

Description of Ibn Battuta on Malabar

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Active trade existed between Arabia and Malabar at an earlier date and in this process the Muslims dominated the trade.¹ The Malabar Coast from time immemorial famous for its Spices, Pepper, Cinnamon and Black Gold and other products. This creates a regular trade with many countries especially by sea route. Foreigners were welcomed and treated with hospitality in Malabar. Many travellers and Scholars came here for the purpose of trade.

Dealing with the early history of Malabar, i.e., Kerala, there were only traditional accounts. So, the Accounts of Travellers form an important source for the history of Malabar. We cannot forget the role of Arab travellers, Greeks, Italian, Moroccan and Portuguese. Their accounts gave Kerala history more known and made a fill up too many facts relating to our past history.

From the Muslim travellers one of the outstanding Globe-trotters and explorers of the Middle Ages was Ibn-Battuta. He had come from Tangier now in the country of Morocco.² He travelled 77,640 miles within a period of 29 years between June 1324 and January 1354 covering 74 countries of the World. In my present study I make special reference to his travel in Malabar only.

In the long interval between the travels of Marco Polo (1271-94) and the awakening of the spirit of discovery in Portugal in the fifteenth century we can place Ibn Battuta. With the purpose of accomplishing the pilgrimage to Mecca he started his journey. He started his journey in the year of the Hegira 725 C.E. 1324 from his native city of Tangier at the age of twenty-two. A Moor by birth, his full name was sheikh Abu Abdullah Mohammed Ibn Abdallah Al Lawati Al-Tandij³, surnamed Ibn Battuta.

There are so many travellers visited Malabar even before him but with a view of the number of countries visited, the total number of miles covered, interesting and informative travel accounts with emphasis on Socio-Cultural matters, Ibn Battuta far surpasses all of them. His travel account was called as *Rihlah*⁴, or *Tuhafat un Nazzar fi Gharaib il Amsar wa Ajaib il Asfar*⁵, in which he gives very exhaustive, extremely useful and interesting information about almost all aspects of Indian life particularly Malabar. It has been

translated into several languages. The mass of information and useful material suggests that a good deal of reading has gone into the writing of this book. Without doubt, he has borrowed information from the accounts of others. After his last journey in 1353 the sultan of Fez commanded him to dictate his experiences to Ibn Juzayy, the court secretary, and this description, which has been preserved for us in good copies, help us to understand about Ibn Battuta's travel. In view of the evidence available at present, no definite statement can be made about how much of it was edited by Ibn Juzayy.

Ibn Battuta's *Rihlah*, which has been translated into English, was another instrument for free circulation of idea and thought between Arabia and Malabar.⁶ Many Scholars have doubted his journey to some places and consider these accounts as mere fabrications based on hearsay. They have argued that these parts of the *Rihlah* must be treated with caution and should be weighted and tested before they can be accepted as authentic. Yet his observations were to be of certain importance for the history of Malabar.

Battuta call Malabar as Pepper country, it extends for two months journey along the coast from Sandabur (Goa) to Kawlam (Quilon). Malabar⁷ is referred to all the Arab writers as the country of Pepper. There are two parts in the word, Mala and bar. Mala means mountain and bar is probably a Persian origin. But the Arabs do not seem to have known the Malai, meaning mountain. They knew an island or place named Mali (Mulay) e.g., Kulam Mali. The reason probably is that the Arabs knew only one port on the West coast of India and that is Quilon.

Sometime before the date of Ibn Battuta's visit to Malabar the Mappilas were a power in the land⁸ this community descendent of Arab traders and women of the country, and of converts of Islam. The origin of Islam in Kerala is related the conversion and emigration of Perumal to Mecca. But Battuta makes no mention of this conversion. He has recorded the tradition of one of the ancestors of the king of Kottayam called "Kuwayl" was converted to Islam. Though the statement is obscure in nature it is possible that perhaps the ancestor referred to here may have been Perumal, ruler of Kerala. He found several prosperous Muslim settlements in different parts of the northern and central Kerala, patronized by them on account of their need for the Merchants. He found that Muslims were highly honoured amongst them (the Hindus) except that they do not eat with them or allow them in to their houses.

Writing about the travels on road he says, “No one travels in these parts” in the fourteenth century, “upon beasts of burden; nor is there any horse found except with the King.”⁹ When however, any merchants have to buy or sell goods, they are carried upon the backs of men who are always ready to do so for hire.

No reference to Calicut is however found earlier than Ibn Battuta. The traveller Marco Polo who had visited Malabar before Battuta did not mention Calicut or its ruler. But from the account of Ibn Battuta, we get a fairly adequate idea about its ruler and this city.¹⁰ This is clear evidence of the fact that Calicut had emerged into prominence by this time in the early part of the 14th century or even some time before it.

He has made extensive observations about Malabar in which the Zamorin’s Kingdom and its capital figure prominently. He speaks “the road over the whole distance runs beneath the shade of trees and at every half-mile there is a wooden shed with benches on which all travellers, whether Muslims or Hindus may sit.” He further says that “at each shed there is a well for drinking and a Hindu he gives him water in vessels: if he is a Muslim, he pours the water into his hands.” It is the custom of the Hindus in the Malabar lands that no Muslim may enter their houses or eat from their vessels; if he does so, they break the vessels or give them to the Muslims. The Muslim merchants had their houses in all districts and were greatly respected. “If a Muslim met a Hindu during the night on the road and when they saw them, they stood aside to let them pass.”

He visited Calicut six times. First in 1343 January 2, Second in April 18, 1343, third in 1344 January 7, Fourth in 1344 March 18, Fifth in 1344 August 24, and his last visit is in 1346 May. He spent many months in this place during his stay here. He stated the reason for the popularity and prominence of Calicut¹¹ and finds the countryside perfectly safe for travel. In the lands of Malabar, except in this one land alone, it is the custom that whenever a ship is wrecked, all that is taken from it belong to the treasury. In Calicut, however, it is retained by its owners and for that reason; Calicut has become a flourishing city and attracts a large number of merchants. Abd al Razzaq (1442) also stated this affair.

In this town lives the famous ship-owner Mithqal, who possesses vast wealth and many ship for his trade with India, China, Yemen and Fars. When he reached the city, the principal inhabitants and merchants and the Sultan’s representative came out to welcome him, with drums, trumpets, bugles and standards on their ships. He entered the harbour in great pomp.

He describes Calicut as Kalikut.¹² It was one of the finest ports in the World, frequented for trade by the people of China, the Archipelago, Ceylon, the Maldives, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf. The title of the King was Samari.

He stated that there were three types of vessels in Calicut the biggest called junk, the middle sized called zaws (dhows), and the third Kakams.¹³ The biggest of them had from three to twelve sails, made of strips of bamboo woven like mats. Each of them had a crew of 1000 men, 6000 sailors and 400 soldiers. When he stopped in the port of Calicut, there were at that time thirteen Chinese Vessels, had disembarked. Some of the Chinese own large number of ships on which their factors are sent to foreign countries. Battuta wanted to go to China and waited for the season so he stayed Calicut for three months. It helped him to experience and to describe about Calicut more.

He met the zamorin and talked to him. He refers to the Kings as the Sultan of Calicut who was an idolater. He refers every ruler as sultan. He also speaks of Ibrahim, the chief of the merchants of Calicut and also the Chief of the Port, a native of Bahrain, and this merchant was endowed with generous qualities, so much so that other merchants met in his house and dined at his table. He met the Kazhi of Calicut named Fakhr-ud-din and was impressed by his generosity.

He mentions three important Ports on the Malabar Coast Kowlam (Kollam), Calicut and Hili (Ezhi). Under tragic circumstances both natural and manmade, Ibn Battuta lost all his baggage, Slaves and women at Calicut, and had to wander about in many places.

Ibn Battuta describes Kollam as the finest bazaars and its merchants as Sulis. They are immensely wealthy; a single merchant will buy a vessel with all that is in it and load it with goods from his own house. Quilon was from very early times the transshipment Port for the Chinese trade. It is mentioned by the Arab and Persian sailors of the ninth century under the name of Kowlam-Malay, and fell into decay, like its rival Calicut, in the sixteenth century. He also equates Quilon and Calicut with Alexandria. It is very beautiful and large place abounding with gardens and markets. It was one of the most bustling Ports with traders from Phoenicia, Arabia, China, Rome, and Greece; this city became a regular halt. This city is nearest of the Malabar towns to China and it is to it that most of the merchants from China come.¹⁴ He saw a Chinese Cock in the city of Quilon. He also states that Chinese merchants were settled at kowlam,

and that envoys from the king of China arrived there during his visit.¹⁵ Muslims are honoured and respected here.

He calls Eli Mala (Mount Dely) as “Ras Haili or Hili”¹⁶ and was the first Indian Land fall made by Vasco de Gama. In the port of Aden he says, “to it come large vessels from Kinbayat (Cambay), Kwlam (Quilon), and Calicut, and many other Malabar Ports.” He calls it as “the Port of the Indians.” He describes chaliyam as al Shaliyat and as a most beautiful town in which the fabrics called by its name are manufactured (shawl) in Malayalam it is *salla*. It is still used for a soft cotton fabric.¹⁷ Battuta also describes Fakanur¹⁸ now Barku, a large town on an inlet, here there is a large quantity of sugar cane, which are unexcelled in the rest of the country. The chief of the Muslim community at Fakanur is called Basadaq. He possesses about thirty warships, commanded by a Muslim called Lula, who is an evildoer and a pirate and a robber of Merchants. He also speaks about the town of Hinawr (Honovar),¹⁹ a day’s journey from Sindabur, is on a large inlet navigable for large ships. During the pushkal, which is the rainy season this bay is so stormy that for four months it is impossible to sail on it except for fishing. The women of this town and all the coastal districts wear nothing but loose unsewn garments, one end of which they gird round their waists and drape the rest over their head and shoulders. They are beautiful and virtuous, and each wears a gold ring in her nose. One peculiarity amongst them is that they all know the Koran by heart. He also saw in these towns thirteen schools for girls and twenty-three for boys, a thing which he never seen elsewhere. Its inhabitants live by maritime commerce, and have no cultivated land. Speaking about Manjarur (Mangalore²⁰) he says, “it is the largest inlet in the land of Malabar.” This is the town at which most of the merchants from Fars and Yemen disembark, and Pepper and ginger are exceedingly abundant there. There is a colony of about four thousand Muslims there, living in a suburb alongside the town. He also speaks about Fandarayna (Pantalayani)²¹ it is a large and fine town with orchards and bazaars. It is at this town that the Chinese vessels pass the winter.

About the rulers, in Malabar lands he says “there are twelve Hindu Sultans, some of them strong with armies numbering fifty thousand men, and others weak with armies of three thousand. Yet there is no discord whatever between them and the strong does not desire to seize the possessions of the weak. At the boundary of the territories of each ruler there is wooden gateway, upon which inscribed the “Gate of Security.” About Sultan Samari (Zamorin) he stated that “wearing a large white cloth round his waist and

a small turban, bare-footed, with the parasol carried by a slave over his head and a fire lit in front of him on the beach.” He is an aged man and shaves his beard, as some of the Greeks do. He calls the Sultan of Mangalore as Rama Daw, Cannanore as Kuwayl,²² Calicut as the Samari²³, Quilon as Tiwari. We teach from Ibn Battuta that Jurfattan,²⁴ Dahfattan²⁵ and Budfattan²⁶ were under the sway of Kuwayl one of the most powerful Sultans of Malabar. Yule suggests that the title Tiwari given by Ibn Battuta to its ruler may be the Tamil-Sanskrit compound Tiru-pati (Holy Lord). About the ruler of Hinawr the Sultan is Jala ad Din, he is under the suzerainty of Hindu Sultan named Haryab.

About the security and Justice, he says the punishment for theft here will meet with death. He never had seen a safer road than this, for they put to death anyone who steals a single nut, and if any fruit falls no one picks it up but the owner. If any Muslim or Hindu criminal flees from the territories of one and reaches the boundary of other ruler, his life is safe, and the prince from whom he has fled cannot seize him, even though he is a powerful prince with a great army. The rulers in these lands transmit their sovereignty to their sister’s sons, to the exclusion of their own children.

About the Mosques of Malabar, he speaks the Mosques at Eli Mala (Hili), Muslims venerate this cathedral Mosque and seafarers make many votive offerings to it. This Mosque contains a number of students, who receive stipends from its revenues. He also speaks a Cathedral Mosque at Dahfattan. It was built by Kuwayl’s grandfather, who was converted Islam.²⁷ In Fandarayan (Panderani), he speaks three Mosques of Muslims, in Quilon he saw a colony of Muslim Merchants and also a cathedral Mosque in a magnificent building, a constructed by the merchant Khwaja Muhazzab.

Ibn Battuta, also mentioned that he met at Hily (Elimala), a virtuous theologian, Zaid by name a native of Maddshau, at Cannannore, he visited a theologian from Baghdad, a man a great merit, named Sarsary, in Calicut he met Sheikh Shahabuddin of Qazarun, a great Saint, and at Quilon he met Sheikh Fakhruddin, son of Sheikh Shahabuddin.

Writing about the products of Kerala he mentioned in details about Betel-trees, coco-Palm, and Pepper etc. About Betel-trees he says they are grown like vines on cane trellises or else trained up Coco-Palms. The Indians have high opinion of betel. A gift of betel is a far greater honour than a gift of gold and silver. He also describes the using of Betel, “Areca-nut was crushed into small bits and take betel leaves and a little chalk is put on them and they chewed with the Areca-nuts. They sweeten the breath and aid

digestion, prevent the effects of drinking water on an empty stomach, and stimulate the faculties. About pepper he states, “this is the country from which black pepper is brought and this is the far greater part of their produce and culture.”²⁸ It resembles that of the dark grape. They plant it near the coconut. Its leaves resemble the leaves of a bramble. The sun dries it. Arab travellers fail to mention Coconuts, one of the chief products of Malabar. Some scholars hold the view that coconut plantation was introduced into Malabar at a later period from Ceylon²⁹ but Ibn Battuta speaks of this indigenous product. He equates “coco-palm nut with a man’s head, for it has marks like eyes and a mouth and the contents, when it is green, are like the brain.”³⁰ It has fibre like hair, out of which they make ropes, which they use instead of nails to tie their ships together. The coco-palm is one of the strangest of trees, and looks exactly like a date palm. Amongst its properties that strengthen the body, fatten, and add redness to the face. It gives a liquid deliciously sweet and fresh. From it also extracted oil, milk and honey.

He also speaks about the great flood of Peiyar “the Port (Muziris) silted up as a result of unusual flooding by the Periyar River in 1341.”³¹ Muziris is usually identified with the present day Kodungalur or Cranganore. Another scholar mentioned that Battuta had seen a Tsunami in Malabar during his days,³² when he was in Calicut, where they awaited the right season for the voyage to China, just before the appointed day of departure, a storm raged over the coast, sinking most of the ships in the harbour at Calicut. Ibn Battuta happened to be ashore at the time, praying in the mosque for the success of the voyage, and he was the sole survivor of the expedition, but lost all his baggage, slaves and women.

He also speaks of the Malabar Marumakkattayam, “no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother’s brother.”³³ A person’s heir is his sister’s son, not his own sons. This is a thing, which he had seen in Malabar.

From the time of Ibn Battuta’s visit to Kerala it is possible to build up a general idea of the distribution of Muslims and of their relations with non-Muslim natives. Battuta revealed that there were Muslims settled in every Port which he visited along the Malabar coast. Most of those he named came from southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf, the Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Bagdad are all mentioned. These names, and the practice of the Sahafi branch of Islamic religious law, provide an early indication of the close contact with and development of a predominantly Arab-Islamic culture among Kerala Muslims. In any case the importance of Ibn Battuta’s *Rihala* is highly readable book, we should congratulate him for his visit to

Malabar otherwise a large section of Kerala History will lose to the world. This book shows the authors experience and he had himself travelled, observing the cities and places, which he describes.

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- ²³ Samari in Malayalam Samutiri or Samuri meaning "Sea King" more familiar to European readers in its Portuguese form zamorin.
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