



## Role of Devotional Literature in the Enlightenment of Kerala Muslims

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The realm of the written word in local Muslim communities was vast and encompassed many themes, genres and linguistic forms (Ricci, 2011). The devotional genres, as Padwick observed, take a major part of such literatures (1977). The literary initiatives with devotional themes occupy a considerable position in the worldwide Islamic society. For it helps to create a submissive mindedness towards religion and generate piety in oneself, a high focus has been given to the production of such literatures in every Muslim circle.<sup>1</sup> With a Sufistic perspective, the devotional literatures may enable its reciters/readers to 'the inculcation of ethical norms, the cultivation of an inner life, and the encouragement of devotion to elders and holy men, living and dead, who may serve as teachers, guides, exemplars, intercessors and conduits of charisma' (Metcalf, 2009: 18). Beyond the purification of self, the devotional literatures also have a persistent role in making a community powerful and awakened. Taking Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka as fields of study, Susan Elizabeth Schaumburg has substantiated this argument in her work on *reviving religion*.<sup>2</sup> The role of Islamic literatures in the reconstruction of Muslim communities on its diverse aspects is not a later notion developed in the wake of colonial modernity. Rather, it had a long history traced back to the inception of the literary history of Islam itself. The interconnectedness of literature, religion and social awakening is an already proven formula, which does not need more explanation here.<sup>3</sup>

In the backdrop of several recent studies conducted on the socio-religious, and literary-cultural formation of Muslims throughout the India Ocean regions, it becomes obvious that the common element that worked as catalyst in the making of their identity was the spirit of Islam shared from the same source and transmitted by the seafaring Sufis. This particular state, which is

<sup>1</sup> In the last decades, the study of Muslim devotional literature has become a trend. Within a short span of time, there have come several academic works in this regard. Most of them were on the literature of South Asia. All will give rich information on the text and practice of different devotional literature.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Elizabeth Schomburg, (2003), *Reviving Religion: The Qadiri Sufi Order, Popular Devotion to Sufi Saint Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir al-Gilani and Process of Islamisation in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka*, PhD Thesis, Harvard University

<sup>3</sup> See Ahmed, Hussein. (1998), *Islamic Literature and Religious Revival in Ethiopia, Islam et societies au Suddu Sahara* 12: 89-108



termed as Arabic cosmopolis represents the concept of a global Muslim, who shares the same culture, same notion, and same spirit. This message highlighted by traders and Sufis in their voyages in the coastal lines of Indian Ocean from Sub-Saharan Africa to South and Southeast Asia helped to create a common thread in their literatures too. According to Ronit Ricci, these so-called 'literary networks connected Muslims across boundaries of space and culture, and they helped introduce and sustain a complex web of prior texts and new interpretations that were crucial to the establishment of both local and global Islamic identities' (2011).

The intellectual milieu of Mappila Muslim literary heritage should be reviewed in the background of this particular juncture. The contents of large corpuses of literary works composed from the fifteenth or sixteenth century in Kerala reflect the impact of this wide literary network. Geographically being at a very strategic location in the trade network of Indian Ocean, Kerala could witness the incessant contacts of worldwide traders and Sufis from the early period itself. So, the role of this cosmopolitanism was very crucial in the distinctive formation of Mappila identity (Riedel, 2013). However, the influence of indigenous elements in the configuration of Mappila's language, literature and culture also is not negligible to an extent. Kerala already has its own culture and tradition even before the advent of the Arabs. According to Asani, who studied the Ismaili literature and culture in India, their literature deals with three inter-related dimensions of their broader cultural contexts: the transnational cultural Islamic community, Indo-Muslim Islam (Sufism and popular literature) and broader Indic context of shared devotional forms and culture (Asani, 2002; Morris, 2004). When we take the literatures of Mappila Muslims as the field of study, the role of these three elements should be given sufficient attention and importance. When the Arab-Islamic factors are seen dominant in its characters, the influence of Indian Islamic literature and the indigenous background of Kerala also must not be ignored from its review.

## Literary Heritage and Kerala Muslims

When we approach Mappila literatures, locating Kerala, especially Malabar on the Indian Ocean coasts, issues like the origin of literature in Arabic language, production of literatures in local vernaculars with Arabic script and the impact of Sufism on all of these works acquire more



relevance. There have come several studies, which explore the origin and development of Arabic literature in Kerala.<sup>4</sup>As these scholars suggest from fourteenth century itself the Arabic texts composed by indigenous authors were available (Muhammad, 2005).<sup>5</sup>In the case of Sufism and its early spreading in Kerala, the new studies suggest that it was very vibrant here from thirteenth century itself (Kunju, 1989; Kunhali, 2004; Prange, 2008). But, the emergence of local vernacular with Arabic script (in the case of Kerala Arabi-Malayalam) is not given much attention in most of the early works in this regard. Besides some assumptions widely available in the local literatures, there is no serious exploration about its early origin and development in Kerala. Here we need to consider the time of the emergence of local vernaculars in Arabic script in different places throughout the Indian Ocean coasts from Indian Subcontinent and outside. Taking Swahili and Hausa languages of East and West Africa, Aljamiado of Spain and other similar languages of South and Southeast Asia, we get an almost clear picture of the antiquity of this tradition. The scholars like Eastman(1976), Furniss(1996), Knappert (1990), Knappert (1996), Topan(2006) provide rich information regarding this tradition in the background of Swahili literature. The works on Aljamiado literatures by Harvey (2005), Chejne(1983), Wieggers(1994), Nykl(1929) also give deep knowledge on its early emergence and development. The study of Arabi-Tmail (Arwi) from South India thoroughly helps to trace the genesis of Arabi-Malayalam and its variety of literatures, because both bear many commonalities in its linguistic forms and contents from its inception. The works by Alim(1993), More(2004), Tschacher(2001) and Thurston(1909) shed light on this interconnections to a great extent.

Since the devotional literature in Arabi-Malayalam is the respiratory of various influences especially from Arabic, Urdu and Persian, a detailed enquiry of similar works composed in different vernaculars is needed to bring out its real identity. It is interesting to note that there have come several works in many languages mostly similar to each other in sense. Swahili, Hausa, and Aljamiado are the selected fields we examined in this study from outside. From South Asia,

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad, K.M. (2005), Contribution of Kerala to Arabic Literature, Tirurangadi Bookstall; Muhyiddin, Viran. Arabic Poem in Kerala: Origin and Development, Arabnet Bookstall, Calicut; Rahman, Prof. P. Abdul. (1979), Contribution of Arabic to Malayalam Vocabulary, PhD thesis, University of Calicut

<sup>5</sup> In the first chapter we have discussed the development of Arabic writing in Kerala and the early books prepared by Mappila scholars.



especially from India, the works in Sindhi, Urdu, Khojki<sup>6</sup> and Arwi are taken for evaluation. From Persian influenced vernaculars the works from Panjabi, Bengali and Gujarati of North India and Dakhni of South India also are considered here for a serious examination to get a wider understanding of the contents of the vernaculars in the particular time of Arabi-Malayalam's development.

How relevant is an enquiry of vernaculars throughout the Indian Ocean and Indian Subcontinent in relation to the development of Arabi-Malayalam literature and its ingredients since the production of literary writings of Kerala Muslims? A question may arise here regarding the rationale of comparison. Against this view, I argue that the development of the literary writings of Kerala Muslims cannot be appreciated completely if we contextualize it within the language and culture attaching only to the Arab cosmopolis. All of the considerable studies, which have come on the literary culture of Kerala Muslims hitherto are constrained by this perspective. All of these works are trying to postulate the origin of Arabi-Malayalam and its Sufistic elements only as the result of Arab contacts. Though it is true to an extent, the role of indigenous background and similar vernaculars in immediate contents are not given any relevance in such discussions. Showing the significant role of such literary contexts in sharing, borrowing, and absorbing a thorough attention is given here to bring out the peculiarities of Arabi-Malayalam literatures and its very Sufistic background.

## The milieu of research on Mappila Devotional Literatures

It is notable that the study of devotional literature in Muslim studies has become a trend in academics in the last few decades. Many works have delineated different aspects of devotional works in Arabic and vernaculars in Arabic script in various parts of the world. *Guide to Happiness: A Manual of Prayer* of A.G. Ellis (1907) and *Muslim Devotion: A Study of Prayer-manuals in Common Use* of Constance E. Padwick (1997) are some of the pioneering works of this kind.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Name of the script used by Naziri Islamails of Indian Subcontinent. The script was in active use within this particular community from at least sixteenth century, if not earlier, to 1960s. For detail see (Asani, 1987)

<sup>7</sup> *Muslim Devotion* was firstly published in 1961. Schimmel has reviewed it in the same year. See (Schimmel A., 1961)



former is a translation and study of *Dalailul Khairat*, the world famous prayer-manual of Al-Jazuli and the latter is a detailed study of different prayer-manuals in common use of worldwide Muslims. Both focus on how they are preserved and practiced among Muslims, and what is its role in their day-to-day life. Besides these early works, a plethora of studies has come in the subsequent periods in the same field (Smith, 1962). Most of them were focused on the devotional literature of South Asia. According to Metcalf, these devotional stories and songs preserved by diverse traditions are the only texts with more characteristic of the early centuries of Muslim presence in South Asia (2009). The works by scholars like Schimmel (1975; 1987), Mcgregor (1992), Sanyal (1996), Metcalf (2009) and Harder (2011) give rich knowledge on the origin and development of devotional literatures from different areas.

The beginning of the impact of Sufism on the local vernaculars of Kerala is a topic not much discussed so far. Though Sufism has gained much consideration, its impact on local vernaculars and its literary forms, which was a subsequent development has not been given due attention in scholarly writings. Because the first ever found work of Arabi-Malayalam was Sufistic in nature, it was presumed that this trend might have started from the very early period itself. But, it has not been substantiated. If we take the stock of the recently published works on social and religious engagements of vernaculars from the North as well as South India, we can see that there remain several similarities between the arguments highlighted by these works and the Sufistic situations of the literature of Malabar. These similarities may guide us to understand the antiquity of this tradition in Mappila literature.

The studies of Ali S. Asani (1995; 1996; 1998; 2002; 2006) on Sindhi, Urdu and Khojki vernacular of Gujarat, Farina Mir (2006; 2010) on Punjabi vernaculars, Eaton (1974; 1978; 2006) on Dakhni vernacular, Ricci (2011) on Tamil and Malay vernaculars, Alim (1993) on Arwi vernacular and Schomburg (2003) on Tamil Sufi literature, help us locate Mappila literatures and its Sufistic affiliations mostly in a similar platform. The common factor in most of these vernaculars is that they were written in Arabic script and came to existence inspired by Sufism. Though some of them changed its script later, they had kept its Sufistic affiliation un-detached. In the backdrop of



these studies, one can assume that the commencement of Sophistic themes in local vernaculars in South Asia might have started by the thirteenth century itself. Various entries from these vernaculars support this argument.

In his notable work *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia*, Asani tries to trace the history and impact of Khojki language, which was written in Arabic script and the popular poetic genre *ginan*. Mostly it was like Arabi-Malayalam and Māla genre among Mappilas. He also discusses the original and changing historical contexts and transmissions of the *ginans*, its themes and poetical dimensions. He also connects this poetic tradition with a wider content of Sufi poetry and popular devotional forms throughout the vernacular languages of the Subcontinent (Morris, 2004). At the same time, Mir (2010) in her work *The Social Space of Language*, tries to discuss the vernaculars and the impact of Sufism on it, taking the *qissa* genre of Punjab. Taking Tamil Muslim vernaculars in the background of Indian Ocean literary network, Ricci (2011) in her recent work *Islam Translated*, discusses how language and literature were shared throughout the Indian Ocean towns and how Arabic Cosmopolis was a notable presence there. Taking South and Southeast Asia as her field, she traces how same literary notions were shared between these landscapes. *Ayiram Masala*, one of the earliest Arabi-Tamil work, and its widespread influence among Muslims in various forms is the main focus of this work. Early Sufistic works of Arwi like Māla also comes in her discussions in detail. It may help to understand the role of Indian Ocean in the formation of the contents of devotional literature in Malabar like Mālas. *Reviving Religion* of Schomburg (2003) is another notable work from Tamil-Sri Lankan context tracing the revivalist role of Sufism and Sufi literature in these particular areas.

The impact of devotional literature in the Arabic language on Mappila Muslims is another topic not provided sufficient attention. Hundreds of prayer-manuals like Mawlid, Ratib, Adhkar, etc. have been produced especially by Sufi circles in Kerala. It had wide circulation and readability among Muslims. As previously mentioned, the works of Ellis (1907) and Padwick (1997) are pioneering initiatives in this field. But both works do not deal with the popular genre of Mawlids at all. Padwick himself was aware of this limitation and mentioned it in the preface of his



work: 'a limitation, for reasons of time and space, had to be imposed, though with reluctance, in the omission of reference to the very numerous volumes of popular religious verse published under the title of Mawlid' (1997: 12).<sup>8</sup> However, particular studies on Mawlid literature have begun to appear by the early decades of the twentieth century itself. *The Mawlids in Egypt* of Mcpherson published in 1941 was one of its early examples. More than a study of Mawlid texts, it was a detailed survey of saint days being celebrated in Egypt at that time. *Muhammad's Birthday Festival* of N.J.G. Kaptein (1993) was one of the later notable works in this series. It was the early history of Mawlid celebration in the central Muslim lands and its development in Muslim west till the sixteenth century. It also does not seriously deal with Mawlid texts in common use among Muslims worldwide. However, the work *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* written by Marion Holmes Katz (2007) considerably discusses the texts and contents of Mawlids in details. It also gives a detailed picture of early Mawlid composition in the Muslim world from Spain to Oman. Discussing the social and political role of Mawlid celebration, some works have focused on the Mawlid culture of Egypt. The works of Schielke like *Snacks and Saints* (2006) and *Peril of Joy* (2012) is notable works among them.

In the backdrop of these works, the present study mainly focuses on the impact of religious literatures in the revival of Malabar Muslims. Taking the cases of Māla and Mawlids, two very influential and popular genres among them, the study intends to explore the role of such devotional little literatures in the awakening of Kerala Muslims before twentieth century itself.

## **Revivalist Trends in Mappila Literature**

Mappilas were renowned bibliophiles from very early centuries, who collected books abundantly and loved it tremendously. They were also prolific writers and wide readers. Hence, countless literary works have been produced on various topics from their circle just after they started a communal life here. From voluminous encyclopaedic works to simple pamphlets, it may

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<sup>8</sup> In the review of this work Schimmel also has mentioned this exclusion of Mawlids from the work, saying that: the large group of Mawlids, which forms now –from Turkey to Pakistan- such an important part of religious life, has been excluded; it is hoped that a research in to the development of this kind of literature will be made in the near future (Schimmel A. , 1961).



differ according to its contents and purpose. Here we classify them all into two big categories: little literature and great literature. The latter represents the giant works composed in Arabic and Arabi-Malayalam, which comprise serious discussions of Islamic contents. The works like tafsir, fiqh, hadith, adab and other comparative narratives are of this category. By little literature, we mean the humble and thin literary attempts, which are largely composed among Mappilas for their day today religious life and devotional purposes. The religious treatise, devotional primers and Islamic booklets, which guide them for a devotional life, in text and practice, are of this kind. Mālas, Mawlids, Ratibs, Adhkar, Awrad, Ahzab, etc. are its important examples from Malabar milieu. The collections of these popular works are generally known by names such as *Sabina Kitab*, *Mawlid Kitab*, *Dhikr Kitab*, *Salat Kitab*, etc. It has a wide circulation and large readability among them than any items from great literature. According to Padwick, these are the little booklets mostly seen in the bookshops unnoticed, scattered here and there, and half-buried under school textbooks and science magazines (1977). It is also available in large numbers piled up on the table of *bazari* booksellers in markets and premises of mosques. However, it is interesting to note that these texts are being printed and sold annually more than thousands in numbers. It suggests that such works have a remarkable impact on Mappila devotional life, and it has become undetachable from their daily life. There have come several studies on the great literature among Mappilas from different perspectives. But, the little literatures have not been given any academical attentions so far. So, this study aims to conduct a thorough survey of these works, whether it is in Arabic or Arabi-Malayalam and examine to which level it has impacted on Mappila life. However, the main focus of this study is Māla and Mawlids, two very important genres among them, which represent Arabi-Malayalam and Arabic respectively. The study addresses these works as devotional literature as well as revivalist literature because it works as the key elements for the multifaceted development of Mappilas.

Mālas and Mawlids are unique devotional genres among Mappilas that are deep-rooted in their life and culture. Mawlids are a transnational genre in the mixed form of prose and verse, and



Mālas are mostly an indigenous origin in verse.<sup>9</sup> Though they are panegyric devotional works on Prophets, Sufis and divines, it has several other aspects to be explored. In the background of such literary works emerged from Kerala, it will become more obvious. Along with its devotional and ritualistic sides, this study focuses on its social, political, religious, cultural, and literary aspects also. How these works benefitted Mappila life in all of these aspects and what were their responsibilities in their life and culture also would be examined here. Above all, the revivalist initiatives of these works also be checked in the backdrop of its impacts on Mappila Muslim life and thought.

## **Mala-Mawlid Literature and the Islamic Resurgence in Kerala**

The Mālas are the first emerged genre in Arabi-Malayalam literature. As devotional and eulogical item, there could be seensimilar tremendous compositions in vernacular Sufi literatures throughout the world. More than the high languages like Arabic, Persian and Turkish, the vernaculars like Swahili, Hausa, Amharic, Aljamiado, Sindhi, etc., which represent worldwide Muslim communities, also have brought out several notable works in this field. In India, the vernaculars like Panjabi, Bengali, and Dakhni also produced large corpuses of literature with the same contents. The Arwi of Tamil Nadu was the gateway of Sufi literatures to Kerala. It also produced various unique Mālas in this perspective. The emergence of Māla in Kerala might be as the continuity of this Sufistic tradition. The study of Māla genre in the backdrop of various local vernaculars reveals that its origin among Muslims might be between thirteenth and sixteenth centuries itself. It was the time of emergence of the trend of using vernaculars in Sufi literature in most parts of the country and various parts of the world also, especially in Indian Ocean regions. Its various literary aspects are traceable in Arabi-Malayalam literature also. So, Mālas were the compendium of various literary and doctrinal influences.

More than a simple devotional genre, Mālas were a particular item related to the various situations of its origin. Its origin had particular reasons related to its social, political, religious and

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<sup>9</sup> It is also available in the neighbour places such as Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and Lakshadweep as it would be discussed in detail in third chapter.



cultural backgrounds. At the same time, it had certain social functions and communal responsibilities also. Muhyiddin Māla, which composed in the first decade of the seventeenth century, was a big resistance as well as a great remedy for its followers. On other hand, Mālas were a very comprehensive and all-encompassing system of educating Mappilas, which worked among them very effectively since the seventeenth century. Composing notable works on various subjects such as Islamic history, biography, religious advice, social criticism, spirituality, etc., Mappila could engage in society seriously and create a distinguished identity in Kerala milieu. As a system of education and creating awareness, the sections like women and children also got due considerations in this cognitive literary movement.

By the early decades of twentieth century, Māla underwent a considerable transformation in its composition and contents. The factors like modernity, reformism, and postmodernism were the major reasons for this shift. By then Mālas came out of its typical devotional and informative format to a liberal and entertaining mode. It was a big turning point in Mālas' so-called development. Instead of its Sufistic and religious allegories, trends of Western literature were got dominance in its contents and expression. However, it was a great setback to its prestigious identity.

Mawlids are another genre taken for this study, which have an influential role in the spiritual empowerment of Mappila Muslims. Despite its Arabic origin, like Arabi-Malayalam it also has obtained an amazing sway over Mappila daily life. Following its initial development in the Muslim world, from sixteenth century itself it made its first appearance in Kerala. In the subsequent centuries, it grew here as a powerful literary genre and obtained a wide circulation and large readability among Muslims. As a text and practice, it was the reflection of Sufi thoughts enrooted among them. Not only as devotional manuals but also as historical records and Sufi documents it has a notable position in Kerala milieu. Foreign and indigenous originated hundreds of Mawlids have got a high impact on Mappila life and culture. It has a tremendous role in making their identity and fixating their remarkable presence in Malabar. In short, Mappila literatures, in general and Māla-Mawlid literature, in particular, have played a major role in bringing Mappilas up in their religious awareness and self-prestige. Starting centuries back, it works still now as a vibrant presence, which can measure their intense religiosity and depth of *iman*.



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