

Two Men of Boats: ‘Alī b. Manṣūr al-Fawfalī and PDYR—Gleanings from the Cairo Geniza

Abstract. Primarily oriented to an analysis of the Cairo Geniza documents of the Jewish ‘India traders’ (1000–1300 CE), this essay takes a close look at two ship-owning merchants, namely Ali b. Mansur Fawfalī and PDYR (pronounced as Fidyar), who in the 1130s and 1140s participated in the flourishing maritime network in the western Indian Ocean. Both these ship-owning merchants operated from the western sea-board of India, especially the Malabar coast, and maintained regular linkages with the Red Sea ports, particularly Aden. The relevant Geniza letters mentioning these two shipowners, have been compared with nearly contemporary Indic sources. This essay argues that it was possible for traders who primarily dealt in agrarian/plant products to own ships or make investments in shipping; it also underlines the close ties between maritime networks and administrators in the coastal society of India at that time.

I

The title of this paper evidently draws upon the inimitable Jerome K. Jerome’s novel of 1883.¹ However, beyond that, the title and the contents of the paper, primarily oriented to an analysis of the Cairo geniza documents (1000–1300 CE) of Jewish merchants, take the cue from Miller’s outstanding historiographical piece on two premier maritime historians of the twentieth century, viz. S.D. Goitein and Fernand Braudel.² He has masterly unraveled before us the Braudel-Goitein correspondence in which two of the greatest 20th century his-

1 Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men on a Boat*, London 1999 (reprint).

2 Peter N. Miller, Two Men in a Boat: The Braudel-Goitein “Correspondence” and the Beginning of Thalassography, in: *The Sea: Thalassography and Historiography*, ed. Peter N. Miller, Michigan 2013, 27–60. I am thankful to Dr. Digvijay Kumar Singh for drawing my attention to this work. Miller’s excellent readings of the Braudel-Goitein correspondence, however, mainly relate to the thalassographies of the Mediterranean largely because he viewed the Mediterranean as the common arena of the historical engagements of both Braudel and Goitein. How Goitein illuminated the Indian Ocean scenario

torians of the Mediterranean exchanged their ideas on incorporating the fascinating world of the seafaring Jewish merchants in the Indian Ocean zone. Both had life-long interests in the history of the Mediterranean on a megascopic scale, but with significant differences in their respective methodologies on approaching the past. One major point of difference between the two was that Goitein's primary scholarly interests had been in the study of the Jewish network in the Indian Ocean in the light of the geniza documents; he subsequently did shift the thrust of his research to the Mediterranean, though he continued to publish a few extremely significant papers on what he termed 'India trade'.

This essay does not deal with maritime historiography or offer a comparative analysis between these two masters of maritime history; its focus is on the Indian Ocean—or more precisely, on the South Asian maritime networks in the Indian Ocean trade during the first three centuries of the second millennium CE. The Indian Ocean maritime scenario during the first half of the second millennium is largely lit up by the letters of Jewish merchants, mostly from Egypt (Miṣr/Maṣr), who frequented the Indian Ocean to reach South Asia, in particular the ports on its western sea-board. Here the contributions of S.D. Goitein are monumental, though the impact of his studies on pre-1500 Indian Ocean history has been felt and recognized only recently. That is why a few words will be apt here—merely as a preliminary statement—on Goitein's enormous contributions to the Indian Ocean maritime history, though he is primarily noted as an authority on the Mediterranean thanks to his colossal study *A Mediterranean Society* (in six volumes). Goitein left indelible marks on the maritime history of the Indian Ocean by laying bare before us a remarkable archive of documents pertaining to Jewish merchants who regularly sailed from Egypt to the western sea-board of India through the Red Sea. The principal players in these letters and other documents from the Cairo geniza were the seafaring travellers/itinerant merchants to India, the *Musāfirūn al-Hind*, whom Goitein labeled as 'India traders'. Significantly enough, the classification, editing, translation and annotation of more than 450 geniza correspondences of these 'India traders' were the premier academic concern and project of Goitein, till perhaps the mid-1950s. Though he never wavered from his meticulous attention to the publication of this unique archival material on the Indian Ocean, Goitein gradually became engrossed in writing his celebrated six-volume *A Mediterranean Society* on the basis of the entire corpus of the Cairo geniza. He published five volumes of this magisterial work in his lifetime; the final and the sixth volume came out posthumously. In Goitein's own words, he had preferred to be off the

with his seminal studies of the Cairo geniza, even when his principal thrust was on the Mediterranean, is virtually left out in Miller's analysis of the Braudel-Goitein correspondence.

Indian Ocean and on to the Mediterranean since the mid-1950s and thus the six-volume *A Mediterranean Society* turned into his academic priority. It was only with the publication of the 450 plus letters of India traders in 2008 (originally called the *India Book*) with English translations, intricate annotations and excellent introductory overviews—to which Goitein’s collaborator and comrade, Mordechai Akiva Friedman made further brilliant contributions—that the Indian Ocean maritime history has been much more illuminated in recent years.

What is striking is that Fernand Braudel had a keen interest in Goitein’s ground-breaking research on the ‘India traders’ and looked forward to a long-term collaboration between the two, especially the publication of letters of ‘India traders’. Miller’s investigations into the Goitein-Braudel correspondence have opened our eyes on how the letters of India traders almost became a part of the megascopic maritime history project planned by Braudel. However, the proposed book on India traders on the basis of the Cairo geniza did not take off, as Goitein independently proceeded to prepare his *A Mediterranean Society* by dissociating himself from Braudel’s maritime history series. He put the publication of the ‘India Book’ on hold—something that did not see the light of the day during Goitein’s lifetime—though he kept on continuously retouching his materials till the very end of his life.

The above historiographical narrative offers a rich background to our present endeavour. Miller’s insightful analyses of the Braudel-Goitein correspondence may throw some light on the reasons of Goitein’s eventual withdrawal from Braudel’s project. Braudel emphasized the centrality of merchants for the making of the modern world. To capture some written words of merchants themselves was of extraordinary importance to him. Goitein wrote to Braudel:

“I am a philologist and historian of Medieval Islam and Judaism, but will never write economic history. I regard it my duty to edit, to translate and explain as exactly and completely as possible these texts of the Cairo geniza. The conclusions to be drawn from them for the history of economy will be made by the scholars specializing in this field.”³

Even when he reached some ‘important conclusions’ regarding the trade to India on the basis of the geniza papers, he considered these to be ‘summaries of facts rather than abstractions made by a specialist’.⁴ Interestingly enough, Goitein subsequently expressed his lesser involvement with writing economic history when he wrote the first volume of *A Mediterranean Society*, dealing with economic foundations. When he published a few samples of Jewish merchants’

³ Miller, *Two Men in a Boat* (cf. n. 2), 34–35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

letters,⁵ his preference for writing social history instead of economic history is evident from his introduction to this anthology. Engrossed in the study of the Mediterranean, Goitein viewed the participation of the Jewish India traders in the Indian Ocean merely as an extension of their primary involvement in the Mediterranean. For Mordechai Friedman, writing the Preface to Goitein's *India Book*, "the India trade was the backbone of the medieval international economy". This simple statement by Friedman gives centrality to the Indian Ocean in the long-distance commercial networks of that time.

II

These preliminary words, in the light of the emerging historiographical contours of Indian Ocean studies of the pre-modern times, have a bearing on our present endeavour which attempts to combine philological data with the history of commercial transactions. The immense possibilities of delving into philology for understanding the commercial and cultural profiles of the geniza letters have been driven home of late by Elizabeth Lambourn.⁶ This 'combined method' of a different sort introduces the Indian textual and epigraphic materials to make some of the contents of letters of Jewish merchants more intelligible.⁷ Needless to emphasize that the letters of the India traders are better grasped when read in conjunction with several contemporary Arabic and Persian texts on travel and geography.

Before situating the specific Jewish geniza letters in the context of the Indian Ocean trade, bearing particularly upon the western Indian Ocean and the western sea-board of India, our primary source material should be introduced at this juncture. Notwithstanding the stupendous importance of the scholarly works on the Cairo geniza, it is a highly specialized field attracting the attention of and interactions among a compact community of scholars, historians, linguists and textual experts alike. In terms of the history of trade in the subcontinent in the first half of the second millennium, the significance of the geniza documents has gained acceptance only in the recent past.

5 Shlomo Dov Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, Princeton 1973.

6 Elizabeth Lambourn, Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects: Geniza Sources and New Cultural Histories of the Indian Ocean, in: *Irreverent History for M.G.S. Naryanan*, ed. Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davis Jr., New Delhi 2014, 1–29. My sincere thanks to Suchandra Ghosh for drawing my attention to this paper.

7 Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, *Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, collected and introduced by B.D. Chattopadhyaya, New Delhi 2004.

Recovered from a Jewish synagogue in Old Cairo (Egypt), these letters of 'India traders' also give us some quantifiable data on commerce, something rarely encountered in other genres of written sources of early Indian history and also on the pre-1500 Indian Ocean maritime history. According to the Jewish custom, any paper having the name of God written on it could not be destroyed, and therefore the discarded papers were deposited in the geniza of the synagogue. The geniza is actually a vast waste-paper basket. It is because these papers became useless to their writers, senders and recipients that they were deposited in the geniza: not because they were considered worth of preservation in an archive, but because they were no longer deemed relevant by their users. The 19th and 20th century scholarship transformed these thrown away documents into an invaluable archive. It is natural that these documents are primarily related to the trade in the Mediterranean zone, embracing Spain, North Africa, Egypt, Sicily and the Levant.⁸ However, there are 459 letters of Jewish merchants who were involved in the maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and India itself. The recent publication of the collection of such letters in English translation offers immense possibilities in delving into the commercial world of the Indian Ocean and the significance of the subcontinent in this vast trade network.⁹ The pioneering research by S. D. Goitein, the greatest authority on the geniza documents, and Mordechai Friedman and other scholars offers significant and new insights into the Indian Ocean situation. The most striking point here is that these letters bear the voice of merchants themselves; their various concerns bring to light the problems and prospects in their commercial ventures and speak of the exchange of information, so crucially linked with the transactions of commodities at distant places.¹⁰ Many business letters also deal with partnerships among merchants, sometimes for a single specific venture

8 The best account of life in the Cairo geniza documents is available in Shlomo Dov Goitein's monumental *A Mediterranean Society*, in six volumes, Berkeley 1967–1990. These volumes focus mainly on the Mediterranean situation, with occasional discussions on the Indian Ocean scenario. Some specimens of the business letters of India traders are also available in Goitein, *Letters* (cf. n. 5). Also see Shaul Shaked, *A Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents*, Paris 1964. The overview of the collection of the documents and the making of the 'archive' is available in Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo*, London 2000.

9 Shlomo D. Goitein and Mordechai Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ("India Book")*, Leiden 2008. This is the most important source for understanding the activities of the Jewish India traders. It is widely cited and used in this present essay. All references to our letters, unless stated otherwise, are from this source collection, abbreviated herein *India Book*.

10 This is a rarity in the Indian Ocean situation. There are many stories of merchants' seafaring activities in Buddhist and Jaina literature and also in Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*. However, it is difficult to find the actual activities of merchants from these stories.

and occasionally a sustained partnership. Partnerships were crucial in view of the tremendous risks and hazards for undertaking these long, perilous journeys often beset with uncertainties of profit. There also are many legal papers which were prepared when disputes took place; legal documents were also needed in case a merchant died in a far-away land or was lost out of sight. One may repeat here that these legal papers became part of the *geniza* when their specific purposes had become a concern of the past.

While many of the letters communicate official business matters, they also contain non-formal and personal aspects of communications among participating merchants.¹¹ This is particularly evident when a letter written in a formal style for business purposes also contained, usually at its end-section, information regarding gift items sent to the recipient. Sometimes personal frustrations of the sender of the letter during a long journey or unpleasant personal memories also found expression within an otherwise formal business letter.

A large number of the Jewish merchants hailed from Tunisia and reached Fustāṭ or Old Cairo, the political centre of the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt. From there the merchants opted for the voyages along the Red Sea from the Egyptian port of Qūṣ or ‘Aidhāb, which could only be reached via overland journeys from Fustāṭ. A major hub of Jewish trading operations was Aden, a great port in Yemen and from Aden began the sea-borne journeys to the west coast of India, the ultimate destination of the *Musāfirūn al-Hind*. Of crucial importance is the maritime network in the Red Sea, the *bahr-i-kulzum* of the Arabic texts. The rise of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt in 965 CE swung the pendulum in

Another collection of seafaring tales is Buzurg ibn Shahriyār’s *Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Hind*, transl. Grenville S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Book of the Wonders of India: Mainland, Sea and Islands*, London 1980. In the vast Arabic and Persian literature on geography, some information on seafaring is also available. See for example, S. Maqbul Ahmed (transl.), *India and the Neighbouring Territories in the Kitāb Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi’khtirāq al-‘āfāq*, Leiden 1960 (al-Idrīsī); S. Maqbul Ahmed (transl.), *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China*, Shimla 1989. The celebrated travel accounts of Marco Polo (Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 2 vols., 3. ed., New York 1926), and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (*Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, transl. Hamilton A.R. Gibb, London 1929) are also important sources on individuals crossing the sea. The concrete epigraphic evidence of various Tamil merchants’ groups, especially the Ainnūrruvar, venturing to Sri Lanka, maritime Southeast Asia and also China reveals the actual seafaring by individuals and groups of merchants. See Noboru Karashima (ed.), *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimony of Inscriptions and Ceramic Sherds*, Tokyo 2002; also Ranabir Chakravarti, An Enchanting Seascape: Through an Epigraphic Lens, in: *Studies in History* 20 (2004), 305–315.

11 Abraham L. Udovitch, Formalism and Informalism in the Social and Economic Institutions of the Medieval Islamic World, in: *Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam*, ed. Amin Banani and Speros Vryonis, Wiesbaden 1977, 61–71.

favour of the Red Sea. The Red Sea network further offered linkages with the vibrant Mediterranean maritime trade through Egypt which acted like a hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean with momentous consequences. The northernmost outreach of the Red Sea network was of course Alexandria which was, however, more oriented towards the eastern Mediterranean. Aden, like Old Cairo under the Fatimids, served as a major hub for the seafaring Jewish merchants who plied either between Maṣr (Egypt) and Yemen or between Aden and the western Indian sea-board, or from Maṣr to India via Aden. The growing importance of the Red Sea network coincided, to some extent, with the waning fortunes of Sirāf, on the Persian Gulf, which experienced a major earthquake in c. 950 CE.¹²

Now we should come to the South Asian commercial scenario during the 1000–1300 CE phase. Any discussion on the history of trade in the South Asian subcontinent—especially in pre-modern times—has to recognize that its social, economic and cultural life is dependent on agriculture, though trade belongs to the non-agrarian sector of the economy. Indian textile products, which were among the staple commercial commodities over very long periods during pre-industrial times, were indeed manufactured items, but also essentially agro-based products. The increasing instances of trade in agrarian commodities during the 600–1300 CE period need to be situated in the context of the spread of agriculture in greater parts of the subcontinent during the early medieval times. The study of trade in the subcontinent often emphasizes the dealings in high-value, small quantity, exotic, portable, luxury items. This is particularly seen in the study of India's long-distance trade, more so, in the historiography of the maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean.¹³ This invariant image of India's maritime trade demands close scrutiny in the light of the changing perspectives of the Indian Ocean maritime history, especially of the pre-1500 AD phase.

The above preliminaries help us focus specifically on the first three centuries of the second millennium CE in relation to India's maritime trade. During

¹² That both the Gujarat and Malabar coasts would benefit from the maritime networks in the western Indian Ocean—whether through the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea—is evident from Jean Charles Ducène, *The Ports of the Western Coast of India According to the Arab Geographers (Eighth-Fifteenth Centuries AD): A Glimpse into Geography*, in: *Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean*, ed. Marie-Françoise Bousac, Jean-François Salles and Jean-Baptiste Yon, New Delhi 2016, 166–178. The Konkan ports, sandwiched between Malabar and Gujarat, seem to have prospered if and when the Persian Gulf network was more important than the Red Sea route.

¹³ For broad overviews of the Indian Ocean maritime history see Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean. A History of the People and Sea*, New Delhi 1993; Michael N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, New York 2004.

the first half of the second millennium the Indian Ocean emerged as a vast trading zone; its western *termini* were Sirāf/Başra/Baghdād in the Persian Gulf zone and Alexandria/Fuṣṭāṭ (Old Cairo) in the Red Sea area (especially after the emergence of the Fatimid Caliphate in 965 CE), while the eastern terminus extended up to the ports in China. The South Asian subcontinent stood almost at the very centre of the Indian Ocean where shipping and navigation were largely determined by the more or less predictable alterations of the monsoon wind system.¹⁴ In view of the emergence of what K.N. Chaudhuri labels as ‘emporia trade’ and ‘segmented voyages’ in the Indian Ocean at the turn of the eleventh century, the two sea-boards of the subcontinent, dotted with numerous ports,¹⁵ began to loom large as suitable points of transshipment, gateways and sojourning, in addition to their direct participation in commercial exchanges. It is surprising that out of the protracted past of India’s involvement in the Indian Ocean maritime trade, only two phases, namely the first three centuries CE and the three centuries from 1500 to 1800, generally attract the prime attention of maritime historians. The first three centuries of the CE are celebrated for India’s far flung contacts with the Roman empire, especially the eastern Mediterranean zone. The most worked out phase in Indian Ocean history is, however, the 1500–1800 period which witnessed major transformations in the Indian Ocean arena with the advent of North Atlantic powers and trading companies.¹⁶ Pearson has rightly pointed out that this phase, however

14 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Merchants, Merchandise and Merchantmen in the Western Sea-board of India: A Maritime Profile (c. 500 BCE–1500 CE)*, in: *The Trading World of the Indian Ocean 1500–1800*, ed. Om Prakash, New Delhi 2012, 56–113, esp. 78–110. The two major sea lanes in the Western Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, did not enjoy the same amount of importance simultaneously; there is a pendulum-like swing in the significance of these two sea lanes. During the period under review the Red Sea seems to have gained greater prominence than the Persian Gulf network, largely due to the emergence of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. For the importance of Fuṣṭāṭ see Abraham L. Udovitch, *Fatimid Cairo: Crossroad of World Trade—From Spain to India*, in: *L’Égypte Fatimide. Son art et son histoire*, ed. Marianne Barrucand, Paris 1999, 681–691. The dependence on the monsoon wind system for shipping and navigation in the Indian Ocean prior to steam locomotion also means that this long history is essentially related to the northern sector of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean, which occupies nearly 20% of the total maritime space of the earth, experiences the wind system up to 10 degrees south latitude, to the south of which there is no impact of the monsoon wind. In other words, a sizeable portion of the Indian Ocean to the south of the 10 degrees south latitude remains outside the long history of monsoon-driven navigation.

15 Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge 1985. Applying Braudelian methods and perspectives to the Indian Ocean situation, Chaudhuri, however, chose to leave the eastern sea-board of Africa blank in his overview of the Indian Ocean.

important, covers only a very short span in the protracted history of the Indian Ocean. The first half of the second millennium often receives marginalized attention among maritime historians of the Indian Ocean.

The present essay takes a closer look at the maritime trade of India, especially along its western sea-board in the light of business letters of Jewish merchants. The geniza documents, among other things, are crucial for understanding the role of the ship-owning merchants. These ship-owning merchants are generally called *nākhudās* in the geniza papers; the Persian term literally stands for the lord or owner (*khudā*) of ships (*nau*). The term has a remarkable correspondence to and affinity to the Sanskrit term *nauvittaka*, encountered fairly regularly in inscriptions from the west coast of India, since about 1000 CE. The term *nauvittaka* literally denotes one whose wealth (*vitta*) was derived from ships (*nau*). In fact, the two terms were considered synonymous in Indian epigraphic vocabulary and also abbreviated as *nau* and *nākhū* respectively. These terms cannot but point to the regular presence of these very rich merchants in coastal western India. It should also be taken into account that on several occasions the term *nākhudā* may not have been used in the geniza as an epithet of a ship-owning merchant; but the ship-owner's presence and active role is evident from the reference to ship(s) of a particular person/persons. Similarly, an early eleventh century Sanskrit inscription from the Konkan coast in the western sea-board of India informs us of the presence of three generations of rich merchants (*śreshṭhis*) who owned sea-going vessels; but none of these merchants bore the epithet *nauvittaka*. The term *nākhudā*, on occasions, has also been used in the sense of a ship-master or ship captain, distinct from the ship-owner. One needs to situate the reference to the epithet *nākhudā* in the historical context of the primary source. Before, however, encountering two such ship-owners in this study, it will perhaps be relevant to introduce the geniza documents as a source for understanding Indian Ocean maritime history, particularly the overseas trade network of the western sea-board of the subcontinent. The India traders were part of the broader maritime network linking the western Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean.

III

In this backdrop we would like to situate the Jewish geniza letters, a few of which will be analyzed here. The itinerant spirit of the Jewish merchants is well

16 Ashin Das Gupta and Micheal N. Pearson (ed.), *India and the Indian Ocean 1500–1800*, Calcutta 1987; Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe, Economy and Civilization in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge 1990.

captured in the following quote, ‘One who is present can see what is not seen by one who is absent’. This was what Joseph b. Abraham, a prominent India trader, wrote from Aden to Abraham b. Yijū in Malabar with the request to purchase for him some Indian commodities.¹⁷ Abraham b. Yijū was deemed as the appropriate person to judge which commodities would be commercially most viable.

The itinerant nature of these merchants is borne out by their very names. Thus the name Joseph al-‘Adanī al-Mamsawī tells us that this merchant had originally hailed from Aden but resided in Mamsa in Morocco. Similarly, the representative of Jewish merchants at Fustāṭ (like the *wakīl al-tujjār* at Aden) Abu Zikrī Kohen bore a *nisba*, Sijilmāsī, immediately implying that he came from Sijilmāsa in Morocco to Fustāṭ. The name Hiba al-Ḥamwī, another India trader, speaks of his connections with Ḥamā in Syria.¹⁸

No other source material offers more information on the ship-owners in the western Indian Ocean during the 1000–1300 CE phase than the geniza letters of the India traders.¹⁹ There were ship-owners from coastal western India as well as Jewish and Muslim ship-owners who came from the Red Sea and the North African areas. Besides the ship-owners, two most prominent Jewish merchants were Abraham b. Yijū, a Tunisian Jew who spent nearly two decades at al-Mānjarūr (Mangalore, from 1132 to 1149) and Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan, who was the premier Jewish India trader at Aden. Many ship-owners figure in the correspondence of and between these two Jewish merchants. Among several such ship-owners, we propose to take a closer look at two of them, figuring prominently in a few business letters. They are ‘Alī b. Maṣṣūr Fawfalī (also spelt as Fofali) and PDYR (pronounced probably as Fidyār). None of them actually wrote any correspondence to a Jewish India trader, nor were they direct recipients of any correspondence. But they figure prominently in the correspondence of major Jewish India traders like Abraham b. Yijū and Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan-Japhet, who also functioned as the representative of the Jewish merchants at Aden.²⁰

17 Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9), 575.

18 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, New Delhi 2007. See particularly the chapter ‘Information, Exchange and Administration—Case Studies from Early India’.

19 Ranabir Chakravarti, Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-owning Merchants in the West Coast of India c. 1000–1500, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43 (2000), 34–64.

20 For these two pre-eminent India traders, see Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9); Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, New Delhi 1990.

Both ship-owners were active in the Western Indian Ocean, especially on the western sea-board of India, in the 1130s and 1140s. Goitein and Friedman rightly found ‘Alī b. Maṣūr Fawfalī a betel nut merchant, without, however, discerning a distinct Indian philological element in his name. The term *fofali* or *fawfalī*, denoting a betel nut dealer, is actually derived from the Sanskrit word for betel or areca nut, *pūgaphala*. The term *pūgaphala* not only figures in Varāhamihira’s *Bṛihatsamhitā* (c. 6th century CE) and the Sanskrit literary (*kāvya*) texts but also in the celebrated medical treatise of Suśruta (c. first three centuries CE²¹). The term *pūgaphala* is mentioned in an early eleventh-century inscription as a saleable commodity, along with black pepper, green vegetable and other products at a locality-level market centre, situated in an inland urban space (*pattanamaṇḍapikā*).²² These nuts were (and are) widely used in the daily life in India, especially for chewing the nuts with the betel leaves. There is a term, derived from *pūga*, to connote a spittoon, which is indispensable to one chewing betel nuts/betel leaves. The betel nut is an essential item in numerous social and religious ritual practices in India, particularly in marriage, auspicious family rituals and temple rituals. That the betel/areca nut was grown and transacted in great bulk will be borne out by many inscriptions and land-grant charters, especially from the Konkan coast. These inscriptions leave little room for doubt that areca/betel nut plants were subject to various revenue demands and levies, including commercial taxes and tolls and customs. The betel nut was evidently an agrarian product grown and exchanged in bulk.²³ The Sanskrit term *pūgaphala*, already mentioned, would become *phuaphala* in Prakrit, from where its Arabic form *fofal* or *fawfal* is then derived. The epithet Fawfalī/Fofali therefore is likely to have had an Indic origin and, as a *nākhudā* he was possibly a person of Indian origin, active in the western sea-board of India. Interestingly, a later Arabic inscription from Gujarat, dated 1291 CE, records the presence of a ship-owner who was also a betel nut dealer. He was Haji Ibrahim, whose epitaph was inscribed on a tombstone at Cambay, the premier port of Gujarat during the 1000–1600 period (before it was eclipsed by the port of Surat).²⁴ The

21 For the meaning of *pūga/pūgaphala* and other related terms see Monier Monier-Williams, *The Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, New Delhi 1964, 641.

22 The *maṇḍapikā*, modern *mandī*, is a middle category market centre, larger than the weekly exchanges at rural level (*hatta/hat*), but smaller than a large market within an urban space (*pattana/pura/nagara*). See Ranabir Chakravarti, *Between the Cities and Villages: Linkages of Trade in India (c. AD 600–1300)*, in: *Explorations in the History of South Asia. Essays in Honour of Dietmar Rothermund*, ed. Georg Berkemer, Tilman Frasch, Hermann Kulke et al., New Delhi 2001, 99–120.

23 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Exchanges of Agrarian Products at Locality Levels and Beyond: Early Medieval Indian Scenario*, in: *Excursus in History. Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, ed. K.M. Shrimali (forthcoming).

considerable financial return from trade in betel nuts, paving the way for further investments into shipping business, is once again underlined here.

Since ‘Alī b. Maṣṣūr Fawfalī was often cited in the letters as *nākhudā*, there is little room for doubt that he was indeed a ship-owner. The ship-owners are likely to have been persons of immense resources which were indispensable for running the risky, hazardous but highly profitable shipping networks. One may further infer logically that our Fawfalī had either himself originally been a betel nut merchant or hailed from a family of betel nut dealers. His or his family’s considerable success in the betel nut business seems to have paved the way for his investing in shipping or owning ships. There is, therefore, a case of a remarkable transformation of a betel nut dealer into a ship-owning *nākhudā* who in the Indian Ocean maritime context was usually a very rich merchant. The geniza letters highlight al-Fawfalī’s close trading interactions with three important Jewish merchants: Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan-Japhet in Aden, Abraham b. Yijū on the west coast of India (Mangalore and various other parts of the Malabar coast) and Joseph b. Abraham, another prominent Jewish India trader. He seems to have been an Indian Muslim ship-owner on the west coast of India.

Writing from Aden in c. 1134 CE to Abraham b. Yijū, Maḍmūn addressed our Fawfalī as the ‘most illustrious *nākhudā*, my lord ‘Alī b. Maṣṣūr al-Fawfalī —may God preserve his position’.²⁵ The context of the letter is to acknowledge the receipt of black pepper, the most coveted spice from South India, sent in al-Fawfalī’s ship to Aden. Abraham b. Yijū sent this consignment of the pepper to Maḍmūn in Aden in al-Fawfalī’s ship. The mode of addressing al-Fawfalī in this letter speaks of his prestigious position in the eyes of the premier Jewish merchant in Aden. It also clearly establishes that al-Fawfalī’s ship(s) plied between ports on the western sea-board of India and Aden. Taking into account the shipment of pepper, for which Malabar was celebrated, and also that Abraham b. Yijū’s principal place of activity was al-Mānjarūr or modern Mangalore on the northernmost part of the Malabar coast, al-Fawfalī’s shipping is likely to have been strongly oriented towards the Malabar coast. Exactly a year later, in 1135 CE, Maḍmūn wrote to Abraham b. Yijū with diverse instructions regarding his business ventures in India. This has important bearing on the functions of al-Fawfalī, the *nākhudā*. Abraham b. Yijū was requested to take delivery of

²⁴ The relevant term used here is *fatolia*, which according to Z.A. Desai, the editor of the record, stood for a betel nut merchant. Ziauddin A. Desai, Arabic Inscriptions of the Rajput Period from Gujarat, in: *Epigraphia Indica, Arabic and Persian Supplement* 1961, 22–24. The point has been noted also by V.K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India 1000–1300*, New Delhi 1989, 228, 230. Jain however did not bring in the perspective of the geniza documents. I am thankful to Dr. Digvijay Kumar Singh for this information.

²⁵ Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9), 353.

letters meant for various merchants, including ‘*nākhudā* al-Fawfalī’. Abraham b. Yijū was to ‘take good care of all the letters’ (implying to ‘take this matter seriously’). Maḍmūn further specifically wrote:

“I have empowered the *nākhudā* ‘Ali al-Fawfalī to sell the goods packed and all the items (actually their gears) and to take possession of the shallow dish kept by Budah.... And to take possession of the copper kettle... and to get the sandarac and all the items which are in the store-room; he is empowered to take possession of everything which belongs to me there. Please help him in this.”²⁶

The above quote, carrying fairly elaborate instructions to al-Fawfalī through Abraham b. Yijū, demonstrates the close trading ties between this Indian *nākhudā* and a Jewish India trader at Aden, the latter passing his written instruction through another Jewish friend of his, Abraham b. Yijū. Abraham b. Yijū is known to have spent nearly twenty years in Malabar, especially in al-Mānjarūr. It is likely that the storeroom referred to in this letter was located in al-Mānjarūr itself. The most important point here is that al-Fawfalī, in addition to being primarily a betel nut dealer and also a ship-owner, was also functioning as the local representative of Maḍmūn in coastal India, more precisely at al-Mānjarūr. This is the third aspect of this Indian merchant’s multifarious trading activities and networks. His looking after the business interests of a Jewish India trader based in Aden and especially taking care of his storeroom at Mangalore, particularly underline that al-Fawfalī was an Indian *nākhudā*-cum-dealer. There is little room for doubt that Maḍmūn instructed al-Fawfalī to sell the goods kept in the storehouse. For the Adanese merchant, al-Fawfalī was acting as his selling agent in Malabar. The information and communication networks also need to be noted. The instructions were sent not directly to al-Fawfalī but through Abraham b. Yijū, by Maḍmūn. It is quite clear that al-Fawfalī had regular interactions with both of the prominent Jewish merchants, Maḍmūn and Abraham b. Yijū. The letters strongly bear out the reliability of al-Fawfalī recognized by Maḍmūn from the other shore of the Arabian Sea. It is likely that al-Fawfalī received communications, written or verbal, from Abraham b. Yijū and acted upon them. One cannot ascertain why al-Fawfalī was not contacted directly by Maḍmūn from Aden.

Now, we would like to take a closer look at another geniza letter, dated c. 1145 (or sometime between 1145 and 1148). This was written by Mahrūz, a prominent Jewish India trader, at that time in al-Mānjarūr (Mangalore). The letter was sent to another Jewish merchant, Abu Zikrī Kohen, who was at that time at Broach, the well known port in Gujarat. The context of the letter is the

26 Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9), 350–351.

offer of consolation and material help to Abu Zikrī Kohen who suffered heavily on account of piracy near the port of Tana or Thana (now a suburb of Mumbai). Giving a host of information to the recipient (which shows how the exchange of information was integral to long-distance commercial transactions), Mahrūz informed that

“I would indeed like to mention to you, my lord, that your servant (i.e. Mahrūz himself) had a large shipment in the boat of al-Fawfalī, then God ordained what happened.”²⁷

Mahrūz evidently sent some consignments in al-Fawfalī’s ship which seems to have suffered shipwreck, leading to a major loss to Mahrūz and also to the ship-owner. It is also evident that al-Fawfalī’s shipping business involved a third Jewish India trader, Mahrūz. Information about shipwrecks is quite common in the geniza papers.

We would now turn our attention to a letter of 1150 CE written by Joseph b. Abraham to Abraham b. Yijū. Three sentences in this letter are striking:

‘Al-Fawfalī has not arrived’. And Al-Fawfalī has absconded to Zabīd’. ‘When he arrives at your place (probably al-Mānjarūr), take from him for me the ‘eggs’ or their proceeds.”²⁸

First, al-Fawfalī’s business dealings with the fourth India Jewish trader, Joseph b. Abraham, looms large in the letter. The dealing in ‘eggs’ actually refers to the trade in a particular type of iron, exported from India to Aden. It is quite clear that al-Fawfalī ran into financial trouble and hence chose to avoid Aden and thus landed up in neighbouring Zabīd. Goitein pointed out that the ruler of Zabīd was an enemy of Aden’s ruler. So the choice of Zabīd seems to have been deliberate on the part of al-Fawfalī. Following Goitein, once again, it appears that the financial problems faced by al Fawfalī could have been the result of the shipwreck he had suffered sometime between 1145 ad 1148, already cited above. Second, al-Fawfalī seems to have journeyed overseas towards Aden, but he did not actually arrive there. Instead the letter shows that he absconded to Zabīd in Yemen. So our ship-owner was actually afloat and took to the sea instead of permanently remaining ashore. What prompted him to undertake a voyage to Aden/Zabīd is not known to us. On other occasions he appears to have been mostly ashore, looking after his ship(s) that sailed and also acting in close cooperation with Maḍmūn in Aden and Abraham b. Yijū in coastal Malabar. That is why his act of absconding was communicated to Abraham b. Yijū

²⁷ Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9), 475.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 589, 590.

by Joseph b. Abraham who was keen to have his supply of a particular type of iron delivered from al-Fawfalī. It is not improbable that he could have sought Abraham b. Yijū's intervention to resolve this issue. Al-Fawfalī also seems to have been familiar with the economic and political situations in and around Aden and Yemen. This is clearly reflected in his deliberate choice of Zabīd as his destination instead of Aden where he could be held as a defaulter. There is also the possibility that he might have planned to sail even farther, up to Egypt, via the Red Sea route, in order to avoid the Jewish merchants in Aden and India.

IV

Now to the second ship-owner, PDYR, whose name was probably pronounced Fidyār. He figures in at least four geniza letters, datable to the 1130s and 1140s. The name PDYR, as Goitein rightly pointed out, is not a personal name, but probably denotes an official designation. In a couple of other geniza letters we come across a similar functionary, called Fatanswamī, as a ship-owner. The term Fatanswamī is derived from Paṭṭanasvāmī, denoting a functionary in charge of a port (*paṭṭana*).²⁹ It is difficult to suggest what could have been the Indic equivalent of PDYR. A guess could be that the term could have been derived from *pratihāra* which in Sanskrit inscriptions texts stood for the chief of palace guards. It is not impossible—but may be difficult to prove—that such an important officer, especially in the context of a coastal society, could have also been engaged in shipping business. The other difficulty is to explain the use of a Sanskrit word in the predominantly Tulu/Kanarese/Malayam-speaking coastal tract in South India at a time when regional vernaculars had already come into vogue. My initial hunch to relate the term PDYR/Fidyār to *pratihāra*, however, gained stronger grounds during my recent communication with Malini Adiga. A scholar very well grounded in Kanarese and Tulu languages and relevant sources of early medieval/medieval times, Adiga points out that the Kanarese/Tulu word *paḍiyāra* was probably derived from Sanskrit *pratihāra* (a door keeper, palace guard, chief of the palace guard).

The term *paḍiyāra* as an important functionary, in charge of the security of a palace, figures in an inscription as early as 969 CE. As this inscription informs us of the marriage of a *paḍiyāra* with the sister of the Ganga ruler, Butuga II, this *paḍiyāra* in question was possibly no ordinary palace guard, but enjoyed an elite rank (whether already an elite and hence married to a princess, or becoming an elite by dint of this marriage cannot be determined at this

²⁹ Chakravarti, Nakhudas and Nauvittakas (cf. n. 19), 48.

stage). A Hoysala inscription of 1196 CE mentions a *paḍiyāra* (a high-ranking royal functionary) one of whose brothers was also a *paḍiyāra*. Significantly enough, their father is mentioned to have been a merchant (*vyavahāri*). Several inferences can be drawn from this record. First, the title *paḍiyāra* could be assumed hereditarily by members of the same family, thereby once again underlining the elite position of the title-holders. Second, a person holding a high-ranking administrative office of a *mahāpradhāna* retained the title *paḍiyāra*. Thus, the title *paḍiyāra*, once again, does not merely connote a palace guard but possibly the chief of the palace guards. No less significant is the third point that the father of these two brothers was a merchant. The likely prosperity of the merchant could have helped his two sons to subsequently gain notable administrative positions, at least one son having been placed fairly high in administrative hierarchy. Adiga further points out that the occasional use of the term *piriya* (senior), as a suffix to the title of *paḍiyāra*, should logically suggest that there was ranking in the office of the *paḍiyāra*—senior and junior. The *paḍiyāra* who was also a *mahāpradhāna* (literally, chief of the high functionaries) could have therefore been a senior *paḍiyāra* which is likely to have caused further elevation of his position in the administrative hierarchy. In another Kanarese inscription of 1170 CE a *paḍiyāra* functioned as an important military officer (*daṇḍanāyaka*).³⁰

Thanks to the data presented by Adiga, the *paḍiyāras*—mostly in Karnataka inscriptions—appear to have enjoyed a high position in the feudatory hierarchy as well as access to lands and very high administrative positions (*mahāpradhāna*, *daṇḍanāyaka*). What is striking from that data presented by Adiga is that many *paḍiyāras* are still present in Karnataka, especially in the coastal areas. The *paḍiyāras* of modern times usually belong to the high caste of the Gaudiya Saraswat brahmanas and most of them nowadays are engaged in trade. The combination of the high caste position of the present day *paḍiyāras* with their commercial ventures may have important bearings on our current topic of study.

However, it is only in the geniza letters that we find the PDYR/*paḍiyāra* as a ship-owner. The PDYR of our geniza papers was most probably an important and elite-level functionary in coastal Karnataka. He seems to have invested a part of his wealth and resources in shipping business. Being stationed in or near the sea-board of Karnataka, he is likely to have found it commercially attractive and advantageous to run a shipping business, in addition to his administrative functions. That his ship(s) plied on high-sea routes to Aden—and not merely chugged along the coast for looping trade network—is amply borne

³⁰ Personal communication from Dr. Malini Adiga through an email. I am indebted to Dr. Adiga for sharing this data with me.

out by our geniza documents. One may recall here that on the southern Konkan coast a *mahāpradhāna* was also a ship-owner (*nauvitāka/nauvittaka*), active at the port of Balipattana (modern Kharepatan in southern Konkan). The same port was also noted for the shipping business of a family of rich merchants (*śreshthis*) of three generations; they also performed some administrative functions. Therefore, it may not be a far-fetched generalization to state that in coastal areas of Karnataka and Konkan there was a tendency to combine administrative functions with ship-owning business.³¹

Now, we turn to a closer examination of PDYR in the light of geniza letters. Like al-Fawfali, PDYR was also intimately connected with a few prominent Jewish India traders. Joseph b. Abraham wrote to Abraham b. Yijū sometime in 1136–39 CE and referred to sending a few gifts for Yijū. In this context he informed Yijū that he had sent the gifts, together with a bag of silk and a bag of arsenic, in PDYR/Fidyār’s ship. These goods for Abraham b. Yijū were carried by a person from Egypt, clearly borne out by his name-ending Miṣri.³² PDYR’s ship plied between Aden and Kanara coast, probably from around the port of al-Mānjarūr (Mangalore). Sometime around 1138, another letter written by a very prominent Jewish India trader, Khalaf b. Isaak (from Aden), to Abraham b. Yijū once again speaks of some gift items being sent for Yijū. These gifts were sent with one ‘*nākhudā* Aḥmad (variantly Muḥammad), the *nākhudā* of Fidyār’s ship’.³³ That the PDYR/Fidyār was a ship-owner is quite clearly evident even though he did not bear the epithet *nākhudā*. In fact, he employed Aḥmad/Muḥammad as a *nākhudā* to man his ship; here the term *nākhudā* denotes a ship-master or ship captain. There is little doubt that the Fidyār/PDYR was a ship-owner and in that capacity he employed a ship captain. In 1146 a geniza letter speaks of the voyage undertaken by an Adanese Jewish merchant, Maḍmūn b. Salim. “While at sea”, the letter narrates, “he boarded a ship of PDYR/Fidyār, but left everything in the ship (which had transported him from India)”.³⁴ This is a rare instance of changing ships at sea. The sea must have been very calm at that moment to enable the merchant to transfer from one ship to the vessel belonging to PDYR. The above data underlines the importance of PDYR/Fidyār as a shipowner from India.

What is significant is that a letter of 1139 written by Khalaf b. Isaak to Abraham b. Yijū deals with the late delivery of cardamom from India to Aden.

31 This is discussed by Ranabir Chakravarti with the help inscriptions of southern Konkan in: Coastal Trade and Voyages in Konkan: The Early Medieval Scenario, in: *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35 (1998), 97–124.

32 Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9), 576, 578.

33 *Ibid.*, 604–605

34 Goitein and Friedman, *India Book* (cf. n. 9), 619

Khalaf informs that he had discussed this matter with the illustrious Sheikh Maḍmūn, his superior who was to write about it, among others, to the PDYR/Fidyār.³⁵ It is possible that PDYR's ship(s) could have been used for the transportation of cardamom from Malabar to Aden on previous occasions. To the Jewish India traders at Aden the Fidyār was a ship-owner important enough to have been consulted in the context of the problem of late delivery of cardamom. It implies that someone like the PDYR could have had access to and given information on the problems of the supply of cardamom from the inland areas to the coast, especially to the ports on the Malabar coast. This once again speaks of the close ties and network between Jewish India traders and prominent Indian ship-owners on the west coast of India.³⁶

V

This essay tries to accentuate the importance of the port of al-Mānjarūr which figures so prominently in the Aden-Malabar shipping network in the geniza documents. In the Arabic and Persian texts on geography, travel and trade, al-Mānjarūr figures as a port on the western sea-board of India, but not as prominently as it does in the geniza papers. It is possible that the prominence of al-Mānjarūr is visible in the record because of its repeated mentions in the correspondence of Abraham b. Yijū with several Jewish India traders, especially Maḍmūn. It is only in the geniza documents that al-Mānjarūr's significance for long-distance high-sea linkages with Aden gains considerable visibility. In other kinds of sources, it is usually mentioned in the context of the coastal shipping along the western sea-board.

The geniza documents further offer exciting insights into the world of the cultural practice of borrowing vocabularies among different linguistic groups participating in the maritime trade between India and the Red Sea areas (extending up to Egypt). The two appellations, Fawfalī and PDYR, incorporated in the vocabulary of the Arabic speaking world, or more precisely the Judeo-Arabic vocabulary, were clearly derived from Indic words. These may not have been loanwords like *ta'alam* and *fatiya*, also occurring in the geniza papers and similarly words of Tulu/Kanarese and Malayalam origin(s).³⁷ However, the Arabic adaptation of two Sanskrit words, *pūgaphala* and *pratīhāra*, respectively into Fawfalī and PDYR hints at active bilingualism among the participants of

³⁵ Ibid., 609

³⁶ For an appreciation of these letters of India traders see Ranabir Chakravarti, Indian Trade through Jewish *geniza* Letters (1000–1300), in: *Studies in People's History* 2 (2015), 27–40.

long-distance maritime trade. Bilingualism and loanwords are essential components of the cultural life in the connected space of the Indian Ocean. The geniza papers furthermore allow the most convincing reconstruction of the active role of ship-owners from the Indian shore; these *nākhudās/nauvittakas* competed and cooperated with Jewish and Muslim ship-owners in the western Indian Ocean. That various people from the sea-boards of India did take to the sea, irrespective of the taboo against crossing the sea pronounced in the Sanskrit normative treatises, is evidently illustrated by these letters. Our discussions also underline the importance of agrarian products (e.g. areca/betel nuts) and bulk items of trade (iron, for instance) in the making of Indian Ocean economic life. The geniza papers uniquely shed light on the small details of the life of several players in the Indian Ocean maritime trade. No biographical details are available to us about the two merchants under review, but some micro-histories of their lives can be attempted by analyzing the geniza letters. In the study of the Indian Ocean maritime history of the pre-1500 CE period the paucity of data does not often allow us to pursue either the micro-history centred around specific events, or the broad patterns of what Braudel labeled as conjunctures.³⁸ The geniza documents, when read in conjunction with Persian and Arabic texts (1000–1400 CE) and nearly contemporary Indian epigraphic materials, may offer interesting insights into some minutiae in the life of the maritime merchants.

37 The two words *taalam* and *fatiya* denote respectively a dish or a salver and the chest or box to keep personal effects. Lambourn's brilliant essay, *Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects* (cf. n. 6), argues how these two Tulu/Malayalam words were incorporated as loan words in the Judeo-Arabic vocabulary of the geniza papers as an outcome of the cultural connections interwoven with commercial exchanges. While the Tulu/Malayalam base of the two words, *ta'alam* and *fatiya*, is well argued for and demonstrated, both the words could also have originated from Sanskrit/Indo-Aryan vocabulary. *Ta'alam* as a dish was probably derived from Sanskrit *sthālam/sthālī* (dish) from which the Prakrit form would be *thali*. The word *fatiya* as a chest or box may well have its base in *peṭaka/peṭikā* in Sanskrit and *piṭaka* in Pali.

38 A stimulating discussion on the possibilities of writing micro-history in the period nearly contemporary to the India Book is offered by Elizabeth Lambourn, *Describing the Lost Camel—Clue for West Asian Mercantile Networks in South Asian Maritime Trade* (tenth-twelfth centuries AD), in: *Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean*, ed. Marie-Françoise Bousac, Jean-François Salles and Jean-Baptiste Yon, New Delhi 2016, 351–407.

