

Culture Setting of Mappila Muslims in the 17th and 18th Century.

Anilkumar. K

Assistant Professor of Islamic History, University College, Thiruvananthapuram.

The Mappilas are either the descendants of the Arab traders or of Hindu converts to Islam. The Arab trade with Malabar dates from as early as the fourth century A.D; right from the decline of the Roman Empire. The Arabs came to dominate the Indian Ocean. Malabar became the chief center of their trading activities and by the seventh century, several Arabs had taken permanent residence in some of its ports. The earliest Islamic influences came to Malabar through the Arabs almost immediately after the faith was founded, before the end of the seventh century¹. However, the earliest inscriptional evidence for the presence of Muslims in Kerala dates back to the mid-ninth century with Tarisappalli copper plates, in which, details relating to a grant given to Syrian Christians by Sthanu Ravi Varma, the king of Quillon, were recorded. This grant was witnessed by Jews and Muslims². Between the ninth and sixteenth centuries, several Muslim settlements developed around important trading ports, particularly Cannanore and Panthalayani Kollam [Quilandy]; and Calicut had considerable Muslim population during this period. Ibin Batutta, the fourteenth century traveller found Muslim settlements in several ports of Kerala. Durate Barbosa who lived in Malabar between 1500 and 1516 observed that the Muslims were so rooted in the soil throughout Malabar and they were the fifth part of its people, spread over all its kingdom and provinces.³ Half a century later, Sheik Zein-uddin, author of the Tuhfat-ul-Mujahidin, placed the Mappila population at ten percent of the total⁴. However, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Mappila population became predominantly rural. In the absence of a detailed demographic data, it is difficult to map out the actual process of this shift. Increase in conversion, particularly from the lower caste, is a possible explanation. More important, however, was the European dominance in trade during the post 1500 period and consequent decline in the fortunes of the Mappilas. Earlier, they had been participants and collaborators in Arab trade, a large number of them being engaged in procurement of goods, transportation and other incidental jobs.

The confusing political situation in south India offered an alluring opportunity to any ambitious chieftain to fight for the crown of the south. The two large kingdoms in this part of the country, the Carnatic and Mysore, were in political confusion and financial decay. Hyder Ali Khan captured supreme power in Mysore in 1761 A.D. Hyder was thinking of a two-pronged attack for the conquest of the South: one, by way of Carnatic country and the other along the Malabar Coast. Hyder Ali and his son Tipu pursued the policy of expansion vigorously. The conquest of the Malabar kingdoms was not an isolated event. The possession of the West Coast assumed a two-fold importance to Mysore. Firstly, the ports of the West Coast were indispensable for the contact with the European nations for import of ammunitions of war. Secondly, the passion or subjugation of the West Coast would enable Mysore to attack the Carnatic from two fronts.

William Logan has given, a clear picture regarding the poverty, agricultural setback and social conflict in Malabar. He intends to reveal how the tenancy system in Malabar created conflict in the local level. Malabar Tenancy Report shows that 70% of food grain cultivated land belonged to Eranad, Valluvanad, Palaghat and Ponnantaluku. Around 66% of the land revenue was derived from the paddy cultivated in the wet land and 33% revenue from the plantations⁵. Major share of the wet land was occupied by the Mappila Muslim community of Malabar right from the time of Mysorean rule. Under the British rule, the Mappila Muslims of

the above mentioned taluks were forced to pay huge amount as land tax. Increasing land tax in addition to the Mappila population created pressure among the Mappila tenants. At this critical juncture, the land lords were competing with each other to exploit the tenant maximum. They believed that it was their right to get maximum tenure from the land they owned. Tenants of Malabar were compelled to give the whole production from the land as tenure, for, they had no right over the land they cultivated. Local tenants were evacuated from the land to change the tenancy agreement from one person to another. The land lord and the mediatory got financial benefit with this change. They could fix higher rate of tenure to the new cultivator. One of the major reasons behind this injustice was the higher rate of land tax imposed on the land lord by the government.

The Mappila Muslim farmers were struggling hard with deteriorated economic system. The hardworking Mappilas were unable to maintain their wives and children with their limited income from the land. The land lords and their mediatory were collecting maximum levy from them and evacuated them from the land by force. The Mappila tenants agitated against the land lords. This caused series of agrarian revolts in Malabar.

It was Tipu Sultan, who introduced land tax in Malabar on the basis of yielding. Tipu made land settlement with the real cultivator, that is, Kanamkkar. Due to the direct land revenue settlement between Tipu Sultan and the cultivators,, it adversely affected the 'Naduvazhis' and 'Desavazhis' (local rulers). They worked as intermediaries between the jenmis and cultivators. The land revenue settlement remained up to 1900 A.D., until the British reversed the land revenue settlement with the jenmis.

Land tax remained as a major source of income to the government for a long time. Cochin State introduced tax on land in 937 M.E. to meet the expenditure incurred on the confiscation of property belonging to the disobedient chieftains who engaged conspiracy with the Zamorien. Further enhancement of land tax was made at Cochin to meet the military expenditure of Hyder Ali, who demanded 4 lakh rupees as tribute. When Tipu Sultan demanded huge amount as tribute from Cochin, the state imposed tax upon the Christians on their 'Kanam land'. But their personal land property was exempted from tax. The decision came into existence as a government order on 10th October 1785 A.D. Janmam lands were exempted from taxation, for, the land lords were a very affluent group at Cochin. The hike in land tax foiled the Latin Christians of Cochin who enjoyed several privileges. They turned against the King and supported the Dutch when they came to Cochin. When the power of the King increased, the tax burden on Christians also increased. Janmam land was totally exempted from any kind of tax as it was occupied by the Brahmins. Janmam right was mandatory for the Brahmins. The 'Nair Chieftains' were obliged to pay limited amount as tax for the land they owned. Nairs were the custodians of all janmam land. Cultivation of the land was entrusted to the peasantry. The peasantry consisted of the tenants and the slaves (agricultural labours). They were struggling hard to support the requirements of the upper layer of the feudal society along with their own lives. Rigid caste rules were the basis of land centric social groups. A Nair never worked for a person below his caste higherachy even if he was in utter poverty. It was the matter of his prestige. If he did so, the Nair would be exempted from his community.

Geographical features of Malabar

The history of Malabar was largely affected by various powers and peoples in the past. It was the center of commercial activities and it remains a connecting link between people particularly in the Middle East and India. The studies of Shaik Sainudeen, Duarte Barbosa, and Col. Wilksetc. give a vivid account of Malabar, which is an ancient name for the entire Malayalam territory stretching from Gokarnam to Cape Comerin. This area, which covered the northern part of Kerala, became the administrative district of Malabar. It extends from north to south along the coast over a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles, and lies between north latitude 10°15' and 12°18' and east longitude 75°14' and 76°56'. The Western Ghats separates the

region on the east from Coorg, Mysore Coimbatore Madura, Ramnad and Thirunelveli⁷. The Indian Ocean bounds the region on the south and Arabian Sea on the west.

The rivers which flow westward from the Ghats to the Arabian Sea make the land fertile. Most of them are navigable by small boats. The rivers are backed up by littoral currents and discharge into a line of backwaters and lagoons parallel to the coast. The slow flowing rivers, such as Chalakkudy River and Periyar, make navigation safe and convenient. Besides these main rivers, there are many small streams and brooks, all of which form a network intersecting the continuity of the land, but connecting the backwaters.

The early history of Kerala is steeped in mystery as there are no reliable, complete and consistent records. There are different versions of legends explaining the origin of the land. According to 'Kerala Mahatmyam', Parasurama, the axe bearing incarnation of Vishnu, who vanquished the Kshatriyas twenty one times, at Viswamitra's suggestion, made over all the land within the four seas to the sages. The Brahmins, it is said, turned him out of the land; but with the help of Subrahmanya he obtained, by penance form of God of the seas, Varuna the grant of some land to dwell on, the extent of land being determined by axe throw. The land covered up to Gokarna was called Parasurama's land. Another version describes⁸ the flooding of Kapila's abodes by the river Ganga, which submerged Gokarnam. At the entreaties of Parasurama, Varuna accepted a retreat. Parasurama cast an axe which fell at Cape Camorin whereon sea receded.

An indication to certain geological conditions of the past provided by the legends seems to be plausible⁹. The reclamation of the land referred to may imply that the oceans once extended up to the Western Ghats and the land came into existence as a result of either their sudden upheaval or a gradual recession of the water.

According to 'Keralolpathy', Kerala is known as 'Karmabhumi', which means the land where salvation depended entirely on good actions¹⁰. It is also called 'Bhargavakshetra' or 'Parasuramakshetra', the holy land of Parasurama. 'Keralolpathy' also calls the land by the name of Kerala. The name of Kerala appears to have been known from early times. But the earliest name seems to be Sera¹¹ (Chera), which subsequently came to be changed to Kerala.

Malabar stretches from the northern landmark of Gokarnam to Cape Comorin¹². Malabar is a combination of Mali, derived from the first syllable of Malayalam, which the Arabs had generally applied to Quilon, and, by extension, to the whole area and the Persian word 'bar' which means country. The meaning 'hill country' is therefore synonymous with the meaning of Malayalam, but probably fortuitously so. Malabar was frequently confused with 'Malabar'. The latter meaning 'crossing over waters' refers to the eastern side of south India. That part of India below the Chandragiri river, the Khasaragod taluk, up to Cape Comorin may be said to form the region where Malayalam language is spoken.

The topography of the land presents three well defined parts, such as hills, plains and sea-coast. The Western Ghats form a continuous mountain barrier of 3,000 to 8,000 feet high at varying distance of 20 to 60 miles from the sea coast. The mountain range rises to 5,000 feet near Coorg and Wayanad and 6,000 feet on the north of Nilgiris¹³. The physiography of this coastal strip separated it from the rest of the Indian peninsula, minimizing social and political intercourse with the areas on the leeward side of the Western Ghats. The Western Ghats while impeding communications with the Tamil areas to the east and Mysore to the north-east also provided Malabar with a distinctive climatic regime characterized by heavy and fairly regular rainfall. The Malabar Coast was dissected by numerous small seasonal rivers which originated in the Ghats and flowed into the Arabian Sea. In an age when communication was tenuous, maintaining regular links across any substantial

expanse of this region was nearly impossible. During the torrential rains of the long monsoon months, maritime communication came to a virtual halt and overland links became difficult.

The hills west of Coimbatore are inhabited by Malasir, Mudugar and Eriligaru. The last category cultivates with the plough, and pay rent for their fields .¹⁴ Besides plantains, they have for sale, honey and wild ginger, which is the same species that they cultivated. They pay no rent immediately to the government; but are compelled to sell their commodities to a man, who pays an annual duty for this exclusive trade. He may give what price he pleases for their commodities. Those who want timber or bamboos hire the hill people to cut them.

From an economic point of view, Malabar remains almost stagnant, and it has been classified as a backward area by the Government. Agriculture, dependent on the vagaries of the monsoon winds, is the backbone of the economy. Marine and timber products and the import export trade also boost up the economy. What was written forty years ago might well be retreated today with only minor qualifications? Manufacturers are still scanty and one might almost write today as the joint commissioners did in 1793; of its manufactures unless vegetable oil and coir fall under that denominations there are hardly any others” the current industrial development of the state has taken place to the south of Malabar.

As Malabar became part of Kerala state in 1956, its situation altered and the people of Malabar became united and involved with their Malayali fellows in Travancore Cochin. The old Malabar district was divided into three smaller districts, Kozhikode, Cannanore and Palghat. In 1969 a fourth district- Malappuram was carved out of these three. Modern Malabar consisted of seven districts. Three more districts were annexed to the old Malabar; they were Thrisur, Vayanadu and Kasaragod.

Early History of Malabar

Some of the more remarkable of vegetable and animal productions of the Malabar Coast were known to western nations from the Pre- Christian era, and have been the objects of maritime enterprises and commerce through all the succeeding centuries.

Perhaps as early as the time of Moses the great Jewish law-giver, this commerce existed, for cinnamon and cassia played a part in the temple services of the Jews. At any rate, the commerce existed in the time of King Solomon (B.C.1000), for the Bible narrative records that silver “was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon” - everything was of gold ¹⁵. For the king had a navy of Tharshish with the navy of Hiram; once in three years came the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold and silver, ivory, and apes and peacocks” With the exceptions perhaps of silver, these are an production of the Malabar coast, and the biblical name for the peacock “tuki” is evidently the “Tam.mal.tokei” the bird of the tail.

Commercial Activities of Malabar

Malabar was the most important state with which the Arb engaged in trade from very ancient time. King Solomon (King of Babiloniya) obtained gold from “Ophir”.The “Opher of the King Solomans’ time was none other than modern Beypore, an important port of Malabar.¹⁶ The Old Testament is the oldest book which gives us information about their trade contact with India in the past. But it may well be pointed out that Beypore lies at the mouth of the river of the same name, which still brings gold from the auriferous quartz region of South-East Wayanad, in the mines of which were well worked in pre-historic times, that Tundis, a village situated near the sea. It lies close to Beypore now called Eranad .

Owing to its geographical situation, Malabar had engaged trade with the outside world in the past. There are those who daringly identified Beypore, a decaying port about six miles from Calicut railway station, with the ‘Ophir’ from which kind Solomon obtained his gold. It was the Arab merchant who monopolized the

trade between Europe and Malabar. As Arabia is surrounded by sea on three sides, they naturally engaged in sea-borne trade from the very beginning of international trade. As India faces Arabia, the Arabs could easily establish trade relations with India from time immemorial.

The history of the commercial relations between Malabar and other foreign nations is perhaps the history of pepper trade. For, Malabar was the only region known to have supplied pepper to the whole world until about the 18th century. Dr.M.S.M.Rao remarked that there is some reason for supposing that pepper was the spice more demand in Babylon and Persian Gulf generally, and that the most active demand for it came with the extension of the Persian empire under Danuis¹⁷ Romans had extensive trade with India during the period of Nero and we have the first instance of commodities exchanged through the medium of currency. Roman coins have been found all over the region. The importance of Roman commerce was so great that local money was replaced to a large extent by the Roman currency.

Merchants from Manzi and from Arabia also came with their ships and merchandise and earned great profits. But Arabs settled here and monopolized the trade, and by the time Ibn-Batuta visited the country, majority of the Mohammedan merchants were very wealthy. Barbosa observed that the moors held key position in sea trade and navigation. In the city of Calicut he found more trade was being carried on by foreigners than by the natives of the land. Besides Moors, there were Persians, 'Huzaratees' and others. As the trade of the country was very large, there was great scope for many foreigners to engage themselves in it. Kings welcomed them as they paid heavy duties on their trade.

With the advent of the Portuguese, the trade of Malabar not only intensified but also widened. More and more commodities figured as articles of trade. The Portuguese created a world market for coir and coconut. The new cape route discovered by them increased the extent of Malabar trade. The Portuguese too introduced European coins in their transactions. The Dutch followed the Portuguese and perpetuated Malabar's commercial relations with the western countries. They brought many kinds of merchandise and exchanged them for cash. The British appeared on the scene after the monopoly of the Dutch and the Portuguese had declined. The chief exporting item from the country was pepper. It was the romance of pepper creating history in the commercial life of the country. It is clear that the natives of the country passive participants in the whole game of the sea- borne trade. The division of the country into a small number of petty principalities at the end of the reign of Perumals acted as a hindrance to smooth internal trade.

Three salient points can be discerned from the reports of joint commission from Bengal and Bombay on the province of Malabar during 1792-93.¹⁸ One of the severest restraints upon commercial, agricultural and manufacturing industry was the great number of inland chowkies and tolls and duties. The toll tariffs were arbitrary and usually a merchant was forced out of his direct road, to make a detour of many miles till he had run the gauntlet through almost every custom house of the province. Padmanabha Menon observes that in the middle of 19th century the tax on the backwaters was a great setback to the transportation of grain.

Secondly, there were different values of coins. A merchant was at the mercy of shroffs or rich men who used to fix an ideal value on every coin according to the wants of the man who applied for it. Indigenous coins as the medium of exchange were in existence for a long time but the currency differed. Vincenzo Maria who visited the coast in 1657 observed that coining was confined to four states of Cannanore, Calicut, Cochin and Travancore. A bewildering variety of weights and measures was another point that should be noted along with currency.

The last and perhaps the most striking among the conditions of inland trade of the past was the system of transport and communication between the interior parts of the country and the sea coast. The construction of good roads and introduction of wheeled traffic instead of the general mode of transporting goods by bullocks and coolies brought about much change. The only system of transport prevalent was the

one provided by rivers, canals and backwaters. Post and telegraph do not go back earlier than the latter half of the 19th century. The two states of Travancore and Cochin had their own 'anchal' system. Till 1860 the 'anchal' was maintained exclusively for the service of the state in Travancore¹⁹. Later hundi or money order system and telegraph were introduced.

After having noted the conditions of inland trade and the history of sea-borne trade, the question that confronts us is whether there was any indigenous caste or community associated with the function of trade. In the four fold division of the caste system, Visyas followed the occupation of commerce and agriculture. While this caste or corresponding indigenous caste, Komati or Chetti is found on the eastern coast of south India, it becomes more conspicuous by its absence in Kerala. There are inferences to Chettis and Konkans fulfilling the functions of trade besides Mappilas, the large trading community of the region. It is obvious that the occupations connected with commerce were not strictly canalized but were open to the people who pursued them to earn their living.

Buchanan notes how the Muslim traders bound the producers to a contract and earned profit. They advanced money to the growers who were in need, thus controlling the market. The cultivator refusing to pay the quantity had to pay, for the deficiency at the market price. The same thing can be said of other wholesale dealers as well. Stephen Dale pointed out that Arab merchants were the first Muslim settlers in Malabar in large numbers, and the other mercantile groups from Mediterranean world and China came to Malabar for the spice trade.²⁰

Many scholars believed that Malabar had close contact with the Arab world before Prophet Muhammad. Many Muslim travellers had visited India before the Prophet. An Arab traveller Ibn Battuta depicted a whole series of substantial Muslim settlements of south Canara in 1342. He was particularly impressed with commercial activities of the Muslim merchants in Calicut. In the early sixteen century, the Mappilas were settled throughout Malabar, but it is obvious from Barbosa's account that the majority of both the Mappilas and foreign Muslims lived in the area between the Kotta River and Cochin, the territories of the Zamorins of Calicut. The Mappilas and other Muslim merchants had originally been attracted to this area because the Zamorins had established an effectively administered free port at Calicut, where in exchange for the payment of a modest fixed tariff, they were guaranteed the security of their goods as well as granted religious freedom and judicial autonomy.

The Arab traders were really a connecting link between Europe and India. It would be appropriate in this connection to consider the role of Arabs or Moors, as they were called by the Portuguese, in building up the edifice of the commercial prosperity and political power of Calicut under the Zamorins and in propagating the religion of Islam in Kozhikode district and other parts of Kerala. The Arabs started their trade with the Kerala coast long before Islam as a religion came to have a foothold in this country. When the Zamorin built up Calicut he gave special concessions to the Arabs to settle down in his new town and carry on trade in an atmosphere of freedom and security.

The Arabs enjoyed the monopoly of export and import trade of Calicut. They also gave complete freedom to propagate their faith in the land. For these reasons, they patronized the port of Calicut in preference to all other ports and developed it into a great emporium of trade in the west coast of India. The Arabs who popularised Indian products in the European markets.

The Mappila Culture

Historians are not unanimous about the origin of the word 'Mappila'. It was a common term for the Christians in the middle Kerala, and this usage continues to some extent to the present. At an earlier period. Muslims and Christian Mappilas were differentiated as Jonaka and Nasrani Mappilas respectively; but in recent

times, the term has tended more and more to be used as an exclusive name for the Kerala Muslims. The Kerala Muslims of Malabar traditionally trace their origins to the ninth century, when Arab traders brought Islam to the west coast of India. Another argument is that the name 'Mappila' is honorific and such terms usually have been applied by the natives of Kerala to respect and welcome visitors and immigrants from abroad.²¹ The term 'Mappila' has different meanings in various parts of Kerala. It is significant that in north Malabar, the husband of all the younger women of the 'tarawad' house in which they live are considered bridegrooms and they continue to be treated as such for a considerable time. It was a common custom practiced among the Nairs and Nambudiris in Kerala. The implication of this derivation is that the term 'Mappila' was applied as a descriptive honorific to foreigners who were married to indigenous families.

Various derivations have been suggested for the term 'Mappila', of which one has been already given in the extract from Dary. Mr. C.P. Brown derives it from Muabar or Malabar and says that the Tamils in those lands could not pronounce the 'ua' or the letter 'b' and Muabar was softened into Mappila, the name borne by the descendants of Africans, who are now called Mappilas. It was written in the form of Notes on Visscher's Letters from Malabar. The Mohamedans of Malabar are divisible into two groups: Those who live in small communities and do not mingle themselves with the other class termed Mappilas, and those who were the followers of the same creed are, to a great extent, distinct from them. While the Mappilas are of indigenous growth, the others are immigrants from foreign lands. Portuguese writers of the 15th and 16th centuries used the term 'Moors' to denote all Malabar Mahomedans, and this practice. There are different views on this point. Some scholars, including Logan, assert that there were no Muslims in Kerala before the ninth Century.

End Notes.

1. For a detailed discussion of this point see Ronald Miller, Mappila Muslims of Kerala_A study in Islamic Trends, pp. 42-6 and P.A. Syed Muhammed, Kerala Muslim Charithram, pp. 46-73.
2. Elamkulam Kunjanpi.Ilai, Studies in Kereala History, pp-370.
3. Quoted by Roland E. Miller, Op. Cit.,p- 58.
4. Muhammad Husayn Nainar, Tuhfat- ul- Mujahidin (English transilation), p.45.
5. Report of the administration of Malabar- Dated 28 th Julu 1801., Calicut, 1910.
6. William Logan, Malabar Manual, Vol. I, New Delhi, 2004, p.1
7. Rolland E. Millar, Mappila Muslims of Kerala, P. 18(Orient Longman,Delhi,1976)
8. K.P.PadmanabhaMenon, ,History of Kerala, Vol.1,1927, pp.17,19.
9. See Menon, K.P.P. (Census Cochin- 1901),: 1902, p 339.
10. Herman Gundert, Keralolpathy (Tr. Eng.), G. Madava Menon. (International school for Draveedian Linguistic, Thiruvananthapura m, 2003.) , P. 29

11. Willim Logan, Op. Cit..p. 261.
12. Rolland E Miller., Mappila Muslims of Kerala, New Delhi,1976, p.18.
13. Rao M.S. M, Social Change in Malabar,.(The Popular Book Depot,Bombay,1957), P.1.
14. Dr.Rao, Op.Cit. P. I
15. Exodus xxx :23,23.(Bible).
16. Ibid;
17. Rao MSM, Op. Cit.,,p.
18. Joint Commission Report vo. I, 1792- 93, 1797, P 273
- 19 Innes, Malabar Gazetter, Trivandram, 1999, p.249.
20. Stephen F Dale, South Asia (Agrarian Conflict in Malabar) Vol.6 1976,p.2
21. R. Gopinath, The Political Economy of the Late Precolonial Malabar, Social Science Probing (Journal), March- 1994, P.84.

