



Intellectual Impact of Sufism in Kerala: A Study on the Influence of Selected Classical Sufi Literatures

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Abstract

Sufism has played a significant role in the intellectual and social awakening of Muslims ever since the spread of Islam in Kerala. The Sufi literature enriched here in accordance with the teachings of eminent early Sufis such as Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Imam Ghazali, etc. This study examines how Muslims in Kerala came to adopt the teachings of important Sufi masters and how the Sufi literatures developed by them influenced the Kerala Muslim society. Additionally, this paper also focused on the impacts of major Sufi literatures like *Mala* and *Mawlids* in the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants.

It is certain that the “*Muhyiddin Mala*,” a classical ode in praise of Sheikh Jilani, was composed by Qazi Muhammed in support of the ordinary people in Kerala and is thought to be the earliest literary work in Mappila history. It



is also one of the most significant works ever produced in Arabi Malayalam language. Moreover, as the developer of Ash'arite theology, which has more followers in Kerala, Al Ghazali's teachings gained greater acceptability among the Muslims residing here. It is a fact that more than ten of Al Ghazali's renowned works, including his magnum opus *Ihya Uloomidden*, have translated into Malayalam. The philosophical concepts and Sufi teachings of Al Ghazali also influenced the Kerala Muslims, especially in Malabar region in great extent.

Keywords: *Sufism, Sufi literature, Al Ghazali, Sheikh Jilani, Mala Mawlid, Muhyiddin Mala, Ihya Uloomidden, Kerala Muslim culture*

Introduction

Sufism has contributed significantly to Muslims' intellectual and social awakening as well as Kerala's development of religious harmony since the spread of Islam there. Ulama and Sufis are responsible for the development of the Islamic culture and values. Sufis had a crucial role in fostering the peaceful communal harmony in the region from the south to the north.

As the historical sources clearly says, Sufism enriched its roots in Kerala soon after the emergence of major Sufi orders all over the world in 11, 12 and 13 centuries. Moreover, as traders and travelers through Indian Ocean region, many Sufis visited Kerala and some of them settled here by the intention of propagation also. Ibn Battuta, in his renowned work 'Rihla' spoke on many Sufi masters with whom he met while he visited Malabar between 1342 and 1345 AD. He depicts a clear picture on the Sufi qanqahs lead by Sheikh Muhammad Nagravi in Honavar near Karnataka, a part of early Malabar.

The interesting historical narratives of Sheikh Aliyyul Kufi, who came from Kufa and lived in Peringathur near Kannur, and Sheikh Alauddin al Himsi, who was well known among the people of Kerala in the title 'Sheikh Mamukkoya' were the outstanding examples of this impact. Anyway in abundance of Sufis visited Malabar region between 13th and 19th centuries and spent their spiritual lives with the people here.

The Sufis contributed to the Mappila community's cultural achievements in the fields of art, literature, and languages in addition to improving the socioeconomic



conditions, bad customs, and superstitions that were prevalent at the time. According to the author of *Tuhfat al Mujahidin*, Hasan al Basari, the earliest head of the major Sufi groups, was a disciple of Malik ibn Dinar (d.748), whose efforts expedited the spread of Islam in Malabar. After building mosques in several locations throughout Malabar, Malik Dinar was in charge of a well-organized missionary operation.

Sufi Orders in Kerala

Most of the Sufi orders like Qadiri, Chishti, Naqshbandi, Suhrawadi, Shadili, and Rifa'i got acceptance among the Muslims of Malabar in the early centuries itself. The Sufi masters and their followers from various orders tried to enrich the spiritual life Muslims along with their common life which was controlled by the *Ulamas*. Most of the Sufi orders came here before 16th century itself. It was the golden age of Kazaroooni, Qadiri, Naqshbandi and Suhrawardi orders. With the combined efforts of these Sufi Masters and native *Ulamas*, these orders got more acceptance among the common people.

The most accepted Sufi order here is *Qadiri tariqa*. In Malabar and Tamil Nadu it was deep-rooted before 15th century. With the support of the *Makhdooms* of Ponnani and the *Qazis* of Kozhikode this order became the well-known one among the Scholars and the local people, especially during ages of Qazi Abdul Aziz and his son Qazi Muhammad. Qazi Muhammad, the author of *Muhyiddeen Mala* has played a great role in the development of Qadiri order in Kerala. (Mandalamkunnu, 2019)

Moreover, *Qutubiyyat*, written by Sadaqatullah al Qahiri (d.1703), *Nool Mala* of Kunjayin Musliyar, *Muhyidden Ratib* and *Muhyidden Maulid* influenced the day-to-day life of Malabar Muslims.

Before 15th century itself, Suhrawardi order reached in Kerala. Sheikh Abdul Qadir Sani (d.1574) well known as '*Puratheel Sheikh*' in Kannur, was one of the propagator of this order. He got the title Abdul Qadir '*Sani*' (Second) by his great social and spiritual reforms. After his demise, Sheikh Vajeeluddin Abdu Rahman of Ponnani lead this Sufi order. Later, Sheikh Kamaluddin (Kallayi Sheikh), Sheikh Nooruddin, Sayyid and Ahmad Jalaluddin Bukhari were the masters of this *tariqa*.

Along with the Qadiri and Suhrawardi orders, the Chishtis also flourished here through the Makhdooms. Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoom I accepted this *tariqa* from Khwaja Izzuddin Chishtiti and later he became a leader of this Sufi order. Later he



wrote some notable works in Sufism like *Murshidu Thullab*, *Shamsul Huda*, *Sirajul Qulub*, *Tuhfatul Ahibba*, *Tafseelul Kifaya*, etc.

The history of Naqshabandi Sufi order also traces back to hundreds of years ago in Kerala. Even though, it became popular in the 19-20 centuries. Sheikh Kunjahammad of Noonjeri (d.1882) (a renowned disciple of Sheikh Yahya Dagastani of Makkah) and his student Sheikh Abdurahman of Tanur (d.1904) were the *Khalifas* of Naqshabandi order. (Malayamma, 2019)

In 18th century, Sufism became more popular here by the arrival of Hazrami Sayyids of Yamen. Most of them were connected with *Ba'alavi*, *Mauladdaveela*, *Bafaqeeh* and *Aidroosi*, subsects of Qadiri order. Among them the renowned leader Sheikh Jifri (d.1808) was the Sheikh of *Qadiri Ba'alavi tariqa*. After him, Sayyid Hasan Jifri and Sayyid Alavi of Mamburam (d.1844) lead this order. It is great fact that, by the efforts of Hazrami Sayyids, *Haddad Ratib* of Imam Abdullah al Haddad (d.1720) spread all over the world especially in Kerala, Indonesia and Malaysia. It was a major impact in the spiritual development of Muslims living in these areas.

Besides these, many other Sayyids and Scholars of that age were associated with different Sufi orders like *Rifa'i*, *Kazarooni*, etc. With their great efforts more literary and classical works in Sufism began to arise, especially written for the spiritual welfare of common people.

Sufi Literatures in Kerala

Islamic literature has a rich tradition in Kerala. A systematic effort was made throughout the centuries to maintain the continuity of literary heritage by taking inspiration straight from Muslim nations like Yemen (Ho, 2006). Various literary genres have been produced in Kerala, which has also seen a considerable increase in Muslim communities along its coast since the fifteenth century.

The early influences of Sufism on Kerala's regional dialects have received little attention up to this point. Though Sufism has received a lot of attention, scholarly studies have not given it the proper consideration when it comes to its effects on regional dialects and its literary forms, which were a subsequent development. The first Arabi-Malayalam text ever discovered was of a Sufistic type, hence it was assumed that this trend may have started even earlier. However, it has not been supported. We can observe that there are still many parallels between the arguments raised by these works and the Sufistic conditions of the literature of Malabar if we assess the newly published works on social and religious engagements of



vernaculars from both the North and South of India. These parallels could help us comprehend the long history of this tradition in Mappila literature.

Mala-Mawlid Literatures

Among these literary works, *Malas* and *Mawlids* were the most significant. The Arabic prosepoetic works known as Mawlid (s) are based on the biographies of Sufis, Sayyids, Ulama, Umara, Shaheeds, and others. They are also known by the colloquial names *Maulid*, *moulood* and *milad*. In the past, it was utilised to describe the Prophet's life and miracles in the form of brief prose-poetic compositions. It is typically chanted on *Milad al Nabi* occasions.

Later, over the succeeding periods, numerous *Mawlids* were written on other saints, intellectuals, and martyrs as well as other historical and religious luminaries. These were chanted during the yearly *Urus*, which was held in honour of their passing anniversary. The fundamental component of the rite is the collective recitation of poetry and prose (typically in Arabic, occasionally in local dialects) glorifying the remembered individuals. As a separate field of study, the composition of Mawlids developed over time, and Mawlid recitation followed suit, becoming an essential component of the general populace's daily religious activities. Although it was known by several titles during that time, the Mawlid literature has a lengthy history in Islamic history.

Kerala Muslims' social identity has been greatly influenced by Mala-Mawlid literatures and their group recitation tradition. They bridge the gap between Muslim minds and rituals more than any other religiously or locally significant composition or presentation, as these presentations served as a centre for worship itself.

In Kerala, Mala-Mawlid literature has a long tradition. Even though there have been numerous attempts in various regions of the world under different titles, Kerala's Mawlid culture is unique in many ways. Along with the Mawlids' composition, Mawlids' presentation, or Mawlid Majlis, is significant and distinctive. Kerala has witnessed hundreds of Mawlids on various academic figures since the fifteenth century.

Malas are devotional lyrical compositions written in Arabic and Arabi-Malayalam that extol the virtues of Sufis, Shaykhs, Shaheeds, Ulamas, and others. Since the word "Mala" literally means "necklace," it is used to refer to a poem's unbroken lines, which are like the pearls on a necklace. The life-sketch, historical occurrences, adventures, miracles, etc. are all included. Malas, in contrast to



Mawlid, have a longer framework and a poetic flair. It can sometimes span several chapters (parts) and hundreds of lines.

Mala-Mawlids and the Community Formation

Mala-Mawlid literatures, particularly in the northern wards, have had a significant impact on Kerala Muslims' sociocultural identity development. This truth is supported by the numerous copies of it that Muslims in Kerala can access, the significant number of fresh publications, and its widespread popularity. It contributes significantly to bridging the divide between Muslim minds and rituals, more so than a few minor religious writings or locally significant ones. It is obvious that Kerala's rich and diverse religious literatures were a significant factor in the continuation of the Islamic renaissance there.

Kerala Muslims have created a significant amount of diverse literature over a long period of time that encourages readers to become more knowledgeable about Islam. These literary works contributed to the growth of the Islamic culture and religious spirit. This scenario may have contributed to Kerala's Muslims' high literacy rate in religious matters. The best aspect of this small body of literature is its variety of subjects and lovely subject pairings.

Although all materials have the same ultimate goal, it has been used in society in a variety of ways. The majority of these were Manaqib literatures, which highlighted the virtues of Sufis, saints, Ulama, and others. It convinced them to reclaim their morality and spirituality in order to carry it forward into their daily lives. The second part of the literature was simultaneously defending their culture and identity against the encroachment of alien forces. A select few of them described the battles fought on the battlefields and the valour of Islamic troops who took the lead in Jihads, inspiring them to mentally join this Jihad.

These Malas and songs have made significant contributions to Kerala's anticolonial efforts. Therefore, the British government formally prohibited the majority of them. Even so, the Muslims of Mappila will always look back on its direction as a heroic experience. According to this statement, Malas and Mawlids have a major impact on Muslim life and culture. And in a world where contemporary and secular alternatives are bridging this divide, it plays a significant part in the continuance of Kerala's Islamic revivalist philosophy.

Muhyiddin Mala and its influence in Kerala Muslim Culture

This well-known devotional classic, written in AD 1607, details the life and spiritual abilities of Sufi saint Sheikh Muhyiddin Abdul Kader. By listening to it,



we are able to obtain an idea of what Islam was like in Iran in the eleventh century, after the prophet, in a distinct setting and culture.

Sanskrit did not appeal to common Muslims at the time it was written. The Sufis were aware of this and created an alternative liturgy that not only gave rise to a new literary tradition of panegyrics honouring great Islamic heroes, but also to a new linguistic heritage—Arabic Malayalam, a simple tongue free from research. Even today, it is customary to recite the Muhyiddin Mala, which recounts the history of Islam in Southern India.

The arrival of the Makhdum family and their religious mission played a crucial impact in Kerala's historical development of Sufism. The Makhdums' activities were centred on the enormous Jama Masjid at Ponnani. Their family arrived in Kayalapatanam after migrating from Yemen. After that, they made Ponnani their home. This family was crucial to Mappilas' reformation. They were the original Qadiri Order adherents in Malabar.

In this regard it is also relevant to note that the Qazis of Calicut were also actively engaged in the spread of the Qadiri order. Qazi Muhammad (d. 1025/1616) who had his education directly from Abdul Aziz Makhdum (d.994/1585) composed the famous devotional song called 'Muhyuddin Mala' in praise of Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani. (Koya, 1998)

The verses have long been revered by Sufi Muslims. The poem is memorized and recited in congregations. Some Muslims believe that, this may heal illnesses and purify hearts when repeated with love and dedication. This Mala is very popular among the Mappila Muslims and was sung in every house soon after the Maghrib prayer. (Ponmala, 2008)

The memorization of Muhyuddin Mala was an obligation for the Mappila girls who were going to be married. The fact has been emphasized by Dr. Raja Muhammed that "Islamization of the Coromandel at its very inception was interlinked with the commercial enterprises. The followers of Islam are called Muslims. The Muslim colonies swelled through intermarriage of native women to the Arab migrants and merchants and multiplied by the conversion of the local population through the influence and efforts of the merchant missionaries and Sufis, the Muslim mystics who enjoyed the liberty to preach the faith. Thus the coromandel Islamic society was founded in the 8 century' itself." (Kunhali, 2004).



Translations of major Classical Sufi Literatures

Abu Hamid Muhammad, famous in the world of learning as ‘Al Ghazali’ was born in Tus, a city in Khurasan. It is reasonable to conclude that Imam Ghazali (d. 1111 A.D.) had a significant impact on Kerala’s spiritual and philosophical life. Al Ghazali was an encyclopedia and prolific scholar especially in Sufism, theology, Philosophy and Jurisprudence. As an Ash’arite scholar and the author of many basic textbooks on the Principles of *Shafi’* Jurisprudence, he got more acceptance among the people in Kerala. Allama Shibli Nomani in his renowned book ‘*Al Ghazali*’, has mentioned Ghazali’s works in 5 categories in which about 85 titles are included. Among his works, the most notable classics are rendered to various languages all over the world. Now, more than 12 of his great works are available in Malayalam.

Al Ghazali’s greatest work, *Ihya Uloomiddeen*, was written in Arabic and was inspired by a personal religious experience. It is recognised as one of his most important writings and a classic overview of the sincere Muslim’s path to Allah. Each of the four sections of the book has ten books in it. Part one covers religious practises and worship, while Part two covers people and societal mores. Parts three and four consists of destructive evils and constructive virtues. *Ihya* clarifies Islamic principles and practises and demonstrates how these can form the cornerstone of a profound devotional life that leads to the most advanced levels of Sufism.

As a first attempt of rendering *Ihya* into Malayalam, P. Muhammed Moideen (d.1967), a disciple of Vakkom Moulavi translated and published the chapter ‘*Ajaibul Qalb*’ into Malayalam under the tile “*Hridayathinte Albhuthangal*”(wonders of the heart) in September 1947 and reprinted in 2007. M.V. Kunhi Ahmed Maulavi (d. 1989)’s first complete translation of *Ihya* into Malayalam was released in 1986.

Conclusion

This research depicts a clear picture on how the Muslims of Kerala came to follow the Sufi masters’ teachings and how the Sufi literature they produced had an impact on Kerala’s Muslim community. Sufi literary works like *Mala* and *Mawliids* affected the locals’ daily life. Along with following the ideology of Shafi jurisprudence, a vast number of muslims in Kerala, especially in Malabar region are following the teachings and rituals of Some Sufi masters. Qadiri, Chishti, Naqshbandi, Suhrawardi and Shadhili orders flourished here in last centuries with the great efforts of renowned Sufis and scholars. It is a fact that in abundance of Sufi Literatures written by these Sufis enriched their moral values and daily rituals. Moreover, Sufi literatures like Muhyiddin Mala, other *Malas* and *Mawliids* such as



Manqoos Mawlid became a part of their lifestyle. In addition to these, some major scholars like Imam Ghazali's works and thoughts also influenced them in every aspects of their life, especially on their moral, educational and jurisprudence.

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