Arab accounts of Malabar and its legacy

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Devotional fervor to see the traditional foot print of Adam in Ceylon was also a motive behind the frequent visits of the Arabs to India and Ceylon. Almost all the Arab writers mention about it. Owing to these favorable circumstances the accounts of Arab travelers, navigators and merchants who visited India during this period (from 9th to 15th century) contain more accurate and comprehensive information about India.¹

There are earliest references to the Muslims in Malabar, however, in the notes of Arab travelers and geographers, Nainar, Geographers, p.3 correctly maintains that Muslim geographers are the main source for information regarding the ninth to twelfth centuries of Malabar history, and they continue to be an important source for history up to the fourteenth century. Western writers have been heavily dependent on the notes of European travellers. The Arab Accounts of India the Arabs who held the monopoly of the intercontinental trade of Asia, Europe and Africa in the ancient as well as the medieval times had been visiting he coastal cities of India, Ceylon and China and all the islands scattered over the vast ocean long before the rise of Islam. They carried the Eastern products to Yemen, from thence to Syria and Egypt via the Red Sea and the land route along the western coast of These commodities were then transported to European countries from the Syrian and Egyptian ports via the Mediterranean Sea. Although the Indo-Arab commercial contacts are of ancient origin, the Arab merchants of pre-Islamic period have left little account of their mercantile activities in the Indian Ocean and islands. ² But the Arab's knowledge observes Nainar, from the pre-Christian era down to the 6th century A.D. is a subject still awaiting the attention of scholars.³ The accounts of Arab travelers and geographers form an important source for the history of Kerala from the 9th century A.D onwards.⁴ After describing various Arab accounts Sreedhara Menon point out that "most of the Arab writers refer to several incredible customs of Kerala from hearsay and their account have therefore to be sued with great care.⁵ Large number of Arab works produced from the 9th to the 13th century contain detailed information about various aspects of Indian life. This information may broadly, be analyzed under the following heads: The early Arabs, came into contact with the coastal region of India and Sind. Naturally their description of India is confined to these

regions only.⁶ Except Kalhana's Rajatarangiri it is difficult to explain the lack of interest in history.⁷

Some of the gaps in the history of ancient India are filled by archaeological remains and numismatic evidence.⁸

A notable non-European foreign writer who gives information about Kerala in the 15th century is **Abdur Razzak**, the Persian ambassador, who visited the Zamorin at Calicut in 1442. He testifies to the predominance of Malabar trade with the Arab countries and the dominant role played by the Arab community in it.⁹

Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim writer of the 15th century, has also written about the Kerala coast. His notices of Cochin and Calicut are particularly valuable. Ma Huan gives an interesting description of the port and town of Calicut which was at the time of his visit a great emporium of trade frequented by merchants from all quarters. Also the first foreign traveler to give an account of Cochin, he describes the sea port as well as the ruler and the people of Cochin. He was impressed by the large scale cultivation of pepper and coconut in the Zamorin's kingdom. There was a considerable Muslim element in the population of Calicut with 20 to 30 mosques to cater to their religious needs. The traveler is all praise for the king's officers who valued the cargo at the port and especially for the accuracy of the calculations they made with their toes and fingers. The peculiar system of succession by which the reigning Zamorin was succeeded not by his son but by his sisters son came in for his special notice.¹¹

Arabic sources from now on are more substantial, and before the narrative is resumed it would be useful to give an account of them. We can make a rough and somewhat arbitrary division of the writers into two classes, geographers and travel writers.¹² By the geographers are meant those who wrote systematic accounts of the lands of Islam and beyond. These provides valuable information about the harbors and coasts of the Indian Ocean.¹³

The Accounts of the Arab writers about India are of great importance for the study of the early medieval period of the Indian history. These Arab travelers visited Indian in the ninth and tenth centuries and each one of them left behind him an account of his own. Few of them like Merchant Sulaiman and Al Masudi visited India personally but others like Abu Zaid and Al Idrisi etc. never set their foot on the Indian soil. The accounts of the latter class of writers are based on information's 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 important 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 firsthand information, deserve to be accepted as a correct or a nearly correct picture of the Indian social system prevalent during these centuries. It is on this account that their accounts demands the best attention of the present day scholars who want to re-construct the contemporary history of India. It has also to be noticed that these Arab travelers often differ among themselves on certain issues. This is so because they observed the existing conditions of the society from different angles. Sometimes, they would not even understand what they were actually writing about. It is here that their accounts have be supplemented by evidences collected from indigenous sources.¹⁴

In the absence of proper contemporary 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 as these are mostly translated into French only. But we can take 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, exactly 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 certain issues which have given considerable misguided information. In the property of the property of the property of the property of the period during which have given considerable misguided information.

Since Arab Geographers did not stay in India for a long period and could not travel the whole of India, they mostly gathered their information's from the hearsay narrations or recitals. They also, had no knowledge of the Indian topography, social structure and the religion of the people. Similarly, they were not aware of the many facts which were quite in vogue at the time they made their visits.¹⁷

We have many references of Malabar in the accounts of Arab travelers. There are so many travelers visited Malabar from time immemorial but there is lack of definite record of their activity. We neglect the activities of Arab travellers because there language is an alien language but the fact 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 large number of Arabic words come in the Malayalam language. The recorded authors or incidents of Travellers and Merchants the famous were several in number.

Sulaiman the Merchant

One of the earliest Arab writers on Kerala was the Arab merchant Sulaiman. He is believed to have visited the coast in 851 C.E., though there is also a view that Sulaiman did not actually visit Kerala and that he wrote his account only on the basis of second-hand information. He has observed that Quilon was "the most considerable port in South India at the time" and that it was the only port in India touched by the huge Chinese ships on their homeward voyage from Persia. At the end of his career he recorded his personal 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 condition of South India and the Indian islands on the basis of his personal knowledge and the information observed from previous works and gathered from contemporary reporters. 19

The first traveler noted by Elliot in his monumental work "History of India, As Told by its own Historians" Volume I, is the Merchant Sulaiman, 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 A.D. (in about 851 A.D.). Mr. M. Reinaud was the first scholar who published the book in 1844 A.D. appended with a translation and short notes which afford mines of valuable information's and nice criticisms. But Mr. M. Reinaud does not seem to be very accurate about the title that he gave to this book. He mentions two travellers, while there was only one who wrote an account of his own travels. But it seems, with all probability, that the second part of this book was completed by another traveller Abu Zaid al Hasan of Siraf. It is, further, interesting to note that this traveller never travelled India and China, as he himself expressly writes that he "made it his to modify and complete the work of Sulaiman, by questioning travelers to those countries."20 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. Hirgund is really that part of the Indian Ocean which washes the coast of southern India.²¹ 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 are badly informed about South India as well; 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 former. 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 travelled to India and China. Later Arab writers were heavily dependent on Sulaiman.²²

Sulaiman makes the famous statement- "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. Note Logan, I p. 192, and Innes, Malabar, p.25 take Sulaiman literally and so conclude that there were no Muslims in Malabar before he wrote.

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. At the end of his naval career he revised, corrected and supplemented the diary of Sulayman. He incorporated some details and fresh information gathered by him personally and from other sources also. His account forms a supplement to *Sulayman's Silsilat ul Tawarikh*. Edited by Reinaud along with *Silsilat-ul Tawarikh*, Paris, 1845.²³ The Arab traveler Abu Zaid is the first foreigner mentions 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 very peculiar custom 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 approaches takes a small quantity and eats it. Al 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.²⁴

Yaqubi (d. 900)

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 travelled 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.²⁵

Rashidu d Din

Rashidu d Din is not very clear in his statements and he simply writes that the people of Malabar speak 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 own language. And no wonder if Rashidu-din has described their admixed language which was mainly on account of the large number of foreign settlers there.²⁶

Ahmad ibn Majid

Ahmad ibn Majid, writing at the end of the fifteenth century, preserves a record of an old *rahmani* composed by the celebrated captains, Muhammad ibn Shadhan, Sahl ibn Aban, and Layth ibn Kahlan. Ibn Majid's source was a *rehmani* written by the grandson of Sahl ibn-Aban and dating from 580 years ago. 315 A.H. or A.D. 927/928. His *Kitab al- Fawaid fi usul ilm al bahr wal qawaid* or Book of Benefits is indeed most valuable, and Ferrand declared that his description of the Red Sea, apart from rectifications of latitude, has never been equaled by any European "Instructions" for sailing boats.²⁷

Balazuri Flourished 9th Century C.E.

Ahmad bin Yahya bin Daud Balazuri was one of the greatest historians of his time. A native of Baghdad and under Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil, Balazuri visited Damascus, Edessa, Antioch and Iraq. He is known for his two monumental works, *Ansab ul Ashraf* (a genealogy of the Arabs down to Hajjaj bin Yusuf) and *Futuh ul Buldan* being a history of the Muslim conquests. It contains a chapter on the conquest of Sind also.²⁸

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Ibn Khurdadhbih

Abu-I-Kasim Ubaidu-Ilah bin Abdu-Ilah bin Khurdadba who 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 Abasside Caliph (9th Century C.E) Ibn Khardazaba was the head of the Post and Intelligence Department. His Kitab ul Masalik wal Mamalik contains some very useful information about India.³⁰ Ibn Khurdadba held a high office under the vigorous ruler of the Caliphs, where he employed his leisure periods in the topographical and geographical researches. Ibn Khurdadba became a great geographer and completed the valuable work entitled, "Book of Roads and Kingdoms." But his Indian accounts can be found in his book entitled "Kitabul Masalik wal Mamalik" in which, describing about the importance of the Balhara state of India and the use of wine as unlawful, he divides the Hindus in seven classes. 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.³¹

It is still not known correctly as to when Ibn Khurdadba completed his work. But since he died in 300 A.H., (912 A.D.) he must have finished his work either towards the close of the ninth century, or in the beginning of the tenth century.³² He refers to the Malabar Coast and the export of rice to Sarandwip (Ceylon) from Bahattan (Baliapatam).³³ In his book he has supplied information of 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.³⁴

Buzurg bin Shahryar (10th Century)

He was a native of Busra. As a merchant captain of a Persian ship he, like Sulaiman and Abu Zaid, used to sail from the ports of Iraq up to China. He has recorded his personal experiences and those of his companions and other travelers under the title Ajaib ul Hind (Marvels of India), being a collection of anecdotes about India.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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 travelled 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 thesis entitled Kitab-ul Tanbih Wal Ashraf. "Maruj uz Zahab" he compiled as an abridgement 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 1987.³⁷ 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 travelled 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.³⁸ Al Masudi greatly admires the kings of Balhara for their greater respect for and protection to Islam.³⁹ Al Masudi met this Abu Zaid at Basra, in 303 A.H (916. C.E. and acknowledges to have derived information from him. 40 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. 41 Masudi refers to them as bayasira (sg.baysari), explaining that this means that they are Muslims born in al-Hind of Muslim parents.⁴² Al Masudi, personally, visited many places of India and gave 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.

Abu Ishak Al Istakhri

Abu Ishaq Ibrahim bin Muhammad al Farisi, popularly known as Istakhari of Karkh in Baghdad was a famous geographer and explorer of the second half of the 10th century. He had travelled widely and had visited India in 951 C.E. and met here his contemporary geographer Ibn Hauqal. He wrote two books on geography, *Kitab al Aqalim and Masalik wal Mamalik*. The *Masalik* contains valuable information about India. He is reported to have prepared a map of the world including that of Sind.⁴³ He also writes about the various Kings and states of India. Al Istakhri is more particular about giving the names of the important cities of India.⁴⁴

Ibn Haukal

His full name was Abul Qasim bin Ali al Nasibi. He was an Arab geographer of the second half of the 10th century. Born in Nasibin (Nisibis) in upper Mesopotamia, Ibn Hauqal travelled throughout the Muslim lands and some European countries also, including Spain, Sicily, Southern edge of Sahara, Armenia and had come to India also. His well-known work is *Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik* (or *Kitab Surat al Ard*). His "Ashkalu-I Bilad" completed in 989 C.E. He had given a vivid description of the major cities of India and indicated the distance between them. He has also given a map of Sind.⁴⁵ Ibn Haukal also discusses largely about the cities and frequently mentions about the religion and language of the Indian people.⁴⁶

Rashidu-d-din

The next important Arab writer for our study is Rashid-ud-din who wrote his book *Jamiu-t Tawarikh* in the year 710 A.H. (1310 A.D.).⁴⁷

Al Biruni 400 A.H 973-1050 A.D

Abu Raihan, native of Birun (near Khwarazm (Khiv). He was one of the greatest scholars of his time. He was well-versed in astronomy, mathematics, geography, religion and philosophy. He was undoubtedly a keen and impartial observer. Attached with the court of sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (999-1030 C.E.), Al-Biruni, accompanied the Sultan on his Indian campaigns. Interested more in the pen than the sword, he is reported to have taught Greek sciences to and earned from the Indians their own religion and sciences. About 180 books and treatises attributed to Al-Biruni. But his most important work is Kitab-al-Hind, which reveals his comprehensive, deep and scientific study of Indian life and thought during the 10-11th century. 48 He has very little information to give about Kerala.⁴⁹ Al Beruni the author of Kitab-ul-Hind is so well-known in literary circles that it is hardly necessary to recapitulate the main facts of his life and work. However, his famous book was written two years after the death of Mahmud. Besides Kitabul Hind which is justly famous, he wrote many other books. Of these, the most important is *Qanun-i-Masudi* which has not been printed yet. In this book, he has given an account of many towns in India, and has given the latitude and longitude of each town. Kitabul Hind, in the original Arabic has already been published. The English and Hindustani translations of the book have also been published. The book gives a geographical survey of India.⁵⁰ His account has been quoted by many writers in various works.⁵¹

Bashari a Maqdisi (d. 1000 C.E)

His full name was Shamsuddin Muhammad ibn Ahmad al Bashari. He was born in or about 946 C.E in Palestine. He travelled widely and visited India also. The last chapter of his *Ahsan ut-Taqasim fi Marifat il Aqalim*, deals with Sind wherein he has given a detailed account of its products, trade and industry, coins and huts of India.⁵²

<u>Al Idrisi (1100-1165 C.E.</u>

He was the member of a family which descended from an ancestor named 'Idrisi' and so he came to be known by the name of Al Idrisi. Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Idris, called also 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 travelled widely and at the instance of Roger II collected information from a number of travellers 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.⁵³

He personally 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 taken help of in the completion of the book. Further, information's were 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 statements embody some misguided information's and error of judgement. Some historians says 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.⁵⁴ Al Idrisi also mentions the pepper and cardamoms of Malabar.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ Idrisi give coastal towns and customs of Kerala.⁵⁷

Zakaria al Kazwini 1203-83 C.E

Born in Persia, Al Kazwini was not actually a traveler, but compiled his works from the writings of Istakhri, Ibn Haukal and others, whom he regularly cites as his authorities.⁵⁸ He was the author of two eminent 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.⁵⁹ He compiled his account of India from the works of others gives information about Quilon. 60 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. Evidently, such statements are the result of poor observation of men and affairs by a credulous foreign traveler. 61 The other two important Travellers accounts were one from Ibn Batuta he is a moor by birth and the other a Persian Abdur Razzak.

Arab Account provide some proper information about Malabar in the early period. We the accounts of these travelers cannot be ignored these accounts because in those days the there were no valuable book about the history of Malabar. It is very valuable information from the Indian point of view.⁶²

According to him Sreedhara Menon Arab writers like Ibnul Faquih 902, Ibn Rusta 903, Abu Zaid 915, and Masudi 945-955 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 fresh information.⁶³

The Arab accounts supply very valuable information about Indian social life and culture particularly the Deccan.⁶⁴ From the records of the Arab travelers Accounts the Zamorins of Calicut or the ruling dynasties of Malabar retained cordial relations with Muslims of Calicut or elsewhere in this Gods Except some instance the relation was cordial. They retained their service in many ways in trade, in 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 prior to the arrival of Portuguese. 65 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 Arab with Malabar was also reveal from their account.

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- ⁵⁰ Mawlana Syed Sulaiman Nadwi, op.cit., p. 25.
- ⁵¹ Ashoka K Srivastav, op.cit., p. 8.
- ⁵² M. Zaki, op.cit., p. 14.

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- ⁶⁴ M. Zaki, op.cit., pp. 4-5.
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