Akshardhara Research Journal
Single Blind Peer-Reviewed & Refereed International Research Journal
E ISSN -3048-8095 / SJIF Impact- 5.16 / October 2026/ Special Issue 05 Volume I

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# The Religiosity of Ancient Indian Merchant Communities: A Comparative Study of Berenike and Socotra (c. 1st century BCE–3rd century CE)

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**DOI.** https://doi-ds.org/doilink/10.2026-33875775/ARJ/2026/V1/SI05/101026A012

**Abstract**

*This paper explores the religiosity of ancient Indian merchant communities through a comparative study of Berenike in Egypt and Socotra in Yemen during the peak phase of Indo-Roman commerce from the first century BCE to the third century CE. Moving beyond purely economic readings of long-distance trade, it examines how merchants expressed belief and ritual practice outside the Indian subcontinent through inscriptions, graffiti, and votive offerings. Berenike, a permanent Roman-controlled port on the Red Sea, provides evidence for relatively structured and communal religious practices. Inscriptions and votive activity suggest the use of shared spaces of worship and the adaptation of foreign or multicultural sacred places as meaningful religious environments for Indian traders living abroad.*

*In contrast, Socotra functioned as a liminal and largely transient stopover within Indian Ocean trade routes. Its unique landscape, characterised by isolation and a striking natural environment, shaped more personal and informal expressions of religiosity. Graffiti and inscriptions reflect individual acts of devotion, protection-seeking, and thanksgiving associated with the risks of maritime travel. Furthermore, these practices show how merchants transformed solitary natural spaces into sites of ritual meaning. A comparative approach demonstrates that Indian merchant religiosity was flexible, situational, and responsive to context. Religious practice helped maintain identity, negotiate belonging, and foster cohesion within mobile mercantile communities. Ultimately, this study argues that trade routes operated as religious as well as economic corridors, revealing how Indian merchants adapted, shared, and reimagined sacred spaces while practising religion beyond the subcontinent.*

***Keywords**: Indo-Roman Trade, Indian Ocean trade, sacred spaces, votive offering, religious practices, Ancient Indian Merchants*

## Introduction

This study approaches the religious lives of Indian merchant communities through the lens of religiosity rather than religion. Religiosity is understood here as what people do — through offerings, inscriptions, spatial choices, and ritual gestures — particularly in contexts where formal religious institutions were absent or inaccessible. Within maritime trade networks, Indian merchants operated as mobile or diasporic communities whose identities were maintained through selective cultural and religious practices adapted to movement, risk, and temporary residence rather than permanent settlement. Merchants are therefore approached here not merely as economic agents but as cultural actors whose mobility enabled the transmission, negotiation, and reconfiguration of religious practices across regions (Ray, 1994; Neelis, 2011).

The study compares two nodes on the Indo-Roman trading circuit that occupied structurally opposite positions: Berenike, a permanent imperial port on Egypt's Red Sea coast, and Socotra, a transient island stopover off the Horn of Africa. Their contrast allows the question of religiosity to be examined not as a fixed cultural trait carried unchanged by merchants, but as a practice reshaped by the permanence, infrastructure, and social composition of the places in which it unfolded. This approach follows

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a wider shift in trade-route scholarship away from treating religion as a discrete category of evidence and toward reading devotional acts as part of the lived, everyday experience of mobility, risk, and settlement abroad, and is consistent with broader work on religion as a mechanism of trust and cohesion within ancient trading diasporas (Seland, 2013).

**Historical and Trade Context**

Indo-Roman maritime trade followed seasonal monsoon cycles rather than year-round sailing: the south-west monsoon (June–September) carried vessels from the Red Sea toward western India, while the north-east monsoon (November–early spring) enabled the return voyage. The network was segmented, linking the Mediterranean, Africa, Arabia, and India through intermediary nodes rather than direct Rome–India routes (Tomber, 2008; Cobb, 2018; McLaughlin, 2010; Thapar, 1992). This system depended on specialised intermediaries — shippers, financiers, tax-farmers, and diaspora communities — who reduced the transaction costs and uncertainty inherent in monsoon-dependent, cross-cultural exchange (Simmons, 2023; Seland, 2014). Major emporia such as Muziris, Barygaza, Berenike, and Myos Hormos were equipped with wharfs, storage facilities, ship-repair capacity, fortifications, and tax administration, while stopovers and anchorages such as Socotra offered only seasonal, minimal infrastructure built around natural bays. Socotra functioned as a crossroads for resupply and ritual rather than regulated exchange. Evidence for this network combines archaeology, texts, and inscriptions — ceramics, botanical remains, papyri, and religious objects, read alongside the first-century Greek sailing manual, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Casson, 1989).[1] Archaeological syntheses of this maritime world increasingly treat seafaring itself, alongside trade, as a domain of religious and cultural practice rather than purely commercial activity (Ray, 2003).




*Figure 1. The Indo-Roman/Indian Ocean maritime trade network described in the Periplus Maris Erythraei, showing Berenike, Myos Hormos, and the major emporia of the Arabian and Indian coasts.*

**Case Study 1: Berenike, Egypt**

**Geographical and Maritime Setting**

Berenike lay on the western Red Sea coast, wedged between the sea and the arid Eastern Desert. Founded by the Ptolemies and later absorbed into the Roman administrative and military system, the port sat at the end of desert routes linking it to the Nile via Coptos. Its harsh environment — aridity, heat, and scarce water — was offset by Roman wells, cisterns, *hydreumata*,[2] and fortified stations along the desert roads. Berenike possessed a naturally deep, sheltered anchorage suited to large Indian Ocean vessels and direct access to the monsoon-driven routes connecting the Red Sea to Arabia and India. Unlike a seasonal anchorage, it functioned as a permanent imperial port, which allowed stable, resident foreign-merchant communities to take shape within its landscape (Sidebotham, 2011).

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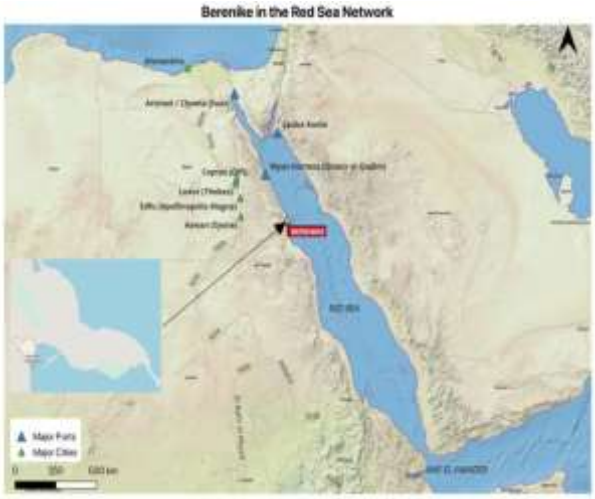



*Figure 2. Berenike's position within the Red Sea network, linking the Mediterranean via Coptos and the Nile to the monsoon routes of the Arabian Sea.*

**Faith Expression in a Permanent Port**

Berenike's permanence produced a structured and communal religiosity rooted in visibility rather than segregation. Indian merchants at the port did not construct separate temples of their own; instead, their devotion was embedded within existing Roman-Egyptian sacred spaces, chiefly the temple of Isis. Religious practice here involved adaptation and negotiation rather than isolation. Where inscriptions survive, they record named donors and invoke collective welfare, with the choice of language itself marking cultural identity. Indian religiosity was thus integrated into the imperial port both spatially and epigraphically, rather than existing apart from it (Sidebotham, 2011; Sidebotham et al., 2023).

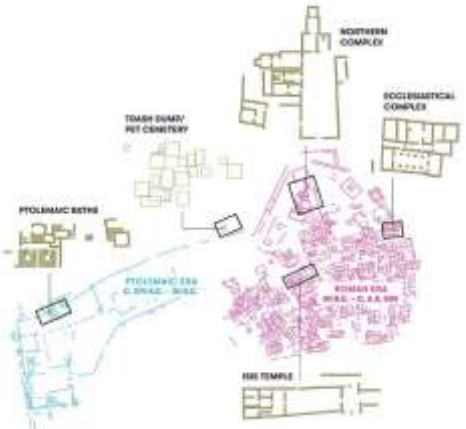


*Figure 3. Schematic plan of Berenike showing the Ptolemaic- and Roman-era zones of the port, including the Isis Temple, the Northern Complex, and the later ecclesiastical complex.*

**The Isis Temple Assemblage: Inscriptions and Statuary**

Excavations directed by the joint American-Polish Berenike Project in the courtyard of the Isis Temple have recovered six Indian, largely locally produced, objects that together constitute the most direct evidence anywhere in the Mediterranean world for the religious life of Indian merchants abroad, including a terracotta soldier figurine, three stone Buddha statuettes, a stela with Vrishni-hero imagery, and a bilingual dedicatory inscription (Sidebotham et al., 2025). The inscription, its Sanskrit text rendered in Brahmi script and accompanied by a Greek translation, is dated to the sixth year of the emperor Philip I (248–249 CE). The Sanskrit line records that "the *kṣatriya* Vasula gave this image for the welfare and happiness of all beings,"[3] a formula expressing Buddhist concern for collective merit rather than personal renown, while the accompanying Greek line — "Vasula set this up" — follows conventional Roman public-dedication phrasing. The inscription was carved on locally worked anhydritic gypsum, indicating production at Berenike itself rather than importation, and Tamil-Brahmi graffiti on associated pottery and ostraca further reinforce the presence of a cohesive merchant community using multiple Indian scripts, consistent with earlier epigraphic evidence for South Indian traders at the nearby Red Sea port of Myos Hormos/Quseir al-Qadim (Salomon, 1991).

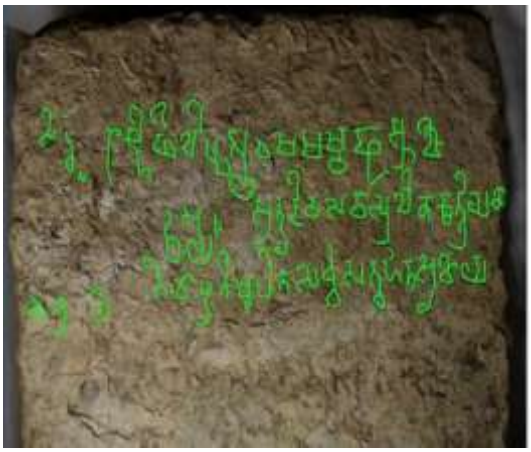


*Figure 4. Bilingual Sanskrit (Brahmi)–Greek dedicatory inscription from the Isis Temple courtyard, Berenike, dated 248–249 CE. Source: Sidebotham et al. (2025).*

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E ISSN -3048-8095 / SJIF Impact- 5.16 / October 2026/ Special Issue 05 Volume I

Found nearby in the temple forecourt was the most complete of the three Buddha statuettes, a fragmentary marble standing figure preserved to a height of approximately 71 cm, representing one of the westernmost known expressions of Buddhist devotion in antiquity. Its sculptural style is markedly hybrid: Indian Buddhist iconographic conventions — the *uṣṇīṣa*, elongated earlobes, and raised right hand — are combined with Greco-Roman treatment of the ring-curled hair and facial modelling, while its radiate halo draws simultaneously on Mediterranean solar imagery and Buddhist ideas of luminosity associated with the *Mahāvastu*. Stylistically the piece aligns with the late first to early second century CE, and its findspot within the temple precinct indicates ritual or votive rather than commercial use (Sidebotham et al., 2025).



*Figure 5. Fragmentary marble Buddha statuette (c. 71 cm preserved height) from the forecourt of the Isis Temple, Berenike. Source: Sidebotham et al. (2025).*

A further object, a stone stela measuring approximately 38 × 42 × 7.8 cm, depicts the Vrishni-hero triad widely identified as Balarama, Ekanamsa, and Vasudeva — figures associated with early Vaishnava devotion and the Krishna cult of Mathura — framed beneath a Greco-Roman decorative arch with volute capitals. Carved from local stone and dated to roughly 50–150 CE, the stela was likely produced by local artisans already familiar with Indian iconographic conventions, pointing to an early and sustained circulation of Brahmanical imagery at the port. It was recovered from a late-antique storage context, suggesting the object's continued significance long after its original dedication (Sidebotham et al., 2025; Zych & Rądkowska, 2019). Taken together, the assemblage is notable within Indo-Roman studies precisely because evidence for cultural transmission running eastward, from India toward the Mediterranean, has long been far scarcer than evidence for the reverse flow of Roman goods into India; the Berenike finds begin to redress that imbalance.



*Figure 6. Stone stela depicting the Vrishni-hero triad (Balarama, Ekanamsa, and Vasudeva) beneath a Greco-Roman arch, Isis Temple, Berenike (c. 50–150 CE).*

**A Shared Sacred Landscape**

Additional finds from the temple deposits, including lotus seeds, rice, and sealed pepper — one jar contained 7.55 kg of black peppercorns, reflecting the commodity's centrality to Indo-Roman exchange more broadly (De Romanis, 2020) — indicate that imported Indic commodities were drawn into ritual practice rather than confined to commercial storage. This reading is reinforced by two Satavahana copper coins recovered from the same temple precinct alongside the Buddha statuette: in a Roman monetary system that did not recognise foreign currency, such coins are best understood as votive deposits carrying symbolic rather than exchange value for the Indian merchants who left them (Smagur, 2026). Indian cotton textiles recovered elsewhere at the port point to a comparable, if more mundane, traffic in Indic material culture running alongside these religious dedications (Wild & Wild, 2004). The co-presence of Buddhist and Brahmanical objects, Sanskrit and Tamil inscriptions, and Greco-Egyptian cult material within a single temple precinct, set within

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a wider port landscape that also included a Northern Complex and a later ecclesiastical quarter, demonstrates that Berenike functioned as a shared sacred landscape rather than a site of segregated worship. Indic religious expressions stood alongside dedications to Roman emperors and Egyptian deities, producing a pluralistic ritual environment characteristic of a permanent, multicultural port (Sidebotham, 2011; Sidebotham et al., 2025).

**Case Study 2: Socotra, Yemen**

**Geography and Setting**

Socotra functioned for nearly two thousand years as a key stopover for seafarers, particularly Indian sailors from Gujarat, owing to its strategic position at the entrance to the Red Sea and its role as a maritime node linking the Mediterranean, Arabia, and the Indian subcontinent. Unlike Berenike, it lacked natural monsoon-sheltered harbours; its limestone plateau and karstic landscape instead offered prominent cave systems, most notably Hoq Cave, situated roughly 300 m above sea level and visible from the shoreline. This geography rendered Socotra physically isolated yet symbolically accessible to passing sailors (Strauch, 2012; Doe, 1992). Archaeological survey has independently documented pre-Islamic settlement remains on the island dating from the first to the fourth centuries CE, broadly contemporary with the cave inscriptions discussed below (Naumkin & Sedov, 1993).




*Figure 7. Location of Socotra at the mouth of the Gulf of Aden, on the maritime route linking the Red Sea, Arabia, and the Indian subcontinent.*



*Figure 8. Socotra's endemic landscape: dragon's blood trees (Dracaena cinnabari) and desert rose (Adenium obesum socotranum), characteristic of the island's karstic plateau.*

**A Liminal Sacred Landscape**

Socotra's religious landscape is best understood through its function as a liminal maritime stopover, operating as both a physical and spiritual gateway. The island exhibited a clear division between coastal and interior populations: the *Periplus* describes the coastal inhabitants as "foreigners" — Arabs, Indians, and Greeks engaged in trade — while the mountainous interior was occupied by indigenous communities the text calls "true ancient naturals." Classical and later accounts frequently describe Socotra as a "sacred island," not on account of institutionalised temples, but because of its isolation, difficult access, and centuries of repeated visitation by sailors (Strauch, 2012). Popular tradition in coastal Gujarat has linked the island to devotion for Sikotar Mata, a maritime goddess whose name is often connected to Socotra itself, although this link remains speculative and is not supported by concrete archaeological evidence.[4]

**The Hoq Cave Inscriptions**

Hoq Cave preserves more than two hundred inscriptions left by travellers from India, Arabia, Africa, Egypt, and Palmyra, the majority in Brahmi script alongside Greek, Aramaic, and other scripts, dated to the second through fourth centuries CE (Strauch, 2012). The inscriptions cluster roughly a kilometre inside the cave, well beyond the point where daylight reaches, and are associated with clear ritual activity — incense

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burners, soot deposits, torches, and auspicious symbols including tridents, stupas, and ships — rather than casual graffiti left in passing. Several texts name sailors (*nāvika*), traders (*vaṇij*), and ship pilots (*niryāmaka*), identifying the authors directly with the maritime venture rather than with any settled community on the island. Comparable clusters of maritime rock art, including incised ship imagery, have since been documented at the nearby Dahaisi cave on Socotra's Mōmi plateau, suggesting that Hoq was not an isolated case but part of a wider practice of marking caves across the island (Jansen van Rensburg & De Geest, 2015). Gujarati stone inscriptions recovered from the island's coast further attest to the presence of Indian sailors alongside the epigraphic record inside the cave itself. Read together, these inscriptions reflect propitiatory acts oriented toward maritime protection and safe passage, articulated individually rather than through the collective, dedicatory idiom seen at Berenike.



*Figure 9. Interior of Hoq Cave, Socotra, showing the karstic passage in which the epigraphic cluster is located.*

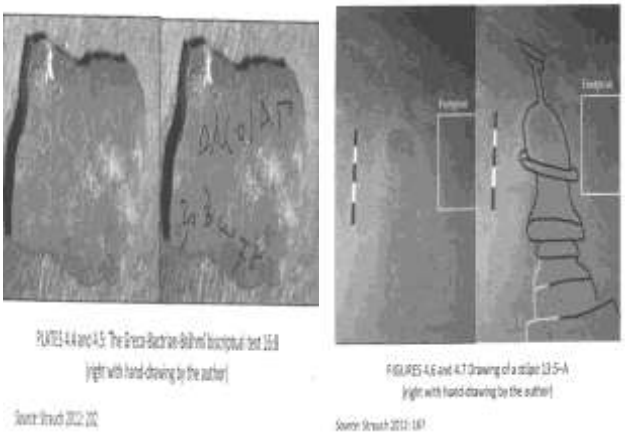




*Figure 10. Selected inscriptions and motifs from Hoq Cave and the Socotran coast: (a) bilingual Greco-Bactrian/Brāhmī inscription (Source: Strauch, 2012, p. 202); (b) hand-drawing of an incised stūpa motif (Source: Strauch, 2012, p. 167); (c) incised trident (triśūla) motif; (d) stone bearing a Gujarati inscription (Source: Jansen van Rensburg, in Strauch, 2012).*

**Comparative Analysis**

The two sites occupied structurally opposite positions within the same trading network, and this difference in permanence, regulation, and social composition shaped correspondingly different modes of religious expression, summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1. Comparative analysis of religious expression at Berenike and Socotra.*

| **Analytical Dimension** | **Berenike (Permanent Imperial Port)** | **Socotra (Liminal Maritime Stopover)** |
|---|---|---|
| **Permanence vs. Transience** | Regulated Roman port within imperial infrastructure, enabling repeated Indian merchant residence and sustained religious engagement (Sidebotham, 2011; Tomber, 2008; Cobb, 2018). | Transient stopover marked by episodic visitation and mobility-oriented ritual practice (Strauch, 2012). |
| **Communal vs. Individual Faith Expression** | Communal and public religiosity expressed through formal dedications, bilingual | Individualised devotion articulated through personal inscriptions, |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | inscriptions, and durable votive objects (Strauch, 2012; Sidebotham et al., 2025). | brief invocations, symbols, and offerings (Strauch, 2012). |
| **Built vs. Natural Sacred Space** | Indic religiosity embedded within constructed temple space (Isis Temple), adapting existing Greco-Egyptian cult architecture (Sidebotham, 2011; Zych & Rądkowska, 2019). | Ritual activity centred on natural spaces, especially caves (Hoq, Dahaisi), where isolation and depth generated sacred meaning (Strauch, 2012; Jansen van Rensburg & De Geest, 2015). |
| **Identity Strategies and Visibility** | Identity made visible through Sanskrit and Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, bilingual texts, and recognisable Indic iconography within a multicultural port (Sidebotham, 2011; Tomber, 2008). | Inward-facing identity preserved through script choice, repeated names, and symbols aimed primarily at fellow sailors (Strauch, 2012). |
| **Maritime Risk and Devotional Orientation** | Devotion emphasised continuity, merit, and welfare within a relatively controlled port environment (Sidebotham, 2011; Cobb, 2018). | Devotion oriented toward protection, safe passage, and thanksgiving amid maritime risk and uncertainty (Strauch, 2012). |

Read together, the comparison suggests that religiosity among Indian merchants was not a fixed cultural export carried unchanged from the subcontinent, but a situational practice calibrated to context. At Berenike, permanence and imperial regulation enabled durable, collective, and visibly inscribed devotion embedded within existing built sacred space, where merchants could invest in lasting dedications precisely because they, or their community, expected to remain and be seen. At Socotra, transience and the absence of institutional infrastructure produced a more individualised, mobile religiosity centred on natural features invested with sacred meaning through repeated ritual visitation rather than architectural investment. Despite these differences, both sites converge on similar underlying concerns: protection, prosperity, and safe voyage, expressed through the deliberate transformation of available space — whether a temple courtyard or a cave interior — into a site of ritual significance. In both cases, religious practice also performed a social function beyond the purely devotional, marking out a recognisable community identity to fellow travellers who might follow the same route in later sailing seasons.

## Conclusion

Evidence from Berenike and Socotra shows that Indian merchants maintained and adapted religious practice well beyond the subcontinent, and that this religiosity was integral to mercantile life rather than incidental to it, embedded in travel, trade, and survival at sea. Context shaped the expression of devotion: Berenike's status as a permanent, institutional port produced formalised worship within temple space, while Socotra's role as a liminal stopover generated informal, mobile rituals centred on natural settings. Despite these differences, both sites reveal shared sacred spaces and a devotion consistently aimed at protection, prosperity, and safe voyages. Indian Ocean trade routes, this study argues, functioned as religious as well as economic corridors, and the evidence assembled here highlights the continuing need to study mercantile religiosity beyond the Indian mainland.

## Notes

1. The Periplus Maris Erythraei is an anonymous first-century CE Greek sailing manual describing ports, sailing times, and commodities across the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean; alongside archaeology and inscriptions, it forms one of the principal sources for reconstructing this trade network.
2. Hydreumata were Roman fortified watering stations built along the desert roads linking Red Sea ports such as Berenike to the Nile Valley, essential to sustaining traffic across the arid Eastern Desert.
3. Kṣatriya denotes a member of the traditional Indian warrior or ruling social class; its use in the Berenike inscription signals the donor's

self-identification within an Indic social framework even while resident abroad.

4. The proposed link between Sikotar Mata, a folk maritime goddess venerated along the Gujarati coast, and the island of Socotra has been noted in the broader literature on Indian Ocean maritime tradition (Strauch, 2012) and in ethnographic accounts of the island (Naumkin, 1993), though it remains a matter of popular tradition rather than established archaeological fact.

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