

South Asia

The Mappilas of Kerala

Cheraman Juma Masjid old structure



In the diverse history and culture harbored in India, the Mappila heritage constitutes an untold and distinct segment. The Mappilas stand out from other Muslim communities in India due to their unique language, culture and relationship with the Arab world since pre-Islamic times. They are also notable for their critical role in both freedom struggle against colonial forces, as well as contemporary economic development of Kerala and India at large. However, categorizing the culture and heritage of Indian Muslims in the West as “Indo-Pak”, the image of Indian Muslims is generally a monolithic picture of Urdu-speaking Muslim community coming from the Indian subcontinent.

Who are the Mappilas?

The word Mappila (sometimes pronounced as Moplah) comes from the ancient Dravidian language and means “great child” (*maha*, “great” and *pilla*, “child”). There are many theories explaining the origins of this term. The Mappilas are mostly the descendants of foreign traders from Middle Eastern descent who visited the southwestern coast of India (known as the Malabar Coast) through the Indian Ocean trade routes. The exemplary character and honesty of these foreign traders impressed the native Hindu rulers in this part of India.

This led to matrimonial alliances; since these foreign traders were highly revered in the local community, the children born to them were named “great child” or “Mappilas”. The culture of harmony towards diverse communities and hospitality towards foreigners which was practiced by the 7th century native Hindu rulers like “Cherman Perumal”, coupled with the respect earned by Arab traders due to their good character and trading skills, led to the propagation of Islam along the Malabar coast. The Arab merchants also intensified trade and helped boost the economy of the southern kingdoms, which further strengthened their relationship with the locals.

Historical records establish the fact that Islam came to India via Kerala and the Mappilas were the first Muslim community in India. The well-known Indian historian M.G.S. Narayanan in his book *Perumals of Kerala* asserts that Cherman Perumal was one of the earliest people in India to embrace Islam; it is fascinating that this happened during the time when Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was alive.

There still exist some doubts among the historians regarding the exact date and period of King Perumal’s acceptance of Islam; however, it is well established that Islam reached the shores of Kerala long before its advent in northern parts of India and advancement of Islam in Kerala was a gradual process. The first documented mosque in India, Cheruman Juma

Growth of the Mappilas and their Role in Freedom Struggle

Kerala today is known for its merit in the peaceful coexistence of religions. This is a culture maintained since ancient times. The early Mappilas also peacefully coexisted with local communities practicing other faiths, and at the same time shunned practices which were considered impermissible in Islam. They did not amend any of the local cultural practices and values unless in these were explicitly prohibited in Islam, in which case they simply left them.

The interactions between the local Dravidians and Mappila Muslims led to the emergence of a language known as “Arabi-Malayalam”. This language has both Arabic and Persian script with words loaned from Dravidian South Indian languages. Arabi-Malayalam still exists and is used in many Muslim religious schools in Kerala. Attempts were also made to inculcate Islamic values within the local artistic expressions. *Kolattam, Kolkkali, Kaikottikali*, and *Oppana* are amongst the traditional folk dances that are still practiced by Mappilas of Kerala. *Mappila Pattu* is a folklore song genre in Mappila dialect; it is very popular among the present-day Mappilas.

History has witnessed many conversions of lower-caste Hindus who accepted Islam to emancipate themselves from the caste system, which put them at a disadvantage. The Moroccan traveler and scholar Ibn Battuta, who traveled widely in the Middle Ages, visited the Malabar coast between 1342 and 1347. He mentions in his travelogue about the Mappila community as very honourable people. Battuta mentions that Muslim travelers used to rest and buy food and other provisions at Mappila houses and centers spread across the Malabar Coast.

The Mappilas remained a peaceful community and coexisted well with other communities until European colonizers reached the southern coast of India. They revolted against the advent of Portuguese colonizers who reached southern India for the spice trade by the 16th century. As the teachings of the Holy Qur’an and traditions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught them to resist against oppression and injustice, the Mappilas resisted the colonization by the Portuguese.

The Muslim scholars of that time among the Mappilas, also encouraged the community to take up this sanctimonious task. The well-known book *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* (“Glory to Victory of Martyrs”), authored by 16th-century scholar Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdam, was written to motivate Mappilas to revolt against the Portuguese imperialists in Malabar. The



factual evidence from Islamic texts to fight against injustice and oppression. Another book by the revered scholar Syed Fazl titled *Uddat al-Umara wa'l-Hukkam* is a compilation of *fatwas* (Islamic rulings) against colonialism. The influence of Mappila leaders like Syed Fazl was so strong that the colonial forces banished him from the Malabar Coast. This book in the later generations also aided the Ottomans in their struggle against the Russian Empire.

The Mappilas also vehemently revolted against the British Raj. The Malabar Rebellion of 1921, also known as “Mappila Lahla”, is the Mappila community’s rebellion against the British crackdown on the famous Khilafat Movement. The “Wagon Tragedy” was a consequence of this revolt, one of the bloodiest events in India’s struggle for freedom. Mappila rebels were suffocated to death in a Wagon of a goods train. Roland Miller, an American researcher who conducted extensive studies about the Mappilas’ struggle against colonial forces, says, “reckless bravery and the conviction that death for faith brought a blessed end, remained constant in all incidents”.

Language, Culture and Politics

In the present day, the Mappilas are one of the few non-Urdu speaking Muslim communities in India. The mainstream Malayalam language spoken in Kerala is part and parcel of their lives and unlike some of the other Muslim communities in India, the Mappilas of Kerala has achieved success in many fields, making their presence in running print newspapers and cable broadcasting channels. They have also played an active role in Indian politics.

The Mappilas take pride in their unique cuisine which combines South Indian recipes with Arabic influences. The migration to the Arabian Gulf which began in the 1970s is a key factor in the economic and educational advancement of the Mappilas. This migration to UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain helped Mappilas strengthen their families through foreign revenue influx. The political influence of socialism and higher literacy rates in Kerala state are other factors that helped Mappila community empower themselves.

Few Notable Mappilas

Mappilas ensured their active representation in politics, at the national (Indian) and international levels, such as the late politician, E. Ahmed, who represented India at the United Nations. A lot of medical centers and hospitals in Kerala and in the Gulf are run by Mappilas, one of them being Aster Medcity run by Dr. Azad Moopan. The retail giant, Lulu Hypermarket, continually expanding around the globe, is headed by the famous businessman, M.A. Yusuf Ali. The former Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Fathima Beevi, is said to be the first recorded female judge of the supreme court in an Asian country.



an increased influx of Mappilas to Western countries like Australia, the UK, Germany, USA and Canada. Unlike before, the current generation of Mappilas migrating is increasingly settling in these countries. While migrating, they bring with them their rich culture, traditions and heritage to blend with the culture of their new homes.



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