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Relocating trans-national trade and cosmopolitan diaspora in the exploration of Muslim lives

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Abstract

The framework of "lived Islam" overshadows the study of Islam in South Asia, presupposing a "local Islam" against a "global Islam". The local is portrayed as accommodative and peaceful in theoretical foregrounds. In studying contemporary trends in Islam, recent western scholarship has been asking how to conceptualize Islam itself, for only then one can speak of the issue of the legitimacy of Islam in the contemporary modern world. In the course of time, deliberate attempts have been done on behalf of several anthropologists and orientalist to essentialize Islam. Western scholarships on global history also take part in this process of essentialization. The history of Islam during premodern period in South Asia (between 12th and 16th century) is relied upon Indian Ocean history. Political histories have traditionally identified the European expansion in to the Indian Ocean as its central juncture. The choices of individual historians are inevitably influenced by their thematic preoccupations. The agency of articulation is firmly assigned to the Europeans who imposed themselves on a static Indian Ocean. This colonial venture are based almost exclusively on European sources. In this whiggish view of history, the narrative arc of Islam were constrained. And portrayed the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean as a unilateral transfer of a stable, fully formed prototype. By shifting attention to the Muslim maritime movements in Indian Ocean, I emphasize the significance of trans-national trade and cosmopolitan diaspora in the exploration of Muslim lives. It offers a framework for conceptualizing a particular trajectory of Islamic history especially in South Asia. At its core, my scholarship is relied upon the tension between the distant and the local, between these Muslims role in far flung trading networks and an Islamic cosmopolis on the one hand and, on the other, their need to negotiate the specific social, economic, and political conditions of particular trading locations. This effort was rooted in the percepts of Muslim historical subjectivity through its universalist faith and cosmopolitan idiom. This ardent effort to bridge the gap between the global and the local is to assign a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of pre-modern South India, especially Malabar. I conclude that, It is this trajectory that has defined the lived reality of the majority of Muslims worldwide, while the Muslim Subjectivity is decisively framed within the constraints of modern western scholarships.

Keywords: Islam, trade, South India, cosmopolitan diaspora, Muslim history, subjectivity

Introduction

Academics have grappled with the complex interplay of local and global forces impacting Muslim existence, molded by diverse religious, societal, economic and political elements. To unravel the enigmatic facets of the Muslim identity, scholars have deployed various analytical approaches. In studying contemporary trends in Islam, recent western scholarships has been asking how to conceptualize Islam itself, for only then one can speak of the issue of the legitimacy of Islam in the contemporary modern world. Over time, deliberate endeavors, especially in western scholarly contributions to global history have been undertaken by numerous anthropologists and orientalist to distill the essence of Islam. Salman Syed sketches these different approaches by emphasising Talal Asad's concept of "Discursive Tradition", "Asad's trenchant critique flies in the face of most of the earlier anthropological conceptualizations of Islam, because they tend to imagine Islam as a "religion" in the modern western sense of the word. The modern enterprise of defining a universal category "religion" as an "autonomous essence", which is transhistorical and transcultural, is a reflection of the liberal demand that religion be separate from the spheres of real power and reason such as

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politics, law and science " [1].

While the cosmos has been characterized as "an intrinsic, logical and foundational dimension", substantial scholarly endeavours have been directed towards the delineation of distinct epochs within the annals of Indian Oceans history. The history of Islam during premodern period in South Asia (between 12th and 16th century) is relied upon Indian Ocean history. The so-called Eurocentric historiography identified the European expansion in to the Indian Ocean as it's central juncture. Sebastian R Prange contend that "The overwhelming emphasis on epigraphy that characterizes studies of medieval South India has meant that the 'sailors, merchants and pilgrims frequenting the Indian Ocean in the post 500AD period become almost invisible in the historiography" [2]. Inscriptions, by and large, exhibit a conspicuous absence of merchants, which has led to the maritime trade's role being either marginalized or altogether overlooked within scholarly discourse. In this interpretation of history, the depiction of Islam's historical trajectory becomes delimited, with the dissemination of Islam throughout the Indian Ocean region presented as an undirectional transmission of an established and unchanging prototype.

The choice of commencing this investigation from a South Indian historical lens is aptly underscored by the significant juncture that was the 12th century. During this epoch, the hegemony of centralized government in the Malabar region saw it's culmination, subsequently giving rise to a plethora of littoral states. They were also able to carve out a place for their trade and communities. This particular period challenges the misleading separation of Indian Ocean history into pre-European and European periods that continues to define much of the literature. Sebastian R Prange critique the framework of "Europe", primarily analysing, the "European language sources" that bear European expansion as the central juncture of Indian Ocean history. My analysis is mainly informed by Sebastian R Prange, Michael Pearson, Nile green and Mahmood kooria. The emphasize is rooted in the percepts of Muslim historical subjectivity through it's cosmopolitan idiom and universalist faith. This warrants special attention to bridge the gap between the global and the local, thereby, to assign a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of premodern South India, especially Malabar.

Beyond conventional horizons: encompassing the Indian ocean

The Indian Ocean, distinguished among the world's major oceans, exhibits a unique geographical orientation along an east-west axis, contrasting with the typical north-south alignment of its counterparts. This distinct configuration is a consequence of its enclosure by adjacent landmasses, encompassing the East African coast, the Arabian Peninsula, the South Asian continental plate, and Southeast Asian archipelagos. This singular geographic arrangement has led to the characterization of the Indian Ocean as an 'embayed ocean,' at times likened to a landlocked sea. Notably, the Indian subcontinent, extending nearly a thousand miles,

effectively divides the Indian Ocean into the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. This exceptional layout not only distinguishes the Indian Ocean but also significantly influences its environmental and climatic dynamics, rendering it a compelling subject of study within the realms of oceanography and geography. As Sebastian R Prange stressed the importance of this layout, "India shapes the character of the Indian Ocean, a sentiment that seems reflected in the ocean's name" [3].

Over the centuries, narrators of the Indian Ocean, hailing from diverse cultural vantage points in both the East and West, have engaged in fervent endeavors necessitating an intricate negotiation with multifaceted legacies and obscured historical narratives, which disconnected locales and the pull of adjoining waters. Apart from the structuralist approach of "Indian Ocean history school", this endeavors looks beyond it. In his article 'The Indian Ocean', Sujit Sivasundharan tries to locate this shift profoundly, like "As historians shift between finding a singular Indian Ocean 'system', environmental pattern or social formation and breaking all of these up into competing Islams or distinct environmental belts, or indeed, moving beyond slavery versus indenture, relinking this sea to the Atlantic and Pacific, and reinserting race, legality, and state-making, the way ahead must surely lie in embracing the many historiographical Indian Oceans" [4]. As Michael Pearson contends, "oceans are not discrete and enclosed. We are now aware of the dangers of the myth of continents, but have not come to terms with the myth of oceans. We now think of Eurasia rather than discrete Europe and Asia, but obviously oceans also flow into each other, and should not be studied as enclosed entities" [5]. Classical historiography is bounded in the realm of Euro-centric framework and essentialized geographies. This colonial venture are almostly based on European sources. And potrayed Indian Ocean as a almost static one. Also, in the post-colonial period, historical accounts of new nationstate formation have tended to prioritize present-day political boundaries while overlooking the broader historical context and intricate maritime connections. In the context of South and Southeast Asia, Farish Noor's scholarship highlights the significant impact of the colonial era in creating an epistemic and politico-economic divide between these regions [6]. This division resulted in the disruption of longstanding cultural, ethnic, and economic links that historically linked the Indian subcontinent with maritime Southeast Asia. Consequently, this period marked the demise of the previously interconnected socio-political landscape of pan-Asian unity, which was previously governed by indigenous Asian actors. When we discuss about this particular inter-disciplinary approach, should informed about the rich trajectory of contemporary Indian oceanic studies that led the foundation for the historical paradigm shift. Where to begin? The initial endeavor to engage in a serious, if popular account was penned not by a historian. Rather, it was undertaken by a distinguished globetrotter, Alan Villiers, known for his authoritative narrative detailing his voyage from Kuwait to the Swahili coast aboard the Kuwaiti dhow vessel 'Triumph of Righteousness' in the year 1938. In many ways, then,

¹ Ovamir Anjum, (2007). Islam as a Discursive Tradi: on: Talal Asad and His Interlocuters

² Sebastein R Prange, (2018). Monsoon Islam

³ Sebastein R Prange, (2018). Monsoon Islam

⁴ Sujith Sundharan, (2017). The Indian Ocean

⁵ Michael Pearson, (2015). Trade, Circula: on, and Flow in the Indian Ocean World

⁶ Farish A. Noor, (2012). Islam on the Move: The Tablighi Jama at in Southeast Asia

Villiers embodied the kind of interdisciplinary approach to Indian Ocean Studies that we in the academy today advocate. Similarly, For Sugata Bose, the Indian Ocean has never been a 'system' as much as an 'arena' of 'a hundred horizons', which are economic, political and cultural, and where both space and time was crossed^[7]. Started from there, it took many crucial engagements and enriched the particular trajectory with profound scholarship. As Sebastian Prange says, "Scholars have engaged with this notion in different ways, prompting new attempts to define the ocean's limits and character"^[8]. Diverse sources, spanning Sanskrit inscriptions, Arabic travelogues, and European records, collectively affirm the cosmopolitan character of trade in the Indian Ocean. These varied accounts converge to provide a rich insight into the evolution and intricate intricacies of the manifold mercantile networks that interwove across this vast expanse. This perception finds further substantiation through meticulous examinations of port cities, merchant collectives, and political entities actively participating in Indian Ocean trade. Additionally, it gains reinforcement from the religious and cultural phenomena that emerged in the wake of, and played an essential role in underpinning, the intricate web of trade routes. Historians who have endeavoured to write Indian history in this sense have synthesized this literature and tended to define the ocean in the broadest sense. The facilitative component underpinning the present exchange of ideas emanates from the intricate monsoon system pervading the Indian Ocean. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, a prominent proponent of the pivotal role played by wind patterns in shaping the course of global history, propounds the "Indian Ocean as an unparalleled domain for extensive maritime expeditions", primarily attributing this to the benevolent character of the monsoon system^[9]. As Sebastian Prange emphasize the importance of monsoon winds, "The understanding of the monsoon was the basis for Graeco-Roman sojourns into the Indian Ocean, and made the difference between Vasco da Gama's smooth passage to western India under the guidance of a knowledgeable pilot and his difficult return journey against the monsoon"^[10]. In the realm of maritime studies, the ocean's significance extends beyond its physical boundaries, encompassing the complex web of societal perceptions and imaginative constructs. As Philip Steinberg examines how different societies have interacted with the sea through their practices, regulations and representations of the maritime sphere^[11]. Recent research reveals that intellectual advancements in diverse domains were driven by cross-cultural idea exchange in the premodern Indian Ocean world. This exchange transcended geographical and societal boundaries, vitalizing the growth and sustainability of expansive civilizations and facilitating the movement of scholars and students. The primary challenge lies in identifying these intellectual exchanges in archaeological and historical records, prompting interdisciplinary dialogue to unveil the shared cultural dimensions spanning this maritime sphere. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that the permeability of the Indian Ocean, viewed as a spatial construct, presents

inherent challenges. Maritime regions, as entities for historical and geographical examination, do not exhibit enduring or steadfast characteristics. Rather, they undergo modifications in response to shifts in economic, technological, or social contexts. In "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II", Braudel himself astutely acknowledged the paradox inherent in the characterization of the sea, wherein it simultaneously serves as a facilitator of exchange and, conversely, assumes the role of a 'great divider, the obstacle that had to be overcome'^[12]. The extent of the Indian Ocean world, then, can be defined by the extent to which it was unified by human activity and interaction at different periods of history.

Exploring Muslim maritime movements: Malabar as it's central juncture

Over the past four decades, Islam in the South Asian region, with a particular emphasis on its manifestation within the context of India, has emerged as a focal point of scholarly investigation. This scholarly endeavor has yielded a narrative that delves into the nuanced historical particularities and idiosyncrasies characterizing the presence and development of Islam in the South Asian subcontinent. At its core, Malabar become one of the main realm of these scholarships. By shifting attention to the Muslim maritime movements in Indian Ocean, especially Malabar Coast, I emphasize the significance of trans-national trade and cosmopolitan diaspora in the exploration of Muslim lives. Historians have come to understand the trading world of maritime Asia, initially by locating the apocryphal account of the South Indian ruler Cheraman Perumal which epitomizes a particular trajectory of Islamic history as it intersects with the history of the Indian Ocean. His realm occupied the westernmost region of Tamilakam, known to foreign entities as Malabar or colloquially as "the land of pepper." Notably, it largely corresponds to the present-day boundaries of the Indian state of Kerala. As Sebastian Prange says, "The story of the legend made up of rulers, traders, holy men, and pilgrims who are part of the trans-oceanic exchange of people, ideas, and patronage is not invented of whole cloth but consistent with the way in which historians have come to understand trading world of maritime Asia"^[13]. During the medieval era, Islam spread along the coastal regions of monsoon Asia as Muslim merchants established communities in port cities along the Indian Ocean. This facilitated the transmission of Islamic beliefs and practices across vast distances, reminiscent of the early Caliphate's expansion in the seventh century. Importantly, this diffusion via maritime trade routes across monsoon Asia between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries differed from traditional conquest or political influence, occurring incidentally through the development of Muslim trade networks. The primary agents of this expansion were not rulers, warriors, or scholars but ordinary traders motivated by economic rather than religious objectives. Islam's historical development has been characterized by a notable lack of stability and a pronounced absence of monolithic cohesion. In regions far removed from its Arabian

⁷ Sugata Bose, (2006). *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*

⁸ Sebastian R. Prange, (2008). *Scholars and the Sea: A Historiography of the Indian Ocean*

⁹ Felipe Fernandez Armesto. (2006). *Pathfinders: A Global History of Explorations*

¹⁰ Sebastian R. Prange, (2008). *Scholars and the Sea: A Historiography of the Indian Ocean*

¹¹ Philip E. Steinberg, (2001). *The Social Construction of the Ocean*

¹² Fernand Braudel, (1949). *The Mediterranean and The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip 2*

¹³ Sebastian R. Prange, (2018). *Monsoon Islam*

origins, such as South Asia, the nuanced local receptions, interpretations, and practices of Islam played an indispensable role in shaping its trajectory. Particularly noteworthy are the enduring communities that emerged from the settlement of Muslim traders in prominent port cities throughout maritime Asia. In other words, Every significant historic trade port within the Indian Ocean basin can be identified as having harbored a Muslim community with historical linkages to the premodern exchanges that transpired in these locales. This was rooted in the prospects of universalist faith and cosmopolitan idiom. To locate the historical development of Islam through the cultural elements that were not directly religious in nature, Marshall Hodgson use the term "Islamicate" in his famous book "The Venture of Islam" ^[14]. It offers a historiographical account of Islam that diverges from a conventional narrative centered on the propagation of an Islam deeply rooted in Arabic high culture. Instead, it delineates the chronicle of Muslims multifaceted engagement with a significantly broader and conspicuously more diverse global milieu. As a result of this, "Islamdom in the westerly coasts of the Indian Ocean formed a political and intellectual world of it's own" ^[15]. Along these regions, Islamic jurisprudence developed independently from traditional centers of Islamic scholarship of the era. Shahab Ahmed finds his "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" from this cultural oecumene, "The Balkans-to-Bengal complex represents the most geographically, demographically and temporally extensive instance of a highly articulated shared paradigm of life and thought in the history of Muslims - it is demographically, spacially, and temporally, an (if not the) historically major paradigm of Islam" ^[16].

Port cities served as pivotal hubs for maritime commerce, and their characterization has evolved through diverse paradigms and terminologies, each of which delineates their unique roles within the broader trade network. The Malabar Coast exhibits an inherent predisposition toward maritime trade. Throughout the period extending to, at the very least, the fifteenth century, it maintained a virtual hegemony over the cultivation and distribution of black pepper, which was one of the lucrative commodities of the entire Indian Ocean trade. As Sebastian Prange contends, "Malabar's pepper was in high demand all across Eurasia, sought after by Elite consumers in the markets of Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and China alike" ^[17]. A Malabari port mentioned with great regularity in contemporary sources is Muziris, this site is now being identified with growing confidence as the village of pattanam at the mouth of the Periyar river, near the modern town of Kodungallur ^[18]. As W.H Schoff describes that Muziris "abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia, and by the Greeks" ^[19]. Kodungallur, owing to its pivotal position in the historical pepper trade, emerges as a central locus in the narratives of Malabar's Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, all of which converge in portraying this port as the epicenter for the dissemination of their respective religious traditions within the South India.

The common articulation of the medieval Indian Ocean as a "Muslim lake" is usually depicted by reference to the Malabar Coast, which performs as a perspicuous example of Muslim control over the highly profitable spice trade. It is all rooted in commerce and eventually Muslims came to predominate the sea trade of the Indian Ocean. Muslim traders were engaged in Malabar's trade from the formative period, continuing the historic connections between South Arabia and Southern India that pre-dated Islam. The Geniza records substantiate the enduring involvement of Jewish merchants in trade between Malabar and Arabia during the 11th and 12th centuries. During this Malabar Coast's historical Muslim ascendancy, there was a notable increase in political patronage, marking a pivotal era. Simultaneously, this period provides the earliest documented evidence of widespread mosque construction. As M. G. S. Narayanan informs, "In fact, the oldest mosque on the Malabar Coast that can be reliably dated, at Madayi, was founded in 1124, that is the very year in which Chera overrule formally ended" ^[20]. The ascendancy of Muslim merchants was inherently perceived by the Portuguese as the primary impediment to their overarching aspiration of monopolizing trade. The Islamic faith comprises not only a set of doctrinal tenets but also an intricate legal framework that dictates a wide spectrum of socio-economic and political standards for its followers. As W. Bernstein informs, "The many commercial precepts included in Islamic law have given rise to Islam being characterized as the 'religion of trade' ^[21]. Apparently, "In the absence of a dominant ruling authority to enforce a singular strand of the multifaceted body of legal exegesis and application inherent in Islamic jurisprudence, it is remarkable that Indian Ocean merchants exhibited a notable degree of uniformity in their allegiance to the Shafi'i school within the Sunni tradition of Islam" ^[22]. During a visit in 2005 to the Cheraman Masjid in Kerala, widely recognized as India's most ancient mosque, President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam invoked this edifice as an emblematic representation of interfaith concord and cohabitation. The presidential citation of the Cheraman Mosque within the context of India's national heritage, as an emblem denoting a gradual and peaceful process of acculturation, served to posit and advocate an alternative historical trajectory of Islam in the subcontinent. This narrative portrays Islam as influenced and molded by the experiences and necessities of common Muslim merchants who engaged in trade and established settlements along the coastlines of South Asia. In the wake of the Gujarat riots, President Kalam's visit to the Cheraman Masjid symbolized a counter-narrative that contested the prevalent discourse of perpetual conflict. This narrative depicted Muslims as arriving peacefully on India's shores as merchants, integrating into the Indic culture, and emphasizing their intrinsic inclusion rather than opposition. Muslim history in modern scholarships demands our special attention.

Here, I am trying to bridge the gap between the global and the local to assign a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of premodern South India, especially Malabar.

¹⁴ Marshall Hodgson, (1974). *The Venture of Islam*

¹⁵ Marshall Hodgson, (1974). *The Venture of Islam*

¹⁶ Shahab Ahmed, (2004). *What is Islam?*

¹⁷ Sebastian R. Prange, (2011). *Measuring by the Bushel: Reweighing the Indian Ocean pepper trade*

¹⁸ K.P Shajan, R. Tomber, V. Selvakumar and P.J Cherian, (2015, Cambridge University Press). *Locating the Ancient Port of Muziris: Fresh findings from Pacanam*

¹⁹ William H. Schoff, (2007). *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*

²⁰ M.G.S. Narayanan, (2013). *Perumals of Kerala*

²¹ William J. Bernstein (2008). *A Splendid Exchange*

²² Sebastian R. Prange, (2018). *Monsoon Islam*

And it is this trajectory that has defined the lived reality of the majority of Muslims worldwide, while the Muslim Subjectivity is decisively framed within the constraints of modern western scholarships.

Conclusion

So far, I have critically analysed the framework of "lived Islam" that overshadows the study of Islam in South Asia, presupposing a "local Islam" against a "global Islam".²³ I have also demonstrated the necessity of understanding the conceptualizing of Islam in the recent western scholarships. The temporal focus also corresponds to a long-standing gap in the historiography that is only beginning to be addressed. As Sebastian Prange notes, "Political histories have traditionally identified the European expansion in to the Indian Ocean as its central juncture. The choices of individual historians are inevitably influenced by their thematic preoccupation" ^[24]. By shifting attention to the Muslim maritime movements in Indian Ocean, I emphasized the significance of trans-national trade and cosmopolitan diaspora in the exploration of Muslim lives. This world's origin can be ascribed to commerce, which, while central, also entails a multitude of complex exchanges intricately woven into the fabric of commercial relationships. These multifaceted exchanges collectively shape a distinctive trajectory in Islamic history, evolving within the dynamic network of trading enclaves across the expansive Indian Ocean.

This offers a framework for conceptualizing a particular trajectory of Islamic history, especially in South Asia. Following these leads, I propose to examine the percepts of Muslim historical Subjectivity through it's universalist faith and cosmopolitan idiom. What scholars can analyse are the historically produced structural and epistemological premises that framed the Muslim subjectivity within the constraints of modern western scholarships. Such an approach will help to assign a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of premodern South India, especially Malabar.

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²³ Thahir Jamal kiliyammil, "Neither global nor local: Reorienting the study of Islam in South Asia" in Asian Journal of Social Science, 2024

²⁴ Sebas:an R.Prange, (2008). Scholars and the sea: A Historiography of the Indian Ocean