

Multiculturalism and Religious Syncretism in Kerala Acquired through Trade : A Historical Analysis

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Acclaimed as ‘God’s Own Country’, Kerala is a fascinating example of how different religious and cultural groups can merge and co-exist leading to multiculturalism and religious syncretism. The conceptual framework of multiculturalism stresses the shared existence and value of many cultures. The three effective religious communities, Hindus, Muslims and Christians mainly form a multicultural community in Kerala, leading parallel lives without compromising their religious integrity. The cultural and religious syncretism observed in Kerala, despite the arrival of different religions at different periods of history, can be attributed to several key factors. In this paper I launch a careful inquiry into the reasons for this situation in Kerala on the basis of some theories of multiculturalism. That these religious groups came as traders whose activities benefited mutually leading to respect and tolerance for each other is my hypothesis. To understand why there is religious syncretism, we have to have a look at the evolution of various religions in Kerala and how they blended over centuries.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The seminal work ‘Perumals of Kerala’ by M.G.S. Narayanan provides insightful analysis of the sociopolitical dynamics of medieval Kerala, emphasizing how the rulers of the area promoted religious tolerance and made it easier for various religious communities to coexist, thus advancing knowledge of Kerala's multiculturalism. The complex relationships between Kerala's many religious communities are examined in MGS Narayanan's work ‘Cultural Symbiosis’, which also clarifies how the introduction and persistence of various religions in the area influenced what he prefers to refer to as the "symbiosis" of different religions rather than their syntheses. Charles Taylor in his ‘Politics of Recognition and Multiculturalism’ expresses the idea that for a multicultural society to exist there must be recognition and respect for people of distinct and diverse cultural groups. Multiculturalism exists because each culture accounts for and accepts their difference from each other and the society offering validation,

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respect, freedom and protection of their rights and customs to all cultural groups.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this paper is a mix of the use of tools of historical research and some theories of multiculturalism. In order to investigate the causes of Kerala's diversity and the introduction and the peaceful persistence of various religions in Kerala, the historical research approach mainly uses secondary sources and inscriptional evidences. While inscriptional evidence offers direct, primary insights about the arrival of distinct religious communities and the social relations that existed between communities in the early era of Kerala History, the secondary sources such as academic books, articles, and historical accounts provide the context and interpretations of previous events. By examining these sources, the study aims to identify the elements - such as migration, trade, and political shifts - that enabled Kerala's distinctive multicultural environment and supported the coexistence of India's many religious traditions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Multiculturalism refers to the presence of cultural diversity and heterogeneity within a territory or state through the co-existence of groups that are different culturally, ethnically, racially and in religious beliefs. Multiculturalism includes assimilation, integration and adaptation of traditions, customs and heritage of both dominant communities of host societies as well as the immigrant communities. Will Kymlicka suggests that there can be two types of minorities; national minorities and immigrant groups. Kymlicka argues that national minorities, i.e. those communities that immigrated much earlier into a society must have specific rights for special representation within the government while the comparatively new immigrant groups require 'poly-ethnic rights' that enable them to retain the culture, in order to ensure 'fair terms of integration'. Bhikku Parekh in 'Rethinking Multiculturalism : Cultural Diversity and Political Theory' argues for a middle ground between naturalism and culturalism and supports 'Pluralist Universalism' which encourages intercultural dialogue and warns against the possibility of cultural relativism.

GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION, SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND OCEANIC CONNECTIVITY

The geographical isolation of Kerala being located on the southwestern coast of India bordered by Arabian Sea to the west and Western Ghats to the east and the long coastline might have perhaps

unknowingly prompted the people to form a close-knit society with greater harmony and cooperation among its people. The numismatic evidences show that trade contacts between ancient Romans and the Kerala coast might have in all probability existed in the early centuries of CE. The Sangam society or the early Iron Age period of south India had an agro-pastoral society with heroism as the main passion, which accounted for the erection of burial monuments and hero stones.¹ During the period, Kerala was well connected to both inland and long-distance sea trade routes via ports like Muziris and Tondi. It is primarily from the accounts of Greco- Roman explorers and traders along with cues and indications from Sangam works that we obtain primary data about trade, commerce and ensuing cultural exchange. The story of Kerala from 500CE to 800CE is mostly shrouded in mystery. A 'lacuna' or gap existed in our knowledge of this period. However, it can be assumed that the ocean trade and cultural exchange took place over all periods of Kerala's history because of its geographical advantageous location and favorable climate for cultivation of valuable crops like spices.

INTEGRATION OF HINDUISM, BUDDHISM AND JAINISM INTO KERALA'S SOCIAL FABRIC:

Several works of Sangam corpus including 'Silappathikaram' and 'Manimekalai' show influences of Shramanic traditions confirming the existence of Buddhism and Jainism during the period, while the Brahmanical influences though mentioned are not considered dominant. From the early Common Era to the eighth century, Buddhism is thought to have been widely practiced in Kerala. Studies on the Paliyam plates by scholars suggest that the Ay Kings and the Mushaka Kings were patrons of Buddhism as they donated land to the Srimulavasam Buddhist monastery in the 9th century. Chera Kings like Vijayaraga nominated princes like Vira Kota as protectors of the temple.² Buddhist influences can be seen in Kerala's cultural practices including Hindu temple festivals such as *kettukazcha* mostly in southern Kerala and temple cars or *terus* used to carry the image of the God/Goddess during festivals.³ Sri Sankaracharya's teachings, which encompass his ideas of *maya* and *moksha*, reflect Buddhist influences.⁴ Although the discussion regarding Sabarimala's Buddhist origins persists, it is evident that Buddhism has been integrated into Hinduism, as seen in the enduring traditions present in Hindu festivals. Similarly, Jain remains have been discovered in numerous parts of Kerala and scholars suggest that Jain shrines were subsequently transformed into Hindu temples. The Kudal

Manikyam temple in Thrissur and the Kallil shrine near Perumbavur were once Jain temples, complete with Jain images and rock-cut cave constructions.⁵

Brahmins began migrating to South India, including Kerala, around the middle of the Sangam age, although their supremacy and the spread of the chaturvarnya system happened later. According to historical records and beliefs, Brahmins migrated from the north, and the tale of Parasurama's creation of the land gave them a claim to it. By the 8th and 9th centuries, they had constructed temple-centered settlements and introduced Vedic Hinduism to Kerala, which resulted in Aryanization by means of introduction of superior knowledge and ritual practices rather than fighting. Over time, Brahmins established themselves as a powerful elite, controlling land, resources, and social structures, but their influence also helped other castes like as Kshatriyas, Nairs, and Ambalavasis. The 'Jenmi system', a landlord-tenant arrangement altered Kerala's social and economic structure. Brahmins' custom of practicing miscegenation with the Nairs also led to multiculturalism.

ARRIVAL OF ISLAM, JUDAISM, AND CHRISTIANITY :

These religions arrived in Kerala through traders who were received cordially and were even granted special privileges and tax exemptions as inferred by historians based on epigraphical studies. *Anchuvannam* and *Manigramam* were West Asian Trade settlements of Jews and Christians from Syrian or Persia.⁶ These trade corporations also employed Hindus in large numbers for their services and they settled in the land allotted to the guild. Gradually, the Hindus adopted these religions while also continuing their traditional practices such as patronizing temples and paying respect to ancestral deities.

The Jews made their first encounter in the port town of Muziris. The Chera ruler granted Joseph Rabban, a Jewish trader, a royal charter that is known as the Jewish copper plates or the Cochin plates of Bhaskara Ravi-varman.⁷ In addition to the privileges of the merchant guild, which would be inherited by his successors, the charter offers Rabban a number of advantages, such as immunity from fees that other residents in Muzirikkode were forced to pay. The Cochin Jewish community is said to have initially settled at Kodungallur, an old port, before moving to Kochi, Paravur, Chendamangalam, and Mala. The majority of the Cochin Jewish population left Kerala for Israel following its creation in 1948, although they lived in harmony with other religious groups here.

It is widely believed that Christianity came to Kerala with the arrival of the apostle St. Thomas in 52 CE at Kodungallur. The Kinayi Thoman Copper Plates, the Thazhekkad Rock inscription, the Tharisappalli copper plates are sets of records which all deal with the Mar Thoma Nazaranies of Kerala and their close connection with Persia. It can be assumed that all these plates belonged to the first millennium CE because it was during that period of time that the documents were inscribed on copper plates by the ruling kings. The discovery of Roman coins in Palayoor and Parur belts points to the economic contacts these areas had with the Rome of Augustus and Nero.⁸ Maruvan Sapir Iso, a Syrian Christian trader, was granted property by Ayyan Adikal, the chieftain of Kollam, in 849 CE to construct the Church of Tarisa in Kollam through the Kollam Syrian copper plates or Tarisapalli Copper Plates.⁹ In addition, the charter enlists two merchant guilds; *anjuvannam* and *manigramam* a number of aristocratic rights, including exemption from taxes on the given property.

Historically, Islam has flourished in Kerala for a long time. The Arabs were actively engaged in trade with the western coast of India as early as 2nd century CE.¹⁰ The legend of the Rama Varma Kulashekara Perumal leaving for Mecca and converting to Islam is popular. The support of the Zamorin, the ruler of the present-day Calicut region, in promoting trade fostered a multicultural society in his region. Over the centuries many Arab traders made settlements in various parts of Kerala, establishing communities, receiving trade concessions and building places of worship. Many Arabic inscriptions including the oldest Maccunti inscription of the 13th century found in the Maccunti Mosque at Kuttichira in Kozhikode was written by a person known by the same name, probably an Arab who received property from Zamorin and settled there.¹¹ The first mosque built outside Arabia, a mere fifty years after the Prophet's death, was built in Ponnani. The Arrakkal family, a Muslim dynasty is the only non-Hindu royal family to have ruled Kerala. They are considered to be a branch of the Kolathiri family who had embraced Islam. During the arrival of Islam, Kerala society was characterized by the caste system, with untouchability and other characteristics. As Islam treated all equally, many people converted themselves to Islam.

THE INFLUENCE OF GULF MIGRATION, COLONIAL LEGACY, AND SOCIAL REFORM:

Kerala's path to becoming a hub of diversity and religious syncretism is inextricably linked to the roles of social reformers, the rise of

colonial modernity, educational reforms, and Gulf migration. During the colonial period, social reformers such as Sree Narayana Guru, Vailloppilly Sreedhara Menon, and Ayyankali questioned the established caste structures, pushing for social inclusion and fairness. Sree Narayana Guru championed the concept of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for All', which challenged the caste structure and advocated for equality among all religions in Kerala. Sree Narayana Guru's '*Anukampa Dashakam*' reveals his great compassion for all beings, emphasizing universal love and humanity's oneness while transcending religious borders to convey a message of unity and harmony across many faiths. Vailloppilly Sreedhara Menon advocated for reforms in education and social justice, helping marginalized people and encouraging cooperation across castes and faiths. Ayyankali battled against lower caste prejudice by pushing for their rights to education, temple access, and social involvement, as well as encouraging religious peace. These reformers strove to tear down barriers among communities, proposing a vision of unity based on common human dignity rather than caste and religious distinctions. Their initiatives paved the way for a more inclusive and pluralistic Kerala society.

Colonial modernity significantly altered Kerala's socio-political terrain. The introduction of Western education, printing presses, and contemporary institutions helped to form a new intellectual and social milieu. Educational reforms increased literacy, empowered individuals across caste and religion, and encouraged a culture of tolerance and acceptance. This new wave of modernism aimed not only to embrace Western ideas, but also to synthesize them with Kerala's existing traditions, resulting in a distinct combination of cultural identities and religious practices.

The social mobility of many populations, along with Gulf migration and possibilities in Western nations, has encouraged the exchange of cultural and religious ideas, fostering religious syncretism and diversity. Democratic administration, by supporting principles of equality and freedom of religion, has facilitated the integration of many religious and cultural traditions, establishing a community that values peace and mutual respect. Finally, Kerala's integration into the Indian Union with its democratic ideals fostered to create a vibrant, peaceful, and pluralistic society.

CONCLUSION

Kerala's coastal location and trade routes allowed for social integration through interactions, intermarriages, and the blending of

religious and cultural customs. Syncretic rituals were created as a result of the blending of local customs and religions, such as Islam and Christianity which loosened cultural borders. Hybridization of different cultures took place in Kerala. For instance, Onam, Christmas and Eid are celebrated by all and sundry. Hindu rites have impacted Christian practices in Kerala, while local Muslims have integrated elements of Christianity and Hinduism into their customs'. The visit of Sabarimala pilgrims to Vavar Palli and Arthunkal St Andrew's Basilica enroute to Sabarimala is a typical example of religious syncretism of Kerala. The Kodimarams (sacred poles) Nilavilakku (traditional lamp) at Christian churches are modelled on Hindu customs. The interreligious conversation in Kerala has promoted tolerance and understanding. All these happened, firstly due to the the arrival of these religions without any wars and forceful conversion rather than conquest and subsequent oppression. The locale and the natural environment which promotes a spirit of harmony, tranquility and peace naturally led to the blossoming of multiculturalism and Religious Syncretism.

END NOTES:

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