



International

Journal of Recent Research and Applied Studies

ISSN: 2349 - 4891

## Communalism and its effects in Post Colonial Malabar- An Analysis

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### Abstract

There were several communal tensions occurred in Malabar region of Kerala in post colonial period. Growth of religious fundamentalism and certain national events have ignited communal sentiments among some of the sections of the society. Besides the ‘adjustment politics’ of the political parties had led to the growth of communal feeling. Tellichery riot which occurred in 1971 was the first large scale communal violence in the Malabar region.

### Keywords.

Communalism, Community consciousness, religious fundamentalism, Tellichery riots, Ayodhya- Babari Masjid issue-

Historical records show that different religious groups co-existed peacefully before the age of colonialism. Religious conflicts started after the arrival of the Portuguese. The friendly relationships between the

Samuthiri in Kozhikode and the Muslims were affected by the arrival of the Portuguese. Even though it was in the interest of his naval strength and maritime prospects, the Samutiri had maintained a good relationship with

Muslims and even supported religious conversion. With the arrival of the Portuguese, things began to sour. K.K.N. Kurup points out that Sufism had a major influence in Malabar and this promoted religious tolerance and acceptance. However, moves were made during the British rule to create religious tensions. The British records from the time of Colonialism, Tipu's conquest, and the Mappila riots portray the relationship between the religions as conflict-ridden.

Most of these historical records portray a biased picture of Haider Ali and Tipu. These references help in creating a Hindutva consciousness. Descriptions of temple desecrations are wide-spread in Malabar. In fact, most of these temples did not belong to the Hindu majority. Most of the people did not have a conscious affiliation to a religion. The majority of the population

was not allowed entry into these premises either. The terms used to describe Mappilas during this time work to create a popular consciousness working against them. They have been referred to as 'Jungle Mappilas, Mappila rascals, Muslim fanatics' etc. These references strengthened the anti-Muslim sentiment among Hindus. The comments made on Muslims by people like Kumaran Asan show how the popular sentiment against Muslims were formed. Verses from his work refer to Muslims as cruel and rakshasa-like, murdering Hindu innocents. These analogies drawn in his *Duravastha* must have definitely exerted an influence on the upper-class Hindus of the time. Such Islamophobic sentiments are reflected in the villain stereotypes imposed on Muslims in Malayalam cinema. This reveals that historical conflicts still exert an influence in

determining religious issues even today.

### **Community-consciousness of minorities and the Hindu community**

The Muslim and Christian communities here follow semitic traditions in their everyday life. They have also maintained an authentic tradition of their own. Religious meetings on a weekly basis serves to strengthen community relationships. Mosques take the foremost importance in conducting important events like marriage, rituals related to death etc. “The religious atmosphere in Mappila households was created to a large extent because mullas began to visit the households. Mullas would conduct Quran reading in households.”<sup>i</sup> Mappila households adopted several practices followed in their resident communities. Several studies show that Mappila communities were developed by

adopting the authentic cultural practices of the places where they settled. ‘Nercha’ is a celebratory occasion incorporating the symbols of the community. Not just ‘Nercha’, there was situation for the adoption of several communal practices. (For e.g., In his book ‘Makhdoom and Ponnanni’, Dr Husain Randathani talks of an incident where a Musaliar named Konganam Veettil Bava proclaimed to the believers that they should believe in ‘Lakshana Shastra’ (the branch of astrology dealing with the study of face reading). The religious reformations in the Muslim community gradually led to a decline in these cultural influences. The economic and social structure of the Muslim community which placed much importance in religious education underwent drastic changes due to the several Reformation movements and the Gulf migration in the 1980s.

Compulsory religious education played a huge role in shaping the Muslim community. “Madrassa/ Othupalli was the strength of Islam.”<sup>ii</sup> ‘Darss’ was another thing. ‘Darss’ was the space near the mosque where pupils would stay for religious education. Colonial records opine that religious education is one of the reasons for the Mappila revolt.

During the time of British rule, religious education was provided in public schools. This was put to a stop after Independence. It was in this background that hundreds of Madrassas sprung up around Malabar.<sup>iii</sup> At the same time, there was not any proper condition for the different Hindu castes to impart religious education. Religious education was received only by the upper-caste Brahmins. The Hindu castes were divided amongst themselves. This kind of education was

common only among Namboothiris. Therefore, religious education, which played a major part in shaping Muslim community, was largely inaccessible to Hindus.

The Christian community gradually strengthened in the mountainous regions of Malabar with their large-scale migration. Having migrated from Travancore in the 1940s, they became influential in the Malabar cultural scene. Migrant farmers made use of the forest lands belonging to the feudal lords for cultivation. There were several clashes when these migrants used land belonging to the Devaswom. Hindu religious groups, including Hindu Parishat led protests when migrants tried to use the land belonging to Kottiyoor temple. There have been reports that the land belonging to tribes was also encroached. It was a huge controversy that acres of land which

was thus encroached and purchased did not come under the agenda for land reformation. Sangh Parivar leaders argued that land reformation caused bigger losses to the upper-class Hindus and that it was discriminatory to avoid agricultural land that yields huge profits from the changes.<sup>iv</sup> O. Rajagopal argues that Land Reformation caused the destruction of paddy fields but did not interfere with rubber plantations. There were several such campaigns against Christians by Hindu organizations.

### **Hindutva Campaigns**

Hindutva organizations had started campaigns against religious conversion as an attempt to foster Hindutva consciousness. Hindu organizations argued that the era of

Tipu and Mappila riots were rife with religious conversions. This has been supported by some documents from the colonial era. The census report of 1871 talks about how lower classes were converting to Islam. Historical records state that the majority of the population converted at their own will. *Kesari*, the mouth-piece of Hindutva campaigns in Kerala talks about the alleged forced religious conversions in Malabar that took place in the 1950s. There are several such reports in *Kesari*, similar to the so-called “love jihad” allegations of recent times. “Some agents are forcefully converting Hindu women and coercing them for marriage. they are misusing the silence of Hindus.”<sup>v</sup>

The publications of Sangh Parivar pushed several such articles to create an Islamophobic environment. A conflict that occurred in front of the Chavakkad Mannathala festival during a temple

procession was written about in the paper with an emotional headline- “Hindus under threat.”<sup>vi</sup> The article also criticises the government for funding the Malappuram ‘Nercha’. Muslims in Tanoor were branded as ‘Pak Muslims’ after the conflicts in 1964 by the *Varika* editorial. (August 30, 1964). The issues around Tali temple was one of the incidents that strengthened anti-Muslim sentiments. *Varika* describes the issues that occurred in Ponnani with an emotional thrust. The conflict that occurred on that day and the further clashes in front of a mosque were represented as continuations. Another incident of a wedding procession being attacked in front of a mosque was represented in a similar manner. Sangh Parivar tried to represent these incidents as threats to Hindu religious integrity, thereby attempting to gain some political mileage.

## Religious Fundamentalism

Issues related to religious fundamentalism strengthened around the 1980s. One of the incidents was the burning of a cinema talkie in Malappuram. Despite several talkies being burned, the culprits were not identified, strengthening the suspicion. The assassination of Chekannur Maulavi was one of the incidents that became a public discussion in Kerala. This incident, which was questioned by even the Muslim intellectuals, was used to create hate against all Muslims. Another incident is when the palm of a professor in Thodupuzha was cut off. These two incidents were used to portray the entire Muslim population as intolerant.

## Intolerance

The gulf boom and the migration of Malayalis for work in the 1980s created huge changes in the

Muslim community. Educational enterprises gained much prominence during this period. The middle class became a prominent group during this period. The money from Gulf could fund the building of more schools and religious institutions. The social and financial growth of the community is said to have caused intolerance in several others. The money from Gulf enabled the building of more luxurious homes, the purchase of estates and buildings. Large donations could now be made to mosques, schools and religious institutions. More unaided educational institutions were constructed during this period. Other than Muslim funded institutions, Amritha School, Bharatiya Vidya Nikethan etc also became prominent during this time. The practise of children from certain communities studying in the unaided schools of their

community itself is another practise that caused the strengthening of communal feelings.

According to Roland Miller, the background of Mappila riots, the communal feelings gained from the interaction with Muslims from other states, the political activities of major Muslim parties etc have caused a division between Muslims and Hindus.<sup>vii</sup> Due to historical reasons, the Muslim community is closer in affiliation to the Muslim League. The League, with their affiliation to Congress and several parties in the Left, has created a major space in politics. The controversy regarding Malappuram state originated while the League was affiliated with the Left. The division of the district was necessary considering the population density. The opposition raised to the proposal was something that could

incite religious conflict. The Indian Express headline written in opposition to the division of the district was titled ‘Mappilastan’ (or the land of Mappilas).<sup>viii</sup> This shows that there were moves made in the national level to prevent the division of the district. The Sangh Parivar made attempts to strengthen the Hindutva agenda in this context. Malappuram is currently the most populous district in Kerala. The situation is so serious that even a demand for the division of the district for ease of administration is being considered in the light of communalism.

### **Babri Masjid/ Gujarat**

Both of these incidents strengthen the community conscience in Kerala. L. K. Advani’s ‘rathyathra’ spread fear across the country. ‘Rathyathra’ was able to increase the existing communal divisions. Abdul

Nasser Madani and his Islamic Sevak Sangh entered active politics after the Ayodhya incident. Madani attracted huge crowds with his cutting-edge speeches criticising the Hindutva forces in Indian politics. As expected, communal clashes increased during this period.

The Gujarat riots was another event that worsened the communalism in India. The political unrest created fertile grounds for the growth of communalism. The riots in Gujarat, closely resembling a genocide strengthened thoughts in the minds of religious minorities of the need for unity within their communities.

### **Issues of morality**

It was in the 1980s that conflicts due to morality issues became more common. Such incidents are reported in bigger numbers from Kasargod district. Hindu fundamentalist groups like Sri

Ram Sena caused several attacks in Mangalore (in Karnataka) in the name of concerns over morality. Such attacks were slowly spreading in Kasargod as well. These attacks were mostly against men and women from other communities. *The Hindu* reported an incident of a young man from a different religion being beaten up for speaking to a girl (17<sup>th</sup> January 2012) and Asianet reported a case of an auto driver taking a young woman and her sick daughter to the hospital being detained and getting beaten up. The young woman and the auto driver were from different religious backgrounds. There was an incident in Mayyil where a youngster who was chatting with his pregnant wife got beaten up. Several such incidents are being reported from North Malabar.

### **Communalism/ Conflicts**

Fundamentalism festers from the attempts to politicize religious doctrines. Even though there were clashes in Kerala after 1956, the first major religious conflict occurred in 1971 in Thalasseri. Later, there were conflicts in places like Marad, Vizhinjam, Poonthura etc. The conflict that broke out in Chala in 1982 resulted in a death. It also caused losses amounting to crores.

Thalasseri is a place with a large population of Tiyyas and Mappilas. Even during the colonial era, these groups would clash with each other in the name of business. There were minor clashes as well. There were arguments in the name of the ‘varavu’ processions from the sacred groves passing in front of mosques. This led to several Hindu-Muslim clashes.<sup>ix</sup> Even though there is such a history in Thalassery, such incidents were not

reported later. The report probing the cause for the conflicts finds that there was a huge shift after the units of R.S.S. and Janasangha began operation there. The Sangh Parivar organizations campaigned to claim that as long as the Muslim League ruled the place, Hindus would never be granted justice. The Commission mentions some unfortunate incidents that took place before the conflict broke out. One of them was a Muslim woman facing an acid attack from her husband's family on the allegation that she had a relationship with a man from the Hindu community. This incident was publicized as proof of Muslim fundamentalism. Similarly, a person named Gangadhran was injured by another named Arabimammu with a knife. However, there was delay from the part of the police to arrest the accused. All these incidents are said to

have strengthened religious intolerance. This was the background in which Thalassery riots broke out.

It is alleged that someone from a hotel named Noor Jahan threw a shoe at a 'varavu' procession from Muthappan kavu in Thalasseri on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1971. The hotel was destroyed immediately. The 'varavu' procession of that year was different from the usual tradition. Women and children were not part of it. The Commission finds that the shoe was not likely thrown by someone from the Muslim community. One, if they had such an intention, they would have taken precautions before the attack. Second, if the shoe was thrown from the hotel, the perpetrator could have been identified easily. No attempt was made for the same. Attacks against Muslims continued. Mosques and madrasas were attacked. Muslim

travellers were pursued after and attacked. What followed was the counter-attack of Muslims. The news of mosques being attacked caused great provocation. Several businesses of Hindus were attacked. More mosques and shops were attacked during this phase. There were rumours spread that some Hindu college girls were paraded naked in the Thalassery town and that the Jagannatha temple was set to fire. Such rumours were easily spread in villages and this increased the attacks against Muslims. The commission reports that people participated in these attacks losing all sense of their political affiliations. M.V. Raghavan says that the C.P.M leadership of the time interfered strongly to shield the Muslims from these attacks.<sup>x</sup>The Thalassery riots were the start of Kerala's violent communalism. Attempts were made to strengthen RSS

in Malabar in the after-math of the riots.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid was another incident that affected the Hindu-Muslim relations in India. The Ayodhya campaigns of Sangh Parivar tried to destroy the friendly relationships between the different religious communities. The conflicts in places like Thanoor, Meparambu (Palakkadu) etc are proof of this. An attack was launched in Meparambu against a BJP protest. A Muslim girl was killed in a gun fight that followed this incident. Even though the Yohannan Commission Report that studied the event says that the girl was killed unexpectedly, the effect it had on society was huge.

The Maradu riots was something that caused discussions at the national level. Maradu was led to conflict by several social and financial factors that

inform life in the coastal area. Maradu was the largest riot in Kerala considering the number of people that were killed in a single event. There were some small-scale conflicts in some areas of Maradu in 1974 and 1984. It occurred again in 2002. It began with a conflict between two people during New Year celebrations. Even though the issue was solved, some rumours elevated the matter to a different plane. About five people were killed in several clashes. Several houses were targeted. There were external influences on both communities to increase the communal divide. Several articles were published with statements like Hindus potentially facing the condition of Kashmiri Hindus and having to leave the state if they are not careful. The Commission report says that the state government did not take adequate measures to put an end to

such campaigns. The report also alleges that the police did not take adequate measures to prevent the riots from breaking out in sensitive areas. The second Maradu riots happened in this context. Dr Ramdas, who completed a PhD thesis on communalism in coastal areas says that the Maradu riots give us some indicators of the communal tendencies in coastal areas. Extremism, the influence of Havala Mani, extremely violent attacks etc were some visible aspects of the Maradu riots. “The Maradu riots gave fertile grounds for the Sangh Parivar to spread their agenda. The campaigns of the Hindu Aikyavedi (Hindu United Front) create fear in the minds of people.”<sup>xi</sup>

Several committees have been formed to study the different riots in Kerala and these have led to several recommendations. The Yohannan Commission asked that permanent

outposts are created in violence-prone areas and that the any moves to withdraw police cases of violence during riots should be stopped. This is an important recommendation. This is because there are pockets where violence occurs routinely. The Commission also highlights the importance of educating the people against communalism. Thomas P. Josphe report says that religious instruction in schools should be under government control. The Commission also asks for the reform of religious educational institutions. Most aided educational institutions are under the control of religious or caste-based managements. In most of these institutions, the staff consists of people from those religious or caste backgrounds. (When aided institutions are counted within the folds of public educational institutions, it proves

difficult for the aims of public educational institutions to be met. Private unaided institutions are proving to be a roadblock in meeting the agenda of plurality and inclusivity.) The Vithayathil Commission has recommended that a separate cell be formed in the police to deal with issues of fundamentalism and religious conflict. The Commission also reacts to the issue of communalism within the Police force. The Report mentions an incident where some policemen shouted at the protestors in Thalassery to return to Pakistan. In practise, the government mostly ignores the recommendations of the Commissions.

The aspects discussed above show the polarity of religious conflict today. The contemporary situation shows that Hindu-Muslim communities in India are shifting to a pan-Hindu and pan-Muslim identity. The demolition of

the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots contributed to this. Even though this type of communalism hasn't reached a fully organized stage, religious interferences have become a threat to the liberal society. The time to examine the factors that threaten the multiplicity

of voices in society and the goodwill between diverse communities is long past. The carelessness in solving fundamental structural issues lead to communalism and increase the chances for violent confrontations on religious grounds.

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I Ronald Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1976.

<sup>ii</sup>Ronald Miller, *op.cit*, p.232.

<sup>iii</sup>Kamal Pasha, 'Muslim Religious Education' in Asgar Ali Engineer (Ed.), *Kerala Muslims a Historical Perspective*, Ajantha, Delhi, 1995, p.134.

<sup>iv</sup>O. Rajagopal, *Jeevithmritham*, D C Books, Kottayam, 2009, pg.43.

<sup>v</sup>*Kesari Varika*, 14 June 1952.

<sup>vi</sup>*Ibid*, 13 April 1958.

<sup>vii</sup>Ronald Miller, *op.cit*, 176.

<sup>viii</sup>Indian Express, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1968.

<sup>ix</sup>See Dileep Menon, *op cit*.

<sup>x</sup>M.V. Raghavan, *Oru Janmam*, D C Books, Kottayam, 2009, pg. 166.

<sup>xi</sup>P. Ramdas, *Socio-economic roots of Communalism in Coastal Malabar*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calicut.