COMMUNAL RELATIONS IN PRE-MODERN INDIA:
16th Century Kerala

There have been many works on Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia, but these have too often been restricted to the imperial policies of the Mughals or to the evolution of the Pakistan movement. Few regional studies have been written, and there are still fewer works which have dealt with the social relations of the two communities. This article attempts to broaden the understanding of the interaction of Hindu and Muslim societies in India by analyzing the relations of Kerala's Muslim community with the predominantly Hindu society of India's Malabar coast. It is focused on the sixteenth century because during this period Hindu-Muslim relations in Kerala appear to have been remarkably stable, and the reasons for this apparent harmony provide the basis for interpreting the causes of the bloody communal outbreaks that plagued Malabar District throughout the nineteenth century.

The study of social organization and communal integration in sixteenth century Kerala has to be based on the two primary sources for the period: the account compiled by the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa and the Arabic history of Zayn al-Din al-Ma'bari which was completed about 1585. These two works complement each other since both authors were principally concerned with the area between South Canara and Cochin which later became the British Malabar District, and because each discusses Malayali society from a different perspective.

Barbosa was a Portuguese commercial agent and linguist who lived in Cochin and Cannanore between 1500 and 1515. According to his contemporaries he was completely fluent in Malayalam, and had a singular knowledge of local society. His stated purpose in writing was to provide a description of the countries which he had visited, and his account contains a detailed ethnography which was the most articulate and comprehensive work available before the nineteenth century.

Zayn al-Din's background is less well known, although he is thought to have resided in Ponnani, a Muslim commercial and religious center located between Calicut and Cochin. In contrast with Barbosa his purpose was essentially polemical. He wrote to incite his fellow Muslims to undertake a jihad against the Portuguese by demonstrating the havoc which they had wreaked upon the Muslim community in Kerala since Vasco da Gama's arrival off Calicut in 1498. But it is just Zayn al-Din's partisan spirit that makes the Tuhfat al-Mujahidin so valuable, for he analyzes Malayali society and the social status of his own community from a Muslim point of view. Taken in the light of Barbosa's descriptive ethnography his work provides the key to understanding the basis of Muslim integration in sixteenth century Malayali society.


2) See Longworth Dames, ed., The Book of Duarte Barbosa, I, p. xxxvi.
Barbosa divides Kerala society into two categories, native Hindus and foreigners. His description of the caste system is remarkably similar to that depicted in various nineteenth century works, although the precise number of castes and sub-castes varies as do their exact names and titles. He describes a hierarchy of eighteen castes which was separated into two groups of seven upper and eleven lower castes. He doesn't make explicit the reason for the latter division, remarking only that the upper castes "do not associate [with] nor do they touch" members of the second group. However, this group is composed of the so-called "polluting castes" of later writers, and it seems certain that the division which Barbosa describes is based upon the exaggerated concept of pollution held by the upper castes. These castes believed themselves to be polluted by the presence as well as by the touch of the lower castes.

Three castes stood at the apex of this hierarchy: the "kings", the priests or Brahmins and the Nairs. Barbosa lists only three kings, the rulers of Cannanore, Calicut and Quilon, all of whom were supposed to have been descended from the semi-legendary emperor of medieval Kerala, Cheruman Perumal. According to the variant of the legend reported by Barbosa Cheruman Perumal was converted to Islam by Arab traders, and then divided his kingdom among the three monarchs and numerous lesser feudatories before departing for Arabia where he eventually died. Barbosa's account of the legend appears to have accurately reflected the main outlines of Kerala's political system in the sixteenth century, for Zayn al-Din identifies these monarchs as the three most powerful in Kerala. He also mentions the existence of subordinate chieftains whose relationship to these rulers is left undefined, but which resembles the decentralized feudalism that can be analyzed in detail for the eighteenth century.

Barbosa describes the kings as being "of one caste and custom", and although he does not assign them a caste name the three were among the families who in the nine-

3) Longworth Dames, ed., The Book of Duarte Barbosa, II, pp. 3-6. Cheruman Perumal is thought to have ruled from the end of the eighth century until about 825 A.D. His apparent disappearance in 825 coincides with the founding of the Kollam era in Kerala. There is no definitive evidence that Cheruman Perumal ever became a Muslim, and the Jains, Christians as well as the Hindu Saivites claim him as one of their devotees. See K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, A History of South India (Madras: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed. 1966), pp. 162-63.
4) Zayn al-Din, Tuhfat al-Mujibidin, p. 27. These rulers divided sixteenth century Kerala into three major spheres of influence. The Kolattiri Rajas dominated the lands north of the Kotta river, including Cannanore. The Zamorins of Calicut were pre-eminent between the Kotta river and Cochin, and the Tiruvadis were paramount in the territories roughly congruent with the eighteenth century state of Travancore. The Rajas of Cochin, who are not included in Zayn al-Din's list, were partially subordinate to the Zamorins at the beginning of the sixteenth century.