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The Arrival of Arabic in India and the Spread of Islam Through Trade, Scholarship, and Education

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Abstract. The Arabic language played a significant role in the spread of Islam in India through trade, religious education, and scholarly activities. Arab traders established commercial and cultural relations with Indian communities, especially along the Malabar Coast, which later became important areas for Islamic interaction. Through peaceful communication, honesty in trade, and religious teachings, Arabic gradually became associated with Islamic scholarship and worship in India. This study examines the historical arrival of Arabic in India, the contribution of Muslim scholars, and the development of Islamic educational institutions such as madrasas and colleges. The research also highlights the influence of Arabic on Indian Muslim culture, including the emergence of Arabi-Malayalam in Kerala. Using qualitative and historical analysis, the study concludes that Arabic functioned not only as a religious language but also as a cultural and intellectual bridge connecting Indian Muslims with the wider Islamic world.

Keywords: Arabic language; Islam in India; Islamic education; Arabi-Malayalam; Muslim scholars

INTRODUCTION

The history of Arabic in India is closely connected with the history of the Indian Ocean, the growth of Muslim communities, and the development of Islamic learning. The relationship between the Arabian Peninsula and the western coast of the Indian subcontinent predates Islam. Maritime routes linked ports on the Malabar and Konkan coasts with the Persian Gulf, southern Arabia, and other commercial centres. Spices, especially pepper, as well as other commodities moved through these networks, while merchants carried languages, religious ideas, customs, and knowledge between ports. The arrival of Arabic in India therefore cannot be reduced to one military event or one date; it developed through several overlapping forms of contact over many centuries (Hassan et al., 2020; Mondini, 2025).

Arabic acquired a particular religious importance after the emergence of Islam in the seventh century. As the language of the Qur'an and a major language of Islamic scholarship, it became essential to Muslim practices and to the study of Hadith, tafsir, fiqh, theology, grammar, and rhetoric. Yet the spread of Islam and the spread of Arabic were not identical processes. Muslim communities could adopt Islam while continuing to speak local languages, and Arabic could be studied as a sacred and scholarly language without becoming the everyday language of the wider population. This distinction is necessary for understanding the Indian experience accurately.

The Indian subcontinent is too large and diverse to be treated as a single historical region. Islam developed through different pathways in Sindh, northern India, Bengal, Gujarat, the Deccan, and the Malabar Coast. Political conquest mattered in some places; maritime commerce, settlement, Sufi networks, local patronage, and gradual social change mattered in others. Historians of South Asian Islam have emphasised the need to study these regional processes rather than assume that one explanation applies everywhere (Eaton, 2000; Wink, 1990).

This article has three objectives. First, it outlines the principal historical channels through which Arabic-speaking people and Arabic texts reached India. Second, it examines Arabic's role in Islamic scholarship and educational institutions, including madrasas, colleges, and universities. Third, it considers the interaction between Arabic and local languages, with particular attention to Arabi-Malayalam in Kerala. The article contributes a broad introductory synthesis by bringing maritime history, religious learning, and language history into a single discussion while acknowledging that each requires more detailed regional study.

The discussion is based on a qualitative review of published historical and linguistic scholarship, together with institutional information available from university websites. It does not claim to offer new archival findings or a complete census of Arabic departments in India. Instead, it identifies major patterns and points out where traditional narratives, institutional dates, and biographical claims require careful verification.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative historical and documentary method. Its principal materials are published books and peer-reviewed articles on Indian Ocean commerce, the history of Islam in South Asia, Muslim communities on the Malabar Coast, and Arabi-Malayalam literary culture. Institutional webpages are used only for specific facts about the history and current structure of selected educational institutions. The method is appropriate because the article investigates historical processes and the interpretation of published evidence rather than measuring contemporary attitudes through surveys or experiments.

The material was examined thematically. The first theme is maritime contact and trade; the second is political expansion and regional Muslim rule; the third is the development of religious scholarship and educational institutions; and the fourth is linguistic adaptation, especially the use of Arabic script for Malayalam. Claims that depend on traditional narratives are distinguished from claims supported by more recent historical research. For example, stories about the earliest mosque in Kerala or the conversion of a Chera ruler are historically significant traditions, but their details and chronology are debated. They should therefore be presented as traditions rather than as facts established beyond dispute (Mondini, 2025).

A limitation of the study is that it is a synthesis of selected secondary literature. It does not examine all Arabic manuscripts held in Indian libraries, nor does it provide a state-by-state survey of every university or madrasa offering Arabic. Institutional details can change, and the status of a department must be checked against current official records before publication. The article consequently avoids presenting an exhaustive list of institutions and treats selected examples as illustrations of wider developments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early maritime contact and the arrival of Arabic

Long before the establishment of Muslim political rule in northern India, merchants from Arabia and other parts of western Asia participated in Indian Ocean commerce. The monsoon system made seasonal voyages between the Arabian Sea and the western coast of India possible. Ports in Malabar, including those associated with present-day Kerala, became important places for the exchange of spices and other goods. Merchants depended on local intermediaries, port authorities, ship owners, and established commercial communities. These relationships created repeated contact rather than a single moment of arrival (Hassan et al., 2020; Mondini, 2025; Prange, 2018).

Trade provided a practical setting for language contact. Arabic-speaking merchants needed to communicate with local traders and officials, while Indian merchants needed to work with partners across the Arabian Sea. Such interaction could produce multilingual communities, intermarriage, shared commercial practices, and the settlement of foreign merchants in coastal towns. However, evidence of trade does not by itself prove that Arabic became widely spoken by local populations. The more defensible conclusion is that maritime commerce created

sustained opportunities for Arabic to be heard, used, and transmitted within particular commercial and religious networks.

With the growth of Islam, some merchants and settlers brought Muslim religious practices to the ports where they lived and traded. In coastal regions, conversion could occur gradually through family relations, neighbourhood contact, the presence of mosques, and the example of established Muslim communities. Historians disagree about the chronology and details of particular origin traditions, including accounts associated with the Cheraman Perumal narrative in Kerala. These traditions remain important to community memory, but academic writing should distinguish them from evidence that can be dated independently. Recent scholarship notes that Arabic and Persian written sources provide clearer evidence for Muslim commercial activity in Malabar from later centuries than for every detail of the earliest traditional accounts (Mondini, 2025).

Arabic did not replace the languages of Indian society. It became a language of religious authority, learning, correspondence, and transregional connection for many Muslim scholars. Local languages remained essential for everyday communication, preaching, poetry, and explaining religious teachings to people who did not know Arabic. This pattern—Arabic for core texts and specialist learning alongside local languages for community life—became a durable feature of Islamic education in India.

Political expansion and regional Muslim rule

The history of Islam in India also includes episodes of military conquest and the formation of Muslim-led states. The Arab conquest of Sindh in the early eighth century, associated with Muhammad ibn Qasim, established an early Muslim political presence in part of the north-western subcontinent. In later centuries, the campaigns of the Ghaznavids and the emergence of the Delhi Sultanate contributed to new political and cultural connections between South Asia, Iran, Central Asia, and the wider Islamic world. These developments helped facilitate the movement of scholars, administrators, texts, and educational traditions, although their effects differed by region (Eaton, 2000; Wink, 1990).

It is important not to describe these political events as the sole cause of Islam's spread. Military rule could establish new institutions and patronage networks, but the growth of Muslim communities also depended on local social and economic circumstances. In some areas, Sufi teachers and their followers built relationships with local populations; in others, traders and settlers played a prominent role. The relative importance of these processes varied over time and place. A careful historical account therefore avoids suggesting that conversion followed automatically from conquest.

The Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire supported diverse forms of Islamic learning, but Persian often held a leading position in administration and elite literary culture. Arabic remained central to Qur'anic sciences, Hadith, theology, jurisprudence, and many scholarly disciplines. The relationship among Arabic, Persian, and regional languages was therefore complementary and sometimes competitive, rather than a simple sequence in which one language replaced another.

Students and scholars could use Arabic for religious texts, Persian for particular literary or administrative purposes, and local languages for teaching and public communication.

The movement of scholars was another important channel. Some scholars travelled to major centres of learning in Arabia and elsewhere, while teachers from other regions came to India. These journeys connected Indian scholarly communities to wider debates and textual traditions. Manuscripts, commentaries, teaching licences, and scholarly correspondence could cross regional boundaries (Kooria, 2024). Such networks helped preserve a common scholarly vocabulary while allowing distinct Indian traditions to develop.

Scholars, texts, and the growth of Islamic learning

Arabic scholarship in India was sustained by generations of teachers, jurists, theologians, Hadith specialists, grammarians, and writers. Their work included the study and explanation of the Qur'an, the transmission and evaluation of Hadith, legal reasoning, Arabic grammar and rhetoric, and the writing of commentaries and biographies. Rather than attributing the spread of Arabic to a short list of celebrated names, it is more historically useful to recognise the cumulative labour of teachers, copyists, librarians, students, local patrons, and institutions. Many contributors remain less visible in broad historical summaries, even though they were essential to the continuity of learning.

A number of scholars associated with South Asian Islamic intellectual history are relevant to this subject. Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703–1762) contributed to Qur'anic scholarship, Hadith studies, and religious thought. His family and scholarly successors helped maintain traditions of learning in northern India. Shah Abdul Aziz continued this intellectual legacy. Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlawi is remembered for his work in Hadith and related disciplines. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars such as Shibli Nomani, Anwar Shah Kashmiri, Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, and Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi participated in different forms of Islamic scholarship, historical writing, and educational reform. Their work should be examined through individual publications and reliable biographies rather than grouped together as if they belonged to one period or performed the same role.

In Kerala, Zayn al-Din Makhdum the Elder and Zayn al-Din Makhdum the Younger are particularly important to the history of Islamic scholarship and resistance to Portuguese expansion. Their writings show that Malabar was not merely a destination for foreign ideas; it was also a place where scholars produced works that circulated within wider Islamic networks (Amer, 2016). Qadi Muhammad, associated with the Arabi-Malayalam poem Muhyiddin Mala, is another significant figure in the history of local Muslim literary expression. The study of these scholars demonstrates that Arabic learning and local literary production were closely connected, but not identical.

A complete prosopography of Arabic scholars in India would require a separate study based on manuscript catalogues, biographical dictionaries, institutional records, and published research. Names sometimes appear in variant spellings or transliterations, and titles such as al-Dihlawi, al-Rampuri, or al-Kalkawi may refer to

geographical associations. For publication, each name and claimed contribution should be verified against reliable sources. This is especially important when a list combines medieval scholars, early modern figures, modern academics, and people whose primary contribution was not specifically to Arabic-language scholarship.

Madrasas and the curriculum of Arabic learning

Madrasas and mosque-based study circles played a major role in transmitting Arabic and Islamic knowledge. Teaching commonly involved reading authoritative texts with a teacher, memorisation, explanation, discussion, and the study of commentaries. The curriculum varied by period, region, school of law, and institution. Core subjects often included Qur'anic recitation, tafsir, Hadith, fiqh, usul al-fiqh, Arabic grammar (nahw), morphology (sarf), rhetoric (balagha), and theology (aqidah). These disciplines helped students understand religious texts and participate in scholarly debates.

Some institutions also taught logic, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and inheritance calculations (fara'id). The balance among transmitted and rational disciplines differed from one educational tradition to another. It would be misleading to assume that every madrasa taught the same subjects or followed an identical syllabus. Nevertheless, the curriculum demonstrates that Arabic learning was part of a broader intellectual system, not simply the memorisation of vocabulary. Grammar and rhetoric provided tools for textual interpretation; legal theory supported disciplined reasoning; and logic was used in some traditions to organise argument.

The educational importance of Arabic extended beyond religious specialists. Students who gained Arabic proficiency could consult texts produced in different parts of the Muslim world, compare commentaries, and participate in scholarly correspondence. At the same time, local-language explanations were necessary for wider access. In Kerala, for example, religious instruction and devotional literature in Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam helped communicate ideas to audiences who did not read classical Arabic fluently. This combination of specialist Arabic study and vernacular teaching was one reason Islamic learning could remain connected to local social life.

Arabic education in modern colleges and universities

The development of modern colleges and universities added new forms of Arabic instruction to older traditions of madrasa education. Arabic came to be studied not only as a language for religious learning but also as a subject within modern degree programmes, literary studies, translation, comparative culture, and research. These programmes can introduce students to classical Arabic texts as well as modern Arabic literature, linguistics, translation, and contemporary intellectual life.

Aliah University provides one documented example of institutional continuity and change. Its institutional history explains that the university grew from Calcutta Madrasah, established in 1780, and that Aliah University began operating as a university in the 2008–2009 academic session. Its Arabic department states that it began in 2009 with undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and launched

doctoral study in 2012 (Aliah University, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). This example illustrates how a long-standing educational heritage can be reorganised within the modern university system.

Other Indian universities and colleges have developed Arabic departments or courses under different administrative arrangements. However, institutional status and founding dates must be reported precisely. The original draft lists Aliah University as established in 1781 and describes Panjab University as a central government university; both details require correction or verification. Aliah University itself distinguishes its historical predecessor, founded in 1780, from the university established under a 2007 state law and operating from 2008. Panjab University is not appropriately described as a central university in the same way as a university directly established and administered by the Union government. For these reasons, a journal article should avoid presenting a table of university dates and categories unless each entry has been checked against official sources.

In Kerala, Arabic is taught in a range of government and aided colleges, including institutions that offer undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. The original draft names several colleges, but the exact title of each institution, the availability of an Arabic programme, and the level of the programme should be checked using current official prospectuses or university affiliation records. The same institution should not be listed twice, and district names should be accurate. A verified institutional survey would be a useful extension of this article, but it requires a separate data-gathering stage.

Arabic, Malayalam, and the Arabi-Malayalam tradition

The relationship between Arabic and Malayalam is especially visible in the Arabi-Malayalam tradition of Kerala. Arabi-Malayalam generally refers to Malayalam written in a modified Arabic script, with adaptations that help represent Malayalam sounds. It developed within the multilingual environment of Malabar and became a medium for religious instruction, devotional writing, poetry, and other forms of community expression. It should not be described simply as Arabic itself: its language is primarily Malayalam, while its script and some of its vocabulary reflect Arabic influence.

Recent research places the development of Arabi-Malayalam within a complex setting of trade, religious practice, local literacy, and literary exchange. Arafath (2020) examines the emergence of this writing tradition and discusses Muhyiddin Mala, associated with Qadi Muhammad, as an important early text in the identifiable Arabi-Malayalam literary tradition. This work shows how a local Muslim literary culture could adapt forms of Islamic learning to a vernacular audience. The tradition is evidence not only of Arabic influence but also of the creative agency of Malayalam-speaking Muslim writers and readers.

Arabi-Malayalam helped circulate religious ideas among readers who might not have been able to read classical Arabic. Poems and devotional works connected local linguistic expression with wider Islamic themes. The tradition also preserved vocabulary, styles, and forms of religious expression that reveal the long history of contact between Malayalam-speaking communities and the Arabic-speaking world.

At the same time, its history cannot be reduced to a simple explanation that it arose only because Arab traders needed to write to local people. The development involved broader social, literary, and religious processes (Arafath, 2020; Kozhisseri, 2022).

The history of Arabi-Malayalam also raises questions about how literary histories define a language and decide which texts belong to a canon. Because it uses Arabic script, Arabi-Malayalam writing has sometimes been overlooked in accounts centred on Malayalam written in the Malayalam script. Studying it expands our understanding of literacy and literary production in Kerala and shows that script, language, religion, and identity do not always map neatly onto one another. It also demonstrates why histories of Arabic in India should include vernacular adaptations, not only works written in classical Arabic.

The relationship between Arabic and the spread of Islam

Arabic contributed to the spread and consolidation of Islam in India primarily by providing access to foundational texts and transregional scholarship. The Qur'an is recited in Arabic, and the major Hadith collections, classical legal texts, and many works of theology and exegesis were composed in Arabic. Knowledge of the language enabled scholars to study these works directly and compare interpretations. Mosques, madrasas, teachers, travelling scholars, and manuscript networks all supported this process.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish the spread of Islam from the spread of Arabic as a spoken language. In many Indian regions, Islam expanded while local languages remained the everyday medium of communication. Religious teachers explained Islamic beliefs in local languages, and poets developed literary forms accessible to their communities. Arabic functioned as a language of worship, learning, and connection, but it was not necessarily the first language of Indian Muslims. Persian, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Malayalam, Tamil, and other languages also played important roles in the religious and cultural lives of Muslim communities.

The spread of Islam should also be understood as a social and historical process rather than as a single campaign led by one group. Merchants, scholars, Sufi networks, local rulers, families, and ordinary communities contributed in different ways. Political conquest was important in certain regions, but it cannot explain every conversion or every Muslim settlement. The Malabar Coast is a useful case because maritime commerce and long-term contact were central to the region's history, while the exact chronology of some traditional accounts remains debated (Eaton, 2000; Mondini, 2025).

Arabic's significance was therefore both religious and intellectual. It connected Indian scholars to texts and debates beyond India, while local languages made religious knowledge accessible to broader audiences. This two-way relationship is more accurate than claiming that Arabic alone spread Islam throughout India. Islam's history in India was multilingual, regionally diverse, and shaped by both local and transregional factors.

Historical cautions and areas for further research

Several claims commonly repeated in general accounts require careful treatment in an academic article. First, statements that particular Companions of the Prophet Muhammad arrived in India to preach Islam should not be presented as established fact unless supported by reliable historical evidence. Second, traditional accounts of the earliest mosque in Kerala and the conversion of a Chera ruler should be identified as traditions where the evidence is contested. Third, lists of scholars should include accurate names, dates, works, and specific contributions rather than treating all named individuals as equivalent contributors to the spread of Arabic.

Fourth, institutional tables should distinguish a college's founding date from the date of its university affiliation, the beginning of an Arabic department, and the launch of a specific degree programme. These are separate facts. Fifth, bibliographic details must be complete. A reference list should not contain only titles without author, publication year, publisher or journal, and page or DOI information where applicable. Such care strengthens the article and allows readers to check its claims.

Further research could examine Arabic manuscripts in Indian collections, the teaching methods used in different madrasa traditions, the history of Arabic departments in Indian universities, and the changing role of Arabic in translation and employment. A focused study of Arabi-Malayalam manuscripts and print culture could also clarify how religious knowledge was adapted for local readers. Oral histories and local archives may supplement published scholarship, provided their provenance and limitations are clearly explained.

CONCLUSION

The history of Arabic in India developed through a long sequence of maritime, political, scholarly, and educational interactions. Trade across the Arabian Sea created early and continuing contact between Arab merchants and Indian coastal communities. After the emergence of Islam, Arabic gained additional importance as the language of the Qur'an and a major medium of Islamic scholarship. Political changes in Sindh and northern India, the Delhi Sultanate, and later Muslim-ruled states created new connections, but they were only part of a much broader history of Muslim settlement and religious change.

Scholars, teachers, students, mosques, madrasas, libraries, and manuscript networks preserved Arabic learning across generations. In modern times, colleges and universities added formal degree programmes and research opportunities. At the same time, Arabic interacted with local languages rather than replacing them. The Arabi-Malayalam tradition in Kerala is a particularly clear example of how Muslim communities used a local language and an adapted Arabic script to produce religious and literary works suited to local audiences.

The central conclusion is that Arabic's role in India cannot be understood through a single route or a simple claim that language alone spread Islam. Trade, migration, scholarship, political patronage, local conversion, vernacular literature, and formal education all contributed in different ways and at different times. A reliable account must distinguish established evidence from traditional narratives,

verify biographical and institutional details, and recognise the diversity of India's Muslim communities. Further research based on manuscripts, institutional archives, and regional studies will deepen our understanding of Arabic's place in Indian intellectual and cultural history.

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