

Mappila Muslims Of Malabar: A Socio- Historical Study

Dr. A. Shahila Banu

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode Kanyakumari District, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012, Tamil Nadu.

Dr. T. Kala Rani

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode, Kanyakumari District, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012, Tamil Nadu.

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Abstract

The Mappila Muslims, who are native to the Malabar region, have occupied an important place in the social, political and economic history of Kerala. The spread of Islam, which began with the arrival of Arab traders in the Malabar region, mingled with the local Dravidian culture and created a unique Mappila identity. Historical studies indicate that the name “Mappila” originated from words denoting the cultural and family ties between foreign Muslim traders and local women. The language (Arabic-Malayalam), traditions, religious rituals and social structure of this community show its uniqueness. This study examines the socio-historical background of the Mappila Muslims and explains the political and economic changes they faced. In particular, the land tenure issues prevailing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the impact of colonial rule, and the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 had a profound impact on the social structure. These events created changes in the community’s education, land ownership, employment opportunities and political participation.

In the present context, Mappila Muslims have made significant progress in the fields of education and foreign employment in Kerala. At the same time, socio-economic challenges arising from the historical background also persist. Therefore, an integrated study of the history and current situation of Mappila Muslims is important to understand the broader social history of Kerala. This study aims to provide new insights into their identity formation, social progress and future development paths.

Keywords: Mappila Muslims, Malabar, social history, migration, economic change.

Introduction

The Malabar region is a coastal region bordering the Indian Ocean. It has been known since ancient times for the arrival of Arab, Chinese and European traders. The northern districts of Kerala, in particular, have a strong Islamic cultural identity. The Mappila Muslim community is one of the most prominent communities that emerged from these coastal contacts. Their history is intertwined with coastal trade, religious diffusion, social organization and political movements. In the state of Kerala (as per the 2011 Census of India): Muslims constitute about 26.6% of the total population. Most of this Muslim population resides in the Malabar region. Muslims constitute over 70% of the total

population in Malappuram district. They are also present in significant proportions in the districts of Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasaragod.

Review of Literature

K. N. Panikkar is one of the prominent scholars who have studied the Mappila community from a socio-economic perspective. He explains the Mappila Rebellion not as a mere religious movement, but as a socio-economic struggle against land rights and colonial exploitation. **Roland E. Miller (1976)** in his study elaborates on the religious movements and social changes of the Mappila community. **S. M. Muhammad Koya (1983)** records the historical and political contributions of the Mappila community of Malabar. **M. Kottaparamban (2019)** points out the development of the Arabic–Malayalam language as a key element in the formation of social identity. Studies such as **Stephen Dale’s** *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* have linked the historical formation of the Malabar Muslim community to international trade and social movements in the border regions.

Research Objectives

- To explain the historical origin and cultural identity of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar.
- To examine the impact of colonial-era land tax changes on the socio-economic structure.
- To assess the contemporary socio-economic impact of Gulf migration and remittances.
- To identify intra-community equity disparities and development challenges.

Definition of the Name “Mappila”:

The word “Mappila” (Moplah) is a Tamil-Malayalam word form. (“Maha” (Maha) – Great / Tall), (“Pilla” (Pilla) – Son / Child). Some researchers say that when Arab traders settled in Malabar and married local women, they called their descendants “Mappila”. Over time, this name became a symbol of that Islamic community. Thus, Mappila Muslims can be defined as a Muslim community with a blend of Arab-Dravidian cultures, native to the Malabar coastal region.

Historical Background

Malabar region has been an important port area in the Indian Ocean trade zone since ancient times. Spices like Malabar pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon played an important role in the trade chain connecting the West and the East via the Arabian coastal route. Arab Muslim traders reached Malabar from the 7th century onwards and established trade and family ties with the local community. Through these connections, Islam spread peacefully and mixed with the local Dravidian culture, creating a unique “Mappila” identity. Historical studies indicate that the name “Mappila” emerged as a symbol of the socio-family ties between foreign traders and local women.

In the medieval period, the support provided by local kings to the development of the Malabar Muslim community was significant. The protection and trade privileges provided to Muslim traders during the reign of the Zamorin of Calicut enhanced the economic strength of the community. When Kozhikode (Calicut) grew as a major port, Muslim traders played a major role in maritime trade. As a result, mosques, madrasas and Arabic-Malayalam literary traditions flourished. Religious scholars (Ulamas) and merchant families played a prominent role in the social structure.

But the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century and later British colonial rule brought about changes in the social structure of Malabar. As the land tenure system (gentry-settler relationship) changed, the Mappila peasantry faced economic crises. Several small-scale Mappila uprisings took

place in the 19th century; these expressed socio-economic discontents combined with religious sentiments. In this context, the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 was a major turning point. This event increased the political awareness of the Mappila community and had a profound impact on their social history.

Thus, the history of Mappila Muslims is not just a history of religious diffusion; it is a socio-historical evolution that integrates the dimensions of trade confluence, cultural integration, land rights struggle and political awareness. This historical background forms the foundation for understanding their current socio-economic status.

Colonial period socio-economic changes:

The onset of colonial rule in Malabar brought about profound changes in the socio-economic life of the Mappila Muslims. The arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century brought about European dominance in maritime trade. Later, the Dutch and finally the British rule changed the political structure of Malabar. Especially during the British East India Company rule, the traditional maritime trade of the Mappila Muslim traders was affected by the changes in trade restrictions and land tax systems. As a result, the economic base of the community gradually shifted to agriculture.

The changes in the land tenure system during the British colonial rule caused great dissatisfaction in the community. Under the landlord-tenant system, land was mostly controlled by the upper caste Hindu landlords; the Mappila Muslims were mostly tenants and small farmers. Problems such as increased land tax, insecurity and eviction weakened the economic position of the community. Small-scale Mappila uprisings took place in the 19th century; Although these were linked to religious sentiments, they were essentially protests against socio-economic exploitation. In this context, the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 emerged as a unified struggle against land ownership and colonial rule.

Educational and administrative structures also changed during the colonial period. Although English education was widely introduced, religious education was initially given priority in the Mappila Muslim community. This led to a decrease in their participation in government jobs and administrative sectors. However, in the early 20th century, educational development improved through social reform movements and awareness-raising efforts by religious scholars. Thus, colonial rule not only changed the economic resources of the Mappila community, but also reshaped their social structure, political awareness and educational progress.

Therefore, the colonial period is considered a key phase in the history of Mappila Muslims, revealing the interplay between change and resistance. The socio-economic changes that emerged during this period provide an important background for understanding the development and challenges of the Mappila community today.

Migration and economic transformation

Migration is a major turning point in the socio-economic history of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar. Although there had been small-scale migration to countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Malaysia since the colonial period, the large-scale migration to the Gulf countries after the 1970s fundamentally changed the economic structure of the community. In particular, workers, traders, and entrepreneurs migrated from the northern districts of Kerala to countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait. This migration was a major factor in the economic progress of the Mappila Muslim community. According to the Kerala Migration Survey (2023, Centre for Development Studies), Muslim families are the largest recipient of foreign remittances in the

state. Remittances sent by workers working in the Gulf countries brought about a significant change in the rural economy of the Malabar region. There was considerable progress in the sectors of housing, investment in education, the start of small and medium enterprises, and commercial development. Families who were previously dependent on land-tenant agriculture later started engaging in trade and service sectors. This foreign income played a major role in the establishment of educational institutions, private schools, colleges and hospitals. The standard of living of the community rose and a new middle class emerged.

However, this economic transformation was accompanied by some challenges. The consequences were increased dependence on foreign employment, family separation, inflation and socio-cultural changes. Furthermore, the job security issues faced by the migrant workers and the global economic changes were detrimental to the stability of the community. Nevertheless, migration increased the economic self-sufficiency of the Mappila Muslim community and supported their educational and social advancement. Thus, migration and economic transformation are seen as central to the contemporary identity formation of Mappila Muslims.

Social and Economic Life

The social life of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar is shaped by the integration of religion, family structure and local cultural traditions. The identity of this community, which originated in the Malabar region, is characterized by the combination of Islamic religious practices and Dravidian traditions. Mosque-centered social life, religious education provided through madrasas, and the constraints of family traditions strengthen the social order. Marriage, property division, social settlement systems, etc. are followed in conjunction with religious laws and local practices. The culture of Mappila Muslims is a fusion of Arabic and Malayalam traditions. Arabic-Malayalam language, Mappila Pattu, Marriage and religious rituals, The literature they created expresses Islamic devotion and social consciousness. The social role of women has undergone significant changes in the last few decades with the development of education and entrepreneurship.

In economic life, the Mappila Muslims were historically involved in trade and agriculture. Spice trade, maritime trade and small-scale industries were their early livelihoods. Later, migration to the Gulf countries in the late 20th century led to economic transformation. In the present context, the economic life of the Mappila Muslims has expanded on a multi-sectoral basis. The community's participation in the fields of education, business, service sector, information technology and foreign employment has increased. At the same time, challenges such as employment stability, income inequality and the impact of global economic changes are also present. However, social cohesion, religious identity and educational advancement are key elements that strengthen the socio-economic life of Mappila Muslims.

The 1921 Mappila Rebellion

This rebellion was not just an expression of religious sentiments; it was a protest against land tenure exploitation, colonial rule and socio-economic inequality. Throughout the 19th century, the contradictions in the landlord-tenant relationship, the increasing land tax and the insecurity of the tenants caused discontent in the society. Along with this, the influence of the Khilafat movement intensified political awareness. The rebellion began with clashes in the Thirurangadi and Airnadu areas in August 1921. Although it was initially a protest against the British administration and the police, it later turned into socio-religious violence in some places. Leaders like Variyankunnath Kunjahammed

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Haji and Ali Musliyar played an important role in the movement. It is also said that a temporary “Khalifa government” was formed in some areas. However, the British government suppressed the rebellion with harsh military measures. Thousands were arrested; many died. The incident known as the “Wagon Tragedy” reflects the brutality and repression of the rebellion.

The consequences of this rebellion had a long-lasting impact on the Mappila community. Many families were economically affected, and fear and political changes were created in the community. At the same time, the event enhanced the political awareness of the Mappila Muslims and later served as an impetus for educational and social reform movements. Historians differ in their views on this rebellion—while some consider it a religious-based rebellion, many interpret it as a socio-economic struggle. Thus, the Mappila Rebellion of 1921 is seen as a key event that shaped the socio-historical identity of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar.

Contemporary Status

The Mappila Muslims of the Malabar region play a significant role in the social and economic development of Kerala. They constitute a significant population in the northern districts of Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kannur, and Kasaragod. Educational advancement, higher education enrollment of women, and growth of entrepreneurship are seen as key components of contemporary social change. Economically, migration to the Gulf countries and the remittances they receive have raised the standard of living of the community. There has been progress in the sectors of housing, private education, and small and medium enterprises. At the same time, there are challenges such as high dependence on foreign employment and low job stability.

Overall, the contemporary status of the Mappila Muslims is an evolutionary stage combined with historical background, educational advancement, and the impacts of globalization. Their development path is determined by their efforts to exploit new economic opportunities while maintaining social cohesion and religious identity.

Conclusion

The history of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar is a continuous evolution of trade, cultural integration and socio-economic changes. The identity of this community, which emerged in the Malabar region, has been shaped by events such as colonial challenges, the 1921 rebellion, and the Gulf migration. Although educational and economic progress has been significant in the present context, challenges such as unsustainable development and lack of leveling continue to be seen.

Suggestions

Quality education, skill development and promotion of local entrepreneurship are essential to strengthen the progress of the Mappila community. The dependence on foreign employment should be reduced and diversified economic development should be promoted. Furthermore, balanced and sustainable development can be achieved through women's advancement and social cohesion programs.

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