

Original Research Article

Religious Conversion and Growth of Islam in Malabar from 9th to 16th Century: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract: In the records of Kerala, the role of religious conversion in the growth of Muslims in Malabar cannot be omitted. Religious conversion is the adoption of a set of ideals identified with a particular nonsecular denomination to the exclusion of others. An inflexible caste system in Malabar gave remarkable growth to Islam. Like Christianity, Islam is a missionary faith, but pressured conversion is not practiced by using Islam like different missionaries. Conversion to Islam becomes a method found by the lower castes to get away from persecution from the top castes.

Keywords: Conversion, Slave Castes, untouchability, Monotheism, Jenni, Cherumakkal.

INTRODUCTION

The Muslims of Malabar experienced numerous religious challenges from the Portuguese and British. The colonial authority has had a tremendous impact on the Malabar Muslim community. The spread of Islam in Kerala (Malabar) through the religious conversion of locals occurred in two stages. Between the 9th and 16th centuries, Arab-Muslim commercial relations and Sufi Da'wat (the concept of religious preaching in Islam) aided the initial wave of conversion (Pius, 2010). In this phase of the medieval period, the natives were attracted to the new religion by the cultural and economic presence of the Arabs or the Arab-Muslim cosmopolitanism. Most of the conversions that took place during the period, especially from the 14th to the 16th century, were related to the political economy of Zamorins, then the rulers of Calicut. By the 14th century, certain sections of Muslims in Calicut, those directly or indirectly engaged in trade, had obtained special privileges from the native rulers (M Aslam, 2016) The important factor explaining this phenomenon is the political change that has taken place, followed by economic development, in the region. In the mid-14th century, a new political trend began in the region with the shifting of the seat of rulers from inland agrarian canters to maritime trading centers to achieve maximum economic benefits and political power.

The Portuguese invasion of Malabar was a historical development that disrupted the region's socio-political order. There had been no reports of inter-communal unrest in this area before their arrival. They forged a trade relationship with the Zamorins not long after their arrival. The Arabs, who had a stranglehold on international trade in the region, were dealt a setback by this new trade agreement. Zamorins preferred Arabs because they brought prosperity to the Malabar region. Evidence from inscriptions shows that Zamorin supported Islam in Kerala. The Arab settlements in Malabar's major coastal towns started to grow under this patronage. By entering into marriages with local groups, Arabs elevated their trade to a cultural level and solidified their bonds with the local populace.

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METHODOLOGY

The present paper is based on the primary and Secondary data collected from various source fields like field visits and published literature on the subject concern. A descriptive and analytical method has been applied in the entire study and a methodical study is required to comprehend the historical facts of religion and conversion and to document a region's current socioeconomic conditions, so it uses quantitative and qualitative methodologies to build hypotheses that can be tested within an applied framework.

CAUSES OF THE NON-SECULAR CONVERSION

The most important factor for the conversion to Islam was the severe and oppressive caste system and untouchability that prevailed in Malabar. The Nambudiri is at the apex of the ritual system based on caste. The Nambudiri Brahmins, who account for 8% of Hindus, have ritual status but are not a big political force. There are a few Kshatriya descendants from the ancient Malabar kingdoms among the lower castes, but no local Vaisyas. The Nayar, the traditional warrior, is the most significant caste below the Nambudiri. The Nayars or Nairs are a wealthy landowning community that accounts for 25.3% of Kerala's Hindus. The ancient service castes, such as barbers and laundresses, are statistically small below the Nayar. Traditional tappers (toddy-tappers), also known as Ezhavas or Tiyyar in Malabar, are the caste with the highest levels of pollution. The poor Ezhavas, who account for 44.4% of the Hindu population, are dominating the Palghat area, where they till the land of wealthy Tamil Brahmin landowners. The scheduled castes, who account for 20.4% of all Hindus, are lower than the Ezhavas. The Playas (Cheruman) are the most important caste in this group, which included Brahmins, temple employees, and Nayar agricultural serfs till 1850.

Each of these castes in the ritual hierarchy is further broken into several lesser endogamous sub-castes. There are more than 100 Nayar sub-castes, for example. Each sub-caste is graded hierarchically inside the greater caste grouping. To justify their heinous practices, the Brahmins had the support of the scriptures. The Rigveda, for example, states that Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra were created from the face, hands, thighs, and feet of the Brahma, respectively, and that since the Brahmins were superior, it was the duty of the lower caste to obey them (M Aslam, 2016). They were based on (i) keeping a prescribed distance from the superior person, (ii) removing any cloth covering the shoulders and head, (iii) using a self-denouncing form of speech with special standardized servile expressions in conversation, and (iv) asserting bodily poses that have been culturally standardized (A. Ayyapan, 1965).

The required distance to prevent pollution varies according to caste standing. A low Paraya (untouchable caste) cannot go into the streets where high caste Hindus walk (Saradmoni, K. 1973) Thus, a Nair should not approach a Nambudiri closer than six paces, a Barber caste member closer than twelve distances, a Tiyyan closer than thirty-six paces, and a Pulayan closer than ninety-six paces (Mattison, 1978). The distance is twenty-four feet for Kammalan and artisan and seventy-four feet for the Nayadis (Innes, 1952). In the first decade of the twentieth century, Innes observes that "at present-day upper caste males when strolling along the road emit a warning grunt or hoot to the person of any lower caste who afterward recede to the proper distance" (ibid.). Thurston interviewed the Nayadis in Shornur in 1901 because of filth, which they traditionally take with them. To avoid walking across the large bridge that spans the Bharatha Puzha (Ponnani river) and instead takes a long-convoluted detour. According to Gilbert Slater, "up until 1916, no man.... other than the.... jemmies were allowed to tile his house, build an upstairs building, or a gateway." Even now, asking for such approval for a riot is risky... No guy should approach him wearing more than one cloth around his waist that does not fall below his knees (ibid).

Excommunication or, more often than not, death was the minimum penalty for anyone who broke the law. Under the native rajas, Nairs had no qualms about slaughtering several inferior castes who had approached within contaminating distance of his person (Francis Buchanan, 1807). If a lower caste guy were to accidentally touch a Nair lady, her relatives would promptly kill her, as would the man who touched her and all his relatives (Innes, op. Cit. p. 116). This demonstrates that even blood links were destroyed to maintain caste restrictions.

SLAVE CASTES

Slavery is another deeply ingrained societal evil in Kerala. It was very common throughout the region. The owners and landlords owned, bought, and sold various "slave castes" just like any other property (Saradmoni, 1973). Slavery was strictly a hereditary system in Kerala, and a person born into a slave caste could not change his caste throughout his life (Kusuman, 1973). They made up around 13% of the population in 1881. This included the Kanakkan, Kutana, and Pulayan castes, also known as Cheruman, Parayan, and Vettuvans. The majority of them are endogamous. When a member of one of these castes dies, the landlord provides a spade to dig a grave, an axe or knife to cut wood for fuel if the corpse is to be burned, a piece of cloth for the dead body, and some paddy and millet to cover funeral expenditures.

Pulayan's other names are Cheruman and Cherumakkal. The term Cheruman alludes to the soil's sons. Cherumakkal is a combination of the words Cher and Makkal. Cher refers to moist dirt or mud, and Makkal refers to

children. Another theory is that Chira signifies bund and Makkal are people who live on field bunds. They were agricultural serfs who lived on their masters' farms. They were divided into 39 divisions in Malabar¹⁰. The Pulayas' position declined dramatically around the end of the nineteenth century. They were seen as essentially agricultural tools in the hands of landlords. Every morning, the master's representative summons them to work in their fields, plowing, getting water from wells, and generally doing all aspects of cultivation. As compensation, they are given a set amount of unhusked rice in the evening.

The Parayan comes after Cheruman in the sequence of precedence. They were not permitted to walk near the homes of persons of higher castes. They were also not permitted to walk on the public road. They rarely bathed and ate cattle flesh. There are also subgroups of Parayas (Moffatt, 1979). They were bought and sold like buffaloes, forced to work all day for a small amount of rice, and kept at a distance because they were polluted, and they were in a position of subservience and severe degradation not unlike the Playas. Vettuvans are agricultural serfs as well. They perform agricultural tasks such as plowing, sowing, weeding, transplanting, pumping water, caring for plants, and reaping them. They also have a lot of sub-sections. The one piece of cloth distributed annually by masters to whose plantations they are linked serves as both male and female attire. Chandalas of the plains were Ullatans and Nayadis, and Chandalas of the forest were Malayans and Kadans. They are not allowed to touch the water and must fast for a day if they do. As a result, they were incredibly filthy. The Nayadis are hunters who are at the bottom of Kerala's Hindu caste system (Anna, 2004). They were exiled from villages and lived on low hills near farmed regions, with only a bush or a rock for cover. They wanted to live in isolation and covered their nakedness with leaves and vegetation threads. Malayar, also known as Kadar, was a hill and jungle dweller. They were all divided into each claiming superiority over the others.

PROCESS AND TYPE OF ISLAMISATION

Like Brahmanical Hinduism and Christianity, Islam is a missionary religion. The Quran denounces and discourages forcible conversions and the Qur'anic injunctions like "let there will be no compulsion in religion" (Michael Bonner, 2008) and "will thou then compel mankind against their will to believe!" (Qur-an. 10: 99.) etc., clearly show that conversion has to be made by persuasion and preaching and it has been left to the people's conviction. The underlying emphasis behind this tolerance is the Qur'anic concept of equal power of God over good and evil and it is by His will that evil and unbelief exist as the antithesis of goodness and faith.

The subject of why people convert to Islam has always elicited strong emotions. Earlier generations of European scholars believed that conversions to Islam were forced and that conquered peoples were given the option of conversion or death. Conversion through force, while not unheard of in Muslim countries, is now known to be uncommon. Muslim conquerors often sought to control rather than convert, and the vast majority of conversions to Islam were voluntary. (...) In most cases, worldly and spiritual motivations for conversion merged. Moreover, conversion to Islam did not necessarily imply a complete turn from an old to a new life. While it entailed the acceptance of new religious beliefs and membership in a new religious community, most converts retained a deep attachment to the cultures and communities from which they came (Ira M. Lapidus. 1988).

Proselytization of Islam on the coast of Malabar was done in conjunction with the letter and spirit of the Quran. The egalitarian ideals of Islam, the existence of Arab colonies, the social and economic systems in the region, and the positive attitude of the native rulers were the main factors that made Malabar a fertile region for Islam. The bulk of the people had grown tired of religious exploitation and feudal jemmies, and they sought sanctuary in a new system that provided them with relief and liberty. With the demise of Buddhism, and subsequently its slow absorption by Brahmanism, a vacuum was created in which oppressed people suffered in the absence of a philosophy on which to rely. Islam filled the void and provided them with an alternative. Thus, in the instance of Malabar, the remark that "Islam spread more rapidly in those areas where Buddhism had hung on till the time of its entrance" (Azeez Ahammad, 1964) was correct. Furthermore, social, economic, political, and theological circumstances facilitated the development of the new faith in Malabar.

RATIONAL ADMIRATION FOR ISLAM

Since the Muslims did not have a pollution problem, they established close contact with the lower castes who practiced various professions. At the same time, the lower castes had greater freedom under their Mappila overlords than they had under the Brahmins or the Nairs. This persuaded them to accept their lords' religion. According to Gaspar Correa, a 16th-century Portuguese writer, "after they (the lower class) became Moors, they (the lower class) could walk wherever they wished and eat whatever they pleased." When they became Moors, the Moors provided them with clothing and gowns to wear." In numerous situations, low-caste Hindus reared by Muslims converted to Islam (Stanley, 1849). Muslim traders were wealthy and maintained a higher standard of living and culture, which might have influenced the upper and lower classes to accept the Islamic faith. Al Biruni, an 11th-century scholar, confirms this fact when visiting India. He says that "their (Muslim) style of life and work aroused curiosity even among the Hindu elites who remained in

the urban centers and came into contact with them as a result. As for artisans and day laborers, they were not well placed in the traditional Hindu system. Hindu law and customs had already dehumanized them (Trans, 1910).

RESULTS OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSION

When epidemics of such miseries occurred among the low castes, Muslims came for their help and relief. On the other hand, caste obligations prevented the upper castes from approaching and helping these victims. Muslims also took responsibility for the relief of the affected persons and their families. These people also embraced Islam as gratitude (Arnold, 1985). The social equality maintained by Muslims was a new experience for Hindus who often cited it as an important characteristic of Muslims. The lines, “to the beloved Kunhali of Kottakkal. Tiyyans and Nairs are alike, “of the northern ballads indicate the attitude of Muslims towards the upper and lower castes. It was a common practice among the lower castes to visit the Muslim saints and their shrines to invoke blessings to solve their problems.

The conversion of upper caste Hindus was mainly due to ex-communication, a punishment that the caste regulations inflicted upon society. Those who account for the breach of social observances such as eating forbidden food, associating with people considered to be impure, and violating of rules of marriage or sexual connections, were expelled from the community and all connections with them were severed. To such people life became difficult and they resorted to Islam or Christianity. Describing the ex-communication of Nairs. Barbosa says that the excommunicated Nair was forced to run away from the country. Otherwise, they were sold to the lower castes. Such people found refuge either in Christianity or in Islam (Padmanabhan Menon, 1963). According to Narayana Panikkar, “caste discrimination became acute during the Portuguese period and this facilitated the growth of Islam and Christianity (Narayana Panikkar, 1978).

Despite being Mlecchas, or filthy or impure, the Hindus of Malabar respected the Muslims. In his travelogue, Ibn Battuta stated, "Muslims are most highly esteemed among them... Except they (Hindus) do not eat with them or allow them into their homes." Converts from low castes were given the same rank, despite their pollution and degradation. The economic aspect driving this cordial interdependence was that the Kings and Hindus relied heavily on Muslims for their dealings. Because there was no Vysya or commercial caste among Malabar Hindus, the Mappilas filled the void, and the inter-relationship became unavoidable. Furthermore, the Mappilas did not participate in political affairs or disrupt Hindu social structures. The converts participated in the new cultural and social process and they were successful in maneuvering respectable positions in the same society.

CONCLUSION

"Religious conversion" would describe leaving membership in one denomination and joining another. This can be from one denomination to another within the same religion, for example, from Baptist to Catholic Christianity or from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam (Stark, 2010). In some cases, religious conversion “marks a transformation of religious identity and is symbolized by particular rituals” (Meintel, 2007) as far as Islam is concerned, the great conversion of the lower castes took place between the 9th to 16th centuries. To avoid the disadvantages and discrimination of upper castes, the tenant's sole option was to convert to Islam or Christianity. "Conversion," according to the author of Islam in India. " Certainly, occur in the Musselman community, but they are primarily the result of social reasons. Outcaste Hindus, widely known as untouchables, have begun to recognize that their position as the object of contempt for all who adhere to the stringent rules of Brahmanism is intolerable. After conversion, Islam provides a full franchise to such people.

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