

Dominators or Dominated? Muslim Traders in South Western India

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This article examines how, during the pre-Portuguese period, Muslim merchants dominated trading activities in South Western India, and played a significant role in polity, economy and society of the region. These Muslims traders obtained support from the local ruling families. With the emergence of the Portuguese, however, the dominant position of the Muslims changed significantly. Portuguese domination, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contributed to the relative decline of Muslim economic and political authority in South Western India.

Hypothesis

During the pre-Portuguese period, among diverse sections of traders, Muslim traders played a dominant role in the trading activities of South Western India. Muslim settlements are found in various parts of the region, such as Malabar and Kanara. Muslims also played an important role in the political, economic and religious life of the region. With the coming of the Portuguese, however, the dominant position of the Muslim traders altered, as they were pressured to accept the terms imposed by the Portuguese with the support of their powerful armada. This led to conflict and compromise between the Portuguese and Muslim traders.

The Region and Setting

South Western India, a part of Peninsular India, consists of principal urban centers, for example, Mangalore, Udupi, Barkur and Basrur. The region was known for the production of rice, and agricultural production was the region's principal economic activity. Trade in agricultural produce was a supplementary important economic activity.¹ Both during pre-Portuguese and Portuguese periods, South Western India was known for trade contacts with both Indian and international trade centers. Since the traders maintained economic and social relations with West Asia, there was an emergence of Muslim settlements in the region along with colonies of other trading communities.²

From very early times, we find records that furnish information regarding trade contacts between ports of South Western India and foreign ports. Most of

these foreign ports belonged to Arabia. Records speak of connections between Mangalore and Aden.³ These trade contacts resulted in the appearance of Muslim traders in India.

Among the Muslim traders, apart from the divergent sections and subsections based on the trading and religious practices, there were two broad categories: indigenous Muslim traders and Muslim traders of foreign origin. The Muslim traders organized themselves into trade guilds. One such trading corporation was called *hanjamanas*.⁴ They participated in the political, economic and social activities of the region. They had obtained political influence obviously due to their economic power, and their economic interests were preserved by the state authorities. Muslim traders and their associations are mentioned in various temple documents.⁵ They donated to temples and thereby attempted to obtain legitimacy in the society. Muslim traders were found in the market places, where there was exchange of commodities. Particularly during the days of Vijayanagara kings in the sixteenth century, there was great demand for horses, as horses were used for waging wars by the kings of South India. Muslim traders monopolized the horse trade before the coming of the Portuguese.⁶ This obviously enhanced their political and economic strength in the region.⁷

Emergence of Urban Centers and Settlements of Muslim Traders

During the period between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, towns like Barkur and Mangalore developed. After the emergence of the Vijayanagara Empire in the fourteenth century, there was a tremendous increase in the commercial activity at Barkur. The Vijayanagara Empire integrated the previously diverse economic zones of South Western India.⁸ The ports and the provincial capitals were visited by foreign ships, as well as ships from other parts of Western Coastal India, such as Malabar. These ships took cargoes of husked rice. Many Muslim traders also visited this port. Ibn Battuta,⁹ who visited India during the early part of the fourteenth century, left his account of trade in Barkur. He described Fakanur (Barkur) as a large town on an inlet and here he found a large quantity of sugar cane. The chief of the Muslim community at Fakanur was called Basadaw.¹⁰ He possessed about thirty warships, commanded by a Muslim called Lula. He was an evildoer, a pirate and a robber of merchants. Ibn Battuta states that:

When we anchored, the Sultan sent his son to us to stay on board the ship as a hostage. We went on shore to visit him and he treated us with utmost hospitality for three nights, as a mark of respect for the Sultan of India and also from a desire to make some profit by trading with the personnel of our vessels. It is a custom of theirs that every ship that passes by a town must needs anchor at it and give a present to the ruler.¹¹ This they call “right of *Bandar*.” If anyone omits to do this, they sail out in pursuit of him, bring

him into the port by force, double the tax on him, and prevent him proceeding on his journey as they wish.¹²

The above account meant that the Muslim population not only participated in trade but also played an important role in the civil and military administration of the region. The ruler tried to exercise his authority not only over land but also over the sea. Muslims also worked as sea pirates, although it is likely that only a minority of the Muslim population acted as sea pirates. Nevertheless, by using their military power, Muslims tried to obtain economic strength.

Ibn Battuta has also left accounts regarding Mangalore. He points out that Mangalore was a large town on the inlet called al-Dumb, which was the largest inlet on the Malabar Coast. This town was visited by merchants from Fars and Yemen and they took with them pepper and ginger in large quantities. The Sultan of Mangalore was Ramadaw. Ibn Battuta further stated that there was a colony of about four thousand Muslims in Mangalore. This figure demonstrates that there was a substantial Muslim population in South Western India. They lived in a suburb alongside the town. Conflicts frequently broke out between Muslims and the townspeople. The Sultan, however, made peace between them because he needed merchants. Ibn Battuta observed that traders in ships refused to come into port until the Sultan sent his son. When they went to meet the Sultan, they were treated with great consideration.¹³ The above account suggests the emergence of solidarity among the Muslim merchants—perhaps they realized they need to cooperate with each other to collectively dominate the trading activities in the region.

According to another foreign traveler, Duarte Barbosa, there existed settlements of both Muslims and Hindus in Mangalore. Many ships took black rice from Mangalore. It is stated that this rice was better than the white variety. The production of rice catered to the needs of consumers of both upper and lower classes within and outside India. Duarte Barbosa mentioned in his travelogue that the cheap rice consumed by the poor population was available in Mangalore. The Malabar traders used to carry this cheap Mangalore rice to Malabar in order to supply it to the poor people of Malabar.¹⁴ High quality rice from Mangalore was also exported to Aden, thereby proving that Mangalore rice also catered to the needs of consumers in the upper classes in the ports like Aden. The above information supports the argument that India had close commercial contacts with Aden even during pre-Portuguese period. This indicates that South Western India had become part of global trade network before the arrival of Europeans. Muslim traders played an important role in the emergence and persistence of trade-based globalization in coastal India.¹⁵

Barbosa also gives some information regarding Muslim settlements and the status of trade in South Western India. He mentions that traders from Basrur exported goods to Ormuz, Aden and Xeher. In the following description of Mangalore, he refers to the Muslim settlements there:

There is a very large town, peopled by Moors and Gentiles, of the kingdom of Narsinga, called Mangalor. There many ships always load brown rice, which is much better and more healthy than the white, for Malabar, for the common people, and it is very cheap. They also ship there much rice in Moorish ships for Aden, also pepper, which henceforward the earth begins to produce, but little of it, and better than all the other which the Malabar bring to this place in small vessels. The banks of this river are very pretty, and very full of woods and palm trees, and are very thickly inhabited by Moors and Gentiles, and studded with fine buildings and houses of prayer of the Gentiles, which are very large, and enriched with large revenue. There are also many mosques, where they greatly honour Mahomed.¹⁶

The above details demonstrate the dominant position obtained by the Muslims in the polity and economy of the region. Using military dexterity, Muslims tried to impose their authority over those traders who visited their ports. This attempt is similar to the Portuguese system of *cartazes*.¹⁷

Due to special facilities that were obtainable at Malabar, the Arab traders first established their colonies there, and from Malabar they carried on their trade with other convenient places. Adventurous merchants settled down for longer periods at places that seemed advantageous to their trade. These temporary settlements eventually developed into small colonies which were patronized by the Muslim merchants who came directly from Arabia and Persia. Some of the settlements, such as Mangalore and Bhatkal, later developed into major trading centers and facilitated the process of urbanization. Muslim traders who came to South India from the Persian Gulf and Southern Arabia settled down permanently.

Categories of Traders

Muslim traders, as indicated earlier, were not a homogenous group,¹⁸ rather they consisted of two broad groups: local Muslims and foreign Muslims. Local Muslims were the indigenous people who had converted to Islam. Mapillas of Malabar and Mangalore belonged to this category. They, in large numbers, participated in the coastal trade. Both big traders and small Muslim traders established themselves in different port towns like Basrur and Mangalore.¹⁹

Foreign Muslims were those who had migrated from foreign countries like Arabia and other West Asian countries. For instance, we find reference to foreign Muslim category called *Navayats*.²⁰ The word Navayat meant “newcomer.” Their settlements are found in the port towns of western India. Studies have shown that most of these foreign Muslims came from west Asia.²¹ A few foreign Muslims had emerged as important political and economic groups in the region. In the interior, they worked as administrators and statesmen, while on the coast they took an interest in trading activities. Both Arab and indigenous

literature provide information regarding the settlement of different categories of traders in South Western India.²²

Non-Muslim Traders

The above statements do not presume that other trading communities did not exist in the region. There are several references to the indigenous trading communities, such as Gauda Saraswats and Jains, who are mostly found in the inland trade centers. Like the Muslims, the Gauda Saraswats and Jain trading communities gave donations to temples and participated in internal trade. Nevertheless, they lacked the advantage of the Muslim, particularly Arab, traders who could communicate and interact with their counterparts in Arabia due to their language and religious affiliation. In this way, the Muslims obtained greater importance in the society, particularly due to their temple grants. One important reason for the domination of Muslims in South Western India, although theoretically speaking, was the brahmanical taboo regarding sea travel. Traders belonging to the brahmanical religion were not allowed to travel on the sea, although this rule was not strictly followed by all the Hindu traders.²³ Nevertheless, this meant that there existed differences between the caste-ridden brahmanical society inland and the trade-oriented Islamic society in the ports on the coastal zones. In spite of this theory of disadvantages faced by the brahmanical traders, there is evidence to suggest that even during pre-Islamic times they traveled to different regions of the world.²⁴ Although the non-Muslim traders had emerged as one of the important trading categories in the region, they played an equally important role in the political and economic life of the region.

The Role of Muslim Merchants in Polity

The role of Muslims in diplomacy and trade continued even during the post-Vijayanagara period. In the account of the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle, there is narration of such a Muslim associate of the Keladi kings who ruled South Western India during the post-Vijayanagara period. Musa Bai, who was Captain-general of the local principality Banghel, was sent to represent the Keladi kings while meeting the Portuguese. Musa Bai offered a gift to the ambassador of the Portuguese.²⁵ Della Valle also mentioned the existence of Muslim a population in various urban and trade centers of South Western India.

The Role of Muslim Traders in the Economy

The Muslim merchants contributed to the growth of the economy of the region by participating in internal and external trade, thereby becoming important

political, social, and economic groups as they obtained the confidence of the indigenous ruling class. The Muslim merchants, many of whom were the migrants from the trade centers of West Asia, settled in the coastal trade centers of south western India, and thus contributed to the expansion of trade contact between south western India and the West Asian trade centers. Through these trade contacts, the Muslim merchants were able to emerge as dominant traders in spite of competition from the indigenous population trading inland. It is true that the Muslim traders clashed with the local Hindu population. Religion was not, however, the main reason for this conflict. The political and economic competition between the Hindu and Muslim traders resulted in minor skirmishes between the two sections of the society, although later the political powers, such as the Vijayanagara kings, were able to interfere and force settlement between the fighting groups. Due to constant political patronage, monopoly of external trade, and social and religious legitimacy, which was obtained through temple grants given to the local Hindu and Jain temples, the Muslim traders were able to emerge as the dominant trading community in the region during the pre-Portuguese period.²⁶

The Emergence of the Portuguese and the Changing Fortunes of Muslim Traders

With the emergence of the Portuguese in Asia, the picture of Muslim domination of trade in South Western India gradually changed.²⁷ The Portuguese introduced the cartazes system. This meant that the Portuguese tried to monopolize trade and commerce on the western coast of India.²⁸ The Portuguese armada gave protection to licensed ships, while they attacked the ships of those traders who had not received their permission to trade. This obviously led to conflict between Portuguese forces and Muslims traders,²⁹ and resulted in the migration of Muslim traders from Calicut and other regions of Kerala to Mangalore in South Western India, since the Kanara coast (as opposed to the Malabar) had not become the part of the Portuguese state. At this time, a small minority of Muslims were acting as either sea pirates or navigators, although there remained a significant number of Muslim traders.³⁰ The pre-Portuguese legal trade of the Muslim traders was gradually converted into illegal trade during the Portuguese period.

A study of the Portuguese document *Livros dos Cartazes* indicates that large numbers of ships were manned by Muslims.³¹ Vasco da Gama himself was helped by Muslim navigators.³² Even in the Portuguese period, many Muslim traders owned ships and maintained trade contact with various west Asian ports,³³ and this fact demonstrates that the Portuguese could not completely control the activities of Muslim traders. When they were not allowed to trade in a proper way, Muslim traders resorted to smuggling of goods. They also

became sea pirates and looted the wealth of some Portuguese ships and other ships protected by the Portuguese.

Earlier Arab traders were known for horse trading, a trade which the Portuguese took over. The Muslim traders could not compete with the Portuguese in the horse trade because they lacked the earlier political patronage that they had enjoyed during the pre-Portuguese period. For instance, Caesar Frederike states that in the year 1567 he went from Goa to capital city of Vijayanagara with two other merchants who carried with them 300 horses. The value of these horses varied from 300 to 1000 ducats a horse. The horse trade also brought revenue to the Portuguese in the form of the custom duty imposed and collected on each horse crossing the border of Goa to Vijayanagara.³⁴ This change in the horse trade happened particularly after the Vijayanagara kings signed an agreement with the Portuguese to supply horses, which were essential to fight against the Muslim enemies of the Hindu Vijayanagara kingdom. In this context, one may note that the Vijayanagara kings also took the service of many Portuguese mercenaries to fight against the Muslim rivals. It is interesting to note that the Portuguese also considered Muslims as their traditional rivals, which led to their confrontation with the Muslim traders in the Malabar region. This contributed the exclusion of the Muslims from the political developments in south western India which was under the control of the Vijayanagara kings who maintained close diplomatic relationship with the Portuguese. This forced Muslim traders to concentrate on trade in rice and pepper and various other commodities, and on exports to west Asian ports like Muscat and Ormuz.

The Attitude of the Portuguese towards Muslim Traders

The experience of the Portuguese with Arab traders was not particularly pleasant. The Portuguese had waged many bloody wars against the Arabs to establish their domination in the global economic scenario. When the Portuguese came to India, they followed deliberate anti-Muslim policy. The Portuguese king often instructed his officials to favor Christian merchants over the Muslim merchants. In order to establish a rival group to the Muslim merchants and to overthrow them, the Portuguese made special efforts to encourage the Hindus in matters of trade.³⁵

The Portuguese, however, were not always successful in their attempt to exclude the Muslims from coastal and overseas trade. This was due to the fact that the Portuguese could not find an alternative to native Muslim merchants who had established a well-connected trade network both in the ports as well as in the hinterland. The Portuguese found it difficult to procure commodities such as rice and pepper from the interior regions and supply them to the ports to be exported to their factories in Goa, Ceylon, Aden, Muscat, Congo, and so on. Yet, since the Portuguese used military strength, the Muslims lost some of their

settlements, for example in the case of Malabar. Now the Muslims of South Western India had to negotiate with the Portuguese to obtain passports to trade with an assortment of west Asian ports.³⁶ Those who worked in the Portuguese system of cartazes, particularly in western coastal India, could participate in peaceful trade, while those who opposed the Portuguese system could not gain the advantage of Portuguese protection. Thus, we can say that there was a change in the nature of the trade of Muslim merchants after the arrival of Portuguese to South Western India, although a few Muslim merchants continued to resist Portuguese domination of western coastal India.³⁷

Many Muslim merchants worked within the Portuguese system of cartazes. The book of sailing permits or passports, or *Livros dos Cartazes*, mentions several Muslim names. There are also references, however, to many Hindu Saraswat traders. This fact demonstrates that the Portuguese deliberately encouraged Saraswat traders to compete with the Muslim merchants so that the Portuguese could find an alternative to the Muslims in the region. For one thing, many Saraswat traders belonged to Goa, the centre of Portuguese activities. Through Saraswats and other Hindu traders, the Portuguese tried to control maritime trade on the western coast.

Muslim traders maintained trade contacts with Mecca, Aden, Congo, Ormuz, Maldives, and so on. Within India, they supplied various items of trade, including rice, to Surat, Malabar and Bengal. These details demonstrate the active participation of Muslim traders in South Western India. The Ikkeri rulers, the successors of the Vijayanagara kings, challenged the domination of the Portuguese in South Western India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This attracted a large number of Muslim merchants to ports, such as Basrur and Mangalore. The patronage given by the Ikkeri kings strengthened the position of Muslim merchants in South Western India. The revival of Muslim trading community, however, happened after the decline of the Portuguese in South Western India. During the period of Portuguese ascendancy, the interest of Muslim traders was suppressed.

Based on the above details and discussion, the Muslim traders' position in South Western India can be divided into three phases: (1) a period of ascendancy and domination of trade; (2) a period of decline, and competition and compromise with the Portuguese, and; (3) a period of revival and regeneration of the Muslim role in the trading activities in the region.

Conclusion

During the pre-Portuguese period the Muslim traders played a dominant role in the overseas trade while Hindu traders were found mainly in the inland trade centers. Muslim traders maintained close contact with political and social authority of the region. During the period of Portuguese domination, however,

there were significant changes in the actual position of Muslims. They were forced to accept the cartazes system of the Portuguese *estado da India*. Those Muslims who accepted the rules of the Portuguese *estado da India* were patronized; those Muslims who opposed the Portuguese were attacked, and they were punished by the Portuguese administration in Goa.

Notes

1. K.G. Vasanthamadhava, *Western Karnataka: Its Agrarian Relations 1500-1800* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1991).
2. Muhammad Husayn Nainar S., ed., *The Knowledge of India Possessed by Arab Geographers Down To 14th Century A.D. with Special Reference to Southern India* (Madras: Madras University, 1942).
3. S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); S.D. Goitein, "From Aden to India," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23 (1980): 43-66.
4. K.V. Ramesh, *A History of South Kanara (From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Vijayanagara)* (Dharwar, 1970).
5. K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyar, *South Indian Inscriptions. Vol. 7, Miscellaneous Inscriptions in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada* (Mysore: The Director [Epigraphy], 1986); R. Shama Sastry and N. Laxminarayana Rao, eds., *South-Indian Inscriptions (Texts)*, vol. 9, part 2, *Kannada Inscriptions from the Madras Presidency* (Mysore: The Director [Epigraphy] 1986).
6. Henry Heras, *The Aravidu Dynasty of Vijayanagara*, vol. 1 (Poona, 1936).
7. Ramesh, *A History of South Kanara*, 23; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100.
8. Burton Stein, *The New Cambridge History of India Vijayanagara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
9. Although Ibn Battuta's work has been used by modern historians to discuss the history of South Western India, one needs to be cautious while using this text since this was a literary composition which comprised both historical facts and impressions of a foreign traveler. These may not always be considered as a true representation of historical events.
10. Perhaps Ibn Battuta was referring to Vasudeva, the governor of Barkur.
11. This system can be compared with the Portuguese system of issuing cartazes or passports to merchant ships. They were given protection by the Portuguese armada. Those who did not take Portuguese cartazes were assaulted and consequently frequent conflicts arose between the Portuguese and Muslim sea pirates on the western coast of India.
12. H.A.R. Gibb, *Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354* (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1992), 233-234.
13. Gibb, *Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa*, 234.
14. Mansel Longworth Dames, ed., *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (repr., New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1989), 195-196.

15. Nagendra Rao, ed., *Globalization: Pre Modern India* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2005).
16. Duarte Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Henry E.J. Stanley (New Delhi, 1995), 83.
17. Pius Malekandathil and Jamal Mohammed, eds., *The Portuguese Indian Ocean and the European Bridgeheads 1500-1800* (Tellicherry: Fundacao Oriente, 2001); M.N. Pearson, *Coastal Western India: Studies from the Portuguese Records* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1981).
18. Tapan Raychaudhury and Iran Habib, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
19. B. Vasanth Shetty, "Barakuru—A Metropolitan City of Antiquity" (Ph.D. diss., Mysore University, 1985).
20. Victor De Souza, *The Navayats of Kanara A Study in Culture Contact* (Dharwar: Karnataka University, 1955).
21. Vasundhara Filliozat, ed., *Vijayanagar as seen by Domingos Paes and Fernao Nuniz (16th Century Portuguese Chroniclers) and Others* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1999), 281-282.
22. George Fadlo Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).
23. Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1, *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990).
24. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*.
25. Edward Grey, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, vol. 2 (repr., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), 246.
26. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean From the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
27. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
28. Malekandathil and Mohammed, eds., *The Portuguese Indian Ocean and the European Bridgeheads 1500-1800*.
29. Genevieve Bouchon, "Regent of the Sea": Cannanore's Response to Portuguese Expansion, 1507-1528 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
30. R.N. Saletore, *Indian Pirates* (Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1978).
31. LDC, *Livros dos Cartazes* (Book of Sailing Permits), Historical Archives of Goa, M.S. No. 1363.
32. Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*.
33. Nagendra Rao and P.K. Sudarshan, "Statistical Analysis of Historical Data: Study of Portuguese *Livros dos Cartazes*," *Portuguese Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2005): 117-127.

34. Filliozat, ed., *Vijayanagar as seen by Domingos Paes and Fernao Nuniz (16th Century Portuguese Chroniclers) and Others*, 318-319. The fall of Vijayanagara must have created problems for the development of Portuguese trade in India, since the Portuguese depended so heavily on the horse trade. The prosperous state of Vijayanagara was an ideal destination of Portuguese traders and they lost this financial advantage with the collapse of the Vijayanagara Empire. After the collapse of Vijayanagara Empire, we find the emergence of many dynasties, prominent among which was the Keladi kingdom (also known as Ikkeri kingdom). The Portuguese continued their trading contacts with the Ikkeri rulers. By monopolizing trade in rice and pepper, however, Ikkeri rulers tried to sell goods to the Portuguese using unfavorable terms and conditions.
35. K.S. Mathew, "Indian Merchants and the Portuguese Trade on the Malabar Coast during the Sixteenth Century," in *Indo-Portuguese History: Old Issues, New Questions*, ed. Teotonio R. de Souza (New Delhi: Concept Publishers, 1985), 7.
36. *Livros dos Cartazes*, Historical Archives of Goa.
37. Bouchon, "Regent of the Sea".

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