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SOUTH ASIA
RESEARCH
www.sagepublications.com
DOI: 10.1177/0262728013475540
Vol. 33(1): 1–20

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SAGE Publications
Los Angeles,
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Washington DC

KERALA MUSLIMS AND SHIFTING NOTIONS OF RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT This article primarily assesses the articulations of Mappila Muslim identity in the public sphere formed in colonial Malabar, especially after the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. The colonial history of the public sphere in Malabar serves as a backdrop to a better understanding of the construction of present-day Muslim identity in Kerala in terms of power and domination. It is shown that a Muslim community that rebelled against the colonial state in northern Kerala earlier and came to be seen as aggressive, uncivilised and religiously fanatic, still faces strong resentment and distrust today, while the memory of subalternity remains present, too.

KEYWORDS: *colonialism, community, education, identity, India, Kerala, language, Malabar, Malayalam, Mappila Muslims, nationalism, public sphere, religion, state, subalternity*

The Relevance of the Public Sphere

The notion of public sphere has been widely seen as an appropriate descriptive tool to understand the formations and transformations of community identities in modern socio-political conditions. The term itself was introduced by Habermas (1989), who considered the public sphere as a domain of common concern and a space for critical debate, inclusive in nature. In the context of separation of state and church in Europe and the development of capitalism, the public sphere is a social space of communication, perceived somewhat idealistically, it now seems, where citizens deliberate upon their common affairs in an institutionalised arena of discursive interaction. Free and equal individuals meet to debate issues of common concern, arriving thereby at a normatively binding public opinion (Bhargava and Reifeld, 2005). However, common sense suggests that the nature and mode of the interference of collective forces in this public sphere varies when significant changes take place in society.

In this context, the engagement of religious communities in the public sphere has become a critical question in postcolonial discourses, especially in South Asian societies (van der Veer, 2001) and it is questionable whether the basically secular approach of Habermas applies in South Asia (Menski, 2012). Indeed, Habermas (2006: 35) acknowledges himself now that '[r]eligious traditions and communities of faith have gained a new, hitherto unexpected political importance'. Moreover, the notion that the public sphere conceived by Habermas is appropriately based on consensus is questioned by advocates of Foucault's notions of power and conflict. Flybjerg (2002) sees conflict and inequality as inherent in the public sphere, advising that we need to look at problems of exclusion, difference and the politics of identity. There are 'declared standards' and 'manifest self-understanding' in the public sphere that often exclude certain groups, which Habermas failed to acknowledge. Even if declared standards do not exist, some groups or individuals may be unable to participate in the public sphere and may assert their views through non-discursive means, manifested in the formation of counter publics and even violent terrorism. Events such as 9/11 evidently made Habermas, too, re-think his concepts (Borradori, 2003). That the public sphere is clearly not just a single overarching entity is reflected when Fraser (1990: 61) notes the possibility of different publics: 'Virtually from the beginning, counter publics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech'.

This plurality-conscious argument is particularly significant in stratified societies where inequality is reflected in the discursive arena and may lead to advantages for dominant groups and disadvantages for subordinate groups. Everywhere on the globe, to varying degrees, the tendency to absorb less powerful and marginalised voices in the public sphere by silencing them seems a well-practised historical reality. In this imagined public sphere, consensus that purports to represent the common good should thus be regarded with cautious suspicion, because it is likely to be constructed and skewed by the effects of dominance and subordination.

Taking the example of Mapillas, the Muslims of Kerala, this article demonstrates how subaltern groups create and reflect counter publics through parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, asserting their identities, interests and needs. The next section focuses on the formation of the public sphere in colonial India and Kerala before we discuss in more detail various aspects of the role and involvement of Muslims in colonial Malabar and in Kerala today. This is a sociological study, of necessity interdisciplinary, which ends arguing in a historical vein that the memory of being 'othered' continues to carry contemporary relevance.

Public Sphere and Community Formation in Colonial India and in Kerala

The particular public formed in colonial India has received attention in many studies (see Roy, 2006). Referring to the community configuration in the colonial public sphere, Bhattacharya (2005) argues that it was not just a space where private individuals

appeared as public actors, it was also an arena in which communities were forced to come together. The emergence of the public sphere in the colonial period allowed communities to transform inter-community matters into public battles (Bhargava and Reifeld, 2005; Chatterjee, 1998), largely determined by the nationalist movement and related political processes. For Chatterjee (1998), it was a space of conflict between the outer 'material domain' and the inner 'spiritual domain' of colonial India. In the outer sphere, the superiority of the West and the ideals of modernity as well as its institutional forms and procedures were acknowledged. The spiritual domain was a cultural weapon in the public sphere that resisted colonial imperialism. Complicating the issue further, Pandian (2002) notably argues that the inner domain as a nationalist weapon of cultural resistance to western imperialism excluded subaltern voices, particularly the 'traditions' of lower castes. When 'national community' and 'national culture' are depicted as forms of cultural resistance against colonial domination, what is commonly missing is the history of subordination of subaltern groups within such national cultures and communities. The exclusion of lower caste groups, women and other communities within the dominant public sphere can be treated as a fact. However, the resistance of lower castes in the public sphere, not only against colonial powers but also hegemonic caste groups, has not been explained satisfactorily in post-colonial studies. While India is not only about 'caste', in Kerala, too, subaltern status is connected to a number of differentiating elements.

General studies on socio-political development in Kerala are informative (Nair, 1994; Nair, 1999; Navergal, 2001) and generally, the public sphere of Kerala is considered to be 'vibrant, rational and critical' (Biju, 2007). The alleged non-interference of 'primordial' forces such as religion and caste, mainly due to Left political interventions in Kerala, has been widely claimed as the primary factor in the formation of such a public sphere (Nair, 2003). This view seems as partial as that of Habermas (1989), assuming that the public sphere of Kerala has evolved as a result of critical and rational debates, with religion and caste absent in every sense. Such 'progress' is then counted as one of the major factors in the social development of Kerala. Notably, as a consequence of such reductionist discourses, we then find well-publicised worries among progressive scholars about 'recent communal' interferences in the public sphere of Kerala (Ganesh, 1997).

Differing from such misguided conventional views, this article highlights that the public sphere of Kerala was never free from either the involvement of religion or the influence of caste, whether in the colonial period or later. There is a history of caste and religious assertions in the colonial period, inspired by Enlightenment modernity and this was one of the foundations of social development in Kerala. The colonial period was a significant phase when communities acquired a new role in the public sphere, though hardly in a neutral manner. In addition, region becomes an important additional factor in understanding the history of communities. As Cohn (1990: 36) asserts: 'There are regional differences in South Asia, just as there is a reality to think about South Asia as a geographic and historical entity or Indian civilization as a cultural unity.'

Any attempt to study communities in a given region necessitates an insight into the specific social history of that region. In that sense, colonial Kerala must certainly be seen as a historical, cultural, linguistic and structural entity that constitutes the confluence of communities. Within this region, Malabar presents its own specificities of community conglomerations in the colonial period (Iyer, 1968). Typically, the transformations of fuzzy, fluid social groups in the region have been understood mainly with reference to the mobilisation of castes (Ganesh, 1997; Menon, 2002), while religious groups seem equally important in understanding the community dynamics of the region. The participation of communities in the public sphere has clearly something to do with the 'discourse' of caste as well as religious groups (Dirks, 2001; Menon, 2002). The literature about the social history of Kerala provides rich evidence of interpenetration between caste and religion in the public sphere (Aloysius, 2005; Menon, 2002; Nair, 1999).

This interpenetration can be seen at two levels. First, the nature of caste movements which emerged over time was intrinsically tied up with religious beliefs and people's cultural practices. The often religiously expressed social protests of lower castes and other marginalised communities found expression in various ways, like construction and appropriation of new religions, or the re-fashioning of Hindu tradition (Aloysius, 1998). The participation and fate of religious communities like Christians and Muslims in the public sphere in Kerala are well associated with the interference of caste groups, especially in terms of politics. This interpenetration between caste and religion in different forms was, then, a crucial factor in the transformation of communities in the socio-political sphere.

Elucidation of the nature of this linkage between caste and religion is highly significant in locating Mappila Muslims in colonial Malabar. All the factors that consolidated community identities under colonial modernity, like colonial administrative practices, introduction of various laws regarding communities, print culture, the emergence of reformist leaders, caste associations and Christian missionary activities helped these groups form into political communities in more or less similar fashion, while also influencing each other. What makes the history of Mappila Muslims unique and complex is their particular local experience of marginality and resistance in relation to the socio-political processes under colonial rule. They were Muslims, but a specific type of Muslims, which evidently makes another critical difference for the present analysis.

Studies on Muslims in India

To examine the Muslim community in colonial Kerala, one also has to question existing wider perspectives in studies on Muslims in India. When the discipline of sociology developed in India, Muslim communities as an area of study remained at first more or less untouched. While studies on caste became fashionable in anthropological and sociological research, issues associated with Indian Muslims

hardly featured. Ahmad (1972) notes that by giving insufficient space to non-Hindus in the study of India, we end up having Hindu, Muslim and Christian sociology, but no sociology of India. Fazalbhoy (1997) confirms that sociology in India is more a Hindu sociology than the sociology of India. Taking Dumont as an example, she shows how he considered Indian culture as primarily Hindu and other communities, religious groups and categories as secondary. In Dumont's work, Muslims were of interest only in terms of how caste contaminated Muslim society, which according to textual practice should have been more egalitarian (Fazalbhoy, 1997).

Recently, scholars have started to talk more about Muslims, either in terms of pan-Islamism and textual Islam, or in terms of lived Islam and cultural diversity (Ahmad, 1984; Osella and Osella, 2006; Robinson, 1986). While reformism, lived Islam and stratification within the community have dominated the discourse, issues such as power and politics, state and citizenship, identity and marginality have not been brought sufficiently into the picture. The caste assertions and movements against the colonial state that shaped 'Malayali' Muslim identity in Kerala, particularly in Malabar, tell us that there is a need to approach history by contextualising such communities in their specific terrains of power and politics. The next section begins to identify aspects of the subalternity of Kerala Muslims.

The History of Mappila Muslims

Muslims in Kerala, generally known as Mappilas, are geographically more in number in Malabar, northern present-day Kerala, than in the south. The term Mappila is derived from the word *Maha-pilla* meaning 'big-child', a title of honour conferred on immigrants, but there are many other interpretations also for 'Mappila' (Kunju, 1989). Unlike North India where Islam arrived through conquest, in Kerala the spread of Islam was mainly through trade by Arab merchants and gradual conversion of natives to Islam (Miller, 1992). Though there is no unanimity among historians regarding when exactly Islam reached India, there is widespread agreement over the significant presence of Islam in Kerala by the ninth century (Dale, 1980; Kunju, 1989; Miller, 1992). Islamic communities emerged around mosques and grew through conversion of natives. Islam as conceived and practised by most Muslims in Malabar prior to the twentieth century was syncretic and often contradictory to the fundamental view of the beliefs and practices to which Muslims must supposedly adhere. Textual Islam, embodied in Arabic literature, proved unable to communicate with the Muslim masses of Malabar, who knew only Malayalam.

The knife known as Malappuram knife, head-tonsuring, eating from a common plate, tying a scarf round the head and wearing a *topi* were all cultural markers of Mappila Muslims. The influence of tomb worship, saint worship and the related cult of *Nercha*,[1] are practices that show the hybrid character of this community and incorporate features of local culture, often cutting across communitarian divides. Muslim ceremonies related to marriage, birth, death and superstitious acts like magic also had much in common with Hindu religious practices.

As a community, the Mappila Muslims played a vital role in the flourishing spice trade of the Malabar Coast from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. They were the trusted associates of the *Zamorin*s of Calicut,[2] enjoying monopolistic control over trade, the economic backbone of the *Zamorin*s. This mutual trust underwent a drastic shift with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1497, as a fierce battle ensued between the Mappilas and the Portuguese for control over the spice trade (Dale, 1990). While the Mappilas suffered heavily, changing geo-political conditions compelled the *Zamorin*s to shift their allegiance to the Portuguese, but when the latter lost out to the British (Hariharan, 2006), it left the Mappilas even more disadvantaged. The decline of their fortunes in trade and political power reduced them to a community of petty traders, landless labourers and poor fishermen (Miller, 1992). The establishment of British hegemony, as the next section shows, added to their woes.

The Malabar Rebellion and its Interpretations

The Malabar rebellion was the outcome of a series of revolts against the upper caste/upper class landlords and the colonial state, which began in the nineteenth century. While the origin of Muslim struggles in Kerala goes back to trade conflicts with the Portuguese, local uprisings started during the nineteenth century when subordination and oppression of Mappilas, a historically subordinated social group in the feudal agrarian social structure of Malabar, by British administrators and local landlords became ever more severe. Upper caste domination and their militancy generated political consciousness and a sense of collective identity among Muslims. Recurring struggles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century turned into mass rebellion, leading to a massacre of Mappilas by the British army in 1921. Some scholars have interpreted this rebellion as primarily a peasant revolt and considered the religious involvement in the revolt as a mere instrumental factor in mobilising the Mappila masses (Panikkar, 1989). Some have explained it in terms of religious assertion as the primary factor in mobilising people (Dale, 1980). A third argument, an integrative view of the earlier two strands, views both agrarian tension and religious mobilisation in the uprisings with equal importance (Gangadharan, 2004).

Considering the religious character of the Mappilas in the rebellion, Dale (1980) notes that Muslims have always been in conflict with Christians and Hindus, using the concept of struggle (*jihad*),[3] mainly as a weapon of political resistance against all kinds of subordination of the community in the region. In Dale's view, the Malayali Muslims were an armed group with a militant religious ideology, a community that perceived social violence as religious conflict, which was sanctioned by the tenets of Islamic law. From this perspective, the Mappila rebellion was the outcome of long-term development of a militant tradition within the community and 'Islam in danger' was the principal issue mobilising Mappilas for rebellion (Dale, 1980). Highlighting the role of the religious leadership of the *ulema* and of mosques in this movement, he considered this rebellion as religiously sanctioned violence.

Panikkar (1989) views the Mappila rebellion as an agrarian revolt emerging out of tensions between peasants and landlords on the one hand and natives and the colonial state on the other. Yet while he talks about local antagonism towards propertied classes and colonial state, he equally emphasises the influence of religion. He points out that 'traditional intellectuals',[4] members of the *ulema* and religious leaders such as Musliars and Gazis, played a dominant role in shaping the outlook of rural Mappilas. Extensively discussing the role of *Thangals* of *Mampuram*,[5] the 'traditional intellectuals' of that time, Panikkar (1989) argues that it is within this ideological world, the domain of religion, that the Mappila peasantry sought resistance for social action.

Neither Panikkar's Marxist framework nor the cultural framework of Dale seems adequate on its own to understand the rebellion and political articulations of Muslim identity. Dale merely reaffirms the Orientalist notions of many other writings that portray Muslims as aggressive and militant. Likewise, Panikkar reduces religious consciousness to mere 'false consciousness', which ignores the role of colonial agency in strengthening the community identity of Muslims in Malabar. He also fails to construct a comprehensive understanding of the movement, led after all by a religious group.

This further evidence of partial theorising shows the need to cast the analytical net wider and Mamdani (2001) is helpful in this respect. He raises a critical point in his writing on African colonial history when he argues that the political economy framework and class-based analysis offered by Marxists and the cultural framework proposed by Orientalists and nationalist scholars have both failed to analyse the political process and identity formations in colonial Africa. He suggests that the formation of political identity cannot be understood in terms of mere economic processes or cultural factors, rather the role of the colonial state and its agencies need to be addressed as well. The next section thus takes us back to the public sphere and factors in the role of the state.

State, Public Sphere and the Mappila Religion

The original formulation of the public sphere by Habermas (1989) implies that the presence of religion will gradually diminish in the public sphere simultaneous with development of rationality and individualism in modern societies. More recently, as indicated, Habermas (2006) argues that the crisis of the modern state is its failure to complete the agenda of secularising society. In other words, the pathology of 'unfinished projects of modernity' leads to the assertion of communities of faith or religious groups. This view belongs, at a theoretical level, still very much to the discourse of modern, secular European self-representation. It clearly ignores the complexities of non-Western societies (Asad, 1993; van der Veer, 2001) and their integrated perspectives about the place of religion.

In India, the public sphere emerged in colonial times out of the interaction between missionary involvement and the counter-activities of Hindu resistant groups or Hindu reformism, as is the case with Islam and Sikhism (van der Veer, 2001). The colonial

policy concerning religion was ambiguous. It tried to privatise religion and separate it from the public sphere when it threatened the colonial power. At the same time it promoted religious assertions for its own benefit (Kaviraj, 1997). According to Nandy (1990), in the eyes of secularism, one can follow religion in one's private life, but in public life, one is expected to leave one's faith behind. He argues that believers are excluded from the public, as they are required to be scientific and rational to be able to engage with the public. The crucial point that Nandy makes here is that religion provides an overall theory of life, including public life, which the colonisers might have been aware of, but could not tolerate.

In the context of colonial Malabar, for Mappila Muslims religion was certainly not something separable from public life. When they engaged in the public in the form of resistance and conflict, religion was intrinsically tied up with their thoughts and actions. The religious character of the Mappilas was depicted as something dangerous by colonisers, as their religion had always been a perceived threat to the colonial power. Hence the colonisers constantly and in all possible ways tried to relegate the Mapillas' religion to the private sphere.

Ansari (2005) discusses how Muslims were identified in colonial writings before and after the rebellion. He argues that in colonial writings, Mappila Muslims were firmly fixed in the frame of religion. The categories through which the Mappilas might be identified, such as peasant, working class and lower caste are overwritten by an emphasis on religion. Ansari (2005) confirms that many of the colonial writings constructed Muslims as 'fanatic', 'barbaric' and 'ignorant'. Blatantly racist attitudes found a place even in judicial verdicts. A judgement dealing with the Malabar rebellion reads: 'The Mappillas…have been described as a barbarous and savage race, and unhappily the description seems appropriate'.[6] Certainly, the Mappillas of Malabar region did not endear themselves to the authorities by murdering a judge who had sentenced their leader to transportation (Gott, 2011: 439).

Since Muslims constantly threatened the colonisers' interests, the latter consciously tried to project Muslims as uncivilised and reiterated the need to control Mappila bodies and minds. The 'fanatic' was administered as a construct deployed by the colonial administrator for the political control of Mappila Muslims (Ansari, 2005). Most of the colonial records emphasise the ignorance, criminality, blind faith in rumours and rituals, inability to comprehend the virtues of non-violence and the politics of the national movement, a lack of patriotism and their hatred of Hindus. Besides the colonisers, nationalist leaders, including Gandhi and prominent nationalist leaders in Kerala, reaffirmed colonial notions about Muslims through their speeches and activities. Gandhi (1966: 321) wrote of 'Mappila madness' and refers to 'shame and humiliation of Mappila conduct about the forcible communal looting'. In another context, Gandhi (1966: 47–48) notes their 'fiery temperament', describes them as easily excitable, quickly enraged and ready to resort to violence and holds them 'responsible for many murders'. The celebrated nationalist poet Kumaran Asan (2004 [1923]: 32) in his poem 'Durvastha' refers to Kerala being reddened with Hindu blood 'shed by the cruel Muhammadans'.

The colonial discourse on Mappilas is also reflected in academic constructions of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 and is evident in colonial ethnographic and anthropological writings, as Asad (1993) illuminates in a different context. Discursive and institutional practices constructed the identity of Mappila Muslims and reaffirmed notions of them as the 'other', also articulated in mainstream newspapers and magazines of that time.[7] Such constructions formed the Mappila political identity while 'community' acquired a new meaning in the public sphere.

Nationalist Discourse and the Public Sphere

The nationalist movement and the discourse it produced itself formed a particular public (Bhattacharya, 2004). This was marked by the exclusion of marginalised social groups in the so-called national culture and a particular kind of discourse that nationalism produced throughout the country. Pandian (2002) notes in detail that the inner domain which was used as a weapon of cultural resistance against western imperialism by the national community, excluded subaltern voices, specifically the 'traditions' of lower castes.

After the 1921 Rebellion, Mappila Muslims were further marginalised from the public sphere which was dominated by nationalist elites also in Kerala (Hitchcock, 1983). There was a notable rupture in Hindu-Muslim relations after the Rebellion. The regional Congress leaders failed to gain the confidence of the Muslims and could not mollify the feelings of Hindus and Muslims after the uprising. This was a period of crisis among Muslims, who wanted to agitate for their social, political and economic needs. On the other hand, they were afraid to assert themselves in the public sphere because they were branded as criminals and seen as a threat to the social order. Far removed from the power centres of North India, Mappila Muslims had to show their loyalty to the emerging nationalism while simultaneously protecting their community's interests. It was only at the time of the Khilafat movement that Muslims actively participated in the nationalist struggle. For the nationalists, this was an anti-colonial struggle, but for the Mappilas who took part in this it was both religious and economic. When this movement ended in 1924, however, the participation of Mappila Muslims in national agenda became even more passive (Miller, 1992).

Though large sections of Muslims were reluctant to get involved in the nationalist movement, a few leaders tried to mobilise the community for nationalist interests. Vakkam Abdul Khader, Muhammad Abdurahman and E. Moidu Moulavi were nationalist Muslim leader figures. It is important to note that in the Travancore state of Southern Kerala, Muslims participated to a greater extent in the nationalist movement (Kunju, 1989). Attempts to bring the nationalist interest into the Mappila community succeeded only when elite Muslims joined hands with upper caste/class nationalists in the region.

Attempts to turn the Malayali Muslims into Indian Muslims, however, created further tensions in the region. The Hindu–Muslim unity that nationalist leaders

proposed was perceived as a somewhat false agenda because in Malabar there was already an inevitable unity formed between lower castes and Mappila Muslims, rooted in regional politics against upper caste hegemony. The 'abstentionist' movement which started in 1932, jointly initiated by lower caste groups along with Muslims and Christians against the domination of upper caste Hindus in administrative positions, is an instance of this unity. The implication of the propaganda for Hindu–Muslim unity was that there could not be any alliance between lower castes and Muslims and there were efforts to alienate Mappila Muslims as a religious group in the region. On the other hand, making Malabar Muslims familiar with North Indian nationalist politics also strengthened the pan-Islamic movement among Muslims in Kerala.

Mappilas as a Political Community

The pressured colonial scenario helped to crystallise the political identity of Indian Muslims, but from a Kerala perspective also brought out internal differences among Mappillas. Different contours of colonial governmentality played a role in making the community and consolidating it as a political force. Under the modern taxonomic system of the British, syncretic or liminal groups were compressed into grand labels. The 1871 census of Malabar classified the people of Malabar into three distinctive groups: Hindus, Muhammadans and Christians. The census reports, district gazetteers, ethnographic sources, counter insurgency reports, missionary notes, basically the entire array of colonial discourse on Mappilas, constantly replicated similar images. The census reports show that Mappilas were marked as a fanatic group long before the rebellion. In the census report of 1871, Cornish (1874: 173) wrote:

> They are almost entirely uneducated and their religious fanaticism is, under these circumstances, a source of danger to the public peace. Under the influence of religious excitement, they are reckless of their own lives and of others and the presence of Europeans in the district has always been considered essential to the preservation of peace.

The Imperial Gazetteer of India of 1881 (Hunter, 1881: 438) represented the Mapillas as a tribe remarkable for the surge of fanaticism in successive revolt against Hindus. However, at a later stage, the census also provided data for using various communitarian appeals. Censuses about Mappilas identified their infirmity, while also helping them claim numerical strength. When community-wise educational status and health reports were officially published, Mappilas mobilised claims for government support, as they were clearly lagging behind other communities. There was hardly any community or caste in the state without an association of its own for self-development, trying to create pressure groups by emphasising caste or religious identity to secure concessions from the government. Muslim newspapers and periodicals also helped in the dissemination of their ideologies and generated a new consciousness among Mappilas. Magazines like Al-Ameen and Al-Murshid (Arabic Malayalam) are good examples of such publications.

Through the press, public meetings and debates each group asserted particular interests in the public sphere.

In this context, the formation of the Muslim League in Kerala was a remarkable turn in the engagement of the Muslim community with the public sphere (Wright and Theodore, 1966). The All India Muslim League was formally organised in Malabar in 1937. The growth of the Muslim League in India as the representative of the vast majority of Indian Muslims was reflected in Kerala, too, as Muslim leaders began to quit the Congress and turn to the Muslim League (Aziz, 1992). This led to the separate mobilisation of Muslims in the political sphere of Kerala. The establishment of newspapers and magazines under the Muslim League also helped represent the interests of Muslims. In electoral politics, nationalist Muslims and the supporters of the Muslim League fought each other and the Muslim League won the seats reserved for Muslims.

Apart from the Muslim League, an organisation called the Muslim Majlis emerged. It resembled what Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) called a 'paracommunity' of Muslims in Malabar. Their aim was to integrate the community to pressurise the government for educational and political benefits. Such organisations helped to achieve greater horizontal solidarity within the community and rural Mappilas began to relate themselves closer with a Malabar identity as opposed to their local or national identity. This significantly helped to achieve social cohesion in a diversified and even culturally polarised community. Conflicting interests within the community were mainly negotiated under the leadership of the Muslim League. When the Partition question emerged, the Malabar branch of the Muslim League fully supported the demand. Interestingly, the logic behind the Pakistan ideal led the Mappilas to make a similar demand for the creation of *Mophlastan*, a separate province for Malayali Muslims. The idea of *Mophlastan*, of course, was rejected and Mappilas had to accept their position as a minority group in a democratic society (Sharafudeen, 2003). But this had a significant impact on the position of Mappilas, as the proposal was now considered as proof of their disloyalty to the Indian nation.

Language, Marginality and Counter Publics

The politics of language and thus the evolving status of the community is a complex issue to deal with. During the early colonial period, whatever remnants there were of Sanskrit language influence gave way to standardised Malayalam and created a space for many communities to articulate their interests in the public sphere. Standardised Malayalam helped caste and religious groups to imagine a collective past through new narratives. With the development of print and language, lower caste groups also reinforced their collective identity through various print activities. Arunima (2006) observes that the development of standardised Malayalam assisted Muslims in producing a variety of writings which helped integrate the community by constructing a past.

Arabic-Malayalam (*Arabimalayalam*) was the language of education for common Muslims (Samad, 1998). In colonial times, Muslims developed their own educational system called *Othupallis,* based on Arabic-Malayalam; newspapers and dictionaries were published in this language (Ali, 1990). Printing presses were established in places like Ponnani and Tirurangadi in the Malabar region. Earlier works put to print in Malabar were the *Malappattus* (a Mappila literary style), mystical poems (*Madhpattus*) and war songs (*Padappattus*). There were novels, dramas and stories in both Malayalam and Arabic Malayalam.[8] While Muslims internalised and recognised Malyalam as their language, they also mixed it with Arabic as a part of their religious identity. This suggests that Muslims in Kerala shared Malayaliness, but simultaneously sought to retain and develop a distinctive identity. When the Malayalam language was standardised and English became the medium of education, it created a dilemma among Muslims. Print in both these languages increasingly undermined the authority of rural Mappilas who were traditionally the sole custodians of Islamic knowledge and who transmitted it through classes and religious seminars. Arabic Malayalam had been a safe language for Muslims in that it mediated between their own particular cultural realm and broader Malayali society. Neither Malayalam nor English was a comfortable language for Mappilas. When the new educational system was imposed, the larger section of the community felt excluded and marginalised. But the Mappilas did not remain passive in the linguistic sphere and there were attempts to create a counter-public through parallel discourses.

For example, one of the agendas of Christian missionaries in the early phase of their intervention in Kerala was to attack other religious beliefs and practices, especially of Islam. Some scholars among Muslims resisted this through publishing books, articles and pamphlets which defended Islam and attacked Christianity. Texts like *Muhammad Charitam* (*History of Muhammad*) and *Mushammado Isanabiyo Aru Valiyavan*, (*Muhammad or Jesus, Who is Greater*?) are examples of such types of writings (Arunima, 2006). It is paradoxical that Mappila intellectuals used standardised Malayalam to resist the hegemonic religious discourse in the public sphere, through texts that used a modern prose style and attempted definitions of community boundaries and self (Arunima, 2006). This genealogy of counter resistance goes back to the writings and speeches of Makthi Thangal in the early twentieth century. For example, in his book '*Parkaleetha porkalam*' (Kareem, 1981: 109) he writes: 'I challenge the Christian scholars to prove with sufficient evidence that Islam is a religion with contradictory arguments in text and it promotes evil practices in society.' While this reflects engagement in cross-communal debates, print also helped to contribute to the strengthening of the exclusiveness and separate identity of Muslims in Malabar.

Reformism and the Muslim Public

When the reformist tendency among Muslims started in the early twentieth century, it was at first a response to the wider social transformations in colonial Kerala (Razak, 2007). Every community tried to reform itself to cope with the new social and institutional values. The transformation of the Muslim community cannot be isolated

from this larger trend by reducing it merely to pan-Islamism. The reformist attempt of lower caste leaders such as Sreenarayana Guru to transform the Ezhava community influenced Muslims as well (Osella and Osella, 2006). The 'modernisation' implied in this reform reflected attempts to negotiate the new social situation, which now urged Muslims to become a part of modern Kerala where literacy, political participation and abolition of evil practices became the agenda of reform, even if this reform also had a pan-Islamic context. Makthi Thangal advised that 'all Muslims have to be patriotic and work for the progress of the Malayali community' (Kareem, 1981: 726).

Reform thus did not exclude the religion of Mappila Muslims from the public sphere. Instead religion coexisted with the new interpretations. New translations of Quran and Hadith aimed to destroy local popular Islamic beliefs and social practices such as the matrilineal descent system (*marumakkathazham*). Despite such reformist attempts, however, the larger Muslim population continued to adhere to their traditions and strongly reacted against reform efforts, so that the local elements proved stronger. During this reformist phase, the Muslim masses remained also influenced by common traditions shared with the Hindu society. The introduction of public speech (*wa'az*) and other programmes now gave way to the formation of a new Muslim public, which sought to break with the traditional lives of the Muslim masses.

However, it is the experience everywhere that reformist projects may fail to reflect mass public sentiment; it depends on what the reforms aim to achieve and also who the reformers are. Reformist movements that have kept large segments of the population out of the public sphere and have not tried to build consensus within the community would need to face questions about what agenda they served. One can see Muslim reformism in Kerala also as a response to parallel Hindu revivalist movements that became very strong in the late colonial phase (Fakhri, 2009). At the same time, pan-Islamic ideas reached Kerala when North Indian Muslims started to engage with Kerala Muslims during the nationalist struggle. Reformist as well as counter-reformist movements brought about a new awareness among Muslims that helped to transform fuzzy and fluid segments of people into a community.

Some wealthy and educated Mappilas such as nationalist leaders, leaders of the Muslim League and certain reformers represented the community in the public sphere. The emerging public arena at that time was limited to the educated middle class (Ali, 1990). In the context of the post-Rebellion crisis, the elite section united the community for their political interests through various platforms. Importantly, the Muslim League aimed to be and became a platform for all sections—the traditionalists, reformists and the educated middle class Mappilas, all broadly united under an elite leadership for political benefit. This public sphere, however, remained internally diverse, too.

Mapilla Muslims in Present-day Kerala

The trajectory of Muslims in the public sphere of Kerala after the post-colonial state formation is, then, quite different from the experience everywhere else in the nation. Before discussing the Mappilas' endeavour, it is important to outline some problems

that Indian Muslims encounter in the larger national public. Serious questions were raised about the condition of Muslims as a minority in the new public sphere after independence. The term 'minority' itself became problematic in India. Pandey (1999) shows how religious groups are being identified as minorities through state-driven discourses. The implicit claim is that members of some cultures truly belong to a particular politically defined place, while others, minority cultures, do not so belong, either because they are immigrants or aborigines. Thus Indian Muslims are now the 'minority' even in districts, cities or towns where they are a numerical majority. The partition crisis and the endemic nature of communal violence in various parts of India had serious repercussions. Alam (2008: 12) writes: 'Common sufferings in communal riots brings Muslims together just as economic strangulation unites tribes, or the evils of untouchability unites Dalits, or gender humiliation unites women, all in common political action generating a sense of bonding'. While such political issues generated a common consciousness among Muslims, recent terrorist attacks and further labelling of Muslims as terrorists only added to the woes of Indian Muslims. There is a sense of 'otherness' to Muslims as the imagined other, essentialised as child breeders, dirty, violent, fundamentalist, sinister-looking, poor, illiterate and so on (Hasan, 2007).

The Sachar Committee Report (Sachar, 2006: 11–13) highlights some major issues around the question of identity for Indian Muslims and modalities of being identified as 'Muslim' in public spaces.[9] Markers of Muslim identity like *burqa* and *purdah* have often been a target for ridiculing the community and generating suspicion. The report reveals that Muslim men donning a beard and *topi* are often picked up for interrogation from public spaces like parks, railway stations and markets. As the Report (Sachar, 2006: 11) rightly points out, Muslims 'carry a double burden of being labelled as "anti-national" and as being "appeased" at the same time'.

Likewise, the reservation issue has generated much debate on Muslims in India (Alam, 2010). Earlier reservations were only in favour of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/ST) and were then extended to Other Backward Classes (OBC), mainly in education and employment. Before the national Report of Sachar (2006), the Narendran Commission of 2001 had dealt with backward communities in Kerala and revealed that Muslims are inadequately represented in public institutions.[10] This led to massive protests and Muslim organisations widely propagated this issue to generate discussions in the public sphere in Kerala. After the Mandal Commission recommendations and particularly the Sachar Committee report, affirmative action again gained much significance. The claims and counterclaims regarding reservations for Muslims have evidently large implications and this debate carries on (Alam, 2010).

The postcolonial history of Mappila Muslims shows the unique endurance of a religious minority in a 'secular' public sphere, related to the colonial legacy of identity assertion of marginalised communities in their social development. Despite a strong communist movement and the establishment of a left government in Kerala, communities and caste groups continued to play important roles in democratic processes within the state. Referring to the complex relationship between communists

and Mappila Muslims, Miller (1992: 203) notes that '[c]ommunism in turn made unexpectedly rapid inroads on the Mappila community, aided by its own contribution to that community's uplift, producing secularizing tendencies and setting loose force of change'. However, there was growing realisation among Muslims that gaining political power on their own terms is important for the development of the community. Mobilisation under the Muslim League gave the community a fresh sense of power, helped to overcome the insecurity stemming from the previous weakening Mappila position and produced a sense of pride and confidence (Miller, 1992). The Muslim League also pressurised both the Communists and Congress to protect the interests of Muslims. They shared power with both parties on various occasions and succeeded in gaining many demands, like exclusive reservation for Muslims, creating the Muslim-dominated district of Malappuram, appointments of Arabic teachers in schools and introduction of Mappila schools.

Gulf migration after the 1970s further significantly changed the socio-economic status of Muslims in Kerala. As such labour opportunities were flourishing, Mappilas of rural Malabar began to migrate to Gulf countries. By the 1990s this Gulf migration had become a key factor in Kerala's economy, brought about tremendous lifestyle changes of many people and provided them partly with a cosmopolitan outlook (Osella and Osella, 2006). At the same time, it also reshaped the religious, educational and political visions of Muslims. Reformist activities among Muslims gained an organised form after the establishment of the Kerala Naduvatul Mujahideen (KNM), leading to severe conflicts between these Mujahid reformists and orthodox Sunni groups. Such conflicts and tensions form part of the wider discussions occurring in the public sphere, in mosques, madrasas, the media and public meetings. Apart from the Mujahids, Jamaat-e-Islami, more oriented towards the ideology of 'political Islam', entered into the picture. Reformist attempts to generate a new Islamic identity among Mappila Muslims are visible in a number of spheres ranging from mosque architecture to the dressing patterns of women. Today, the publication wings of these organisations are so active that they have separate magazines for children, youth and women, besides many polemical booklets. In the sphere of education, too, they have progressed and managed to a large extent to overcome the traditional backwardness.

Simultaneously, other national and international socio-political processes after 1990s have impacted on the political identity of Muslims in Kerala. Increasing communal polarisation and violence all over India influenced the political identity of Kerala Muslims, too. Issues including the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Gujarat violence, the Iraq invasion and other post 9/11 events evoked strong responses from many Muslim organisations and the Muslim public. A heightened identification with global Islamic conditions and trends is evident. International events affecting Islamic communities in various parts of the world are vigorously debated in the public sphere of Kerala. The emergence of party political organisations other than the Muslim League, like PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) and Non-party political organisations like NDF (National Democratic Front, now known as Popular Front) and a Solidarity Youth Movement

influence the public opinion of Muslims. Many newspapers, magazines and journals of different organisations try to manipulate public opinion. Despite internal differences, they seek to unite Kerala Muslims for a common political cause in times of adversity.

Conclusions

The history of Mappila Muslims demonstrates their subaltern features in colonial Kerala. Mappila marginalisation can be seen to result partly from their position as a historically subaltern group, like other caste groups and partly as a religious community. After the Rebellion of 1921, there was a rupture in the social life of the Mappilas and their colonial projection and negative labelling as 'fanatic' had major impacts on the public sphere, which restricted the community's interaction and involvement with the wider public. The traditionally subordinated position of Mappilas in Kerala's social structure had its own implications in various endeavours to integrate them into the newly emerging public sphere of the twentieth century. Later periods saw the emergence of identity consciousness among Mappilas, especially in the political sphere. This reflected the transformation of a caste-like group (*kulam*) into a community (*ummath*) and Malabar as a region became important for this imagination. Internal tensions and conflicts remained, but especially in the political sphere they sought to project outwardly a common Muslim identity and argued for collective interests. Sometimes, they tried to create counter-publics, especially in the literary and political realms, with counter discourses and activities along with other subordinated groups.

Overall, the journey of Mappila Muslims from the colonial history to the present is a journey from a clearly subaltern position to that of a more powerful community, experiencing considerable educational and economic progress and political empowerment. Although the Muslims of Malabar are no more a subaltern community and show a unique history of social development compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the country, stereotypes and stigmas surrounding their religious identity continue to persist in the public sphere even today, often in new forms. While such experiences have much in common with many Islamic communities in India and elsewhere in the new global political circumstances, it does not astonish that sometimes such situations also invoke the local collective memory of Mappilas, which often takes them back to the colonial history of subordination and struggle.

Notes

1. *Nercha* is a declining traditional festival of Mappilas, celebrated around a few historically significant mosques in Malabar. It resembles local temple festivals, including use of elephants and has become advertised as a tourist attraction.
2. This is the English version of the kingdom of Samoothiri. He was the ruler of the present day *Kozikod*e or *Calicut* in the fourteenth century.
3. Various meanings are attached to this idea, like the struggle for self- purification, the struggle against evils in society and the struggle for an Islamic state.

4. Panikkar (1989) uses Gramci's idea of 'traditional intellectuals' to explain the struggles initiated by the Mappila religious leaders. Traditional intellectuals are those who do regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group and are regarded as such by the population at large.
5. *Thangal* is the Malayalam version of *Sayyid* in North India, a term used for those who claim their lineage from the Prophet Muhammad. The leading *Thangal*s lived in *Mampuram,* in *Malabar*.
6. Malabar Special Tribunal Case No. 7 of 1921, cited in Hitchcock (1983: 245).
7. Articles and reports published in various newspapers found in the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library in Delhi provide rich evidence for this. See *Nazrani Deepika*, 2 September 1921; *Malayala Manorama*, 17 September 1921, 19 November 1921, 18 December 1921 and 29 December 1921; *Kerala Patrika*, 5 September 1921; *Mathrubhumi*, 1 May 1923 and 26 May 1923.
8. The novel titled *Khilr Nabiya Kala Nafees*, written by K. Jamaludhin and journals like *Malabar Islam* are good examples of the vibrant print public developed by Mappilas of Malabar.
9. This Government report reveals the social, educational and economic conditions of Muslims in India. The Report recommended many policies to uplift the condition of Muslims and led to lively debate in the public sphere. For key elements of an emerging discussion, see Jodhka (2007).
10. Kerala's Narendran Commission report of 2001 focused on the representation of various communities in four avenues of employment, namely government departments, public sector undertakings, universities and autonomous institutions. The Commission concluded that the representation of most of the backward communities in the state service and related areas of employment was `clearly inadequate', though the extent of inadequacy varied from community to community.

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