CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

The Omanis have had a seafaring tradition since ancient times. Considering the time since they have mastered the technique of sailing, it is for a relatively short period of time in Omani history that Oman was a maritime power. The beginning of this influence has been traced to the Yarubi dynasty which ruled from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth. But it was during the time of the Al Bu Saidi rulers in Oman during the eighteenth century when Oman acquired new territories and began to try to bring under greater control the territories which were nominally under its suzerainty. This attempt to spread its political control was also related to the increase in trade and commercial activities in Muscat and other ports of Oman. The result was greater economic interconnectedness between Oman and its territories in East Africa, the Gulf and the Makran coast of Baluchistan. Whether Oman and the territories under its control during this time can really be considered as an empire is a matter of debate. Scholars like Calvin Allen and Rheda Bhacker have also questioned if the period of Said bin Sultan (1812–1856) was the heyday of Oman’s maritime influence as was argued in most works on Oman.

What has been agreed upon is that the death of Said bin Sultan in 1856 was a major turning point in the history of Oman’s maritime empire. It resulted in the dispute between his two sons, Sayyid Thuwaini who ruled in Muscat and Oman, and Sayyid Majid who ruled in Zanzibar in East Africa. The dispute resulted in British arbitration which led to the formal separation of the two territories into independent Sultanates in 1861. Scholars like Robert Geran Landen and Calvin Allen have debated if Oman since this event can be described as going through a phase of economic and political decline. This work will study this phase of Omani history from 1856 to 1900 and try to find out if Oman was really going through decline and if so what was the nature of this decline. Here, it would not just be enough to identify the factors, be it internal or external, that caused the decline. If British intervention was the cause of the decline, then to what extent did it
affect Omani politics, economy and society? Was the nature of the decline political or economic, or both? Or did it decline at all? While looking at this specific period in Omani history, it would be impossible to avoid certain events which occurred before 1856 but had a huge impact on the post-1856 situation.

There are also certain factors that have influenced society and politics throughout Omani history, of which an understanding is a pre-requisite. But before dwelling on these factors, it would be proper to clarify what entity would 'Oman' refer to. While Oman is today usually referred to the modern day state of the Sultanate of Oman, Oman proper would actually refer to the northern parts of this state leaving out the southern portion of Dhofar. Before the coming to power of the present day Sultan of Oman, Qabus bin Said in 1970, the official name of the country was the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman. The earlier title of the country reflected the socio-cultural and economic divisions between the coast and interior in Oman. Until the 1950s, this division was also political, with an Imamate in the interior and a Sultanate on the coast.

While Muscat represented the ports and coastal settlements along the Batina coast, Oman referred to the interior regions of Oman. Muscat and the other ports along the coast have been linked to the Indian Ocean trade networks through maritime trade. This has produced a fairly cosmopolitan and diverse society in these ports with people from a variety of racial, ethnic, religious and sectarian backgrounds. At the same time, interior Oman has been dominated by Arab tribal politics with the ulama or religious clerics also having considerable influence. In comparison to the coast, interior Oman can be described as socially and culturally homogenous. An attempt that will be made during the course of this study will be to see if the coast and interior will completely separate.

The Islam that is mostly practised in interior Oman is Ibadi Islam. The Ibadi sect, considered neither Sunni nor Shia, had its origins in the Kharijites, who were the first group to split off from the main body of Muslims during the seventh century. While the Kharijites were radical in their views, the Ibadis are a moderate offshoot of the former. While there are slight differences between the Ibadis and Sunnis in theology,
jurisprudence and rituals, what really distinguished the Ibadis from the other sects in Islam is the system of government that they espouse. The Ibadis believed that their Imam, who would be their spiritual and temporal leader, had to be elected from among the worthy candidates by the ulama. In the Omani tribal context, the decision of the ulama would have to be backed up by support from the group of tamimah or the paramount sheikhs of the most powerful tribal confederations. The Ibadis did not believe in the hereditary succession of the Imams. They believed that the Ibadi community was the true body of Muslims and the final objective was to bring all Muslims into their fold. Only the Imam had the right to declare holy war on behalf of the community.

During the early Imamates in Oman, the Imam was elected as according to the Ibadi strictures. During the time of the Yarubi dynasty, the Imamate began to be passed down hereditarily. Towards the end of the Yarubi period, a civil war broke out in Oman due to a dispute over the succession to the Imamate. It was during this civil war that Ahmad bin Said, the first ruler of the present Al Bu Saidi dynasty emerged and became the ruler of Oman. He was later declared as the Imam. After the death of Ahmad, his son, Said bin Ahmad became the Imam in accordance with the wishes of his father. But Said soon lost control of Muscat to his son Hamad. Said also became unpopular in interior Oman because of some of his policies. Therefore, after the death of Said in 1822, not only was there no new Imam from among the ruling Al Bu Saidi dynasty, Oman itself had no Imam until 1868. Hamad bin Said had set a precedent where the Sultans ruling at Muscat would only pay attention to expanding the commercial prosperity of the coastal region, maintaining their political influence and acquiring territories oversees either through conquest or commercial lease. The Sultans at Muscat since Hamad bin Said never tried to actively get themselves declared as the Imam.

Apart from Imamate politics, the alignment of the tribes also influenced the course of politics in Oman. Until the civil war that engulfed Oman at the end of the Yarubi period, the tribes in Oman were aligned as either Adnani, or tribes who migrated to Oman from the north, or Yamani, or tribes who migrated from the southern region of Yemen. During the civil war at the end of the Yarubi dynasty, almost all of the tribes in Oman belonged
to either of the two main tribal confederations. They were the Hinawi confederation and the Ghafiri confederation. Even after the coming to power of the Al Bu Saidi dynasty and till the end of the Imamate in the 1950s, Omani tribal politics was determined by the Hinawi/Ghafiri dichotomy. The earlier view that the Hinawi/Ghafiri division exactly paralleled the Adnani/Yamani split has been discounted as there were Adnani and Yamani tribes in both Hinawi and Ghafiri tribal confederations. A major phenomenon that influenced politics in nineteenth century Oman was the birth of the Wahhabi/Muwahiddun movement in central Arabia in the eighteenth century. It was a Sunni puritanical movement that rejected all the innovations that had entered Islam since the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

The founder of the movement, Muhammad Abdul Wahhab entered into an alliance with the ruler of Diriyah, Muhammad ibn Saud. From then on, the Wahhabi movement tried to spread in the Arabian Peninsula under Saudi patronage and soon came into a clash with the Omanis. As the first Saudi state was powerful, the Omanis often faced Wahhabi raids which caused massive death and destruction. They captured the frontier post of Buraimi and made it their base for conducting forays into Oman. The destruction of the first Saudi state by the Ottomans in 1818 and the emergence of a new Saudi state altered the nature of the Wahhabi/Ibadi contest in Oman. While initially powerful, the second Saudi state got caught in factionary feuds within the ruling family. While hopeful of regaining its capability to effectively coerce the Sultans of Muscat, the Wahhabis restricted themselves to intervening in Omani politics through its supporters in Oman and conducting flash raids on the coastal towns of Oman. Their converts included the powerful Naim tribe of the north-west frontier region of Oman and the war-like Bani Bu Ali of the Ghafiri confederation in the coastal Ja’alan province.

As mentioned earlier, some events that happened before 1856 are important for the purpose of this study. Hamad bin Said’s decision to shift the capital from Rustaq to Muscat was one such event. Rustaq was one of the traditional seats of the Ibadi Imam. By taking this step, Hamad was clearly trying to distance himself from Imamate politics and put his focus on maritime affairs. But this decision had important consequences for the
political future of the Al Bu Saidi dynasty. By distancing themselves from the tribal core, the Al Bu Saidi's lost the ability to influence tribal politics in the traditional manner as Ahmad bin Said had done. From then on, methods like coercion and monetary enticements began to be used to influence tribal politics to the benefit of the ruling dynasty. Also, Muscat and the coastal belt became susceptible to attacks from the interior tribal areas. All these developments determined the character of Omani politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the nature of British intervention in Oman.

As far as the Al Bu Saidis were concerned, such events further decreased their limited influence within Omani tribal politics. The Al Bu Saidis had never played any significant role in interior Oman until the mid-eighteenth century. In fact, they represented the new group of elites which emerged due to the rising commercial prosperity of Muscat. Ahmad bin Said's father was successful coffee merchant and he himself had gained the confidence of the Yarubi ruler because of his ability in commercial matters and was made the governor of Sohar. In the nineteenth century, Said bin Sultan's decision to shift the capital from Muscat to Zanzibar further distanced the ruling branch from the happenings in the interior. But it was not as if the entire Al Bu Saidi dynasty had lost out on interior Oman.

Ahmad bin Said's son, Qays bin Ahmad was the governor of Sohar right from the time of his father. Sohar continued to remain under the hands of his descendents even while new Sultans of the ruling branch came and went in Muscat. But Sultan bin Ahmad, another son of Ahmad and the father of Said bin Sultan, and whose descendents continued to rule Oman till the present, tried to wrest the control of Sohar away from the hands of Qays's descendents. This began a rivalry between the ruling branch of Sultan bin Ahmad and the collateral branch of Qays bin Ahmad. While they finally lost Sohar, the descendents of Qays bin Ahmad created a new base in Rustaq, began to involve in Imamate politics and one of them got himself declared as an Imam. This is the setting of the of the post-1856 period in Oman.
Survey of Literature

As the research project is of a historical nature, it is necessary to refer to archival material on Oman's maritime empire and trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The India Office Records in London has archival material on the late nineteenth century Gulf and Oman. Records pertaining to Oman in the India Office Records have been published in a series of volumes by Archive Editions. The Maharashtra State Archives also has archival material on Oman especially from 1856 to 1873. As mentioned before, there is very little material on the decline of Oman's maritime empire. But there are a few books and articles that deal with the maritime trade of the Al Bu Saidi dynasty during its prime. As this work is a study on Oman's maritime empire and trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we need to have a good understanding about the history of the Al Bu Saidi family and the politics of the Omani empire. Patricia Risso's book, *Oman and Muscat: An Early Modern History*, concentrates on the rise of the Al Bu Saidi dynasty in Oman. But this book describes the political conditions in Oman only until 1804, during the rule of Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad. It does not dwell on the period of Sayyid Said bin Sultan who acquired territories in East Africa. It was after his death that Oman's maritime empire began to decline.

Saidi dynasty. There are several works which detail Oman’s maritime trade during the Al Bu Saidi period. Patricia Risso’s book mentions Oman’s maritime trade during this period in a detailed manner during the early modern period. This book covers the economic conditions in Oman only until 1804, during the rule of Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad. Therefore, we do not get any information on the nature of maritime trade in Oman during the empire’s declining phase in the second half of the nineteenth century.

John E. Peterson and John Townsend mention Oman’s maritime trade during the Al Bu Saidi period as a background to Oman in the twentieth century. Peterson’s book also includes the administration of trading activities during the second half of the nineteenth century. Joseph A. Kechichian and Fred Halliday also refer to Oman’s maritime trade during the Al Bu Saidi period. Calvin H. Allen Jr.’s article, The Indian Merchant Community of Muscat, gives a detailed account about how there was a decrease in state control over Oman’s maritime trade and how merchant communities from India like the Sindhis and Kutchis came to control maritime trade in Muscat. Calvin H. Allen Jr.’s article, “The State of Masqat in the Gulf and East Africa, 1785-1829”, describes Oman’s maritime trade during the period of the Al Bu Saidi rulers, Sayyid Hamad bin Ahmad, Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad and Sayyid Said bin Sultan. It includes vital information on customs duties at the Muscat port during this time.

There are some works on Oman’s East African territories. Oman’s East African territories were the Omani empire’s most important assets in both political and economic terms. Reda M. Bhacker’s book, Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination, refers to Oman’s activities in East Africa until 1856 after which Oman’s empire was divided. Ahmed Hamoud Al-Maamiry’s work, Oman and East Africa, describes Oman’s activities in Zanzibar and other parts of East Africa. This book gives us vital information on Oman’s maritime possessions in East Africa and the initial events that led to the downfall of Omani influence in the Indian Ocean region. The book describes how Sayyid Said bin Sultan acquired territories like Zanzibar in East Africa. As its main theme is on Oman’s involvement in the East African affairs, it concentrates on affairs in Oman and Muscat which had a bearing on affairs in Zanzibar and nearby areas.

Erik Gilbert, in his article, “Coastal East African and Western Indian Ocean: Long-Distance Trade, Empire, Migration, and Regional Unity, 1750-1970”, refers to Oman’s activities in East Africa. It also looks at migration from Oman to East Africa. Vishnu Padayachee and Robert Morrell, in their article, “Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy, 1875-1914”, mentions how Indian merchants profited by Oman’s rising influence in East Africa under Sayyid Said bin Sultan. Surendra Gopal’s article “India and Oman in Medieval Times”, narrates the role played by Indian merchants in East Africa during Omani rule. In book edited by Dr. A.K. Pasha and titled, India and Oman: History, State, Economy, and Foreign Policy, we get information on Oman’s maritime trade activities during the second half of the eighteenth century. In this book, Dr Pasha devotes a chapter to Oman’s maritime trade relations with the state of Mysore under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan.

Oman’s domestic Imamate politics is another important theme for our research work. The conflict between interior Oman and coastal Muscat prompted Ahmad bin Said’s successors to shift the capital to Muscat and concentrate on building Oman’s maritime empire and trade. But even then, whenever the Omani interior became unstable, Muscat was also affected by it. Therefore, a good study of works on the domestic politics of Oman is necessary to understand how the Imamate politics of interior Oman had a bearing on Oman’s maritime trade. John C. Wilkinson’s book, The Imamate Tradition of Oman and Ibn Ruzayk’s work, History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman, translated by the Hakluyt Society of London, are some of the detailed works on the domestic politics of Oman during the Al Bu Saidi period. We get little or no information on maritime trade in these works. In fact, J. C. Wilkinson divides Oman into the coastal and interior regions and clearly mentions that he would focus only on the politics of the interior. John E.
Peterson provides information about Omani domestic politics during the nineteenth century and its effect on Muscat. This information is important for this research as Oman’s maritime trade was centered on Muscat and events having a bearing on Muscat effect maritime trade as well.

The regional politics of the Gulf region and how it affected Oman during this period is another important theme that has to be dwelt with in this study. After the death of Nadir Shah in Persia, maritime trade in the ports in Mesopotamia and Persia declined because of the political instability. Ahmad Bin Sultan tried to make use of this instability to develop maritime trade in the port of Muscat. But his successors like Sayyid Said bin Sultan had to face stiff competition from economic rivals like the Qawasim of Ras-al-Khayma and the Utub of Bahrain. Patricia Risso, in her article, “Muslim Identity in Maritime Trade: General Observations and Some Evidence from the 18th century Persian Gulf/ Indian Ocean Region”, mentions how Oman’s economic power influenced regional politics in the Gulf region during the eighteenth century. Sultan Bin Muhammad al-Qasimi’s book, The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf, gives us an idea on the regional politics of the Gulf during the early nineteenth century. Calvin H. Allen Jr.’s article on Oman’s politics in Muscat and East Africa, which was mentioned earlier in this survey, refers to the rivalry between Oman and other regional powers of the Gulf for the control of maritime trade.

The last major theme of this research work is European intervention in the affairs of Oman and its effect on Oman’s maritime trade. Patricia Risso in her book refers to the competition between Britain and France for gaining influence in Oman during the late eighteenth century. Thus, we get detailed information of increasing British influence in Oman. This could be important for our research as British intervention in Oman’s affairs could be one of the factors that contributed to the decline of Oman’s empire. Reda M. Bhacker’s book on British domination over Oman’s empire, which was mentioned earlier, narrates how British activities resulted in the division of Oman’s empire. John Townsend also describes the nature of European intervention in Oman’s affairs before the twentieth century. The book mentions how European intervention decreased the slave
trade in Africa resulting in loss of revenues for Oman. As Fred Halliday’s main theme in this book is the consequence of British imperialism on Arab countries, he refers to Oman’s trade being negatively affected by British policies during the nineteenth century. Erik Gilbert’s article mentions how British intervention effected Omani influence in East Africa.

Most of the works on Oman’s maritime empire and trade concentrate on how the empire began to expand from the 1749 to 1856 and the nature of trade during this period. We have extensive recording of Imamate politics in Oman, the regional politics of the Gulf region and their impact on Oman’s maritime trade. There are references to Oman’s activities in East Africa and European intervention in the affairs of Oman. But what is most lacking in the literature is how the maritime trade of Oman was affected by the decline of Oman’s maritime empire after 1856 which was the year in which Sayyid Said bin Sultan died. The rising British influence in the region resulted in the decline and finally the end of the slave trade from East Africa which had procured enormous revenues for Oman. In Calvin H. Allen’s article on Indian merchants in Muscat, we realise that the influence of Indian merchants in the trade of Muscat increased when state control over the same declined. As the Al Bu Saidi rulers began to spend more on wars in the interior, they began to depend on Indian merchants to conduct their trade. Even though these factors are mentioned, we still do not have specific information on the maritime trade of Oman during the second half of the nineteenth century apart from a general idea. This research seeks to fill this gap in the area of Oman’s maritime empire.

Objectives of the Study
1. To understand the reasons for the decline of Oman’s maritime empire.
2. To investigate the factors that led to decreasing of state control over Oman’s trade.
3. To understand the nature of trade that existed in Oman in the second half of the nineteenth century.
Hypotheses

1. The decline of Oman’s maritime empire began with the division of the empire into two after the death of Sayyid Said bin Sultan Al Bu Saidi.
2. Increasing expenses of the state due to wars waged in Oman led to the decline of state control over Oman’s maritime trade.
3. Increasing British intervention in the internal affairs of Oman gave the final blow to the demise of Oman’s empire.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

As the topic is of a historical nature archival materials have been used as primary sources for this research. The largest source of archival material on Oman in India the Maharashtra State Archives have been extensively used for this research. Moreover, the India Office Records which contain the records pertaining to British India and the Gulf has published archival material relating to Oman in the form of volumes. J.G. Lorimer’s Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf was another important source that has been used. The travelogues of Western travellers to Oman during the concerned period have also been used. The attempt here is to link Oman to the world economic system and the Indian Ocean world. While Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of modern world-system has been used to understood Oman’s economic situation during the nineteenth century, Janet Abu Lughod’s explanation of a thirteenth century world-system which included West Asia and John M. Hobson’s concept of oriental globalisation has been utilised to study Oman’s position before the nineteenth century. Mark Speece’s model of a dual economic system for Oman has been scrutinised in this work. Finally, Andre Gunder Frank’s dependency theory is used to compare the economic situations of Muscat and Sur during the late nineteenth century.