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A Critical Analysis of the Spread of Islam in Mauritius

Musleem Jumeer

A Euro-centric approach to history has resulted in the Portuguese being considered the discoverers of the island of Mauritius during the early 16th Century but it is more logical to consider the Swahili as the true discoverers of the island. However, it was of no great significance to them as well as to the succeeding Portuguese and Dutch. The French Settlement saw the beginning of Islam on the island. The high rate of mortality (and the high rate of prevalence of diseases linked to scurvy) among the French sailors during the hazardous long distance voyages to and from Europe and Asia compelled the French to have recourse to the services of indigenous Indians as replacement sailors for the very survival of their commercial enterprises with the East. These sailors hailed mainly from the Pondicherry, the head quarters of all French activities in the East, but they were not all necessarily of South Indian origin. Many came from the Bay of Bengal and even from the West Malabar Coast of India. These 'lascards' as they were called by virtue of their job which took them to different parts of the world where they often settled constituted a racially mixed group par excellence.¹

The success of the French Commercial enterprise rested on the shoulders of these sailors and right from the beginning of the French occupation of the Mascarenes, we find many of them living either in Port-Louis or St Denis. The sailor's job was not a well-paid one due to the high rate of unemployment

¹ Musleem Jumeer, "Les Affranchissements et les Libres a L'île de France", *Memoire de Maitrise*, Universite de Poitiers, France.

among them. The low wages induced the French authorities to hire a good number of them and very soon a small community of Muslim sailors emerged with basic facilities for prayers, rituals of birth, marriage and death.

The original Islamic society of Reunion Island has, unfortunately, not been researched. But from available evidence, it would seem that the lack of economic enterprises there stultified the growth of this small community and the few Muslim sailors who settled there were subsequently absorbed into the mainstream of the Catholic population. The Isle de France where major economic enterprises were developed, especially by the French governor Mahé de Labourdonnais in its initial stage attracted, more and more Muslim sailors and skilled workers. Relatively speaking, the 150 skilled lascards brought during the rule of Labourdonnais constituted quite a substantial group in a population that consisted only of 1500 people. Labourdonnais relied to a great extent on them for laying the foundation of French commercial supremacy in the Indian Ocean.

After Labourdonnais, however, a significant drop was registered in maritime activities and inevitably the number of Muslim sailors imported was reduced; this affected the consolidation of Islam in the Ile de France. Less maritime and commercial activities also meant a return to the homeland for many of these sailors who found it increasingly difficult to get employed. This negative growth was accentuated by the failure of the French East India Company, which had bought the privilege of administering the island from the King of France, to produce ghee from vegetable or cattle as stipulated in the contract between the sailors and the company. Since the island was devoid of any significant cattle breeding, this meant that the product had to be imported at great cost. The Company thereupon decided to substitute ghee with the less costly *sain doux*. These two factors led to the gradual departure of these lascards from the island. Only those who could not make the return journey due to old age, ill health or other social reasons were compelled to stay on the island. In the available archival sources relating to the period 1745 to 1770 there is no mention of these sailors in notarial, commercial and other transactions.

But this depopulation does not mean that Islam had been completely wiped off the Ile de France. Because of the restrictions place on Islam by the French laws prevailing on the island, it had to be practised in secret. Fortunately, the religious fervour of its adherents was unabated and they were not only able to keep their faith alive in a hostile environment but also to make new caveats.²

It is impossible from our knowledge of those early Muslim settlers to assess their level of religiosity, the religious books or authorities to which they had recourse for inspiration or interpretation of religious dogmas, or even the nature of the religious practices that characterized their society. The archival records are silent on all these issues. It would be possible, however, by establishing a list of all ships hailing from oriental/Muslim ports to gain some idea of the religious influences to which they were exposed. In the absence of any research along these lines, it is difficult to make any claims or assertions about this issue but we have been struck by the number of ships named by Shī`ah crews that called at the Ilede France. The Sunni sailors, isolated from their roots in Eastern India, became exposed to Shī`ah influences and inevitably certain Shī`ah practices, especially those that did not contradict the basic Sunni faith in principle, were adopted and integrated by the Sunni Muslims who mostly belonged to the Hanafi *madhhab*.

This is apparent from the fact that the Yamsé or Ghoon is still practised by the descendants of these lascar sailors during the month of Ramadān. The first 10 days are observed in mourning and huge replicas of minarets, beautifully adorned, are drawn in a procession along the streets of Port-Louis in honour of Hadrat `Ali and the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala. The harmonious blend of Shia and Sunni practices has enriched the cultural heritage of Mauritius.

The following two factors may help to explain why the spread of Islam in the neighbouring island of Reunion has been stunted whilst on the Ile de France Islam has made some gains:

(a) more economic investments (more injections of capital) in the economy of the Ile de France which is well endowed with two good harbours in a region of the world characterized by a dearth of natural shelters

² Musleem Jumeer, "Les Affranchis et les Indiens Libres a L'île de France," *Doctorat de 3e Cycle*, Université de Poitiers, France.

(b) a larger population of Muslim sailors better equipped to resist catholic proselytism because they had in their midst of influential and knowledgeable personalities.

Again, it is extremely difficult to come across writings left by the sailors themselves or by outside observers and we have had to rely on the collection of memories, souvenirs, etc that have been saved from generation to generation, to corroborate this information with the historical evidence and make due allowance for distortion over the years. Fortunately, the descendants of many of the oldest families are still present in Mauritius and we were able to trace them and speak to them about the past. Their recollection whilst working on the old tomb of Sakina Bibi Goulamy situated in the yard of the Camp des Lascards Mosque (now known as Al Aksa Mosque) puts us in a position to make the following assumptions.

In the midst of these sailors whose degree of religiosity cannot be assessed for obvious reasons, were to be found some enfranchised slaves, especially women who had been kidnapped and brought as slaves to the island. We have no indication of the status of Amina who was bought and enfranchised by the sailor Sheik Ally in 1738 but we are pretty certain that Sakina Goulamy was of a certain social status. According to oral traditions, among descendants of the Sobdar family she was the daughter of Sheik Goulamy. She did not come to the island as a captive slave as was the case of so many of the slaves of Indian origin in the French factories in India. She could also have been captured by pirates whilst traveling to Arabia for pilgrimage or to some other place. It is known that many Arab/Indian ships fell prey to private attacks. The wealthy hostages were ransomed but those who could not be ransomed were sold to the Indian Ocean islands as slaves after undergoing terrible humiliation.

Sakina Goulamy was bought by Joseph Francois who enfranchised and married her. This explains why she remained in the collective memory of the descendants of the lascards as Mrs Françoise. She later married the sailor Goulamy. Her descendants played a leading role in the construction (along with other Muslim sailors) of the first mosque on the island. She passed away at the exceptional age of 112 years.

Sakina Goulamy's role in the survival of this first Islamic community was crucial. She was able to rally the whole group around her - due to respect for her old age - in an environment where Islam could not be practised openly. She was revered by the whole community and when she died in 1809, she was buried out of respect for the role she played in the consolidation of that community in the very premises of the mosque.

This small community which consisted of briefly 35 families kept Islam alive in the two main harbours of Ile de France, Port-Louis and Grandport, until the British conquest of 1810. The restrictions on the practice of Islam were removed and Muslims petitioned the British authorities for the right to establish other mosques. Unfortunately, the initial unity that characterized the Muslim community during the French period finally gave way to infernal feuds over the leadership of the Sobdar and Goulamy families.

During the 1820's, the British brought political prisoners to the island and they were employed for the construction of roads, bridges and buildings. Many of these political exiles were Muslims and contact between them and the Muslim inhabitants which was established when they met during the Jumu`ah prayer at the Camp des Lascards mosque reinforced their religious convictions.

It was only after 1835 when the Indian Indentured system was installed on the island that we witness a spread of Islam in Mauritius. From 1835 to 1924 (when the system ended) a total of some 435,000 Indians had been brought to toil in the sugar plantations following the dismantling of the slave system. It is generally assumed that about a quarter of these immigrants under contract professed the Islamic faith. They hailed mostly from the provinces of Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar and boarded the ship at Calcutta, whilst others did so at the two other ports of embarkation viz Bombay and Madras.

Once in Mauritius, they tried to replicate the type of society to which they were accustomed in India. Despite the harsh conditions to which they had to submit themselves, the gregarious spirit enabled them to settle in the rural countryside of Mauritius in some specific places where the preceding group of Muslim immigrants had already established the basic structures and facilities for prayer and other rituals.

At first, newly employed labourers had to settle in the village assigned to them on the plantation, next to their Hindu neighbors. This did not pose any problems since the two groups had been living side by side for centuries, sharing basically the same Indian culture, speaking the same bhojpuri language. But the Muslims preferred to live in the Southern part of the island where facilities existed for the performance of the daily prayers. Even the plantation sugar camp with a Muslim population had a place reserved for prayers. It could be just a simple plot of land marked off by some poles or a more elaborate facility depending on the size of the Muslim population. The sugar planter (employer) did not place any restrictions on the occupational organization of the camp. In fact, in their quest for more and more labour the planters dispatched sirdars to the coolie ghat (landing place of the immigrants) with a special mission to recruit them to their particular estate. In the case of Muslim labourers, the sirdars offered to provide them with the facilities that included the basic structure for the practice of their religion. In this way, we find that some states especially in the southern part of the island had a higher concentration of Muslim laborers.

With the gradual emergence of villages that developed on crown lands or on the periphery of the sugar plantations the possibility for the old immigrants who had completed their 5-year contract and who had chosen to leave their plantations to cluster together became more real. Again, the mosque or more precisely the place reserved for building a mosque became the focal point around which most of the Muslims would rally. Most of these early mosques can be found along rivers or near a suitable water point for performing ablution. The mosques of Flacq and La Riviere Citron are two good examples.

What is important to note is that the Muslim labourers, once they had decided to be employed on the estates of old immigrants, would tend to cluster around places where mosques already existed or were in the process of being built. This does not, however, mean that they were not at ease living in the midst of Hindu fellow workers; their choice was motivated by the desire to benefit from existing Islamic structures.

This is true for the whole island. Concentration of old immigrants belonging to the Muslim faith developed islandwide and these served in their turn to attract

more and more old immigrants. The greater the concentrations of these residents the more likely were the mosques that were established there to be greater in size.

The way that Islam spread across rural Mauritius during the 19th century goes a long way to explain how the Muslims have been able to develop an identity over the years which distinguished them from their Hindu and Tamil counterparts. Urdu became their language of identity even though they used Bhojpuri as their lingua franca (extensively among themselves and to communicate with others). Urdu achieved in their eyes much importance; it became their cultural language, the language through which the Islamic dogmas were enshrined. It was also the educational language of the *madrassa*.

Another way in which the Muslims highlighted their identity was through the dressing of their womenfolk with the *baju* (the dress that reaches halfway between the ankle and the knees) and the *horni* (a piece of cloth that covers the head and goes down to the waist). They also developed a typical cuisine with *biryani* as the main dish.

Most of the Muslim labourers belonged to the working class and were not quite equipped to face a substantial, organized society. Some studies have however revealed the existence in their midst of professionals who either passed themselves often as labourers in order to avoid political persecution following the collapse of the Indian Mutiny movement or were keen to leave India for personal reasons such as debt, love affairs, matrimonial/family problems etc. In Mauritius, they had to labour on the fields but their past education background enabled them to provide the unskilled/skilled labourers with the refined structures (organizational) with themselves acting as cadres in order to survive and prosper in an alien society.

Memons and Surtees

In a class-conscious society, the Muslims were considered to be at the lowest rung of society up to the 1830's until the arrival of Muslim traders since the lascar sailors and the Muslim coolies were considered as economic nonentities. The Muslim traders, dubbed respectively Maimans and Surtees changed this negative perception and came to be a new force to be reckoned with in the economic field.

The migration of the Indian coolies to Mauritius attracted the attention of the Indian Memon and Surtee traders who realised that this had the potential to open up a huge market for them and they did not waste time in following in the footsteps of the indentured labourers.

The group known as Memons hailed from the Gujerati province - from Kutch and Kathiawar - and were experts in the supply and marketing of cereals, rice and pulses. They had developed an elaborate commercial network exclusively for Memons with their agents, in most cities of the Indian subcontinent and the main cities of Asia. These agents were well positioned to supply the market with cereals obtained at source at the most competitive price. The British merchants unable to obtain cheaper prices despite their own commercial network operating from Port Louis soon abandoned this lucrative market to the Memons who were thus able to supply the market. Without these Memon merchants, the five rupees monthly wages which remained unchanged during the whole era of indentured history from 1835 to 1924 would not have been sufficient to cover the cost of living of the coolies. The social history of Mauritius could have taken another turn and the whole system of indentured labour could have collapsed due to the rising cost of food which made it extremely difficult for the laborers to make both ends meet and for the sugar producers to compete on the world market. The monopoly of these merchants supplying this huge market of both the labourers and the local population with the lowest margin of profit made these Memon merchants amongst the wealthiest on the island.

The other organized groups of traders, the Surtees also hailed from Gujerat from the town of Surat and its surroundings. They were not as well organized as the Maimans on the international market but could nevertheless supply the local market with all textile goods, such as skirts, dhoti, turban etc. destined for the labourer's at the most competitive price and this became their monopoly. Though this market was not as huge and lucrative as the cereal market it was sufficient to make them prosperous.

Just as in the case of the Memons they could easily compete with the British and local merchants and supply the local markets due to an elaborate network of agents in India. The textile market was not as extensive as the market for cereals and the Surtee population that immigrated as "passenger immigrants" to

Mauritius was far too numerous for the limited market, with the result that many Surtees had to branch out into other markets. This, however, proved to be beneficial for the spread of Islam in rural Mauritius. These Surtees who could not establish themselves in Port-Louis were compelled to move out to numerous villages where a ready market for Old Immigrants existed.

The Memon cereal merchants remained primarily wholesalers operating in the business port of Port-Louis and were never interested in becoming retailers. Their number remained consequently limited. The Surtees, on the other hand, besides being wholesalers was virtually compelled to become retailers in view of their greater number immigrating to the island. The limited wholesale market became saturated and they had to spread out to the main localities of rural Mauritius. The Surtees who came to Mauritius to try their luck and who did not succeed because of the limited market moved to neighbouring Reunion and even to Tamatave where there still exists a thriving community of Surtee merchants using the Mauritian Creole as their lingua franca.

Unity between the Memons and Surtees would facilitate the spread of Islam on the island. When the Memons and the Surtees came to the island, they found themselves in an environment that has for long been marked by slavery and the indentured system and where the free society was stratified into social classes, strongly divided on the lines of wealth, color and race. The French society was divided into several hierarchies where the upper classes looked down with disdain upon the lower ones. It was fashionable to organize one's society along discriminatory lines where the upper class believed in the superiority of its blood which could not under any circumstances be degraded through marriage with the lower classes. To prosper in such a society, one had to adopt its norms, beliefs and values and both the Memons and the Surtees adopted them.

As indicated earlier, the cereal trade brought immense wealth, prestige and importance to the Memon merchants and this induced them to look upon themselves as the bourgeois of the Muslim community. Just like the French bourgeois 'grand blanc' they lived as a closed community, endogamous. In the organization of their society, they had a choice of following either the pattern set by the French/British society or the Islamic injunctions about equality. They chose the former. The Surtees resented this strongly, but as the pull of the new

society in which they had settled was too strong for them, they in turn developed the same approach towards the rest of the Muslim population viz lascar and coolies. The Muslim community came to be organized thus into three main components: the Memons, the Surtees and the "Calcatees", a name that was given in principle to all those who did not belong to the two former groups. This stratified division of the Islamic society has caused much bitterness among the different groups of Muslims and has had a negative effect on the spread of Islam on the island.

The wealth and the prestige wielded by the Memons have induced them to establish the caste system within the ranks of the Muslims in Mauritius. We have argued above that they had allowed themselves to be influenced by the prevailing pattern of social organization on the island. It is also true that they were merely perpetuating a practice that had been inherent in their society for ages. They had been the last group to convert to Islam from Hinduism; this happened as late as the 14th Century. Despite this conversion to a religion that emphasizes equality and fraternity among its adherents, the Memons have not been able to rid themselves of this mindset of social classification. Mauritius provided them with a suitable ground for the caste system to blossom. Their wealth placed them in a position to perpetuate and even improve on the system. Matrimonial liaisons were strictly restricted as was the case among the white inhabitants but the Memons went further in so far as burials were concerned. Unlike the Christians where cemeteries (except for private cemeteries) were considered sacred places for one and all and where tombs were allocated according to one's position in society, the Memons chose to have private cemeteries exclusively reserved for them selves. This approach even bewildered the British authorities who asked whether they were not "Musulmaans".

This caste system practiced by the Memons and Surtees had a negative effect on the spread of Islam in Mauritius. People convert for different reasons, including being convinced by religious argumentation, for the sake of marriage or a desire to upgrade themselves. The caste system acted as a deterrent to those who might have been induced to embrace Islam.

Despite this, human nature being what it is, many liaisons developed between the different groups. When the first Memon and Surtee traders came to the

island, they did not bring with them their spouses who came at a later stage when things had settled down favourably. Many men married a second wife usually with a Calacatee woman.

The influx of the Gujerati Muslims facilitated the consolidation of the spread of Islam in the capital as well as in the countryside. During the French and early British period, most of the Muslims gathered for their prayers and the Camp des Lascards Mosque in Port Louis and there were two other temporary mosques (designated as a Jamaat Khanna). Both the Memons and Surtees used it and it went a long way to facilitate the integration of these two groups within the existing Muslim community. But due to the fact that its location was too remote from the business quarters of the Gujerati merchants, the latter decided to build another mosque, more appropriately situated. These two Gujerati groups, though distinct, cooperated readily with each other but soon they separated and the Memons became the sole administrator of the Jummah Mosque.