

# Communal Identity Of The Muslims In Kanyakumari District

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The history of the people of a locality is connected with the history and culture of the land. The Arab trade and commerce, coupled with conversion to Islam, created large Diasporas of Muslims in different parts of the Kanyakumari district. The Muslims formed a community life in Kanyakumari district from the arrival of Muslim merchant groups from various parts of the world. The history of Muslims in the Kanyakumari district is extricable intertwined with the history and culture of the Malabar Coast. In the Kanyakumari district, the Muslims have played a prominent role in the shaping of its history. The Muslim community was designated with distinct identities from the time Islam was spread in South India, as early as the 8th and 9th centuries C.E. Thus, they emerged as a new community attached to their new faith, Islam, among the majority native Tamils of the Hindu faith. Muslims have lived in harmonious syncretism with their Hindu neighbours for centuries, but in recent years, many have sought to differentiate themselves culturally. The life of women in the Muslim community was very deplorable. They lived under the patronage of the male members of the family. The excellent tolerance and hospitality of the Muslims created a favourable situation for the convergence of so many religions in India, particularly in the Kanyakumari district. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Muslims of the Kanyakumari district were aware of the non-existence of proportional representation in public services. The Muslim in Kanyakumari district emerged as a politically motivated community only after the second decade of the twentieth century. Thus, in Kanyakumari district, the formal structure of the Muslim community could be involved in the nineteenth century and could incorporate them into the social ensemble of the state. They could consolidate themselves as a formidable community to be reckoned with. They were also competent to improve their social position and strengthen their economic condition through affirmative social and political actions.

**KEY WORDS** Arab trade – Diasporas – Commerce – Conversion – Islam - Culture – Community – Muslims - Malabar Coast - Hindu Faith – Harmonious - Civil Rights - Formidable community – Hospitality - Public Services.

## Introduction:

The study of human life and culture is a way of understanding different phases of culture. The social formation is a term familiar to the study of sociology, and it is largely synonymous with society. In the Kanyakumari district, the Muslims have played a prominent role in the shaping of its history. The Muslim community was designated with distinct identities from the time Islam was spread in South India, as early as the 8th and 9th centuries C.E. Thus, they emerged as a new community attached to their new faith, Islam, among the majority native Tamils of the Hindu faith. Muslims have lived in harmonious syncretism with their Hindu neighbours for centuries, but in recent years, many have sought to differentiate themselves culturally. In the process, they have undergone a process of Islam and have emerged as a distinctive ethnic community in the Kanyakumari district. While commonly ethnicity has been analysed as an adaptation to political and economic competition, Muslim ethnicity in the Kanyakumari district develops in response to internal needs to acquire status and a sense of social position rather than in response to external relations. It is proposed that the type of ethnicity represented by Muslims be called congeneric ethnicity, emphasising the form's similarity to racial and national ethnicity while simultaneously suggesting its differences.

### **Community Formation:**

Man has constantly been striving to improve their living conditions from time immemorial. People migrate from one place to another due to catastrophes in life, epidemics, poverty, trade, agriculture, religion, and caste reasons. It paved the way for a mixture of different cultures and groups. They propagated their religious ideology wherever they went, which naturally attracted the native's attention for so many reasons. Since the beginning of the first millennium BCE, different religious groups have settled in other parts of India. It became a profound process mainly after the origin of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in West Asia. The excellent tolerance and hospitality of the Muslims created a favourable situation for the convergence of so many religions in India, particularly in the Kanyakumari district. Over time, Tamil Muslims were generally identified and addressed chronologically as Yavana, Sonakar, Anjuvanam, and Thulakkar in South India. The history of the people of a locality is connected with the history and culture of the land. The history of Muslims in the Kanyakumari district is extricable intertwined with the history and culture of the Malabar Coast. As far as the history and culture of the Muslims in Kanyakumari district were concerned, to a certain extent, it had its own regional identity, and it continued up to the formation of Kanyakumari district. Since the eighth century CE, the Arabs had formed settlements near important ports in India, Sri Lanka, and the East Indies.

The Arabs who had settled down in Malabar used to travel from the port of Muziris (Kodungalloor). Their trade contacts with Kerala, even before the rise of Islam, gave impetus to the flourishing of Islam until the arrival of the Portuguese in Kerala. According to scholars, the traditional boundary of Malabar was Gokharnam, south of Karnataka in the north, and Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin) in the south. The ancient and medieval travelers mention Malabar vividly in their accounts as the main center of trade on the western coast of the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the settlements of early Muslims were mainly around the ports, depending upon the nature of their trade. Unlike northern India, in the southern region, Islam did not spread out of political pressure but through continuous missionary activities. Islamic penetration in South India and particularly in Kanyakumari district is marked by a calm

movement, a peaceful contact. The preaching of the tenets of Islam began, especially in the south, soon after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. There were several legends and stories regarding the spread of Islam in the land.

**Spread of Islam:**

Trade and commerce were the main factors that indirectly influenced the spread of Islam in South India. One of the characteristics of the spread of Islam in Kanyakumari district was that the immigrant Arab traders were constantly being reinforced by new arrivals from West Asia. The early Muslims received royal patronage from local chieftains. The legend of Cheraman Perumal represented the earlier example of religious toleration in Malabar. Likewise, the Rajas of Malabar, such as the Zamorin of Calicut, gave freedom to the Arabs to intermarry and to preach their faith among the local population. Moreover, the early mosques constructed in the Kanyakumari district were built in an indigenous style resembling the temples or Jaina Basadi or Buddhist Vihara. William Logan observes that the front portion of the old mosques in Malabar has a decorated gable as found in the indigenous temples of the region. The Arab trade and commerce, coupled with conversion to Islam, created large Diasporas of Muslims in different parts of the Kanyakumari district. Three activities that have been the most important have worked together to generate diasporas. The general assumption is that 'Diaspora has been the product of trade, war, and religion; and, of these three social forces, trade was the first to get to work.' Several travel accounts recorded the trade activities of Arabs with the native rulers in the port cities of the Malabar region. In the middle of the ninth century, Sulaiman of Tajir, an Arabic merchant, visited Malabar and mentioned Colachel in his travel accounts. He wrote about the port city of Colachel as 'the most considerable port in Kanyakumari district at that time.'

**Stratification among the Muslims of Kanyakumari District:**

Islam being the missionary faith, the Arabs, including Islamic preachers, used their ships wherever they went and established their colonies in the port cities of Asia and Africa. The Muslims seem to have settled first on the Malabar Coast in the ninth century and then spread to the eastern coast, especially Kayalpattinam and Ceylon. The Muslims of Kanyakumari district are either descendants of the Arab traders or the native converts. The Muslim traders, in due course, got married to the native women after converting them to Islam. A social institution among the Arabs, called contract marriages, was carried out wherever the Arab traders had arrived. Most of the weddings were contract marriages, which only lasted a maximum extending one year. After that, would be ceased the contract would cease to exist. It created a new class of people called Mappila in Malabar, Methan in Kerala, and Marakkiyar and Labbai in Kanyakumari district, and Marakkala in Sri Lanka. It is interesting to examine the expansion of the Muslim population. The influence of multiple strands in Islamic jurisprudence paved the origin and growth of different sectarian groups within the Islamic fold. These sectarian elements later crystallized in a caste system in Hinduism within Islam. The Travancore Census Report shows the population of these different groups and their peculiarities. A detailed description of the emergence and gradual development of each of these particulars is discussed in detail in this chapter. When the Muslim culture flourished in the Malabar Coast, the natives used the term 'Jonaka', a corrupt form of the word Yavana (the

Greeks), to address native Muslims. Their origin created different sectarian groups among the Muslims of the Malabar Coast. The rites and rituals also influenced it in contrast to Islamic jurisprudence. For instance, the Mappila or Methan of the state were Sha'fi Muslims because they were the followers of the Shafi School of Islamic jurisprudence. The Tamil Muslim communities, like the Tulukkan, the Rawthar, the Lebbai, and the North Indian Muslims like the Khoja, the Cutch Memon, the Pathan, settled in the Malabar Coast, etc., were the followers of the Hanafi School. They had always maintained a separate identity by speaking Dakkini Urdu (the dialects derived from Urdu) and Tamil as their home languages.

### **Congregational Structure of the Muslims**

In Kanyakumari district, the Muslims, as part of their congregational life, created their neighbourhood known as mahals (village assembly) or jama'at (community assembly) with an adjacent mosque that held Friday congregational prayers. Early Arab travelers such as Mazudi (ninth century), Ibn Batuta (fourteenth century), and Abdur Razak (fifteenth century) do not mention such an institution with religious and administrative authority over the members. Shaikh Zainuddin of Ponnani also did not refer in this regard. It is believed that, after building mosques in various parts of Kanyakumari district, such as Thengapattinam, Colachel, Thiruvithancode, Thittuvilai, Madavalayam, and Kottar, etc., the missionaries delegated a Qazi from Arabia or learned men among them. They looked after the day-to-day practices of the mosques. The structures of the mahal (mohalla) originated during the domination of Muslim rule in north India. These included not only the religious environment but also administrative and judicial characteristics. It is created based on demographic distribution and distinctive community identities. Therefore, every section of Muslims formed their mahal or mohalla in their neighbourhood. It has been identified as their spheres of influence with separate community entities. Moreover, each mahal was an administrative body to look after the mosque and its members. In some other places, the day-to-day administration was looked after by the kaikkaran, members of the powerful family of the mahal, or elders in the reputed Muslim families. They were the prominent executives of the mahal and were involved in the affairs of marriage, divorce, death, and other festivities.

### **Cultural Identity of the Muslims in Kanyakumari District:**

Major and minor mosques adorned the Muslim centers of the Kanyakumari district. In 1856 CE, there were thirty-four major mosques in the district. Among them, five were constructed with stones, especially two in Eraniel and three in Vilavancode taluk. The mosques in the Kanyakumari district were erected with granite stones. These stone structures were models of Hindu or Jain worshiping centers. The stone pillars of the mosque in this place bear a remarkable resemblance to those of the cave temples. These types of temples can be seen in the various parts of the Kanyakumari district. In Colachel, a mosque popularly known as 'Periyapalli', and the towns such as Thengapattinam, Colachel, Thiruvithancode, Thittuvilai, Kottar, and Madavalayam were the mainstays of Islamic culture. There is a beautiful old structure in Thiruvithancode, usually called the Maluku Muthaliar mosque, which is supposed to be a burial site of a Sufi from Arabia. Mateer narrates a popular legend on the mosque's construction in Kanyakumari district. The propagation of religious beliefs can be centered on the mosque. Like Hindu temples, some mosque has gateways, and some have circular towers.

The western gate of Mecca is the main entrance to the sacred building. As far as the Muslims' religious beliefs are concerned, they were very rigid and orthodox in their thoughts. Qazi was the head of the Muslims in a locality or a region. He was the judicial head of the Muslims. He became the fountain chief among the Muslims in that region. His jurisdiction probably extended to the entire mahal that includes many mosques. Mostly, they belonged to the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, like the Thangal families of Malabar. They were ecclesiastical leaders and religious scholars. The locals considered them with great respect. They acted as the spiritual leader and the judicial head, like the Sadar or Qazi of the Muslim world.

As the judicial head among the Muslims, they settled minor disputes between those mahals under his jurisdiction. As in the present day, the Labba or Mullah or Musaliyar is attached to the entire mosque to read the Qur'an and to lead the religious services. His work includes reading the Friday sermon (kuthuba) and general litigation in civil and religious matters in his locality. They have given instructions to the people based on the Qur'an. He was associated with a muezzin (mukri) to call for prayers and other helpers like the osthā (barber), thanneer (watermen), and kabaran (graveyard keepers). These people were looked after in the mosque's day-to-day affairs and the administrative bodies. In those days, they strictly followed the hierarchy, and the osthā, kabaran, etc., were the lowest strata of the community life.

### **Social Identity of the Muslim Community:**

The most important social institution in every society is the family. As far as the family system of the Muslims in Kanyakumari district was concerned, they followed a joint family system till recent years. As allowed by the tenets of Islam, the method of polygamy has been practiced by Muslims. In the Kalkulam region, the Muslims lived as a heterogeneous community. It does not mean that Indian Muslims constitute a homogeneous group of the population or that Islam is a monolithic religion, nor is this true.' The marriages were not homogeneous, and cross marriages were not allowed until recently. Though the members of the different Muslim denominations shared the same faith, performed the same ceremonies, and opposed endogamy. It was not based on religious feelings or prejudices but on social distinctiveness. The differences in Islamic jurisprudence also prevented intermarriages between them. In Islam, marriage is a contract; therefore, either the bride's or the groom's relatives can approach the other for marriage alliances. After the consensus, the pocket money is given to the groom's close relative. It was locally called acharam. Later, the wedding was fixed. During the wedding day, the witness obtained the bride's permission and a similar correspondence by the elder member to the Labba or the priest, who carries out the nikkah (wedding rite).

The Mahar was fixed before the nikkah held in a mosque or the bride's house. It was documented in the record book and signed by the bride's father or guardian, the bridegroom, and two spectators from both sides. Later, the bride is seated in an ornamented room where the bridegroom and his sister arrive and tie the tali around her neck. The duo kept on for a few hours at the bridegroom's home and returned to the bride's house. After the arrival of the bridegroom's relatives at the residence, they moved to the groom's house. A few days later, the bride's father and mother, along with their relatives, visit their daughter with furniture, utensils, fruits, and sweets. There were specific changes in rituals in connection with marriage according to the jurisprudence of the Hanafi compared to the Shafi. Moreover, the practices

associated with marriages, childbirth, etc., were more or less copied from the various Muslim groups and the native Hindus. The wearing of taali, prevalent in Kanyakumari district, was reproduced by the natives. Some Muslim families followed a loose family system with a matrilineal system of inheritance (Aliyasanthananiyamam or Marumakkathayam) in certain pockets of Travancore. In Edava, Odayam, Varkala, Paravur, and the Mayyanad regions of Travancore, the non-Islamic practices of Marumakkathayam were prevalent among the Muslims. According to some scholars, the matrilineal system among the Muslims originated from the theory of property followed by the Hindu families. Securing the families' property, like the Nair community, created the matrilineal system. Like North Malabar, the tharavad system was also prevalent in this region.

### **Women in the Muslim Community:**

The life of women in the Muslim community in Kanyakumari district was very deplorable once. They lived under the patronage of the male members of the family. The women had no formal education till the dawn of the twentieth century, and they were treated as secondary persons and allowed minimal rights over family life. In those days, marriage was not the lady's will, but the elders' demand, and she had no ownership over the ancestral property. They were confined to the four walls of the house. Women neither manage family expenses nor have decision-making supremacy. Most of the women were of poor status. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim women were seen from a different perspective from historical, political, social, and religious contexts. Their behavioural and visible aspects of Muslim identity highlight the importance of their cultural and religious practices in their new society of settlement. The government is also taking a keen interest in providing every possible help for the development of Muslim women through many types of action plans, such as educational plans, health plans, awareness programs, etc. Through these programs, women are coming out from veils and proving themselves in various fields. In the last twenty years, rapid change has been noticed in women of the Muslim society of Kanyakumari district.

### **Leadership and Social Legislation**

The Muslim in Kanyakumari district emerged as a politically motivated community only after the second decade of the twentieth century. The community representatives of the SMPA in its beginning were constantly working for the progress of the Muslim community. Moreover, they were politically oriented community leaders. They imitated the other organizations and ideologies in and outside the state. The western-educated Muslims of Travancore also followed the path of the European missionaries and formed voluntary organizations on the model of the YMCA and YWCA. 'All Travancore Young Men's Muslim Association,' started by S Adam Sait, merchant by profession and social activist by nature. As a philanthropist, he worked in various capacities as a public figure in Travancore, especially in Trivandrum. He was born at Vallakkadavu, Trivandrum, in a Cutchi Memon family. As a professional businessman, he was accepted as a 'natural leader' by the government of Travancore and the community. He was nominated to the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly of Travancore as per Rule VII from the backward communities and the representative of the Town Improvement Committee, Trivandrum. He had also been nominated to the SMPA from the Trading Class,



Trivandrum, and he spoke for the Muslim community, especially educational development in the state.

### **Civil Rights Movements and the Muslims:**

In the Malayali Memorial of 1891, the first organized political movement in the Kanyakumari district did not include the Muslims. It was the native elites of the memorial, like the Nairs and Syrian Christians, who considered that the Muslims as a community could not be incorporated into the memorial due to the absence of formal education. The situation was changed during the Civil Rights Movement in Kanyakumari district (1917 -1922). The movement was an earnest attempt to create more opportunities in public service for the backward communities in Kanyakumari district. The Ezhavas, the backward Christians, the Muslims, and other backward communities joined together for a common cause. In 1917, the deprived communities demanded the separation of Dewaswam from the revenue department because this was not accessible to non-Hindus and non-caste Hindus. They were denied employment in the revenue department due to caste barriers. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Muslims of the Kanyakumari district were aware of the non-existence of proportional representation in public services. PM Ismail Munavari, a nominated member to the SMPA, clearly mentioned the predicament of the Muslims in the Assembly: 'The Government realized the deplorable conditions of the Muslims in public service. However, they never open up opportunities to the community.' The Muslims actively participated in the civic rights campaigns. On 1st January 1920, the aggrieved communities submitted a memorial representing the twenty-six lakhs of social inferiors, which stipulated the socio-economic status of these communities. This memorial was signed by 26,000 signatories from different walks of life. There were many Muslims who signed it. During the 'Civil Rights Movement', the Muslim community leaders revealed their unsatisfactory conditions of the community in public services. The central allegation was that the appointment authorities, especially the head of the secretariat department, demanded that to appoint their community members from among the acting or temporary officers. Thus, the members of the higher strata became the state's permanent officers, and the educated backward community spared their lives with misery.

### **Conclusion:**

The Muslims formed a community life in Kanyakumari district from the arrival of Muslim merchant groups from various parts of the world. From the Treaty of 1805 CE, the British controlled the internal affairs of the state. They strengthened the administration on the western model, and the communal structures changed. The education system was transformed into the medium of instruction, the pattern of study, etc. The introduction of printing brought out the practice of publishing official reports and census reports to study aspects such as religion, caste, sub-caste, education, literacy, health, etc. Thus, in Kanyakumari district, the formal structure of the Muslim community could be involved in the nineteenth century and could incorporate them into the social ensemble of the state. They could consolidate themselves as a formidable community to be reckoned with. They were also competent to improve their social position and strengthen their economic condition through affirmative social and political actions.

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