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Arab Trade Relation and Its Influence on Malabar Culture

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Introduction

Stretching along Kerala's northern shoreline, the Malabar Coast is more than a geographical region. For centuries, this coastline has welcomed traders, explorers, and settlers from across the world, leaving behind a legacy that continues to shape its culture, architecture, and way of life. Ports such as Calicut (Kozhikode), Kollam (Quilon), Kannur, and Cochin attracted merchants from Arabia, Persia, China, and later Europe. The major merchant communities of the Malabar Coast included Mappila Muslims, descendants of Arab merchants who settled there. The Mappila community originated primarily as a result of West Asian contact with Kerala, which was fundamentally based on commerce.

According to local tradition, Islam reached the Malabar coast, a prosperous trading region. The continuous interactions of Arabs with Kerala have profoundly impacted the life, customs, and culture of Malabar. This has resulted in the formation of a unique Indo-Islamic synthesis. This article analyses the expansion and growth of Islam through trade relations and its impact on the Malabar regions. The main objective of this study is to understand the socio-economic, religious and educational influence of Arabs on Malabar culture and to analyse the features of folklore, art, and architecture of the Mappila Muslim communities in Malabar.

Arab Trade in Kerala

The Malabar Coast of South India commands a predominant position in the trading map of the ancient and medieval world. It remained pivotal in the exchange of goods between the East and the West and maintained strong trade links with all the great empires of the period: Abbasid Baghdad, Byzantine Constantinople, the Holy Roman Empire, Moorish Cordoba, and Zanzibar, etc. The importance of Malabar during the medieval period further increased as it was in the direct line between Arabia and China. Even though the Arabs had maritime relations with Kerala from the ancient period, they got full control over trade after the fall of the Roman Empire in the first century AD. They began to use the monsoon winds for their travel from Aden to the Malabar coast. The word Monsoon is the corruption of the Arabic word *Mausam*, meaning season. Omani Arabs were dominant in the Malabar region right from the first century AD. By the seventh century, Arab merchants from Yemen, Oman, and the Red Sea region were visiting Kerala for trade and to spread Islam. The eighth century marked the beginning of Arab settlements in Kerala. This Arab interaction contributed to the development of the Mappila Muslim community, which became deeply connected with maritime commerce.[1] Arab traders often married local women and integrated themselves into regional societies, thereby creating hybrid cultural traditions that reflected both local and Islamic influences. However, in the descriptions in Arab manuscripts, the mentions of the Kerala coast start only from the 9th century onwards, that is, after the introduction of Islam. The relationship between Arabs and Malabar was therefore not limited to commerce alone; it became a process of cultural exchange that deeply influenced the region's identity.[2]

One of the major contributions by the Arabs was the religion of

Islam. It made a dramatic change in the political history of Kerala. Sulayman - one of the earliest travellers in the post-Islamic period - reported in the 9th century that he had never known anyone in Hind (India) who had embraced Islam. Later, Idris in the 12th century and Ibn Battuta refer to so many mosques along the Malabar Coast. Muslim communities gradually emerged in regions such as Kerala, the Swahili Coast, the Maldives, and Southeast Asia. Slowly, the Arabs became a part of Kerala's social structure. They constructed so many mosques in Kerala, mainly in the port towns. The Muslims were the right hand of Zamorins. Eventually, Calicut became the major Muslim trade centre. Later, they had a province under their own rule, the Arakkyal dynasty at Cannanore. The Muslims were given the freedom to convert people to Islam and were also given the monopoly of import and export trade.[3] The merchant missionaries effectively combined the interests of their religion and mercantile activities.

Expansion of Islam In Kerala

The spread of Islam in Kerala differed from North India because it was largely peaceful and connected to trade, mercantile settlements, and social interaction rather than conquest.[4] The speedy expansion of Islam was helped by the social conditions that prevailed in Kerala, in which people were divided and subdivided based on casteism. To escape from such evils within the Hindu community, many lower-caste people embraced Islam. The lower caste Hindus were attracted to Islam not only by the social upgradation it guaranteed but also by the better economic prospects opened to them by conversion. Another factor responsible for the fast growth of Islam in Kerala was the tolerant policy followed by the Hindu Rajas of Kerala, particularly in the case of Zamorin of Calicut. They patronized the Arabs and Muslims all the way; to organize a good naval force, he needed the help

of Muslims because crossing the sea was considered sacrilegious by Hindus. The Zamorins issued an order that from every family of fishermen, one or more male members should be brought up as Muslims.[5] Economically, the presence of Muslims was beneficial to the Zamorins. The government fixed allowances for *Quazis* and *Mauddins* and entrusted them with the duty of carrying on the laws of the *Shariats*. No one is permitted to neglect to pray on Friday. Legends say that the *pon naanayam* (gold coin) the Arab traders brought were exchanged for goods. After the arrival of the Portuguese, the condition of Muslims became pathetic. When the Portuguese reached the Malabar coast, they found that Arab traders had held control of the spice trade. The Portuguese decided to monopolise the entire spice trade of Kerala, but Zamorin was not prepared to comply with it. By the mid of 18th century, the majority of Muslims in Kerala became landless, poor fishermen, and petty traders. Gradually, the Arab trade contact with Malabar declined.

Muslim Communities in Kerala

The Mappilas are the Muslim community in the Malabar region. These Mappilas are divided into thirteen sub-communities. Mappilas are the largest community among the Muslims of Kerala.[6] The subcommunities are *Pusalans, Ossans, Tangals, Vattakolis, Labbais, Nahas, Marakkars, Keyis, Koyas, Kurikkals, Nainars, Pathansor, Dakhnis, Ravuthars, Bohras. Pusalans* mostly converted from the *Mukkuvan* caste. The other Mappila Muslims used to call them "kadappurathukar", while they were known as "Angadikar". Ossans were the traditional barbers in the Muslim community. Formed lowest rank in the hierarchy. *Tangals* (*sayyis*) were the highest in social order among the Muslims. claiming the descendants from the family of the Prophet Muhammad. *Tangal* families are the focal point of Muslim

communities in Kerala. *Vattakkolis* are an ancient community in Kerala, claiming Arab origin. *Labbais* are a mercantile community partly in Tamil Nadu; they migrated through south Kerala. They are called Mappilas of the Coromandel coast. Nahas community is mainly concentrated in Parappanagadi. Marakkar is a powerful multilingual maritime trading community. Keyis is a community of wealthy merchants mainly settled in Thalassery and Parappanagadi. Koyas may be of Omani origin. It is said that the name is a corruption of Khawaja; they held administrative positions in Zamorin's court.

Kurikkals are a family of Muslims who served as instructors in the use of firearms in the employ of various chiefs of Cochin. *Pathans* are a trader and businessman community. *Ravuthars* is a Tamil origin, settled in the Palakkad region. *Bohras* are the Western *Ismaili Shia* community, settled in Kozhikode, Kannur and Kochi. *Bohras* migrated from Gujarat to Kerala.[7] The social and cultural features of the coastal Mappilas of Malabar in particular can be traced by the influence of the Arabs on the Muslim community. The matrilineal system (*marumakkathayam*) of inheritance and residence among the Mappila is from the Arab background. In some parts of Malabar, still they follow *marumakkathayam* system. The Mappila Muslims later became influential in maritime trade, literature, education, and cultural life, while maintaining strong links with the wider Arab world. Their mosques, Arabic-Malayalam literary traditions, and matrilineal influences reflected the unique synthesis of West Asian and Kerala traditions.[8]

Socio-Economic and Cultural Influence of Arabs

The long-standing contact between Arabs and Kerala contributed greatly to the transformation of the region's social and cultural life. Arab traders settled in several coastal towns such as

Kozhikode, Kollam, Ponnani, and Kannur, where they intermarried with local communities and participated actively in regional economic activities. This interaction led to the emergence of the Mappila Muslim community, which reflected a blend of Arab and indigenous traditions. The spread of Islam in Kerala, the development of Arabi-Malayalam literature, the construction of mosques with unique Kerala architectural features, and the influence on food habits, dress patterns, language, music, and social customs all reveal the lasting Arab presence in the region. The Arab connection with Kerala was not merely an economic phenomenon but also a process of cultural synthesis that shaped the identity of Malabar society. The socio-cultural influences of Arabs contributed to the cosmopolitan character of Kerala's coastal regions and strengthened its role as a major centre of interaction in the Indian Ocean trade network.

Education

Muslim traders influenced the culture of the Malabar people. Muslim traders were received well at the port of Canton, and they were allowed to conduct their commercial and communal affairs through the traditional Islamic institutions. Wherever the Arabs went Arabi language reached there. The people of Malabar adopted the food habits, dress patterns, and religious practices of Arabs. The large increase in the population of the community was mainly due to conversion. Ponnani was a prominent centre of Islamic learning. The prominent theologian of Ponnani was Zain-ud-din Makhdum I. Zain-ud-din Makhdoom II wrote a historical chronicle, *Tuhfal-ul-mujjahdin* (glory to the victory of mujahdin). It is known that students from Sumatra, Java, and Sri Lanka travelled to Ponnani for spiritual education. Arabi Malayalam, a script used to write Malayalam, originated at Ponnani. The script is also known as the *Ponnani* script. *Madrasa* is an Arabic

word for any type of educational institution. *Othupalli* and *Madrasa* are institutions giving primary education to Muslims. Several Arabic words also entered the Malayalam vocabulary, particularly terms related to trade, navigation, religion, and daily life.[9] For instance, ginger is called *Inchi* in Malayalam and in Arabic it is called *zanjabil*. The Arabic word for Camphor is *Kaphur*, which is said to be derived from the Malayalam word *karpuram*. The Arabic word sandal might be derived from the Malayalam word *chandanam*. Similarly, cardamom, called hail in Arabic, came from the Malayalam word *Elam*; clove, meaning *Quranful* in Arabic, resemble similar with Malayalam word *krampu; Betal*, called *Tambul* in Arabic, traces from Malayalam word *tambulam*, etc. All these words testify to a close relationship between Arabs and Keralites.

Arabi Malayalam

Arabic is a distinguished language of Arab Muslims. When they reached Kerala, there occurred a mixture of both Arabic and early Malayalam languages and thus evolved a new language, Arabi Malayalam. Arabi Malayalam is simply Arabic written in the Malayalam script.[10] The Arabs who came to Malabar for trade often settled down in the region and married native women, and the Malayalis who had to interact with the Arabs might have made efforts, both conscious and unconscious, to overcome this completely. Arabi Malayalam emerged as a result of the same.[11] Arabic script was the basis of Arabi Malayalam characters. This is made possible by making necessary changes to the eight letters of the Arabic language. More than using lines, dots and symbols so as to denote Malayalam sounds, there are 5000 works composed in Arabi Malayalam.

Dress Code

The Mappilas of Malabar followed many of the traditions

related to the birth, marriage and death of their matrilineal line. They also followed the indigenous dress code. The important dress code of the medieval period was the Ottamund. Both males and females followed the same dress code. The local people who converted to the new faith followed their traditional dress code with some changes favourable to the new faith. The Portuguese accounts narrate about the dress code and social structure of Malabar during the Zamorin period. Durate Barbosa and Varthema are the important travellers who referred to the dress code of Mappila Muslims in Malabar. Traditional Mappila attire, ornaments, and social customs similarly reflected a blend of local and Arab traditions. Religious festivals, marriage customs, and social practices within the Mappila community evolved through centuries of interaction between Arab settlers and indigenous communities. They go bare-chested like Nairs, and they distinguish themselves with a small round cap on their heads and their beards are fully grown.[12]

Food Habits

Kerala cuisine is so different from the rest of India. The Greek, Roman, Chinese, Portuguese, Arab and Dutch traders made their way to the port town of Kerala. It is no wonder that the food has been cast with a spectacular range of culinary influences. North Kerala has a large array of Non-vegetarian dishes given its Arab lineage. Mappila food is especially famous for *biriyani*. The use of fragrant spices, especially pepper, cardamom and clove. *Kallumakkaya, chattipathiri, erachi puttu* & *pazham nirachath, unnakaya, and pathiri*, etc. are the traditional foods of Malabar. Certain Malabar dishes, including varieties of *Biriyani, Pathiri*, and *Alisa*, show strong West Asian culinary connections.

Folklore

Malabar, Kerala, has a significant Muslim population

compared to the rest of the state. Among the several art forms of the Muslims of Kerala. *Duffmutt, kolkali* and *Oppana* are the most popular. The Muslims have adopted several foreign and Kerala visual art forms and made them their own with suitable changes. Though many of them are purely Arabian in origin, others are either original or partly foreign. *Kolkali* is an art form in which the performers move in a circle. A combination of two words, *kol* means the stick, and *kali* means dance. *Kolkali* creates a mesmerising rhythmic effect. During *Kolkali*, all male dancers dance to the rhythmic beating of the sticks. Folk songs were sung at the time of dance. *Duffmutt* is a group performance popular among the Malabar. *Duffmutt* is staged as a social event during festivals, weddings, and urs-annual festivals conducted in the mosque.

The performers beat on a shallow round percussion instrument called the Duff. The leader of the group sings the lead, while the others form a chorus and move in a circle. The songs of *Duffmutt* are often a tribute to martyrs, heroes, and saints. *Duffmutt* can be performed at any time of the day and has no fixed time limit. It is also called *Arbanamutt*. *Oppana* is a dance performance in the Malabar regions. It is commonly seen in wedding ceremonies, held to herald puberty and so on. The Arabic word *afna* is the root word of *oppana*. There are separate *oppana* for men and women. These two styles of singing *oppana* are the *oppana chaayal* and *oppana murukkam*. In *chaayal*, the singers do not clap their hands to the beat of the song, whereas in parts of the song that incorporate the *murukkam*, clapping accompanies the singing. Usually, *Oppana* starts and ends with *chaayal*. Mappila songs, known as Mappila Pattu, evolved as a literary and musical tradition influenced by Arabic poetic forms and local Malayalam folk culture.[13] These songs often dealt with themes of religion, love, maritime life, and heroic resistance.

Architecture

The cultural impact of Arab trade relations extended into architecture and artistic traditions as well. Mosques built in Malabar displayed a fusion of Kerala architectural styles with Islamic religious features.[14] Unlike the domed mosques of West Asia, early mosques in Kerala often resembled traditional temple architecture with sloping roofs, wooden carvings, and intricate craftsmanship. This architectural synthesis demonstrated the adaptation of Islam into the local cultural environment. This architectural synthesis demonstrated the adaptation of Islam into the local cultural environment. The architectural features of the Malabar region are distinguished from other regions of India. The mosques of Kerala had peculiar features. The extensive use of timber in the construction of upper stories and the tiered form of their roof represents a type of Indo-Islamic architecture, peculiar to the region, and worthy of special attention. India's first mosque, the Cheraman Juma Masjid, is situated in the Malabar region. Malik bin Dinar, one of the Arab propagators of Islam, built this mosque in the Kodungallur region in 629 CE. The oldest mosques situated in Malabar include Cheraman Juma masjid in Kodungallur, Malik Deenar Juma masjid in Kasargod, Khizar Juma masjid in Kasargod, Ichlangodu mosque, Kakkulangara mosque at Valapattanam, Moideenpalli Kannur, Odathpalli Thalassery, Kunjali Maraykkar Mosque Vadakara, Mishkal Pallikozhikodu, Kuttichira mosque Kozhikode, Uchundipalli mosque Kozhikode, Valiya Juma masjid Ponnani.

The mosque architecture of Kerala exhibits none of the features of the Arabic style. The work of mosque construction was done by the local Hindu artisans under the instructions of the Muslim religious head. Arabic style of architecture was introduced to the Malabar area of the present day during the occupation of Hyder Ali and

later Tipu Sultan. In plan, the mosque comprises of large prayer hall with a mihrab on the western wall and covered with verandah. The pulpit in the mosque presents the wood carving. The austere architectural features of the old mosque are however in the process of being replaced by Islamic architecture.

Conclusion

The emergence of Arab trade activities on the Malabar coast expanded Islam in India. They did not use any aggressive measures to spread Islam; they only used trade as the main weapon of conversion. After the arrival of the arabs, the Malabar region witnessed cultural amalgamation. This amalgamation led to the emergence of matrimonial alliances, migration, etc. A trading diaspora was developed with the Arabs. Mappila culture is distinct in Kerala. After the advent of Islam in Kerala, many people migrated to Arab countries. A large number of Muslims found employment in Persian Gulf countries. This widespread participation in the Gulf rush produced huge economic and social benefits for the community. Issues such as widespread poverty, unemployment, and educational backwardness began to change. The Mappila community is now considered a section of Indian Muslims marked by positive recovery, change, and involvement in the modern world.

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