Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

The Period of our study is one in which the native trade was generally in decline. In that the maritime activities of the Muslims of the Coromandel met with drastic changes and it was closely linked with the political conditions of the region. This study is an earnest attempt to focus about the role of the Muslims in the maritime activities on the Coromandel and their social customs.

Islam was well established in peninsular India long anterior to the crystallisation of medieval Muslim kingdom in North India. The age old trade contact between the Arabs and Tamils was responsible for such a religious intercourse. Arab traders who frequented south Indian ports from the close of seventh century, came as the followers of the new faith, Islam. They married the women of the coast and settled permanently or semi permanently. They spread the message of the Prophet Mohamed among the masses. The teachings of Islam caught the attention of the people of the peninsula, who were struggling for basic human rights in the then caste infested Hindu social system. Thus the peaceful preachings of these merchants and the mystics who accompanied them, induced the underprivileged to embrace Islam and thus the process of Islamisation in peninsular India and particularly in Coromandel Coast was peaceful and voluntary and was not spread with sword as alleged by some scholars. It is a historic fact that the Muslim rulers who were associated with the politics of Coromandel for some time had nothing to do with the spread of Islam. Evidences are wanting to postulate their proselitizing activities.

The descendants of the Arabs through the native women and the people who embraced Islam who came to be called as Marakkayars, Labbais and Rawthars (Sonakar, Thulukkar) continued the Arab maritime tradition and they dominated the maritime trade and allied activities in Coromandel Coast and were living in peace within the larger society, as Tamils. The location of the ports and the commodities that were available for export were well suited for their overseas enterprises. Hence the maritime commerce of the Eastern lands
and Ceylon was in their hands. They also took up the other maritime activities such as pearl fishing, ship building, manufacture of salt etc., for which the medieval native rulers granted many concessions. They have contributed a honourable share for the economic development of the Coromandel region by their maritime professions. The coming of Europeans was shocking challenge to their economic enterprises.

The maritime trade potential was behind the economic invasion of the Europeans on the Coromandel. The local rulers extended a red carpet welcome to all these Europeans and encouraged their trading activities at the cost of native traditional trading community including the Muslims. The native rulers, big and small, were fighting among themselves and freely allied with the aliens and they never rose to unite for chasing the foreign predators. They tolerated their misdeeds, political, economic and religious. The European colonial powers utilised the confused political condition of the region and developed themselves and the local rulers were silent spectators. Thus the interest of their subjects and economic wellbeing became casualty in the efforts of the native rulers for their self preservation.

During the period of our study the English who emerged as supreme power in land and sea and the native rulers fell prey to their economic and political ambition. The English who came for trade to our land crowned themselves as custodians of traditional empires. In the confused political condition, the maritime trade and other maritime activities slipped from the hands of the natives. The Europeans' economic dominance created a new capitalistic order for which the natives were no match. The White race competed with the native traders including the Muslims, in all the trading and other marine products. The European administrators prepared the Paravas and other non trading castes against the Muslims and these people became local competitors to the Muslims. The Muslims also did not rise up and respond suitably to overcome such challenges.
The Coromandel Muslims did not attain any political significance at any point of time and they kept away from the warring groups. They lost their power and position gradually from the beginning of sixteenth century. When the Europeans took over the affairs in the Southeast Asian countries it had serious consequences on their trading activities and political influence. Arasaratnam has pointed out rightly that from the middle of the eighteenth century the native traders including the Marakkayars and Labbaís were very much on their own continuing their operations in an unfriendly environment both at home and abroad with risk and lesser profit.

The economic and ethnic policies of the English were harmful to the trading activities of the Muslims. The Muslims were the most affected under the English administration. They were docile themselves and retreated, like snails into their shells, whenever their freedom and privileges were threatened. They had no State owned patronage, financial, military or political. With all their effective trade experience they proved to be the great survivors till the second half of nineteenth century but they could not continue their trade operation in the growing modern capitalistic pattern.

Though the Muslims were the largest group of shipowning maritime merchants up to eighteenth century the superior naval power, technology and capital resources of the Europeans made them to sink in fathom depth. Combined with the economic marginalisation of the English, the absence of awareness about modern world capitalism, neglect of modern education and technologies, disunity among them in economic ventures and their satisfaction in the residual opportunities at their disposal made them insignificant economic force by 1900. But they did not feel the necessity of woke up from the slumber. This concept may said to apply even to this day. The Coromandel Muslims who were ruling the waves of the oceans employing thousands of people had to run desperately in search of alternate jobs and business ventures in inland and in various far off countries.

From the available source materials an overall view on Coromandel trade could be drawn easily. Segregating the Muslim trading community for the study was indeed a difficult job. A sincere attempt has been made here to throw some newlight on their commercial
and other economic activities hitherto remained unexplored in the archival volumes and historical facts left unnoticed in the dark corners. This is the first effort in this direction. Material evidences on the subject are at the lowest minimum including that of the archival sources. A study of a few original Dutch records relating to this period could have given some more information and it was not possible. The descendants of the traditional maritime Muslim families do not possess much materials on their past or they are very serious about it. However data collected from all the possible sources have been pooled together to present a micro view on the maritime activities of the Muslims during this period. No doubt that their share for the economic development of the region was substantial but from the available data it was not possible to quantify their exact share in the Coromandel trade during the period of our study.

Sociological studies have revealed very interesting aspects about this community. To the converts, the Dravidian - Tamil culture, was close to their hearts. They retained with them their old and traditional customs and it was not a hindrance for their Islamic way of life. They share many of the social customs of the co-religionists, the Hindus. Such a cultural synthesis has brought a peaceful co-existence to both the religionists. The Hindu social order has been influenced by the Islamic culture in many respects, i.e. in food, dress, worship, widow remarriage, property right to women etc. But the Muslims society is also affected by the influence of the larger society, the one important example being the reprehensible dowry menace. The social customs of the Muslims have been handed down by tradition. The study on the social behaviour of the Muslims shows that their social customs and practices are continuing process from the remote antiquity to the present day.

The Tamil Muslim society of Coromandel present a homogenous character with other Tamil castes and communities. This is the special feature of the Tamil Muslim society and such a strong harmony cannot be seen in other parts of the country. To quote an example, the Maplos of the Western Coast, whose foundation is also of similar nature like that of the Coromandel Muslims, yet they do not constitute such a homogenous group for certain ethnographical and political reasons. In principle the Islamic society is totally egalitarian. But certain social disabilities among the Coromandel Muslim population will prompt one to
think that the Coromandel Muslim society has been affected by caste like organisation (Jathi). In support of this view some authors have pointed out the different sect names, sub sect names, caste like appellations (Rawthar, Labbai, Marakkayar etc.) matrimonial alliance only with in the sects, and sub sects, separate mosques for different sects, separate residential localities of some sub sects and so on. Further these authors have also argued that the equality in the prayer hall (mosque) is not maintained outside of it. But these are more casual observations. The segregations are more economical than religious. Islamic society is always mobile socially and when one climb up the ladder the stigma cast on him vanishes and thus the lowest can become equal with the socially and economically well placed. Hence there is no permanent incompatibility for a Muslim as in the case of a caste Hindu. Thus the social mobility is an important aspect in the Islamic society. The various custom and practices followed by the Coromandel Muslims in day to day life has shown that they go with the larger society in most of the cultural affairs. The contribution of the Muslims for language literature, mysticism, medicine, astronomy, astrology and arts and architecture have given them a honoured status in the society. Their religious attitude is always cordial with the people of other religions. The scope of our study of the community on social structure is limited. A detailed study on the linguistic and cultural aspects may yield much more materials for comparative sociology.

In fine, towards the end of nineteenth century the Muslims of Coromandel (Tamil Nadu) who were the rulers of waves and merchant princes in homeland and king makers and economic builders in far off countries met with their destiny not to rise again in the maritime world and they themselves have conveniently forgotten their glorious past yet they glitter in the pages of history.