

ISLAMIC MERCHANT COMMUNITIES
OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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by

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ISLAMIC MERCHANT COMMUNITIES OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The trade routes of the world have served not only to knit material cultures of widely dispersed societies but have also functioned as conduits for the transmission of ideas and ideologies, knowledge and learning, institutions and beliefs. The process of exchanging goods of great value over long distances sets in motion a series of on-going relationships that become the vehicle for the transit of more than material goods. The fact that the exchange takes place over long distances, between people of widely different cultures sets the stage for the cross-cultural interchanges that generally follow. The dispersal of some major systems of religious and political belief in this way has been an important phenomenon of world history. The spread of Islam and Islamic civilization through a great part of the world was a remarkable chapter in this process and was brought about by the link between Islam and the pre-modern world-system. The westward spread of Islam from its birth in the 7th Century, outside the homelands of its origin in the Arabian peninsula, coincided with the explosion of commercial techniques among the Arab people which continued for almost a millenium.

The expansion of Islam in West Asia and the Mediterranean and the strategic control of the meeting point of three continents contributed to invigorate long distance trade and exchange. What had been a trickle of goods of high value and exotic appeal, producing large profits by their scarcity, now expanded into an increasing flood of commerce in consumables fuelled by new demands and new sources of supply across the trading world. Many geographic regions were involved in this commerce and contributed in their individual ways towards knitting it into a system. East Asia, with the vast integrated Chinese Empire and the productive enterprises of the Chinese and Japanese, gradually expanded its input of a variety of consumer goods

into the system. Southeast Asia increasingly found itself seminal to the system with a wide distribution of its natural products of pepper, spices and minerals which were circulating throughout the trading world in the second millenium A.D. Besides, its natural geography, favouring the growth of ports and central places of trade and its human capital of maritime communities put premium on the role played by this region in world trade. In South Asia, the Indian sub-continent, with its unique situation astride of the main oceanic highways and its long-settled political and economic units, found itself moved to the centre stage of the trading world of Asia in these centuries. Its handicraft production, food surpluses and exportable cash crops combined with the maritime and commercial skills developed along a lengthy coastline gave it advantages that it soon exploited. In West Asia, the growth of Islamic political power and civilization had resulted in urbanised and sophisticated consumers with an insatiable demand for the good things of life, to be found only eastward. To its west was the continent of Europe, slowly emerging from the effects of the collapse of the Roman Empire, releasing demands to be supplied only from long distances and remote countries.

An intrinsic part of the cultural dynamism of Islam was a great diaspora of commercial groups from its original homeland into the outer reaches of the then-known maritime world. This diaspora consisted of plural Islamic communities of major trading areas — Turks, Arabs from Egypt, Yemen, Oman and Iraq, and Persians — settling in terminal points of trade and maintaining links with their home countries. This merchant diaspora caught on and spread to the outermost limits of the trading world with major cultural consequences. The explosion of Arab sea-faring almost from the time of the foundation of Islam brought Arab and Arabised communities of West Asia eastwards to the Indian subcontinent, the Maldive islands and Sri Lanka and further on into the Southeast Asian archipelago and reached China where by the end of the 7th Century a large colony of Arab and Persian merchants was settled in Canton. In the course of this eastward movement, colonies and settlements had been founded in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, the earliest of which was the port of Daybhol at the mouth of the Indus river and when accompanied by military conquest, resulted in the first

Arab kingdom on the subcontinent in Sindh in the early 8th Century. This period up to the 10th Century is rightly termed the Arab period of Indian Ocean trade. During this period Arab merchant colonies existed peacefully in the midst of Indian states and societies and led to the spread of the Islamic faith. There was considerable inter-marriage with local maritime people and the consequent foundation of Indo-Arab communities along the major commercial routes.

We may note the first Arab merchant colonies of India which will later be found relevant in the Indo-Southeast Asian trade. The Gujarat coast was a natural attraction for Arab merchants as it provided easy land-fall after a short sailing from south Arabian and Persian Gulf ports. The ports in the Gulf of Cutch, some of which were to become famous later, were the home of these colonies and a strong Gujarati Muslim merchant community soon made its appearance. Another home of these early Arab colonies was Malabar, with its obvious commercial attractions and strategic location. Here Indo-Muslim communities soon appeared with considerable intermarriage among indigenous Malayalees. The settlements were established in a number of ports but Quilon or Kollam in south Malabar seems to have been a major Arab entrepôt around the 10th Century. Among the Indo-Muslims here are the celebrated Mopillas who were later to play a historic role in Indian Ocean trade and in resisting the Portuguese. There was a small Arab colony in Colombo and neighbouring ports of the south but it does not seem to have resulted in a settler Muslim population. Another distinctive Arab colony was in the ports east of the southern tip of the subcontinent, in Kayalpatnam, Karikal and Cuddalore on the Coromandel coast. Here too there was intermarriage between Arab settlers and indigenous Tamils and a distinctive Indo-Muslim community of Marakkayar, Labbai and other Tamil Muslims was born, collectively known later as Chulias.

Somewhat later Islam penetrated the subcontinent through its land frontiers and spread into its various regions. At the end of the 13th Century, Alauddin Khalji, the Sultan of Delhi, annexed Gujarat to his empire. It was ruled by Muslim Governors subordinate to Delhi till 1441 when it broke free and an Islamic dynasty was established there. The Sultanate of Gujarat continued as an independent political entity until it was annexed to the Mughal

Empire by Akbar in 1572. The strong links of the Gujarati coast with the Islamic trading world were now strengthened by the establishment of Islamic power in the hinterland. During these five centuries 1300-1700 Gujarat emerged as a core region in the Indian Ocean trading system.

Gujarat's location where west Asia merged into south Asia and peninsular India made it look westwards towards lands between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. It was easy of access from these two waterways, both by coastal sailing and direct, utilizing the monsoons. Its hinterland extended deep into the interior, northwards and northeastwards into lands watered by the Indus and its tributaries and the Ganges. The terrain was hardy and undulating, producing an industrious people working a balanced economy of agriculture and industrial production. Surplus agricultural produce was always available from the northern plains. The state itself became the home of a skilled and aesthetically desirable textile production which soon became famous in Asian markets. The opportunities for inland and seaborne trade produced dynamic merchant communities of a variety of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. The local cultural milieu was transformed to accommodate the demands of commerce and the commercial ethic.

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that, from the 14th Century, Gujarati mercantile and commercial tradition became entrenched in the Indian Ocean. The Gujarati coast was dotted with a number of ports that waxed and waned in importance: Broach, Gogha, Diu, Rander, Bassein, Chaul, Daman, and, of course, the famous Cambay. The port of Cambay was situated in the gulf at the southern end of the Kathiawar peninsula, at the mouth of the River Mani. The gulf provided good anchoring ground in waters becalmed by the land mass to the north and south. It was within easy reach of the great textile manufacturing centres of Ahmadabad and Baroda, producing cotton, silk and mixed weaves famous all over Asia. It is speculated that the changing coastline of Gujarat put an end to the predominance of the port of Cambay. The rise in altitude of the coast in the gulf of Cambay resulted in bars and islands that made the approaches to Cambay dangerous to large ships. Other ports in the gulf rose and later in the 16th Century Surat displaced Cambay as the premier port of the region.

Gujarati ports were major centres of ship-building. Arabs, starved of ship-building timber in their homelands, resorted to Cambay and other Gujarati ports for the construction of ships. Timber from the Kathiawar peninsula fed the shipyards of Cambay. Coastal Gujaratis rightly became famous as mariners and seamen of great professionalism. The big ships that plied the Indian Ocean, built in Gujarat, were manned by Gujaratis. Gujarati merchant communities were both Hindu and Muslim, but the ascendancy of Gujarati Muslims in certain sectors of overseas trade (such as, for example, the West Asia trade), was clearly established by the 15th Century. The Gujarati Muslim merchants were themselves very plural in composition and consisted of domiciled and indigenous Gujaratis and immigrants from all parts of the Islamic world. They were intimately connected with the ruling nobility of Gujarat, such as the 16th Century Governor of the port of Diu, Malik Ayaz, an inveterate opponent of the Portuguese. They consisted of Turks, among whom there were some prominent merchant families, Arabs from Egypt and Hadramaut, Afghans and Pathans, Persians and Bohras. These expatriate Muslims had settled in Gujarat for generations and there was no distinction between Gujaratis and foreign Muslims. Islamic culture spread in Gujarat both by landward penetration and the foundation of the Sultanate, and by the continuing seaborne links with Arab and Persian Islamic lands.

It is not clear when the Gujaratis turned their attention to the eastward trade. Perhaps it began from the time Arab direct sailings to Southeast Asia declined in the 12th Century. Perhaps it was an extension of the strong Gujarati trade southwards into Malabar in search of pepper and spices to satisfy the growing demand from west Asia, Egypt and the Mediterranean. The strong links established with Malabar Mapilla merchants may have been extended to the Southeast Asian sources of these spices. Whatever the case may be, by the 15th Century, Gujarati ships were sailing in large numbers, via Calicut and Quilon, to Pasa, Pedie and Melaka and later to Aceh and the west coast of Sumatra. The purpose of these voyages was to bring back pepper and spices to Cambay to make it a major entrepôt for these goods to be reshipped to Aden, Jeddah, Suez, Hormuz and Basra by Arabs, Persians and Gujaratis themselves.

The nature of the voyage was such that Gujarati merchants were constrained to establish settlements at these ports and

enter into close relationships with the states of the area. They brought goods of prestige and luxury consumption. The most valued goods they brought were Indian textiles of the fine, dyed and embroidered varieties desired by the ruling classes. There were goods of west Asian and Mediterranean origin of which Gujaratis became the sole providers. It is no coincidence that the first substantial evidence of Gujarati presence in Southeast Asian ports dates from the early 14th Century when the east-west trade gets an impetus with the increased demand for pepper and spices in Europe. Tombstones of Gujarati origin begin to appear in some of these ports assignable to that period. While the earliest substantial presence must have been in the ports of Pase and Pedie in north-east Sumatra, there is no quantitative evidence on the extent of this presence. The first such evidence comes from Tome Pires relating to the beginning of the 16th Century, when he says there were a thousand Gujarati merchants in Melaka, with a Syabandar specially to attend to their trade, the most important of the four Syabandars of the port. He goes on to speak of a total of four thousand people in the port-city engaged in seafaring activities, made up mainly of Gujaratis and including Bengalees, Arabs and Parsis.¹ Arab sailing manuals of the 15th Century used Gujarati and Tamil sources in describing the voyage to Southeast Asia.² The evidence for the large presence of Gujaratis in Melaka is overwhelming. Pires goes on to say that Gujarati merchants persuaded Sultan Mahmud to attack the Portuguese fleet under Lopes de Sequeira in 1509. Later when Albuquerque attacked the city, Gujarati vessels were anchored at the port and their crew fought with the Melakans against the Portuguese and their ships were set on fire by Albuquerque's men.

After the Portuguese conquest of Melaka, there was a drift of Islamic merchants of all nationalities away from that port to neighbouring ports in the Straits and through the Straits on to Java. After a brief interruption, Gujarati sailings resumed, partly with Portuguese passes and partly in defiance of the Portuguese.

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- 1 *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires* translated and Ed. A. Cortesao (London 1944) II pp. 142, 254, 265.
 - 2 G.R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese* (London 1971).

But it does not appear that Gujaratis returned to Melaka in anything like the numbers they had under the Sultanate. Gujarati ships appear to have used the Straits of Sunda to enter the ports of north Java, avoiding the Straits of Melaka. Evidence of the end of the 16th Century and of the early Dutch reports of the beginning of the 17th shows them continuing to trade in Aceh, Banten, Japara and Gresik, among other ports. It was to Aceh, above all other places, that the Gujarati merchants flocked, symbolising as it did the Asian maritime defiance of Portuguese claims. At the time of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah (1537-71), Gujaratis appear to have supplied him with troops in his campaign against Aru. The sea captain under whom these troops fought, Kuti Ali Marikkar, was obviously from Malabar and points to the Mapilla Malabar-Gujarati alliance that was being forged in western India to combat Portuguese threats.

The Gujarati presence in Aceh was strong till the middle of the 17th Century, sufficient for observers to talk of a Gujarati quarter in the port. Their support was necessary to Sultan Iskander Muda in his efforts to centralise the pepper trade to Sumatra. There was a channel called the Surat channel through which Gujarati vessels entered the port of Dar al Salam. The presence of Gujaratis in Aceh during Iskander Muda's reign and their influence left its impact on cultural and literary life. Arab, Indo-Arab, and Persian scholars appear to have come in Gujarati ships and settled in Aceh and made a contribution to cultural life.³ Most of the historical literature tends to assume that Gujarati merchants ceased to sail to Southeast Asia after the first few decades of the 17th Century. Gujarati Muslim ship-owners were among the most powerful operators in the Indian Ocean and they appear to have continued to trade in their favourite ports of Aceh and Banten well into the 17th Century. Under Sultan Safiyyat al Din (1641-75), two out of four Syabandars of the port were Gujaratis and their merchants were continuing to provide a link between the western part of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and west Asia.⁴

3 D. Lombard, *Le Sultanat D'Atjeh au temps D'Iskandar Muda 1607-1636* (Paris 1967) *passim*.

4 Ito Takeshi, *The World of Adat Aceh. A Historical Study of the Sultanate of Aceh*. Ph.D. Thesis Australian National University (1984), p.293.

Bengal came under Islamic rule at the beginning of the 13th Century, when the Delhi Sultanate under the Khilji dynasty expanded eastwards along the Ganges. A Khilji general founded the Sultanate of Gaur in Bengal. There followed a chequered history of Islamic rule in Bengal under a succession of Governors owing various degrees of allegiance to the Sultans of Delhi and asserting their independence to find separate dynasties whenever the opportunity arose. This situation continued till 1575 when it was firmly incorporated into the Mughal Empire by Akbar and ruled thereafter as a province till British conquest. With the establishment of Islamic power into this wealthy region of eastern India, Turkish and Persian nobles migrated there from Delhi. In the 13th and 14th Centuries there followed an influx of Ghazies and Awliyas, referred to as the warrior-saints of Islam. After the military and political conquest of Bengal had given it a century of relative peace, its moral and spiritual conquest was achieved. Islamic learning and institutions became firmly established and mass conversions of large sections of Bengalee society took place.

During this period of Islamic rule under the Sultanate and later the Great Mughals, Bengal prospered economically and its agricultural and industrial productivity grew. Ibn Batuta, travelling across the country in 1345, noted with admiration the great agricultural prosperity and observed the extremely low cost of foodstuffs and essentials of living. The low cost of living was a marked feature of pre-colonial Bengal and gave it great advantage in world trade, as its produce was very cost competitive in overseas markets. Bengalee merchants of this period built up on a pre-Islamic tradition of Bengalee trade to southeast Asia and powerful Muslim merchants soon outstripped their Hindu rivals. Bengalee Muslim merchants had access to, and derived support from, the Islamic official nobility both of the Sultanate and of the Mughal Empire. This was a feature of Bengalee trade right up to the period of decline of the Empire.

Unlike in the case of other merchants originating from India, there is little direct evidence of the presence of large Bengalee merchant communities in Southeast Asian ports. There is the tradition reported by Tome Pires that Pase was converted to Islam by a large community of Bengalee merchants who resided there. Pires also mentions Bengalees as an important

trading group in Melaka.⁵ Perhaps, given the shorter sailing distance between Bengal and the ports of the western entrance into Southeast Asia, it was not necessary for large settlements of those communities to be founded there. From the end of the 16th Century, there is evidence of Bengalee shipping to Aceh and Banten. After the Portuguese established themselves on the Bengal coast, these vessels were sailing with Portuguese cartazes to these ports and to Melaka. The evidence is even more scanty in the 17th Century, but Dutch records continue to refer to Bengalee shipping in Kedah, Johore and Aceh. Again there is no evidence of Bengalee settlements, though in this period Bengalee Muslim shipping had expanded greatly with Mughal support. The general drift of its activities seems to be westwards to Malabar, Surat, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Apart from the reference to Bengalees as carriers of Islam to Pasa, there is no evidence of any socio-cultural impact of Bengalee Muslim merchants in southeast Asia. They appear as individual merchants sailing in small numbers into southeast Asia in the course of their trade.

In mainland Southeast Asia, to the north, Islamic merchant presence of another type was making itself felt in the 17th Century. Along the northern coast of Burma, Bengalee Muslim merchants had extended their trade into Arakan and Pegu by the 16th Century. The kingdom of Arakan was subject to Islamic influence from the 15th Century when its rulers were assisted by the Sultans of Bengal to retain their independence against the Burmese to their west. The brief Portuguese domination of the upper Burmese coast at the end of the 16th and early 17th Centuries tended to reduce the trade of the Islamic merchants. But with the defeat of the Portuguese freebooter, Felipe de Brito, in Syriam in 1613, and the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hughli in 1636, these merchants were free to resume and expand their trade to the entire Burmese coast. The brief unification of Burma and the establishment of a strong kingdom in the last quarter of the 16th Century opened Burma to Indian Ocean trade and regular sailings from eastern Indian ports were seen to begin. The ports of Mrahaung, Pegu, Martaban, Syriam, Mergui and Tenasserim participated in Indian Ocean trade and were

5 *The Suma Oriental* ..., I, pp.143-4.

brought into the east-west trading system. Bengal, Golconda and south Coromandel Muslim merchants flocked to these ports where facilities for ship-building were an added incentive to the trade in commodities.

To the west of Burma, the Thai people were engaged in state formation and consolidation during this period that brought them into world trade. The southward migration of the Thais brought them to the Gulf of Siam and the Isthmus of Kra where the kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayuthya began to foster trade eastwards and westwards. The founding of the upriver port and town of Tenasserim and the establishment of provincial administration here under the control of the Thai centre enabled the kingdom to tap into the growing Indian Ocean trade from the 16th Century. In the 17th Century, a powerful kingdom of Ayuthya had been established, claiming large parts of Burma and expanding southwards to the north of the Malay peninsula, and controlling the trans-peninsular route through Tenasserim to the Gulf of Siam. This enabled Ayuthya to emerge as an important Indian Ocean trading power. Mergui and Tenasserim attracted merchants of Golconda and a special relationship was soon established between these two states. The relationship paved the way to interesting historical developments that are relevant to a study of Islamic merchant communities in Southeast Asia.

Merchants sailed to Mergui in large vessels and then proceeded up the river to Tenasserim in smaller vessels of up to 100 tons. There they unloaded their goods on to smaller boats capable of sailing up a number of shallow rivers and streams and then proceeded overland to Bangkok. There were also direct sailings by the all-sea route through the Straits of Melaka to Ayuthya. The encouragement of trade, both in the Bay of Bengal and in the Gulf of Siam, led to the growth of large communities of foreign merchants in Ayuthya and other ports. Under King Narai (1656-1688), it was reported that the four major foreign communities in the Thai capital were Chinese, Moors (by which was meant Persians and Indo-Muslims), Malays and Portuguese. Under Narai, the west Asian and Indian connection became strong. Direct from Persia, as well as through the Shi'a kingdom of Golconda in north Coromandel, Persian merchant grandees

established themselves in Ayuthya and rose to positions of influence in the state.⁶

The Kingdom of Golconda had come under strong Persian cultural influence from the reign of Sultan Muhammad Qutb Shah (1612-1626). Embassies were exchanged with the Persian ruler Shah Abbas and a succession of Persian notables migrated and settled in Golconda. The Shah of Iran had precedence over all other rulers in the Golconda court, including even the Mughal Emperor until that kingdom submitted to the Mughals. Among the Persians who made Golconda their home were the powerful merchants of Masulipatnam, who traded under royal patronage westwards to the Persian Gulf and eastwards to Burma and Siam. It was these Persian and Indo-Persian merchants who rose to pre-eminence in Ayuthya under King Narai and dominated the court and the administration for a period of twenty years up to 1680.

These merchants performed a role similar to Indian merchants in the archipelago kingdoms of helping the king to dominate the trade of the region. Thailand had many valuable commodities which circulated in the trade of the Indian Ocean and the South China Seas. Its tin, ivory, elephants, timber, hides and rice were valuable export commodities and it provided excellent markets for Indian textiles, Chinese silk, porcelain and other goods. The king was an active merchant as were many nobles and held monopolies over particular commodities. It was a mixed system of directed and free trade and merchants had to come to terms with the system. The Persian and Golconda Muslim merchants were able to do so with great success. Under King Narai, the Muslim colony in Ayuthya expanded to 3000 to 4000 people. There were Indo-Persians and Golconda Muslim communities settled in other ports and market towns of the kingdom. The town of Tenasserim had the largest Muslim population in the country.

Because of the dominant Persian character of the Muslim settlers, it was Persian cultural influences that permeated the

6 For a detailed discussion of the Persian connection with Thailand, see J. Aubin, 'Le Persans au Siam sous le regime de Narai (1656-1688)'. *Mare Luso Indicum* IV (1980), pp.95-126.

country. Persian forms of dress, Persian cuisine and Shi'a religious rites were prevalent. The King himself began to wear Persian dress and is said to have engaged Indian Muslim cooks in his palace. Muslim grandees enjoyed great favours at court. Ambassadors were exchanged with the Sultan of Golconda and the embassies usually included Islamic religious divines and teachers. Under their influence, mosques were built in Ayuthya and a public bath, a feature of Islamic cities. King Narai, like the Emperor Akhbar, enjoyed listening to teachers of various religions and is often said to have had discussions with Islamic learned men. Muslim notables rose to high office and in the 1660s one of them directed the Department of Commerce where he supervised the king's commercial speculations and was head of the foreign colonies of Ayuthya. During this period of dominance of Indo-Persians, the commerce with Golconda through Masulipatnam and with Bengal grew and the trade was almost totally in the hands of the Muslims. A royal guard consisting of Mughals, Tartars and Rajputs was recruited from India. One of the most powerful Muslim notables was Agha Mohammad Astrabadi, a Persian merchant who came to Siam to trade, rose in the king's favour and became a royal counsellor and confidant for many years.

As most of the eastern commerce from Masulipatnam was carried out through Mergui, Tenasserim and by the overland route, Muslims had risen to high positions in the regional administrations of the country *en route*. The Governors of Tenasserim province and the port-town of Mergui were Indo-Persians as well as those of major towns on the road to Ayuthya. Bangkok, as important a port as Mergui, had a Turani Muslim Governor who had been a Shi'a. So were all the commanders of the king's ships that sailed to Masulipatnam and Bengal where he had factors to transact his affairs. In Masulipatnam, the king had a residence in the port and a well-situated compound on the banks of the river under the Golconda factor, who attended to the repairs and maintenance of his ships and the procuring of cargo.

The tin-rich island of Ujang Selang was in the king of Ayuthya's domains. Here Indian Muslims had engrossed the export trade in tin and the island passed under the administrative authority of two of Astrabadi's nominees. They became Governors

of Ujang Selang and the neighbouring province of Bangeri. A dispute arose between these expatriate Muslims and the local population - Siamese and Malay -, a rebellion broke out against their rule in 1678 in which they were assassinated. Chulias were also settled here under protection of these Persians where they carried on the tin trade and operated the pearl fishery, a speciality they had acquired in their homelands in South India. During this period of Indo-Persian dominance, there was some conversion to Islam among indigenous people, especially in areas near ports and market towns. By 1685 there were about 10,000 to 15,000 Siamese Muslims consisting of converts and children of mixed marriages.

In the late 1670s King Narai was endeavouring to extricate himself from Indo-Muslim influence. Astrabadi fell from favour and his commercial privileges were removed. In an effort to weaken the Indo-Muslims, the king encouraged European trade and offered them privileges. With the rise to power in the kingdom of Constance Phaulkon, the Greek adventurer, Muslim power declined further. Phaulkon appointed his English and French proteges to lucrative offices previously held by the Muslims. He took over the administration of royal monopolies in his hands and awarded favours to his friends. The king's ships were now manned and commanded by European freebooters who began a period of piracy in the Indian Ocean under the king's flag. The important governorship of Mergui port was given to the English privateer Samuel White. This process of alienation of the Muslims culminated in the declaration of war against the Sultan of Golconda and there was a period of piracy of Muslim shipping in the Bay of Bengal. A number of ships from Masulipatnam and Bengal were captured as booty and Islamic trade was severely disrupted. Muslims withdrew from Siamese ports. Though the death of Phaulkon led to a reversal of this policy and Muslim trade resumed, their position never returned to the heights reached during Astrabadi's dominance.

A more persistent presence with continuities into the modern and contemporary periods is that of the South Indian Tamil-speaking Muslim community, generally known as Chulias. It was seen earlier that this relatively homogenous community was descended from the early Arab settlements of the southern coastal tip from Kayalpatnam and Kilakkarai, westwards and northwards

to Porto Novo and Cuddalore. Ethnically separated from other Muslim peoples of the south, Dakhanis, Hindustanis and a variety of west Asians, they maintained this separation through the establishment of powerful religious institutions and traditions of their own and the evolution of an autonomous language-Arabic - Tamil - in addition to the sacred language of Islam-Arabic. There were subdivided into four groups partly on a territorial and an occupational basis, with the emergence of a semblance of hierarchy among them. The wealthiest and most powerful were the Marakayar and Labbais, mainly ship-owning merchants engaged in coastal and overseas trade. They lived in and around the major southern ports in urban conglomerations of some magnitude and affluence. Other sub-groups engaged in peddling, pearl-diving, fishing and some specialised occupations such as weaving and leather craftsmen.

The ports where these merchants were settled had a long history of trade with Southeast Asia from the Chola and Vijayanagar periods. There must have been a period when they shared this trade with indigenous Hindu merchants but by the 17th Century these ports had become predominantly Chulia Muslim ports with Tamil Muslims being the major settlers. The community had a number of mosques, Sufi centres of learning and *dargahs* of famed men of learning and piety. The Chulia port of Nagore, for example, became a famous centre of pilgrimage to the shrine of a Sufi mystic of the 16th Century. The Chulias built up a substantial shipping fleet in these ports and in the island of Sri Lanka, which they frequented, and established close links with hinterland rulers of the region: The Nayaks of Gingee, Raja of Tanjore and the Raja of Ramnad.

In the 14th and 15th Centuries, it must be assumed that they would already have established regular trade between south Coromandel ports and Pase, Pedie, Jambi, Acheh, Johore and Melaka, entering the expanding trade between these two regions in textiles, pepper, tin, aromatic woods, elephants and rice. When the Malay annals speak of Keling merchants of south India, it may be assumed that they consisted both of Hindus and Muslims and that the Muslims belonged to the Chulia communities. In Sultanate Melaka, there is abundant evidence of Muslims of south India origin wielding influence in the polity and they would have lived and traded alongside their Tamil

Hindu compatriots in the city of Melaka as they did on the Indian mainland. Indeed there is evidence of Hindu merchants of Melaka converting to Islam, extending a process that had already taken place on the Indian mainland.

The Portuguese conquest of Melaka must have affected south Indian Muslim trade in the straits area, though not as drastically as it affected Gujarati Muslim trade. Like the Gujaratis, it may be assumed that the Chulias shifted their trade to Aceh, Johore and other ports in the Straits area. The Chulias were forced to come to terms with the Portuguese after they had conquered and fortified the port of Nagapatnam, a centre of Chulia shipping, and the ports of Sri Lanka which had been the preserve of Chulia Muslim trade. The need for accommodation was mutual. The Portuguese realised that they had to reopen the trade of Melaka if they were to derive benefits from it, just as they could not frighten the trade out of Nagapatnam if that port was to be economically viable. Thus, after a brief period of interruption, the Coromandel-Melaka trade resumed under Portuguese protection, with Hindu and Muslim shipping liberally provided with cartazes and even armed against piracy. It was at this time that Chulias extended their trade to Aceh and developed good relations with the merchant elites there, just as the Gujarati and Malabar Muslims did. Under Portuguese Melaka, the Keling quarter of the city expanded and consisted of both Hindu and Muslim settlers whose main function was to service and facilitate the trade of the principal merchants of both communities based in south Indian ports.

As Portuguese power in Melaka and its claims to naval mastery were challenged from the end of the 16th Century, Chulia trade benefited from this weakening hold of the Portuguese. They now sailed more boldly to peninsular and Straits ports, to Kedah, Perak, Johore, Aceh and proceeded through the Straits to Javanese ports of Banten and Japara and on to Macassar. The Dutch noted this expanded network of south Indian trade in Malay and Javanese ports in the early 17th Century. When the Dutch conquered Melaka in 1641, they were confronted with this network which had a dominant hold on textile imports into the region as well as on exports of tin, pepper and other produce. This dominance was to grow in the mid-17th Century, taking advantage of the Dutch-Portuguese conflict and the col-

lapse of Portuguese naval mastery in the Indian Ocean, before it was replaced by a more strident Dutch claim. It was also strengthened by two other factors autonomous to Asian history. In India the rise of large and powerful political units fostered trade and industry. In Southeast Asia, port-city based kingdoms utilised trade to further power and led to an increase in demand and circulation of trade within the region. This was to go on till the Dutch finally asserted their control with the destruction of Banten in 1682.

The Chulias developed a type of presence and a manner of operation that was to enable them to persist as traders, through an increasingly hostile environment, till the end of the 18th Century. In the process they outmanoeuvred their Hindu compatriots. It is possible to look at the major Southeast Asian ports to note the nature of Chulia Muslim trade and presence. In Melaka itself, once the Dutch had established their system of controls and direction of trade through a series of regulations, the Chulias seem to have given the port a miss. Though they continued to sail there, largely it appears to secure a pass from the Dutch to cross the Bay of Bengal, their trade was less profitable because of Dutch restrictions. Their mastery of the import trade is seen in their ability to outsell the Dutch in textiles, in spite of a duty of 20% on their goods. The Keling quarters of the city continued to be occupied by Hindus and Muslims, the latter functioning as agents in the neighbouring Malay Sultanates.

Acheh, which had developed as an entrepôt to replace Melaka in the 16th Century, continued to develop under Iskander Muda (1607-1636), and Islamic merchants from Masulipatnam to Nagapatnam traded there in the 17th century. Chulias sailed to Acheh with Dutch and English passes and utilised English colours to circumvent Dutch blockades. We hear of a wealthy and powerful merchant of Cuddalor, Nellabuka Marikar, freighting goods in his ships to Acheh and having great influence with port authorities to secure advantage for his ships.⁷ This Chulia trade continued into the 18th century, even after the decline of Acheh from a position of eminence in Southeast Asian trade.

7 Factory Records: Cuddalore. Consultations 29 March 1685/6, India Office Library G/14/2.

Macassar was another port to which Chulia Muslims traded after the Dutch conquest of Melaka. Their first contacts with Macassar would have been through the Portuguese from whom they secured permission to sail through the Straits. Porto Novo and Cuddalore were the Coromandel ports for this trade. Later they secured English protection, freighted goods in English vessels and used English colours to sail their vessels. In Macassar they traded with the Sultan, who himself consigned goods in English and Portuguese vessels to Chulia merchants in Coromandel. Chulias had their agents in Macassar to whom they consigned goods and who helped the Sultan and other Macassar merchants to despatch goods and cash to be reinvested in Coromandel exports.⁸

When the Dutch drew their net closer around the trading centres of Southeast Asia, the Chulias responded by dispersing their trade to other places remote from Dutch control. They entered the states of Perak, Kedah and Johore in search of desired exports and of markets for imported textiles. Soon after the Dutch conquest of Melaka, Chulias moved to Perak, a prolific exporter of tin. The rulers of Perak in an effort to move away from the hegemony of Aceh and encourage direct exports from Perak, enticed Chulia vessels with incentives. Chulia vessels were able to sail close to river mouths and escape detection by Dutch cruisers. This search for new markets took them to Kedah and began a long history of Chulia association with that state. In both Perak and Kedah, the Sultan was a merchant holding a monopoly over major commodities. Through the Chulias, the rulers secured the best prices for these commodities, and secured supplies of textiles wholesale for the *orang kaya* merchants of the states.

This association brought them closer to the ruling groups of these states and of Johore, and a community of interests bound them together, enabling Chulias to gradually penetrate the political system. The officer called *saudagar raja* managed

8 Factory Records: Macassar. General letters to Bantam, 12 June 1659, 21 July 1659, I.O.L.G/21/3 Pt.3.

the trade of the royal family in a Malay state.⁹ Chulias occupied this position at various times. In the 1670s, a powerful Chulia merchant called Sidi Lebbe was *saudagar raja* in Perak for many years and, when he fell out of favour, removed to Johore and carried on his extensive shipping concerns from there. Further to the north, the Chulias, in their search for tin and markets for textiles, settled in large numbers in the southern Siamese province of Bangery and the island of Ujang Selang. They were associated here with Indo-Persians in subordinate roles and appear to have suffered in the rebellion of Siamese and Malays against Indo-Muslim dominance in the 1680s. There were some Chulia settlements in the port of Mergui and in the province of Tenasserim, on the overland route to Ayuthya, but subordinate to Golconda Muslims and Indo-Persians.

The Chulias had a substantial presence in Banten, during its efflorescence as a free port, making full use of English and Danish protection against the Dutch. Porto Novo was the major port of sailings to Banten. As in the Malay states, they traded here in association with Bantenese ruling groups, including the Sultan, whose ships sailed regularly to Porto Novo where they were serviced by Chulias. Chulias so dominated the textile markets of Banten that in the 1670s the Dutch were unable to dispose of their imports in Melaka and even in Batavia. The Chulia trade to Banten, as to other Malay states, had elements of a peddling trade. In each vessel, 100 to 150 merchants would sail with their small parcels of goods. Chulia merchants based in Banten also sailed to other Javanese ports in association with Bantenese merchants, some of whom were state officials.

After the Dutch conquest of Macassar and Banten, with the gradual winding down of trade in the archipelago islands, Chulias concentrated their activities on the Malay peninsula and the south Siam ports. The Chulias provided a continuity in the old trade of southeast Asia throughout the late 17th and the 18th Centuries. They continued with the trade to Aceh, despite its decline. It was probably during this period that they established

9 For a discussion of the role of the *saudagar raja*, see Barbara Andaya, 'The Indian "Saudagar Raja" in Traditional Malay Courts', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch Royal Asiatic Society*, L1, Pt1 (1978), pp.13-36.

colonies of settlement in some of these states. This seems to have proceeded furthest in Kedah, perhaps because of its furthest distance from Dutch Melaka and its proximity to the rich tin producing districts of south Siam. By the end of the 18th Century, there were populous Chulia settlements in Kuala Kedah and up the Kedah river close to the capital of Alor Star. Some of these settlements were fortified.¹⁰ With the decline of the trade of the Companies and the expansion of the trade of European freemercants, Chulias began to draw closer to the freemercants. The freemercants found the Chulias useful partners to introduce them to the commercial world of the Bay of Bengal.

But competition between them was also intense and Chulias utilised their influence in the Malay states to resist European penetration. When the English tried to revive their trade in Aceh and sent a mission from Fort St George to the Sultan in 1771 to secure permission to settle a factory, the emissary returned empty-handed. It was thought by the English that Chulia merchants had worked actively against the emissary. The influence they wielded in Kedah was even greater. A Chulia merchant, Jamal, from low beginnings, rose to become an advisor to the king, with the title Datu Seri Raja. The English held him responsible for thwarting Forrest's mission for permission to settle in Kedah. Other Chulias feature as councillors, managers of trade and procurers of arms for the Kedah rulers.¹¹

After the unsettling events in Kedah in the 1770s, the Chulias seem to have dropped their opposition to British interests in Southeast Asia. By this time, they were the only Asian commercial interest group of any significance left in the Bay of Bengal trading area. When the British settlement of Fort Cornwallis was founded in Penang in 1786, the Chulias decided to throw in their lot with this new force in Southeast Asian commerce. Chulias settled in that port in large numbers, migrating from Kedah and probably from other west Malayan ports. In the early censuses, they are recorded as the third largest settler community,

10 Factory Records: Straits Settlements. I.O.L. G/34/1.

11 R. Bonney, *Kedah 1771-1821. The Search for Security and Independence* (Kuala Lumpur 1971), pp.40, 53, 162 and *passim*.

next to Malays and Chinese. Their vessels began to call regularly in Penang. The sailing patterns were predictable. The ships came from Porto Novo, Nagore or Nagapatnam and from Penang they sailed to Mergui, Ujang Selang, Melaka, Acheh and Pedie. The most popular schedule was from South India to Penang and back through Pedie and Acheh. The ships ranged from 100 to 300 tons and carried goods of the traditional trade exchange: textiles, rice, tobacco, salt from India, pepper, tin, ginger, gambier, lak, betel nuts, rattan, horses and gold dust on the return journey. It is interesting to note that all the vessels carried heavy guns.¹²

Chulia settlers of Penang included agents of these shippers to whom goods were consigned and who assembled goods for the return journey. They were of the wealthier class and soon built houses of considerable size near the port. A number of the settlers were small pedlars who took passage in the large ships, bringing small quantities of goods and capital, and stayed over for one or more seasons to return after some regional trading. Some of them became shop-keepers selling supplies and provisions to ships and tending towards semi-permanent settlement. At the bottom were labourers at port and shiphands lending their services to shipowners. By the early 1790s, they were settling with families brought direct from their homelands or starting families in Penang by intermarriage with Malays. In 1794, Francis Light wrote that the Chulia vessels brought annually 1500 to 2000 men who earned a living by labour and returned home with their savings only to be succeeded by others.¹³ Thus began an new type of economic relationship between India and Malaya that pointed the way to developments in the 19th Century and after. It was also the beginning of a new type of migration by Islamic communities from the Indian subcontinent, this time specifically directed to the Malay peninsula and to colonial settlements there. These migrants were to perform different functions from those of their predecessors and interact with local communities in a new setting.

The Islamization of Southeast Asia is a subject that has for long attracted the attention of historians, sociologists, linguists,

12 Bengal Consultations, 10 April 1789, 6 August 1790, 20 June 1790, 5 January 1791. India Office Library.

13 Bengal Consultations, 1 August 1794, India Office Library.

legal and theological scholars. There has been an ongoing debate on the process and method of Islamization. One of the viewpoints canvassed in that debate is the role of India in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. Variousy, Bengal, Gujarat, Bijapur, Coromandel and Malabar are mentioned as likely regions from which the propagation of Islam came. It is not the purpose of this lecture to enter that debate. Its purpose is rather to set out some material conditons which may have made possible the transmission of culture.

It has been shown that the Indian subcontinent has been closely knit with the Southeast Asian region in a historic exchange of ideas, beliefs, goods and people. In this lecture I have looked at what may be called the Islamic period of pre-modern trade to show the strengthening of this nexus and the machinery by which it functioned. Islamic merchants of the Indian subcontinent were in the forefront of the commercial exchanges and this took them to various parts of Southeast Asia where they established close links with the ruling groups. Permanent and semi-permanent settlements of these merchants were established. They provided access to world markets to the west, introduced goods of prestige and value desired by the rulers, assisted them with expertise in the management of trade and even helped in administrative and political spheres. They performed these roles for a period of five centuries, providing continuity, offering the trading kingdoms of southeast Asia a window to the world outside. These merchants may not have been the carriers and the disseminators of Islam, they certainly helped in its consolidation at a time of upheavals in the Southeast Asian commercial world.