

Muslims of Coromandel Coast-Society and Economy - A.D.1300-1901 - With Special reference to South Arcot District

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Abstract

The contact of South India with Islam is much older than that of the north. In 639 A.D. the Muslims traders settled in the Malabar coast.¹ The *Moplahs* are the descendants of the Arab merchants and the native women of the western coast. The Muslims of different sects such as *Marakkayars*, *Lebbais* and *Navayats* came from Persia in the eighth century A.D, married the women of the country and settled in India. The Muslims of Coromandel Coast are generally called *Chulia* or *Cholia*. The Hindus called them *Jonagan* or *Sonagan*. This article is aimed to trace the society and economy of Muslims of Coromandel Coast.

Key Words: *Moplahs, Marakkayars, Lebbais, Navayats, Sonagan. Marakkayars, Valanadu, Mandalam, Panjukotti, Wahabis, Namakaranam.*

The contact of South India with Islam is much older than that of the north. In 639 A.D. the Muslims traders settled in the Malabar coast.¹ The *Moplahs* are the descendants of the Arab merchants and the native women of the western coast. The Muslims of different sects such as *Marakkayars*, *Lebbais* and *Navyats* came from Persia in the eighth century A.D, married the women of the country and settled in India. The Muslims of Coromandel Coast are generally called *Chulia* or *Cholia*. The Hindus called them *Jonagan* or *Sonagan*.

Coromandel Muslims, mostly converted Hindu traders continued to participate in the Indian Ocean network. The *Marakkayars* of Parangipettai in Cuddalore district were largely big traders with the foreign countries such as Ceylon, and the Straits Settlement and were ship owners. Besides *Marakkayars* some *Labbais* were also engaged in maritime trade.² The *Labbais* were skin traders and betel growers. Some *Marakkayars* and *Labbais* were land owners. Panjukattis and *Labbais* were also engaged in weaving industry. The Muslims were private traders and received the patronage of the British. It may be noted that no Muslim traders was registered as Company's merchants in Cuddalore.³

The Coromandel Muslims maintained cordial relationship with their neighbours and disputes were rare. The wedding ceremonies and rituals resembled those of the Hindus. The Muslim women were fond of wearing gold ornaments and wore *Purdah* when they went out. There was support and resistance to *Purdah* system. The women dominated in taking decision in crucial matters. However, even in the late nineteenth century the Muslim women's education was neglected. At the same time, men like Khan Sahib⁴ and Cader Sahib⁵ occupied high position in the British administration and were honoured. Unlike the Europeans, the Muslims either migrated or converted became part and parcel of the Indian society.

The descendants of Vijayalaya Cholas who ruled Chola Kingdom having their capital at Thanjavur expanded their territory up to Mahanadi in the north and Cape Comorin in the south. *Valanadu* or *Mandalam* was the largest administrative unit of Chola kingdom. The coastal region under the control of the Chola kings was termed as '*Cholamandala kadarkarai*.' In the seventeenth century the Europeans, especially the English called it '*Coromandel Coast*.' The English called Cuddalore, the erstwhile capital of South Arcot district on the mid-*Coromandel Coast* as *Corallur*, the centre for the trade in Coral beads and

hence applied the term *Coromandel Coast*.¹ Thus, the eastern coastal region lying in between Mahanadi and Cape Comorin was known as Coromandel coast.

The prominent ports in the east coast are Nizamapattinam, Pulicat, Masulipattanam, Chennai, Mamallapuram, Sadraspattanam, Puducherry, Devanampattinam, Cuddalore, Portonovo, Kaveripoompattinam(Poompukar), Karaikal, Nagore, Nagapattinam, Korkai, Kayal and Tuticorin. Korkai and Kayal on the Thiunelvely coast were silted up. Of all these ports Cuddalore is the natural harbor.

South Arcot was bounded by Chengalpattu and North Arcot districts in the north, Kollidam and Vellar rivers and Tiruchy districts in the south, Salem district in the west and bay of Bengal in the east. In th ancient days South Arcot was called by different names such as Kedilanadu, Malayamanadu, Nadunadu, Thirumunaipadinadu, Sethinadu, Jagannathanadu, sananathanadu and Magathanadu.²

Rivers

Kollidam, the tributary of river Kaveri which mingles in the sea near Parangipettai, Vellar river which takes its source in Salem runs into sea near Parangipettai, Gadilam river which originates in the Kalvarayan hills in the Kallakurichi taluk and mingle with sea in two branches- northern branch close to Fort. St. David and southern branch near Cuddalore old town, Southern Pennayar river which rises in the Chennakesava hill, east of Nandidurg in Mysore and runs into sea a few miles north of Fort. St.David, Paravanaru which takes its source in Viruthachalam taluk and mingles with sea south of the estuary of Gadilam river are important rivers of the district. The Gadilam river which bisects the present town of Cuddalore is called '*Cuddalore river*'. The Southern Pennayar and Gadilam rivers facilitated maritime trade as they were important source of transportation of goods from the hinterland to the port by boats and carrying goods from the port back to hinterland till the introduction of railways in this part in the late nineteenth century.

Advent of Islam

The contact of South India with Islam is much older than that of the north. In 636 A.D. the Muslim traders settled in the Malabar coast . They married the women of the country. Their descendants are known as Moplahs .³ Colonel Wilks says that Lebbais and also Navayats are descendants of persons who were driven from Persia early in the eighth century A.D. by the cruelties of a local governor, settled in India and married with the women of the country. However, the Navayats claim that they the descendants of the former rulers of the Chengee fort. The term *Labbai* was derived from the Arabic, *Labbek*, meaning 'here Iam.' The immigrant Markkayars like the Labbais , were driven from their own country by persecutions. When they landed on the Indian shore, they were asked who they were and whence they came. In answer they pointed to their boats and pronounced the word *markab* , and they became in consequence known to the Hindus as Marakkayars, or the people of the *markab*.⁴ Marakkayars , Labbais, Panjukotti(*Panjukatti*) and others of mixed Mussalman and Hindu blood- the offspring of immigrant Muhamadans from Persia and Arabia and the women of the country. Sheiks by tribe and many more belonging to other sub-divisions of pure descent which claim to have sprung from the north country Mussalmans who journeyed south in the train of the conquering armies of Bijapur and Delhi.⁵ Most of the Muslims belong to Sunni sect. There are good number of the Wahabis (or *Ahl-i-Hadis*) in Thiruvannainallur and in some of the villages in Tindivanam taluk.

Muslims and maritime trade

From an early time until fourteenth century , the sea the presented an opportunity for South Indians to trade and pillage. From the ports lying on the east coast, the South Indian

merchants organized in guilds (*manigramattar*) sailed to the Kra Isthmus or directly to the other South-east Asian ports with wares collected from throughout the southern peninsula of India.⁶ Coromandel Muslims were mostly converted Hindu traders. They continued to participate in the Indian Ocean network. But the role of Coromandel diminished relatively after this time while that of western India grew.⁷ Rise of more powerful and larger scale political units reduced guildsmen to a congeries of localized merchant groups in the internal trade. At the same time Muslim traders on the coast were able to fit into the Muslim-dominated trade system of the Indian Ocean. They conducted most of the external trade.

The Marakkayars of Parangipettai in Cuddalore district were largely big traders with the foreign countries such as Ceylon and the Straits Settlements and owned most of the coasting crafts. Besides Marakkayars, some Labbais were also engaged in maritime trade. The Marakkayar traders of Nagapattinam continued till the second quarter of the nineteenth century. However, Marakkayar merchants cum ship owners were declining in this region.⁸

The Muslim merchants of Cuddalore and Portonovo traded with Penang, Kedah and Aceh. The East India Company officials gave protection to the ships of the Muslim traders on the request of the latter. Some of the leading Muslim merchants of Cuddalore were Kadar Mohamad Ali, Hussain Marakkayars, Adam Sahib, Kadir Mohideen Malumi, Esa Levai, John Sahib, Sevatha Marakkayar and Madaka Sahib . The Muslim merchants of Portonovo included Mian Mohamed, Bade Mian, Vavoo Maricar, Umar Naina Aulia Labbai, Mahaboob Sahib, Magudam Sha and Kabeer.⁹ It may be noted that no Muslim merchant registered under the English East India Company as Company's merchants.¹⁰ However, the English honoured prominent Muslim men. Cauder Sahib who returned from Carupa(Kadappa?) was saluted with seven guns and the death of Abduloreba Cawn's death at Carupa was intimated to the Deputy Governor of Fort. St. David.¹¹ They might have held high office in the Fort.St. David administration. It may be noted that Khan Sahib was senior Presidency Magistrate and formerly Headquarter Deputy Collector of Cuddalore.¹² The Khan Sahib canal running from Chidambaram to Portonovo was named after him.

Other occupations of the Muslims of South Arcot

The Panjukottis(Panjukattis) were cotton cleaners weavers of coarse fabrics by profession. The Labbais of Nellikuppam were generally cotton growers and also conducted skin trade of South Arcot. They were also petty shop keepers and engaged in commerce at the ports. Their women were good at weaving mats from the leaves of the screw-pine which grew abundantly along the sandy shores of the Bay of Bengal.¹³ As cited elsewhere some were in governmental services.

Society and Culture

The Muslims of Coromandel coast are generally called Chulia or Cholia Muslims. W. Francis who was in Indian Civil Service says that the Hindus applied the term Jonagan or Sonagan to both Marakkayars and Lebbais. But it was usually held to have contemptuous flavor about it.¹⁴ At the same time he was of the view that the Muslims maintained cordial relation with Hindu neighbours and disputes were rare. He adds, " In some villages the followers of both religions combine in the celebration of the Mohuram, and wailing over the death of Hussan and Hosain before a fire lit in a pit has in many places been turned into a regular fire- walking ceremony after the Hindu pattern."¹⁵ Though there were Mosques and Durgas which enjoyed local reputation the Muslims of the region often went to well known mosque at Nagore.

The pure-bred Muslims differed from the mixed descent and the men and women wore dress in strict Mussalman fashion. They spoke Hindustani at home among themselves.

Unlike the Muslims of Malabar coast, the Coromandel Muslims were converts from Hindus. Hence they followed Hindu customs in marriages and rituals. The Marakkayars imitated the Sheiks in wearing dress and speaking Hindustani at home. Most of the Marakkayars wore the famous high hat of plaited coloured grass and the tartan (*Kambayam*) waist cloth. The Labbais also wore these dress and high hats but some of them use Hindu turban and waist cloth and allowed their women to dress exactly like Hindu women. Some of them speak Hindustani at home while others speak Tamil. There was a growing dislike to the introduction of domestic rites among Muslims. The procession and music which were once common at marriage was replaced by a simpler ritual more in resemblance with the *nikka* ceremony of the Muslim faith.

However, the Marakkayar wedding ceremonies were the medley of Hindu and Muslim rites. Contrary to the usual Muslim practice, the parents of the bride searched for a suitable bride groom instead waiting until her hand was sought in marriage. After finding suitable bridegroom certain amount called *kaikuli* or 'price of bride's hand was given to the bridegroom's parents on the day fixed at the house of the bride.

Placing the said amount on a plate along with a piece of gold, one or two grains of paddy and a blade of grass, all wrapped in a piece of cloth dyed with saffron and acceptance of the plate constituting an inviolable betrothal, planting *muhurta kambu* (auspicious post) a pole twisted with a piece of silk and tied with mango leaves in the courtyard of bride's as well as bridegroom's house, erecting pandal in front of the bridegroom's house, taking the bride groom seated in a carriage round the town to the bride's, house, the bride groom tying a tali round the wife's neck in the morning except reading *fatika* and conducting wedding ceremony by the *Kazi* according to the Mussalman *nikka* rite resembled Hindu pattern of wedding. After spending a few days in her house, the girl went to her husband's house. After a short stay, she returned to her parent's house and stayed permanently. Unlike the ordinary Hindu wife, she was free from molestation from her mother-in-law.¹⁵ The custom of the bride staying with her mother still practised by the Muslims of Malabar coast.

There is a change of duration of *Namakaranam* or naming ceremony of the child among Hindus and Muslims. Muslims perform *Khathna* (circumcision) between the age seven and fourteen. Puberty celebration for girls was not different from that of the Hindus.¹⁶ Unlike the Hindus the ear boring ceremony for the boys was absent among Muslims. It is doubtful whether the Ear boring ceremony for Muslim girls was conducted with great publicity. In due course there was a growing dislike to the introduction of Hindu rites into the domestic ceremonies of the Muslims.

Food habits

In the Coromandel Coast region their breakfast constituted *idly*, *thosai* and *rotti* similar to that of Maplahs of Malabar coast. Coromandel Muslims consume mutton, chicken and a lot of fish. Dry fish was a favourite food item. "It is lawful to eat the flesh of sheep, goat, deer, hare, rabbit, cow, bull, female and male buffalo (pothu) and camel, duck, partridge, goose, snipe and pigeon. These animals and birds have to be cut in the throat with the recitation of *Thakbir* (Quranic verse). The meat obtained in this way is called *halal*. It is unlawful to consume intoxicating liquors and substances like *ganja* and *abin* (Opium).¹⁷

Status of Muslim women

Even after the introduction of public schools towards the close of the nineteenth century, the school going population was relatively very small compared to Hindus and Christians in Cuddalore. In 1890, of the total population of 39,997 Hindus, 1878 boys and 21 girls attended schools. Among the Muslims (1883), 73 boys were under instruction. No

single Muslim girl went to school. Among Christians (1510), there were 233 boys and 13 girls.¹⁸ As the Muslims were reluctant to send their girls to public schools, separate schools for Muslims were also proposed to be started in 1891-92 in order to promote education among them.

During the colonial period the Muslim women played important role in household affairs. They took important decision on crucial matters such as women's freedom, education and equality. This is evident from the following incident:

A well-known leader in the Mohammaden world had, while on a visit to London, remarked to an English lady, the wife of an Indian official, that when he returned to India he should try to get the ladies of his household to take some interest in what is going on in the world, and to learn some of the things that English ladies learn and do. When the lady in question returned to India, she met the Mohammedan gentleman, and remembering their conversation on the subject, said: "Well! Have you reformed your ladies?" "No, indeed," he replied. "They very soon reformed me, and made me think that the old ways are best for us."¹⁹

The above incidence shows that the women in general, Muslim Women in particular were against reform. This attitude hampered Muslim women's education and progress.

The Muslim women were fond of wearing ornaments and it revealed their economic status. They wore different types of ornaments like ear stud, pendent, nose stead, bangles and rings.

When the Muslim women go out they wear *purdah*. The *purdah* system fosters self-consciousness. A Muslim lady remarked that when she was in *purdah* no body took notice of her and everyone seemed preoccupied with their own affairs. Particularly, the old ladies who lost their charms supported *purdah* system. But there was resistance to the *purdah* system. In Bengal a number of Indian ladies formed an association to bring about the abolition of the *purdah* system, as the custom of ladies living in seclusion was called. In the Bombay Presidency some ladies of rank formed an association to resist this innovation and to maintain *purdah* system. "When they are enlightened and wish to change position or customs, the change will be made, but for the most part, at present they do not desire it, and their influence is against progress, and for superstition and caste prejudice."²⁰

Festivals

The Muslims celebrated the festivals like *Ramzan*, *Bakrid* and *Mohuram* with great enthusiasm. And share their happiness with neighbours and relatives. Marakkayars, Lebbai and Ravuthars do not celebrate Muharrum festival, the mourning and lametation of the martyrdom of Hossein and Husein with much interest²¹ but the Wahabis celebrated the festival with great enthusiasm.

Disposal of the dead

Muslims bury the dead in the vicinity of Pallivasal. The burial ceremony is simple. The corpse, placed in a wooden chest is carried to Pallivasal. The corpse is taken out of the chest and rested inside the pit. Some wooden poles are placed just above the dead body to prevent the earth fall on the corpse. Then they filled the pit with earth. This practice is contrary to the Hindu custom of filling the pit with earth directly.

Conclusion

Thus the Muslims of the Coromandel coast assimilated the customs and habits of Hindus as they were converts from Hinduism. Most of them were engaged in trade and textile industry. After the middle of the nineteenth century when lands also could be purchased or sold just other commodities, a section of the Muslims became land owners. Some of the Marakkayars and Labbais were big land lords in Chidambaram and

Parangipettai region. They lived amicably along with Hindu neighbours. Though there were clashes within the Hindus on the basis of caste, the disputes between Hindus and Muslims were rare. Hence some of the depressed section of the society became Muslims in order to escape humiliation and torture at the hands of caste Hindus. Unlike the Europeans, the Muslims either migrated or converted became part and parcel of the Indian society.

End Notes

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