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Literature as a Revolt: The Early Malabar Muslim Literacy Movement

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Abstract:

The literature of Malabar Muslims (Mappila) was not purely in Malayalam, neither in Arabic. It was in a new language called Arabimalayalam, a language used only by Mappila community of Malabar. The rise and development of Arabimalayalam was in fact a choice made by the Malayalam speaking community between two different styles of foreign cultural invasions, viz. Arabian and Western. Though developed with a purpose of educating the lower-castes, who were attracted to Islam only for its egalitarianism, with religious texts and prayers, the language induced the production of a compatible stream of knowledge, accessible to a community which was struggling under the tramples of landlord-colonialist nexus. Being an attempt to withstand the imperialist and feudal supremacy on native intellect, the Arabimalayalam publications covered all branches of knowledge required for the sustenance of a society without the imperialist aids. Production of all sort of ethnic knowledge and artistic expressions in a language which is purely the representation of their voice, gave the community a courage to reject even English education. Being the representation of their identity, Arabimalayalam grew into the shape of a social action. The anti-supremacy nature of Arabimalayalam literature made it a poetic counter theory, and at the same time, the elaborate loans of words and expressions from neighbouring languages like Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Tulu etc. made it the currency of across-the-border cultural transactions. In this study, I would look at how Arabimalayalam functioned as an alternative literacy movement, especially in the juncture of communal rejection of English education, through an analysis of Arabimalayalam texts and formalized folk songs.

Keywords: Mappila Malayalam, Arabimalayalam, Alternative literacy, Anti-colonial movement.

Mappilas or the Muslims of Malabar/Kerala are a distinguished community with their cultural speciality in the multi-cultured Kerala. It is often argued that the cultural distinctiveness of this particular community owe to its long held connection to the Arabic speaking land, from where came their religion, Islam. Linguistically, Mappilas are noted for the variety of Malayalam they speak (with numerable regional varieties), which is by now recognised as 'Mappila Malayalam'. Mappila Malayalam can be traced to be developed from Arabimalayalam, a lingua franca that developed in the Malabar region of Kerala circa 8 CE. In the later period, it gave rise to a creole called 'Mappila Malayalam' subsequent to the formation of the Mappila community. The creole still survive in Kerala as a variety of Malayalam.

The prominent feature of Arabimalayalam is that it uses Arabic and Persian orthographic symbols with some modifications and adaptations for scripting Malayalam. This lingua franca, as it grew into a creole called Mappila Malayalam, with loaned words from neighbouring South Indian languages like Tamil, Tulu, Kannad etc., has subtle politics and culture immersed in its history. The development and functioning of this language can be taken as one of the earliest intellectual anti-colonial/feudal measures taken out by one single community in Kerala. With this language, the Mappilas devised an alternative literacy movement based on the rich literature they developed in it.

Before we look into the details of the alternative literacy strategy developed by Mappilas, let us look at the surrounding cultural and political scenario of the Malabar region.

Arabic on Malayalam shores : the trade link

Kerala's connection with the Arabic speaking world goes back to the pre-Islamic period, to the BCEs. Merchants from the Arabic-speaking world has been here since 4th century BCE. Islam as a religion is reaching Kerala only towards the end of 7th century. Excavations on a prevalent music genre called "*mappila paattu*" (Mappila song) shed more light onto this. After the death of prophet Muhammed, there were conflicts within the Islamic world, both ideological and political. Dissatisfaction with the selection of Caliphs ended up in dividing muslims to Shias and Sunnis. The Shias, when expatriated from the Euphrates-Tigris valley in the post-prophet era, traversed to Yemen and established a well developed culture with Ma'bar (70 km south of the present capital San'aa) as their centre. The Sayeds, a group in Shias, continued their journey and made settlements in various parts in the world including many Indian states. Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Kerala housed many of such travelers. The Shia settlements in Kerala show a lot of examples for cultural borrowing from Arabian countries, especially Yemen.

The very name of Malabar for a region with high population of Muslims in northern Kerala, is assumed to have derived from the settlement the "Sayeds from Ma'bar" made in Kerala. Apart from this similarity in name, there are a lot of other features which Malabar Muslims (Mappilas) share with the Yemeni social life, ranging from the "kallimundu" (lungi) to the famous "malappuram kathi" (knife). There are families in Malabar which still have connections with families in Yemen. The depth of relation this cultural mingling bears hints the other possible exchanges happened. From that platform, it is reasonable to assume that there was a large import of Sufi stories, Arabian music, Arabic language and literature and of course, Semitic myths and religious beliefs too. *Mappila paattu* (Mappila songs) has such an origin. It can also be assumed that the varieties of native language scripted with Arabic letters (Arabi-Malyalam, Arabi-Urudu, Arabi-Telugu, Arabi-Bengali, Arabi-Tamil etc.) would have had its origin in the era of Arab merchant settlements.

The colonial history of Kerala

Another aspect we have to have a glimpse of is the colonial history of Kerala.

Through the high middle ages to the late middle ages, Arabs dominated the trades with Kerala. Though this was not a colonial dominance, the maritime interactions had its dominating impacts on the Kerala culture, especially in the coastal regions where the Arabs interacted with the natives more. The trade winds changed direction by 1500s, as the Portuguese anchored their vessels along Kerala costs in 1498. Taking advantage of the internal conflicts between the two prominent nation-states in Kerala, Cochin and Calicut, the Portuguese propelled their vessels in and stood by the Cochin side. But by 1571, they were defeated out of the lands and the internal conflicts intensified to new levels. The Dutch East India company, who also came in taking advantage of these fights, were sent back by constant wars with the militia of Travancore state by 1741. And gradually, Travancore became a dominant state in Kerala. This remained until the Mysore Kingdom conquered the northern Kerala in the mid 18th century. In this time, the British who had already established their presence in northern India, were engaged in conflicts with the Mysore kingdom. This resulted in the Mysorean cession of Malabar in 1792 and the British took over the control. The other two states, Cochin and Travancore, were made into the Princely states under the British ruled Madras Presidency.

Arabimalayalam- Rise and History

There are different accounts on the origin or rise of Arabimalayalam in Kerala. Historians have connected it mostly with the advent of Islam. I would like to propose a different perspective to that in this paper.

As we said, Kerala had a long rooted contact with the Arab speaking lands. The merchant visitors from those lands had won the good impression of kings of the spice land too. For a long and effective business relationship, a smooth communication platform was inevitable. It might have been the visitors' attempt to learn the native language for a better involvement with the native community, that tilted the land for the inception of Arabimalayalam in Kerala. And same would be the case in other states like Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu etc. If we assume the context, it would be something like, the Arabic speaking visitors hear Malayalam and in their attempt to learn that language quickly as possible, they tried to jot the verbal language down in the orthographics they are familiar with, here Arabic. Having the Malayalam words readable for their purpose, they are better equipped to act in verbal discourse with the natives and thereby for improved marshalling of business. In other words, Arabimalayalam was a lingua franca, developed by the Arabic speaking merchants in the Malayalam speaking Malabar. In the later periods, there is a shift happening from this lingua franca to a creole, viz. Mappila Malayalam. The historical turn of that can be assumed as below.

Gradually, and clearly, in the reverberations of conversions to Islam, the intimacy the natives have for the visitor-settlers, probably instigated by the communion developed from the sharing of same religion, the *esprit de corps*, deepens until it reaches the climax with the natives adopting the lingua franca developed by the incomer as their orthography. The factor of religion comes onto stage at this juncture. Here it is a historical coincidence that the language of the merchant-settlers with whom the native community actively involved and the language of the Muslim missionaries happened to

be the same. Now the factor of esprit de corps comes out as the soul reason. But that is only the tip of the ice berg. The socio-cultural scenario has to be looked at as well, to get an answer for the question why did the Mappilas went for a comparatively difficult process of learning a new orthography abandoning the easily learnable and first-hand orthography of the language they speak.

Malabar: Social Scenario

Rise of Arabimalayalam is not a natural development happened over time. There are some other factors also at play and are rather crucial in their role. To understand it, we need to look the social scenario of the Mappila community and their period little closely. This is the period when the Bhraminical civilization reaches its culmination in Kerala, the period of the zenith of caste system. The landed-class had their full right on the lives of the landless. Inequality had contaminated the air they breath. The downtrodden where smothering. Robin Jeffrey's account gives a glimpse of the ghastly state of social situation.

"...a Nair may approach but not touch a Namboodiri Brahmin: a Chovan [Ezhava] must remain thirty-six paces off, and a Pulayan slave ninety-six steps distant. A Chovan may remain twelve steps away from a Nair, and a Pulayan sixty-six steps off, and a Parayan some distance farther still. A Syrian Christian may touch a Nair (though this is not allowed in some parts of the country) but the latter may not eat with each other. Pulayans and Parayars, who are the lowest of all, may approach but not touch, much less may they eat with each other. "

Arrival of Islam to Kerala

It was to this troubled stormy sea, another batch of Arabs introduced a lifeboat in the form of a religion of equality- Islam. They promised an alleviation to the drowning slaves of caste system. There blows a wind of change. Coming years witness a massive conversion to the religion of the incomers, especially from the communities in the lower rung of the caste hierarchy. Here, we should consider one very crucial factor. There is a popular belief that conversion to Islam in this era was due to the theological greatness of the religion. It cannot be completely true. There might be religion-internal factors in it, but that is not the end of the story. The main motive of the conversion was the gift of equality Islam offered. The equal consideration of all human souls- the pivotal value the propagators of Islam heralded in that time to that particular community. The upholding of human values bricked up on the platform of equality, offered a new birth to the people of the lower castes who were living their days cursing their evil birth. It offered a new meaning to their being. Naturally, a platform which offers such a big change would win the hearts, particularly in an era when the miseries of castism being at its peak. The converted people were disencumbered from the castist obligations and observances. When the Pulayns and Parayans had to stand away from the king in meters, Mappila could sit beside him. This new empowered identity gave the boost for conversions. The feudal barricades, cobwebs and entanglements held the majority aback though.

Arabimalayalam: a Political move

People who have converted into Islam in Malabar, Mappilas, have been enjoying a privileged social life with their first mosque built in 629 AD¹. Their life was brighter as they stood as the intermediary between the Arab/Muslim merchants and the Kerala Agriculture-owners. The converted agriculture labourers dropped their labour and took up the new job as export agents. Gradually, trade became the signature of Mappilas of Malabar, and they completely abandoned agriculture. This bright times did not last very long for the them. The large colonial vessels in the seaports of Kerala cast a cloud over the hitherto bright Mappila sky.

Changes in the international market, especially new power equations and colonialist partitions of the world had brought Portuguese vessels onto the Kerala shores. With much bloodshed, Portuguese snatched the trade monopoly from the Arabs and ruled it over. The exemption of Arabs from the sea waters of Kerala hurt the sentiments of Mappilas. They started revolting against the Portuguese, and unfortunately ended in losing their role as intermediary. Loss of job, religious sentiments etc. irked the Mappila temper. In addition to that, unlike the Arab traders, the Portuguese traders came with a colonization agenda. This intensified the native hatred against them. The long history of anti-colonial struggles of Mappilas has its beginnings here. Starting from the sea-war against the Portuguese invasion to Malabar in 1498, it stretches till the Malabar rebellion of 1921 against the British government-Hindu landlord nexus.

Banishment of Arabs from the seas of Kerala gave Mappilas a religious insecurity. The absence of the source of their faith gave them an identity challenge. It was the need of the hour that Mappilas had to unite. This historical juncture can be considered the springboard of many a developments that shaped the Mappila "community" of Kerala. Thoughts about formalizing their religious faith into a community springs here. The need of a language to give the community a clear identity was necessary. Immediately, the *esprit de corps* they had developed with the Arab merchant-settlers advised them to adapt the lingua franca they had developed into a language. The community was already taught with Arabic by Muslim missionary, as it was necessary for their religious life. By the late middle ages, most of the Mappilas had Arabic literacy. This led to the birth of the creole, Mappila Malayalam from the lingua franca Arabimalayalam. Gradually this creole was modified and developed to include all the sounds of Malayalam and beyond.

There happened immense borrowings from other languages such as Arabic, Persian, Tamil, Tulu, Telugu etc. as these were the language-lands Mappilas had connections through a common denominator, the Arab/Muslim travellers. The Arabs had already marked their presence in these language territories and that defined an across-the-border communion between all the places they go. Presence of these loaned words became the signature of the Mappila Malayalam. The language had to broaden its phonetic inventory in order to adapt these loans. That means, the script system of Arabimalayalam was not only the adoption of Arabic alphabets to write Malayalam,

1 <https://www.keralatourism.org/muziris/cheraman-juma-masjid.php>

instead there were modifications made on each side to include sounds or letter that one of the two languages lacks. With this imported sounds and script, Mappila Malayalam stood different from other varieties of Malayalam.

The growth of this language was not an independent process. It was carried out along with the literary or artistic production that was done in it. Mappila Malayalam opened up a vast horizon of artistic works, majority of it was in the form of prose and poetry.

By 17th century, Mappila Malayalam had developed a well grown literary genre in it. The poetic style and artistic quality of earliest of identified Mappila literary specimen, *muhiyudhin maala*, is a living justification for this argument. Though any works predating it has not been identified yet, a blinding abundance of works after it establish the language sound and solid. The Mappila Malayalam literature covered almost all walks of life, mostly in the form of prose and poetry. Themes and topics of it spans over religion, science, fictions and history.

Politics of language

An immediate question would be why Mappilas would reject Malayalam orthography to rebellion against imperialism. The ideology of rejecting one particular orthography and accepting another has nothing to do with the linguistic factors of the particular languages. There was no language chauvinism or prejudice at play here. It was purely cultural and political. An aspect of the cultural turn of it was that, Malayalam, especially with the taste of Sanskrit, wore the gown of a blue blood lord with all evil aspects of casteism attributed to it. Hatred against the grave social system force-implemented by the 'Sanskritised-Malayalam speaking' upper class ignited an emotional rebellion against that social class. As time flies by, there happened a change in the political scenario of the land.

The English has gained power, both of economy and governing. British imperialism clawed the cast-mauled society. Naturally, the landed aristocracy acted as the British hammers. All this culminated with the lower class of the natives getting a double burden on them - the colonial suppressions from the English and the already existing casteist social system implemented by the landed aristocracy. They realized that a revolt against the new suppressive dominations should start from a revolt against the foundations of these institutions, that is their language. Rejection of the languages of both the imperialist forces -the British and the land-lord - became the anti-suppression cult. So, there was a prominent cultural and political requirement behind the use of Arabimalayalam. Thus the new affiliation and conflicts painted a political colour on the language.

Thus, a lingua franca grows beyond the confinements of a purely business purpose to a level of foundation to literary aspirations of a community along with the basic language function- identity of a community. From there, it further grows to an amazing tool against colonialism with its immense contributions in a community's nationalist ventures.

Alternative literacy-Methods

With this we can fairly assume that there are reasons as cultural or political requirement beyond the influence and scope of religion, in the development and maintenance of Arabimalayalam, and later, Mappila Malayalam. The determination evident in this is that, because of rejecting the English/modern education, Mappilas should not lag in cultural advancements or acquiring knowledge. Development of a compatible stream of knowledge in a language accessible to any one without the intricacies of casteism was a cultural as well as a political necessity. Making up the both sides, cultural and political, Mappilas made the alternative coin to trade out the colonialist supremacy on native culture and polity. Completing the requirements, Arabimalayalam stood as the spinal cord of a community in its ventures to support Indian anti-colonial movement in that era.

Era of literary revolts and rejections

With this back up of a language, Mappilas were better equipped for a covert revolution against the colonial power. They fought against all tools of colonialist imperialism starting from the soul of it- the English language. They rejected the education the British brought. They declined the renaissance it promised. They disputed out the imperialist definitions of knowledge and power. This full-fledged defiance against the British colonial strategies even went to the creation of what can be called a 'poetic counter theory', through the development of a whole body of Mappila literature in Arabimalayalam.

Rejection of English education

Mappilas rejected the English/modern education. It is not that the Mappilas *did not get* the English education, it is that they *rejected* it, an informed choice. The Mappilas had all the opportunities to take up English education, to an extent better than some other communities as they had no barriers of casteism to stand in the way. But they decided to reject the imperialist dole outs. They were not ready to accept the British as their master. Thus Mappilas were not availing the so called "modern education" the English offered. There were even religious *fatwas* stating that "English is the language of Hell", and thereby strongly prohibiting any association with it. Since it is apparent that, Islam, theologically, does not dishonour English as a language, the only motive behind such *fatwas* were purely political mobilization. In that way, it was a sheer expression of hatred toward colonialist imperialism and clearly not an instance of linguistic chauvinism. Here, the crucial point is that, though there were some social setbacks, this rebellion against the "modern education" did not throw them back to a pagan culture. And the secret behind this was the parallel education system the Mappilas developed.

Education beyond *madrasas*

The only formal education Mappilas acquired was the religious education from *madrasas*. An amazingly pleasant contradiction of this was that, even without the formal education, there happened to have a home-literacy culture in addition to the *madrasa* education, which created a parallel literacy system to the English education. This induced

the production of a wide range of secular literary publications in Arabimalayalam and were delivered to each household door to door. There were whole books on short stories, poetry, novels, history, and mathematics as there were on theology. And nothing other than theological books were taught in the *madrastas*. Everything else was meant for 'extra reading', clearly an extra-religious project. This alternative-literacy system was their culture, not just a system of education. In the nooks and huts of Kerala which haven't seen the light of "modern education", girls in veil were reciting the lines of Persian poets.

Poetry was the most popular genre in Mappila literature. Translation was another active field. Many great works from Arabic and Persian were translated to Malayalam, and wrote them in Arabimalayalam. Sanskrit and Tamil also came under its purview. They texted their own poems and stories also. The themes of poems covered almost all walks of human life; birth, marriage, death, imprisonment, subjugation, revolution etc. They wrote letters, praises and eulogies in the form of songs. They gave it rhythm and rhyme. The present day letter-songs (*kaththupaattukal*), chain-songs (*maalapaattukakal*) etc. are living examples. Books released in Arabimalayalam on history, science, mathematics, linguistics, medicine and theology were manifestation of immense hard work and deep knowledge. Books like "*Aayirathonnu ravukal*" (One Thousand and One Nights), "*Fatahul Fataah*" (world history), "*Malabar charitram*" (Malabar history), "*Vikramaaditya kadhakal*" (Vikramaditya stories), "*Ashtangahridayam*" (Ashtānga Hridayam), "*Muslim Panchangam*" etc. were some of the great works came out in for a reading outside the four walls of *madrastas*.

By the 19th century, there were fifteen Arabimalayalam printing press across Kerala. This alternative literacy system was ardently accepted in the Mappila populace of Malabar, in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The social leaders of then were adamant that the community should not fall short in knowledge due to the lack of modern/English education. For that they produced all sorts of ethnic knowledge and world literature in Arabimalayalam.

Anti-colonial themes

Anti-colonial literature was a prominent branch of Mappila literature. Mappilas became a major threat to the imperialists with their "community-internal" literature being pungently anti-colonial. The book "*Thahriid*" written by Sainudhin Maqdam I (1467-1521) called for "holy war" *Jihad* against the Portuguese. Sheik Sainudhin II's *Thuhfathul mujahidiin*, and khazi Muhammed's *fatahul mubiin*, etc. are rich with anti-colonial propaganda. These writings also celebrate the brave men who fought and died against the colonial forces. It laments the brutal measures the Portuguese unleashed against the Mappilas and ignites the community for a revolution. Many songs and stories came out that glorify the brave men among them and urged the common man to rise against the colonial forces. This trend of literary-revolt and mobilization continued against the British also. The *fatwas* released in Arabimalayalam against the British are historical examples for this. The 1921 Madras gazette banned the publication or possession of a book published in Arabimalayalam titled "*Muhimmathul mu'amiin*" for criticising British colonialism using the Islamic ideology. War songs that contextualized Islamic

Holy wars to Kerala context, eulogies, calls for *jihad* etc. were recurring themes in the literature. The emancipatory potential conceived in the shift from the primary devotional-song style to anticolonial-song style during the colonial era was tremendous.

The social insulator

This new language gave an insulation/cover to the community, from both the imperialist forces. Their efforts to stand different from the common Malayalam speaking community and their need to be inaccessible to native spies of the British were made possible with this community-internal language. In that way, unlike the general unificatory function of a language, Arabimalayalam can be seen as a dividing language. A language that insulated the speech community from its social community. This independent status necessitated them a parallel literary stream in their language, the price of which is debated. Mappilas, therefore, developed a community-internal literacy system and measures. The best example for this is that, during this period, in a marriage proposal, if the bride is unable to read any two lines from *muhyudhin maala* in Arabimalayalam, the bride was considered unqualified. While this *muhyudhin maala* was not taught in *madrasas*.

Nationalism and Language

An interesting point is that, the Mappilas did not attempt to create a microcosm of Arabia in Kerala. The history shows us that in most of the lands where people converted largely into Islam, the native tongue has been replaced by Arabic. The spread of Arabic replacing Qibti (Coptic) language in Egypt and replacing Aramaic and Syriac in Syria and examples for this. But the case in Malabar is different. At this point, why the community did not convert to a complete Arabic speaking community remains as a historical question. This is where the nationalist aspect of the language choice comes forward. Unlike many West-Asian and North-African countries, where converted Muslims replaced their local languages with Arabic, Mappilas stood by their native tongue. Though they could have easily adopted Arabic, which they had to master for their religious existence, as their tongue, the Mappilas opted not to. The superficial modification they brought in was clearly political in this scenario.

Being an attempt to withstand the imperialist supremacy on native intellect, the Arabimalayalam publications covered all branches of knowledge required for the sustenance of a society without the help of the imperialist aids. A striking feature of this parallel literacy was that it drew a clear-cut distinction between the religious and secular education. The non-inclusion of poetry and related streams in the *madrasa* curriculum was an act of making the religious education and extra-religious education (or secular education) different. With this, Mappilas attempted on countering the westerner's dominance-by-knowledge tool by producing all sort of ethnic knowledge and artistic expressions in their own tongue.

Conclusion

If the Arabic part of Mappila Malayalam is removed, what we get is not Malayalam, its more than Malayalam. That means, Mappila Malayalam was not just a

transcription of Malayalam with Arabic phonemes. There were additions and modifications that were taken into Malayalam, and that too not just from Arababic, but from Persian, Yemeni, and many south Indian languages too. That forces us to assume that Mappila Malayalam is a creole derived from the lingua franca, Arabimalayalam.

The results of this language adaptation and the resultant cultural framing that the community had to accept are viewed differently. These different perspectives, as it did through out the course of history of community, engage in continuing debates up to date. The community reformers had to face a tough challenge from one section of the society at the age of reformation. And the validity of the arguments raised as requiring a change in the community's language policy and social standpoints are still questioned. Present day Muslim populace of Kerala divide into factions that stand pro and anti to the Arabimalayalam movement.

It has been widely pointed out by many later historians that the communal backwardness of the Mappilas was highly influenced by the Arabimalayalam period. The relentless combats with the colonial forces of different ages is the main reason in it. The anti-colonial attitude and imprudent rejection of colonial favours brought them in conflict with the colonial modernity. Excessive glorification of anti-colonial struggle made the Mappilas "fanatic". The rejection of modern education by the first generation had its negative effects perpetuated. The categorization of education into religious and secular and prioritization of the former and disregard to the latter brought a setback in academic field. The limits the insulating nature of Arabimalayalam put on extra-community interactions secluded the community in a social platform of growth and advancements.

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