



# Discourse and counter Discourses of Ulema in Colonial Malabar

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the activism of Ulema, Muslim religious scholars, in colonial Malabar, India. It argues that the Ulema played a crucial role in shaping the political and intellectual discourse of the Mappila community, the Muslims of Malabar. It highlights the Ulema's contributions to anti-colonial literature, the development of Arabic-Malayalam, and the issuance of fatwas (religious decrees) that inspired the Mappila community to resist colonial rule. The overall information and instances percepts on the intellectual exercises of Keralites ulamas in the said period.

**Key Words:** Ulama activism, Dars, Arabic-Malayalam, Anti-colonial literature, Fatwa.

Kerala Muslims are the inheritors of a long history and a glorious culture. Islam found its way in to Malabar at early period of its history. The Muslims of Kerala generally referred as the Mappilas who constitute a significant part of the Kerala population. Historians generally agree that Islam was introduced into the region by Arab traders and early missionaries from Arabia. Due to the efforts of Malik bin Dinar and his comrades, Islam spread up in Kerala. Shaikh Zainuddin (1532-1618)'s *'Tuhfatul Mujahidin'* threw light on the result of their missionary activities in the coastal areas like Kozhikode, Veliyancode, Tirurangadi, Tanur, Chombal, Dharmmadam, Ezhimala, Ponnani, Chavakkad, Tikkodi, Kannur and Mahe. The early mosques were built-up and Qazis were appointed and they exercised very instrumental role in the growth of Islam. Subsequently, the Ulema or religious scholars proceeded further. They interfered in all areas of Mappila life, including the realms of politics, social affairs and religious spheres. They exercised different activities in pre-colonial and colonial periods according to the geo-political situation.

Islam was introduced into Kerala during pre-colonial period. Kerala was a distinct geographical territory that maintained its own culture and style. The process of the *Aryanisation* was set in motion here between 9<sup>th</sup> to 11 centuries C.E. As a result, a Brahmin-centered, caste-based feudal system was introduced. Under this system, low and downtrodden communities in Kerala such as Cherumas, Pulayas, Pariah, Mukkuvas etc. experienced a very pathetic life. William Logan states, “The conversion of a Pariah or a low caste Hindu to Mohammadanism raises his social status, and he is treated with more respect by Hindus. He is no longer a degraded Pariah whose approach disgusted, and whose touch polluted the Hindu of caste, but belonging now to a different scale of being, contact with him does not require the same ablutions to purify it”. Understanding the situation, the Ulema played very positive role. They had propagated and practiced the egalitarian ideals of Islam which shed great solace and relief to the downtrodden sections of society.<sup>1</sup>

The tremendous proselytization to Islam brought many responsibilities upon the Ulema and the Umarah (the leading laity). The Ulema, as the patrons of guidance and reformation, had to do some effective and innovative programmes. The reformatory measures like the introduction of *Dars*<sup>2</sup> system for imparting religious education and the framing of Arabic-Malayalam dialect have to be historisized in this scenario.

Regarding the *Dars*<sup>3</sup> system of the religious education, we do not know exactly when it came in to being. From the available records, it is discerned that the first *Dars* was introduced by Imam Muhammed bin Abdullah al Hadhrami in Tanur Valiyakulangara Jumamasjid in AH 670 (1272 C.E). Subsequently, Qazis of Kozhikode expanded this system. Shaikh Zainuddin Ramazan Shaliyathi (d.1451) introduced the *Dars* system in Miskal Juma Masjid and Kuttichira Juma Masjid in Kozhikode. By the time of Qazi Fakhruddin Uthman, *Dars* system became prevalent in Kozhikode zone.<sup>4</sup> In the subsequent colonial period, it became more active and decisive. Shaikh Zainuddin Ibn Ahmed al Maa’bari (1467-1521-22) who further systematised it at Ponnani Grand Mosque. During his tenure, this mosque became a great educational and cultural centre and Ponnani came to be called ‘little Makkah of Malabar’<sup>3</sup>. This prestigious institution was further promoted by renowned scholars like Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdum II (1532-1618), Shaikh Abdul Aziz Makhdum (1515-1584), Shaikh Nuruddin Makhdum (d. 1735) Shaikh Abdul Salam Makhdum etc.

The formulation of 'Arabic-Malayalam' was another outstanding contribution of the Ulema in pre-colonial period. It was the system of writing Malayalam in Arabic script. Muslims all over the world have inherited Islam with its language-Arabic. The religious terms and phrases of Islam are indispensable for every Muslims for the proper performance of his religious duties in his day-today life. It is very difficult to translate the Arabic terminology in to indigenous languages. This necessitated the formulation of Arabic-Malayalam. A large number of literary works are written in this script. Both prose and poetry were composed in this dialect. The themes of these books were mainly Islamic Theology, Mappila songs, folklore, novels, traditional herbal medicine and the translation of various Islamic texts.<sup>5</sup> These reforms brought about many positive results in society. The *Dars* movement and Arabic-Malayalam literature evolved an alternative discourse which resisted the intellectual hegemony of both the Brahmins and colonial powers in the region. This activism brought about some radical changes in the subsequent colonial period.

### **The Ulema Activism in the Colonial Period**

Colonial intrusion into the Malabar Coast opened a new epoch in the Kerala Muslim history. The colonial dominance started in 16<sup>th</sup> century and lasted till the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Portuguese was the first colonial power who consolidated their political dominance in the region. The Portuguese supremacy of more than 100 years destroyed the foundations of socio-economic life of Mappilas. The process of colonization steadily progressed. After the Portuguese, the Dutch came in to dominance (1661-1795) and followed by the British East India Company (1792-1947). However, 450 years of the Colonial atrocities brought about very critical situation in Malabar. All these entrusted new responsibilities and challenges upon the Ulema class.

The Colonial Malabar produced sizeable Islamic literature. They can be categorized under three divisions: 1. Islamic theological works. 2. Anti-colonial literary works. 3. Mappila creative literary works. The first category of books describes the various aspects of Islamic faith and rituals. These books are pertaining to the various branches of Islamic studies such as *Tafsir* (exegesis of Quran), *Hadith* (Prophetic tradition), *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), *Tasawwuf* (spiritual science) and *Ilm al Kalam* (Theology). The second category deals with anti-colonial struggle literature. It mirrors common mindset of the Ulema on the foreign intriugition. The third represents, Mappila creative literary works. The important genre of *Mappilapattu* (Mappila song) comes under this category. All these works were composed either in Arabic or Arabic-Malayalam.

## The Arenas of Activism

The Colonial Malabar witnessed a variety of the Ulema activism. Three types of the scholarly activism can be seen in this period. The first type of the Ulema directly took part in anti-colonial struggle without compromising Islamic teachings and academic activities. The eminent scholars like Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdum I (1467-1521), Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdum II (1532-1618), Qazi Muhammed bin Abdul Aziz (1579-1617), Sayed Alawi of Mampuram (d.1844-45), Syed Fazal Tangal (1820-1901), Aali Musliyar (1861-1922), Pangil Ahmed Kutty Musliyar (d.1946), Kattilassery Muhammed Musliyar (d.1965) and Umer Qazi (1273-1857), who is the protagonist of present study, belong to this group.

The second group of the Ulema prioritized Islamic teachings and academic activities. They are not being directly involved in anti-colonial struggles. But they had motivated it through their literary works indirectly. Shujayi Moidu Musliyar (1891-1919), Kunjayin Musliyar, Avukoya Musliyar, Puthiyakath Kunhan Bava Musliyar, Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Tangal (1847-1912) and Mahin Hamadani Tangal (d.1922) are the examples of this stream. The third group of Ulema exclusively devoted to Islamic teachings and spiritual guidance. They confined themselves in religious affairs. However, all these classes of the Ulema did their best for the betterment of the community and strived for communal harmony and peaceful co-existence.

The Ulema activism opened one of the brilliant chapters in the Kerala history. They had composed a number of anti-colonial works and enacted religious decrees (*fatawa*) which inspired a collective consciousness against the common enemies. The literary works produced by them clearly developed a political outlook imbibing the ground realities and cultural diversities the region.

The first anti-colonial book composed is *Thahreed Ahlil Iman Ala Jihadi Abadathi al Sulban* (Rousing the people of faith to struggle against the Portuguese). This historical poem was composed by Shaikh Abu Yahya Zainuddin bin Ali, popularly called Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdum I (1467-1521). He contributed 22 valuable works to the promotion of Islamic studies. This poem contains 135 verses. Portuguese invaders are mentioned as the cross-worshippers. In this poem, he persuades the faithful to fight against the colonialists. Poet says:

*“It is the duty of all Muslims who have physical strength, provisions and equipment, to wage holy war against them/ When you spend your wealth and fight against the enemies, you have really served all the servants of God*

*from all afflictions/ And you have protected the servants of God from the evils of deceivers and guarded children and women with zeal*"<sup>6</sup> This is the first resistance poem in Arabic ever written in India.

The second noted attempt of this kind is *Tuhfathul Mujahideen Fi Ba'thi Akhbar al Portugaliyyin* (A gratuitous gift to the holy warriors in respect of a brief account of the Portuguese). This legendary work authored by Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdum II (1532-1618) and submitted to Adil Shah, the Sultan of Bijapur. This book composed after 80 years of the Portuguese advent. Therefore, it contains the valuable descriptions of the incidents in Kerala that took place between the arrival of the Portuguese and 1583 C.E. and descriptions of the caste system, rituals, customs and traditions prevalent in Hindu society at that period. He clearly explained Portuguese atrocities and the Zamorin's encounter with them<sup>6</sup>.

The third anti-colonial lore is *Al Fathul Mubeen Lissamiri Alladhee Yuhibbul Muslimeen* (Luminous Victory of the Zamorin who loves the Muslims) contributed by Qazi Mohammed bin Abdul Aziz (1579- 1617-18). Author was an eminent scholar, gifted poet and Qazi of Kozhikode. This historical poem is popularly known as *Al Fat'hul Mubeen*. It depicts the incidents related to the great victory of the Zamorin of Calicut at Chaliyam in 1571 C.E. This poem is an authoritative document of the said war. It unfolds the Hindu- Muslim unity and amity that prevailed in Malabar in those days. The poet wholeheartedly supports to the Zamorin of Calicut and advises the Muslims to pray and fight for him. Poet says:

*"Oh Muslims, it is incumbent upon every Muslim to pray for him (the Zamorin)/ Because ironically enough a king who is not a believer in Islam, fight for the Islamic cause whereas a Muslim king does not fight at all/ For their religion and the religion of Muslim; but the Muslim kings struck a compromise with their Portuguese enemies/ So oh people, listen to the war tale of Zamorin in rapt attention/ Hear the legend of Zamorin! Pray for Zamorin! Sultans you learn from the Hindu King"*<sup>7</sup>

The above works left tremendous impacts on the society. Both the scholars and the common people came in the frontline of the struggles against the invaders. The call for *jihad* prompted the Kunjalis, the traditional grain merchants, to lead the battles against the Portuguese. Thus Kunjalis, who later become the naval commanders of Zamorins, continued as the disciples of Makhdums and spearheaded anti-Portuguese struggles in 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Subsequently, at the battle of Chaliyam (1571), eminent scholars like Qazi Abdul Aziz of Calicut, Shaikh

Abdul Wafa alias Shaikh Mamukoya, Shaikh Abdul Aziz Makhdum of Ponnani etc. directly involved. This path was followed by some other prominent scholars in later centuries.

Situation became very complex in 19<sup>th</sup> century. A series of peasant uprisings broke out in south Malabar. Many factors were responsible for it. The new agrarian laws of British East India Company fully restored the hegemony of landed aristocracy; eviction of the peasants by the *Janmis* (Land lords), *Melcharth* (overlease), heavy renewal fee, rampant corruptions of bureaucrats etc. worsened the condition of peasants. Most of the Mappilas were tenants and peasants under the local Hindu *Janmis*. All these factors brought very pathetic effects on Mappilas and other peasant communities. In this turbulent situation, the Ulema used their religion, Islam as a coherent political ideology.

The figures like Shaikh Hasan Jifri (d. 1807), Syed Alavi of Mampuram (d.1844-45), Syed Fazal Pookkooya Tangal (d.1901), Umer Qazi of Veliyamkode (d.1857) Aali Musliyar (1864-1922) etc were the main exponents of this stream. They subsequently headed and mobilized Mappila community against the alliance of local landlords and British imperialists. They also issued many *fatwas* and composed anti-colonial literature as the earlier Ulema did.

Analysing the same, K.N Panikkar opined that “the ideological world of the rural Mappilas revolved almost times of stress, when all explanations and solace were sought within religion. An actual or supposed sanction from this quarter therefore, became rational for action. Hence a quest to obtain religious blessings, either implicitly or explicitly formed an integral part of the preparations for almost every uprising in the nineteenth Century”.

Syed Alavi Mampuram (d.1844-45) wrote *Assaiful Bathar Alaman Yuwalil Kuffar* (The sword that strike those who make the unbelievers as their protectors) to inspire the Mappilas in their tremendous war with the British colonialists. It was circulated all over the Mohallas in Malabar. Syed Alavi Tangal had great compassion for the Muslim and lower caste tenants who languished under the oppressive Hindu feudal lords. Simultaneously he stood for Hindu – Muslim unity and amity. He exhorted Muslims to unleash their militant vigour against the British. So, the British Government seized and destroyed the copies of it. Later on, it was printed at Istanbul in Turkey by his son Syed Fazal Pookkoya Thangal. (d1901)<sup>8</sup>

Syed Fazal Pookkoya Tangal (d.1901) followed the foot prints of his revered father. He conducted many struggles against the British and issued many *fatwas* against them. He compiled *Uaddatul Umarah Wal Hukkam Li Ihanat al Kuffarat Wa Abdatul Asnam* (the Preparation to the Judges and leaders to undermine the idolators and the unbelievers). Earlier it was published from Malabar and secretly distributed through the mosques. In 1851, Mr. Conolly, the then Collector of Malabar banned the distribution of the book and subsequently, the text in Arabic was printed and published by Syed Abdullah bin Abdurahman in 1856 from Egypt. Later on, Sayyid Fazal and his family were banished from Malabar by the British Government on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1852. Since then, he played a very active role in international politics in support to the Turkish Khilafat.<sup>9</sup>

Umer Qazi of Veliyamcode (d.1857), opened one of the shining episodes in the Mappila History in 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He introduced a new path of religio-political activism in Malabar. He was a multi faceted genius who contributed several works in different subjects.<sup>10</sup>

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## Reference

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- <sup>2</sup> Traditional religious education or mosque education. This is a free education where students get free food and accommodation both religious and some specific secular sciences are taught there. Quran, Tafsir, Hadith, Fiqh, Tasawwuf, Geometry, Astronomy, logic, Rhetoric, are included in the scheme of education.
- <sup>3</sup> William Logan, *Malabar Manual* p.232
- <sup>4</sup> Mohammed Ali, K.T, *Development of Education among the Mappilas of Malabar*, NewDelhi. 1990, p.20.
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