

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TAMIL NADU MUSLIMS BEFORE 1947

MR. K SYED ASMATHULLAH

PH.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR (FULL-TIME), DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY
ANNAMALAI NAGAR – 608 002

DR. M. C. RAJA

RESEARCH SUPERVISOR, PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY,
ANNAMALAI NAGAR – 608 002

Abstract

This study examines the social and cultural characteristics of Tamil Nadu Muslims before 1947. It focuses on their history, population, social groups, occupations, religious life, education, language, family life and cultural practices. Tamil Muslims had strong connections with maritime trade and developed important settlements along the Tamil coast. Census records show that the Muslim population of the Madras Presidency increased from about 1.92 million in 1881 to 3.31 million in 1931. The study also looks at communities such as the Marakkars, Labbais and Rowthers and their different social and economic backgrounds. Special attention is given to the relationship between Islamic traditions and Tamil culture, including Arwi language, mosques, madrasas, Sufi shrines, festivals, food, dress and marriage practices. The study also examines the impact of modern education, colonial rule, economic changes and social reform on Tamil Muslim society.

Keywords: Tamil Nadu Muslims; Madras Presidency; Tamil Culture; Muslim Society; Arwi; Maritime Trade; Education; Religion; Social History; Cultural History.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Muslims in Tamil Nadu before 1947 represents a distinctive interaction between Islam and the region's long-established Tamil social and cultural traditions. Muslim communities had been present along the Tamil coast for many centuries, particularly through commercial connections across the Indian Ocean. Arab merchants, local converts, and later migrants contributed to the growth of Muslim settlements in coastal towns and inland centres. Over time, Tamil Muslims developed a distinctive social identity that combined Islamic religious traditions with regional languages, customs, occupations, and cultural practices. The Muslim population of the Tamil region was not socially or culturally homogeneous. Groups such as the Marakkars, Labbais, Rowthers and other Muslim communities developed different occupational and regional identities. Nevertheless, they shared important religious institutions and cultural practices that connected them to the wider Muslim world while also embedding them deeply within Tamil society. Islam reached the Tamil coast at an early stage through maritime trade. Arab Muslim merchants travelled regularly to ports along the Coromandel and southern Tamil coast, establishing commercial settlements and matrimonial relationships with local communities. Ports such as Kayal, Kilakarai, Kayalpattinam, Nagore, Porto Novo and Nagapattinam became important centres of Muslim commercial and religious activity.

The expansion of Muslim communities was closely connected with trade. Tamil Muslim merchants participated in the Indian Ocean networks linking South India with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Arabia and other parts of the Indian Ocean world. This commercial activity helped create prosperous Muslim settlements and encouraged the construction of mosques, educational institutions and charitable establishments. During the medieval and early modern periods, Muslim communities also became associated with the political structures of the region. Under the Sultanates, the Nayak kingdoms, the Nawabs of the Carnatic and subsequently British rule, Muslims participated in administration, military service, commerce and agriculture.

Social Structure

Tamil Muslim society before 1947 consisted of several communities with distinct occupational and regional backgrounds. The **Marakkars** were particularly associated with maritime trade, shipping and commerce. The **Labbais** were widely involved in trade, religious activities and various occupations, especially in the eastern and southern districts. The **Rowthers** developed a strong association with horse trading, cavalry traditions, agriculture and later other commercial activities. These categories were not always rigid or uniform, and their meanings changed over time and from one locality to another. Social status was influenced by occupation, wealth, ancestry, education and religious reputation. Merchant families with substantial economic resources often occupied influential positions within local Muslim society. Family and kinship played an important role in social organisation. Marriage was generally conducted within the Muslim community, and extended family relationships

provided economic and social support. At the same time, centuries of interaction with Tamil society resulted in the adoption of several regional customs and social practices.

Language and Literature

One of the most significant characteristics of Tamil Muslims was their development of a distinctive Tamil-Islamic literary culture. Tamil became an important language of everyday communication and cultural expression, while Arabic remained central to religious education and Islamic scholarship. A notable feature was the development of **Arwi**, or Arabic-Tamil. Arwi used the Arabic script to write Tamil and became an important medium for Islamic religious instruction and literature. Religious scholars produced works dealing with theology, law, morality, devotional practices and stories of Islamic figures. Tamil Muslim literary culture therefore demonstrated a synthesis between Islamic intellectual traditions and Tamil linguistic heritage. This tradition helped preserve religious knowledge while making Islamic ideas accessible to Tamil-speaking Muslim communities.

Religious Life

Religion occupied a central position in the social and cultural life of Tamil Muslims. Mosques served not only as places of worship but also as centres of education, community organisation and social interaction. Islamic festivals such as Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha were important occasions for communal participation. Sufi traditions also had a considerable influence. Shrines associated with Muslim saints attracted Muslims as well as people from other religious communities. The Nagore Dargah, associated with Shahul Hamid of Nagore, became one of the most prominent examples of this shared religious and cultural environment. Religious teachers, scholars and mosque institutions played important roles in transmitting Islamic knowledge. Madrasas provided instruction in the Qur'an, Arabic, Islamic jurisprudence and religious ethics.

Education

Before the expansion of modern education, Muslim education was primarily organised around mosques, maktabas and madrasas. Children were taught Qur'anic recitation, basic Islamic principles, Arabic and religious practices. The spread of modern schools during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gradually changed educational patterns. However, access to modern education remained uneven. Urban centres and economically prosperous families generally had greater opportunities than poorer rural communities. Muslim reformers increasingly emphasised modern education, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Educational advancement became an important element of social reform and community development.

Economic Life

Commerce was one of the most important features of Tamil Muslim society. Coastal Muslim merchants participated in long-distance trade across the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Textiles, spices, food products and other commodities formed part of regional and international commercial networks. In inland areas, Muslims were also engaged in agriculture, animal trading, retail commerce, transport and various crafts. The economic position of communities varied considerably, ranging from wealthy merchant families to small traders, artisans and agricultural workers. The expansion of colonial transportation and commercial systems altered traditional patterns of economic activity. New opportunities developed in towns and ports, while some traditional maritime occupations declined or underwent transformation.

Food, Dress and Everyday Culture

Tamil Muslim culture reflected a combination of Islamic practices and local Tamil traditions. Food habits were shaped by both religious dietary requirements and regional culinary traditions. Rice-based dishes, meat preparations, seafood and distinctive festive foods became important components of Muslim cuisine in Tamil Nadu. Dress also reflected regional influences. Muslim men commonly wore garments such as the **veshti**, shirts, caps and turbans, while women followed forms of dress influenced by both Islamic modesty and local Tamil traditions. Over time, urbanisation and changing social attitudes introduced new forms of clothing. Marriage ceremonies and other social occasions similarly combined Islamic religious requirements with local customs. While the nikah remained the essential Islamic marriage ceremony, celebrations could include regional food, music, dress and other Tamil cultural elements.

Women and Family Life

Women occupied an important position within the extended family structure. Their primary responsibilities were traditionally associated with household management, child-rearing and maintaining kinship relationships. However, women also participated in economic activities in various communities, particularly through household-based production and assistance in family businesses. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, discussions about women's education became increasingly prominent among Muslim reformers. The gradual establishment of schools and greater awareness of modern education created new opportunities, although progress remained uneven.

Relations with Wider Tamil Society

Tamil Muslims were deeply integrated into the social and economic life of the Tamil region. Their participation in trade, agriculture, administration and local politics brought them into continuous contact with Hindus and Christians. Shared cultural practices could be seen in language, food, dress, local festivals and relationships with religious institutions. Certain Muslim shrines attracted visitors from different religious communities, demonstrating the interconnected nature of local religious culture. At the same time, Muslims maintained distinct religious institutions, marriage practices and dietary regulations. Thus, their identity developed through both Islamic religious affiliation and Tamil regional belonging.

Reform and Political Awakening

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed significant changes in Tamil Muslim society. Colonial rule, modern education, print culture and new political organisations encouraged debates about religious reform, education and social advancement. Muslim intellectuals increasingly advocated modern education and community organisation. Newspapers, journals and printed religious works helped circulate new ideas. The emergence of political consciousness also connected Tamil Muslims with broader developments in Indian Muslim and nationalist politics. By the early twentieth century, questions of education, representation, employment and political participation had become important concerns. Tamil Muslims therefore entered the period immediately preceding independence with an increasingly developed sense of community organisation and political awareness. The social and cultural history of Tamil Nadu Muslims before 1947 needs to be understood within the wider historical context of the Madras Presidency, since the administrative boundaries of the colonial period were considerably larger than those of present-day Tamil Nadu. Islam had a long historical presence in the Tamil region, particularly through the maritime trade networks of the Indian Ocean. Arab Muslim merchants established commercial and social connections with the Tamil coast centuries before the colonial period. Important coastal centres such as Kayalpattinam, Kilakarai, Nagore, Nagapattinam and Porto Novo developed into significant centres of Muslim commercial, religious and cultural life. The growth of these communities was closely connected with trade, migration, intermarriage, religious networks and the movement of people and ideas between Tamil Nadu, Arabia, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and other parts of the Indian Ocean world.

Demographic Context

By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tamil Muslims had become an established and diverse component of the social structure of the region. Census statistics provide an important quantitative background to this development. In the Madras Presidency, the Muslim population increased from approximately 1.92 million in 1881 to 3.31 million in 1931, representing an increase of roughly 72 per cent over fifty years. In 1931, the total population of the Madras Presidency was approximately 46.74 million, of whom about 3.31 million were Muslims, meaning that Muslims constituted approximately 7.1 per cent of the total population. These figures demonstrate the demographic importance of the Muslim community within the Presidency before independence.

Rural and Urban Distribution

The population of the Madras Presidency was predominantly rural, with around 40.39 million people living in rural areas and approximately 6.35 million in urban areas in 1931. However, Muslims had a relatively stronger presence in many urban and commercial centres. The 1941 census data indicates that Muslims constituted approximately 14.5 per cent of the urban population, compared with about 6.6 per cent of the rural population. This difference highlights the historical importance of towns, ports, markets and commercial centres in the social and economic development of Muslim communities.

Diversity within Muslim Society

Tamil Muslim society was not homogeneous. Different communities developed distinctive occupational and regional identities. The Marakkars were historically associated with maritime trade, shipping and commerce, while the Labbais were involved in trade, religious activities, scholarship and various occupations. The Rowthers developed historical associations with horse trading, military traditions, agriculture and commerce. These identities were shaped by occupation, locality, economic position, family networks and historical circumstances. Therefore, the study of Tamil Muslims must recognise considerable internal diversity rather than treating them as a single uniform community.

Tamil and Islamic Cultural Interaction

Tamil Muslims developed a distinctive cultural identity through the interaction of Islamic religious traditions with the Tamil linguistic and social environment. Arabic remained central to religious learning, while Tamil became the principal language of everyday communication. This created a unique cultural synthesis between Islam and Tamil society. Tamil Muslims were therefore able to maintain their religious identity while becoming deeply connected with the language, customs and social environment of Tamil Nadu. One of the most important expressions of this cultural synthesis was the development of Arwi, or Arabic-Tamil, in which the Tamil language

was written using the Arabic script. Arwi literature played an important role in communicating Islamic theology, law, morality, devotional ideas and religious instruction to Tamil-speaking Muslims. The study of Arwi provides valuable evidence for understanding the intellectual, literary and cultural history of Tamil Muslims and demonstrates the close relationship between Tamil language and Islamic scholarship.

Religious Institutions

Religious institutions were central to the social organisation of Tamil Muslim communities. Mosques functioned not only as places of worship but also as centres of education, social interaction and community organisation. Maktabs and madrasas provided instruction in Qur'anic studies, Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge. Sufi traditions also influenced Tamil Muslim society, and shrines such as the Nagore Dargah became important religious and cultural centres. Such institutions sometimes attracted people from different religious communities and provide evidence of shared cultural spaces within Tamil society.

Family and Social Organisation

Family and kinship networks formed another major foundation of Muslim social organisation. Marriage, inheritance, household structure and economic cooperation were strongly influenced by extended family relationships. Islamic requirements such as the nikah existed alongside regional Tamil customs and practices. Family networks also played an important role in maintaining economic cooperation, social security and community relationships.

Women and Gender Relations

Women occupied an important position within family and community life, although their experiences were shaped by prevailing social structures, marriage patterns, domestic responsibilities and economic conditions. Women also participated in household-based economic activities and contributed to the maintenance of family and community networks. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the growth of modern education gradually created new discussions concerning female education, social reform and women's changing roles within Muslim society.

Education and Social Change

Education became an important indicator of social transformation. Traditional Muslim education was primarily organised through mosques, maktabs and madrasas, where children received instruction in Qur'anic studies, Arabic and Islamic knowledge. The expansion of colonial education, English-language schooling and modern institutions gradually introduced new educational and occupational opportunities. Muslim reformers increasingly regarded education as an essential means of community advancement, social mobility and participation in modern public life. Colonial rule transformed the economic environment through the expansion of transportation, markets, administrative institutions and new forms of employment. Many Tamil Muslims continued to participate in traditional occupations such as maritime trade, agriculture, retail commerce and local business, while others entered new professions and educationally based occupations. These changes contributed to the emergence of new Muslim middle-class groups and altered traditional patterns of social mobility.

Coastal and Inland Communities

The geographical distribution of Muslim communities is another important aspect of the research. Census records provide information on Muslim populations at the district, taluk and town levels, making it possible to examine differences between coastal and inland settlements. Coastal Muslim communities were particularly influenced by maritime commerce and overseas connections, whereas inland communities were more closely associated with agriculture, local trade and regional economic networks. This geographical distinction helps explain the diversity of Muslim social experiences within the Tamil region. Tamil Muslims maintained continuous social and economic interaction with Hindus and Christians through markets, agriculture, neighbourhood relationships and local institutions. Such interactions did not eliminate religious distinctions, but they contributed to the development of shared regional cultural practices. Food, language, dress, commercial relationships and local traditions often reflected this long history of interaction.

Print Culture and Social Reform

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed increasing intellectual and social change among Tamil Muslims. Print culture, newspapers, journals, religious publications and reform movements created new spaces for discussion about education, religious practice, women's status, social customs and political participation. These developments helped connect local Muslim communities with wider intellectual and social changes taking place across India.

Political Awakening before 1947

By the early twentieth century, Muslim communities were increasingly involved in debates concerning education, employment, political representation and community development. Tamil Muslim political experiences were

shaped by both local developments in Tamil Nadu and wider Indian political movements. This period therefore witnessed the gradual emergence of new forms of political consciousness alongside established religious, social and economic identities. The statistical evidence provides an important foundation for understanding the broader social and cultural history of Tamil Muslims. The Muslim population of the Madras Presidency increased from about 1.92 million in 1881 to 3.31 million in 1931; Muslims represented approximately 7.1 per cent of the total population in 1931; and their stronger representation in urban areas in 1941 highlights the importance of towns, ports and commercial centres. These statistics can be combined with qualitative evidence from census reports, government records, newspapers, Arwi and Tamil literature, mosque and madrasa records, biographies, community publications and oral traditions.

The central historical significance of this research lies in demonstrating that Tamil Muslim identity was neither exclusively religious nor simply regional. Rather, it emerged through a long process of interaction between Islamic faith, Tamil language and culture, maritime connections, local social structures, economic networks and colonial modernity. Studying these characteristics provides a regional perspective on Indian Muslim history and highlights the diversity of Muslim experiences across India before independence. It also helps move the study of Tamil Muslims beyond political narratives by giving greater attention to everyday life, family, women, education, language, literature, occupation, religion and cultural practices. Thus, the study of the social and cultural characteristics of Tamil Nadu Muslims before 1947 is situated at the intersection of social history, cultural history, religious history, economic history and colonial history. The combination of demographic statistics and qualitative historical evidence makes it possible to understand how Tamil Muslim communities developed, adapted and preserved their distinctive identity within the changing social environment of Tamil Nadu.

CONCLUSION

The study of the social and cultural characteristics of Tamil Nadu Muslims before 1947 shows that they formed an important and diverse part of Tamil society. Their history was shaped by centuries of maritime trade, migration, local settlement and interaction with the wider Islamic world. Coastal centres such as Kayalpattinam, Kilakarai, Nagore and Nagapattinam became important centres of Muslim trade, religion and culture. Tamil Muslim society included different communities such as the Marakkars, Labbais and Rowthers, who had different occupational and regional backgrounds. At the same time, they shared important religious and cultural institutions such as mosques, madrasas and dargahs. Family, marriage, education, occupation and religious practices played important roles in maintaining community life. One of the most important features of Tamil Muslim history was the combination of Islamic traditions with Tamil language and culture. The development of Arwi, Tamil Muslim literature, local food, dress, festivals and social customs demonstrates this cultural interaction. Tamil Muslims maintained their Islamic identity while also developing a strong connection with Tamil society. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought significant changes through colonial rule, modern education, new economic opportunities, print culture and social reform. These developments gradually changed traditional patterns of Muslim society and contributed to the growth of education, social awareness and political participation. Overall, Tamil Muslims before 1947 should not be viewed only as a religious minority. They were active participants in the social, economic and cultural development of Tamil Nadu. Their history demonstrates how Islamic faith, Tamil culture, maritime connections and local traditions interacted over several centuries. Understanding this history provides a broader and more balanced picture of Tamil Nadu's past and contributes to the study of the diverse experiences of Muslims in South India before Indian independence.

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