

Religious Conversion: The Hindu- Muslim Conflicts in Malabar

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Abstract: Conflicts between different religious communities are frequent in Malabar from 1990 onwards. This region of Kerala is densely populated with both Hindu and Muslim communities while the hilly region of Malabar has a strong presence of the Christian community. Various types of conflicts among these communities in some places developed into religious riots. Initially the Hindu-Muslim relations were affected by the arrival of Portuguese and later intensified by the British Colonial rulers. After the Colonial rule the communal politics of organizations like Rashtreeya Swayam Sevak Sangh, Muslim League and Islamic Sevak Sangh continued to use these conflicts for their political gains.

Keywords: Religious Conversions, Malabar, Hindu, Muslim, Christian.

I. Introduction

The arrival of Portuguese was a historical event that destabilized the socio-political structure of Malabar. Before their arrival there was no report of communal riots in this region. Soon after their arrival they made trade alliance with the Zamorins. This new trade treaty was a blow to the Arabs who were enjoying monopoly on international trade in the area. Arabs who brought prosperity to the Malabar region were the favorites of Zamorins. There are inscriptional evidences that prove Zamorin patronized Islam in Kerala. Under this patronage the settlements of Arabs began to develop in major coastal towns of Malabar. Arabs took their trade into the cultural level by involving in marital relationship with local communities in which created strong ties between Arabs and local people.

On another level Zamorins always preferred Mapilas as their Navel chiefs since the taboo of oceanic travel prevented high caste Hindus from occupying such positions. There are many legends about the dedication Kunjalis who were the chiefs of the naval powers of the Zamorin for a long time. To strengthen the navel force Zamorin even ordered conversion of Mukkuvas to Mappilas (Thurston, 1993: 110). Zamorin was not concerned about the loss in religion since the untouchable Mukkuvas were outside the religious system of Hindus.

Conversion from other subaltern communities was also prevalent at that time. "The great majority of conversions must have come from the lower castes, those who most strongly felt the "inconvenience" of their subordinate, degraded status." The marginalized used their new identity to raise voice against upper class suppression. "Lower castes such as the Ilavas and Cherumans had a tremendous amount to gain from conversion to and membership in a relatively prosperous and powerful community which was exempted from such oppressive social disabilities as distance pollution." Selling women to the Mappilas was a custom in Malabar. "Women of the region mainly of Tiya community who violated rigid sexual taboos were sold to the Mappilas, who also added their numbers." This was a traditional form of punishment for violating moral principles. Usually the reason for population growth of minority communities is attributed to conversion from native Hindus. Beside these subaltern conversions people from high caste Nair community were also converted to Islam in North Malabar during Mysorean conquest. The matrilineal system among high caste North Malabar is cited as a reasons for this phenomena.

The Muslims in Malabar faced a lot of problems related to religion from Portuguese and British. The colonial rule has a significant role in shaping Muslim community in Malabar. According to Stephen Frederic "..., first the Portuguese and later other Europeans helped to shape an Islamic community which would eventually seek a political solution for its problems; Malayali Muslims first attempted such a solution in the Mappila Rebellion and then finally succeeded when the Kerala Muslim League used its political leverage to win the Muslim majority district of Malappuram in 1969."

Gradually, due to many reasons the socio-economic life of minorities changed a lot. Majority of the people in Malappuram, where the population is dominated by Muslim community, are economically backward due to historical reasons. The Muslim community as such did not give much importance to general education since their attempts were oriented towards religious education. But mass migration to Gulf countries and other reform initiatives helped the Muslims to bring out a positive change in their socio-economic life.

Invasion of Mysor, the colonial rule, the issues of religious conversion, semitic Identity, economic disparity etc. are some of the several factors which determined the community relations of Hindus and the Minorities. In addition to the religious structure, politics also helped the minorities to strengthen community formation rapidly during post independence period. Formation of Muslim League and Kerala Congress are examples of such political orientation based on religion in Kerala. While League focused on grabbing political power for the Muslim community Kerala Congress organized the Christian community in the middle region of Kerala.

Islamic community formation in the Malabar Coast was different from that of North India. It was done without any bloodshed. Many unique cultural and political elements have contributed to it. "Kerala is so distant from the centers of Muslim power in northern and central India and its Arabic, Islamic cultures so distinct from the Persianized society of the Mughal Empire and the Deccan Sultanates that is rarely considered relevant to discussions of Indo- Muslim history." It is amusing to note that the strong influence of Sufi cult of Islam in Malabar is closely connected to the Bhakti cult in Hinduism. Their blend created an environment of mutual understanding and an atmosphere of religious tolerance in the region. "They gave birth to a new culture of religious synthesis and tolerance. Both of them were against caste, creed and communal tensions." This religious blending made both the communities to accept the other as a part of their life.

The local Muslim communities adapted many of the indigenous festivals as their own and even believed in black magic and astrology. For example Malappattu(songs) of Mappilas of Ponnani has the character called Odiyan which is basically a concept related to indigenous black magic (Randathani, 2010: 304). A booklet printed in Ponnani in 1891 by Mr. Konganam Veetil Bava Musliar exhorts the Muslims to believe in lakshanasastra even if it was widely acceptable to Kafirs (Randathani, 2010: 275). The "Mappilas in the interior regions of Malabar offered worshipped at local mosques, shrines to Muslim holy men as well as a variety of shrines devoted to snakes, tribal deities and local divinities loosely within a 'Hindu' pantheon. Attitudes with regard to the other religious communities were characterized by obliviousness rather than knowledge (Menon, 1994: 7)." The ritual called Nercha is a good example for such secular acceptance of regional culture. "The ceremonial pattern of the Nercha reveals the fact that, it represents the Mappila adaptation of indigenous religious traditions (Razak, 2007: 30)." The present social milieu of present Kerala shows a selective amnesia to such inherent secular practices by moving towards a text based religious identity.

Now religious symbols are used by the fundamentalist elements in minorities to define and exhibit identities. The syncretic nature of cultural identity has begun to reshape. "It was against this syncretism of Mappilas that the reformists in 20th century started a crusade by which they tried to shake off most of the factors in social and religious life, which they had in common with their Hindu brethren but which went against the spirit of their religion (Razak, 2007: 60-61)." Attempts to create a separate identity above socio- cultural tradition naturally makes other communities suspicious. For example recently there was an attempt to prevent the ritual of Nercha of Battam near Tirur. Traditions like Nercha questions monolithic view of Islam. Asgar Ali Engineer raised serious questions about the monolithic view of Islam in 'Kerala Muslims in Historical Perspective- An Introduction (Engineer, 1995: 1). V.C. Harris in an article titled 'From Structure to Communitas and Back' says "The cultural identity of Islam in Kerala offers a peculiar mix of the indigenous and the exotic, and the patterns of feeling determined to a large extent by this dyad structure are also indicative of the unique historical situation of the community (Harris, 1995: 200)." He concludes that "The noticeable drop in the popularity of , and participation in, the nercha before) and the rise of purist/classicist movements that shun the folk elements of culture are pointers to a cultural- not to say religious- Polarisation that is fast moving toward a point to no return (Harris, 1995: 200)."

Muslim League as a party mobilized the Muslim community in Malabar. Though partition of India affected the growth of Muslim league from early sixties it again got strengthened due to the political game of the mainstream political parties. The Congress and C P I (M) engaged in political understanding with Muslim League diplomatically (Miller, 1976: 169). Such coalitions in the power helped the Muslim League a lot to strengthen their political power.

Though a minority religion in status, Muslims are very powerful in Malabar but the influence of Hindu social vision is very much evident in the community. There are many groups who differ in religious views among the Muslim community in Malabar. "The lowest ebb of society though a part of Malabar who were excluded by Sayyids from the jurisdiction of Malabar, the Osaan (Barber) groups and Puisalans (fishermen group), possessed an inferior status mainly because the Sayyids excluded them from matrimonial relations with them (Abdurahaman, 2004: 18)." The Sayyids were the most influential in forming religious affairs in South Malabar.

Migration to Gulf countries for highly paid jobs helped the Muslim community to have upward economic mobility and raised their social status. Colonial writers, attribute the cause of Mysore invasion of Malabar on the conflict between Muslims and other communities. "...there is no doubt that both Hayder Ali and Tipu Sultan greatly exacerbated the tensions and fuelled the hostilities between Muslims and Hindus (Dale,

1998: 79.)” Such narratives raised serious questions from local scholars and several historians argue that they helped in creating soft ‘Hindutva’ attitude. Later Hindutva elements projected the regime of Haider and Tipu as anti- Hindu (Muraleedharan, 1996: 51). There is a common Hindu belief that Tipu attacked most of the temples in Malabar (Panikkar, 1983: 4). It is interesting to note that most of the Hindus were not allowed to worship in the temples owing to rigid caste hierarchy and thus were not a part of the Hindu ritual system. The temples in medieval period were like a ‘mini secretariat’ and treasure house (Gurikkal, 1992). So the motivation behind the attack was wealth not religion.

Colonial narrative of Mappilas as barbarians was an important factor in generating animosity among other religious groups against Muslims in the region. Muslims are addressed as ‘jungle Mappila’, Mappila rascals, fanatics etc. in many colonial records. The area in which Muslim agrarian riots took place was addressed as the ‘Fanatic Zone (Innes and Evans, 1951: 84.)’ “The Mappila has been almost universally reported to be religiously fanatic, antisocial, and unprogressive in character (Miller, 1976: 225).” This false notion of the British has been transmitted through generations and resulted in creating the present apprehensive attitude of common Hindu towards Muslims. In a poem Kumaranasan has portrayed Muslim as a ‘Cruel Muhammadan who seeks the blood of Hindus (Kurmaranasan, 1971: 5).’ The humiliating remarks against Mappilas are still a matter of discussion in the Hindu society (Aravindakshan, 2009: 181). The suppressed anger against the Mappila folk did not materialise to form a Hindu platform owing to rigid caste system. Some modern Malayalam movies carry this message (Baburaj, 2008: 175). There were many such films released in late eighties and early nineties. In several films like ‘Abimanyu’ released in eighties the villain is a Muslim displaying his religious symbols.¹

II. Semitic Identity

The Semitic is also a factor in community mobilization of Christianity and Islam. Weekly gathering of the members of these communities is an occasion to form a community feeling based on religion. The church and its activities under the leadership chief priest and Mahallu committee (committee in Mosque) of Muslims intensify community consciousness. The Mosque is the pivotal point in the life of Muslims. “Formal religious life is centered on the mosque and its activities (Miller, 1976: 232). The Mahallu committee is very powerful plays a significant role in the family affairs of a Muslim. Uruvilakku was one of the methods used by the Mahallu committee to enact religious regulations on people. In Hindu religion such community gathering is not mandatory. “The religious atmosphere in Mappila home life is nourished by the practice of house visits by mullas. Each mulla has a certain number of homes which he regularly visits for Quran reading. Such visits may be daily or periodic, depending on the financial ability of the home (Miller, 1976: 232).” “The orthodox and prejudiced Mullas (the Muslim religious teachers in Madrassas) were themselves responsible for their educational backwardness (Chandramohan, 1999: 457). In functions like marriage and funerals presence of religious people is indispensable. Religious education is compulsory and any breach in such rules would invite protest from local mahallu or church. Religious education moulds the thought of the individual in religious line. Such things are not compulsory to the Hindus. Some Hindu groups have started geetha classes for children on Sundays but the attendance is poor. So the advantage of community grouping in the early childhood on religious line plays an active role in moulding the attitude of the individual.

Madrassa education is one of the important features of Islam. The religion mandates all Muslim children to attend Madrasa. Madrasa or othupalli has a great impact upon the Muslims in Kerala. “The Madrassa is the wonder and strength of Mappila Islam (Miller, 1976: 234.)” The Discipline in Madrassas is very strict compared to schools. During the colonial period the Muslims were reluctant to join western education system on religious ground. Naturally children preferred Madrassas. The colonial writings provide an awful picture of the Madrassa education. A colonial account comments “ The Koran schools are bad enough, and it is melancholy to think that how much time is wasted by Mappila children in learning, to repeat in language in which they do not understand, passages from the Koran, of the meaning of which they have not the fairest idea.”² The British thought that religious education was one of the reasons for the Mappila outbreak. A critical observation of the new converts is mentioned here. On the issue of new converts the report “..... Alavi and Kuhnji Musliar who bear the marks of their Cheruma origin plain upon their faces, drawn from the dregs of the population, and all of them dependent for their food on local charity.”³

The ‘Dars’ which is attached to the Masjid in several places are residential teaching centre of Islam. The local village communities provide basic needs to the children who stay in ‘Dars’. “Food was given by the villagers. Each family adopted a student. Poor families offered either breakfast, dinner or supper (Pasha, 1995: 134). It targets mainly the children from low income group among the Muslims. Both othupalli and Darsa are said to be an adaptation of traditional Hindu educational system (Pasha, 1995: 134-136). Muslims of Malabar developed ‘Arabi- Malayalam script for religious teaching (Pasha, 1995: 134-136). “During British period religious instruction was given in government and aided schools. After independence the practice of offering religious instruction in public schools was stopped. This made the Muslim community alert. They started

making arrangements for religious education. So thousands of Madrassas were started by different religious groups in different parts of the country (Pasha, 1995: 138).” Apart from Madrassas there are numerous Arabic Colleges in the Malabar region. Samastha Kerala Jamiyat Islami al Ulama, Kerala Jam’iyat at Ulama and Jama’at Islami are some of the Muslim organizations that contributed to Muslim religious Education in Malabar (Pasha, 1995: 165). Thus religious teachings through an organized system helped formation of community feeling among the Mappilas of Malabar. Comparatively Muslims appear to be more vigilant in providing religious education to the young generation.

The local Christian and Islamic religious groups collect compulsory donation from the members for the purpose of religious development. Compulsory religious education, weekly prayer meetings and donations for religious purposes are some of the signs of collective mentality the minorities in Malabar. Construction of the mosques in large numbers is another contemporary phenomenon in Kerala. The financial support from Gulf countries contributed for such practices. Hindu groups also started renovation of old temples in nineties but they could not catch up with the Islamite groups.

The Christians community achieved upward financial mobility through plantations and jobs abroad. Migration of the Travancore Christians into Malabar region resulted in socio cultural changes in the locality. In many places forests which included tribal land were transformed to plantations. The tribals and other backward sections of these regions began to depend on plantation owners for livelihood. Land Reforms in Kerala left the plantations untouched. Migration of the Christians into the forest areas led protests from the local people and much of the forest land was under the ownership of Devaswom. So encroachment into these lands created tension between communities.

Migration of Christian to the Malabar region started in the Forties. Large area of forest was encroached for plantation. Forest land under the ownership of various temples became controversial as they were also converted to plantations (Sebastian, 2002: 79-89). Land Reforms in Kerala exempted large estates where the income was higher than that of paddy fields (Rajagopal, 2009: 43). Most of those who were affected by land reforms were the upper caste Hindus and temples which held many acres of land (Rajagopal, 2009: 43). “The implementation of Land Reforms resulted in the destruction of paddy fields. At the same time it has not created any harm to the rubber estates mostly owned by the Christians (Rajagopal, 2009: 43).” Upper caste Hindus owned most of the paddy fields. Part of many forest areas were converted into estates and ruling governments made legislations and migration policies favouring the estate owners. Various Hindu organisations like Kerala Pradesh Vishwa Hindu Parisad and Ayyappa Seva Sangam asked the government to evacuate migrants occupation of Devaswom land holdings. Kottiyur in Kannur district and Pulppally in Wayanad district were the epicenter of such issues. Accepting the demands of various Hindu organizations The Revenue Board decided to hand over around 30,000 acres of land of Kottiyoor Devaswam to the NSS for 90 years lease.⁴ The temple trustees under monetary interests tried to lease out the devaswom land. The Vellattu devaswam land consisting of 1000 acres was leased to Christians for 99 years.⁵ So Christian-migrants from Travancore began their cultivation in vast areas of Devaswam lands. Their hardwork transformed these lands to fertile agricultural holdings and raised their economic status. Gradually Christians occupied all hilly regions of Malabar. They established churches schools and hospitals. Due to the geographical peculiarity, there were no threats to their life except from the wild animals and tribals were not strong raise any resistance. The foreign missionaries began to enter the scene engage in the conversion of the local people into Christianity. Many people belonging to backward communities readily accepted this opportunity to escape caste suppression and discrimination. Before 16th century Christians followed the local tradition. After the Synod of Diamper the Christianity in Kerala came under an organized structure (Ganesh, 1997: 245).

Christians under the banner of Congress and Kerala Congress gained much is a fact in the political history of Kerala. Most of the Christian-dominated regions in Malabar are UDF centers (Arivindan, 2006: 163). It is alleged that the department of revenue was used for the legitimizing encroachments of forest (Raman, 2007: 32). Conflicts between Christians and Hindus were comparatively less. One such incident occurred at Karuvanchal, Alakkode in Kannur district when the Hindu organizations tried to build a bhajanamandapam (Sebastian, 2003: 298). The Christians in the locality objected it which led to tensions between two communities.

III. Conversions

Issue of religious conversion led to rift between different communities. Colonial writers argue that Mysore invasion and Malabar riot were the two major events in Kerala history which prompted forcible conversions. There is statistical data of conversions of the lower caste people into Islam (Reghu, 2012: 95). Kumaranasan, the noted poet of Malayalam who lived in early 20th century writes,

“Ethrayo dhooram vazhi thetti nilkkendo-
rezha cheruman poyi toppi ittal
Chithramvanethi charathirunniidaam
Ottum pedikkanda namboorare (Kumaranasaan, 1974: 26)”

These lines say that if a Cheruma converts into Islam he achieves higher social status and no more apprehensive of caste discrimination. A large section of the lower caste people converted to the Islam owing to the horrible caste restrictions in Hindu society. The typical narration of Colonial records goes like this “In Tippu’s time thousands of Hindus in Malabar and Canara were forcibly circumcised, and compelled to confess the Mahomedan faith.”⁶ According to the Records of Census Report of 1871 most of the Mahomedans of South India are aboriginal people. “During Mahomedan rule forcible conversion was not uncommon, and to this day proselytism is going on among the lower orders of society” records Census Report of 1871.⁷

The new converts who had been facing extreme discrimination from the Hindu Upper caste used the religion of Islam as a weapon. This resulted in the mappila riot in Malabar. Some of the Mappila riots in 19th century were also due to this social discrimination. “The converts, therefore, amongst the agricultural labourers are practically martyrs, especially if they turn Mahomedans, and this was the cause of the Mappila insurrection in Malabar which ended with the murder of the Col Cannolly”.⁸

These converts were educated in Islamic life by Ponnani Mounathul Islam Sabha. It was registered in 1908 according to Indian companies Act 1882 (Randathani, 2010: 399). It offers residential religious education for new converts. Conversion to Islam was popularly known as “Ponnaniyil poyi toppi iduka’ which shows the influence of the Sabha (Randathani, 2010: 399). Muslim leader Moulana Shoukkathali had visited Ponnani in 1934 April 28th and 29th to address the 33th general body of Mounathul Islam Sabha (Randathani, 2010: 438). He exhorted the people to oppose western culture. He also told the community to wear beard as symbol of Islamic identity (Randathani, 2010: 439).

Thus due to miserable life conditions of the Caste based feudal system, several lower caste people opted Islam as a resistance mechanism in Malabar. Conversion into Islam resulted in expulsion of these poor people from the lands where worked for their livelihood.¹ Thus the Nair dominated social geography was shaken by the protests from the converts which in turn resulted in a series of riots in Malabar during the British period. Practically it was a fight between lower and upper lyres of the society and the lower caste people used religion as a powerful means to meet their ends.

Notes

- [1]. ‘Abimanyu’, Malayalam film directed by Priyadarshan. (1991)
- [2]. Confidential Judicil Report, 2399 M/ 31, Mappila outbreak in Malabar, p. 36.
- [3]. *Ibid.*
- [4]. Kesari, a news paper, 10th September, 1961.
- [5]. *Ibid.*
- [6]. W. R. Cornish Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, Gazette Press, p. 71.
- [7]. Census Report of India, 1871, p. 109.
- [8]. Specimen of Southern india Dialects, by A C Burnell, Madras Civil services, Census Report, p. 53.
- [9]. See for details Census Report of India, 1871, p. 172.

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