

# A PEEP INTO MAPPILA DIASPORA IN MALABAR

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The Muslims of Malabar, who were generally known as the Mappilas, are “the oldest Islamic community in the South Asian subcontinent.”<sup>1</sup> As a distinct religious and cultural entity, Mappilas originated with the spread of Islam in Kerala through Arab Traders. There is no record of any conflict between different communities before the arrival of the Portuguese.<sup>2</sup> Today, the Mappilas are consisted of both the descendents of the Arabs through local women and converts from the local people.

Malabar had been one major centre for foreign trade in India right from the ancient time. Trade communities from all over the world were attracted to Kerala due to its geographic position, commercial traditions and the great abundance of spices and foreign goods. The Arabs had trade contact with Indian Ocean for long years before the emergence of Islam. Soon after the fall the Roman Empire, the Arabs entered and became leaders of the commercial space of oceanic trade. From then onwards till the sixteenth century the Arabs maintained their authority over the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> This phase experienced continues exchange not just of commodities but ideas, values, language and Culture.

There is no unanimous opinion among historians about the origin of Islam in Kerala. The most popular belief is that Islam came to Kerala during the time of the Prophet. On the basis of the narration from *Keralolpathi* and many other sources, historians have tried to link the spread of Islam in Kerala with the conversion of King Cheraman Perumal. Al Thabri in his famous *Firdousul Hikma* (9<sup>th</sup> century) noticed that a king from Malabar met the Prophet and lived with him for 17 days. <sup>4</sup> Another group of historians argue that Islam reached Kerala during the time of Pious Caliphate or the Ummayyad Caliphate.<sup>5</sup> The Arabic signatures in Tarissappally copper plates (CE 849) swear for the presence of Arabs in Kollam during 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Many Muslim travelers and traders refer to Malabar in their travelogues. Sulaiman, Abu Sayyed, Masoodi and Abul Fida in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and Al Idreesi, Dimishqi, Qazneeni and Ibn Bathutha between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries provides various aspects of Kerala society and geography. It can be concluded that Kerala had a full-fledged Islamic community by fourteenth-century. Revisiting the existing studies and unearthed sources, researchers reiterate that Islam was there from the time of Prophet in Kerala.<sup>7</sup>

The tradition of Malik Ibu Dinar is considered as the first missionary activity in the spread of Islam in Kerala.<sup>8</sup> The trade relationship between Arab and Malabar was so cohesive before the rise of Islam. Due to the patronage and hospitality from the rulers as well as from the native communities, the spiritual enlightenment of

Islam, the charismatic life of the early Muslim leaders paved the way for spread of Islam in the Malabar coast. The innate ideology and philosophy put forward by Islam was the basic cause to attract the mass to believe in oneness of god and equality between human being. Socio-political situations, particularly the cast ridden social structure and the freedom and equality provided by Islam attracted the mass. Conversion to Islam may become a way to liberation from the rigid cast system prevailed in the society. The brotherhood, justice, equality and the spirituality attracted the low casts like Thiyya, Paraya, Pulaya communities to Islam. The strong missionary work done by Sufi saints and Islamic scholars helped to reach Islam to the nook and corner of the Malabar coast.

The support from the native people as well as the rulers to the Muslim traders and preachers fastened this process.<sup>9</sup> CA Innes noted that Zamorins of Calicut, in a significant move, ordered that in every family of fishermen (*Mukkuvans*) in his dominion one or more of the male members should be brought up as Muhammadan.<sup>10</sup> It has been observed that “the Arabs not only made Calicut the greatest port on the west coast of India, they even helped to spread the name and fame of the Zamorin to Europe.”<sup>11</sup> The *Muat'a* marriage<sup>12</sup> was another important factor that helped the growth of Muslim population in Malabar.<sup>13</sup> In the north, establishment of *Arakkal Swarupam* and rise of Ali Raja helped the progress of Muslim growth.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of Vasco de Gama in 1498 is considered as a turning point and beginning of a new epoch of the history of Malabar. The European period may be conveniently divided into Portuguese (1498-1663), Dutch (1663-1793), and English. The French appeared on the scene in 1725, but played only a marginal role in the history of Malabar. The conquest of the region by Haider Ali in AD 1763 and his son Tipu Sultan of Mysore was the most important episode in the history of Malabar. The caste system, superstitions and social evils, customs like polyandry, etc were the main features of the Kerala society when the Mysoriean arrived here. Tipu Sulthan tried to eliminate such evil practices and put forward many political and social reforms in Malabar.<sup>15</sup>

Hyder Ali and Tipu strived to eliminate the ‘feudal’ character of Malabar society by implementing land reforms and changing the tax system. Many roads, bridges, forts and towns were constructed under their rule. During their period Malabar came under a centralized administrative system. As per the treaties of Sreerangapatanam signed by Tipu Sultan, the Mysore king, Malabar was amalgamated to the British in 18<sup>th</sup> March 1792.<sup>16</sup> Malabar was detached from Bombay Presidency and it became a district of Madrass Presidency in 21<sup>st</sup> May 1800.<sup>17</sup> British Malabar covered an area of 6002 square miles and it included five Municipalities and ten Taluks which were sub-divided in to 432 villages. Cannanore, Tellichery, Calicut, Palghat, and Cochin were the five Municipal towns of Malabar.<sup>18</sup> Laccadives Islands also came under the administrative boundary of Malabar province.<sup>19</sup> In 1793 Malabar was equally divided into two separate divisions, North and South Malabar. The administration was entrusted to two Civil Servants of the Company. Calicut became the center of the whole province of Malabar.<sup>20</sup>

The British government took the first Census report of Madrass presidency in 1871. In 1871, 91% of the whole Mohammedan population of Madras presidency was in Malabar Province. According to the 1871 district Census Report the *Mappila* community was energetic, independent, of whom 96% were Sunnis.<sup>21</sup> It was in the same year, as a solution to what they termed "*the Mappila problem*", the British decided to impart modern

education to the *Mappilas* and inducements in the form of small salaries and grants for each successful student that would be given to religious teachers (*Mullas*) to encourage the provision of elementary instruction in Malayalam along with religious training in the mosques were provided.

The census reports and British writers divided the Mappila Muslims of Malabar into different cast groups. According to Edwaed B. Eastwick, Muhamadens in Madras presidency can be divided into eight different groups *viz* 1. Labbays. 2. Mapilahs. 3. Arabs. 4. Shaikhs. 5. Saiyids. 6. Pathans. 7. Mughals. 8. Other Muhammadans.<sup>22</sup> The Mappilas are originally of Arab extraction. 95 per cent of them are Sunnis and the remaining were Shia Muslims. The Arabs number 2,121, the Shaikhs 511,112, the Sayids 89,219, the Pathans 70,943, the Mughuls 12,407".<sup>23</sup>

The census report helped to get the exact figures of the Mappila population of Malabar. The census reports introduced in India by the British was not only to enumerate the demographic structure but was instrumental in creating categories and fixing them to some imaginary boundaries that people themselves felt as real in course of time. Adding to the theory of 'imagined communities' of Benedict Anderson<sup>24</sup>, Abdul Razak argues that, identities were multiple and not fixed during the pre-colonial phase. The census reports became instrumental in igniting community sentiments.<sup>25</sup> It is observed that the process of enumerating people according to caste and religion played as a tool to generate a community consciousness among the people in the colonies.

Malabar Muslims continuously fought against colonial powers for centuries since 1498. They produced many anti-imperialist literatures and created an anti colonial consciousness among the indigenous people. The revolt of 1921 was a culmination of these revolts. In the incessant war against the colonial powers, they have lost thousands of members and abundance of wealth. Moreover, as a consequence of long wars, the community was pulled down to backwardness both socially and economically.

The Mappilas are distinct in many ways but connected to the world Islamic societies from the early days of its origin. They have grown out of the trends, ethos and traits within the complex Kerala society. Unlike their counterparts from other states in India, the Muslim community in Kerala has mingled with the other communities and has not shown much difference in life style, dress code, language, etc. Muslims of Kerala accepted and retained the local cultural religious traditions with a distinguishable character. They had a separate cultural identity, but not alien or not necessarily distinguishable in public. They remained part of the wider cultural complex with their own peculiarity and expanded character.

The Kerala Muslims developed and followed a syncretic culture. Though *Mappilas* acknowledge basic ideology of Islam, the Islam that they practiced up to the early quarter of 20th century was heavily underlined by elements which were accretions from the local environment of Malabar as well as Yemen.<sup>26</sup> A chronicle in Hadramouth (Yemen) of 17th century AD says, the people of Malabar were of great courage and zeal for Islam even though they have few scholars among them and no more of Islam than the merest name of it<sup>27</sup> The reformist organizations criticized this 'Islam' which is away from the 'textual Islam'. The debate between the 'orthodox' and the 'reformers' were mainly concentrated on the critique of the 'Syncretic Islam' and the 'Textual Islam'.

The status of Kerala Muslims is comparatively better off than their brothers in rest of India. They have attained some noticeable achievements in the fields of education, economy and politics in Kerala society. However, nobody can underestimate these achievements since it is a community which was subjected to the colonial oppression for centuries. Kerala Muslims are generally strict observers of religion. At present 98 percent of Kerala Muslims are the followers of Shafi's school of Sunni thought. There are many groups and organizations among them. The most important fragmentations among the Muslim organizations are Samastha Kerala Jamiyathul Ulama, Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen, Jamath e Islami and Thableegue Jamath. Various *Sufi* sects also have roots among Kerala Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Many *sufi Kankhas* were there in various part of the region. Ahmadiya Jamath is another minority group<sup>29</sup>. Nowadays all these organizations have been working among the community to promote modern and religious education, development of the community, social and humanitarian activities, etc.

Many of these organizations were faced splits and divisions. The traditional Sunni organization, Samastha Kerala Jamiyathul Ulama (found in 1926 by noted religious leaders like Varakkal Mullakoya Thangal and Pangil Ahmed Kutty Musliyar) faced a split in early 1980s into two groups and now called as EK Sunni (The group organized under the leadership of EK Aboobacker Musliyar) and AP Sunni (The group organized under AP Aboobacker Musliyar). In 2002, Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen also split into two fractions, one led by AP Abdul Kadar Moulavi and the other led by Dr. Hussain Madavoor. Each organizations have its own mazjids, madrassa, youth and students wings, publications and other propaganda mechanisms. These both rejoined to one organization in December 2016. There are many small groups, organizations and fractions among Kerala Muslims. *Dakshina Kerala Jamiyathul Ulema* is another organization working in and around South Kerala.

Most of the organizations have their youth, students and women's wings. Some of them like Solidarity Youth Movement of Jamath e Islami has got important space among the main stream public arena due to their continuous involvements in social issues. Muslim youth organizations like Solidarity Youth Movement, Youth League, ISM, SYS, etc involves in social issues as well as conducting programs and humanitarian activities beyond religion and cast. Student's organizations like SIO and SDPI participates in campus elections and achieve remarkable positions in various college unions. MSM, SSF, SKSSF, were the other major student's organizations among the Muslims of Kerala.

Apart from these organizations, there are many charitable trusts and welfare associations, which are working for the benevolence of Muslim community and their progress and prosperity. These are Muslim Educational Society (M.E.S.), Muslim Service Society (M.S.S.), Kerala Muslim Educational Association (K.M.E.A.). Muslim Souhrida Vedi, a unity of all Muslim religious, political and welfare organizations, tries to unite the various organizations in common issues.

The community has a good participation in the main stream politics of the state. Muslim League has considerable presence in Malabar. It is the part of United Democratic Alliance in Kerala, and has been sharing power since the establishment of a united Kerala in 1956. CH. Muhammad Koya became the only ever Muslim chief minister of Kerala in 1979. Muslim League has student organization called MSF and youth wing called Muslim Youth League. The Women's league and *Haritha*, The girls organization were the organs exclusively for women's.

Apart from Muslim League, there were many other secular political organizations in Kerala led by Muslims. Socialist Democratic Party of India (SDPI), Welfare Party of India, Indian National League, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) are the major political parties led or controlled by Muslims. These all parties have non-Muslim leaders and workers but the major chunk of its workers belongs to Muslim community. These parties are actively participates in general elections and gain seats in local self government institutions. Muslims have memberships in mainstream secular political parties like National Congress, CPIM, CPI, etc. In short, the members of this community constitute a significant group in main stream politics of the state.

The sizeable presence of the community in the ownership of media organizations is also a matter to be considered. There are many leading daily news papers run by religious and political organizations of Mappilas. These are 'Chandrika', 'Madhyamam', 'Suprabhatham', 'Siraj' and 'Varthamanam'. Besides, there are different types of periodicals run by various groups and individuals. Each organizations run their own periodicals as their mouthpiece to publish their ideologies. Prabodhanam, Shabab, Sunni Voice, Sunni Afgar, 'Al-Manar', Prabodhanam', 'Al Islah', 'Sunni Afkar', 'Thelicham', 'Bodhanam', Vichindanam, etc are some of them. Apart from this, the community organizations and its supporting groups and individuals run independent periodicals to discuss public issues and create consciousness among the community as well as the whole public. 'Madhyamam Weekly', 'Satyadhara', 'Risala', 'Thejas', 'Thulika', 'Keralanadu' were the examples for this category.

Muslim organizations are very active in print and social media and run many Malayalam periodicals for women including 'Aramam', 'Poonkavanam', 'Pudava', 'Santushta Kudumbam', 'Mahila Chandrika' etc. There are some magazines for children too, such as 'Malarvadi', 'Balachandrika', 'Kurunnukal' and 'Balakauthukam'. The community organizations have started few TV channels also. The leading television channel 'MedeaOne' was officially launched in 2013 by Madhyamam Broadcasting Limited. It tries to develop an alternative media culture based on moral values. 'Dharshana' is another TV Channel launched in 2012.

Almost all organizations have their own publication wing as well as well organized websites and digital networks. Individuals and organizations get involved in public issues and put up creative activities through social media. All organizations have well organized websites and social media partnerships though official pages and groups. [www.islamonline.in](http://www.islamonline.in) is a very popular website developed as a center of resources in Malayalam on regarding Muslim issues worldwide.

- <sup>1</sup> Stephen Federic Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922 Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, Caarendon Press, Oxford, 1980. p 1
- <sup>2</sup> K M Bahaudhin, *Kerala Muslims; The Long Struggle*, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992. p 26
- <sup>3</sup> CK Kareem, *Keralathinteyum Kerala Muslingaludeyum Charithram*,., Edapally, 1997, pp. 91-92
- <sup>4</sup> A P. Ibrahim Kunju, 'Origin and spread of Islam in Kerala in Kerala Muslims- A Historical Perspective' in Asghar Ali Engineer (ed.), *Kerala Muslims; A Historical Perspective*, Ajanta Book House, New Delhi , 1995. P. 20
- <sup>5</sup> Tarachand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, [The Indian Press, Allahabad](http://www.theindianpress.com), 1936, ebook accessed from <https://archive.org/details/influenceofislam035070mbp>
- <sup>6</sup> Tarissappally *Tamra Saasana* was issued during the reign of the Chera emperor Sthanu Ravi (AD 844-855) by the Venad chieftain Ayyanadikal in AD 849.
- <sup>7</sup> See, Abdulla Anjillath, Maatti Ezhuthanam Charitram; Islam Ivideyund, Ezham Noottandil Thanne (Islam is here in Kerala during 7<sup>th</sup> century CE), *Samakalika Malayalam*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015, pp 39-50 Sakeer Hussain, 'Cheraman Perumalum Kesari A Ramakrishnapillayude Nireekshanangalum', Dr. Jameel Ahmed (ed.), Kerala Muslim Charitra Conference Prabanda Samaharam, Kerala Muslim Heritage Foundation, Kozhikode, 2015
- <sup>8</sup> Kunju Ibrahim A P. *op.cit.*, Asghar Ali Engineer(ed.), Ajanta Book House, New Delhi ,1995. p. 214
- <sup>9</sup> Sheik Zainudheen Makhdam, *Thuhfathul Mujahideen*, translated by AP Muhammadali Musliyar, genius books, Kozhikode, 2006
- <sup>10</sup> C.A. Innes., *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar and Anjengo*, P. 190
- <sup>11</sup> K.V. Krishna Ayyar., *Zamorins*, P. 52. Quoted by Roland Miller, *Op ct*, P. 55.
- <sup>12</sup> *Muth'a* marriage is a type of temporary contract marriage and generally considered as non Islamic by Muslims.
- <sup>13</sup> Koya S.M. Mohammad, *The Mappilas of Malabar: Studies in Social and Cultural History*, Sandhya Publications, Calicut, 1983, pp.17-18
- <sup>14</sup> Arakkal kingdom is the only Muslim dynasty existed in Kerala.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Janaki., *Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, Kerala Muslims a Historical perspective*, edited by Asghar Ali Engineer, P. 105.
- <sup>16</sup> Roland E Miller., *Op ct*, P. 13
- <sup>17</sup> William Logan, *Collection of Treaties Etc., Relating To British In Malabar*, Govt. Press, Madras, 1889 (1879)
- <sup>18</sup> Madras Presidency Census Report- 1871, Govt. Press, Madras, 1872
- <sup>19</sup> Madras Presidency Census Report- 1871, p. 2.
- <sup>20</sup> British Administrative Report of Malabar District, 1805, p. 5
- <sup>21</sup> Census reports of madras presidency and Malabar province from 1871, Govt. of press, Madras, p. 356
- <sup>22</sup> The Labbays are the offspring of Arabs and Persians and the women of the country. They number 312,085, and are found mostly in Madura, Tinneveli, Trichinapalli and Tanjur, and are fishermen, boatmen, sailors and traders.
- <sup>23</sup> Edwaed B. Eastwick, *Handbook of The Madras Presidency. With A Notice of the Overland Route to India*, London,(1859) 1879, p.72
- <sup>24</sup> See, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communitie : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso. 1991.
- <sup>25</sup> P.P. Abdul Razak, Census Modality and the Making of Muslim Community of Malabar, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress 2008*, 69<sup>th</sup> Session, Kolkata, 2009, p. 771
- <sup>26</sup> See, K. Moidu Moulavi, *Ormakurippukal* (Mal.), IPH, Kozhikode, 1992.
- <sup>27</sup> R.B. Serjeant, *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast*, Beiroot, Librainedu Libnan, 2nd edn. 1974, p.117. quoted in PP Abdul Razak, 2007, p. 18
- <sup>28</sup> These *Sufi Tahreeqath* groups were mainly linked with the *Noorisha thareeqa* of Hyderabad and *Dasookiya thareeqa* of Egypt.
- <sup>29</sup> Ahmadiya jama'ath (Qadiyani) was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1901 at Qadiyan, Punjab. Its followers have become an exclusively independent community characterized by its own doctrinal pluralities. In 1974, after an exhaustive examination of all the evidence presented for and against the Qadianis, the Muslim World League (*Rabita Alame Islami*) -which represents the religious scholars from different parts of the world - passed a unanimous resolution declaring the Qadiani Movement and its leadership is out of the fold of Islam.