



A Political Life Sketch of Umer Qazi of Veliyamcode: An Unexplored Poet and Freedom Fighter in Malabar

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Abstract: This article delves into the life and contributions of Umer Qazi of Veliyamcode, a prominent religious scholar, poet, and social reformer in Malabar during the 19th century. Drawing parallels with historical figures like Imam Ghazzali and Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi, Umer Qazi's mission was to uplift the Mappila community from British oppression and moral degradation. Through social criticism, satire, and fearless opposition to colonial rule, he played a pivotal role in advocating for justice and equality. His defiance against unjust taxation and imprisonment exemplifies his unwavering commitment to the principles of social justice and religious integrity.

Key words: Umer Qazi, Veliyamcode, Dars, Malabar, Freedom fighter, Religio-political activism, Colonialism, Mappila uprising, Makhdum, Mampuram, Kondotty, Ponnani Kaitharkkam, Extempore poems, Prophetic hymn, Sufi inclination, Islamic knowledge, social criticism, British imperialism.

The great freedom fighter and blessed poet, Hazrath Umer Qazi was born to Ali Musliyar - Amina couple on Hijrah 10th Rabiul Awwal 1177 (A.E 1765). His original name is Qaziarakath, Kakkatharayil Umer. His father was a religious scholar. Umer Qazi had four sisters and one brother. His brother Kutty Hasan was also a religious scholar. His sisters were Fathima, Thithikutty, Ummachakutty and Ayishakutty. He was born in Veliyamcode,¹ a historical place near Ponnani in present Malappuram District in Kerala.

Early Education

The early education of Umer Qazi started with his father. He attained from him Quran recitation and primary lessons of Islam. Thereafter, he left for Tanur, Valiyakulangara Juma Masjid where he received further education under Thunnanveetil Ahamed Musliar. He had studied Alfiya ibn Malik from him. At the age of seven, his mother passed away. Then Umer Qazi grew up in the custody of his father; At the age of eleven, his father too passed away. The demises of his parents did not fact his pursuit of knowledge. He continued at Tanur Dars (religions seminary) ² up to thirteen years of age. His childhood was very creative and fantastic like William Blake (1782-1827) the renowned English poet and Sir Muhammed Iqbal (1877-1938). At this stage, he used to inscribe poems on mosque walls and books. He had also made additions to the poetical works in tune with their recitation by his teacher in the classroom. That was one of his childhood frolics. He also paid visits to his parent's grave and prayed for them. Abubaker Koya alias Avukoya Musliar, a favourite disciple of Sayed Alavi of Mampuram (d.1844-45) was a classmate of his at Tanur. The period of early education at Tanur was an important phase in his life. He had caressed those nostalgic memories up to his death. He always reiterated that it was Tanur who made him Umer Qazi. He used to visit Tanur and its populace to express his deep gratitude.

Higher Studies

At the age of Thirteen, he joined Ponnani Dars for higher studies. At that time the academic glory of Ponnani reached a position of 'little Makkah of Malabar'. The renowned Scholar Qazi Muhammed ibn Sufikutty alias Mammikutty Qazi was the 'chief makhdum' of Ponnani at that time. From him, Umer Qazi learned important texts like *Tafsir Jalalaini*, *Fathhul Mueen*, *Mahalli*, *Thuhfa*, *Minhajul Abideen*, *Sharah Hikam* and *Ihya Ulumuddin*. He spent six years under him. After completing his studies in Ponnani, he goes to Ijaziah (scholastic permission) to teach Veliyamcode. Thus, he became chief tutor and judge (Qazi) of Veliyamcode. Other neighboring places also proclaimed him as the Qazi. Since then, he has to popularly known as Umer Qazi.

Inclination to Sufism

Hazrath Umer Qazi was inclined to Sufism during his studies at Ponnani. His teacher Mammikutty Qazi was the grandmaster of the Qadiriya Sufi order in those days. There is well-known story about his initiation to Sufism. He expressed his desire to join Qadiriya order to his teacher many times. But he kept silent. One night

while Makhdum was got in home after closing Dars, Umer escorted him. Reaching home, makhdum get in and closed the door. He instructed Umer to remain in the courtyard and he stood there the whole night. The next day, morning makhdum came out to offer *fajr* prayer and saw his waiting disciple. It impressed him and thereafter he took *biath* (swear of allegiance). After the demise of his mentor Mammi Kutty Qazi, he maintained a spiritual relationship with Syed Alavi of Mampuram (d. 1844-45). There was another story connected with their historical meeting. Once Umer Qazi went to Mampuram to clarify a doubt on Islamic law with Syed Alavi. At one point in time, he doubted the spirituality of Syed Alavi Thangal. It is said that as a result, he forgot what he learned. Thereafter, Umer Qazi realized that Syed Alavi was the *Quthub-uz Zaman* (the axle of the era) and he was a divine scholar. He apologized for misunderstanding the great saint. Syed Alavi bestowed the mantle of the Qadiriya Order to Umer Qazi and taught him the secrets of the spiritual domain. In this way, Tangal became a guiding light to Umer Qazi in his later life.

Teaching and disciples

Umer Qazi launched his teaching at the grand mosque of Ponnani. He served as Qazi (Judge) and mudarris (Teacher) there from 1802 to 1803. After a year he shifted his teaching to Veliyamcode where he continued till 1821(A.H1237). During this long period of service, his name and fame spread out in Malabar. In 1822 (A.H 1238) he shifted his career to Tanur Valiyakulangara Juma Masjid where he continued until 1841(A.H 1257). The two decades of teaching and preaching of Umer Qazi elevated Tanur into an intellectual hub. The withdrawal of Umer Qazi from the Dars at Ponnani grand masjid weakened the academics of Ponnani Dars. It is therefore, people over there requested him for his immediate return. Thus, in 1841 he came back to Ponnani and taught there until 1849. Finally, he shifted his teaching to Veliyamcode and continued there until his last breath in 1856 (A.H 1273). Umer Qazi left many erudite scholars who molded the Islamic upliftment and spiritual revival of the Mappila community in the later period. Parappanangadi Avukoya Musliar (d.1875) Shaikh Zainuddin Akhir (d. 1887), Kasargod Saeed Musliar (d. 1872), Payyoli Fariduddin Ibn Muhiyuddin alias Farid Musliar (d.1883), Vadekkekad Shaikh Zainuddin Musliar (d.1891), Ponnani Kammukutty Musliar(d.1860), Ponnani Cheriya Bava Musliar (d.1908), Mattathur Madathil Avaran alias Abdurahman Musliar (d.1894), Tirurangadi Qazi Zainuddin Musliar (d.1882), Kuttipuram Odakkal Kunhahamed Musliar (d.1897), Ottakath Mammad Kutty Musliar (d.1871), Manjeri Pattarkulam Erikunnan Kunhamed Musliar (d.

1873) and Tanur Qazi Valiya Muhammed Musliar (d. 1904) are the Prominent disciples of him. Umer Qazi of Veliyamcode maintained a very strong intellectual friendship with contemporary Muslim scholars both locally and abroad. For this, he had extensively travelled and corresponded through letters. During his pilgrimage, he contacted many scholars.

Works

Hazrath Qazi Umer composed some books on different subjects. All these works are written in Arabic. He had a good mastery of the Arabic language. Most of his works have irrecoverably been lost. A large number of poems, letters, and Fatwas, composed by him have been missing for a long. The lost composition by him is four times as big as the available ones. The surviving works are 1. *Qasidat al Umariyah or Swallal Ilah Bait* (poem) 2. *Nafaisudurar*/the precious gems (poem) 3. *Lahal Hilal /Crescent emerged* (poem)³ *Lamma Dahar/* When appeared (poem). *Allafal Aasi/A convicted* composed (poem). *Tarajimul Muharramat/Explanation on forbidden* (Treatise) *Kitab al Swaidh wal Isthiyad/* Text on slaughtering and hunting (treatise). *Maqasid al Nikah/*Objectives of Marriage (Poem). Besides these, he composed many instant couplets on different topics like religion, medical advice, and historical incidents which reflects the depth of his poetical imagination.

Religio- Political Activism of Qazi Umer Qazi

Hazrath Qazi Umer was a prominent Islamic Scholar and ardent rebel of Malabar in the 19th Century. He has exposed his caliber equally in religious and political fields. The very important challenge before him was saving the Mappila community from the catastrophe imposed upon them by the British Raj. As a religious scholar, he was also committed to lifting the Muslims from their moral degradation and perversion. Qazi Umer successfully did his mission likewise the pious pioneers did in earlier history, we can compare his historical life with those great people like Imam Abu Hamid al Ghazzali (A.E 1058-1111), Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi (1564-1624), Allama Ibn Taymiyah (A.E 1263-1328), Al Ghazzali, a prominent scholar and reformer of the 5th century Hijra, corrected the way of misguided Ulemas, corrupted political regimes and ascetic Sufis and restored upon the real position of Islam. He also openly criticized the violation of the human rights of the ruled by the ruling class. So also, Allama Ibn Taimiyah effectively resisted pseudo-criticism raised by crusaders against Islam. It is also noteworthy that Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi fearlessly opposed the heretical trends of the period of Akbar and

restored the pristine purity of Islam. Qazi Umer of Veliyamcode was inspired by them and applied their social vision to his mission.⁴

Social Criticism

As a social reformer, he exposed many social malpractices prevalent in the period. For this, he used both his pen and tongue. He also used his short extempore poem as a sharp weapon against social decadence. Qazi Umer was a poet-philosopher who imbibed the satire and humour of Kunhayin Musliar, a legend of the 18th century in Malabar. The sense of humour and satire is the very soul of Umer Qazi's poetics satire is generally considered to be an invincible tool for social criticism in all epochs. There was a legion of satirists in the 19th century in Europe. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), and Samuel Butler (1835-1902) are a few among them. Qazi Umer did the same social reform and criticism through sarcastic satire as these giants did. Elitism and vainglory prevailed among upper-class Muslims during those days. It might have emerged due to the influence of higher caste Hindus who had absorbed such aristocratism in those days. He rebuked such aristocratic pretensions of the Muslim upper class in Malabar as follows:

“O, the aristocratic pretenders!

Browse your roots-

You are nothing but progeny of

Nair, Thiyya, Ashari, Mushari

Paraya, Chetti, Nayadi....”⁵

The above lines stressed the egalitarian ethos of Islam by which he advocates that it is the deed of man that counts and not the nobility of birth. As a Qazi (Judge), he fearlessly criticized social injustice and faults. He resolved many family quarrels and property disputes. As an Arbiter, he was very impartial and honest. He respected work and the working class. He mocked those who were very lazy in their work and took refuge in mosques. He exhorted his people to seek God not in mosques but in the toiling fields. He openly and seriously warned those who were idle in social and religious duties and indulged in immoral activities. Nobody dared to be lazy in offering namaz in his Mohalla. He arbitrated the disputes of all peoples irrespective of their caste and creed. His veridictions were respected and accepted by all. As a Sufi, he was an embodiment of noble ideals like piety, party, righteousness, and magnanimity. He distributed all the gifts presented to him among

the poor and needy and thus preached the lessons of generosity and empathy that Islam preached. A large number of non-Muslims embraced Islam due to his guidance. Against the British imperialism.

As a leading religious figure and brave fighter, Qazi Umer played direct and indirect roles in the instigation of the Mappila uprising in the 19th Century. On this path, his spiritual guide was Syed Alavi of Mampuram (1163/1750-1259/1844). Both of them provided similar direction to the resistance to British Colonialism. There are some similarities, seeing in their mindsets and political activities. Therefore, a narration without referring to them would be incomplete. Sayed Alavi of Mampuram was born at Tarim in Hadramaut in Yemen in 1753 (1163 A.H). His lineage starts from Hazrath Fathima, daughter of the prophet Muhammed (Pbuh). This clan is known as 'Baalawi.' It is generally believed, that this originates from Alavi Ibn Ubaidullah who lived in a Village in Hadhramaut in 4th Century A.H. The progeny of him migrated to western Africa, Java, Sumatra, and India for the propagation of Islam. Muhammed Ibn Muhammed (573-675/1178-1255) an eminent Baa Alawi Sufi was a prominent figure in South Arabia in the 13th century who was considered to be the founder of this Tariqah. Syed Alavi thangal arrived in Malabar in Ramazan 19, 1181/ February 7, 1768, to join his maternal uncles Syed Hasan Jifri (1720-1764-65) and Syed Shaikh Jifri (1726-1808) Syed Jifri was settled in Calicut in the middle of the 18th Century. The Zamorin of Calicut provided him with accommodation. Shaikh Jifri's cousin Hasan Jifri (1720- 1764) came after him and settled in Mamburam. These two Tangals engaged in missionary activities and kept aloof from political ones. Syed Alavi married Fatimah, the daughter of his uncle, Hasan Jifri, and settled down in the Maliyekkal (Tarammal) house at Mamburam. After Fatimah's death, he married another woman, also named Fathima who was the daughter of Kovilkandy Ambakantakath Abubakar Madani of Quilandi. Syed Fazl was the son of his second wife. These two Tangals, Syed Alavi and his son Syed Fazl engaged in political activities along with religious duties, and thus Mamburam tangals became very popular in the Mappila history. During this period, Qazi Umer developed a good relationship with Sayed Alavi Thangal and took *bay'ath* (Swear allegiance) from him. The attributes of Syed Alavi were transmitted to Qazi Umer through this spiritual bonding. The quest for freedom, Vigour for fighting, literary skills, zeal for religious propagation, and social activism are the noble values seen in both luminaries. Analyzing the role and personality of Mamburam Tangal and Qazi Umer of Veliamcode, K.M Bahavuddin (1929-2011), a noted scholar observes "Both of them were widely believed to have been endowed with divine powers. Each had a huge following and

was highly respected by Muslims and Hindus alike. It was also believed that they would perform miracles and cure diseases. They used to arbitrate in quarrels between people. Who need therefore not go to British Courts.” During Nineteenth Century South Malabar witnessed a series of Peasant uprisings. Between 1836 and 1921, fifty-two peasant outbreaks were happened in Malabar. The outbreaks were called by the British government as ‘Moplah outrages.’ Agrarian discontent was the main cause for these revolts. In the traditional Malabar land system, most of the lands were occupied by Hindu *Jenmis* the peasants were mostly from Mappilas. They have been subjected to many financial burdens like high rent, heavy tax, eviction by the landlords (*Kudiyirakkal*), reassertion of land by the company, etc. Mappila peasants raised their voices against these hazards. Syed Alavi Tangal and Qazi Umer provided a coherent political ideology to these rebels. Both leaders exposed the reality of landlordism and colonialism. They have also made awareness among the Dalits to resist the Brahmanical Supremacist mentality. Both leaders exhorted the Mappilas to wage war against the landlords and colonial states. For this Syed Alavi Tangal issued religious decrees (*Fatwa*) titled *Assaiful Bathar* (The Sharp sword). The book is structured as a reply of Tangal to eight questions raised by Abdullah Ibn Abdul Bari Ahdul Tangal of Quilandy. Most of the questions are on the attitude and policy of Muslims towards the colonial rule. He advocated that to fight against the British rule till the end. Copies of the fatwa were secretly circulated in *Mohallas* of Malabar. Qazi Umer prepared the copies of this fatwa by his hand and circulated them in his *Mohallas*. The British tried their best to destroy its copies. Qazi strongly criticized the British atrocities and unleashed anti-Muslim stand of landlord-British conspiracy. He also explained in his sermons how the peasants were burdened with heavy taxes and evicted from their land. In this way, the activities of Qazi Umer and Syed Alavi Tangal became a great headache for the British Government. Mr. T.L. Strange, a Judge of Sardar Adalath, was appointed by the British Government on 17 February 1852 to submit a report on the outrages. He found that the Tangals of Mamburam and his disciples were sworn enemies of the British. Qazi Umer of Veliyamcode was an important figure among them.⁶

Refusal of Tax and arrest

As a foresighted political activist, Qazi Umer brought a new tool of agitation; Which was a denial of tax to the British Government. When the British officials approached him to collect tax, he vehemently opposed them and the officials had to go back due to his strong reaction. He had two reasons for this denial:

1. The British are usurpers to whom the native people are not obligated to pay tax.
2. The British are the oppressors and Indians are the oppressed. The oppressed are not liable to pay taxes to the oppressors.

Mr. C. Saidalikutty (1856-1919), the founder of Swalahul Ikhwan, an Arabic-Malayalam journal, has vividly narrated further happenings related to the issue. The *Adhikari* or *Menavan* (Local Revenue Officer) sent a petition to the British revenue office (*Thukdi* or Sub Collector) of Chavakkad to take action. The content of the petition is as follows: “The report humbly submitted by Metheri Shankara Menon, the resident and village revenue officer of Veliyamcode Amsom Desom to Hon. Sub Collector, Chavakkad:

1. Umer Musliar, 48, son of Kakkatharayil Ali Musliar, Veliyamcode Amsom Desom is a prominent religious scholar and Mappila leader of the locality.
2. He has unequivocally informed the revenue authorities that he was not liable to pay tax on his immovable properties. He scolded the officers who approached him at his residence and openly criticized His Majesty’s Government.
3. We apprehend that a forceful extraction of tax from him would trigger a riot by the Mappila community in the locality.
4. Therefore we humbly pray for an appropriate order in the above matter”⁷

The report infuriated the sub-collector who ordered to arrest of the Qazi. The Head constable of Chavakkad was arrested immediately. On the way to Chavakkad, he offered namaz at Veliyamcode and Kodancheri mosques. He travelled in Palanquin given by a rich family of the locality and was escorted by a large crowd of people. Reached at Chavakkad, he persuaded the people to go back and appeared before the Magistrate. Then Magistrate ordered him to pay tax. But he refused. Then both of them have undergone very emotional debate. The magistrate disgraced him with abusive words. Hearing this, Qazi replied on the same coin by calling him a fool (*Bathul*). It is also said that Qazi even spit at the magistrate's face. This infuriated the magistrate who ordered to detain him in Chavakkad Jail. Subsequently, he was jailed for a few days. It is said that the Qazi miraculously came out of the Jail and seated himself in the Kodancheri Juma Masjid engaging in meditation.

The news was brought to authorities and the district collector ordered to arrest and bring him to Calicut. When the police informed him of his arrest, he declared to go to Calicut to meet the Collector. On the next morning, he reached the Court of Collector, Mecklin, a big crowd of all communities also reached Calicut. The collector attempted to make him regret insulting the Sub Collector and nonpayment of tax. But he was not availed. He was arrested on 18 December 1819 and sent to Kozhikode Jail. He persuaded his people not to create any violation. Qazi Umer spent his days in jail fully immersed in prayers and poetic composition. He composed a poetic letter and sent it to Sayyid Alavi Thangal. The beautiful Arabic poem depicts the attitude of the British towards the Mappila scholars who indulged in Anti-colonial struggles in those days. The poet explains the circumstances that led to his imprisonment: "I have been imprisoned by *Tukdi* (Dy. Collector) based on false accusation charged against me that I have abused Mr. Neebu. I have not practiced anything wrong. Yet this cruel man imprisoned me deliberately ascribing certain crimes." Reading this letter Sayyid Alavi Thangal appealed to the collector to release his close disciple, Qazi Umer. Accordingly, the collector released him after consulting the Qazi of Calicut. Umer Qazi went to Mamburam and sought the blessings of his spiritual master. He continued his untiring anti-colonial struggles till his death.⁸

Against the Kondotty Faction

Qazi actively resisted heresy and spiritual exploitation. He expressed his juristical opinion on *Kondotty-Ponnani Kaitharkkam*, a burning controversy in the 19th century in Malabar. 'Kai' technically means faction and 'Tharkkam' means controversy. The crux of the dispute is Sunni-Shia differences related to certain religious practices. The Malabar Muslims were Sunnis and they have generally followed the Shafie School of Islamic jurisprudence and Asharite and Maturite thought beliefs. The Thangals who settled in Kondotty in the 18th century brought some strange practices and ceremonies that rocked some controversies among the religious scholars of Malabar. The controversy is known as '*Kondotty-Ponnani Kaitharkkam*.' From the first half of the 18th century onwards, the common Muslims of Kondotty were under the influence of Kondotty Thangals. Mohammed Shah (1687- 1717-18) was the founder of this sect. He was a native of Kardan near Bombay and completed spiritual training under Karam Ali, who was a Shiite and Qadiri Sufi master. After the death of his master, he had underwent many Sufi experiences and extensively travelled in the state and abroad. He visited Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Hijaz in the Middle East. During this journey, he performed Hajj. This is saying

that in Palestine he had a dream in which the prophet Muhammed (pbuh) advised him to go to Malabar. Thus, he landed in Kochi. Travelling overland he reached Palakkad, Mulliakurssi near Perinthalmanna and Areacode where he had undergone deep meditation. Finally, he reached at Kondotty in 1717-18. Since then, his fame as a Sufi spread, and the number of his disciples (Murid) increased. Subsequently, Mysorian ruler Tippu Sultan (1750- 1799) made him Inamdar. When the British took over Malabar in 1792, they also approved the same position on the condition that he would be loyal to the crown. Mohamed Shah died in 1180/1766 and was buried in the tomb near his hospice.⁹

After the death of Mohammed Shah his son Aftabh Shah left as his successor. He was followed by Isthiyaq Shah. At the time of the above Sufis in Kondotty, many non-Islamic practices were introduced such as prostration to Shaikh, *Chandanakudam* (Sandal Pot), Kissing the foot of Shaikh (Qadamposi), Pulikkali (Men dressed like tigers), Cock fight, etc. All these practices were opposed by traditional scholars of the region who issued Fatwa (religious decree). Several judicial cases were filed by both parties against each other in the court. Ponnani Ulema issued boycott on the Kondotty faction. Umer Qazi unleashed the un-Islamic practices of the Kondotty faction with his tongue and pen. He composed his Fatwa in a beautiful poem. This poem comprises 24 stanzas which relied upon the famous books, *Thuhfa* by Ibn Hajar Al Haythami (A.H. 909-974) and *Rawdath Al Talibin* by Imam Nawawi (A.H. 631-676). The Qazi illustrated that prostration before the Shaikh is forbidden and those who support it are heretics. Qazi says: “prostration before any creation of God is forbidden by Islam. By doing so he has become an unbeliever. It is also a serious sin. His stand was very creative and scholastic which brought clear awareness among the people. As an Islamic Jurist, Qazi issued some other Fatwas on various problems concerned with property disputes, marital issues inheritance, etc. All these efforts of him settled the issue amicably later. His works like *Maqasid Al Nikah*, *usul Dhahab*, etc. have provided solutions to problems that arise in day-to-day life of Muslims. Demise and descendants Umer Qazi contracted three marriages from Tanur, Maranchery, and Eramangalam. All these marriages had borne no fruits. He was so compassionate and very pious man. Always immersed in the thoughts of death and the other world. He feared no power except Allah. Even before falling ill, he arranged a burial for himself at the grounds of Juma masjid, Veliamcode. There is a story widely spoken about his death. One week before his demise, he inquired the attending family doctor about the time when he could take a full bath. After checking his pulse, the doctor

replied that he could have a bath on the coming Friday as he wished. Umer Qazi congratulated the doctor for his medical accuracy and gifted him with his walking stick. Qazi's appreciation made the doctor and his family very prosperous. As per the doctor's prediction, Umer Qazi breathed his last the next Friday. It was on 21st Ramzan in 1273 A.H/15th March 1857.¹⁰

Reference

¹ Veliyamcode is a coastal village located four kilometers away from Ponnai Harbor. This hamlet has very historical significance and it is situated near Ponnani, an important place in the history of Islam in Kerala.

² A mosque connected Arabic-Quran school used in the older Mappila traditions for training religious scholars.

³ Biography and works of Umer Qazi, p.37.

⁴ Dr. P Sakkeer Hussain, Umar Qadi of Veliyamcode; The poet and Patriot, IPB Books Kozhikode, 2019, p. 18.

⁵ Biography and works of Umar Qadi of Veliamkode, Veliamkode Mahallu Jammayathu committee, 2012, p. 13.

⁶ Prof. K.M Bahavuddin, Kerala Muslim History: A Revisit, Other Books, Kozhikode, 2012, p. 33.

⁷ Swalahul Ikhwan, Ed. Saidalikutty Master.

⁸ K.K Muhammed Abdul Kareem, C.N Ahmed Moulavi, Mahathaya Mappila Sahithya Parambaryam Glorious Mappila Heritage, Kozhikode, 1979, p. 78.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dr. P Sakkeer Hussain, Umar Qadi of Veliyamcode; The poet and Patriot, op.cit., p. 40.