

VERNACULAR HISTORIES AND THE HISTORY OF REMEMBERING: A STUDY OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MUSLIMS OF MALABAR

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“In south India, history was not itself a genre and no single genre was allotted to history writing. Moreover the choice of genre or mode for historical purpose frequently changes overtime, as a community changes its preferred mode of literary production” - V.N. Rao, D. Schulman and S. Subramanyan¹.

For a long period, nobody dared to question the facile assumption popularized by colonial historians that there was no history writing in India before the colonial encounter and history was considered as a derivative discourse from the west. Recently, there have been scholarly attempt to interrogate this assumption and to locate the historical consciousness of Indians during the pre- colonial period². It is in this context that V.N. Rao and his colleagues argue that history in South India had been written in many genres and that writing history is not a matter of strict adherence to formal characteristics and types.³ They suggest that many texts in Telugu, Tamil, Sanskrit, Marathi and Persian, composed from late medieval to early modern period may not have looked like history to the eyes of conventionally oriented observers of late 19th and early 20th centuries probably because they were written in poetic genre. This is because from the time of Hegel onwards, western historians insisted that no medium other than prose was suited to a history claiming to embody truth. They sum up the argument stating that history is written in the dominant literary genre of a particular community located in space at a given moment in time.⁴ In other words, each community writes history in the mode that is dominant in its own literary practice.

Though history is fundamentally different from poetic imagination, this distinction was not observed in pre-modern times. In parenthesis, one should also note that, many historical thinkers like Hayden White questions the possibility of objective history and argues that every historical narrative is at core, a work of poetic imagination.⁵ During the pre-modern phase, historical consciousness expressed itself in many forms, not only in scholarship but also in imaginative literature, in songs and in various expressions of collective memory. It is in the backdrop of these theoretical formulations that the present paper tries

to locate the historical consciousness of Malabar Muslims during the medieval period.

Malabar Muslims, like Muslims all over the world had inherited their own genre of historical scholarship from the Arabs, right from the time of prophet Mohammed in 7th AD. What prophet brought to the Arabs was not only a divine plan but also the *Quran* or a new literary form and a masterpiece of Arab prose and poetry.⁶ Verse thus became the earliest and most respected style in historical writing among the Muslims. Poetry was the mode used for writing battle-day epics and genealogies by the Muslims of medieval period. By 13th century itself historical writing had become a dominant literary genre in Arabic language. Here an attempt is made to examine two Arabic texts of 16th century, *Thuhfathul Mujahideen* by Sheikh Zainuddin and *Fathul Mubin* by Qazi Mohammed.

Thuhfathul Mujahideen

Tuhfathul Mujahideen written by Sheikh Zainuddin, a noted Arabic Scholar, who lived at Ponnani in Kerala during 16th Century is a distinct contribution to pre-modern vernacular historical tradition of Kerala. The full name of the text is "*Tuhfathul Mujahideen Fi Baazu Akhbaril Burthugaliyyin*" meaning "A gratuitous gift to the Holy warriors in respect of a brief account of the Portuguese."⁷ About the author very little is known. The book gives his name as Sheikh Zainuddin Ibn Mohammed al Ghazzali al Fannaniya al Malabariyya (Sheikh Zainuddin son of Mohammed Ghazzali of Ponnani in Malabar). The author mentions his grand grand father's name as Ahmed al Mabari which probably indicates that his ancestors were from Mabar of Coromondal coast. According to Shamsullah Qadri, Zainuddin died at Ponnani in 1583 AD (991 HE) which was the year of the composition of the work.⁸

Since the book is written in Arabic, the author was not addressing the native Muslims alone, but his intention was to convey a very important message to the Muslim rulers all over the world. If he was addressing the native Muslims, he would have definitely written it in Arabic-Malayalam script, which had become very popular during the 16th century. Arabic had the status of a global language during 16th century and even the letter of Portuguese king addressed to Zamorin of Calicut had been in Arabic. Moreover, the book itself is dedicated to Sultan Adil Shah of Bijapur, whom Zainuddin considered as the most potent defender of Portuguese menace. He also mentions about the rulers of Ahmed Nagar, Egypt, Syria and Moghul emperors like Humayun and Babur. Thus., by writing the book in Arabic, he was drawing the attention of the whole Muslim Sultans to the grim situation

in Calicut and expecting their cooperation in the struggle against Portuguese.

This Arabic text got public attention all over India as part of it was reproduced in *Tarikh-i Ferishta* in a chapter on "The Muslims of Malabar"⁹ The book can be compared with Thucydide's, *History of Peloponnesian War* as the author through this work is narrating the details of the prolonged war between the combined forces of Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut and the Portuguese from 1498 to 1583 AD. The book contains four chapters and an introduction. In the introductory section, he explains the motive behind the compilation of the narrative thus: "I have compiled this with the intention of giving inspiration to believers to wage war (*Jihad*) against cross-worshipping Portuguese. The occasion for this effort is the fact that waging a holy war has become an obligation of all individual Muslims as the Portuguese had invaded and occupied the Muslim abodes. They killed innumerable Muslims, many were forcefully converted to Christianity. Kidnapping Muslim women and raping them in custody to produce Christian children was rampant"¹⁰. This is the way Zainuddin legitimises the *Jihad* against the Portuguese. Historians of Portuguese intervention in Kerala have already testified to the fact that the Portuguese had followed intolerant policy towards all communities including the native Christians. In short, Zainuddin had no intention of writing history of the period. His purpose was to inspire his fellow Muslims to undertake *Jihad* against the Portuguese by demonstrating the havoc which they had wrecked upon the Muslims in Kerala, since the arrival of Vasco Da Gama in 1498 AD.

The first chapter of the work deals with the laws regarding *Jihad*, the reward that awaits the *Mujahids* and an exhortation to *Jihad*. It is to be noted that Zainuddin never intends to organise a *Jihad* by Muslims alone, rather he visualises a grand alliance of Muslims and the armies of Zamorin, the king of Calicut against the Portuguese. The second chapter deals with the introduction of Islam in Kerala, the Cheraman Perumal legend and the growth of ports on the west coast. It is interesting to note that though he tells about the Perumal legend, which is the most popular story among Muslims regarding the origin of Islam in Kerala, he does not admit the credibility of the story and adds that the Arab Muslims were of the opinion that Islam came to Kerala only after two centuries of prophet's death¹¹. This position shows the relative objectivity of the author even when dealing with such a popular legend.

The third chapter is a brief account of the strange customs and practices pertaining to the people of Malabar. The caste system, the untouchability and matriliney etc. are vividly described. While the first

three chapters cover about half of the work, the fourth chapter deals exclusively with the political history of Kerala from the advent of the Portuguese in 1498 AD to 1583 AD, the year of composition of the work, with special reference to the shameful activities of the Portuguese in Kerala. To ensure accuracy, he had insisted on dating events by year, month and even day when dealing with political events. Thus, chronology in the text is wonderfully accurate as he was narrating events which he himself had witnessed or related to him by some dependable persons.

The significance of the text lies in the fact that it is not a conventional historical text following either the Islamic or courtier traditions. As already pointed out, he never intended to write the history of the period but to inspire the Muslims to fight the Portuguese. The text clearly shows that Muslims before the advent of Portuguese appear to have been in good condition and they were treated by Zamorins, the Hindu rulers of Calicut, with great respect and consideration. But once the Portuguese established in Malabar coast, the Muslims began to lose their trade supremacy and prosperity. As pointed out by K.N. Ganesh, in order to establish the claims of Islam in Malabar society and economy, Zainudhin had to go in to a historical account of the coming of Islam and their relation with Kerala rulers, social practice in Kerala with reference to the role of Islam, the coming of the Portuguese and finally the ongoing conflict between the Portuguese and the Muslims for maritime supremacy. Zainuddin saw history as a background for the ongoing struggle and his own commitment determined his outlook towards history.¹²

Regarding Zamorins, the rulers of Calicut, Zainuddin Says : The Muslims and their trade prospered because of great tolerance with which the rulers and their military, though they were Hindus, treated the Muslims. They were not Hindus only in name but pious people who strictly observe their ancestral culture. The Muslims then were in fact, their subject and not even accounted one tenth of the population. Yet they did not treat the Muslims in any way hostile or unfriendly except on rare occasion¹³. Zainuddin considers the province under such a ruler as *Darul Islam* and any attack against the province as an attack against Islam.

Fathhul Mubin

Muslims of Kerala were not averse to the mode of poetry in the realm of history. *Fathhul Mubin* is another Arabic work of the same period written by Qazi Mohammed who lived at Calicut during the last quarter of 16th and early decades of 17th Century¹⁴. While *Tuhfath- ul*

Mujahideen is in prose style, *Fathul Mubin* is in verse. At the outset of the poem itself, the author states that ‘transforming the prose into poetic mode is like transforming silver into gold’ (Verse 13). Qazi Muhammed is the celebrated author of *Muhyudhin Mala* composed in 1607 AD, considered to be the earliest known work in Arabic-Malayalam.¹⁵ *Fathul Mubin*, as the very title indicates, is the history of the victory of the combined forces of Zamorin and the ruler of Calicut over the Portuguese at Chaliyam fort in 1571AD. The full name of the text is ‘*Al Fathul Mubin li Samiriyilladi Yuhibbul Muslemeen*’ which means ‘total victory : (dedicated) to the Zamorin, who loves Muslims’. Perhaps no Arabic work, whether in prose or poetry, prior to this, had been dedicated to a non-Muslim by a Muslim author.¹⁶ When a Muslim, who served as a chief priest and spiritual head of the Muslims of Malabar, dedicates a work to a non-Muslim ruler, the Zamorin of Calicut, it could be easily assumed that there existed a very cordial and healthy reciprocity between the King and his Muslim subjects. This cordial relationship could be seen even during the 13th century as evidenced by the Muccunti inscription on the wall of a mosque of Calicut dealing with the donation of landed property to the mosque by Zamorin.¹⁷

As mentioned already, the poem deals with the victory accomplished by the combined forces of Nair soldiers and the Muslim naval fleet of Kunjali Marakkars over the Portuguese at Chaliyam in 1571 AD. It is written in the form of an eye – witness account of the events leading to the seizure of Chaliyam fort from the Portuguese. Like *Tuhfathul Mujahideen*, the poem was written in Arabic with the definite aim of drawing the attention of the Muslim rulers of Syria, Iraq and other Islamic countries to the country of Zamorin (Calicut) where the Muslims are involved in a *Jihad* (holy war) against the Portuguese infidels (*Farangal Kaffir*) [verse 8-9]. The loss of Chaliyam fort marked the beginning of the end of the Portuguese power in Kerala. As K.M. Panikkar observed, with their expulsion from Chaliyam, the Portuguese effort to control Malabar practically came to an end.¹⁸ Thus, it could be seen that on the one hand, the poem is a celebration of the marked victory of Zamorin against the Portuguese and on the other, the poem reflects the ire against Sultan Adilshah of Bijapur for signing a peace treaty with the Portuguese in 1579 AD, exactly after a lapse of 8 years of the victory at Chaliyam. The reference to the treaty between Adilsha and Portuguese gives us a clue to the date of composition of this poem. [Verse 506] Prof. Mankada Abdul Azeez, the translator of the poem to Malayalam, holds the view that the poem was written between 1579AD, the year of treaty and 1607, the year in which Qazi Mohammed composed *Muhyuddin Mala*.¹⁹

The poem which contains 537 verses, begins with the praise of God and prophet which is formulaic expression commonly seen in all medieval Muslims texts. At the outset, the poet states that the narration of the battle between, the Zamorin, the friend of Muslims of Malabar and the infidels of Portugal, is in itself a worship to God as this narration has got a didactic purpose of educating the Muslim rulers of the world about the grim situation prevailing in Malabar. [Verses 1-13]. In the next module titled 'Muslims and the Zamorin [verses 15-33], the author is in full praise of Zamorin. He is depicted as the 'friend of Muslims and Islam and one who protects and executes the *Shariat* law in his Kingdom, allows Muslims to mention the name of Caliph of Turkey in *Khutuba* (Friday sermons). Wherever the Muslims live in Malabar, they are the subjects of Zamorin'. The poet also refers to the conversion and departure of Cheraman Perumal to Mecca after presenting the broken sword and conch to the ancestors of the Zamorins (the Eradi brothers of Nedyiruppu). It is interesting to note that the poet holds the view that the Zamorin could win the present battle against Portuguese by the grace of the prayer offered by Prophet Muhammed to his uncle (Cheraman Perumal, the last of the Perumal who met the prophet at Mecca). In this way, the poet traces the history of friendship between Muslims and Zamorin back to the period of Cheraman Perumal. This shows that the *Kerolpathi* tradition about the partition of Kingdom by Cheraman Perumal had become popular in Kerala during the 16th century. The whole portion is spent to eulogize Zamorin, which shows the loyalty of the author to the royal authority of the king.

From verse 53 onwards, the poem deals with the dastardly actions of the Portuguese against the Muslims of Malabar like burning Quran, defecating in mosques, exhuming the tombs of Muslims and raping women in the presence of their husbands, etc. [Verses 181-184]. It also mentions about the letters sent by Zamorin to rulers of Egypt and Turkey seeking help against the Portuguese. But the fleets sent by these rulers went back without reaching Calicut due to cowardice. From stanza 200 onwards, the poem deals with the heroic exploits of Kunjali Marakkars, the admirals of Zamorins, in the fight against Portuguese. An interesting information provided by the poem in this section is that Zamorin and his ministers (all non-Muslims) and prominent Muslim dignitaries of the period, assembled in the Mishkal mosque at Calicut to discuss the details of the fight against the Portuguese [verses 252-254]. It clearly shows that mosque had played certain secular roles and that entry to the mosque was not restricted to Muslims alone during this period. For the victory of his side, Zamorin had offered vows (*nerchas*) to the shrines of Mecca and Medina [272-273]. This is followed by an elaborate description about the din and

bustle of war [288-323]. In the succeeding portion of the poem, the poet speaks in detail about the Muslim-Nair harmony [397-409]. Here, he says that 'the death of a Muslim soldier is more painful to Zamorin than the death of ten Hindu (Nair) soldiers [408]. From stanza 410 onwards, detailed description of the final days of the battle is given. In the midst of this, the poet speaks about the treachery of Adilshah of Bijapur for being signed a treaty with Portuguese [504-509]. While Zainudhin praises Adilshah for the help rendered by him in the struggle, Qazi Mohammed speaks ill of him for signing a treaty with Portuguese in 1579 AD . The last portion also is devoted to eulogize the King Zamorin. The poet says:

Ye, Muslim Kings and Sulthans
Learn from this Hindu King
How many of you have heard
About the atrocities
Perpetrated by this damned [Portuguese]
Nobody seems to have known
Any Muslim King
Taking note of this
And wielding the sword
For this oppressed Muslims
Though not being a believer
Of our own ilk
Zamórin fought for us
And spent the whole of his treasury. [510-518]

Here, the poet is in all praise for Zamorin and use harsh words against Muslim Sultans, who did not help him in the hour of need.

Conclusion

Thus, the above analysis of these Arabic texts, one in prose and the other in verse, show that history as a mode of organizing community memory was not unknown to the Muslims of Malabar. By the 16th Century, a distinct genre of history had emerged in Malabar which recorded the history of an event that affected the community adversely. Both the works historicize the resistance against the Portuguese. The incidents and the details given in these works are factual and could be corroborated with other contemporary sources. The resistance against Portuguese according to the authors, is not to be undertaken by Muslims alone, but has to be organized collectively. They believe that the fight against the Portuguese cannot be done without the alliance of those oppressed by the intervention. These texts unequivocally tell us that though Muslims in Kerala maintained their separate identity, there was more of mutual co-operation than conflict with the neighbouring

communities. This is the phenomenon that M.G.S. Narayanan calls 'cultural symbiosis'.²⁰

These works resemble that of the battle-day epics of West Asia composed during the period of Umayyads and Abbasids. Almost all battles fought by the Prophet and orthodox Caliphs during the formative phase of Islam have been dealt within these battle-day epics. Just like their counterparts in other parts of the Islamic world, Muslims of Malabar also evolved their own genre of historical literature.²¹ Both the works prove beyond doubt that the Muslims of Malabar had a strong sense of history, but they wrote history in different genres, both in prose and poetry, 'which were often dramatic, rich in colour and taste, alive with feeling. 'Indeed', says G. Arunima, 'for the three group of Semitic origin in Kerala (the Jews, the Syrian Christians and the Mappila Muslims) . . . there was a rich and complex tradition of memo-history that they had evolved to organize their collective memory'.²² Though such narratives are embedded within non-historical literary genres like poetry, they are marked by discursive signs sufficient enough to be recognized as historical narratives by the members of the community. Thus the history of Malabar Muslims was intrinsically tied up with the history of remembering. History or the past was used by them as a resource for constructing, mobilizing and consolidating their community identity.

NOTES AND REFERENCE

1. V.N. Rao, D Shulman and S Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*, Delhi, 2001, p.3.
2. Raziudhin Aquil and P. Chatterjee, *History in Vernacular*, Delhi, 2010. See also V.N. Rao, *et al., op. cit.*
3. *Ibid.*, p.3.
4. *Ibid.*, p.4.
5. See Hayden White, *Metahistory : The Historical Imagination of 19th century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973.
6. Karen Amstrong, *Islam : A Short History*, New York, 2000, p.5.
7. Sheikh Zainuddin, *Tuhfat-ul-Mujahideen*, Translated by SM Nainar, Calicut, 2007, p.68.
8. Shamsulla Qadiri, *Malabar*, (Urdu, 1936), Reprint in Malayalam, Calicut, 2010.
9. See John Briggs, *History of the Rise of Mohammedan Power till the year 1612* (Trans. from original Persian of Ferishta), Vol-IV.
10. Zainuddin, *Op.cit.*, p.5.
11. The legend says that the last Chera ruler of Kerala embraced Islam, went to Mecca and after meeting prophet Mohammed sent emissaries to Kerala to spread Islam.

Thus the legend traces the origin of Islam in Kerala to the time of prophet in 7th century AD.

12. KN Ganesh, 'Historiographical Trends' in PJ Cheriyan ed., *Perspectives on Kerala History*, Trivandrum, 1999, p.3.
13. Zainuddin, *Op.cit.*, p.45.
14. Qasi Mohammed *Fathul Mubin* (Malayalam translation by Mankada Abdul Azeez), Al-Huda, Calicut, 1996.
15. Arabic-Malayalam is a peculiar polyglot developed by Mappila Muslims of Malabar. It is Malayalam rendered in Arabic script.
16. *Tuhfathul Mujahideen* is dedicated to Sultan Adil Shah of Bijapur.
17. See M.G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbolism in Kerala*, Calicut, 1976.
18. K.M. Panikkar, *Malabar and the Portuguese*, Bombay, 1925, p. 134.
19. Qazi Mohammed, *Op.cit.*, p.20. During the composition of the Poem, author was not the Qazi of Calicut while at the time of the composition of *Mauhiyudhin Mala*, he had succeeded his father as the Qazi, as mentioned in the latter.
20. See M.G.S. Narayanan, *op. cit.*
21. For more details see P.P. Abdul Razak, *Colonialism and Community Formation in Malabar: A Study of Muslims of Malabar*, an unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Calicut University, 2007.
22. G. Arunima, 'Print, Language, Public Sphere in Colonial Kerala', *IESHR*, 43, 1, Delhi, 2006, pp.63-75.