

The Emergence of Identity Politics among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala - A Revisit

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Abstract: *The Muslims of North Kerala, generally known as the Mappilas had an important role in the history of Kerala. They rendered valuable services in the struggle against the Foreign power like Portuguese and the British..They remained as the loyal subjects of the Hindu rulers like the Zamorin and the Kolathiri. Later, when the Indian national congress took the leadership of Indian freedom movement, they whole heartedly lined up under its banner. But the Malabar rebellion of 1921 changed their political outlook and they began to move towards an identity politics, that is towards Muslim League. This paper is a study in this regard.*

Key Words: *Mappila- Identity politics- Islam-Mappila Outbreaks- Khilafath Movement- Malabar rebellion- Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangam-Islahi- Kerala Muslim Majlis-The Jamiyathul Ikhwan- Samastha Kerala Jamiyathul Ulema- Muslim League*

Introduction.

Since the introduction of Islam, the Muslims of Malabar, generally known as the Mappilas, played an important role in the social sphere of Kerala. Under the native rulers they enjoyed highly privileged positions. The Mappilas rendered valuable services against in the anti imperialist struggle of native rulers. The name of Kunjali Marakkars, admirals of the Zamorin were most remarkable one in this regard. In the struggle against the British colonialism also, the Muslims had their own role. It was due to the effort of Congress leaders that the Muslims were brought into the forefront of mainstream politics. When the Congress put forward the proposal of Khilafat - non co-operation movement, the Mappila community stood under the banner of Congress. The movement soon got a character of a rebellion which later became known as the Malabar rebellion, which was a landmark in the history of Mappila Muslims. The rebellion changed the political perspectives of the Mappila community.

The rebellion had a far reaching effect upon the community. Before the rebellion the Mappilas were kept away from nationalistic movements due to many reasons, especially due to the suppressive measures of the British. The British policies directly or indirectly affected the Mappilas in many ways. The heavy burden of Taxation and unexpected eviction from land compelled them to respond. Hence the Mappilas before the rebellion of 1921 organized a series of outrages in different parts of Malabar. Thus, in between 1836-1919 Kerala, especially Malabar witnessed 32 such outbreaks. The British opened brutal suppressive measures upon the community. The net result was the political alienation of the Mappila community. It was through the khilafath- non- cooperation movement that the Mappilas began to participate actively in the national movement. Before that the Mappila had generally taken little interest in the nationalist struggle. It was Gandhi who brought the attention of Congress on the Khilafath issue. He considered it as an opportunity to unite the Hindus and Muslims against the British. The Mappilas positively responded to the call of Gandhi on Khilafath issue as it was their religious concern.

The nationalist leaders succeeded in mobilizing the Mappila community towards national movement. Thus a large section of Mappila community, who were once kept away from nationalistic uprisings, became the active members of Indian national congress and volunteers of Khilafath movement. The visit of nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Shoukat Ali gave a strong motivation to the Mappilas.

The majority participants of non cooperation movement were the Mappilas, whereas the Hindu participation was very poor. (**Madhavan Nair, Malabar Kalapam pp 65-66**). The khilfath movement becomes a major factor which attracted the Mappila community to the non co-operation movement. The Mappilas found it as a means to solve their basic problems such as tenet security, the problems between landlords and peasants etc.,(The history of freedom movement in Kerala p 296 Vol.III S Raimon, S.RAMACHANDRAN NAIR, B.SOBHANAN, k. JOHN) . The Socio- economic condition of the Mappilas, their resentment against the British administrative policies like divide and rule, revenue exploitations and above all the khilafath issue constituted as the chief cause of the outbreak of the rebellion of 1921. Unfortunately, their expectations failed miserably. The unwanted attack of British police officers against the Mappilas forced them to take arms against the British force and gradually the movement turned into the nature of a riot. It was the Indian National Congress that drew the Muslims, especially the Mappila community into mainstream politics. But during the course of the revolt the Congress withdrew from the scene and the Mappilas fell into isolation.

The Mappila community who was brought up with the legendary stories of their predecessors like Kunjali Marakkars and Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan, who fought against the foreign aggressions and persecution of landlords. These predecessors became their motivation role models. The principle of nonviolence was completely unfamiliar to them. When their women folk were harassed and properties were confiscated, they have no other means but to fight with arms. The leaders of Indian national congress thrown the Mappilas in front of the British force and withdrew from the scene. It was the responsibility of Congress to protect the Mappilas as it was the main force which brought the Mappila Community against the British. This betrayal constituted as a major factor, which prompted the Muslims to make a political re-thinking.

Emergence of Communitarian politics

The Indian national congress used the Khilafath issue as a political weapon through which they ensured the Mappila participation in the freedom struggle . (**Emergence of Islam in Kerala in 20th century p 20**).The Mappilas responded positively to their call and wholeheartedly participated in the movements. They formed Khilafath committees all over Malabar. Meetings were convened and led processions as per the instruction of the Congress. But when the Muslims fell in trouble no one was there to make an voice for the cause of Mappilas. Hence the Mappilas considered the attitudes of Congress during the course of the rebellion as betrayal. When the Mappilas were suffering from the brutality of British force the congress leaders stayed outside the riot region by preaching non violence. (M.P.S. Menon **.Malabar Struggle, (Mal) p-11**)

The bitter treatment from the part of Congress and British authorities changed their political perspectives . As a result , most of the Mappilas began to make a move from secular politics to communal politics. After the rebellion an insecure feeling occurred among the Mappilas which changed their political thinking and outlook. The bitter experience which they had to face in the last stage of the rebellion caused for a rethinking. The people lost their faith in Congress. Nationalist Muslim leaders like Muhammad Abdurrahman Sahib and E. Moidu Maulavi tried their best to pacify the Mappilas and to make a balance between Mappilas and Congress but no avail. It was in this extreme communalistic polarization that the Muslim League as a political party was introduced in Malabar. The socio-political situation of post rebellion was so suitable for the growth of communal politics. It was the time when the Muslims of Kerala began to think a new political organization to represent their grievances and demands. Even though the Muslim league was founded in 1906 it could not make any root in Kerala until 1937. (**EMS., Keralam Malayalikalude Mathirbhumi (Mal.) P. 316**). A number of factors constituted for the emergence of communal politics among Mappila Muslims . The attitude of Congress, the developments of Muslim organizations, the role of Hindu organizations like Arya samajam and Hindu Maha Sabha etc., paved the way for the development of communitarian politics among the Mappila community.

The attitude of congress in post rebellious period

The approach of Indian National Congress after the rebellion constituted a major factor for the emergence of Muslim League. The leaders of Indian national congress thrown the Mappilas in front of the British force and withdrew from the scene. It was the responsibility of Congress to protect the Mappilas as it was the main force which brought the Mappila Community against the British. But when they fell in trouble nothing was done by the Congress for the safety of the Muslims of Malabar. The Congress leaders failed to give any support to them.

The Police created a terror atmosphere in South Malabar and brutally suppressed the Mappilas as a whole even though the majority of them were not involved in the rebellion. Nobody was there to raise a voice for the Mappilas. Without any leaders and organizations the Mappilas fell into isolation. Even though Muslim leaders like Muhammad Abdurrahman Sahib and E. Moidu Maulavi stood against the policies of Congress ,the people never accepted them and considered them also as traitors.

The post rebellious attitude of the Congress was not in favor of the Mappilas. After the rebellion the Indian National Congress became a land lord dominated party which creates much resentment among the Mappilas. The British force opened terror upon the Mappila community as a whole irrespective of their gender and age. The Mappila womenfolk suffered a lot from the hands of the police than suffered by Hindu ladies at the hands of the rebels (**Madhavan Nair , Malabar Kalapam, p. 266**).The relief activities organized under the Congress had a communal line. Major portions of relief fund were distributed among the Hindus.(**K.N PANIKKAR,AGAINST LORD AND THE STATE P 189**). Further the moves of Congress be towards the communal organizations like Hindu Maha Sabha and Arya Samaj, which was clearly visible in the later phase also caused for a re- thinking. . The interference of Gandhiji also indirectly changed the political attitude of the Mappilas. It was a great shock to them when he vehemently opposed the participation of Muslim leaders in Vaikom Satyagraha by labelling it as a Hindu issue alone. (Collected Works of Gandhi,Vo.27,p.427).The participation of Congress leaders in the Hindu conference held at Thirunavaya also added fuel to fire and created suspicion in Mappila mind. The nationalist leader Muhammad Abdurrahman severely criticized the attitudes of Congress leaders in many situations. Gradually there emerged a split among the Congress leaders as right wing congress leaders called Chalapuram gang and another as left wing concentrated at Ameen lodge(EMS, Keralam Malayalikalude Mathurbhumi, p.316). Subsequently Mappilas felt doubt in the attitude of Congress and began to consider it as a pro -Hindu party . Some Congress leaders doesn't hesitate to keep away the Mappilas from their surroundings. When the Mappilas were not permitted to visit the residence of Hindu congress leaders like Kesava Menon and Madhavan Nair these houses became a meeting place of other Hindu congress leaders. These factors also caused for the for alienation of Mappila community from Congress .

The conflict between the national leaders of Kerala for leadership, the dispute between Mathirbhumi and Al Ameen journal, the Nair dominancy of Chalappuram Congress etc., had a great role in the emergence of community politics among the Mappilas (**Ibid P 317**). It was proved by the later developments which showed the anti Muslim policies of the right wing Congress leaders. As mentioned above Gandhi was responsible for the introduction of Khilafath movement in India as a part of Indian nationalism . But there was an irony that the same Gandhi severely criticized of Muhammed Abdhurrahman Sahib when he participated in the Vaikom Satyagraha by labeling it as a matter of Hindu Community alone. When in 1931 the name of Muhammad Abdurrahman Sahib was proposed for the chairmanship of Calicut Municipality some congress leaders opposed the proposal by branding him as a fanatic and even remarked that the Municipal office would filled with Mappilas if he was elected as the chairman the (**S.K. Pottakkat, et. al,Muhammed Abdurrahman Sahib P 256**).The chairmanship was denied to him on the ground of inexperience. Meanwhile Kelappan was selected for that post even though he also had no previous experiences. The subsequent elections reveals the segregation policies of the right wing Congressman ,the ' Chalappuram Gang, through the distribution of pamphlet against the nationalist leader like Muhammed Abdhurrahman Sahib. Gradually the congress fell in the clutches of Hindu landlords and the Hindu communal organizations like Shindu Maha Sabha for a small extend. . Naturally the Mappila community changed their attitude and shift their support from secular politics and slowly drifted to communal politics. Thus the failure of Congress to fulfill the need of Mappilas in the post rebellious period directly or indirectly constituted as a major factor behind the emergence of communal politics among the community. (**S. Raimon et.al,The history of freedom movement in Kerala**) .The activities of Hindu organizations like Hindu Maha Sabha and Arya Samaj also played an important role in the development of identity politics among the Mappilas.

The development of Muslim organizations

A number of Muslim organizations emerged after the rebellion of 1921. These organizations also played an important role in the development of community politics among the Muslims especially of Mappilas. The Nishpaksha Sangam founded in 1922 for settling the problems of two prominent families at Kodungallore later developed as the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangam. This organization played an important role in the socio-political mobilization of the Muslim community. It had a great role in the growth of communal politics among the Mappilas. During its annual sessions convened from 1922 to 1933 they succeeded in the creation of an identity politics among the community. Nationalist Muslim leaders like Muhammad Abdurrahman and E. Moidu Maulavi were against the separatist tendencies of the Sangam. But leaders like Seethi Shib stood strong for a separate political platform for the Muslim community to represent their grievances. (M. Abdul Aziz, Rise of Muslims in Kerala politics, 24). As a result the Kerala Muslim Majlis was formed in 1931 for the progress of the community. Gradually the efforts of these Mappila leaders found fruitful. The community began to respond towards the leader's call. The religious organizations like Samastha Kerala Jamiyathul Ulema also played an important role in the development of community politics. The development of community politics was visible during the later period. The election campaign of Abdul Sattar Sait was led by the Samastha leader Pangil Ahammed Kutti Muslaiyar and in the election Muhammed Abdurrahman Sahib, the great nationalist leader was defeated by Abdul Satar Sit, a League minded person. The Ulema also motivated the people to change their political outlook.

Conclusion

The post rebellious period and the subsequent developments revolt gave a fertilized soil for of Muslim organizations Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangam, The Jamiathul Ikhwan Sangam, Kerala Muslim Majlis etc. These organizations played an important role in the development of identity politics among Kerala Muslims, especially among Mappila Muslims of Malabar. In this situation, that a group of Congress minded youth under the leadership of Abdul Satar Sait, K Uppi Sahib, B Pokker Sahib and Seethi Sahib joined Muslim League in Malabar 1937. The bitter experience which they had faced in the post rebellious period created a new tendency of alienation from secular politics. The Muslim league began to act as the mouthpiece of Malabar Muslims and worked for the benefit of the community. Soon they gained the support of the Muslim mass and became a strong political party. The elections took place in the later period proved their strength. Thus the Malabar rebellion, the attitude of Congress and the development of Muslim organizations played a substantial role in the development of identity politics and its crystallization in the form of Muslim League.

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