or for opening factories. Krishna Deva Raya (1509-1530) of Vijayanagar followed a careful imperial policy towards Portuguese, though his transactions with them showed the spirit of friendship. After the fall of Goa into the hands of the Portuguese, the aggressive attitude of Albuquerque was not approved by him. When Albuquerque sought the alliance of the Raya against the coastal native powers, such as the Zamorin, it was not favoured by him. Albuquerque also requested the Rays to assist him against the Muslims of Calicut and in turn he promised to extend help to defeat the Sultans of Deccan and also not to sell horses to Bijapur but only to Raya. In this Raya gave special consideration to the merchants who imported horses and elephants, so that they may not supply them to his enemies. Prior to the fall of Goa to the Portuguese, this trade was in the hands of the Muslims. But by the time of Krishna Deva Raya, the

Arab and the native Muslim merchants were completely driven out from this market and the Portuguese enjoyed the monopoly in horse trade.

The successors of Krishna Deva Raya also purchased a large number of horses. Sadasiva concluded a treaty with the Portuguese that the horses landed at Goa should be sold only to him the ruler of Travancore had a different request. He requested the Portuguese permission to buy horses for war with Vijayanagar. In return, he promised to permit all the fishermen to become Christians. Though the Vijayanagar Emperors were not against the monopolistic trading attitude of the Portuguese, the proselytizing of the natives by them called for drastic action. There were large scale conversions to Christianity in the coastal belt. The converts were regarded by the Portuguese as Portuguese subjects. When the Vijayanagar emperor Ramaraja, felt this danger, he wanted to assert the Imperial authority and hence the invasion of the Badagason the Coromandel. Vithala, the cousin of Ramaraja, during his southern expedition in 1537, wanted to suppress the activities of the Portuguese in Coromandel. The Portuguese were well established during this decade at Manapad, Pinnaikayal, Vembar and Tuticorin and also took the civil and criminal jurisdiction of the whole fishery coast. Pinnaikayal was the headquarters of the Portuguese. It was shifted to Tuticorin in 1580," The Paravas were effective tools at the hands of the Portuguese and it helped them to become the masters of the fishery coast wresting it from the Muslims. The Paravas had lived as fishers and pearl divers on the fishery coast from ancient times. By the 14th century A.D., the Muslims had established firmly in the coast of Kayalpattanam and Kilakkarai. And gained control over the pearl fishery as leaseholders. The control of the Pearl fishery by the Muslims reduced the Paravas to the state of daily labourers and slaves. They had to pay tribute to the Muslims leaseholders. According to Francis Xavier, the Paravas were oppressed under the Moorish yoke. There were many quarrels between the Paravas and the Muslims resulting in the loss of many lives on both sides.

The Paravas approached the Portuguese Captain at Cochin. The Portuguese captain promised those help and protection if they got converted to Christianity, which was gladly accepted by the Paravas. Priests were sent from Cochin and many were baptised. Later during the visit of the Francis Xavier to the Coromandel Coast there was mass baptism. Thereafter the Paravas were spoken off as the favourite children of Portuguese and regarded as Portuguese subjects. The Muslims of Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam wanted to prevent these conversions obviously fearing that these conversions will hamper their activities in the fishery coast. They sent a delegation to Cochin with valuable presents to the Portuguese Captain and approached their co-religionist, Cherina Marakkar, an Influential ship owner and merchant of Cochin, to pressurise the Portuguese. But the latter could not help them. By 1537, the entire fishery coast was converted to Christianity. Later, the Paravas also became competitors to the Muslims, in the maritime activities with the blessings of the Portuguese.

Vithala's forces started their campaign against the Portuguese and the Paravas with the assistance of the local Muslims. The Portuguese captain at Pinnaikayal was attacked in 1544 and he fled with his family. Tuticorin was also swept The Port of Nagore was captured in 1543." The Portuguese had a mud fort at Vedalai. The Portuguese soldiers stationed there were collecting toll from the pilgrims to Rameswaram. Vithala drove these soldiers from Vedalai with the help of the local Muslims. Vithala again attacked Pinnaikayal with the help of the Muslim pirate, Irap Ali's fleet and the Portuguese captain was caught. But the Portuguese retaliated and defeated the Muslim fleet. There were mass scale murders of Muslims "

The Portuguese had fortified Nagapattanam and carried on brisk trade. The Nayaks of Thanjavur greatly favoured the Portuguese. The Nayaks do not seem to have possessed control either fiscal or judicial over the Portuguese and they cared only for the revenue return from the trade operations, the regular payment of which maintained a happy relationship between them. Moreover, the Nayaks did not encourage the trade enterprises of the natives including that of the Muslims. Foreign trade went to the hands of the Europeans. The fortified city of Nagapattanam became the subject to the King of Portugal in 1642. Nagapattanam became the centre of Portuguese missionary activities. Religion and commerce always combined in the expansion of Portuguese empire. But their religious policy made them unpopular. Like the Vijayanagar rulers, the Nayaks of Thanjavur also were not in favour of the proselytizing activities of the Portuguese and were unhappy over their treatment of the natives and hence they wanted to push them out of Nagapattanam.

In spite of the hostilities of the later Nayak rulers towards the Portuguese, they carried vast trade at Nagapattanam. There was brisk trade between Nagapattanam and Malabar. Spices and drugs were exported to Malacca and China. Along with the Portuguese, there were many Chettiar merchants who were dominant. But there were also many Muslims who were the natives of the land and owners of many ships by 1650, though political powers of the Portuguese diminished, their fortress and factories defenceless, the trade continued to increase. The attempts of the Nayaks to oust the Portuguese from Nagapattanam failed just as the efforts of the Moghuls to oust them from Goa. During this period, the Portuguese trade and their supremacy were challenged by the Dutch. When the attempts of the Nayaks failed to ground the Portuguese, they sought the help of the Dutch to drive them away. In 1658, Nagapattanam was captured by the Dutch and the Portuguese surrendered the trade enterprises of the Portuguese assumed definite shape in the coast of Madurai by 1650. The Nayaks of Madurai did not encourage the native maritime traders including the Muslims. Utilising the naval deficiency of the Nayaks the Portuguese became the masters of the fishery coast.

Hostility among the native rulers resulted in the political polarisation, centring round the European powers. Since the native rulers were unequal to the Portuguese in the sea, they necessarily had recourse to the other European powers. Thus, we find the Madurai Nayaks in alliance with the Portuguese, Thanjavur and Ramanathapuram were in alliance with the Dutch. Thirumalai Nayak of Madurai (1623-1659), strongly supported the Portuguese. In the succession dispute of the Marava kingdom of Ramnad in 1637, Thirumalai Nayak favoured the opponent's claim and enlisted the support of the Portuguese. The Sethupathi got the assistance of the Dutch. In return for the support from the Portuguese, Thirumalai Nayak undertook to give a place for the fortress wherever they desired in his territory. He also undertook to build at his own cost a church at Ramanathapuram and seven churches between Pamban and Tondi. He also gave permission to all those who desired to become Christians, and promised to the king of Portugal all assistance in men and supplies for services in Ceylon. He further undertook not to be friendly to the Dutch, not to admit them into his territories and not to send his vessels to the Dutch ports. This encouraged the Portuguese to strengthen the proselytizing and trading activities which went against the interest of the Muslims of the region.

On the other hand, the Sethupathis were hostile to the Portuguese. They favoured the Muslim traders in their coast against the Paravas of the Portuguese camp. In February 1655, Sethupathi Raghunatha Devan contracted a treaty with the Dutch declaring common enmity towards Portuguese. The Dutch promised the Sethupathi, protection from Portuguese attacks, in the fierce contest for colonial rivalry between the Portuguese and the Dutch, the winds were in favour of the latter. The Dutch gained the blessings of the most of the native rulers. Ultimately the Portuguese political hold began to weaken and their territories slipped from them. The Dutch captured Tuticorin in 1658. Ceylon was also taken in the same year. Malabar was lost in 1663. Kuthub Sha of Golkonda took Mylapore in 1662.

After the loss of Nagapattanam in 1658, the Portuguese and their Mestizo children (through Portuguese father and Indian mother) and Kestico (children through Portuguese mother and native father) offspring relocated their activities in Porto Novo. From there, together with the local Muslim merchants, they developed extensive network of mercantile contact with the ports of Malay Peninsula, Malacca, and Ache. Thus, the Portuguese trading activities continued. Thus, forgetting their old rivalry, the local Muslim population extended their helping hand to the Portuguese. The Portuguese settlers on the Coromandel bowed to the changed situation, abandoning their trading role, were all too happy to apply for jobs with the Dutch and the English, as soldiers and clerks. In the nineteenth century and thereafter the Portuguese survived in India owing to their friendship and alliance with the English. The English tolerated them in Indian packets of Goa, Diu and Daman.

The Muslims were considered as principal competitors by the Portuguese in India as elsewhere. But Vasco da Gama could not have reached India without the guidance of the Muslim navigator, Ibn Masjid, a native of Oman. He conducted Vasco da Gama from the east coast of Africa to Calicut. Portuguese attitude towards the Muslims was one of the inveterate hostilities on account of economic motives and the idea of colonisation. In the light of these realities, it will be seen that the Portuguese animosity towards the Muslims was strong even after centuries of their conflict in Iberia and North Africa. The Muslim merchants

were not permitted to trade in merchandise in which the Portuguese claimed monopoly. Hence the Muslims had to trade on the commodities in which the Portuguese had little interest. Most of the Muslim traders became petty merchants dealing in coconut, coarse cloth and such other things.

The Portuguese were also responsible for innumerable atrocities on Muslims on the sea. Panikkar while quoting a passage from Kerala Pazhama, says: "The Mohamaden ships were special objects of their fury. Even with cartazes, their ships were not safe. The Portuguese sea-men demanded heavy bribes; if it is not given the ships were confiscated. To quote an example a ship captured at the port of Kayalpattanam in 1526 by Manuel de Gama, then the captain of Coromandel, was confiscated and the Muslim Nagudha and his family sold to slavery. There were wanton destruction of Muslim vessels, people and ports. The Muslims carried on trade in such adverse condition at the risk of their lives and property. Whenever possible the Portuguese allied themselves with the Hindu state of Vijayanagar against the Muslim principalities and adopted a different attitude towards the Hindu natives. They spared the Hindus while massacring Muslims as in the case of D' Albuquerque's capture of Goa in 1510, where the Hindus were spared the Muslims, men, women and children were burnt in batches in mosques.

They did not scruple to destroy mosques for the construction of churches. They prevented the Muslims from going on pilgrimage to Mecca. The Portuguese tried to eliminate the Muslims from the pearl fishery with the assistance of the Paravas. The Muslims, clashed with Joao Froles, the captain of pearl fishery coast, in 1527. Affonso de Mello, the Portuguese captain avenged this in 1528 by burning down Kayal and Kilakkaral. The Muslims had to agree to pay annual tribute to the Portuguese for pearl fishery. The Muslim leader (Nainar) of Kilakkarai made an agreement with the Portuguese with regard to pearl fishery since the latter assumed themselves the charge of the pearl fishing of the coast. The Muslims of Kayal left the place and developed the port of Kayalpattinam from 1532 But the battle continued between the Portuguese and the Muslims on the sea between Pamban and Cape Comerin.

In 1537 the three captains of the Zamorin, Pate Marcar, Kunjali Marcar, and Ali Ibrahim came to the rescue of the Muslims of Coromandel and sailed to the fishery coast with a strong force. They attacked the Parava villages and many were killed. Then they sailed to Vedalai and waited for a voyage to Ceylon. The Portuguese with a large contingent and with the help of the Paravas of the area attacked the Muslim camp. Many Muslims were slain. Vedalai and other nearby villages were burnt, their properties looted, and boats were burnt. [We can see hundreds of epitaphs in Vedalai even to this day, which are ascribed to the martyrs in this battle, awaiting the attention of the historians] Further the Paravas sailed to Kayalpattanam and burnt the entire village and the Muslims fled to nearby islands and Ceylon." The Portuguese and Paravas emerged stronger and Muslims trading power were broken. According to a letter of the St. Xavier [Dt. 28.10.1542] "after the victory of Vedalai, no one now remembers Moors, none among them dares to raise his head"

When the Portuguese established a fortified settlement in the port of Colombo in 1518, they became hostile to the Muslim settlers there. Some of the Muslims had blood relations in the Coromandel some had a dual domicile in South India and Ceylon. Regulations were passed restricting their migration and settlements. Muslim merchants spread out to the smaller ports away from the Portuguese. So, the migration of the Coromandel Muslims to Ceylon for trade and religious purposes was seriously affected.

Malacca was captured in 1511. Coromandel Muslim traders avoided Malacca and transferred their headquarters to Brunel on the southern coast of Borneo, which became anew centre for the spread of Islam and they also concentrated in Johore. By 1535, the North Coast of Java was islamised. The rapid spread of Islam in Southeast Asian lands contributed a serious setback to the plans of the Portuguese. Thus, the earlier conflicts between the Portuguese and Muslims were centred both on ecclesiastical and economic rivalries. When the Portuguese military and naval powers were episodic in the areas in Bay of Bengal, the Muslim traders evaded the Portuguese. Instead of challenging them and they could carry on their trade. It is also a fact that the Muslim traders in many places acquiesced to the Portuguese. M.N. Pearson reports that the Muslim merchants made no attempts to oppose the arbitrary explosive demands of the Portuguese.

The merchants rather accommodated quickly and indeed cooperated with the exploiters. Muslim merchants of Cochin like Cherina Marcar, and Mammalae Marcar supplied large quantities of pepper to the Portuguese. They obtained cartazes from the Cochin factory to send their ships to Ormuz. These two merchants were

very influential with the Portuguese. The Governor of India recommended to the Portugal crown in 1513 for some special concessions to them. Nino Mercar another ship owner had sent his ships for the Portuguese to Mallorca. The vessels of Chilay Marcar took elephants to Goa for the Portuguese". Nino Marcar and his brother had commercial establishments in Coromandel Coast and arranged for 1500 fighters to overpower the enemies of the Portuguese in Coromandel region. The Portuguese kings often instructed their officials in India to favour the Christian and Hindu merchants in contrast to the Muslims. This could not bear any point. The Hindu and Christian merchants had no such great capital as the Muslims.

The local ship owners and sailors were only Muslims in 1590, when the Portuguese crown ordered that the mosques in the Portuguese territories (except in Ormuz) be demolished, the Governor of India replied that the orders could not be put in to effect since the Portuguese were trading in these territories, with the Muslims also because of economic compulsions and in the furtherance of their trading activities, the Portuguese had to throw their lot with the Muslims. They married even local Muslim women. As K.S. Mathew puts it very aptly the Crusade joined hands with Jihad in the matter of trade. The Portuguese who reportedly crossed the ocean to hunt out the Muslims had to depend on the Intermediary and shipping expertise of the Muslims for their trade promotion.

It will be observed that the Portuguese's hostility toward the Muslims somewhat subsided toward the end of their colonial period in India. However, the majority of the Muslims had already begun to shift their career patterns and were driven to despair, so it was too late for them to recover and readjust. Muslim trade fell because of the use of force based on superior technology and the absence of cooperation from the local ruling authorities, not because of a lack of commercial ability. The Coromandel Muslims lacked both the military technology and the ability to repel the assault. Consequently, the broken commerce of the Muslims was subjugated. The Portuguese naval might was too strong for the Muslims to match. This crucial element gave the other European powers—particularly the Dutch and the English—the ability to invade previously unoccupied Muslim territory. The saga of the Coromandel Muslims' subjugation does not end with the Portuguese; the Dutch carried on the tradition.

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