

## The Ethnic Arabs of Pulicat

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Pulicat or “Pazhavercaud” has a very ancient history dating back to 1336 when the Vijayanagar Kingdom was established (Krishnan *et al.*, 2000). The quest for the spices of the east and lucrative textile trade in silk and cotton, inspired the Europeans to find an alternative route to the Indian subcontinent of which the Spanish and Portuguese were the pioneers. A change in the trading stream along the Coromandel Coast was caused by the English who wanted to monopolize trade in that area. After a series of wars and treaties, finally by the treaty of 1824, Pulicat came under the English East India Company in 1825. Researches of scholars like Vogel, Radhakumud Mukherji, Krishnasami Iyengar, and Hornell have shown conclusively that Indians many centuries prior to the commencement of the Christian era displayed extraordinary maritime activities. Besides the reference in Dr JW Mcrindle’s “Ancient India” to a disastrous voyage of some Hindus who were blown by storm into Germany, and a Greek inscription, referred to in Rawlinson’s “Intercourse between India and the Western World from the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome” (1916; p. 99), as found in a ruined shrine on the banks of the Nile which was visited by Sophon an Indian mentioned in it, ancient literature in Tamil, Sanskrit,

Pali and other languages are replete with references which prove that the Hindus of South India exhibited great enterprise overseas. Anthropologists have now almost agreed with Sir A Keith in raising the Tamil race to a status equal to any one of the three other races, viz., Mongolian, Aryan (Caucasian), and the Negroid. The Tamil race which is apparently akin to the Aryan is quite distinct ethnologically from it. Their color is brown or gold. The race, the original home of which is our continent Tamilagam, reached its golden age many centuries before Christ. Ancient literature proves how this continent was subject to invasions from the other three races. ‘Thirupura dakanam’ is the Negroid expedition and Suraparnan invasion that of the Mongolian. To the ancient civilizations of Babylonia and Assyria, the Tamils contributed a large share as it was the Sumarians, a branch of the Tamils, who migrated there and laid the foundation. Egyptian civilization also, is indebted to the Tamil race, a branch of which migrated from the West Coast to Egypt. The Tamils were great sea-traders and long before Solomon’s days about 10<sup>th</sup> century BC and down through the period of the rise and fall of the Babylonian, Persian, Grecian, and Roman empires to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of the Christian era our continent

occupied the glorious position of 'Queen of the Eastern seas'. The northern limit on the East Coast was Verkadu (Pulicat); vide quotation by Nachinar Kinyar in his commentary to Tholkappiam, Porulathikara Sutram 113. Taking advantage of the constant intercourse between Tamilagam and the countries in Western Asia and Eastern Europe one of the Pandians sent an embassy to Rome during Caesar's time and another sent for Greek soldiers and employed them as his bodyguard. The Tamils conquered lands as far as Tibet in the North, Siam, and China in the east and Egypt in the west. Even America is said to have been conquered by the Tamil Emperor Athigaman. Several colonies were also founded in the East Indian Archipelago.

Though during the early centuries of the Christian era the Tamils monopolized the maritime trade, subsequently in the competition with Chinese and Arabian shipping, Indian shipping could not hold its own particularly on the East Coast where the kings down to the last one of Vijayanagar neglected the navy and the mercantile marine. For many centuries after the Christian era, the trade between India and the Western countries was entirely in the hands of the Arabs. From the 4<sup>th</sup> till about the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC the Arabs did not make any permanent settlement on our coasts but were found in thousands among the floating population of important maritime centers. Subsequently however, settlements were made and many hundreds of Mussalmans from Persia and Arabia were found permanently settled in all important seaports and trading centers. Many of these settlers had married Indian women and

the indiscriminate application of the term 'Moor' by the early European visitors to all Mussalmans (Persian, Arab, or Indian), pure or mixed, has led to much confusion. In the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries Arab settlers were persecuted by the Moghuls – this was four centuries before the Portuguese killed Arab traders by their barbarous cruelties and piratical acts – and many of them retired to their country leaving their children by the Indian women here. These descendants of the Arabian and Persian traders by Indian wives are found in various places in South India, e.g., South Arcot, Tinnevely, Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Canara, and Malabar. Their names are various: Nawayaths, Labbais, Maricairs, Ravuthars, Moplals, etc.

The Nawayaths who are found mostly in Kundapur are the descendants of refugees who fled from the borders of the Persian Gulf because of the cruelty of Ben Girzolf, Governor of Iran. The Moplals of Malabar are descendants of the old Arab settlers; many Labbais are descendants of those who settled on the East Coast. The Tanjore Labbais are made up partly of descendants of Arab traders or refugees and partly of the progeny of the forced converts of Tippu Sultan. The Ravuthars of Trichinopoly are the descendants of the forced converts of Aurangzeb, Haidar Ali (the son of an Arab mother), and Tippu Sultan. It is very curious

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that many of them speak Telugu and their women folk are not *goshā* and have not yet discarded the Hindu dress as they are descendants of Kavarai women.

Labbai is said to be derived from 'Lebek' which means 'here I am', while others say it is a corruption of the term Arabic. This word is absent from ancient Tamil literature and is not found in any of the old Tamil lexicons. The term used to designate these Mussalmans is 'Jonagar,' which is currently in use in Pulicat (Jonagam being the name for Arabia); the Arabs were called Jonagar and their descendants too are styled the same. The Moplals of Malabar are styled 'Jonaka Moplals' to distinguish them from Christians who are called Narrene Mappillals. Maricairs, the expert Mussalman seamen of the East Coast, form another class. The name is derived from 'Markab', a boat. They are usually considered to be higher than the Labbais in the social scale.

During these centuries of Arab trade, Pulicat, or as it was then known 'Paleakatta', the corruption of its Tamil name 'Palaverkadu' (old jungle of babul trees) was a very important seaport. Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Barbosa described it as 'a grand port' which was frequented by an infinite number of Moorish vessels from all quarters. Today Pulicat, shorn of its glory as a port since the recession of the sea and eclipsed by Madras, retains the shadow of its importance by the possession of a light house, to warn sailors of the dangerous 'Pulicat shoals'. It is still a stronghold of Muhammadans who form nearly one-fifth of its population. Of the 889 Mussalmans (men and women) recorded in the latest Census Reports, about 83 families

consisting of nearly 500 individuals seem to be 'pure Arabs' like the descendants of Arabs found in Trichendur, Tinnevely district. They are very exclusive and do not seek marriage alliances with other Muhammadans but marry only among themselves. They take great pride in recounting their pedigree which is in all cases not a little confused! They are good-looking with a light complexion. They are tall with fairly developed and long limbs. The cast of countenance is typically Jewish and reminds one irresistibly of Bible paintings. The head is singularly and strikingly small. The eyes in many cases appear to be slightly oblique and to be wanting in expression. The nose is aquiline like that of the Jews and the chin very small. The face is long with a beard which is cropped into medium length and is in most cases decidedly spare. The ears appear divergent in a ventral view. The other Muhammadans present in Pulicat are dark brown and these may perhaps be the descendants of slaves of the original Arab settlers but more probably are descendants of local converts and Indian Mussalman emigrants from neighboring parts. It is the fair Mussalmans of Pulicat who form the subject of this study.

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Measurements were taken of the cranium and nose of 100 Muhammadans of Pulicat and their cranial and nasal indices worked out (Moses, 1923). The cranial index ranges from 71.6 to 86.3 giving an average of 78.9. The high percentage of medium heads and the average cranial index show that the Pulicat fair Muhammadans are medium-headed. The nasal index varies from 48.0 to 89.4, the average being 68.7. The large number of Platyrrhine subjects and the average nasal index indicate these Muhammadans to be broad-nosed. The high nasal index is apparently a proof of their mixed descent from Arabs and the Tamils.

They belong to the Shafi sect of Sunnis. They are usually very timid and quiet. Their relations with the Hindus are very friendly though they have not adopted Hindu customs as the Dudekulas of Bellary and Cuddapah where Hindus often give their children Muhammadan names, e.g., Masthan Redi, Masthan Ammal! Though they are timid by nature, some years ago bitter feud existed between two sections of these Muhammadans which manifested itself in serious riots during their religious processions on the occasion of Mohurrum. They are divided into two sections the Rengen with the red flag and the Berbethal with yellow flag. The yellow is said to be the male or right-hand party and is more

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numerous than the red which is the female or left-hand party.

These Muhammadans speak a characteristic dialect of Tamil. They address each other as 'Ennamulai' a corruption of 'Enna Anpillai', meaning 'what man'. The sing-song intonation and pronunciation is quite peculiar. Their Koran is translated into Tamil known as 'Arai thamil' (half Tamil) a corruption of 'Arabi Thamil', i.e., Tamil written in Arabic characters. When they read the scriptures we find them reading one sentence of Arabic followed by its translation into Tamil, written however in Arabic characters. Their correspondence, private and business, is carried on through Arabic letters in Tamil. The Bible Society, Madras, has followed this method in publishing their Edition of St. John in Tamil in Arabic characters for the benefit of the Labbais of South India and Ceylon.

Pulicat and the village Karimanal the "Sembasipalli" of Persian records are important boat-building centers, the Muhammadan 'Odalis' of which have always on hand many orders for construction of boats plying up and down the Buckingham Canal. These 'Odalis' are usually of the

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dark brown variety. Many of the fair Muhammadans are traders doing business in Siam, Straits Settlements, etc. Most merchants after amassing money return to Pulicat, frequently the home-coming instinct being very strong in them. With the exception of these merchants who hibernate here after a busy life in Penang and elsewhere, the others can be safely termed “drones”. The houses built at a time when Pulicat was a flourishing emporium are very pretentious but unfortunately many of them are in ruins owing to the neglect to repair the blighting effects of biting winds loaded with salt spray. Many of the inhabitants are poor and eke out a precarious living by selling stones, timber, pillars, etc. from the ruins of the palatial residences built by their rich forebears. Their children do not avail themselves of the benefits of modern education nor are the parents particularly anxious that they should. The only education is from the religious schools where they are taught to read and write Arabic Tamil. In the important religious school of the place, there are three rooms on the doors of which are inscribed on one ‘Babus Salem’, another ‘Babus Zekir’, and the last ‘Babel elmo’ in Arabic. ‘Babus Salem’ (door of peace) and ‘Babus Zekir’ (door of meditation) rooms are open only from 8 to 10 in the morning while ‘Babel Elmo’ (door of learning) room is open all day. The men do not care to be employed under others though some have now accepted service as agents to businessmen. The Village Munsiff of Pulicat is a Muhammadan and he always refers to the fact of his being the only Muhammadan in service under Government. But for their women folk the poverty of many families would be appalling. The women, though

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*gosha*, do a lot by way of weaving palmyra mats and fancy-colored baskets of many curious shapes. These baskets are greatly in demand and the sale proceeds go to swell their otherwise slender resources. The women exceed the men in number. The census figures which relate to all Mussalmans of Pulicat are similarly curious, there being 393 males as against 496 females.

Some of the Muhammadans are more interested in sports than the docile Hindus who while away their time, particularly during the hot weather, shooting birds for curry with a blow gun called ‘Sumpthan’. These blow pipes are owned mostly by men who have returned from Siam and other places and are said to have been purchased from Bugis and Chinese traders there.

In Pulicat there are 19 blowpipes in use. It is a tube of hard red wood (palm) with an even bore and a polished smooth surface. Usually it is solid, the bore being obtained by drilling. In three instances the tube was found made up of two pieces so finely put together by glue that the union is scarcely perceptible. Eight blow guns had a sheath of leather stitched on around the wooden tube.

Both the ends of the blow gun are metallised. The metal is white and appears to be tin. Solid tin pieces from two to six inches long are taken and the bore drilled through the pieces, and two pieces with the same sized bore as that of the blow gun are fixed to the blow gun fore and aft. On the butt end the piece is longer than at the tail end. In three there were tin foils extending from the solid pieces onto the tube for a short space of less than an inch. The border of the tin foil was cut into a series of triangles (see Fig. 1). One blow gun had no metal ends at all.

The length of a blow gun is from 4 ft 2 inches to 6 ft 10 inches. The external diameter at the muzzle end ranged from 2 to 1.1 inches. The diameter externally at the other end varied from 1 to nearly 5/8 inch. The internal diameter which is the same throughout the blow gun was found to be nearly 3/8 of an inch in all cases. The metal ends near the mouth end ranged in length from 3 to 5 inches while at the tail end it varied from 2 to 4 inches. The weights of the blow guns varied from 19 to 54 oz. To help in taking accurate aim there is a sight close to the muzzle made of wax. The height of this wax piece is adjusted by the fingers which mold it to

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**Figure 1. A metallic blow gun.**

the required height. The missile used is a round pellet of clay molded by fingers or as is now occasionally done in a bullet mold. The pellets are made some hours before they are required for use. Darts are not used as missiles as is the case with the Kadirs and fishermen of the West Coast. Shooting is done by first placing a pellet in the mouth and when the blow pipe is put in the mouth and aim taken with the help of the wax-sight, the pellet is introduced into the gun by the tongue and shot out by a powerful effort of the lungs. Though experience enables the shooters to be accurate marksmen, the weapon, probably because of its weight, is clumsy and it is difficult for beginners to use it with good effect. The maximum distance to which the pellet could be propelled is about 80 yards though usually birds are shot at a distance of not more than 20 yards.

Labbais of Kilakarai and Negapatam, call them 'Sengthan'. The blow gun used by Tanjore pigeon fanciers for shooting alien birds is also called 'Sengthan'. This Tamil word is said to be a corruption of 'Sengthan' which means a stabbing weapon. On the West Coast some fishermen and Kadirs use blow guns, the former to shoot fish and the latter squirrels. There they are called 'Thumpithan kulal'.

The blowpipe which is very commonly used in the Malay Archipelago and neighboring parts is known in Malay as 'Sumpitan' and this name is used in Pulicat for the

blow gun. From 'Sumpithan' it is easy to get corrupted forms 'Senguthan' and 'Sengthan'. Whatever the facts of ancient history, whether the original Tamils were responsible for introducing the blowpipe from India to the Straits or not, the guns used by the Pulicat Muhammadans and Kilakarai Labbais are not indigenous. The West Coast blow guns, more primitive in their nature and in the nature of the missiles used, are perhaps survivals from those days when the Tamil race spread overseas and introduced the blowpipe into Malaya where it has undergone more effective alterations. But the Malayalam name 'Thumpithan kulal' (*kulal* means pipe), which is obviously a corruption of Sumpithan (compare the Malayalam word 'Thuji' derived from 'Suji' for needle) supports a converse argument.

The dress of the males is usually a long shirt, drawers, invariably colored, and a skull cap. Sometimes white drawers and *longies* are also used. The head is shaved clean. The dress of the women is a jacket and a saree usually colored. Elderly ladies use white sarees. All men, women, and children use sandals (wooden) or leather slippers whether walking inside the house or outside.

They partake of both animal and vegetable food. Pork is eschewed completely. Pulicat Lake abounds in shrimps, prawns, crabs, and fish. All these are freely used as food particularly the backwater crab *Scylla serrata* which is known hereabouts as the 'Palawerkadu nandu' because of its abundance in Pulicat Lake. For another delicacy, reckoned as such by Europeans who eat them raw, Pulicat Lake is famous,

viz., oysters. Some Muhammadans eat cooked oysters, apparently an acquired taste, though in general they have an aversion for them. A story is current to explain this aversion. Once at low tide a Muhammadan who went to an oyster bed with intent to take some, while bending over the oysters and handling them unconsciously allowed the tips of his long beard to tickle an oyster which had just then opened its valves. The shells instantaneously shut themselves tight enclosing the tip of the beard and the man was fixed in that posture. The tide was rising but yet the man could not free himself. Someone suspected something was wrong, approached the victim and released him. He was jeered at by the whole village, which he left never to return! The eating of oysters and crabs by these Muhammadans is in accordance with the teaching of their leader Iman Shafi. The other important sect of Sunnis, the Hanafi, forbids the eating of those animals not explicitly demonstrated as edible by the prophet Muhammad.

The Muhammadans are very timid and superstitious. Fear of ghosts is very prevalent particularly of those who died violent deaths or committed suicide. A new building was constructed near the old fort-moat where ghosts were said to shriek and dance at nights and a watchman for whose benefit the building was constructed would rather live in some other rented quarters than face the music of the ghosts. Soon after dusk, Pulicat – at least the Muhammadan part of it – will be quiet, all people having retired, afraid to come out in spite of street lamps except during a moonlight night. In their houses the front doors carry innumerable brass nails; and curious oblong shaped metallic plates,

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with curious lines and figures (Fig. 2), are nailed to the wall above the cross door beam to ward off the evil eye.



Figure 2. Oblong shaped brass plates with lines to ward off evil.

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