



Vol. 2, No. 1; Jan – Mar (2026)

SAKHA: Multidisciplinary Journal of Science, Arts & Technology

Available at <https://sakha.co.in/journals/mjsat>



A Historical Overview of the Origin of Tamil Muslims and their Settlements in TamilNadu

Dr. Farida Gani.A^{1a}

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed College for women (Autonomous), Chennai.

Abstract

This study is bring to analyse the history of the Tamil Muslims and their contact with Tamilagam which is very interesting and important. There are about 10 to 11 million Tamil Muslims in India mostly in Tamil Nadu state and also in neighboring Kerala. Tamil Muslims are largely urban traders rather than farmers. The Muslims who settled on the coastal towns of Coromandel speak Tamil and Tamil language is their mother tongue. The progenitors of the early Muslims were the Arab Muslim merchants and navigators who settled in the port towns of Coromandel region right from the Eighth Century A.D. from there they continued their mercantile activities, for which the local rulers willingly extended all facilities The Coromandel Coast was studded with ports like Porto Novo, Nagapattanam, Nagore, Karaikkal, Adirampattanam, Mandapam, Vedalai, Killakkarai and Kayalpattanam and they served as passage or crossing points to Ceylon, Malacca and other Southeast Asian lands. The Arab Musilm settlers on the Coromandel region married the native women. The Muslims by their maritime activities have contributed a honourable share for the economic development of the Coromandel region . The Tami Muslims share many customs and practices in common with their co – religionists, the Hindus. At the same time they identify themselves with their own customs and manners Endogamous marriage , Matrilocal residence , house gift to bride are some of the unique customs among the Marakkayars. As a great fortune seekers , the material minded Muslims strictly perform their duties as expected of a devout Muslim, charity, hospitality and philanthropy are in their blood. During the

^a Corresponding Author: farisherif@gmail.com

sangam age the eastern coast of Tamil country possessed a number of sea ports like Musiri, Tondi and Korkai through which the Arab merchants established good business. The Muslims living in Tamil Nadu are classified into many categories on the basis of their origin, language and the like. Majorities of the Muslims of Tamil Nadu are Tamil speaking and Urdu is the mother tongue of a section of the Muslims. The different segments in the Tamil Muslim society such as Rawthar, Labbai, Marakkayar and Deccanis are very important. Arabu-Tamil was used by Arabs who came and settled in Tamil Nadu. The settled Arabs in Tamil Nadu learnt Tamil through Arabic Script and wrote Tamil in Arabic script. It is believed that the origin of Arabu-Tamil is as old as contact of Arabs with Tamil Nadu. Muslims in Tamilnadu contributed their best to the local culture.

Keywords: Arab traders, Muslim Settlements, Anjuvannam, Marakayar, Mohulla System, Labbais, Rowthers, , Arabic- Tamil language.

Introduction

Tamil Culture :

Muslims in Tamil Nadu contributed their best to the local culture. The Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas rulers patronised Islam and donated lands for places of worship. The 734 AD. mosque in Tiruchirappalli (near Fort Railway Station) is proof that Muslims lived in this area since eighth century. Though they identify closely with Tamil culture in many respects, their manners, customs, dress, food and festivities have been influenced by Islam. In other words, Tamil and Islam have been synthesised in such a manner. Arab Muslim traders and the native Tamil converts to Islam in Tamil Nadu came into closer contact as a result of their commercial activities.

The Muslim contact with Tamilagam took place under two different categories of Muslims. The first contact came through the Arab traders and settlers, who came as peace emigrants. The trade contact was followed by the missionary contact. The Muslims who settled in the coastal towns of Coromandel speak Tamil and Tamil language in their mother tongue. Muslims from one of the major social groups and their settled in different parts of Tamil Nadu.

In the beginning, the contact of the Arab traders led to Muslim settlement in some parts of Tamil country. The Arabs had commercial contacts with the Tamil country even from the Pre – Islamic days and developed a lucrative trade. From the third century BC, they established their monopoly in the India Maritime.

A chain of Muslim trading settlements grew up along the east coast from Pulicat to Colachel in Kanniyakumari. Many of their richest settlements were located in the coastal towns of Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram and Thirunelveli districts. They had links with the wider trading world of the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. The port towns of the Coromandel coast

came to be identified as centres of formal Islam in South India by the 12- 13th centuries. The localities such as Pulicat, Nagapattanam, Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam² contained a significant number of Tamil-speaking Muslims who could be classed as permanently professing Islam and were actually recognised as such within the wider society

Sonakar – Population in Ceylon :

The Muslim population, which integrated in the local society was influenced by Tamil culture. The early name of the Tamil Muslims was Sonakar or Sonakan or Jonakan. Sonakars were recognized as the descendants of the Arabs. The official records of Ceylon call the Muslims population in Ceylon as Sonakar. The earliest settlers among the Muslims of Ceylon were called Ceylon Sonakar and the recent South Indian Muslim migrants were known as Indian Sonakar the Muslim population of the Coromandel came to be called as Sonakars from eighth century. It is also interesting to note that the Mapillas of Malabar were known as Sonaka Mapillas

Muslims of the Coromandel Coast:

The Muslims of the Coromandel Coast were also called as Thulukkar, along with Sonakar. Thulukkar, meaning the native of Thrkey. Though all the Muslims who frequented the Coromandel Coast had not come from Thrkey, this term is very extensively and popularly applied to all the Muslims by the fellow Hindus.

Merchant Guild :

The early Muslims settled on the coastal towns functioned as a guild for themselves, like the merchant guilds of the Hindus, like Ainoorruvar, and Valanjar. The name Anjuvannam found in some copper plates and inscriptions of the 12-13th centuries A.D. along with the names of other merchant guilds is considered to be the merchant guild of the Muslims. Anjuvannam is a Persian word meaning assembly or congregation. An old mosque in Thenkasi (Thirunelveli Dt.) is called "Anjuvannam Pallivasal" (mosque) even to this day.

Social Structure of Muslims in TamilNadu:

The Muslims of the Coromandel Coast were socially organised into segments or sub- divisions. They are Rawthar, Labbai, Marakkayar and Deccani. In the view of Dr . J. Raja Mohamad, The social segments of the Muslims such as Rawthar, Labbai, Marakkayar and Deccani cannot be

called as castes nor are they classes. (Caste is a distinctive feature of Hinduism and has no place in Islam).¹⁷ They are not hierarchically ranked like castes, as all sub divisions are equal. But it is extremely difficult to distinguish one from another as they merge with each other. Despite distinctions of the sub divisions or segments, the profession of Islam is a single distinctive religion to all of them. The names of these sub divisions are rather occupational titles. It is behaviorally difficult to distinguish the sub divisions on the basis of occupational distinctions. For example, the Labbai boatmen call themselves Marakkayars.

A. Role of Marakayars in Maritime Trade

Marakayar is a word derived from the fusion of the Arabic work 'Marakab' meaning 'boat' and the Tamil word 'Rayar' meaning 'King', while according to another version, Marakayars is derived from the Tamil word 'Marakkalam' meaning 'ship' and Rayar meaning King. Both, however, indicate that the Marakayars are well-versed in the maritime trade and are also the progeny of the Arab Traders who married local women. In later years the converts to Islam took the title Marakayar. Tamil was their mother tongue. The majority of the Marakayars lived in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu like Keelakarai, Kayalpatnam, Nagore and the like and traded in pearls, rubies and chanks. The Urdu speaking Muslims of Tamil Nadu are grouped under several headings namely, the Syeds, Shaikhs, Pathans, Mughals and Navayats. The Sayeds and Shaikhs are of Arab origin and they came to India as warriors.

One of the most powerful of these coastal trading families was the Kayalpatanam Line who controlled much of the Palk Strait's pearling and chank diving Industries and organised the great boatloads of divers who travelled To Ceylon for the region's periodic pearl fishing sessions.

The maraikkayar all belong to the Shafi'i madhab (school of Quranic law). Shafi'i affiliation tends to reflect connections with Arabia. The maraikkayar take this Shafi'i affiliation as proof of their separate superior status and identity. They maintain these divisions by marrying with their fellow Shafi'is from the Malabar coast and south east Asia in preference to Tamil speaking Hanafi's.

Settlements of Maraikkayar :

Susan Bayly writes, "Many of the maraikkayar towns' remarkable mosques, madrasas, Dargahs and Sufi Khanaqahs date back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or even earlier. The town of Karaikkal, for example, is one of several maraikkayar centres whose dargahs are said

to contain the remains of Sahabi, companions of the Prophet. Kayalpattanam contains a series of fine Early masjids including the periyapalli ('great mosque'), which was built in AD1331, and Kilakkarai has come to be equally well known for its great array of imposing mosques and Dargahs

A good example of the maraikkayar families links to the Hindu kingdoms can be seen through the career of the celebrated Kilakkarai trading magnate and literary patron 'Sitakkati' (Shaikh Abdul Qadir:1650-1715). This maraikkayar notable came from along line of Kilakkarai ship owners and commercial men. A family history dating from the early eighteenth century claims that the Sitakkati's ancestors were the main suppliers of horses to the fourteenth century Pandya kings of Tamilnad, and that one of their number actually married a Pandya princess.²¹ The Sitakkati is remembered today as a patron of scholars and poets: it was he who commissioned south India's best known Muslim devotional work, the Sirapuranam, a 5,000 – stanza epic on the life of the Prophet. He is also said to have laid the foundations of the great jama masjid (Friday mosque) at Kilakkarai.

B. Labbai Muslims of TamilNadu

The Labbais of Arab origin. The Arab merchants who settled in the ports of Tamil country had brought along with them some Arabs as helpers. Who used to respond to the calls of their masters with the word Labbaik which means "Here I Am". Hence these Muslims and their offspring came to be known as Labbais. The Arab refugees who came along with the Arab traders and their children through their Indian wives were also known as Labbais. The word Labbai was also applicable to the Hindu converts to Islam. The Labbais were mainly traders. Some of them were also engaged in agriculture and mat making. In the erstwhile North Arcot and present Vellore District, the Labbais mostly own the tanning industry, thereby breaking the monopoly of the Chakilies. A section of the Labbais speaks Tamil and Urdu is the mother tongue of the others.

In the view of Susan Bayly All other Tamil-speaking Muslims in the south came to be referred to as Labbais. He asserts all Labbais is Sunnis, included coastal fishermen And pearl- divers as well as large numbers of hinterland cultivators, Weavers and other artisans, and petty traders including people engaged in Trades such as fish-selling and leather-making

The Census Report of 1881, says that "the Labbais are known as Coromandel Moplas, with a slight admixture of Arab blood and native converts, they are thrifty, industrious and enterprising, plucky mariners and expert traders and they are distinct from Marakkayars"

"Labbai" is considered to be a class name for the purpose of educational and job concessions in Tamil Nadu at present.

C. Life and Culture of Rowthers :

The majorities of Labbais of Tamil Nadu whose mother tongue is Tamil are known as Rowthers and are mainly connected with the horse trade. As the Muslims of Tamil Nadu were either engaged in horse-trading or employed as horse trainers or cavalrymen, they were called Rowthers. They were also known as "Guthirai Chettigal" meaning horse traders. The Rowthers were frugal traders who were engaged in both wholesale and retail trade. They were also engaged in agriculture and mat making.

In addition to the low ranking Tamil Labbais and the Maraikkayar with their claims of Arab descent, the region also became the home of a group of Muslims who see themselves as quite distinct from all these Tamil-speaking groups. These people are only a small minority in the Muslim society of Tamil Nadu. Their importance derives partly from their claims to be superior to other Muslims in the region: in recent years, this has injected an element of tension into questions of linguistic and corporate identity from any Muslims in Tamil Nadu.²⁷In addition, though, these were the soldiers and service people who founded the Tamil country's first sizeable Muslim political elite, and this meant that they had a disproportionate effect on religion and political life in the region.

Most of these non-Tamils claim Dakhni as their mother tongue. This is the southern variant of Urdu, which emerged as the court language of the mediaeval sultanates of the Deccan. As might be expected, many of the Muslims of Tamilnad who describe themselves as Dakhnis claim to be descended from soldiers, officials and literary men in service to the Muslim ruling houses of the Deccan. When Bijapur and the other Deccani kingdoms were over run by the Mughals at the end of the seventeenth century, large numbers of these Muslims migrated to other parts of India, including the south. Some of the Shia trading families of Madras city are Deccanis who first established themselves in the Tamil country after the fall of the Bijapur sultans.

Muslim Weavers of TamilNadu :

Earliest epigraphical evidence of 16th century, clearly showing the active role of Muslims in weaving industry of South India. Pañchu Kotti and Achchu katti is the most important two

Muslim weaver communities of Tamil Nadu. Pañchu kotti and Achchu katti, both Tamil names by which at present these people are known.

Role of Textile and Trade Profession of Muslim in TamilNadu :

i) Panchukutti:

The word Pañchu means is 'Cotton', and Kotti is 'to beat'; so Pañchu Kotti is Cotton cleaner. Beating cotton by using a rod or machine.³¹ The Pañcu kotties are densely populated in modern Trichirappalli and Thanavur districts. In Perambalur Taluk, Trichirappalli Dt, they are inhabited in villages like Visuvakudi and Muhamadu Pattanam.

The Panju-V ettis are a group of Muslims who claim to descend from Andra Pradesh. They are engaged in the profession of cleaning cotton and weaving coarse fabrics.³² they speak Telugu as their mother tongue. The elderly ladies of this community wear saris in a typical way of how the native ladies of Andhra Pradesh wear, by passing the sari in between the legs. They believe that they were inhabited by the Nawabs of Arcot in 18th Century from Andhra Pradesh.

The Nawabs endowed for the construction of Mosques to these people in seven villages and these mosques were small and built with lime and sand mortar which resembled alike in their architectural style. The mosques were constructed at Visvakudi, Kolakkudi, Thataiyangar pettai, Ichchampettai, Muttañchetti, Eragudi and Thaccan kuricci.

ii) Achhcu Katti

The term Accu has more than one meaning like mould, mark, print, stamp, weavers' reed, instrument for pressing down the threads of the wool; comb, like frame in a loom through which they are pressed or battened together, Katti or Kattu is to tie or join. Accu katti— Indian Country surgeon or one who passes the thread through the loom are the meanings suggested by the Tamil Lexicon .

This community is densely populated in and around Salem, Namakkal Trichy and Thanjavur districts, the textile areas of Tamil Nadu. Rasipuram of Namakkal district is the most densely populated town of this community. This is a single area which goes by their name as Accu katti where nearly eight hundred of them line together and actively engaged in textile industry. This community speak a different language which not have script form, but only sound.

This community also does not find a place in any government records. The main reason is the inferiority complex due their low economic status. They record 'Labbai' as their community and Tamil as their mother tongue.

Arabic Script in Tamil Writing (Arwi Tradition)

Arabic-Tamil, which happened to be the vehicle of various religious materials and creative expressions was the other special cultural achievement of Coromandel's extensive trade. The Arabs traded and settled more or less freely over here. It is in the context of this great traffic of people and ideas that we find the origin of Arabic- Tamil. The Arab Muslim Traders and the native Tamil converts to Islam in Tamilnadu state of India and Sri Lanka came into closer contact as a result of their commercial activities. They were bound by a common religion, but separated by two different languages They felt the necessity for a link-language. They started to write Tamil in an adapted Arabic script called Arabu-Tamil.

The Arabu-Tamil or Arwi script represents the Tamil language using an Arabic style of scripts. From eighth century to nineteenth century, this language enjoyed its popularity among Tamil speaking Muslims of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka.

M.M.M. Mahroof define the 'Arabic –Tamil' "Tamil written in the Arabic script is the standard definition of Arabic Tamil" He also explain again, this term is also used, somewhat imprecisely, for Tamil written in its own script but containing a large number of loan-words from Arabic, Urdu, Persian and Turkish. Arabu-Tamil was used by Arabs who came and settled in Tamil Nadu. The settled Arabs in Tamil Nadu learnt Tamil through Arabic Script and wrote Tamil in Arabic script. It is believed that the origin of Arabu-Tamil is as old as contact of Arabs with Tamil Nadu. The Muslim communities of Sarandib (Sri Lanka) and Tamil Nadu were able to use this language as an effective shield for the preservation of their cultural identity.

This language was developed during the early medieval ages. Its literature is mostly of religious character. In the words of Edgard Thurston, Arabu-Tamil is a literature which was developed for the purpose of the education of Labbai and Maraikayar children. The Koran and other books were published in this language.

Four hundred years ago, a particular procedure and a new literary style was adopted in Arabu-Tamil writing. This new literary style was adopted by Hafiz Amir Wali Appa, a saint of Kayalpattinam. He is considered to be the first person who reintroduced Arabu-Tamil after the

Portuguese devastation in around 1600.³⁸His tomb is available in the weaver's street, in Kayalpattinam.

Conclusion

The trading Arab diaspora has obviously contributed to the transformation of various Tamil Muslim communities. The major Muslim communities such as Marakkayar, Labbai and Rawthar are the descendants of the Arabs, where as the Deccanis are of Turkish or Mangoloid descent. All of them are orthodox Sunnites and profess Hanafi faith, and part of the present-day minority Muslim community. They are also declared as educationally backwards in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Muslims started to write Tamil in an adapted Arabic script called Arabu-Tamil. The Arabu-Tamil or Arwi script represents the Tamil language using an Arabic style of scripts. The decline of Arabu-Tamil language is a great loss to the Tamil Muslim community as this was their religious language.

References

1. Dr . J. Raja Mohamad , Maritime History of the Coromandel Muslims , P. 11.
2. Bayly,Susan, Saints, Goddesses and kings , Muslims and Christians in South Indian society, 1700 – 1900, Cambridge University Press. pp. 73-74.
3. Dr . J. Raja Mohamad , Maritime History of the Coromandel Muslims, PP. 68 ,69.
4. ibid. pp. 70 – 71
5. ibid. p. 71.
6. Bayly,Susan, Saints, Goddesses and kings , Muslims and Christians in South Indian society, 1700 – 1900, Cambridge University Press. P. 79.
7. ibid. pp. 78 – 80
8. Bayly,Susan, Saints, Goddesses and kings , Muslims and Christians in South Indian society, 1700 – 1900, Cambridge University Press. P.81.
9. N.A.AmirAli, Vallal Sitakkdtiyal Vazhvum Kdlamum (The Life and Times of Sitakkati The Great Patron) (Madras, 1983) pp.69,87-95.
10. Dale, Islamic Society, pp.113-1
11. Dr . J. Raja Mohamad , Maritime History of the Coromandel Muslims,, P. 77
12. Madras Cencus Report 1881; Thurston op.cit. IV p.199
13. Mir Hussein Ali Khan Kirmani, History of the Reign of Tipu Sultan; Neshani Hyduri. Trans.W.Miles (London, 1844), p.87.

14. Bayly, Susan, Saints, Goddesses and kings , Muslims and Christians in South Indian society, 1700 – 1900, Cambridge University Press. P. 96 – 97.
15. P . Nallathambi, History Of The Muslims' Settlement In Tamil Nadu , International Multidisciplinary Research Journal, Vol 4 Issue 5 Nov 2014, p
16. Dr. S. Chandni Bi, Pañchu Kotti and Achhcu Katti two Weaver Communities of Tamil Nadu
17. Bayly, Susan, Saints, Goddesses and kings , Muslims and Christians in South Indian society, 1700 – 1900, Cambridge University Press. P. 97- 98
18. Af. M. M. Mahroof, Arabic – Tamil in south India and Sri Lanka: language as mimicry , Islamic Studies, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 169-189.
19. ABDUR RAHMAN, H. (April 1985), Origin and Development of ArabuTamil in Tamil Nadu, Chennai, pp.23
20. JOHN SAMUEL, DR. G. (2010), Tamil as a classical Language, Chennai, pp:275