Hadrami diaspora in Indian Ocean territories, with special reference to Malabar

By Zubair Hudawi

The history of Islam, especially in the whole Indian Ocean littoral, and the entire Islamization process of the eastern frontiers for at least last one Millennium, is inseparably mixed with the Arabs from Hadhramawt of Yemen. Hadrami Arabs – Sayyids, scholars, Sufis, traders, commoners – created a trans-cultural space of Islamic acumen as they traversed and settled in the trans-oceanic world that stretched from Cape Town on the southern tip of Africa to Timor at the limit of the Malay Archipelago. In fact, they played the major role in the spread and evolution of Islamic culture, religious ethos and social formation in all these regions. Consequently, studies on Hadhrami Arabs, patterns of their migration, the depth and breadth of their influence across the Indian Ocean littoral has nowadays become a major sub-section of Indian Ocean studies, and there have been a number of rigorous academic works on Hadramis and Hadrami Diaspora in various Indian Ocean regions.

However, despite being part of this Indian Ocean world,
the presence, spread and contributions of Hadrami Arabs in southern coasts of India, especially Malabar in Kerala, where Hadrami notables earned immense influence and played multiple roles, has received scant attention in these global studies on Hadrami Diaspora. Though rich resource is available in various hagiographies, chronologies, genealogies and mawlids that provide enormous information about Hadramis in Kerala, no methodologically sound attempts were made to analyze and explore these primary sources into a fruitful research. This paper is an attempt to fill some gaps in this regard as it calls to look to the role of Hadrami Arabs, especially Sayyid families among them, in the Islamic life and Muslim culture of Kerala.

Starting with a brief introduction to the existing studies on Hadrami Diasporas developed in different places and the expansion of Hadrami diasporic networks into diverse regions from East Africa to East Indies and from modern gulf states to western countries, the initial part of this paper would try to trace the migratory movements of Hadrami Sayyids and to apprise diverse Hadrami communities that developed into distinct diasporas in different regions of world. The second part tries to depict the exuberance of literature produced by these Hadrami people which could be taken as primary materials like genealogies, mawlids, hagiographies, historiographies, chronologies and etc.. It will also sketch out the important research materials and current researches in
the study of Hadrami community at homeland and abroad. From this backdrop, the paper would look into the emergence and development of Hadrami Sayyids in Kerala and their imprints in socio-cultural aspects of later Muslim community of Malabar. The main objective of this paper is a humble call on researchers to give serious attention towards intensive research on various socio-cultural dynamics of Hadramis especially Hadrami Sayyids in Malabar.

The Hadrami Diaspora: Time and Space

The migratory movements among religious communities especially Muslims have to be dealt with through both sacred and profane realms. The travels like for Hajj, Rihla Talab al ilm (travels seeking knowledge), Ziyara and Sufi wanderings are considered with religious notions. The Hadrami travels often have been accompanied by culture, religion and traditions. In fact, migratory movements among Sayyids or descendants of Prophet can be replicated with the historical movement of Hijra by Prophet. His descendants and his followers imitated this model by migrating into far lands with the message of God. For Hadhrami Alawi Sayyids, migration was part of their life. Founder of Sayyid line in Hadramat, Ahmad bin Isa al Muhajir (The Migrant), a 9th-generation descendant of Prophet, entered Hadramawt, travelling from Iraq through Hijaz and Yemen. Muhammad bin Ali, Sahib Mirbat (d 1161 in Oman), is the ancestor in whom all Hadhrami Sayyid genealogical ascent lines meet. His
grandson, Muhammad b Ali the First Jurist (al Faqih al Muqaddam, d 1255), is the initiator of the Sayyid, Sufi Alawi way. Sahib Mirbat’s son Alawi b Muhammad is called Uncle of the Jurist (Amm al Faqih). Al Hadhrami Sayyids trace their ancestry to one of these two men – Muhammad bin Ali (Al Faqih al Muqaddam) and Alawi bin Muhammad (‘Amm al Faqih). More than two centuries after the death of the First Jurist, Abu Bakar Hyдарus al Adani became the first among the Alawi Sayyids who trans-located the typical Sayyid-Sufi complex of Alawis outside Tarim. He migrated to Aden from Hadramawt in 1484, when the city was a burgeoning port hosting trans-regional trade between Europe and Asia, and the commercial activity was accompanied by heightened religious activity in the region. Adeni travelled around the region, and he is credited with converting communities of Ethiopians to Islam. Adeni’s migration was followed by other members of his lineage as they migrated across the Indian Ocean, to East Africa, western India, and Southeast Asia. Throughout this region, the graves of members of this lineage have become pilgrimage destinations. They are explicitly connected to each other by elaborate genealogical books.

A model of Malabari boat

There are various opinions about when Hadhramis started their ventures in the Indian Ocean and what all were the reasons that induced their travels. According to B. G. Martin, Hadhrami migrations were certainly taking
place before the time of Muhammad (s), and during the Muslim period they continued for many centuries. The push factor of poverty in the province, abundant opportunities in far-flung areas, missionary activities and easily acceptable legitimacy by the Prophet’s family lineage, made the movement urgent or easier for them. The lack of research (Hartwig) and problems in periodization of Hadrami historiography (al Atas 1997, 29) makes it difficult to know when a clearly constituted Diaspora has emerged. The vague generalization on centuries and decades often in primary Hadrami literatures also would be a great difficulty in fixing the exact time period (Pkm 2010, 43). Therefore, it’s very problematic to fix out clearly the exact time which urged the movement, of Hadramis in general and Hadrami Sayyids in particular, out of their homeland.

Even though the earlier movements would stretches back to pre-Islamic period, Hadhramis emerged as a distinct diaspora during the modern era, which can be taken to have begun when Europeans progressed from naval to territorial expansion in the Indian Ocean around 1750 (Chaudhuri, 1985). Likewise, Dale argues that “the tradition of Hadrami emigration from Southern Arabia is thought to have become well established in the sixteenth century, as they moved from their impoverished homeland along the well established trade routes to East Africa, India and Southeast Asia” (Dale 1990, 168). The recorded history of Malabar explicates the first arrival of a
Hadrami Sayyid in 1766, as Zamorin of Calicut warmly welcomed Sayyid Sheikh Jifry. In East African case, Coppens sees that two distinct periods become more auspicious for Hadrami migration the first from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries and second from the eighteenth to the beginning of twentieth century (1989, 185). However, the period after eighteenth century has witnessed the development of particular Hadrami diaspora in diverse regions of the world.

It will be very interesting to trace the geographical dispersal of Hadramis in to diverse regions as Richard Burton, the famous historian did observe that “it’s generally said that the sun doesn’t rise upon a land that does not contain a man from Hadhramawt” (Burton 1966, p. 58). Smith attributes this extension as he says that Hadhramis pushed further afield settling beyond Dutch and British. To the North, they went to Thailand, Cambodia and Southern Vietnam. To the east, they reached Portuguese Timor and New Guinea. To western Indian Ocean, they extended to Suez, Comoro Islands. In south western India, they occupied Malabar (Smith, 2002). The West Indies, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore were mentioned as the main migrant destinations before the Second World War, that can be explained by religious reasons, traditions as well as by existing family ties.

Generally speaking, throughout the last Millennium there was Hadhrami migration through Indian Ocean and they
had settled as far as beyond the Malay-Indonesian archipelago in Mindanao and Vietnam. However, patterns become identifiable in the fifteenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries respectively with the specific migratory movements of Arabs from the Hadramaut. Groups landed in Sumatra and Java in the fifteenth century to perform the tasks of syahbandar (port captains), engage in trade, and proselytise Islam, thereby assuming a place of importance in the royal courts. Hadhrami were dominant in Aceh after 1699 and assimilated into the ruling elites of Perlis, Siak and Jambi in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Sumit K Mandal, 2004) One can see the same history from the Malabar coasts where Hadhrami Arabs arrived and performed all kind of the mentioned works.

There was a large scale migration from Hadhramawt in the 17th and 18th centuries, and it was mostly due to demographic pressures at home, a bad climate, famines and floods, or political upheavals. However, many of them were Sayyids, Sufis or scholars, often all at the same time, and they took up high religious and juridical posts. There are a continuous set of records provided by the Hadhrami Diaspora, tracing of which will give clearer idea about the Hadhrami migration patterns in the Indian Ocean. Rare manuscript in Arabic and local languages with valuable narratives are available at different parts of the ocean, such as Zanzibar, Makkah, Hadramawt, Surat and Malabar in India, and the Malay Archipelago. It would
Scholars have tried to understand why the Hadhrami Arabs, especially Sayyids, gained enormous prestige and influence and the role of cultural mediators and facilitators in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Indian Ocean world, before, during and after the era of European colonialism. Though meant trade and business as well as religious propagations through their frequent travels at length and breadth of Indian Ocean, ‘the Hadhramis differed from their European counterparts in how they engaged the area. Their enterprises overseas were not backed by an equally mobile, armed state. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English in the Indian Ocean were strange new traders who brought their states with them. They created militarized trading post empire in the Indian Ocean, and did business at the point of a gun. However, rather than elbowing their way in, Hadramis comported themselves to local arrangements wherever they went. They settled and sojourned in towns big and small and entered into relations with locals that were more intimate, sticky and prolonged than the Europeans could countenance. They were there before the Portuguese arrived and remained after the British left’. Many across the Indian Ocean invited them for permanent settlements. Engseng Ho says that it was due to kings and Sultanates across the Indian Ocean littoral who needed to show that they were now civilized and
their abodes are comfortable places for the peaceful pursuit of profit and they needed to advertise their maturity. ‘Few better ways existed to achieve such objectives than installing a resident Muslim jurist to refashion a grim pirates haven as a new sphere of civilian concourse, boasting a Friday congregational mosque, a court of Justice, and a school’. Hadhrami Arabs wielded immense prestige and influence throughout the vast Indian Ocean. The history of their migrations across this region has compelled Western writers like Richard Burton (1856) and Snouck Hurgronje (1906) to explain with a mixture of awe and resentment. They wondered seeing the apparent ease with which foreign Hadhrami Sayyids, descendants of the Prophet, entered the ruling echelons of native society in these very different places. Also, they were the only party in all these negotiations that never overtly posed a threat to any other. The Sayyids had a history of cooperative relations with most of these groups. With rulers they had served as counselors and administrators, with slave elites such as the Ethiopians they had been Muslim cultural mentors, with the merchants they were familiar as judges and arbitrators in commercial disputes. Europeans often found that the Sayyids could help or hinder their dealings.

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Hadrami Sayyids in Literature

Hadramis themselves have produced rich literature which has played greatly in making their cultural adaptation easier in receiving societies. Along with their migratory movements, Hadrami Sayyids have carried genealogical texts that mobilize genealogy toward many narrative ends. Genealogy combines with poetry, biography, history, law, novels, and prayers in the Diaspora (Ho 2006). The movement of lineage through genealogical texts enabled them easy and improved trans-cultural occurrences, through marriages often with nobles, kings and people of high cultural spectrum whom they selected as wives from the host societies. There are hagiographical works also on forefathers like Bustan al Qulub al Jawahir by Abd al Rahaman al Khatib contains five hundred stories of preternatural instances from late Sayyids (Ho, Engsang, 2006, p. 46).

Besides Mawlids and Ansabs, there we will find historiographies written on the religious and social services rendered to the community. Sayyids in Diaspora possess huge collections of Hadrami literatures that
would substantiate the greatness of their lineage and would link them into the large Sayyid family. Mawlids remind the young generations the hagiographic qualities of the late fathers, which also helps in maintaining the prestigious position of Sayyids. These huge collections have indeed worked in making sound researches on Hadrami traditions possible and much easier.

Besides these collections, thoroughly researched works have been produced in the genealogies of Hadrami Sayyids like Shams al- d’ahira fi nasab ahl al bayt min Bani Alawi Furu’ Fatwima al-Zahira wa Amir al Mu’minin H`ali radiya Allah anhu by al-Mashhur (1911), Al Muhjam al Lateef Li asbab il alqabi wal kuni li qabai’l wa butwuni al sadati Bani Alawi by al-Shatwiri (1986), and ‘Kawkab al-Durriyya fi nasab al-Sada aal Ba Alawi (the brilliant stars concerning the pedigree of the Alawi Saada), a book on Sayyid genealogy by Sayyid Shaykh al Jifri (d 1807). The hagiographies like al Mashrah` al- rawi fi manaqib al sada al kiram Al Abi Alawi, Iqd al Jawahir wa al durar fi akhbar al qarn al hadi ashar both by al-Shilli, (1989, 2009) and Rihlat al ashwaq al qawiyya ila mawatin al sada al Alawiyya by Ba Kathir al Kindi (1985) Iqd al Yawaqit al jawhariyya wa simt al ayn al dhahabiyya bi dhikri tariq sadatil alawiya by al Hibshi (1900), also provide a clear hagiographic description of Hadrami Sayyids especially Alawis.

Having a lot of socio-cultural and religious importance Sayyids have been matter of serious academic concern
for scholars of different disciplines. The seminal work of R.B. Sergeant ‘Sayyids of Hadramawt’ details not only diverse Sayyid families but also provides a historical sketch of the Wadi Hadramawt. With its Islamic Sufi heritage and religious learning centres, Hadramawt indeed represents a medieval Islamic land which produced one of world’s largest Diaspora. Bujra’s (1971) ‘The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town’, outlines the social scenario prevailed in Hadramawt and how this social hierarchy controls the political turnings. Hadramawt’s old learning centres and scholarly linkages with other Islamic centres was exposed through Frietag’s (1999, 2002) works ‘Hadhramaut: A Religious Centre for the Indian Ocean in the late 19th and early 20th century’ and ‘Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean’. Coppens (1989, 1997) has provided the Hadrami tradition and settlement in the East African region and the socio-cultural integration in the indigenous community. Martin’s (1971) article ‘Migrations from Hadramawt to East Africa and Indonesia c. 1200-1900’, depicts the emergence and development of Diaspora in both East Africa and Indonesia. Ingram’s ‘Zanzibar: Its History and its Peoples’, Berg’s (1887) Hadhramut and the Arab Colonies in the Indian Archipelago, Al Atas’ (1994) ‘The Twareeqat al Alawiyya and the Emergence of the Shi’i School in Indonesia and Malaysia’ also describe Hadrami diasporas from Zanzibar, Dutch East Indies, to Indonesia and Malaysia. Ann K Bang’s work ‘Sufis and Scholars of Sea:
Family Networks in East Africa 1860-1925’ has drawn the family sufi scholarly linkages of a East African and in this meticulous study Bang talks about one of the most influential Hadhrami-East African scholars of the period, Ahmad b Abi Bakr b Sumayt (1861-1925). The socio-political presence of Hadrami Sayyids in India except Kerala has been put by Omar Khalidi (1997) in his The Hadhrami Role in the Politics and Society of Colonial India, 1750-1950s Stephen Dale’s (1997) article ‘The Hadhrami Diaspora in South Western India: The Role of the Sayyids of the Malabar Coast’ represents the lone work on Hadrami Diaspora in Malabar.

Hadrami Sayyid Diaspora in Malabar

Dale (1997) concludes his article on Hadhrami Diaspora in Malabar Coast asserting the scope of intense research on this scantly attended area of Malabar. Kerala provides amazing stories of Sayyid families being received and respected. Still, in the 21st century, the pious and religious descendents of Sayyid families wield religious and political leadership of the community. Across the state, especially in the contemporary Malabar, a number of notable graves of reputed Sayyid personalities are widely respected, and are abode of many religious activities, a typical tradition of Hadhramawt, where the graves of pious ancestors play an important symbolic role in the religious and social lives of Hadhramis.

Around 30 Sayyed Qabilas have reached Kerala from
different parts of the Islamic world, and most of them were from Yemen, precisely Hadramouth, and from Central Asian regions like Bukhara. Malabar Muslims as well as non-Muslim rulers of Kerala received them happily and in most cases, they were gifted lands and houses. Many rose to the fame through their leadership qualities as many of them were big scholars, sheikhs or Mureeds of Sufi thareeqas, or influential and pious umara. Jifri Qabila was major Hadrami Sayyed family arrived and inhabited in the state taking important roles in religious leadership. Sheik Jifri, who landed to a warm welcome in Calicut in 1159 AH, was a great scholar and a sheikh of Qadiriyyaa Sufi silsilah.

Mamburam Sayyed Alawi and his son Sayyed Fadhl were two of the most important figures descended from this family, both of whom were famous for their role in defending the region against British colonisers. The former, who was born in Thareem of Yemen in 1166 AH and who is famous by the name of Mamburam Thangal, was a big reformer who spent his whole life for social service and to save the society from the clutches of British cruelty. He and his son, who was later exiled to Arabia due to his anti-British attitudes, set up many mosques and religious institutions in Muslim villages and played a leading role in awakening the community against the colonisers and in reviving their deteriorating religiosity and piety. Other families like, Bafaqeeh, Ba’a’Iwi, Saqaf, Jamalullail, Haddad etc have also
contributed to the religious growth, social formation and educational developments of Kerala Muslims. Still Mappilas respect scholarly and pious members from Sayyid families, and the first leadership of almost all traditionalist organisations and educational institutions in the state lay in their safe hands.

The importance of Hadhrami Sayyids and scholars is evident in the nature of Islamic life and culture they spread in the regions they settled in. It starts in the common tradition of following Shafi‘i school of jurisprudence, but it becomes more apparent in the healthy and creative synthesis of Islamic scholarship (‘Ilm) and Tasawwuf (which is called Islamic Mysticism or Sufism by western scholars of Islam). Shafi‘i’s legal school, the Ash’ari school of theology and the purified or reconciliatory form of Tasawwuf or Sufi orders and practices (which is called neo-Sufism by Fazlur Rahman) are the common traditions imparted by Hadhrami Diaspora in their host societies.

Sayyids often have been called in indigenous language of Malayalam as Thangals, as the term literally assumes the honour to the people with this sacred lineage from Prophet. This sacred lineage along with Sufi preternatural activities indeed gained them honour and they were linked to high or ruling echelons of the society. This could be experienced from the arrival of Sheikh Jifry whom Zamorin of Calicut received with reverence. Preternatural activities of Karamaths and pro-poor policies attributed
to them have also etched a significant position in the minds of Mappila Muslims till today. The sacred lineage of Prophet and perternatural actions along with healing traditions gives them a charisma to which the community is attracted. The political and religious leadership of Shihab family of Panakkad can be read in this charismatic individuality exposed by Weber.

Sayyid, Sufi Sheikh and ‘Aalim or the religious scholar – these are the three major religious notables, who emerged from the Hadhrami Diaspora that lived in the Indian Ocean littoral. A Sufi sheikh was respected and received by the majority only when he become a religious scholar as well, or at least totally lived in the way of Shari’a. Also, mostly the influential Sayyids will be sheikh or member of a Sufi order, in the Hadhrami case the Alawiyya order, and scholar of Shari’a.

The theoretical base of Hadhrami Sufi tradition lies on the ideas of Imam Gazali, Ibn al Arabi and Abu Madyan; A broad understanding of Arabi’s ‘true saint is prophet’s inheritor’ in genealogical terms, and Abu Madyan’s notion who combines knowledge and action (‘Ilm wa amal), and of Gazali who engages both religious and mundane world (deen wa dunya). Their social and scholarly engagements mark it clearly, and from this tradition Alawi Sayyids form a core and provide leadership that is not aloof but participates in society at large. The common spiritual origin serves to explain the strong doctrinal connection between the ethics literature of the Shadhiliyya and the
Alawiyya. In the centuries after Faqih al Muqaddam, both Alawis and Shadhilies continue much emphasis on such classical works as Ghazzali and Zuhrawardi. Both of them coupled mysticism with a strong emphasis on the Shari’a, both as the science of jurisprudence and as a way of life. While some spiritual seekers flee from the mundane world and others reach God, the full saint is one who, having attained such spiritual heights, then returns to the mundane world to act within it.

The focus on Ghazali-inspired Tasawwuf, Nawawi-inspired Shafi’i legal texts, Ashari-inspired theology and the more moralistic-ethical Hadith collections in the schooling curricula of scholars becomes clearer from the make-up and careers of almost all religious specialists sprout from Hadhrami-influenced centers of learning, be it in South Arabia or in any of the Indian Ocean territories.

Visiting the graves of respected ancestors in both familial lineage and Tariqa isnad, in order to seek baraka and keep a roohi contact (spiritual attachment) with them, is one of the characteristics of Hadhrami Sayyids and scholars; a legacy widely followed in Hadhrami-inspired regions. ‘Collective visits of graves were commonplace among the Hadhrami ‘Ulama. The public demonstration of piety and respect for the forefathers, the charity, hospitality, communal visits of graves and the exchanges of Ijazas were, of course, more than just accidental manifestations of individual behaviors.’ (Freitag, 2003) Other than visiting the graves, (a) seeking baraka or
blessing from the remains of the pious ones and (b) kissing the hands of respected Sayyids, Sheikhs, Sufis, scholars, and even all respected elders like parents, are two Hadhrami-Sufi-scholarly traditions spread in these region.

Learning the life of pious ancestors is a key area of Hadhrami scholastic tradition. Officially or unofficially they learn and understand the biography of their ancestors and their religious and spiritual qualities. Along with the family lineage, they will have their Tariqa Isnad and ‘Ilmi Isnad, and often both become same. This shows an unbroken chain of pious and God-fearing transmitters reaching all the way to the Prophet. The aim of learning about the life of ancestors was not only to adopt a clear and pure spiritual root to the Prophet, but also to emulate their praiseworthy characters, ethics, piety and etiquettes and behaviors in the life. In Alawi manuals the lives of the pious forefathers are held forth as brilliant examples, flawless individuals embodying the essence of the prophet. Fadl B Alawi b Sahl asked his followers to know the forefathers, to study them, follow their path and increase the core of their group. Ibnu Sumayt, the East African Hadhrami scholar advices his son, ‘you should have the full knowledge of the way of the forefathers, their doings. These are collected and written for the purpose of being noble examples, so that those blessed by god to succeed may succeed through them”.

Yet another Hadhrami tradition common in South India
and Southeast Asia is the importance being given to esoteric rituals of reciting Mawlid s and Ratibs in groups. The famous Ratib al-Haddad, composed by the Hadhrami Alawi poet and Sufi sheikh Abdullah b. Alawi al-Haddad (1634-1719), is very much common and popular among Kerala Muslims. Almost all traditional mosques have the habit of reciting it collectively every day after Magrib or Isha prayer. Many of Mappilas still keep the tradition of reciting it at their homes every evening. Anne Bang is presently heading a project aimed at tracing distinct local variations of Ratib al-Haddad in space and time. (Haddad Ratib is common in South Africa, Southeast Asia and South India. As the Hadhrami tradition spread, it was not only those joined in the Sufi orders and took the oath (bai’at) who participated in these rituals, but along with learned sheikhs and devout members, non-members also took part in a popular expression of faith, and this has been vehicle for islamization and social reorganisations in many places.

The socio-cultural integration of this diaspora into the local culture of Malabar would be very explicit as they have almost integrated in the indigeneous style of dressing, cuisine, etc. The Hadrami influence defined the dynamism of entire Islamic culture, the modes of thoughts, the individual and social behaviors, rites and rituals, the nature of scholars and their students, and the entire modifications until the effect of a larger globalization.
Hadhramis were invited by resident kings to station in their places in order to take up multiple roles in their relocated places like resident scholars, traders, statesmen, and arbitrators. Kings and rulers in both the places encouraged the settlement of leading figures and families from Hadhramout to boost their trade and to show that they were now civilized and their abodes are comfortable places for the peaceful pursuit of profit, and in this way they advertised their maturity.

Thus, the Hadrami Diaspora of Malabar indeed offers wide scope to link with international Hadrami studies.

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