

Ma'bar to Malabar: The Relationship between Kayalpattanam and Northern Kerala

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Abstract

There exists a close relationship between the Malabar Region of Kerala State and Kayalpattanam, an Islamic Settlement in Tamil Nadu. The ties are historic and has benefited the Malabar, economically, socially and religiously. The present paper explores the relationship between the two regions from a historic perspective.

Keywords: masjid, Dargah, Kayal, Nainans, Ma'bar.

Kayalpattanam was one of the early centres of Islamic settlement in the Coromandel Coast, situated in the eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. Multiple references is there for Kayalpattanam in many records including that of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo. The port of Kayalpattanam, known with different names during different times was famous and is Egypt and Yemen came to South India through the port of Kayalpattanam and it also served as a connection to Ceylon, the present Sri Lanka. Kayal, the short name of Kayalpattanam, emerged as one of the strong enters of trade during the medieval period, visited by merchants from different parts of the world. Though there are a number of Muslim settlements in Tamil Nadu, Kayalpattanam is the only municipality that has been totally inhabited by the Muslim population. In Kayalpattanam a Muslim settlement, the role played by the Arabs, traders and Sufi Saints are remarkable

It was during AD 633, the first settlement in Kayalpattanam was expected to have started. This was the result of the visit of traders and missionaries from Mecca and this happened during the reign of Hazrath Aboobakker, the Khalifah after Prophet Muhammad¹. They constructed a Kadal Karai masjid on the southern side of the Kosmarai Dargah, but it is believed that it was ruined a hundred years ago².

During the excavations of Carl Well in 1860³, coins of Arabian origin were found from Kayalpattanam. It is a clear connection of the existence of long distance trade with Arabia and these contacts would have resulted in the establishment of Muslim settlement in Kayalpattanam. It was believed that Muslim have inhabited the region from AD 846. As per the Tamil copper plate inscription dated in 875AD, a group of Muslim from Egypt under Muhammed Khilji came to Kayalpattanam and they renamed the region as Khairapattanam⁴. During AD1284, under the leadership of SayyidJammaludhin, the Muslim settlement started in Kayalpattanam. This was during the reign of Pandya King SundaraPandya and Sayyid Jamalludhin later became a Minister under the Pandya King and after the death of Sundra Pandya he was enthroned to the Pandya Kingdom. The Muslim settlement of Kayalpattanam is very important because of multiple reasons. Kayalpattanam provided the strength for the beginning of many other Muslim settlements and helped to enhance the influence of Islam in other parts of South India. The acceptance to these settlements by the rulers like Cholas and Pandyas were much helpful in establishing their influence. This was mainly because of the benefits from trade with Arabs⁵. Recognizing the importance of trade, these rulers welcomed the Arabs and gave the right over land in the region also. Reference to this can be seen in the Tamil Copper Plate inscription.

One can see close and unbreakable relationship between Malabar and Ma'bar (Kayalpattanam). Beliefpatterns, trade relationships, Arab and Sufi traditions, all these have created a peculiar culture and even today this ardent relationship can be seen. Anti-

Portuguese struggles, linguistic and cultural factors and the influence of Sufi tradition has strengthened the relationship between the people of two regions. Sussan Bayly has stated that “the most important factor in the spread of Islam in South India was the influence of Sufis, the Muslim mystical adepts whose activities are now seen to have been crucial in the expansion of Islam into South East Asia and many other regions of the Muslim world⁶.

In the Dargahas of Kayalpattanam, information has been given in Malayalam. This shows the religious and linguistic relationship between the two regions. Even today, the Muslim believers of Malabar visit the Dargahas of Tamil Nadu with great respect and importance and participate in the festivals[Urus] there.

One can notice close relationship between Kayalpattanam and the three main Islamic sects in the Kerala especially Malabar region. They were mainly those who have migrated from Kayalpattanam and settled in many parts of Kerala. The Nainans of Mattancherry, Kochi has played a major role in the development of Islamic knowledge in the region. They constructed schools, and other religious institutions and provided effective leadership for it. one of the ancient masjid at Mattancherryin Kochi, is called ChambttaPalli, literally copper roofed masjid, owned and run by the Nians community of Kochi⁷. Inside the masjid, you see inscription in ancient Tamil, still not completely decoded.

The roots of Makdhoom family of Ponnani can also be traced to Kayalpattanam⁸. They are the ones who have given immense contribution to the development of Islamic religious consciousness in Kerala. It is this family that exhorted the people to react against foreign invasions and they have written immensely against foreign rule. The contributions of Makdhoom family and the fact that they are from Kayalpattanam gives a new colour to the relationship between Malabar and Kayalpattanam. Shaikh ZainuddinMakdoom I penned an Arabic poem titled Tahrid that invoked local muslims to resist the invasion. His Grandson Shaikh ZainuddinMakhdhoom II authored a historic treatise in the 16th century, titled Tuhfat AlMujahidin, exhorting Muslims to fight against the Portuguese under the leadership of King Zamorin.⁹

The Marakkar family, one of the well known naval group in Malabar, were known to have better connections with Kayalpattanam. The Marakkar Community is a prominent community and their origin is traced to the marriage alliances between the Arab trades and indigenous women. Since the community is connected to trade they were far advanced than any other community. So they could easily dominate the economic and educational of the region. Marakkarsof Malabar controlled the Sea and provided necessary naval assistance to the Zamorin of Calicut. Eminent historian Dr. J Raja Mohamad, in his thickly footnoted work Maritime History of Coromandel Muslims, elaborates how the three captains of the Calicut king Zamorin, came to rescue the Coromandel Muslims and sailed to the coast, only to taste defeat at the end of the day. The elders of Kayalpattanam testify that several Malabari warriors were martyred, along with Kayalites, in the Kosmarai area¹⁰.

One could also trace the influence of Arabi-Tamil for the development of Arabi-Malayalam, which in turn contributed to the religious growth of Malabar Muslims. Moyinkutti Vaidhyar, a famous Mappila Poet, is known to have stayed at Kayalpattanam and studied Tamil from there and he in turn adopted many Tamil words in his work¹¹. Another noteworthy thing is Mohitheen Mala in Arabi Malayalam, written by Qadi Muhammed, the chief religious jurist of Kozhikode, gained immense popularity in kayalapattana, and it still does. This also strengthens the relationship with Kayalpattanam.

Malabar and Ma’bar has many things in commonality. When we look at the matrilineal practices, both followed a common pattern. Same is the case with cuisines also.

The common legacies reveal the traditional link between these two regions. The social-cultural links has been connected with bus services but have been stopped during the pandemic times. The service is expected to return, once the pandemic is over. The strong sense of connection between Kayalpattanam and Malabar is very clear and the people residing in both areas have a role to play in reviving the historic relationship between these places.

End Notes

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