



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. V, Issue No. X, April-  
2013, ISSN 2230-7540*

**A STUDY ON ARABS IN EAST WEST TRADE A  
STUDY IN POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
INTERACTIONS 9<sup>TH</sup> TO 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

AN  
INTERNATIONALLY  
INDEXED PEER  
REVIEWED &  
REFEREED JOURNAL

# A Study on Arabs in East West Trade a Study in Political, Economic and Social Interactions 9<sup>th</sup> To 15<sup>th</sup> Century

Manju Malik

D.P.E. Govt. Sr. Sec. School

**Abstract – The term ‘Arabs’ has referred to different peoples at different times. In the modern sense, the term refers to the people who speak Arabic as their native language. Ethnically, the term denotes the nomadic peoples of Arabian peninsula who use Arabic as their mother tongue. In pre-Islamic times the term was used to designate the inhabitants of Arabian peninsula. On the advent of Islam, when believers of the new faith were unified in to one ‘Ummah’ or community irrespective of their nationality or ethnic affiliation the term Arab got a wider meaning and began to be used to denote anyone who professed Islam and used Arabic as his ‘language’. In this study the term ‘Arab trade’ is used in the wider sense to denote the commercial activities of a people with diverse ethnic origin, whether it be Persian, Syrian, Egyptian, Turkish, Arabian or any other one, but united by a common bond of the medieval Arab culture.**

----- X -----

## INTRODUCTION

From the seventh century to the time of Vasco da Gama maritime routes to India and China through the Spice Islands were under the control of Arabs. This monopoly allowed them to control much of the trade in silk and spices and made them the total masters of Indian Ocean trade. Trade income or in modern sense, mercantile capital, is the surplus generated through commercial activities with others. It is the most sustainable source of income of an economy. Trade became possible when men learned to exploit nature and to produce beyond his immediate needs. Trade is considered as one of the indications for the existence or formation of state. Trade had an important role in territorial expansion during the early historic period. Through trade, along with the exchange of tangible goods, invisible cargoes of ideas, knowledge, culture, language, faith, technology etc. were also exchanged. Hence a study of ‘trade’ becomes exhaustive, when it focuses not only on the visible facet of exchange of wealth and wares but also on the other aspects like the socio-economic, political interactions of the buyers and the sellers. In this study an attempt is made to analyze the social, economic and political interactions that took place during 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. on account of the Arab trade with East-West countries.

The items of early trade consisted mainly of luxury and prestige goods such as spices, silk, precious metals and stones the demand for which came from the ruling chiefs, wealthy merchants and towns-folk. These items, which had less bulk and high value offered lucrative returns. The geomorphology of Arabia has played a vital role in the growth of both maritime and land trade. The Arab regions as a whole have long

been important points on the world’s great trade routes. Arabian Peninsula which is situated at the meeting point of three continents, i.e. Asia, Africa and Europe acted as an entrance to every nook and corner of the world. The very long coast line which bounds the peninsula on the three sides favored the development of sailing from Arabian shores. The most fertile and inhabited parts of Arabia, al Yemen, Hadramaut and Oman are situated near the coasts.

Arabia which stands at the cross roads of three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa, has the distinction of being the centre of the old world. Its shores are washed by the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf. Where the seas end, the historic rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris form the boundary between Iraq and Arabia<sup>4</sup>. Beyond Arabia, to the south-west it was easy to cross to East Africa, “to the east, the monsoon winds were very helpful for voyages to India and China. The Red Sea and Persian Gulf supplemented by the Nile, the Euphrates and Tigris functioned as natural thorough fare between the Mediterranean and East Asian countries. Hence, the Arabs were astride two of the world’s trade routes”. Moreover, the famous overland Silk Road to China was accessible through Persia and Central Asia. “From Persia it was possible to go to China via Balk or Samarqand by high passes over the Pamirs crossing the desert of East Turkestan; this was the ancient ‘Silk Road’ between West Asia and China”. Nations, tribes, armies and pilgrims – people on the move have traversed the middle east, finding the land bridge convenient and along the way discovering the wealth of the area and the civilization of its people. Since the Arabs stood in the past, as

they stand today, in a most strategic geographical position; no people were in a more favourable position for exploring the ancient world than the Arabs.

## SOURCES OF THE STUDY

The primary sources utilized for this work consist mainly of the accounts of the medieval Arab travellers and geographers. Travelogues of explorers, adventurers, mariners and earlier Greeco-Roman accounts, European and Chinese accounts are also utilized. As medieval Arab travellers were co-travellers of Arab merchants their accounts contain a detailed narration of the itinerary of a merchant, giving meticulous details of various ports and towns en-route and the distance between them and major items of merchandise exchanged between far off lands. They also provide information on the economic, political, social and cultural conditions of different peoples of different regions.

The political superiority and economic prosperity of the medieval Arab empire and the Arab domination of the maritime routes encouraged the Arab travellers to undertake long journeys to far off lands and to produce voluminous travel accounts. The information provided in these accounts on the basis of their personal experiences and direct contacts with informants has helped historians to reconstruct the history of the medieval period.

One notable feature of these accounts is the exhaustive and interesting way of presentation of the information incorporating reports and narratives of sailors and merchants. As these accounts deal with several problems connected with trade, commerce and taxes of different countries, they are the most reliable source for the study of trade and mercantile activities of different peoples of the medieval period. Hence Arab travellers' and geographers' accounts are used as the major source of information for this study.

Many Non-Arab travellers' accounts for the period from the tenth to sixteenth centuries have also been used as major source of primary information. In order to compare historical facts and identify modern names of ports and markets, many connected early European works are found to be very useful. The secondary sources of information that have been utilized consist of many published and unpublished materials from different archives and libraries.

In general terms, a necessity is an item of consumption, whose consumption does not increase in proportion with income; a luxury is one whose consumption increases more than proportionately with income. But this does not mean that the demarcation between necessity and luxury is clear-cut. A luxury in one society need not necessarily be a luxury in another. Even within the same society what is luxury to one class may not necessarily be a luxury of another. Likewise a luxury of a period need not be a luxury of another time.

## RESEARCH STUDY:

As the Egyptians used the Arabian incense, myrrh, to mummify their dead, uninterrupted supply of the same was a social necessity during the ancient period. Perpetual import of horses by the medieval South Indian Kingdoms was due to the political rivalry of warring states and history witnesses that some of the Kings even encouraged 'the naughty and unworthy practice of piracy' to ensure a steady supply of warhorses. It was the lucrative spice trade of the Arabs that led the Europeans to discover a sea route to the spice countries and to the later brutal incidents of enslavement and forcible deportation of hundreds of inhabitants of the Spice Islands and uprooting of the spice trees in their desperate endeavors to establish monopoly over the trade.

The Portuguese, in order to get a dominant position on the south west coast of India for the effective control of pepper trade, even deported all unmarried Portuguese men back to Lisbon and all married Portuguese and nearly all Eurasian families of Portuguese descent to Goa. It is estimated that about four thousand persons were displaced in this manner. As every item of medieval trade had its own cultural, social or political value in addition to its commercial value, a brief survey of the knapsack of Arab traders is indispensable for the analysis of the impacts of Arab trade.

Large quantities of pepper was consumed in the East itself. Marco Polo's accounts reveal that great quantities of pepper were consumed by the Chinese also. Speaking of the kingdom of Vijayanagar, Barbosa says "much pepper is used here and every where throughout the Kingdom". He remarks about the food habit of Zamorin "all the food which he eats, whether of flesh or fish or vegetable or other viands, is flavoured with so much pepper that no man from our countries would be able to eat it". He adds 'the food of Moors of Ormuz and other places was well spiced.

Regarding the quality of pepper, there seem to be no doubt that Malabar pepper was superior to those of other places and even within Malabar, a word of praise was sometimes given to the pepper produced in the Kingdom of North Cananor in North Malabar and Hili. A country's trade items consist of its own produce and items imported from other countries. As the geographical boundary of the medieval Arab empire was so vast that a remarkable portion of the goods which were available to the population of the empire did not come from their 'East' or 'West', but from the diverse regions within the empire like Egypt, Persia, Syria, Sind or Spain. Iran was the major supplier of food stuffs, fruits and sugar to the Caliphate.

Africa supplied natural products like ivory, rhinoceros horn, frankincense, slaves and iron, taking in return manufactured goods like cloths, beads, copperware, Islamic earthenware and glass. Through Alexandria and Constantinople Spanish products such as cotton, olive oil, figs, saffron and sugar were available all over

the Empire. As cottage industry was greatly developed during the Abbasid period, rugs, tapestry, silk, cotton and woolen fabrics, satin brocade, sofa and cushion covers and other items of furniture and kitchen utensils were easily available throughout the whole empire.

The Arab empire by the Abbasid period was in possession of vast lands from Pyrenees in Europe to Morocco in Africa to the shores of the Caspian Sea in the north and to the confines of China and the Bay of Bengal in the East. The Abbasid countries were the leading industrial and manufacturing regions of the period. Hence it is clear that within the Arab Empire, as it stood in the ninth and following centuries many of the rare items, which the Mediterranean world had always brought from distant countries were available uninterrupted. It was not necessary to go to China for silk as silk was produced in Merv and Bukhara, ambergris, pearl and precious stones were available off the coasts of Arabia and in the mountains of Persia, cotton and sugar cane, myrrh and incense, woven and embroidered stuffs, rare and sweet smelling woods, ivory and metals of almost every kind could be obtained without ever crossing the borders of the Kingdom of Walid or even of the shrunken realm of Harun-al-Rashid. The regional consolidation of Syria and Persia by the Arabs resulted not only in the abolition of the unnatural frontier between the nations but also in the political unification of the trade routes of Persian Gulf and Red Sea. When the Persian Gulf and Red Sea came under the control of one Caliph these sea routes were used side by side for exchanging goods between the East and West.

By the first decade of the ninth century, Ubaidullah al Mahdi had established the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa. Under the Fatimids, Cairo became a metropolis of world-wide renown. In the eleventh century, with the decline of the central power of Baghdad and also with the ascendancy of Fatimids of Egypt, a major portion of the Eastern trade was diverted from the Persian Gulf and Baghdad to the Red Sea and Egypt. This rejuvenated the ancient trade centres like Aden, Cairo and Alexandria. By this redirection, Cairo and Alexandria became the mediating centres of Asia and Europe through which oriental goods travelled to the West. The disintegration of Constantinople in 1204 AD and the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 made Egypt the new centre of commercial activity. During this period, the Egyptian trade was controlled by the rich and well organized Karimi merchants who had fleets of their own.

At the beginning of the ninth century, the Umayyad caliphate of Spain was about fifty years old and had completed the reign of first two Caliphs Abdur-Rahman, its founder, his son Hisham. Though Umayyad caliphs ruled over Spain for a period of nearly eight centuries the zenith of its prosperity was during the period of the first few caliphs, especially during the reign of Abdul-Rahman III. Throughout the

Umayyad period, Cordova was the capital and was considered as the Western rival of Baghdad in splendour. When the capital of the Arab empire was shifted from Damascus to Baghdad by the Abbasids, the capital of this vast empire was for the first time connected by the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris with the eastern seas. Thus the Persian Gulf became the main artery of the Middle Eastern trade with the Indian Ocean. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Indian Ocean had practically become an Arab lake bordering Sudan and Ethiopia in the West, Yemen, Oman, Iraq and Iran in the north, Sind and Gujarat in the east, all under Arab rule. All along the coasts of this "Arab Mediterranean" there were so many Arab or Muslim settlements in the non-Arab regions. During this period, the Indian Ocean trade was the backbone of the inter-continental Muslim economy. With the expansion of the Gulf trade to Africa, India, Indonesia, the Malay peninsula and China the Arab capital Baghdad became the world's largest harbor receiving the traffic of the then chartered seas. The merchants of Baghdad carried with them to India and China textiles, perfumes, rugs made in Islamic countries and brought silk and porcelain from China, spices and aromatics from India and Indonesian Islands which were also exported to Europe. A lively traffic was kept up with the Ceylonese and Malabar ports also.

Al-Hind of the Arabs was the region beyond Sind which the Arabs left unconquered and it included the Islands in the Bahr-al-Hind (Indian Ocean). Unlike the Romans, the Arab traders who came to India settled down permanently. They were welcomed honourably and well treated not only by the native Hindus but also by the rulers so much so that they were even allowed to have lands in their names and acquire and accumulate property. The Arabs always reached South India as traders and travellers and occasionally as missionaries but never as conquerors. Unlike in Sind where the Arabs exercised their political power, the relationship between the Arabs who settled in South India and the host society was based on the cordiality of commerce; never on political or racial antagonism. The safe and navigable coasts of the South India, the favourable social, economic and political policies of the Kings of the regions, amiable attitude of the natives and above all availability of precious spices attracted thousands of Arab traders to the coasts of Indian peninsula. Whole of the Indian coast from Konkan to Bengal coast was busy with commercial activities during the medieval period.

## **IMPACTS OF ARAB TRADE**

The intensity of economic, political, social and cultural interactions between different peoples of a period is closely connected with the transport and communication system of the age. Before the invention of modern communication systems trade

across the seas and land was the major means of communication and contact between peoples of different regions. The trade routes were the only communication highways of the medieval period and social customs, life styles, artistic styles, religious beliefs and new inventions were transmitted through these routes in addition to the goods of trade.

Peoples living on the shores of Indian Ocean were linked during the middle ages mainly by the Arab traders. When Arab trade flourished during the eighth and ninth centuries, previously isolated peoples of Asia, Africa and Europe were brought in to closer contact leading to intensive interaction between them. Long distance trade of Arabs has played a major role in facilitating the exchange of cultural, religious and social values between major civilizations of Europe, Africa and Asia.

The most important social impact of medieval Arab trade was the peaceful spread of Islam along trade routes. The success of the medieval Arabs in spreading their new religion is directly associated with the expansion of their trade of the period. In areas where Islam was introduced by Arab traders, the indigenous social order was not replaced all on a sudden, but was blended with the new practices in a gradual transition giving rise to new cultures such as Swahili of East Africa, Navayats of Kanara Coast, Mappilas of Malabar Coast and Marikkayar of Coromandel coast. Since the native rulers and leaders were not replaced in this gradual process, there were no societal disruptions and the spread of the new faith was peaceful and permanent. Arab traders tried to modify the spiritual environment of the converts than their physical one. Some of the social systems and practices of the native communities were not replaced even after their conversion to the new religion. For example, in contrast to the Arab practice of patrilineal system of inheritance, some of the Mappilas of Calicut and Ponnani, especially who had marriage connection with or were converted from matrilineal communities followed the matrilineal joint family system of the land called 'marumakkathayam'. The deep rooted spread of Islam along the trade routes and trade centres of medieval Arabs shows that the strategy adopted by the Arab merchants for the propagation of their religion was a great success.

Arab trade was based on the policy of mutual benefit and cooperation, Arab merchants always co-operated with other trading communities of the period and never used restrictive trade practices against business rivals. During the Abbasid days Jews rose to prominence in finance, banking and trade and great finance and banking institutions arose in Baghdad and Isfahan with important and even pivotal Jewish connection. During the tenth century Jewish bankers got control of Abbasid money market and became instrumental in the development of sophisticated financial techniques such as the use of bills of exchange and cheques. In Egypt Jews and Christians held prominent position in the economic and administrative spheres which were

in greater proportion to their numbers. It has been assessed that the prosperity of the Jewish communities in India and their success in trade was due to the influence and prominent position they had in the Islamic Middle East.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the strategical location, the Middle East was the converging ground of trade and commerce from the beginning of recorded history. Many intermediaries of East-West trade had passed through this middle land at different times exploring wealth and civilization. The medieval period was the golden days of Arab political and commercial expansion. From the seventh century to the time of European exploration of the Indian Ocean, Arabs were the masters of world trade and navigation. When Arab political expansion reached Spain and Sind the entire ancient centres of trade and commerce from Europe to India came under the direct control of Arabs. By this period commercial expansion of Arabs had reached as far east as China resulting in the establishment of many Arab settlements all along the Indian Ocean region. Arabs had the widest network of Arab trade settlements in foreign countries. During this period extensive travel were undertaken by them observing closely the social, economic, political and commercial status of different peoples of different regions. The frequent and deep contacts of Arab merchants, many of whom were missionaries as much, along the Indian Ocean coasts had resulted in the emergence of a distinct cultural identity all along the region. The universality of their religion, Islam, provided them a cosmo-politan outlook and the support of their co-religionists scattered over a vast region, in their maritime activities. The accounts of Arab travellers like Sulaiman, Ibn Rusta and Ibn Battuta show that Arab merchants and travellers had not experienced any alienation while travelling in the different ports of the Indian Ocean world. During this period, Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean had become well chartered maritime thoroughfares and the centres of sophisticated commercial and maritime activities.

Arab merchants who kept cordial commercial contact with almost all the coastal kingdoms of Indian Ocean region were able to pursue the practice of segmented trading journeys all over the region. This not only enhanced their profit but also resulted in the growth and development of many port cities. As the Europeans who followed the Arabs, were in enmity with many coastal kingdoms they were not able to engage in segmented trading voyages. The Portuguese introduced the drive for super profits and they elaborated a technique of oppressing the primary producer in order to keep down prices. In many ports of the Indian Ocean they used the threat of their superior naval power and imposed forced treaties with the native rules. Frequent attacks were made on ports to protect their commercial interests. History shows that this hostile commercial policy of the Portuguese

and the Dutch culminated in the decline of both the trade empires.

Expansion of Arab trade encouraged many agrarian communities to pursue commercial activities like trade and navigation. This resulted in the growth and development of many urban centres and the emergence of new occupational groups such as sailors, traders and many artisan groups. Though China had maritime trade contact with South East Asia from the early days of the present era it expanded and reached its zenith during the period of Arab domination of the maritime routes.

As early as the thirteenth century the Europeans were enticed by the fantastic wealth of the East from the narration of European travellers like Marco Polo. Struggles between the great power of Arab empires and small and weak Western Christendom, that lasted for centuries had instilled in the European mind a burning desire to overreach the Arab predominance and break the almost complete monopoly of the East West trade held by the Arabs. The crusading zeal of the Portuguese had prompted them to seek the help of the mysterious legendary Christian priest king of the East, Prester John to fight against the Muslims. Hence the Portuguese were desperately longing to reach the 'Indies'. The discovery of the cape route to the East was the fulfillment of the prolonged quest of the Portuguese.

#### REFERENCES:

- Natu V.R., 1894, Madhavrao alias Mahadji Shindyanche Charitra Tatha Karyakal, Belgaon Samachar, Belgaon.
- Parasnis D.B. (Edit.), 1909, Itihas Sangraha - 2, Tukaram Javji, Nirnay Sagar Press, Mumbai.
- Parasnis D.B. (Edit.), 1908, Aitihāsik Tipni, Part – 1, Nirnay Sagar Prakashna, Mumbai.
- Parasnis D.B., 1917, Peshwe Daftaratil Upadhi Patre, Mahiti, Nirnay Sagar Press, Satara.
- Parasnis D.B. (Edit.), 1913, Dilhit Marathyanchi Rajnity, Part – 12, Nirnay Sagar Press, Pune.
- Pathak Arunchandra (Edit.), 1999, Maharashtra Shashan Prant Gaziteer, Satara, Jisha Karyakari Sampadak Tatha Sachiv, Maharashtra Shashan, Mumbai.
- Pitre K.G., 2000, Marathyancha Yudh Itihas, 1600 to 1818, Continental Prakashan, Pune.

- Purandare K.V., (Edit.), 1929, Purandare Daftar, Part – 1, Bharat Itihas Shanshodhan Mandal, Pune .
- Pandit Bhavanishankar, Maharashtra Jivan Stityantare, Pune Vishwavidyalaya, Pune.
- Phatak Narhar Raghunath (Trans.), 1964, Marthyancha Pune Samrajyacha Utkarsh, Maharashtra Prant Sahitya Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai.
- Bahekar S.A., 2001, Sindhkhedkar Jadhav Parvaracha Chikitsak Itihas, Kasab Prakashan, Jalgaon.
- Bendre V.C., 2001, Shri Chatrapati Sambhaji Maharajacha Chikitsak Charitra, Manorama Prakashan, Mumbai.