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The Evolution of Cultural Practices in Tamil Society under Islamic Influence

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Abstract

The development of cultural practices in Tamil society under Islamic influence shows a long history of contact and exchange from the early medieval period to the colonial period. This study looks at the conditions that allowed interaction between Tamil communities and Muslim traders, scholars, and rulers, especially through coastal trade, towns, and Sufi religious centres. It explains changes in language use, clothing, food habits, and religious customs. Islamic influence did not replace Tamil culture but blended with existing traditions in many areas of daily life. Tamil Muslim identity grew by keeping the Tamil language and local customs while adopting Islamic beliefs and social values. These changes are understood as part of wider Indian Ocean trade and regional political developments. The study shows that cultural change happened through cooperation and adjustment rather than conflict, and that Tamil society developed through both continuity and change.

Keywords: *Tamil society; Islamic influence; cultural practices; Sufi traditions; maritime trade; social interaction; identity formation; historical change.*

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Introduction

Islamic culture began in the 7th century CE in Arabia with the message of Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE). After his death, Islam spread many regions through trade, travel, and missionary activity. By the 8th century CE, Arab traders had established strong commercial links across the Indian Ocean, connecting Arabia with South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. The Tamil region came into contact with Islamic culture mainly through maritime trade. Historical records and inscriptions show that Arab merchants were active along the Tamil coast from the 8th–9th centuries CE. Important port towns such as Kayal (Thoothukudi region), Nagapattinam, and Nagore became centres of Muslim settlement. By the 10th and 11th centuries, Tamil Muslim communities such as the Labbais and Marakkayars had emerged as traders and sailors. The Chola period (9th–13th centuries CE) provides inscriptional evidence of Muslim merchants participating in overseas commerce and local society. Sufi saints played an important role in spreading Islamic culture in Tamil areas between the 13th and 17th centuries. Shrines such as Nagore Dargah (linked to Shahul Hamid, 16th century) became places of shared religious and cultural interaction. These centres attracted both Muslims and non-Muslims and promoted ideas of harmony and service.

The impact of Islamic culture in the Tamil region can be seen in language, food habits, clothing, and religious life. Tamil Muslims continued to use the Tamil language while adopting Islamic beliefs and social customs. This interaction created a blended cultural tradition rather than a complete change of earlier practices. Studying the origin and impact of Islamic culture in Tamil society shows that cultural change occurred through long-term contact, trade, and peaceful exchange, shaping the region's social and cultural history over many centuries. Tamil sailors themselves travelled to West Asia and East Africa, and some settled there, creating two-way cultural movement rather than only Arab influence entering Tamil lands. An unknown aspect of history is the role of Tamil Muslim merchant guilds. Communities such as the Marakkayars and Labbais were not only traders but also ship owners and navigators who controlled parts of the Bay of Bengal trade. They acted as middle agents between Arab merchants and Tamil rulers. Some Pandya inscriptions indirectly refer to foreign merchants being granted land and tax privileges near ports, suggesting early Muslim settlements supported by the state. Another little-noticed feature is the shared religious space in coastal towns. Early mosques were built near Hindu temples and Buddhist sites, showing peaceful coexistence. Local traditions record that Sufi saints adopted Tamil language and folk teach Islam, blending Islamic ideas with Tamil

cultural forms. Dargahs such as Nagore later became places visited by both Muslims and Hindus, indicating mixed religious practice shaped by trade communities.

Chera and Pandya Kingdoms in Early Global Trade (1st century BCE–6th century CE)

Long before Islam, Chera and Pandya kingdoms participated in Mediterranean and West Asian trade. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (1st century CE) mentions Muziris (Chera) and Korkai (Pandya) as major export centres of pepper and pearls. Archaeological excavations in Tamil Nadu and Kerala have yielded over 6,000 Roman gold and silver coins, showing the scale of trade with the Roman Empire. Sangam literature refers to Yavana (foreign) traders living in port towns, proving early multicultural interaction. These networks formed the foundation for later Islamic commercial links.

Transformation of Trade Networks after the 7th Century CE

With the decline of Roman trade after the 6th century, Arab and Persian merchants replaced Mediterranean traders. By the 9th–12th centuries, ports such as Kayal, Nagapattinam, and Nagore became major Muslim trading centres. Chinese records of the Song dynasty (10th–12th centuries) list South India as a key exporter of spices and cotton textiles. This period also saw Tamil sailors participating in Indian Ocean navigation, indicating a two-way movement of people and culture rather than one-sided Islamic influence. Tamil port towns became multicultural spaces where Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and Buddhists lived together. Archaeological remains show early mosques built close to market areas and temple zones.

The Kayalpattinam region preserves traces of early Islamic settlement from the 9th century CE. Tamil inscriptions include Arabic loan words related to trade and taxation, indicating everyday interaction. These ports acted as cultural laboratories where Islamic customs merged with Tamil social life. Tamil Muslim communities such as the Marakkayars, Labbais, and Rowthers emerged between the 10th and 13th centuries. They controlled pearl fisheries, spice trade, and shipping networks. Pandya inscriptions mention foreign merchants receiving land grants and protection near ports. Historians estimate that maritime trade contributed nearly 30–35 percent of state revenue in coastal regions during the medieval period. These merchant groups thus gained social status and cultural influence.

Sufi Networks and Cultural Adaptation (13th–17th centuries CE)

Sufi saints used Tamil language and folk music to spread Islamic ideas. Shrines such as Nagore Dargah (16th century, associated with Shahul Hamid) became centres of shared devotion. By the 17th century, more than 30 major dargahs existed along the Tamil coast. Folk songs and

oral poetry preserve the memory of these saints, showing the cultural blending of Islamic belief with Tamil artistic forms. Chera and Pandya rulers encouraged Muslim traders to strengthen overseas commerce. Inscriptions indicate royal protection for merchant communities and exemptions from certain taxes. Diplomatic contacts with West Asian regions are recorded in Arab chronicles. Customs duties and port taxes formed a steady income for the state, confirming the economic basis of cultural interaction.

Language and Literary Exchange

Tamil Muslims retained Tamil as their spoken language while using Arabic for religious learning. Works such as Tamil Islamic devotional poetry and oral narratives emerged from this interaction. The use of Tamil script for Islamic themes is cultural evidence of synthesis. This bilingual practice ensured continuity of Tamil identity alongside Islamic faith. Islamic influence can be seen in food habits (meat-based rice dishes with spices), dress styles (long robes and caps), and music (devotional songs using Tamil rhythms). These changes are recorded in local customs and oral traditions. Cultural practices show selective adoption rather than replacement of earlier traditions. Mosques and temples existed in the same urban zones of port towns. Local legends speak of shipwrecked Arab sailors marrying Tamil women and forming trading families. Clan histories among Marakkayars preserve memories of early settlement. These narratives provide cultural evidence beyond inscriptions and texts, revealing social integration through family and neighbourhood life.

Inland and Coastal Differences

Islamic cultural influence was strongest in coastal trade centres, while inland agrarian regions remained shaped mainly by temple institutions. Population estimates suggest Muslims formed 8–10 percent of coastal town populations by the 18th century, but far less in interior districts. Geography and economy thus determined cultural diffusion. The Tamil region became part of a shared maritime world linking Arabia, East Africa, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. Tamil traders exported textiles and spices while receiving cultural and religious ideas. Archaeological finds of foreign ceramics and coins confirm this transoceanic exchange. By the early modern period, stable Tamil Muslim communities with mosques and madrasas had formed. Cultural synthesis produced a distinct Tamil Muslim identity combining regional language with Islamic belief. Trade-based cultural exchange continued even under European colonial rule.

Periods of Major Conversion to Islam in Tamil Nadu

The adoption of Islam in Tamil Nadu occurred in distinct historical phases rather than as a single event. The most significant phase of conversion took place between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, coinciding with the expansion of Sufi networks and the consolidation of maritime trade communities. Earlier contacts (8th–12th centuries) produced only limited conversions, largely confined to coastal trading families. Demographic estimates suggest that Muslims constituted no more than 1–2 percent of the population during this initial phase. A marked increase occurred during the Sufi period (13th–16th centuries), when the proportion rose to approximately 4–6 percent. Under the Nawabs of Arcot in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Muslim population expanded further to around 7–8 percent, particularly in North Arcot, Vellore, and Thanjavur regions. Colonial census data provide quantitative confirmation:

- 1871 Census of Madras Presidency: Muslims ≈ 6.5%
- 1901 Census: Muslims ≈ 6.9%

These figures indicate that the principal phase of religious transition had already occurred before British rule.

Epigraphic and Documentary Sources

Inscriptional references from Pandya and later periods record the presence of foreign Muslim merchants in port towns such as Kayal and Nagapattinam. Arab travel accounts by Al-Masʿudi and Ibn Khurdadbeh mention Muslim settlements along the South Indian coast. These sources demonstrate early institutional presence rather than state-sponsored conversion. Shrines such as Nagore Dargah (16th century), Erwadi, and Kunangudi Mastan functioned as centres of religious and social interaction. These sites attracted followers across caste and religious boundaries. By the seventeenth century, more than thirty major dargahs were established along the Tamil coast, forming a spatial network of Islamic cultural diffusion. Marakkayar and Labbai communities preserve genealogical narratives linking their origins to Arab traders and Tamil women.

Period	Estimated Scale of Conversion
8th–12th centuries	1–2% (coastal trading families)
13th–16th centuries	3–4% increase (Sufi phase)
17th–18th centuries	1–2% increase (Nawab period)
19th century	Stabilisation

The thirteenth to sixteenth centuries marked the most decisive phase of Islamisation in Tamil society, shaped less by political conquest than by processes of cultural accommodation and social interaction. Epigraphic records from the Pandya and Vijayanagara periods reveal the increasing presence of Tamil-speaking Muslim communities in port towns and inland market centres, while literary and inscriptional evidence indicates that Tamil rapidly became the primary medium of religious instruction and devotional expression among converts. By the sixteenth century, traveller accounts and regional chronicles suggest that Muslim settlements were firmly established in more than twenty major commercial towns along the Coromandel Coast and the Tamiraparani basin. Dietary convergence further facilitated integration, as both Hindu and Muslim populations shared rice-based food regimes with common use of spices, oils, and coastal produce, differing mainly in ritual restrictions rather than daily consumption patterns.

Cultural exchange was especially visible and poetry: Sufi devotional traditions incorporated Tamil metres, folk melodies, and narrative styles, giving rise to a hybrid religious culture intelligible to local audiences. Pilgrimage practices also overlapped, with dargahs functioning as shared sacred spaces frequented by both Muslims and non-Muslims; by the early modern period, more than 40 percent of prominent shrines in the Tamil region attracted mixed congregations during annual festivals. These shared linguistic, dietary, artistic, and devotional forms enabled Islam to be embedded within existing Tamil cultural frameworks, making conversion and community formation a process of accommodation rather than rupture.

Caste Hierarchy and Religious Change

Caste stratification within Tamil society constituted a decisive structural condition for religious conversion, particularly from the thirteenth century onward, when access to temples, land, and ritual authority became increasingly restricted by hereditary hierarchy. Epigraphic and travel accounts from the medieval period indicate that early Muslim settlements in the Tamil region were concentrated among coastal trading and artisan groups rather than among dominant agrarian castes. By the late nineteenth century, colonial census data provide clearer statistical patterns: the Madras Presidency Census of 1881 recorded Muslims at 6.5 percent of the population, rising to 6.9 percent in 1901, with over 60 percent of Tamil Muslims residing in urban or semi-urban commercial centres such as Nagapattinam, Kayalpattinam, Arcot, and Vellore. Occupational statistics from the 1901 Census show that nearly 48 percent of Muslims in Tamil districts were engaged in trade, weaving, leatherwork, transport, and small-scale manufacture, compared with less than 20 percent in landholding agriculture. These figures

contrast sharply with upper-caste Hindu dominance in temple administration and wet-rice agrarian control.

Islam offered an alternative moral and social framework grounded in the principle of equality before God, rejecting birth-based ritual hierarchy and enabling converts to enter merchant and artisan networks linked to Indian Ocean commercial circuits. Sufi institutions further reinforced this transformation through shrine-based communities that weakened caste distinctions and emphasised ethical belonging rather than lineage. Conversion therefore operated not merely as a religious realignment but as a historically measurable social process aimed at escaping caste discrimination, securing access to occupational mobility, and asserting social dignity within a rigidly stratified Tamil social order. Religious change must therefore be understood in relation to social inequality rather than as an isolated theological shift.

Linguistic and Cultural Practices

Arabic-derived words such as salaam, dua, and haj have entered everyday Tamil usage. Tamil Islamic literature and devotional poetry reflect a synthesis of regional language and religious ethics. Cuisine (biryani, haleem), devotional (qawwali and Tamil Sufi songs), and festival participation illustrate cultural interpenetration. Dargahs remain shared spaces visited by Muslims and non-Muslims. Centuries of interaction have produced a relatively stable model of religious coexistence grounded in everyday social relations rather than formal ideology.

Inland–Coastal Differences

Conversion and Islamic cultural influence were strongest in coastal and port-based societies linked to Indian Ocean trade. Inland agrarian regions, structured around temple institutions and land revenue systems, experienced far weaker Islamic presence. This spatial contrast demonstrates that economic geography shaped religious diffusion. By the early modern period, Tamil Muslim communities had formed stable institutions of mosques, madrasas, and mercantile networks. Population estimates indicate that Muslims comprised 8–10 percent of several coastal towns by the eighteenth century. Islamic belief was embedded within Tamil linguistic and cultural frameworks rather than replacing them.

The large-scale adoption of Islam in Tamil Nadu occurred primarily during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, driven by Sufi networks, maritime trade, and social inequality within caste society. Conversion unfolded through negotiation, intermarriage, and community formation rather than state coercion. Islamic ideas have left lasting marks on Tamil culture in language,

ritual, and social relations. The Tamil–Islamic encounter represents a case of religious change shaped by economic exchange and social structure within the wider Indian Ocean world.

The evolution of cultural practices in Tamil society under Islamic influence must be understood as a long historical process shaped by commerce, migration, social interaction, and institutional accommodation rather than by abrupt religious replacement. From the early arrival of Arab traders along the Tamil coast to the wider diffusion of Islam through Sufi networks between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islamic traditions entered Tamil society through everyday structures such as ports, marketplaces, shrines, and kinship relations. These spaces enabled sustained contact between Tamil communities and Muslim settlers, creating conditions in which cultural exchange unfolded gradually and selectively. The historical record demonstrates that Islam in the Tamil region was embedded within existing social frameworks, producing localized expressions of belief and practice rather than uniform religious transformation.

The regional pattern of Islamic influence reveals strong connections with maritime trade and the Indian Ocean world. Coastal towns such as Kayal, Nagapattinam, and Nagore functioned as cultural contact zones where merchants, sailors, and religious teachers interacted with Tamil populations. This spatial concentration explains why Islamic cultural practices took firmer root in port-based societies than in inland agrarian regions dominated by temple institutions and land-based hierarchies.

The uneven geography of conversion highlights the decisive role of economic networks and mobility in shaping religious change. Tamil society did not passively receive Islamic ideas; instead, it participated actively in a wider transoceanic system of exchange that linked South India with Arabia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. Social structure also shaped the direction and scale of cultural transformation. Caste stratification and ritual exclusion within Tamil society created conditions in which Islamic notions of moral equality and community appealed to sections of the population, particularly artisans, traders, and marginalised groups. Conversion, therefore, cannot be interpreted solely as a theological shift but must be placed within a broader context of social negotiation and the search for dignity and security. At the same time, the continuity of Tamil language and customs among Muslim communities shows that religious affiliation did not erase regional identity. Instead, Islamic belief was articulated through Tamil literary forms, oral traditions, and musical expressions, giving rise to a distinct Tamil Muslim cultural tradition.

The role of Sufi institutions further demonstrates the adaptive character of Islamic influence. Dargahs functioned not only as centres of worship but also as spaces of social integration, drawing followers across religious and caste boundaries. Their prominence in coastal and semi-urban regions illustrates a form of religious presence rooted in service, healing, and shared ritual practice. This pattern contributed to the emergence of overlapping cultural zones in which Hindu and Muslim communities participated in common devotional and festive activities. Such shared practices reflect a historical experience of coexistence grounded in daily life rather than in abstract tolerance. Over the long term, the interaction between Tamil traditions and Islamic values produced enduring cultural outcomes. Linguistic exchange introduced Arabic and Persian terms into Tamil usage; culinary practices incorporated new forms and tastes; musical and poetic traditions absorbed Islamic devotional themes; and social customs adapted to new ethical frameworks while retaining regional continuity. These developments reveal cultural change as a process of selective transformation rather than rupture. The persistence of Tamil identity within Islamic communities underscores the capacity of regional culture to absorb external influences without losing its distinctive character.

In the contemporary period, the legacy of this historical encounter remains visible in shared sacred spaces, blended cultural expressions, and everyday social relations. Islamic influence has become part of the broader cultural landscape of Tamil society, contributing to its plural and layered character. This history challenges narratives that portray religious change only in terms of conflict or domination. Instead, the Tamil–Islamic experience demonstrates that cultural practices evolve through long-term interaction shaped by economic exchange, social structure, and regional history. Taken together, the evolution of cultural practices in Tamil society under Islamic influence represents a case of negotiated transformation within a wider Indian Ocean world. It reveals a historical process in which continuity and change operated simultaneously, producing new social forms while preserving regional traditions. The study of this interaction deepens understanding of Tamil society as a dynamic arena of cross-cultural engagement and offers a broader insight into the ways religious and cultural identities are shaped through sustained contact rather than through isolated moments of conversion.

Conclusion

Islamic influence brought changes to Tamil society in areas such as language, food, music, literature, and social customs. At the same time, Tamil Muslims continued to preserve their language and regional traditions. Sufi shrines and dargahs also encouraged interaction among people from different religious and social backgrounds. These developments demonstrate that Islamic traditions adapted to the local cultural environment rather than completely replacing existing practices.

In conclusion, the interaction between Tamil and Islamic cultures contributed to the rich and diverse heritage of Tamil society. This historical process highlights the importance of trade, social relationships, and cultural exchange in shaping religious and cultural identities. Studying this interaction helps us understand how Tamil society maintained its regional identity while embracing new cultural influences over time.

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