

Paradigm shift of Muslims of Travancore Beemapally the abode of Sufi activity

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The Muslims of Kerala was founded by Arab missionaries either during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime or shortly after his death in 632 A.D., definitely pre-dating Muhammad Bin Qasim's conquest of Sind (711-715 A.D.) It is a little known fact that Islam entered the Indian subcontinent via Kerala on the West Coast through a process of peaceful communication and economic relationship between Arab traders and the Kerala region.¹

There is no detailed study about the genesis and growth of Muslims in Travancore especially Beemapally Muslims. It is now serves as a repository of Hindu-Islamic Culture and stand as the beautiful mosque of Kerala Muslims. The main surprise is that it is open to Hindus, Christians and Muslims irrespective of creed. It is the original resting place of BeemaBeevi, is in a state of utter neglect today by the mainstream Muslims. So treat our heritage better. Hers is an evidence of Maritime heritage because such a long day back she came here through sea.

The studies about the Muslims in Travancore were limited with New Generation, Mappila Muslims, Reform Movement, Madrasah education, Education of Muslims, Muslims and Kerala Politics, Jamat al Islami, Salafi Movement and anti-Sufism studies. Other than that there is no systematic study or further analysis about the history and culture of Muslims of Travancore. But there is sufficient proofs to indicate that the Arabs were conversant from earliest times with Ceylon and the coastal cities of India.² There were several examples like, Kerala products especially pepper is like gold in European Markets, Arab were the Carriers;³ Biblical references to Solomon⁴ gold, silver and ivory, apes and peacock; Malabar Teak wood;⁵ are plenty in number. Malabar is referred by Arab Geographers in their writings,⁶ trade of Philistines; excavation of Ur; Ancient Muziris port; Hippalaus invention⁷ are some of them indicates Arab links.⁸

According to Roland E Miller, Muslims originated in Kerala in Coastal ports first, because Arabs first came through these ports. Merchants trade progress through these ports. Like Mappilas of Malabar, Methans are majority in Thiruvananthapuram. Only Thiruvananthapuram and Alappuzha Muslims are known as Methans. Mettan, a term of respect used to these people, appears to be the Mahratta “*mehtar*”, a common designation for a hereditary village officer, or the head of a business or a caste, who used to exercise considerable authority over the others. It was once a title of honour given by the Rajah to the chief Muhammadan at Poovar (*Poovar* a fishing village in Trivandrum) and others: now every man is politely called Mettan.⁹ The name Mettan also appear in the *Mathilakom Records* Vol. I M.E 918. (A.D. 17430 p. 236. Trivandrum. Arch. As MeeranMetar, MeranKadavu, and Metan Mani of Padmanabhaswamy temple.¹⁰

Among the Muslim holy sites in Travancore the most important is a tomb of a female pious Muslim saint¹¹ known as BeemaBeevi and in her memory built the famous mosque BeemaPalli. Here rests two famous personality’s one oulliyakal and one shuhadakal. Everyday thousands of visitors came here irrespective of different caste and religion. It is south of the Trivandrum Airport and after bypass road then comes the new Trivandrum Malland it ends on the seashore. The Beema Mosque 6 km south of Trivandrum city and five kilometers southwest of Central Railway Station of Trivandrum. It was near Muttatara, Shangumukham beach, and Valiyathura, Poonthuraare nearby places. Beemapally is one of the famous spiritual centers and Tourist place of Kerala. The place name also comes after BeemaBeevi. Beemapally also known as pink mosque.

Origin of Islam in Travancore

Like other communities Islam found its way to Travancore at an early period of its history, but its exact origin is involved in obscurity. Roland E Miller interprets the phrase by degrees to mean immigration and intermarriages supplemented by direct conversion. As the chief means of Muslim increase during the period. The first mosque in Kerala was established at *Crananganor (Muziris)* in the 8th century A.D. that is now known as CheramanJuma Masjid. According the tradition current in Kerala, the last of the Chera emperors, (CheramanPerumal) became a convert to Islam and left for Mecca and this event helped the spread of Islam

in Kerala.¹² But Shaikh Zainudeen did not clearly mention the date of origin of Islam in Kerala and support it happened after 200 years after Higraph.¹³

The extensive Sufi missionary activity that was known elsewhere in the history of Indian Islam is not evident in South India. However, the Sufi overtones with Malik Ibn Dinar, the first missionary and his assistants cannot be denied. The high respect given by the Mappila community to Sufi saints shows the influence of Sufism on the life and teachings of Kerala Muslims. Zainuddin, the author of Tuhafat-al-Mujahideen, speaks of Muslim Sheiks being the first to propagate Islam in Ceylon before the Malabar, and they are on the way to Adam Peak¹⁴ in Ceylon, landed in Kodungaloor.¹⁵ He clearly says it was a sheikh. Their story also reveals they were Sufis.¹⁶

According to one tradition they were companions of Malik ibn Dinar, the celebrated pioneer missionary.¹⁷ The spread of Islam in the southern part of Kerala began probably after the visit of Malik ibn Habib and his wife, Kumarieth, to Quilon (Kollam).¹⁸ According to Logan Malik ibn Habib was sent out to Southern Kollam (Quilon) by Malik ibn Dinar.¹⁹ Malik-ibn Habib is said to have landed at Quilon to spread and propagate Islam, where a great mosque was founded by Hussain, one of the sons of Malik-ibn Habib. Malik ibn Habib built a mosque there and propagated the new faith.²⁰ Hassan, one of Malik's own sons, was the first Qazi of the mosque. Quilon was then the capital of venad (Travancore) and the Raja of Venad was kind and hospitable towards Malik ibn Habib and his party.²¹ Malik ibn Dinar along with Malik ibn Habib returned to Quilon after visiting all the mosques in Kerala before his departure to Arabia.²² According to the census of 1891 there were 453 mosques in Travancore.²³ It is the common belief that Islamic religion spread to the southern-most parts of the erstwhile Travancore State from Quilon.²⁴

Samuel Mateer, says in his Native Life in Travancore, Muhammadans are divided into seven classes, of which there are insignificant in numbers in Travancore, viz. :- Two or three thousand Moghuls, who should be descendants of the Tartar chiefs who followed Tamerlane into India; six or seven hundred Arabs, who come over as horse dealers, trades, & c.; and over eight hundred Sheiks (or Shaikhs), who profess to be the descendants of the immediate friends and followers of Muhammad, though the title (which means "an old

man, especially one who had authority and respect) is given to anyone who is learned and clever. Besides these, there are some fifteen thousand persons belonging to other minor sub-divisions.²⁵

Marakkars or Kayalars was the yet another Muslim community migrated from Tamil Nadu to Travancore. This community was most prominent in the areas near by Beema Pally in Travancore. Osson was one of the occupational sub community prevailed in Travancore.²⁶ Here are a few notes of a fishing village, *Vilinjam*, (vizhim). The Muslims are divided into two classes, whom they call merchants and *Marakans* or *Lubbays*-the last inferior. These two do not intermarry, but they attend the mosque together, and are buried alike, close by the mosque. The Marakans will eat food from their superiors, but not vice versa. They are probably pure native proselytes from the *Mukuvar* and other castes. None however have recently been converted to Islam here.²⁷ Ward and Conner called Lubbees as the Lona Maupulay or Lubbes, inferior classes of Mohamedans (Islam).²⁸

Role of Sufis in Travancore

The arrival of the Makhdums in the second half of the 15th century Ponnani became the religious and cultural center of Mappilas. The oldest mosque at Ponnani is said to have been built in the 12th century. The first Makhdum Shaikh Zainudeen Ali (1467- 1521) was initiated in to the Chishti Tariqah. The missionary activities of Malik ibn Dinar and others are only minor elements in the context of other enduring social, economic and ethical factors leading to the community's growth. In fact, as I.H. Qureshi observes, Islamic missionary activity was practically absent in south India as compared with the large scale missionary work elsewhere in the country.²⁹ Admiration of saints is common to most of all religions across the world. Even though monotheism remains the fundamental principle of Islam veneration of saints and *shahids* (martyr) has become a part of this Semitic religion. Some people of the Muslim community in Kerala still continue the practices related to the *jarams* (*nerchas*) means Vayipadus and the worship of saints. This kind of saint worship along with shrine visit could be termed as saint worship. Such shrines usually witness *siyarat* or pilgrimage. It is common practice among devotees, to conduct *Andu-nerchas* or annual festivals in relation with the glorification of saints. This kind of practices can also be seen in many of the non-Arab countries.³⁰

The scholars unanimously agreed that the important factor to facilitate the spread of Islam in Kerala was the dawah work of Muslim Scholars and Sufis. Their peaceful means of propagation, and simple ways of life attracted a number of people to Islam. The Sufis lived amongst the people and shared their joys and sorrows. Simultaneously the people were always associated with them seeking their blessing and visiting their shrines. The indigenous sources reveal the names and activities of several Muslim Sufis and saints who propagated Islam in the region. The tradition of Malik bin Dinar and his associates, spreading the religion of Islam in Kerala definitely indicates a missionary activity. They were responsible for a systematized missionary work after constructing mosques at different parts of Kerala. These missionaries spread the Islamic ideology and invited the local people to the new faith. After that a number of scholars and saints came to Kerala, in them one of them was BeemaBeevi. The most important worship of Pirs and Saints (*Ouliyakanmar*) and martyrs (*Sayids or Sahidis*) and their tombs (*Mukham, Jaram*) become holy shrines and popular places of pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) in Kerala.³¹ These types of worship are reported from other parts of Kerala.

We cannot find the activity of BeemaBeevi from Arab Account like Sulaiman, Abu Zaid, Masudi, alBiruni. Ibn Battuta in his famous work *Tuhafat un Nazzar fi Gharaib il Amsar wal Ajaib il Asfar* or simply *Rihlah* observes several saints and famous personalities in Kerala. He visited Kollam during the 14th century and mention one Sheikh Fakhruddin son of Sheikh Shahabuddin, but fail to mention about BeemaBeevi and Maheen Abu Bakr. Kollam an area which in modern terms corresponds closely to the state of Travancore. In ancient times, Malabar was ruled from Quilon by a single ruler.³² He also refers to “the five mosques which stood as an ornament to the noble emporium of Quilon” and bestows high praise on the generosity and power of its Hindu sovereigns.³³ Again Abdur Razzak also did not mention about this famous pious Lady in his *Matla us Sadain wa Majmaul Bahrain*. The Portuguese Duarte Barbosa who visited Malabar before 1518 C.E, and mention Tiruvankodu and mention as a village of Moors and Heathen but not mention BeemaBeevi.³⁴

According to the information's available BeemaBeevi and son MahinAbuBakrAuliya came and settled in Puntura some 200 years ago which means the mosque raised near their burial place is a later structure and its gates and tower are still later structure renovated and enlarged by the local community. It appears therefore Beemapalli never existed as a pilgrim center before 1800 C.E because it looks new and no contemporaneous records did not remember it.

Origin and Early Life of BeemaBeevi

The history about Beemapally and origin of Islam in Travancore are still obscure. But the place name BeemaPally is derived from BeemaBeevi without doubt. Beemapally Dargashareef is one of the famous religious place of worship in south India. T. Madhava Menon, says that it is believed to have been founded by a devout lady from Sri Lanka.³⁵ P.K Muhammed Kunhi also support this view.³⁶ According to K. P Ahammed Musaliyar, in his "*Beema Pally Charitham*" deals with a tradition, typically ancient story about the history of Saidathunisa BeemaBeevi and her son Maheen AbuBakr. BeemaBeevi belonged to the Koresh family³⁷ which had its origin in Arabia,³⁸ the family of Prophet Muhammed.³⁹ Though no birth records exist, Kerala history indicate that Beema Beevi comes to Thiruvallam during the period of Marthanda Varma 1705 – 7 July 1758 C.E So she was born before this period, from this we infer that she was born before 1705 C.E. K.P Ahamed Musaliyar claim that she was born near Hijrah 857.⁴⁰ The reign of Marthanda Varma, the most powerful of the Thiruvithankur Kings (1729-1758), was also the most glorious period in Padmanabhapuram's history. It was Marthanda Varma, the maker of modern Thiruvithankur, who gave the palace and its surroundings the present name of Padmanabhapuram or the abode of Padmanabha.⁴¹

Her real journey in education really started at an early age, she studied Quran, Haith and Fiqh and other Islamic science and led the life according to the morals of Islam. She was raised in a pious society and was an emblem of purity, humanity, Justice, patience and sincerity, forbearance, bravery and for her virtue of attitude and behavior everybody loved her. She married her longtime partner Abdul Gaffar at an early age of her youth. He is a perfect partner for her life. He is also nobleness of character, simplicity of life, loyalty to

the principles of Islam. He married her because of her knowledge in Islam, simplicity of life not because of her beauty or Wealth. The same was the motto of her to marry him also.

Both of them have ardent love and selfless devotion towards Allah the almighty and gradually they attained divine power as a result of continuous prayer. She has good ability to cure the patients, so people came before her. She prayed and gave the needy water *Urk* and *alles*. It is a good medicine for patients and mentally retarded. So people flock besides her. She never used this divine power for amazing wealth, but used to help the helpless. They have healed many diseases with their magical power and accepted nothing in return. Thus both of them became famous throughout Arabia. They know that they were Muslims and every Muslims is of missionary of religion. From their efforts several non-Muslims comes to the fold of Islam. Meantime they get a new born and named as Maheen Abu Bakr. The child was brought up by the hard work of this mother and father. He was an eminent boy and learnt reading and writing and from his boyhood he was generous and honest. Then suddenly Abdul Jaffar died, she lost her husband at an early age.

One night Beema Beevi dreamt a dream that somebody had calling her, Wake up ye sleeping one “You go to India where your service need much”.⁴² Maheen AbuBakr also dream a similar dream.⁴³ Adamant in their words and to accomplish the words of almighty God, after farewell to his family members and friends and people they left their homeland and started their long journey to India. It is a day when travelling was very difficult, no vehicles of today are available and after much difficulty they reached Kerala. They first reached in Mahe, It is in north Malabar, Kerala. This is corroborated by the fact that a mosque is there in memory of Beema Beevi.

Another reason for their migration was the People viewed her belief as new faith and revolt against her. They wanted to destroy the belief of Beema. She faced many challenges with ardent faith in Almighty. But at last like the migration to Abyssinia during the period of prophet Muhammed, Beema Beevi migrate to Kerala.

Later they travelled to south Malabar and got settled in Thiruvallam in Thiruvananthapuram district and started their service to the poor and the needy. They have healed many diseases with their divine power and their word spread across the princely state of Travancore. They got many followers and disciples in due course of time. The increasing popularity of Saidathunisa Beema Beevi and her son made several officials jealous, but they hesitated to do something harm to them as the King who was ruling then was very generous to foreign people who took asylum in his country. Everything was going smoothly and Mahin AbuBaker started off to Arabia for Hajj pilgrim. On those days, it was not an easy task and used to take several months to complete Hajj. The increasing popularity of Beema Beevi disturbed some Anti-god and Anti-religious person who were the most influential class in the society and royalty. They conspired with minor royal officers against Beevi. The outcome of their conspiracy was to expel Beevi with importing tax as foreigners.

When Mahin was on his way to Hajj, several government officials approached Saidathunisa Beema Beevi and demanded to pay the tax. On those days all foreign people staying in Travancore had to pay a tax as per the prevailing law. She told the officials that her son is away and requested them to wait till his return. The officials who were jealous with the popularity being enjoyed by the Beevi and her son did not listen her prayers and started pestering her regularly. When Maheen came back from the Hajj, he heard the stories of his mother being trouble by the officials and became angry. However, his mother prevented him from having a quarrel with them. After a few days many officials came to their place along with some military personals and demanded tax. At this time a small quarrel developed between Mahin Abu Backer and the officials, which has been developed in to a direct fight. Unfortunately a military official got killed in that and this made the officials angry. They started fight with Mahin and shortly it turned to a riot at the end of which Mahin got killed. The message of son's death was quite unbearable for Saidathunisa and she too died as her heart got broken with this news after 40th day after her son died.⁴⁴ She too had been buried near her son as per her last wish. These two tombs are believed to have divine power and even now many devotees across the religion visit these tombs to heal their disease.

The society of Kerala during this period was filled with full of social evils and caste taboos. The Caste systems are the main problematic hardship of the poor and were the major evils of the society. A mass conversion occurs in beemapally area. But the more abiding reasons are to be sought in the religious uncertainty coupled with the Brahmanical oppression of the untouchables in the name of caste and in the boundless generosity and assistance shown to the Arab Muslims by the all-powerful Hindu rulers all over Kerala.⁴⁵

Chandanakudam Mahotsavam or Beemapalli Urs



This mosque is famous for the yearly Urs. The Chandanakudam festival at Beemapally in Trivandrum is an impressive affair. The celebration begins with the hoisting of the customary flag of the mosque in front of the elders and other devotees. The devotees carry money in pots which are adorned with flowers and incense sticks. The pot's opening is swathed in white cloth and a garland is fastened around the neck. In the Beemapally festival, it is an interesting sight to watch streams of pilgrims belonging to various communities carrying pots (Kudam) having their tops covered with white cloth and two or three burning Bathis emitting fragrance from them, moving towards the shrine in batches. The pilgrims carry with them coin filled clay pots (kudams) for offering and sandal wood paste (chandanam) is put on the surface of these pots. So this festival is known as Chandanakudam".⁴⁶ Various variety entertainments are held, for example, sword play, dance, music drama, kathaprasangam etc. In the night there is an impressive procession led by two caparisoned elephants to the accompaniment of *Panchavadyam*, band etc. A grand display of fireworks is also a feature of the festival. The *Chandanakudam* festival shows the influence of the festivals of the Hindus in many respects.⁴⁷

This festival to commemorate BeemaBeevi is conducted annually. Thousands of pilgrims irrespective of caste and religion from different parts visit this shrine. The yearly ten-day Urs festival at Beemapalli is observed in remembrance of Beema Beevi and her son. Several art forms like daharamuttu (done with sword) is performed within the mosque and Religious discussions, dance and Islamic songs are performed

outside. At the culminating day of the festival, a flag from Beema Beevi's grave is taken out and a procession follows accompanied by the music of panchavadyam and barded elephants. The offerings such as silk, flowers and oil that are made as offerings at Beemapalli are circulated among the pilgrims of this religion. The opening of the pots is covered with white cloth and a garland is tied around the neck of the pot. The maimed, the crippled, and the mentally deranged belonging to all castes and communities visit the shrine in large numbers seeking favours.⁴⁸

Panoramic view and the style of the mosque

The original Malik ibn Dinar Masjid was washed away by the sea centuries ago. But the tombs remained eroded and built new mosque.⁴⁹ The Entrance is through a beautiful Arch. There were various structures near the tombs. The structure of Mosque is very broad and wide and stands within 15cents of land. The chief structure of the main building is Juma Masjid. Minarets are the chief characterization of every mosque. Another notable structure of the main building is Dargashereif or the mosque of Beema Beevi. In recent years there has been some change in the style of mosque architecture in Travancore and almost Kerala. The Indo-Saracenic style has influenced the construction of quite a few mosques. The old mosques renovated and the new ones constructed follow this style and the old Kerala style has almost become out of fashion.⁵⁰ The chief Architect of Beema Pally Juma Masjid is G Gopalakrishnan, it is now a major pilgrim Centre in South of India. The edifice, which rests on a podium, has massive façade huge domes, tall minarets, pillars and jaali work. The wall and ceilings are rich in floral inlay and Arabic inscriptions.⁵¹

Innumerable miracles of the Saint are described, of which the following are the best known.

1. She cure Diseases
2. Detection of Thieves
3. Birth of Child
4. Good fortune
5. Well of Beema Palli

6. Visited by the physically crippled and mentally deranged belonging to all castes and communities in large numbers seeking favours.

A Link with a Royal Travancore Past - it is said that Nagamani Nadar in the court of Marthanda Varma had affected a severe secret disease below his abdomen and he knew that if the Royal member knew about this cure they will remove him from his office. But he didn't find any doctors to cure it. Later he knew that a lady named Beema Umma in Tiruvalla had some secret medicines and magical cure. So he approached her and his disease was cured. She only asked him to become Muslim as the reward. It was said that he accepted Islam and gave large amount of his land in Trivandrum to them. So she moved from Thiruvalla to Trivandrum and constructed a masjid in the place given to them.⁵²

The Muslims of Beema Palli is very superstitious and witchcraft is not by any means unknown. To pretend to cure diseases by writing selections from the Koran on a plate with ink or on a coating of ashes and then given the ink or ashes mixed with water to the patient to swallow. They also dispense scrolls for elassus, and small flags inscribed with sacred verses which are set up to avert pestilence or misfortune.⁵³ Some says that it was from the Karamath of Beema Beevi that these wicked persons are curing their diseases.⁵⁴

There is a well near the tomb which is It is believed that Mahin Abu Backer got killed at this place. People believe that any disease can be cured by drinking water from this well. The prayers and the water from the well are believed to have curative effects on several types of mental illnesses, devotees irrespective of religious denominations throng for such cures.⁵⁵ There are two wells at Beemapalli out of which one contains cold water and the other hot water. It is said that even in the most severe drought, the water in these wells don't dry.

Some disease did not cure with medicine which was cured by extraordinary activity of places or with the help of Saints.⁵⁶ People came here for several purposes and they were different and their aims are different, some want to get for good luck in their life. An analysis of the main Hindu, Christian and Muslim festivals shows that in spite of the diversities and differences that mark the various celebrations there is still an underlying unity in them. There are several features which are common to these festivals, e.g. Musical

concerts, dances, kathaprasangams, religious discourses, processions of caparisoned elephants, chendamelam, fireworks etc. The celebrations of the Christians and Muslims have been influenced thought the centuries by those of their Hindu brethren. The different communities have also cooperated with one another in order to make the celebrations of all religions successful.

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