

Cheraman Juma Masjid: The First Mosque in India

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ABSTRACT

India's trade relations with Arabia are very old. Long before the spread of Islam in Arabia, Arab traders used to come to trade on the west coast of India and the Deccan. This contact continued even after the spread of Islam in Arabia and since then the Arabs have been interested in expanding their trade relation in India. Arabs developed a good relationship with south India for commercial reason. Cheraman Juma Masjid is the first mosque established in south India before the Arab conquest of Sindh in 712 AD. There is a difference of opinion among the historians as to how the Cheraman Juma Masjid was established. Many miracles are also attributed to the establishment of this mosque. In the present paper an attempt has been made to judge various facts about the origin of Cheraman Juma Masjid from a historical perspective.

Keywords: Arabs, Cheraman, Juma, Masjid

Islam lays great impulse on congregational prayers, orders, directness, exactness, symbolic posture and a common direction for the believers of the Islam. For this a prayer hall is required which is called Masjid or Mosque. The universal law for the congregation in accordance to the Islamic injunction is to face the Kaba (in Mecca) and the Qiblah would mark its direction. This is the only rule and norm for the making of a Mosque. In Islam, the main purpose of a mosque is to be a place where the believers of Islam can pray to God in congregation. Prayers can also be offered at home but the importance of praying in mosques is different.

Muslims first led by Muhammad Bin Qasim in the eighth century and led India under the leadership of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi in the tenth century. But much earlier, during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Islam entered India's south-west coast in the early part of the seventh century by the hands of the Arab traders and the first mosque of India Cheraman Juma Masjid was built there. It is not only the first mosque in India but also one of the oldest mosques in the world outside the Arab world. Cheraman Jami Masjid¹, located in Methala village of Cranganore or Kodungalur taluk in the state of present Kerala. It is the first mosque in the Indian subcontinent. This mosque was built during the era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) long before the arrival of Muhammad Bin Qasim, Muhammad Ghuri and Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi in India. The Cheraman Juma Masjid is a blend of Arab tradition and Indian architectural style. It was built in 629 AD by Malik Bin Dinar² and still in use. There are many local and tribal alternatives of the history of the last Chera king who threw away his throne, accepted Islam and his later pilgrimage to Mecca.

Arab trade relations with Kerala existed from ancient times. Kerala is a coastal region of Indian Ocean and Arabian Ocean. Cheraman Perumal, the last king of Chera Empire and his capital was Kodungalur.

He had experienced a dream in his sleep. It is said that one day he dreamed that the moon in the sky was split into two. When the anxious king inquired the meaning of the dream from the sages of his assembly, no one could give a good answer. Uneasiness remains in the king's mind. At that time, India had good commercial relations with Arabia. Arab traders used to trade in India by sea. Shortly after the king's dream, a group of Arab Muslim merchants arrived at the seaport of king Cheraman. Later he got to know the truth and mystery of the incident from the Arab merchants. At that time Islam was victorious. From these merchants, the new religion of Islam and the praise of its Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) began to spread in the spread in the kingdom. At this time the story of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) splitting the moon into two parts reached the ears of the king.³ After that, leaving the responsibility of the kingdom to his successors, he traveled Mecca with the Arab merchants and embraced Islam⁴ in the court of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) around 627 AD, when he was fifty seven years old.⁵

The king called the merchants and listened to them and realized that this is what he has been hinting at in his dreams. He converted to Islam and traveled to Mecca with a group of merchants. It is said that he also met Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) there and adopted the name Tajuddin. He married the sister of the then ruler of Jeddah⁵ and resettled there. M.G.S Narayan in his book *Perumals of Kerala: Political and Social Conditions of Kerala Under the Chera Perumals of Makotai (c. 800 A.D.- 1124A.D.)* described that there is no reason to reject the tradition that Cheraman Perumal embraced Islam and went Mecca.⁶

Realizing the death was imminent in his later life, Cheraman Perumal wrote letters to his relatives in Kerala to spread Islam. Soon after his death, a representative of the eminent companion Hazrat Malik Ibn Dinar and a contemporary of Cherman Perumal brought the letter to Kerala.⁷ The rulers of Kerala received the delegation with respect and allowed the construction of mosque to facilitate evangelization. Cheraman Masjid established at Kodungallur, Kerala. Hazrat Malik Ibn Dinar was the first imam and caretaker of this mosque. Later Hazrat Malik Ibn Dinar's son Habib Ibn Malik was appointed as imam and custodian.⁸

A plaque inside the mosque gives the year 629 as the founding date of the mosque, although the plaque was probably placed during a later renovation. Historians are not certain about the mosque's founding date, but there is no doubt that Muslims traders came to the area around this time. According to the local history, the man under whose leadership the Cheraman Juma Masjid was founded was Malik Dinar, a Muslim businessman and missionary.⁹ Malik Dinar was not only this mosque, rather famous for establishing several other mosques in different parts of Kerala. There was confusion about Malik Dinar's true identity. Some historians identify him with another Muslim Sufi saint named Malik Ibn Dinar. But Malik Ibn Dinar, who was mentioned in history, was a student of Hazrat Hasan Basri (RA), who never came to India. The Cheraman Mosque was originally established in the coastal area for Arab merchants, who frequented the coast and this mosque was established towards the end of Muhammad's life.¹⁰

According to historian Bahadur Singh Gopalan, the founder of the Cheraman Mosque was therefore not Malik Ibn Dinar, rather the owner of the Dinar. He was the companion of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). He came to India with his cousin Malik Ibn Habib, who was an eyewitness to the splitting of the moon by the Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). Malik Dinar was said to have visited India three times in total.¹¹ He first came with Malik Ibn Habib, when king Cheraman Perumal accepted Islam and travelled with them to Mecca. The second time he came to India was after the death of king Perumal with his letter. It was during this time that he built Cheraman Juma Masjid and some other mosques. It is assumed that the Masjid was first reconstructed in the eleventh century and from that time it has suffered a lot of changes.

The original Cheraman Juma Masjid was very small in size with an antechamber in front.¹² It later underwent several renovations to attain its present size. The original mosque was built of wood, with parts of the central main structure still intact today. Cranganore was attacked by the Portuguese in the year 1504 and they burnt the town and all the ships.¹³ The Cheraman Mosque was severely damaged as a result of this attack by the Portuguese. They did not harm the houses, shops and churches of the Christians. The Cheraman Mosque was rebuilt after the Portuguese invasion but there is no detailed information about when exactly it was rebuilt. The present mosque has been rebuilt between the late sixteenth century and early seventh century.¹⁴



Recent Picture of Cheraman Juma Masjid

The main building of the mosque consists of a small prayer hall with an open courtyard in front. No changes have been made in the style of the main prayer hall of the mosque, including the mihrab¹⁵ which is curved in plan and has a curved arch, with a rectangular ledge behind the qiblah¹⁶ wall. The most remarkable part is the ceiling which was made of oiled timber corroborated by wooden cross timbers resting on the walls. There are no columns in the prayer hall or other corridors. It has mainly simple wooden ceiling which is supported by timber beams. The mosque underwent two major renovations, first in the eleventh century and then in 1975-75. Some new corridors and halls built in 1984.¹⁷ In 1994 and 2001, the front part of the mosque was demolished and the area was expanded. The interior of the ancient mosque, the mihrab and the minaret are still intact. The exterior of the mosque is made of concrete.

Inside the mosque is an oil lamp, which is always lit. It is believed to have been burning for about a thousand years. Not only Muslims but also followers of other religious places of worship in Kerala, the mosque is open to all believers.¹⁸ Many famous people have visited this mosque. APJ Abdul Kalam visited the mosque when he was the president of India. The mosque is known as a monument of India's Islamic heritage and beacon of glory. The government of Kerala introduces the Muziris¹⁹ Heritage Project. Muziris Projects Ltd. is related with the repair of a list of historical constructions that show the summary of an important time in the history of Kerala known for its cultural tradition and the Cheraman Masjid restoration is its very important upkeep project involved. The mosque was restored to its original structure during the renovation work of 2020. The mosque is open for all and any visitor can easily enter the mosque. It is still a functional place of worship and often hums with activity.

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13. Ibid. p-141
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15. *Mihrab*: A mihrab is a specialized segment in the wall of a mosque or religious school (madrasa) that indicates the direction of Mecca (qibla), which Muslims face when praying.
16. *Qiblah*: The direction of the Kaaba (the sacred building at Mecca), to which Muslims turn at prayer.

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