

The Socio-economic and Cultural Reflections of the Early Arabs in Kerala

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Abstract

Kerala has one of the longest-standing relationships with the Arab nations. The link began with the trade, then in the propagation of Islam and finally witnessing to the emergence of a code-mixing Arabic language and culture. Over the years both the nations have maintained a good tie with each other. The significance of Kerala and its people is mentioned in the great works of Arabic writers and travelogues. Presently, what the state witnessed is a result of the inflow of Arab traders, travellers etc since ancient times. The Arabs have not only tried to boost the state's economy but have also provided Kerala with other remarkable institutions. The research paper will seek to analyse the role and influence of Arabs in the religious and cultural space of Kerala.

Keywords: Arab settlements, trade, Kerala, Spice trade, Malabar, Islamic culture

Introduction

The Arab- Kerala relations are often time immemorial. Still some of the traces of Arab traders to the South-Western coasts (The Malabar) can be traced as in 9th century. Since then, the Arab influence has been amalgamated into the Kerala culture. Inevitably, it is one of the states in India, which has flourished its relations with the Arabs especially in terms of its socio-cultural and economic values. From the ancient times, before the advent of Prophet Muhammad, till present the state has maintained a healthy relationship with the Middle-Eastern countries and these countries have played a vital role in the development of the state. Over the years, Kerala has witnessed a large inflow of Gulf remittance into its economy through the migrants, which has contributed in the development of the state. According to B.A. Prakash (1998), “the Gulf remittances have also pushed up prices of land, construction material, consumer foods and charges on health, education and transport, adversely affecting non-migrant households belonging to poor, middle class and fixed income groups”. The paper seeks to analyse the role and influence of Arabs in the religious and cultural space of Kerala.

Kerala is a rich-land with its cultivations especially spices. Historically, circa 3000 BC, the unexplored land caught its first attention from the Babylonians, followed by the arrival of Arabs, Chinese, Egyptians, Romans, Greeks and many other European colonial powers. Sooner, the land was colonised in the hands of the colonisers. It is said that the Egyptians had already established their trade across the coastal regions of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, long before the Romans. By the beginning of the Christian era, the trade routes were intensified across the regions such as Arab, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The expensive spices that

grew in the lands were traded across the globe. The traders referred Kerala as “*The land of spices*”. Highlighting on the maritime trades and its significance, eminent historian Romila Thapar (1992) testifies on the huge trade especially pepper, popularly known among the traders as “*black gold*”, especially in the Malabar coasts which lasted till the beginning of 20th century. In addition to pepper, they traded other spices including cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, cardamom etc., along with precious stones, ivory, teak wood, sandalwood etc. According to the history and archaeological¹ evidences, the Cranganore region (present Kodungallur), popularly known as *Muziris* was one of the popular hubs of Arab traders which was equal to the Alexandria.

Ever since the foreign traders colonised and established their trade with in and out of Kerala, they treasured the land. The relevance of it is mentioned earlier during the period of Prophet Moses and also in the *Old Testament*. According to it, during the rule of Emperor Solomon, he exported teakwood, ivory, peacock, monkey, gold, silver, black pepper etc. The woods from Kerala were imported for the building of *Kaaba*² pillars. Evidences of teakwood from Kerala have been identified in the Moon-Attur temple of Mesopotamia and in the 6th century BC Palaces of Nebuchadnezzar. Similarly, the spice cinnamon became an integral part of the cuisines of Jews settled in the Muziris region.

The early influence of Islam in Kerala

The evidences on the influence of Islam in Kerala can be seen before the Arab settlement. The fragments of Arabic literature emerged by 5th century in written form, which gathered the attention of many people. One of the celebrated poets in the pre-Islamic period (*Jahiliya*) was Imru’ul-Qays, an Arabic poet in the 6th century A.D, and sometimes considered the father of Arabic poetry, in his *qasīda*, or long poem, is one of the seven *Mu'allaqat*, has compared the black pepper with the deer droppings stools as:

...those deer droppings,

as they lay on the earth,

spread across;

like small black pepper seeds,

I can see them everywhere...

Another celebrated poet of the Pre-Islamic period, Tarafa- bin-al-Abd, in his poem *Shakalamu*, swears on the Indian made sword tied around his waist. Interestingly, these Indian origin items found only in our land were mentioned in this 5th century literature, way before the Arabs set their foot Kerala.

¹AnujanAcchan, Annual Report of the Archaeological Department of Cochin state, 1945-46, Ernakulam, 1947 and 48

²Kaaba, is a building at the center of Islam's most important mosque, the [Masjid al-Haram](#) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is the most sacred site in Islam.

The Chinese traveller monk, Fa –Hien (399-414) in his travel diaries to Ceylon, mentions about meeting with the various southern Arabian traders, who traded through the Indian Ocean and Arabian ocean and along the coastal of Malabar.

The Arabs were in the forefront of extensive trades in the beginning. Along their deep passion for exploring the world, the Arabs were successful in spreading their religion followed by the advent of Islam and it's preaching in the lands they visited. The origin of Islam in India was in the Malabar region. Gradually, the religion expanded to the regions including, Kodungalloor, Kannur, Bhramapattanam, Pazhayengadi, Kozhikode, Panthalani, Beypore, Chaliyam, Puthupattanam Thrikodi, Poorakkadu, Kayamkulam, Kollam, Kizhakekari, and Tengapattanam. Furthermore, these regions were also the trade centres of the Arab merchants.

Islam was first propagated in Kerala by the Muslim scholar and traveller, Malik Ibn Dinar, first Muslim to land in India. He travelled along with his companions namely, Habib Ibn Malik, Sharf Ibn Malik, Malik Ibn Habib and his wife Umeriyath and their ten sons; Habib, Muhammed, Ali, Hussain, Thaqeyuddin, Abdul Rahman, Ibrahim, Moosa, Umar and Hassan, and five daughters; Fathima, Aisha, Sainaba, Thanirath, Halima. The group spread across the state for promulgation of the new religion and built mosques the assigned regions. In the consequent years, they succeeded and more natives embraced the new religion. The Cheraman Perumal Mosque, built in 629 AD, in Kodungalloor, erstwhile Cranganore, was the first mosque in India, and Malik Ibn Dinar was the first Ghazi of the mosque. William Logan (1887), records on the second mosque in Kerala was built in Panthalayani, North Kollam by the companions of Malik Inb Dinar.

With the advent of Islam, and on the other side the tyranny the people faced in the hands of the upper-class Hindus, paved a way for better life with no caste and class atrocities. According to the Presidency Census Report 1881, a remarkable number of people have embraced the new religion between the years 1871-1881. Cherumar, one of the most backward and untouchable communities in Kerala, has been facing caste atrocities in the hands of upper caste. In 1871, the total population of this community in Malabar region was 99,009, which got narrowed down to 64,715 in the year 1881. However, the total population in the district during the period 1871-1881 increased by 5.71% but in the case of the Cherumar community, their population was reduced to 34.63 %. The period witnessed a mass conversion, around 40,000, of Cherumar to Islam. One of the reasons for Cherumar's bolt for freedom the deep-rooted caste system, Brahmanical hegemony and social segregation within the society, Islam promised them liberation and equal opportunity before law.

The feudalism and the socio-religious conditions in Kerala played a major role in the further spread of Islam. The case of Kerala was extremely complex especially with the social organisation among the Hindus. Untouchability was one among them. Then existing self-contained segregation within the society was also one of the reasons that helped the companions of Malik Ibn Dinar to succeed in the propagation of Islam in Southern Kerala. P.A Sayed Muhammed (1961) in his noted work *Kerala Muslim Chairithram*

mentions on the early Muslim settlements in southern Travancore region includes Paravur, Poonthura, Poovar, Kakela, Thiruvancodu, Kulachal, Thengapattanm and Kottar etc. Apart from this, the ports in Travancore regulated the trade relationships with the Arabs, which flourished in the later years. Miller (1992) acknowledges the evidences of the Muslim presence in South Kerala in Kulasekharam, Travancore region. According to him, their presence had been proved by the Tarisappally Copper Plates issued to the Christian merchants by Sthanu Ravi Varma the then ruler of Kulasekhara dynasty, in 849 A.D.

The mid of 7th century witnessed the emergence of a close-knit relationship between the Arab traders and the natives. The Arab traveller, Tajir Sulaiman records his visit to Kerala in 851 A.D where he mentions Quilon as one of the prime Arab trade port in Travancore. In 9th century, Ibnu-Qur-Daad comments on his visit to Kerala in his book *Nations and Routes* (844-848) and refers Malabar as the thriving land of black pepper, often the Arab traded the pepper to Middle eastern countries from here. Arab historian and geographer, Al Masudi, often referred as the "Herodotus of Arabs", visited Kerala in the early 10th century. In his book *Muruj-ul-Zahab*, he emphasises on the geography and the flora and fauna of Kerala. He accentuates on the ports-trade-native and the traders in Kerala.

Al-Birunni, the well known scholar and traveller, in his voluminous historic text, *Kitab-ul-Hind*, confirms on the trade of expensive timbers such as teakwood, Indian rosewood, sandalwood across the sea. Furthermore, he brings up on the pleasant relations the Arabs maintained with the then rulers of Kerala.

Muhammed al-Idrisi (1100-1166) one of the most famous cartographer and geographer in his illustrated book *Kitab nuzhat al-mushtaq*, translated as *A Diversion for the Man Longing to Travel to Far-Off Places*, stresses Kerala as the only land that produced black pepper. Muhammed ibn Battutah, also known as Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan scholar and explorer in the 14th century who travelled extensively. His scholarly work *Rihla*, accounts on the life of the Muslims residing in the coastal regions, their lands, lineage, cultural practices, worship places and so on. His note on both the social and commercial affairs in the Malabar throws light into the peaceful Muslim settlements in Malabar. According to him the Muslim traders here, administrated the coastal trade especially on exporting materials (Ibn Battuta, 1905).

In 15th century, the Chinese Muslim traveller Ma Huan in his expedition visited the Calicut port. He narrates on the Calicut Muslims in his drafted work titled, *Yingya Shenglan (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores)*. This period witnessed more inflow of travellers like Abdul Razaq. According to him, the flourished city, Calicut attracted merchants from places like Abyssinia, Sanjubar, Barbados, Malang, Mecca, Hijas and so on and they maintained a better bond with the rulers and the natives. It was after the arrival of the Portuguese in Kappad, Calicut under the leadership of Vasco-da-Gama, the relation between the traders and the inhabitants got worse. Following the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British traders arrived and started to export the crops, spices, silk, gold, timber etc to their country. Sooner, the scenario changed and situations in the state deteriorated, as a result, the old ties between the Arab Muslim traders and the rulers were broken.

The Cultural Influence

The geographic significance of Kerala has attracted large number of Maritime people over the Malabar coasts merging their culture and religion with one another (Bouchon, Gupta & Pearson, 2001). The relationship between the Arabs and the people of Kerala lasted for centuries. Since 7th century AD, the spice trade and other trade between Kerala coastal regions and the Middle-Eastern regions, through the Arabian Sea and other sea-routes, have played a vital role in the historical civilization of the state. Alongside with the Arabs traders settling in the coastal regions of Kerala, they did a peaceful expansion of Islam, engendered new-identities especially through matrimonial alliance. Hence, the period witnessed the origin of a new community, often believed to be the descendents of the foreign traders; the *Mappila* (anglicized as *Moplah*). The etymological explanation of this term is often illuminating, the term meaning “great child”, a compound of the terms *maha* meaning great and *pilla* means child (Logan 191; Mayaram, Pandian and Skaria; Miller, Mappila 30-32). Although there exist various theories on the semantic relation of the term, such as, *pilla* is a term of endearment, another is a reference for the son, and the upper castes of Travancore etc. To cite Logan, the term *Mappila* was used by the Nayars and Christians in Travancore and probably by the early Muslim immigrants (Logan, 1981: 191). Nonetheless, in the present the term refers to the bridegroom. The Gundert's *Malayalam Dictionary* defines *Mappila* as “West Asian Semitic migrant settlers in Kerala.” Over the centuries, the term has witnessed a semantic narrowing, as earlier *Mappila* words referred to their religious affiliations such as Jewish (*Yudamappila*), Christian (*Nasrani mappila*) and Muslim (*Jonakamappila*) (Maliackal 300; Županov 99). As northern Kerala barely had a Christian or Jewish population, the phrase subsequently evolved to mean Muslims exclusively (M. Gangadharan 2004:11).

Over centuries, the Arab merchants settled in the coastal regions and they intensified their trade and boosted the economy of the kingdoms in Kerala resulting in a fruitful friendship and relations with the Malayali community. The rigorous contact with the Malayalam speakers, one of the Dravidian language and the Arabic resulted in the birth of a new dialect, known as “Arabi-Malayalam”. The dialect has loaned enormous number of Arabic-Persian terms. Even today, there is a visible presence of Arabic terms in official departments such as, Law Court terms; *vakeel*, *amen*, *munshi*, *aadalat*. To name a few nativised Arabic terms such as *arekameez*, *baaki*, *khaddar*, *raddh*, *Inquilab* etc.

Arabi-Malayalam emerged as the literary language of Mappilas. Though there are various debates on the Arabi-Malayalam script, the dialect advanced with the practice of writing Malayalam in Arabic script. Sheikh Sainuddin Makhdum I, Sheikh Sainuddin Makhdum II, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Makhdum, Umar Quasi composed scholarly works in Arabic. O. Abu and C.K. Karim both advocate the theory that Arabi Malayalam was created by the Arabs (Abu 1970:21). But due to some of the religious and educational reforms, the practice of writing in Arab-Malayalam got reduced. Soon the Mappila writers adopted Malayalam for their scholarly works. Presently, the Sunni Muslims are the only community who write and publish periodicals in Arabi-Malayalam. The Samastha Kerala Islamic Educational Board at

Chelari, Malappuram, and part of the publication *Al'mu'alleen* publishes in Arabi-Malayalam. Infact, *Al'mu'alleen* is the only Arabi-Malayalam in the modern times.

Arabic language has become an integral subject especially in the school and higher degree education in Kerala. Presently, the state has more than 15000 madrassa, an Islamic religious place, one of the largest organised sector with 1,30,000 teachers and 20,00,000 students has enrolled in learning Arabic (Samasthakerala Jem-iiyyathul Islam, Dakshina Kerala Jem-iiyyathul Islam, Majlisul Taleemul Islam,). In addition to this, hundreds of Arabic Colleges both government-aided and private, functioning under different Muslim Managements in the state, which can be seen in and around Kerala only because of the early arrivals of Arabs in the region.

Moreover, an evidence in the interplay of varied cross-cultural basics in the formation of Mappila culture and their customs and rituals can be seen (Ilias, 2007) in the artistic expressions such as *kolattam*, *kolkkali*, *kaikottikali*, *oppana*, *mappilapattu*, *daftamuttu*, *Aravnamuttu*, *vattapattu* etc.

The Mappila traditional dance involves coordination and complex movements. Kolkkali is one of them, performed by men with stick, which is a feast to the eyes and the ears. Similar, is the Arvanamuttu, another performance done by men with an instrument like duff. The Arabic word *Afna*, root word for *Oppana*, the pre-wedding dance performed by women.

The Arab influence is omnipresent in the Kerala culture today. It has been harmoniously mixed with the Kerala food habit. Arabic breads commonly known as *pathiri* in Malabar have captured an important place in the Mappila cuisine along with the Mappila version of *biryani*.

Conclusion

To conclude, the presence of Arab trade relationship with Kerala and its coasts is an unanimously agreed fact among the historians. The early settlement of the Arabs in the coastal areas of Kerala for trade has helped to boost the state's economy. Knowing the uniqueness of the land, the Arabs coaxed the people of Kerala to cultivation. This benefitted both the traders as well as the native farmers. The spice trade between the Middle-East and the South-Western coastal region remained fruitful till the imperialists' powers hegemonised the people and culture of Kerala.

Along with the trade, the evidences from the Arab chronicles reveals on the events such as introduction of Islam, conversion of people to Islam beginning from Cheraman Perumal and so on. Prior to the propagation of Islam, in early 7th century, it is believed that Kerala had witnessed the presence of Arabs way-before. The era of Arab witness not only the spread of Islam but also a unique cultural exchange, which no other state had seen at that time.

Alongside, with the religion, the bounded Islamic culture from various strands, is often sedimented from the past and has been reformed later. One of the reasons is the migration to the Middle-Eastern countries by the mid-20th century. The migration still continues and the old ties between Kerala and Arab nations got stronger century after century. The Arabs have a vital role in reforming and elevating, what we presently call “Kerala Culture”. The historical contributions of the Arabs and culture are unique to Kerala and its relevance is still prevails.

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