

Re-Visiting the Impact of Dravidian And Folk Culture On Kerala Muslims

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Abstract

Dravidian and folk customs and practices have made an indelible impact on Kerala Muslims. Islam spread in Kerala particularly through conversion, especially, from Hindus who were steeped in Dravidian and folk customs and practices. The influence of the pre-conversion mindset remains in the minds of the converted as psychological remnants. As for the Kerala Muslims, they have continued to follow the Dravidian and folk customs and practices which they had been following prior to their conversion. The influence of these are found in their festivals, art forms, saint- hero worship and treatment for diseases.

Key words: Uruz, Nerchas, Velas, Pooram, Dargah, Id- Ul- Fitr, Bakrid, Kolk kali, Parichamuttukali, Kalarippayattu, Rateeb

Introduction

This article seeks to bring out the impact of Dravidian and folk customs and practices on the Kerala

Muslims. Islam spread in Kerala as soon as it originated in Arabia. Among the immigrants the Muslims occupy a predominant status in the society of Kerala. Though the religion of Islam was born in

Arabia, it had attracted many converts to its fold, thanks to its preaching of egalitarianism

and universal brotherhood. This is especially true as far as Kerala is concerned. In Kerala, Islam proved to be a deliverance from the social oppression, social inequality and caste system which characterised the society. Though Islam brought about radical changes in the society, the newly- converted Muslims could not free themselves from certain influences which had been in vogue for centuries in the Kerala Society. This article is an earnest attempt to analyse the impact of those influences on Kerala Muslims.

Unity in diversity is the attraction of Indian culture. This is particularly true in the case of Kerala as well. Kerala culture, a part of the vibrant Dravidian culture, is considered by scholars as both ancient and contemporary with immense historical depth and significance. The main current of Kerala culture is the living and continuous flow for six thousand years or more with smaller cultural currents that have entered the mainstream from time to time at different historical junctures.

Religions like Islam and Christianity flourished through conversion. Religion is an aspect of culture, and the environment includes both the natural world and human society. The influence of the pre-conversion mindset remains in the minds of the converted followers as psychological remnants which are natural to human nature. This is because of the personal temperament of the individual and also because of the atavistic persuasions of the human psyche that is primarily conditioned to a life space through symbols and myths. But this process is fraught with tension. Islamic theology strives hard to establish a pan-Islamic code of conduct in all aspects of Islamic faith with puritanical fervour. But the endeavours of the partisans fail to attain the desired results because the followers who are mostly converts find it hard to serve their archetypal links to the local cultures from which they originated and prevail. This helps to the prevalence of Dravidian customs and practices among Muslim of Kerala.

Though the religion of Islam was born in Arabia, it had attracted many converts to its fold, thanks to the monotheistic message it expounded. Kerala had trade relations with West Asian ports long before the establishment of the Roman Empire. Among the countries with which Kerala had trade relations, Arabia occupied a paramount place. Naturally Islam spread in Kerala as soon as it originated in Arabia. The main reasons which favoured and paved the way for the growth of Islam in Kerala were : Kerala's geography, Muslim

merchants' contributions in the economic sector, and the caste system prevailed among the Hindus. Besides, Islam's preaching of universal brotherhood, and social equality had attracted people towards the new faith (Ampotti A.K. p. 25.)

In Kerala, Islam presented itself as a deliverance from social oppression. Social inequality and caste prejudices brought the low caste people into the fold of Islam. They considered the conversion to Islam as an emancipation from slavery. The low caste Hindus were able to enjoy many benefits by conversion to Islam (P.K. Muhammed Kunji, p. 63) At the same time, the newly - converts followed several Dravidian and folk customs and practices which they had been following for several centuries.

Festivals: Nerchas and Uruz

The festivals of Kerala Muslims reflect the influence of Dravidian and folk culture the people of Kerala had been following over the centuries. Though the Muslims meticulously followed the tenets of Islam, they had not hesitated in accepting the cultural moorings of Kerala. It gave rise to the Muslims incorporating certain unIslamic practices in their lives, and it resulted in symbiosis and assimilation of cultures (K.K. N. Kurup, p. 19). The Nercha festivals have close resemblance with folk festivals like Velas and Poorams. Velas and Poorams are seasonal festivals held in the Kavus. They are connected with folk and agriculture. Most of these are held between March and May. Nercha is also a seasonal, harvest festival. It shares common

ceremonial pattern with most Velas and Poorams. In Nerchas, procession, beating drums and fireworks seem to be compulsory. Procession of elephants, panchavadya, musical feats and religious discourses form part of Nercha festivals - they are proof of the similarity. They are conducted within the ritual frame work derived from the worship of folk deities in Kerala. Nerchas are usually seen at Pattambi, Malappuram, Kontotti, Mananthala, Changanasseri, Puthur Palli in Kottayam, Kakkayam Palli, Antikhattu Palli, Nooranadu Kavumpad Palli in Alappuzha, Kalamala Palli, Erumeli in Pathanamthitta, Mayyathumkara Palli in Kollam, Edakunnam Palli, Erattupetta Palli, Kanjiramattam and Beema Palli in Thiruvananthapuram.

Among the nerchas, the most important one is the Mamburam Nercha. It is held at the residence of the Mamburam Tangals (Sayyed Alavi Thangal). The place was in the northern side of Kadalundi river (Ottamaliyekkal Muthukoya Thangal, p.12). Tangals were sufis. Both Muslims and non-muslims were attracted by their spiritual and personal qualities. In course of time, the residence (madam) became a centre of devotion, and large number of people (devotees) offered nerchas to the Tangal.

Malappuram Nercha is another important nercha. It is held at the Jaram (tomb), adjacent to the jama'at mosque in Valiyannagadi in Malappuram. It is held in commemoration of the fight between the Mappilas of Malappuram and the Nair

retainers of Para Nambi. It was alleged that the retainers of Para Nambi decided to chastise the troublesome Mappila tenants and tried to set fire the Jama'at Mosque, which was resisted by the Mappilas. In the fight that ensued, forty four Mappilas and one goldsmith were killed, but the attempt to set fire to the mosque was foiled. The event was commemorated by the nercha (A. P. Ibrahim Kunju, p. 193).

Kondotti Nercha is held in honour of a sufi saint Muhammad Sha. This nercha is held in the month of March every year. During this time the paddy fields are cleared after the harvest and it is the time of carnival. Hundreds of visitors, especially women, pour into the bazaars and buy trinkets and sweetmeat. The first item in the festivities is the Kolkkali, singing songs in praise of God, Sheikh Muhammad Shah and Sheikh Muhiyuddin. Then the naqara is sounded, at the sound of which the cannons are fired. Next day, the main ceremony of the nercha begins with the Varavu. The first Varavu is greeted at a distance from the Dargah by a representative of the Tangal, 'Who is seated on a small horse symbolically shaded with a parasol held by a servant'. The varavu first proceeds to the Dargah, and then to the Tangal's home. During the concluding ceremonies on the following day, the Sufi Silsilah of the Tangal is recited and a special sweet known as Shirni is distributed to the disciples (A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, pp.193-194).

The earthly remains of Sayyidah Nizamah Beevi and her son, Sayyid Mahin Abubakar remain in Beemapalli Dargah. It

is believed that Beevi and her son are the companions of Malik-ibn-Dinar, they settled in Thiruvallam. Sayyid Mahin Abubakar was killed in a scuffle and was buried at Punthura. Beevi also, on her death, was buried near her son's grave (A. P. Ahammed Musaliyar, pp.20-21). People believe that prayer at their graves bring blessings to the devotees. In course of time, Dargha was erected around their graves and a ten day annual festival was held ending with the death anniversary of Nizamah Beevi on 11th Jamad-UI-Akhir. The Beema Palli Uruz attracts various Muslims and non-Muslims. Uruz festivals are conducted in the Jarams in connection with death anniversaries of saints and martyrs, they bear resemblance to the temple festivals of Kerala. Procession and sanctification of residential area are part and parcel of Uruz. Melam and fireworks are inevitable. In Thiruvananthapuram, Beema palli Uruz is a very famous festival. The colourful Sufi inspired Uruz celebrations stand in contrast to the austerity of Muslim festivals like Idul-Fitar and Bakrid. Uruz festivals are a much livelier and joyous affair. This festival has a very wide mass appeal with thousands participating in the festivals. (Ibid, pp.50-51)

Rateeb is another form of nercha celebrated by some Muslims of Kerala. Rateeb is also conducted in the name of Sufi Saint Ahmed Kabeer Rifayi. The priests make bruises on body with knives, dagger etc. These bruises disappear while they recite hymns in honour of the Shaikh. Rateeb is mainly conducted for preventing

the spread of epidemic or mortal diseases in their family and their locality. It is like the Velichappadu Thullal (oracle performance) in the temple. The oracle here strikes his forehead with a sword to the accompaniment of drum-beats (P.K. Muhammed Kunji, p.258).

Art forms

Muslims of Kerala adopt several visual art form in folk. They have adopted it and made suitable changes. Of the several art forms of Kerala the most popular among the mappilas is kolkali (Raghavan Payyanad, p. 179). Kolkali is widespread in Kerala. It is related to kalaripayattu (N. Kathirikoya, p.50). Fast paces and steps, captivating outpouring, sweet songs etc. are its features. This is a sort of play in which participants stand inside and outside. Participants wear different costumes unlike the Hindus and there is no traditional lamp in the middle. Movements and kolady bear resemblance to Kalaripayattu.

Parichamuttukali is an adoption of kalaripayattu. The players stand in circle. Wielding paricha in one hand and a baton in other, the players stand. Guru or kurukkal sings songs. The group consists of at least twelve players. The players cover inside and outside of the circle. There is one beating the rhythm. All the players are charged with zeal and enthusiasm.

Kurikkalum kuttikalum is an art form for the under sixteen children. It is like kolkali. Sometimes players tie hipchains round their hips. They usually sing mappila songs. Mappila teyyam is the

indigenous art of Kerala folk. Theyyams of Muslims are Arumpoomkanni, Bapurian, Ali teyyam and Madai teyyam (P.K. Muhammed Kunji, p. 321). The cult of teyyam is a ritualistic art form. Even in such performance, the Muslim characters are incorporated as boatmen of the Goddesses.

Saint Hero Worship and Treatment for Diseases

In the folk culture, relief from diseases is attained through offerings to rustic deities like kaali, appooppan (grandparents), chathans, manthramoorthy, kannichav, marutha and pay (ghosts). Even now this system of attaining relief from diseases still exists among all walks of people. Reflections of this sort can be seen in khabr and Jaram.

Tombs or graves of saints are centres of treatment also. In the Dravidian folk, there is panacea for many ills without medicine. There are unnumbered people who believe in relief from ills where modern medicine has failed miserably, through prasadam or offerings to khabr (Some respondents, interview held on 16.1.2018).

Each and every Jaram gives importance to distinct diseases. Beemapalli in Thiruvananthapuram gives treatment for insanity. Here, there are three Holy wells, believed to contain medicinal water, bathing in which is believed to cure people from diseases. It is also believed that tying of mantras infused threads around the wrists would give relief to the afflicted. People

consider Beema beevi's karamath also as a form of treatment.

Some people believe in the power of dead one's soul that is prayed for panacea for the ills of people. Khabr is another of the same sort of invocation of soul for treatment. It is an acknowledged fact that one who has just embraced Islam is not free from his recent past. Newly converted may not have understood everything about the new religion into which they have been indoctrinated. He has a tip of old customs and traditions with him. His new generation also carries the same.

Conclusion

A perusal of the customs and practices of Kerala Muslims bring out that they have meticulously followed the Dravidian and folk culture which they had been following prior to their conversion to Islam. They could not free themselves from the influence of pre-conversion mindset which is quite natural. This is evident if their festivals are analysed, especially Nerchas and Uruz. This influence can also be seen in their art forms, saint - hero worship and treatment for some diseases. Though the Muslims of Kerala follow these customs and practices, they are strict adherents to the tenets of Islam.

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