
Arab Accounts of Malabar History: The Early Episodes

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to trace the relations of the Arabs with the Malabar coast during the early centuries in the light of Arab accounts. The accounts of Arab travelers and geographers form an important source for the history of Kerala. Malabar occupies a major role in the Indian Ocean's ancient and medieval trade. In this large network of Indian Ocean trade, Malabar assumed greater importance, not only in terms of geographical specificities but also in terms of the high-value commodities it owned and traded. Moreover, this place was a spot for the interaction of four major civilizations of that period; the Perso-Arabic, the South East Asian, Indian and Chinese. In reality, cultures that sometimes seem so broadly divergent have been in constant touch and exchange with each other. The contact between Malabar and the seafaring people of the Arab world goes well back to the first century CE. By then, a system of interlinked trading networks had been established, with Malabar Coast possessing an all-important role. The trading Arab diaspora of Malabar consisted mostly of Arabs from Hadramawt, Hormuz, Cairo, Abyssinia, and even Tunis. It has obviously contributed to the transformation of the Mappila community in Kerala.*

Keywords: Arab Travelers, Yemen, Quilon, Zirbad, Arab Geographers, Abyssinia, Zanzibar

Introduction

The history of Kerala's contact with the Semitic world, particularly Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, goes back to ancient times, long before the rise of Islam. From ancient times, the Arab merchants were the main ware-carriers and commercial agents for the trade between India and Arabia. The main trade route in ancient times as in the present day lay through the Arabian coast and the Red Sea, and through them, the trade of Malabar thrived into Europe. The earliest trade contact with the Malabar Coast was also traced to the Phoenician as the curious culture like ear-lobbing, shank worship, and other elements of heliolithic culture were found in the Malabar region (Panikkar

1997: 1). At that time, the main center of trade and commerce in Malabar was Muziris or Cranganore (Kodungallur). The exports of Malabar consisted mainly of high-quality pearl, pepper in large quantities, and various gems. In his poem, the pre-Islamic poet, Imral-Qays has compared the antelope's dry dung to the peppercorns. He says: "There all about its yards, and away in the dry hollows, you may see the dung of antelopes scattered like peppercorns." It is sufficient proof for the availability of pepper in Arabia before Islam, and since pepper was available in Kerala alone at that time, it is clear that Arabs had contact with Kerala before Islam (Mohammad 1999: 228).

The early phase of this relationship is based primarily on trade. Attention is mainly given to the later stage when many Arab settlers in the area engaged themselves in literacy, religious and other activities and produced an impressive corpus of Arabic literary, historical and religious works, many of which are acknowledged by scholars for their authenticity and importance. The West Coast of India was known as Malabar to the Arabs. Al-Biruni appears to have been the first to call the country by its proper name, Malabar. The word Malabar is, therefore probably, in part at least, of foreign origin. The first two syllables are almost certainly the Dravidian word 'Mala' (the hill of the mountain), and 'Bar' is probably the Arabic word 'Barr' (land or ground) (Logan 1981: 1). From the time of Cosmas Indicopleustes down to the eleventh century CE, the word Malabar was applied to the coast by the Arab navigators: and the seafaring population who flocked thither subsequently for pepper and other spices. Malibar, Manibar, Mulibar, and Malabar were the name's various forms, which meant the hilly or mountainous country, a name well-suited to its configuration (Innes 1951: 26).

According to an eminent historian of Kerala, A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, from very early times, Malabar and the West Asian countries of Arabia, Syria, and Egypt had wide-ranging maritime trade contacts. Till the establishment of the Roman Empire, the trade monopoly was in the hands of the Arab merchants (Kunju 1975: 11). Kerala had been continuing trade relations with many parts of the world since very ancient times. It is difficult to say precisely how many years of trade links Kerala has had with foreign countries. It is assumed that Kerala has had trade relations with foreign countries for over 3000 years. Among Kerala's foreign trade relations, those with the Arab world were the most significant.

Historians are unanimous that Kerala had maritime relations with the Arabs since very early times. The availability of spices attracted the Arab merchants to the Kerala coast. Sardar K.M. Panikkar says that from very early times, Kerala had been in contact with the Arabian coast and that traders, especially from Muscat and other centers of the Arabian Peninsula, used to frequent the Malabar ports (Panikkar 1959: 32). Pepper, which was grown in Kerala alone until the Dutch spread its cultivation in Java, was an essential item for the people in the cold area. Mecca was on the trade route for goods from China, India, and the African coast in the south and Damascus and Constantinople in the North. Arab merchants sailed to the coasts of India and Africa for trade. There were other reasons also for Arab contact with Kerala. Ceylon was

known to the Arabs on account of its pearl fisheries and trade in precious stones from very early times. The Arab merchants had made commercial establishments there centuries before the rise of Islam.

When Islam spread over Arabia, its influence was felt immediately in Kerala also. The Muslim Arabs took up missionary work and strengthened their contact with Kerala's people, which led to the propagation of their faith, culture, and language. Islam was making headway quite peacefully and without adopting jingoistic methods (Nadvi 1967: 204). Moreover, Muslim Arabs came to India, not like the Christian colonies of Syrians, driven and persecuted from their homelands, but full of the ardor of a newfound religion and the prestige of conquest and glory (Chand 1936: 26). Thus, the propagation of Islam played a significant role in developing the Arab contact with Kerala.

The Zamorins' (13th to 15th century CE) relations with the Arab traders became intimate, and Calicut slowly attained a pre-eminence in the trade of pepper and other spices, which made it the greatest emporium on the West Coast. Gradually Muslims monopolised the external trade of the coast. Malabar's pepper and cardamom, and textiles, which were also in great demand, were shipped from the port. As a result, the Zamorins became one of the wealthiest rulers in India and the most powerful on the West Coast. A Muslim inscription in Pantalayini Kollam in North Malabar dated Hijra 166 (752 CE) is sufficient evidence for it. With the growth of Arab commercial activity, Malabar port became popular among traders and travelers. Numerous Arab travelers, most notable among whom are Ibn Khurdadibah (256-272 AH/ 869-885 CE), and Abu Zayd of Zirag (304 AH/916 CE) speak of Malabar ports in their works (Panikkar 1997: 7).

The presence of Muslim groups in the different port-towns of Kerala, which were able to secure recognition of the governments in the country, is proved by the Tarisappalli Copper Plates (849 CE). One such group attested the grant in Arabic in Kufic characters, which included the names of eleven Muslims as witnesses viz., Maimun ibn Ibrahim, Muhammad ibn Main, Salih ibn Ali, Uthman ibn Ali Marziban, Muhammad ibn Yahya, Amr ibn Ibrahim, Ibrahim ibn al- Tayyi, Bakr ibn Mansur, Al-Qasim ibn Hamid, Mansur ibn Isa, and Ismail ibn Yaqub.

Calicut had risen to great prominence by the beginning of the 14th century, chiefly on account of the preference shown to the port by the Muslim merchants. The phenomenal growth of Calicut by the time of Ibn Battuta's visit (1342-1347 CE) made it one of the most prosperous towns in the whole of the Malabar Coast. Abdur-Razzaq, the Persian ambassador to the Court of the Zamorin, who visited Calicut in 1442, described the city thus: "Security and justice are so firmly established in this city that the wealthiest merchants bring towards that place from maritime countries, considerable cargoes which they unload and unhesitatingly send into the markets and bazaars, without thinking at the meantime of any necessity of checking account or

keeping watch over the goods. The officers of the custom-house take it upon themselves the charge of looking after the merchandise, over which they keep watch night and day when a sale is affected, they levy a duty on the goods of one-fortieth part; if they are not sold, and they make no change whatsoever” (Major 1974: 11). The nature of Arab traders varied. As Pherson writes, “the majority of traveling merchants moved with small quantities of goods, but there were merchants, who owned considerable numbers of vessels and dealt in large quantities of goods. There were also conglomerations of merchants who combined their fortunes to mount annual trading fleets down the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to the ports of East Africa and South Asia. The Karimi merchants of Egypt, along with the Jewish merchants, who flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, exemplify the latter type of merchants, whose complex trading world stretched from the Mediterranean to the African and Asian shores of the Arabian Sea” (Pherson 2002: 129).

Indian Ocean Trade and Arab Travelers

The accounts of writers are based on information gathered either from other travelers visiting this country or on the accounts of those who had personally been to this sub-continent. The observations of these travelers are generally faulty in the sense that they very often overlook essential facts or exaggerate a minor thing out of all proportions. This is because they happened to be strangers to the political conditions, manners, and religious outlook of a foreign country. It was, therefore, but natural that, in some cases, they failed to give a correct picture of the society as it existed at that time. But all the same, their observations, based as they are on second-hand information, deserve to be accepted as a correct or a nearly accurate picture of the Indian social system prevalent during these centuries. It is on this account that their accounts demand the best attention of the present-day scholars who want to reconstruct the history of India. It also has to be noticed that these Arab travelers often differ among themselves on specific issues. This is so because they viewed the conditions of society from different angles; moreover, their accounts have been supplemented by pieces of evidence collected from indigenous sources.

In the absence of proper Indian historical resources, these Arab writers deserve to be summarized separately. It is a misfortune for us that the original works of these Arab writers are not available, and they are available only in French translations. But we can make use of some of the extracts of H.M. Elliot’s most celebrated, historical, and monumental work, including some other modern works and translations. It is pleasant to note here that these Arab travelers accurately depict the social, religious, and political conditions, especially of the period during which they visited India from time to time. It is further interesting to note that some of them never visited India personally, but they gathered their information from others. But a little critical study of these accounts will disclose that they are not without faults, and they bear several topographical errors. It has also been noticed that the Arab Geographers often differ among themselves on specific issues that have given much-misguided information.

Since Arab Geographers did not stay in India for an extended period and could not travel the whole of India, they mostly gathered their information from hearsay narrations or recitals. They also did not know the Indian topography, social structure, and religion of the people. Similarly, they were not aware of the many facts which were there at the time they made their visits (Srivastava 1967: 2). We have many references of Malabar in the accounts of Arab travelers. There are so many travelers who visited Malabar from time immemorial, but there is a lack of correct record of their activity. We neglect the events of Arab travelers because their language is alien, but the fact is that even the Zamorins of Calicut of earlier generation knew this language. The trade became active that the ruler and the traders want to communicate with each other. So the ruler and the traders in exchange learned each language. It is a fact that a large number of Arabic words came into the Malayalam language.

Sulaiman the Merchant

One of the earliest Arab writers in Kerala was the Arab merchant Sulaiman. He is believed to have visited the coast in 851 C.E. Sulaiman of Siraf in his book called *Chaine de Chroniques* mentions Kollam as 'Kukam Mali' (Nainar 1942: 45) and observed that it the only port in India touched by huge Chinese ships on their voyage from Canton to other ports on the Persian Gulf (Menon 2008: 34; Tambi 1901: 203). More specifically, Sulaiman describes that Chinese ships on their homeward voyage left Siraf on the Persian Gulf for the coast of Oman, then touches down Muscut and sail along with monsoon across the Arabian Sea to Kollam. With a moderate wind the journey from Muscut to Kollam takes thirty days (Tambi 1901: 203). Kollam was the first port which vessels touch in between their voyage from Muscat at a month's sail (Gurukkal and Varier 1999: 32). He attests that at the port of Kollam the Chinese ships/junks have to pay a heavy port duty of 1000 dinars and other ships paid a sum ranging from one to ten dinars (Nainar 1942: 45). At the end of his career, he recorded his observations and experiments in his travel diary known as *Akhbar us Sind wal Hind*, which is the earliest known travel diary of an Arab that has come down to us. He has given a vivid description of the political, social, religious, and economic conditions of South India and the Indian islands based on his knowledge and the information gathered from previous works and contemporary reporters.

The first traveler noted by Elliot in his monumental work "*History of India, As Told by its Historians*" Volume I, is Sulaiman the Merchant, who landed on the Persian Gulf, and made several voyages to India and China. He completed his book entitled '*Salsilatul Tawarikh*' in the middle of the ninth century CE (in about 851 CE). Mr. M. Reinaud was the first scholar who published the book in 1844 CE appended with a translation and short notes, which afford mines of valuable information and sharp criticisms. But Mr. M. Reinaud does not seem to be very accurate about the title that he gave to this book. He mentions two travelers, while there was only one who wrote an account of his travels. But it seems, with all probability, that the second part of this book was completed by another traveler Abu Zaid al Hasan of Siraf. It is further interesting to note that this traveler never traveled to India and China, as he expressly writes that he

has modified the complete works of Sulaiman based on the reports of the travelers to these countries. The diary of Sulaiman has, however, been preserved. This is the first Arab traveler whose diary of travel has been preserved. It was published in Paris in the year 1845 and bears the title *Silsilatul Tawarikh*. Sulaiman was a merchant who undertook many voyages from a port in Iraq to China. During these voyages, he sailed along the whole coast of India, jotting down notes of all that he saw. He completed his book in 237 A.H. The book is a reliable source of information about the Indian Ocean, which, for the first time, is referred to as the sea of Hirgund, a name which soon gained currency among the Arabs. Hiragund is that part of the Indian Ocean, which washes the coast of southern India.

The first Arab account of the Siraf-Canton route, the ninth century *Akhbar as Sin wal Hind*, does not yet mention Muslim settlements in Malabar. But its author descended only at Quilon—a place where Arab and Persian ships customarily stopped to take in local spices and to obtain Chinese merchandise. Other Muslim authors of the same period did not have any information about south India; they mention the Muslims of Sind and Gujarat, and they speak of Jains and Buddhists but are equally silent about Muslim communities in Malabar. None of this disproves that Muslims can be found in considerable numbers at this time within the fold of the Jewish and Christian guilds - which as we will see in more detail, still controlled much of maritime commerce - but are as yet invisible as separate communities. There were, in the era before the Muslims became dominant in the economic life of Malabar, the *Anjuvannam* and *Manigramam* and two native chetti mercantile guilds, and Muslims, until the eleventh century, appear only as members of the two formers. The Mappilas and other South Indian Muslims, whatever their date of first settlement, emerged from obscurity several centuries before the rise of Islam. The account is the story of two Muslims who traveled to India and China. Later, Arab writers were heavily dependent on Sulaiman. According to him, “*I have never known anyone in either India or China who has embraced Islam, or anyone who can speak Arabic.*” This has been used as proof that the Mappilas could not have originated before the late ninth century.

Abu Zayd

Like his predecessor Sulayman, Abu Zaid also sailed from the ports of Iraq through the coasts and islands of India up to China for trade purposes. Abu Zaid mentions about trade exchanges between Al-Iraq, China and India and major port towns in the Malabar Coast such as Shaliyat (Chaliyam), Shinkli (Kodungallur) and Kulam (Kollam). He says that Kulam was the last town in the pepper country (Malabar) of the east (Ray 2001: 387- 402). At the end of his naval career, he revised, corrected, and supplemented the diary of Sulayman. He incorporated some details and new information gathered by him from other sources also. His account forms a supplement to *Sulayman's Silsilat ul Tawarikh*. It was edited by Reinaud along with *Silsilat-ul Tawarikh*, Paris, 1845. The Arab traveler Abu Zaid is the first foreigner to mention the peculiar custom of royal servants of the Kings who used to sacrifice their lives for their masters or burn themselves at their death. Abu Zaid records a bizarre tradition that

some of the Rajas (Rulers) of Kerala after *Ariyittuaycha* (inauguration of the reign on a grand scale), have a quantity of rice cooked and served on banana leaves. He invites from among his companions three or four hundred men, and those who are willing, present themselves to the king without any compulsion on his part. When the king has eaten some of the rice, he gives it to his companions, each in his turn takes a small quantity and eats it. All those who so eat the rice are obliged, when the king dies or is slain, to burn themselves to the very last man on the very day of the King's decease. This is a duty which admits of no delay.

Yaqubi

Ahmad bin Yaqub bin Jafar, popularly known as Yaqubi, was an officer in the *Diwan-i-Insha* Department of Correspondence under the Abbasids. He had traveled widely throughout the Islamic world and had come to India also. His fame rests on his *Kitab ul Buldan* (on geography), and the universal history called the *Tarikh*, which contains a section on India also.

Rashidud-din

A prominent Arab writer Rashid-ud-din wrote the book *Jamiu-t Tawarikh* in the year 710 A.H. (1310 CE). Rashidud-din is not very clear in his statements, and he reports that the people of Malabar speak the mixed language. This may be taken as a true picture because Malabar was one of the places where the Arab merchants had established their colonies even before the rise of Islam. Due to these immigrants of the Arabs in that region, they used their own Arabic language, whereas the Indian inhabitants of the same place used their language. And no wonder if Rashidu-din has described their admixed language, which was mainly on account of a large number of foreign settlers there.

Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn-al- Faqih

Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn-al- Faqih, a 10th century CE, Persian historian and geographer gives a brief description of Kollam in his book *Mukhtasar Kitab al- Buldan*. The original work is lost, but the abridged version, possibly composed around 1022, has survived in a handful of manuscripts. The description of Kollam in his account seems to be similar to that of Sulaiman, but with a little variation and specific. He visited Kollam in 902 CE, mentions Kollam as Kulu Mali, and says that the ships after leaving Masqat (Muscat in Oman) comes straight to Kulu Mali (Kollam), the first port of Hind (India). The distance between the two is about a month's journey and this place has a garrison (Port), where ships paid a duty of ten to twenty dinars (Nainar 1942: 506).

Ibn Khurdadhbih

Abu-I-Kasim Ubaidu-Ilah bin Abdu-Ilah bin Khurdadba is popularly known to us as Ibn Khurdadba. He was born in or about 825 C.E in Khurasan. During the reign of Mutamid, the Abbasid Caliph (9th Century C.E) Ibn Khurdadba was the head of the

Post and Intelligence Department. His *Kitab ul Masalik wal Mamalik (Book of Roads and Kingdoms)* contains some very useful information about India. The work speaks about 'Mulay' which could be identified as Kaulam Mali or Kollam in the Malabar region. He says that from Sandan (Daman) it takes nine days to reach Mulay, He describes this region as the land of pepper and bamboos, he says that the production of pepper was depended upon the rain of the region (Sastri 1939: 119). He also writes about the various states of India, and according to him in India, there were forty-two religious sects. Ibn Khurdadba speaks of the castes into which society was divided in India. There are seven castes in India (Nadwi 1962: 11).

It is still not known correctly as to when Ibn Khurdadba completed his work. But since he died in 300 A.H. (912 CE), he must have finished his work either towards the close of the ninth century or at the beginning of the tenth century. He refers to the Malabar Coast and the export of rice to *Sarandwip* (Ceylon) from *Bahattan* (Baliapatam). In his book, he has supplied information on the distances of various countries from Baghdad, and the land routes and ocean lines leading to India. A brief account of the different Indian castes is also given. His geographical knowledge is mainly borrowed from Ptolemy, but there is a good deal of information, which was gathered by the officials of his department. He, himself, never visited India. But because of his constant intercourse with merchants and travelers who were familiar with India, his knowledge of the geography and history of this country is extensive. His book was printed and published in Leyden in 1899 by De Goeje.

Masudi

The foreign traveler Masudi seems to have visited Kerala and written an account of the country and its people during the reign of Rama Varma Kulasekhara. Abul Hasan Ali ibn al Husain al Masudi (d. 345/46 A.H/ 956 C.E) was a well-known Arab Historian and Geographer of the 9th Century C.E. who traveled far and wide and visited India as well. His Magnum Opus "*Kitab Akhbar az Zaman*" (in 30 volumes) has been considered as one of the most authentic sources of world history. One of these is a small treatise entitled *Kitab-ul Tanbih Wal Ashraf. "Maruj uz Zahab"* he compiled as an abridgment in two volumes of the above extinct work. The work has been printed several times. Its French translation, along with Arabic text, was published in 1890 from Paris. Urdu translation of a part of the work was also published from Osmania University, Hyderabad, in 1931. Recently, the Arabic Original, edited by Mohyduddin Abdul Hamid, has been published from Beirut in 1987. The date of his birth is not known to us, but his death occurred in Egypt in 345 A.H. (956 C.E.). And before his death, Al Masudi traveled far and wide. He visited India in 915 C.E., and most probably stayed here for two years. As a historian, he is regarded as an unbiased and objective reporter of events. Al Masudi greatly admires the kings of Balhara for their greater respect for and protection to Islam. Al Masudi met this Abu Zaid at Basra in 303 A.H (916. C.E. and acknowledges to have derived information from him. A brief account of Indian history is included. He has described the rivers of India in minute detail. It is interesting to learn from this book that the ships plying between Arabia and India were

named after the owner and his brothers or his sons, just as to-day a shipping Company may have the designation of Marakkars and Sons. The book was published with a French translation, in nine volumes, in Paris. It has been published several times in Egypt. Masudi refers to them as bayasira (sg.baysari), explaining that this means that they are Muslims born in al-Hind of Muslim parents. Al Masudi, personally, visited many places in India and gave a clear account of the political and social customs of the Hindus. The main feature of his work is that he also mentions about the tongue and language of the Indian people of the various places.

Sayyad Marhab

Sayyad Marhab a Yemani, Jewish poet in a letter written to inform the death of ship owner named Nagid Halfon, gives a short description of Kollam which he mentions as *Kulam* and says that Nagid equipped a new ship with cargo on the route of Aden to *Kulam* and named it as Kulami (since ships were named for their destination) which had sank before reaching Kollam which he attests as a famous port city on the Coast of India (Goitten and Friedman 2007: 530-531).

Yaqut al- Hamawi

Arabic traveler and geographer Yaqut al- Hamawi, born in Byzantium (the ancient Greek city also known as Constantinople, or present-day Istanbul). Yaqut traveled extensively in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Persia (present-day Iran). His *Mu'jam al-Buldan* (Dictionary of Countries) is a vast encyclopedia of geography, summarizing almost all of the world's medieval knowledge. There is a wide range of information in the dictionary, including archaeology, ethnography, history, anthropology, natural sciences, geography, and the coordinates of listed places. The work gives the different names that were known to towns and cities and describes their monuments and riches, history, population, and leading figures. The book gives a description of Kollam. He says that the Island of Kulam (Kollam) is one of the innumerable islands in the sea of Hind (India) with a flourishing trade port (Nainar 1942: 46).

Abu Dulaf Misa'rbn Muhalhil

Abu Dulaf Misa'rbn Muhalhil, visited Kollam in 13th Century CE, gives an interesting note on the people, society and agriculture at Kollam in his book *First Rislalah* (Boseworth et al. 1980: 360), but it is not clear whether his account of information is legitimate or not since most of it contain inaccurate or imaginary details. He mentions this region as Kulam, and says that people in Kulam have a prayer house which has no idol. The pillars of the houses are made from the backbone of the fish, the inhabitants do not eat fish not they slaughter animals (Nainar 1942: 46). The people had good talent in the art of medicine and the town of Kollam had tanks for conserving the rain water. He also says that different kinds of aloes, wood, resin, camphor, teak and barks of trees were found in the markets of Kollam (Nainar 1942: 46). He contrasts the ceramics with Chinaware and records that the inhabitants of the city manufactured clay vessels, but blackish in color, interestingly he says that when the King dies, people

choose another King from China. From the above description of Kollam, it seems that Abu Dulaf might not have visited Kollam and his account may be depended upon secondary information. The traveler also attests the presence of mines of Yellow Sulphur and a mine of Copper in Kollam (Elliot 1872: 95-96).

Ibn Said al Maghribi

Arabian traveler Ibn Said, in his book *Kitab- al- Atwal* says that *Kawlam* (Kollam) is the last city of the pepper land in the east where ships proceeds further to Aden. Ibn Said identifies the presence of a separate quarter for Muslims in Kollam and also has a cathedral for Christian worship as well. He describes the city of Kollam as a rich, beautiful place situated on a plain land along with numerous gardens. He also testifies that wood, camphor, resin and different kinds of aloes were the native products of Kollam (Nainar 1942: 507).

Zakariya Al Qazwini

Zakariya Al Qazwini (1263-1275 CE), an Arab geographer gives information about Kollam in his account of travelogue called *Asaru-L- Bilad* and says that “*Kawlam*” (Kollam) is a large city in India, but his information was drawn from the records of other travelers and not necessary that he has visited Kollam by himself (Menon 1924: 276).

Abd al-Aziz Mansur al Kulami al Karimi

Mansur al Kulami al Karimi was a Karimi group merchant, which is a popular Arab trade guild. He was based at Kollam (Kulam) and had trade connection with China, on his return voyage from Kulam to Aden in 1303-04 he added the epithet Kulami to his title as a to associate himself with the Kulam or Kollam port which earned him all his successful commercial ventures (Chakravarti 2012: 95)

Abulfeda

Abulfeda calls Kollam as *Caoulem* and says that it is situated on the extremity of Pepper country and says that ships bounded to Aden were directly sailed from this port. He says that the city and the port is situated on a gulf at the very end of the pepper country and have a separate quarter for Muslim merchants. He says that the town is built on a sandy plain and it have many orchards, gardens and trees. It had abundant brazil trees (Sastri 1939: 215).

Wassaf or Abdalla Sharaf-al-Din Shirazhi

Muslim historian Wassaf or Abdalla Sharaf-al-Din Shirazhi (1265-1328 CE), who visited the Pandyan empire in the early 13th century CE, describes the trade scenario in the coast of south India, extended from Nilwar (Nellore) to Kaulam (Kollam), he speaks about the volume of international trade in this region and export of Sappan wood, ginger and pepper from the port at Kollam (Rai 1993: 23-24; Aiya 1906: 392). Wassaf gives a short description of Chinese junks (Ships) arriving at this region, he calls them

as huge and terms it as 'mountains with wings'. This description shows the bulk of foreign trade carried out at Kollam in the medieval period (Dikshitar 1951: 162).

Ansari al Dimishqi

Ansari al Dimishqi, a medieval Arab geographer, has visited Kollam and mentions Kulam (Kollam) as the last city in the pepper country (Malabar). He says about the richness of Kollam port where pepper was loaded into huge ships and its market which was filled with loads of pepper and different kinds of perfumes (Nainar 1942: 47).

Al Idrisi

He was the member of a family that descended from an ancestor named 'Idrisi,' and so he came to be known by the name of Al Idrisi (1100-1165 CE). Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Idris, also called Sharif al Idrisi, was born in Ceuta (Sicily) and belonged to the royal family of Africa and was a remote descendent of Hazrat Ali. He was educated at Cordova and soon became famous for his scholarship. He attracted the attention and enjoyed the patronage of Roger II, the then ruler of Sicily. He traveled widely, and at the instance of Roger II, collected information from many travelers and previous books for his monumental work *Nuzhat al Mushtaq fil khtiraq il aflaq*, dedicated to Roger hence called *Kitab Rujar* or *Kitab a Rujari*. It contains some valuable information about India (Zaki 1981: 14). He visited Europe and finally settled in Sicily. It was at this place where he was encouraged to write a book on geography. He refers in his preface, to the various authors whose works were used in the completion of the book. Further, information was derived from other travelers, whose verbal statements are required to be compared and tested. Al Idrisi tried to touch every aspect of India - social, religious and political - but his comments embody some misguided information and error of judgment. In his travelogue, he refers to Kulam Mali (Kollam) and Manibar (Malabar) during the first half of 12th century CE as two major countries in India (Elliot 1872: 84; More 2003: 4). He describes a brief account of the geographical features of Kulam Mali (Kollam) and the pepper cultivation over here. He says that Kulam Mali is large and pretty, an elevated plateau and covered with vegetation. The pepper vines which grow here was found nowhere else and that produces good quality pepper (Elliot 1872: 68). Some historians say that Al Idrisi, who never visited India personally, derived this information from some most unreliable and quite disreputable travelers and mentioned it without having tested it. Therefore, his statement should be studied with great care and caution (Srivastava 1967: 8). Al Idrisi also speaks about the pepper and cardamoms of Malabar. Al-Idrisi produced a map of the East from data given by Arab and Indian navigators, using the grid system for the first time in the world. He gives coastal towns and customs of Kerala (Menon 1967: 29).

Zakaria al Kazwini

Born in Persia, Al Kazwini (1203-83 CE) was not a traveler but compiled his works from the writings of Istakhri, Ibn Haukal, and others, whom he regularly cites as his

authorities. He was the author of two famous works, *Ajaibul-Makhuqat* (on cosmography and geography) and *Athar-al-Biad wal Akhbar al Ibad*, a more comprehensive treatment of general geographical features and conditions of various countries including India. But his account of India seems to have been derived from earlier works. He compiled his account of India from the works of others and gives information about Quilon. He refers to *Kualm* (Quilon) as “a large city in India,” but he also refers to such incredible customs as the pillars of the buildings in Quilon being covered with shells from the backs of fishes. Such statements are the result of poor observation of men and affairs by a credulous foreign traveler (Menon 1967: 177).

Ibn Battuta

He started his journey in the year of the Hegira 725, CE 1324, from his native city of Tangier at the age of twenty-two. A Moor by birth, his full name was *Sheikh Abu Abdullah Mohammed Ibn Abdallah al Lawati Al-Tandij*, surnamed Ibn Battuta. He visited Egypt, Syria, Persia, Arabia, Zanzibar, Asia Minor, Constantinople, Khwarizm, Bukhara, India, the Maldives, the Islands of Ceylon and Sumatra and China successively. In India, at the court of the Sultan of Delhi and then the Maldives, he performed for some time the functions of a *Qadi*. He visited India during the reign of Mohammed Tughlaq. His sojourn here was of sufficient duration to enable him to acquire an intimate knowledge of every part of this vast country. His particular interest to us is his description of conditions in southern India as prevailed prior to the Muslim conquest (Nadwi 1962: 26). Ibn Battuta died in 1377 CE. His travel account was called as *Rihlah, or Tuhafat un Nazar fi Gharaib il Amsar wa Ajaib il Asfar*, in which he gives very exhaustive, extremely useful and interesting information about almost all aspects of Indian life particularly Malabar. It has been translated into several languages. After his last journey in 1353, the sultan of Fez commanded him to dictate his experiences to Ibn Juzayy, the court secretary, and this description, which has been preserved for us in good copies, help us to understand about Ibn Battuta’s travel. Ibn Battuta’s *Rehela*, which has been translated into English, was another instrument for the free circulation of ideas and thought between Arabia and Malabar. Yet his observations were to be of certain importance for the history of Malabar.

Battuta calls Malabar as Pepper country; it extends for two months journey along the coast from Sandabur (Goa) to Kawlam (Quilon). Malabar is referred to as all Arab writers as the country of Pepper. There are two parts in the word, Mala and bar. Mala means mountain and bar is probably a Persian origin. But the Arabs do not seem to have known the Malai, meaning Mountain. They identified an island or place named Mali (Mulay). e.g., Kulam Mali. The reason probably is that the Arabs knew only one port on the West coast of India, and that is Quilon. Sometime before the dates of Ibn Battuta’s visit to Malabar, the Mappilas were powerful in the land. This community is the descendent of Arab traders and women of the country, and of converts to Islam. The origin of Islam in Kerala is related to the conversion and emigration of Perumal to Mecca. But Battuta makes no mention of this conversion. He has recorded the tradition of one of the ancestors of the king of Kottayam called Kuwayl being converted to

Islam. Though the statement is obscure in nature, it is possible that perhaps the ancestor referred to here may have been Perumal, ruler of Kerala. He found several prosperous Muslim settlements in different parts of the northern and central Kerala, patronized by their rulers on account of their need for the Merchants. He found that Muslims were highly honored amongst them (the Hindus) except that they do not eat with them or allow them into their houses. Writing about the travels on the road he says, "No one travels in these parts" in the fourteenth century, "upon beasts of burden; nor is there any horse found except with the king." When, however, any merchants have to buy or sell goods, they are carried upon the backs of men who are always ready to do so for hire.

No reference to Calicut is, however, found earlier than Ibn Battuta. The traveler Marco polo, who had visited Malabar before Battuta did not mention Calicut or its ruler. But from the account of Ibn Battuta, we get an adequate idea about its ruler and this city. This is clear evidence of the fact that Calicut had emerged into prominence by this time in the early part of the 14th century or even sometime before it. He describes Calicut as "one of the great ports of the district of Malabar," where merchants from all parts of the globe are found. The African traveler refers to the large fleet of Chinese merchant vessels that lay anchored at the Calicut Port during his visit (Menon, 1967: 194). When he stopped at the port of Calicut, there were at that time thirteen Chinese vessels had disembarked. Some of the Chinese owned a large number of ships on which their factors were sent to foreign countries. Battuta wanted to go to China and waited for the season, so he stayed in Calicut for three months. It helped him to experience and describe Calicut more.

He has made extensive observations about Malabar in which the Zamorin's kingdom and its Capital figure prominently. He speaks "the road over the whole distance runs beneath the shade of trees, and at every half-mile, there is a wooden shed with benches on which all travelers, whether Muslim or Hindus, may sit". He further says that "at each shed, there is a well for drinking and if a Hindu, he gives water in vessels; if he is a Muslim he pours the water into his hands." It was the custom of the Hindus in the Malabar lands that no Muslim might enter their houses or eat from their vessels; if he did so, they would break the vessels or give them to the Muslims. The Muslim merchants had their homes in all districts and were greatly respected. If a Muslim met a Hindu during the night on the road he would stand aside for the Hindu to pass.

He visited Calicut six times. First, in 1343 on January 2, second in 1343 on April 18, third in 1344 on January 7, fourth in 1344 on March 18, fifth in 1344 on August 24, and his last visit was in 1346 May. He spent many months in this place during his stay here. He stated the reason for the popularity and prominence of Calicut and found the countryside perfectly safe for travel. In the lands of Malabar, except in this one land alone, it was the custom that whenever a ship was wrecked, all that was taken from it belonged to the treasury. In Calicut, however, it was retained by its owners, and for this reason, Calicut had become a flourishing city and attracted a large number of

merchants. In this town lives the famous ship-owner *Mithqal*, who possessed vast wealth and many ships for his trade with India, China, Yemen, and Fars. When he reached the city, the principal inhabitants and merchants and the Sultan's representative came out to welcome him, with drums, trumpets, bugles, and standards on their ships. He entered the harbor in great pomp. He describes Calicut as *Kalicut*. It was one of the finest ports in the world, frequented for trade by the people of China, the Archipelago, Ceylon, the Maldives, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf. The title of the King was *Samari*.

He met the Zamorin and talked to him. He refers to the King as the Sultan of Calicut, who was an idolater. He refers to every ruler as Sultan. He also speaks of Ibrahim, the chief of the merchants of Calicut and also the Chief of the Port, a native of Bahrain, and this merchant was endowed with generous qualities, so much so that other merchants met in his house and dined at his table. He met the *Qadi* of Calicut named *Fakhr-ud-din* and was impressed by his generosity. He mentions three important Ports on the Malabar Coast *Kawlam* (Kollam), Calicut and *Hili* (*Ezhi*). Under tragic circumstances, both natural and manmade, Ibn Battuta lost all his baggage, slaves, and women at Calicut, and had to wander about in many places.

Battuta describes Kollam as the most elegant bazaar and its merchants as *Sulis*. They were immensely wealthy; a single merchant would buy a vessel with all that is in it and load it with goods from his own house. Quilon was from very early times the transshipment Port for the Chinese trade. It is mentioned by the Arab and Persian sailors of the ninth century under the name of *Kawlam-malay*, and fell into decay, like its rival Calicut, in the Sixteenth Century. He also equates Quilon and Calicut with Alexandria. It was a very beautiful and large place abounding with gardens and markets. It was one of the most bustling Ports with traders from Phoenicia, Arabia, China, Rome, and Greece; this city became a regular halt. This city is nearest to the Malabar towns to China, and it is to it that most of the merchants from China came. He saw a Chinese cock in the city of Quilon. He also states that Chinese merchants were settled at *Kawlam*, and that envoys from the king of China arrived there during his visit. Muslims were honored and respected here.

He calls Eli Mala (mount *Dely*) as *Ras Haili* or *Hili* and was the first Indian land touched by Vasco de Gama. In the port of Aden, he says, "came large vessels from Kinbayat (Cambay), Kwlam (Quilon), and Calicut, and many other Malabar Ports." He calls it "the Port of the Indians". He describes *Chaliyam* as *al shaliyat* and as a most beautiful town in which the fabrics called by its name are manufactured (shawl). In Malayalam it is *sall*. It is still used for soft cotton fabrics. Battuta also describes *Fakanur* now *Barkur*, a large town on an inlet, where there is a large quantity of sugar cane, which are unexcelled in the rest of the country. The chief of the Muslim community at *Fakannur* was called *Basadaw*. He possessed about thirty warships, commanded by a Muslim called *Lula*, who was an evildoer and a pirate and a robber of merchants. He also speaks about the town of *Hinawr* (*Honovar*), a day's journey from *Sindabur*, which was

on a large inlet navigable for large ships. During the *pushkal*, which is the rainy season, this bay was so stormy that for four months, it was impossible to sail on it except for fishing. The women of this town and all the coastal districts were nothing but loose unsewn garments, one end of which they gird around their waists. And drape the rest over their head and shoulders. They were beautiful and virtuous, and each wore a gold ring in her nose. One peculiarity amongst them was that they all knew the Koran by heart. He also saw in these towns' thirteen schools for girls and twenty-three for boys, a thing which he has never seen elsewhere. Its inhabitants lived by maritime commerce and had no cultivated land. Speaking about *Manjarur* (*Mangalore*) he says, "it is the largest inlet in the area of Malabar." Fars and Yemen disembark, and pepper and ginger are exceedingly abundant there. There was a colony of about four thousand Muslims, living in a suburb alongside the town. He also speaks about *Fandarayna* (*Pantalayani*). It was a large and fine town with orchards and bazaars. It was at this town that the Chinese vessels passed the winter.

About the rulers, in Malabar lands, he says, "there are twelve Hindu Sultans, some of them strong with armies numbering fifty thousand men, and others weak with armies of three thousand. Yet there is no discord whatever between them, and the strong do not desire to seize the possessions of the weak. At the boundary of the territories of each ruler, there is a wooden gateway, upon which inscribed the "Gate of Security." About Sultan *Samari* (*Zamorin*), he stated that "wearing a large white cloth round his waist and a small turban, bare-footed, with the parasol carried by a slave over his head and a fire, lit in front of him on the beach." He was an aged man and shaved his beard, as some of the Greeks did. He calls the Sultan of Mangalore as *Ram Daw*, *Cannanore* as *Kuwayl*, *Calicut* as the *Samari*, and *Quilon* as *Tiwari*. We understand from Ibn Battuta that *Jurfattan*, *Dahfattan*, and *Budfattan* were under the sway of *Kuwayl* one of the most powerful Sultans of Malabar. Yule suggests that the title *Tiwari* given by Ibn Battuta to its ruler may be the Tamil-Sanskrit compound *Tirupati* (Holy Lord). About the ruler of *Hinawr* the Sultan is Jala ad-Din; he is under the suzerainty of Hindu Sultan named *Haryab*.

About the security and justice, he says the punishment for theft here was death. He had never seen a safer road than this, for they put to death anyone who stole a single nut, and if any fruit fell, no one picked it up but the owner. If any Muslim or Hindu criminal fled from the territories of one and reached the boundary of other rulers, his life was safe, and the prince from whom he had fled could not seize him, even though he was a powerful prince with a great army. The rulers in these lands transmitted their sovereignty to their sister's sons, to the exclusion of their children.

About the mosques of Malabar, he speaks the mosques at *Eli Mala* (*Hili*). Muslims venerated this Cathedral Mosque, and seafarers made many offerings to it. This mosque contained several students who received stipends from its revenues. He also speaks a Cathedral Mosque at *Dahfattan*. It was built by *Kuwayl's* grandfather, who was converted to Islam. In *Fandarayana* (*Panderani*), he speaks of the three mosques of

Muslims. In Quilon he saw a colony of Muslim merchants and also a Cathedral Mosque in a magnificent building, constructed by the merchant Khwaja Muhazzab. Ibn Battuta, also mentions that he met al Hily (Elimala), a virtuous theologian, *Said* by name a native of *Maddshau*, at *Cannannore*. He visited a theologian from Baghdad, a man of great merit, named *Sarsary*. In Calicut he met Sheikh *Shahabuddin* of *Qazarun*, a great saint. At Quilon, he met Sheikh *Fakhruddin*, son of Sheikh *Shahabuddin*.

He also speaks about the great flood of Periyar Port (*Muziris*) silted up as a result of unusual flooding by the *Periyar* River in 1341. *Muziris* is usually identified with the present-day Kodungalur or Cranganore. Another scholar mentioned that Battuta had seen a Tsunami in Malabar during his days, when he was in Calicut, where they awaited the right season for the voyage to China, just before the appointed day of departure, a storm raged over the coast, sinking most of the ships in the harbor at Calicut. Ibn Battuta happened to be ashore at the time, praying in the mosque for the success of the voyage, and he was the sole survivor of the expedition but lost all his baggage, slaves and women. He also speaks of the Malabar *Marumakkatayam*: “no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother’s brother.” A person’s heirs are his sister’s sons, not his sons. This is a thing which he had seen in Malabar.

From the time of Ibn Battuta’s visit to Kerala, it is possible to build up a general idea of the distribution of Muslims and of their relations with non-Muslim natives. These names, and the practice of the Shafi branch of Islamic religious law, provide an early indication of the close contact with and development of a predominantly Arab-Islamic culture among Kerala Muslims. In any case, the importance of Ibn Battuta’s *Rehela* is a highly readable book; we should congratulate him for his visit to Malabar otherwise, a large aspect of Kerala history would have been lost to the World.

Abdur Razzak

In 1442, 56 years before Da Gama reached it, Abdu-Razzak visited Calicut. As a Persian, he hated the place, and he appears to have been treated with a scant ceremony by the *Samurai*. The town is inhabited by infidels and situated on a hostile shore. At the time of Abur Razzak’s visit in 1443, there was a preponderance of trade with Arab countries at the port of Calicut, Chinese trade having declined in volume. He says, “Calicut is a perfectly secured harbor, which, like that of Ormuz, brings together merchants from every city and every country. In it are to be found an abundance of valuable articles brought hither from maritime countries and especially from Abyssinia, Zirbad and Zanzibar. The town is inhabited by infidels and situated on a hostile shore. It contains a considerable number of *Mussalmans*, who are constant residents here and have built two mosques, in which they meet every Friday to offer a prayer. They have one *Qadi* a priest, and for the most part, they belong to the sect *schafie*. Security and justice are also firmly established in the city, that the wealthiest merchants bring thither from maritime countries considerable cargoes, which they unload and unhesitatingly send into the markets and bazaars, without thinking in the

meantime of any necessity of checking the account or of keeping watch over the goods. The officers of the Customs-House take upon themselves the charge of looking after the merchandise, over which they keep watch day and night. When a sale is effected, they levy a duty on the goods of one-fortieth part; if they are not sold, they make no charges on them. In other parts, a strange practice is adopted. When a vessel sets sail for a certain point and suddenly is driven by a decree of Divine Providence into another roadstead, the inhabitants, under the pretext that the wind has driven it there, plunder the ship. But at Calicut, every ship, when it puts into this port, is treated like other vessels and has no trouble of any kind to put up with" (Menon 1967: 195).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the aforesaid lack of proper information, a critical study of the accounts of the Arab travelers reveals a certain amount of wrong information and error of judgment which they have, hitherto, transmitted to us. It becomes, therefore, necessary that the accounts should be reviewed and read along with the contemporary Hindu records, which are, though, few, but all the same, are quite remarkable. This will help us greatly in making a correct and objective estimate of the history of the period under review, in reconstructing a social, religious and political history of India, from the 8th to the 15th century CE. For this purpose, the contemporary literary works of the Hindu authors, inscriptions, coins, epigraphic evidence, and various other sources, have to be utilized fully, and they should be compared with that of the Arab travellers. This can help us to arrive at a fair conclusion. However, in spite of many accompanying defects and shortcomings, the accounts of these travelers cannot be ignored. Instead, they are very valuable information from the Indian point of view.

According to, Sreedhara Menon Arab writers like Ibnul Faquih (902 CE), Ibn Rusta (903 CE), Abu Zaid (915 CE), and Masudi (945-955 CE), are the other Arab writers who have made references to Kerala in the 10th century, but of these Masudi alone actually visited Kerala. Most of these writers only repeat the statements of Sulaiman and do not furnish any new information. The early travel accounts of India shows that the Greek sources supply some very useful information about India for a period roughly extending from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE. Then come the Chinese memoirs which help us till the 8th century CE. From the 8th century onwards till about the 15th century when the Portuguese records appear, the Arab accounts supply very valuable information about Indian social life and culture particularly the Deccan. From the records of the Arab traveler's accounts, the Zamorins of Calicut or the ruling dynasties of Malabar retained cordial relations with Muslims of Calicut or elsewhere in this God's own country. Except for some instances, the relation was cordial. They hired their service in many ways in trade, in the army, as tax collectors, etc. Thus, the accounts of the foreign travelers give us a fairly good picture of the commercial glory and the attendant economic prosperity of the Zamorin's kingdom during the period before the arrival of Portuguese. Their account is also valuable in other sense that it establishes the advent of Islam in Malabar at an early age, and the trade relation of Arabs with Malabar is also revealed from their account.

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