



Mosques as Socio-Political Institutions: Community Governance and Collective Identity in Malabar

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ABSTRACT

This study examines mosques in Malabar as dynamic socio-political institutions that shaped community governance and collective Muslim identity between 1498 and 1947. Moving beyond their conventional role as places of worship, Malabar mosques functioned as centers of administration, education, dispute resolution, economic management, and political mobilization. From the arrival of the Portuguese and the disruption of Muslim maritime dominance to British colonial rule and the Malabar Rebellion of 1921, mosques played a critical role in organizing communal life and articulating resistance to external domination. Institutions such as the qadi, mahal committees, and waqf governance structures embedded mosques within everyday social regulation and local authority. The study highlights how mosques facilitated collective identity formation through religious discourse, shared rituals, legal norms, and political consciousness, particularly among the Mappila Muslim community. In the post-1921 period, mosques further evolved as spaces of reform, education, and public debate, engaging with modern political movements and nationalist aspirations. By analyzing mosques as socio-political institutions, this research provides deeper insight into the intersection of religion, governance, and anti-colonial experience in Malabar's historical landscape.

Keyword:- Mosque, Malabar, Khutuba, Waqaf, Mahal, Qazi

Introduction

The western coasts of India were known to the Persian and Arab geographers as Malabar, *Malibar* or *Milibar* from at least the early days of Muslim maritime trade, and the name was later adopted by the Europeans. The most impressive buildings of the Muslim settlers are preserved in the ancient port of Malabar. The earliest of these buildings is a masjid in Malabar founded in the 7th century. All this masjid act as an administrative unit in the coastal areas of Malabar. Sometimes it has a role like the shelters of foreigners came to Malabar for the trade activities. The masjid is important role in the community governance and socio-political activities during the absence of the centralised power in Muslims community of the Malabar.

The Arabic term masjid literally means a place where one prostrates oneself (before God), or completely surrenders to God. The presence of mosques on the Malabar Coast can serve as a useful index for the growth of Muslim communities on the Indian coast. By the middle of the 7th century AD almost all people of Arabia embraced Islam. Naturally the Arab traders who came to Malabar in the 7th century would probably be the followers of this faith. Thus, from them Islam would have spread in this part of the country. Francis Day also assumes that in the first settlement of the Muslims on the western coast took place sometime in the 7th century AD¹. I.H. Qureshi observes that Islam therefore entered within a few years of the proclamation by the Prophet of his mission². The native historical writing of sixteenth century mentioned the legend. Arabic author Shaikh Zayn-ud-Din' of Tuhfatul-Mujahideen 1583, has also recorded the tradition in details who thinks the conversion might have happened 200 years after the prophet³.

Major Historic Mosques in Malabar

The beginning of Islam and construction of mosques in Malabar is clouded in obscurity. The Indian sources dealing with the subject are so full of inconsistencies and contradictions that modern historians were able to

reach widely divergent conclusions regarding the date and the manner in which Islam was introduced into Malabar and gave rise to the Muslim community⁴. The arrival of Islam in Malabar and the construction of mosques is attributed to the activities of Malik Dinar and Malik Habib, following the last Chera emperor's related legend. It is believed that they were constructed ten mosques in different parts of Kerala.

The earliest ten mosques that were established in Malabar based on a story and these were situated in the following cities: Kolam, Kalankallur, Shaliyat, Fandarina, Darmafatan, Jurfatan, Hayli, Kanjrakut, Manjalur, Fakkanur⁵. Calicut is known as the 'City of mosques'. There are many mosques to be found in this city and its surrounding areas. Many of them are historically significant. The historically important mosques in Calicut are Chaliyam mosque, Paropally, Muchunthi mosque, Kappad jamath mosque, Cheenam pally, Pattalapally, Palyam Muhiyuddien pally, Parappil shaduli pally, Kannirithinkal Jamath pally, Mukhdar masjid, Chemmangad pally, Kannamparamb pally, the Kuttichira Jama Masjid, and the Mithqalpalli or the mosque of Nakhuda Mithqal⁶. The historical mosque in Eranad – valluvanad areas are valiya juma masjid in Parappanagadi, akode juma masjid in Edavannappara, Kodancheri Juma Masjid, Payyanad Juma masjid, Ponnani Mosque, Pallippuram Juma Masjid, Kodotty Payangadi Juma Masjid, Thavannur onnam mile Valiya juma masjid, Pullara Juma Masjid, Mamburam mosque, Konnara Pally, Malappuram valiyangadi palli, kottakkal palappura pally, kodinji pally, Chengara juma masjid, Tirur Korangath pally, Muttichira juma masjid, Tirur kott Juma masjid, Kalikavu Juma masjid, pookotur valiya jamath pally, Chaliyapram juma masjid, valancheri pally, vadakkum muri pally, Puthangadi suhada pally, kadakkathumpuram masjid, edappal Angadi pally, cherur shuhda pally, othai pally and thalakkedathur juma masjid.⁷

Socio-Political Institution

The advent of the Portuguese in 1498 marked a major turning point in the political, economic, and social history of Malabar. During this period, mosques in Malabar emerged not merely as places of worship but as vital socio-political institutions that shaped the collective life of the Muslim community. Between 1498 and 1947, Malabar mosques functioned as centers of social organization, political communication, resistance, education, and leadership.

The Portuguese intervention in Malabar severely disrupted the established Muslim-dominated maritime trade. As the Muslim community faced economic marginalization and political pressure, mosques became focal points of social cohesion and collective resistance. Mosques served as spaces where religious sermons and public gatherings reinforced community solidarity. The *khutbah* (Friday sermon) often carried political undertones, fostering awareness of foreign domination and encouraging resistance against Portuguese aggression⁸. Mosques also facilitated the mobilization of resources, including financial support for traders and sailors affected by Portuguese policies. In this period, mosques acted as symbols of cultural survival and organized resistance.

The decline of Portuguese power and the emergence of Dutch and Mysorean influence altered the political landscape of Malabar. During this phase, mosques assumed more structured socio-political roles⁹. Religious scholars (*ulama*) and *qazis* associated with mosques functioned as community leaders and intermediaries between local rulers and Muslim society. Mosques became venues for dispute resolution, moral regulation, and dissemination of political information. Under Tipu Sultan's rule, mosques gained increased importance as institutions that supported Islamic governance and social order. Thus, mosques evolved into centers of political mediation and communal leadership.

British colonial administration introduced new land revenue systems, legal frameworks, and political institutions that significantly affected the Muslim peasantry of Malabar. These changes intensified social tensions, particularly among the Mappila Muslims. Mosques during this period functioned as spaces of political awareness and protest. Religious leaders used sermons and gatherings to critique colonial exploitation and articulate grievances related to land, taxation, and social injustice¹⁰. Mosques also facilitated the organization of collective action, making them critical nodes in the socio-political life of the Mappila community. Consequently, mosques emerged as sites of political consciousness and anti-colonial discourse.

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 represents a defining moment in the socio-political history of Malabar mosques. During the uprising, mosques functioned as communication hubs and organizational centers¹¹. Religious discourse within mosques contributed to the articulation of resistance against colonial authority and landlord oppression. British officials perceived mosques as politically sensitive spaces and subjected them to surveillance and control. The events of 1921 highlighted the mosque's transformation into an explicitly political arena that connected religious ideology with mass mobilization.

After 1921, the socio-political role of mosques underwent further transformation. The period witnessed the growth of educational reform, print culture, and organized political movements among Muslims in Malabar. Mosques became associated with madrasas, libraries, and reading rooms, facilitating intellectual and social reform. They functioned as spaces of public discussion, resembling a public sphere where social, political, and religious issues were debated. During the Indian freedom movement, mosques contributed to political mobilization and community organization, aligning religious leadership with broader nationalist aspirations.

Community Governance

The mosques became focal points for Muslims' religious and communal identities. It argues that mosques and their affiliated structures were crucial in organizing Muslim communal life, maintaining legal and social norms.

The mosques focusing on *qadi authority, mahal/mahallu committees, waqf land and property governance*, dispute resolution and social welfare. The earliest institutions evolved into *mahals* or *mahallu* localized community clusters around a mosque, whose governance had both *religious* and *social* dimensions.

The Qadi- A core figure in Malabar's mosque governance was the *qadi*. Historically, the *qadi* was appointed to a mosque and given religious and limited legal authority over the Muslim community. The *qadi* oversaw ritual practice, interpretation of Islamic law (*shariah*), and prayer leadership. Their role in judicial activities is important. Their mediated role in disputes relating to family law especially marriage, divorce, inheritance and religious endowments¹². In colonial periods, leading *qadis* such as those who played significant roles in anti-colonial resistance against the Portuguese, and in community mobilization. The *qadi* was thus central to both religious life and broader community regulation.

Mahal - In Malabar, the term 'mahal' (or 'mahallu' in Malayalam) denotes a local Islamic social unit, typically cantered on a grand mosque (Juma Masjid). The term 'mahal' refers to a local Islamic unit cantered on a cathedral mosque, where Friday congregations impart religious values to residents. Notably, early travellers like Masudi, Ibn Battuta, and Abdul Razak make no mention of such an institution. Similarly, Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdum's historical work, *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*, mentions *qazis* overseeing mosques but not the mahal system. After establishing mosques in Kerala, Malik ibn Dinar's mission appointed *qazis* to manage these institutions¹³. None of the early mosques in Malabar, constructed during Islam's initial years, show evidence of the 'mahal' concept or the characteristic living patterns associated with modern Malabar's mahals. These mosques indicate they primarily catered to a transient Muslim population engaged in trade and commerce, including both local and foreign merchants¹⁴. These mosques were typically managed by influential individuals with wealth and social standing.

In Malabar, a *mahal* centred around a mosque became the unit of community governance. These committees were typically composed of respected elders or wealthy patrons who supervised Administration of mosque property, Management of waqf land and finances, Local dispute resolution, Socio-religious events and education.

The mahals in Malabar developed in a different context and with a different purpose. The mahals were virtually a creation of Islamic faith in earlier period. It forming a Muslim regional section, as they needed make a form of administrative relationships with the life and culture of the Muslims living around the mosques. In colonial period, Mahals emerged as a British colonial construct, creating regional Muslim sections without deeply engaging with local Muslim culture. Colonial rulers were unfamiliar with Shariah and Muslim personal laws.

The *qazi* had limited jurisdiction over the people who lived around the mosque and attended congregational prayers. Hence, the *qazi* of a mahal came to have some contact with the local administration. The *qazis*, being religious heads, had close relations with the members of the mahal and supervised the day-to-day affairs of the people in matters like birth, death, marriage and divorce. The British administrators often summoned the *qazis*, instead of meeting committees or leaders of the Muslims, to redress grievances. Mosques served as a political platform for communities, with the *Qazi*, the Islamic judge, holding a high authority. *Qadis* interpreted Islamic law, determined guidelines for social interactions with Hindus, and resolved disputes. Despite Islamic law not favoring court proceedings in mosques, the *Qazi's* office was often associated with the mosque, typically located upstairs¹⁵. *Qazis* in Malabar's mahals gained prominence and social standing, beyond their existing religious authority. This elevated status enabled them to effectively mediate disputes between landlords and mahal members, often resolving issues amicably rather than through formal court proceedings¹⁶.

In Malabar, mahals played a vital role in religious education, aiming to guide individuals toward a righteous afterlife. The mosque-based dars system emerged, offering Islamic studies, including Quran, Sunnah, Fiqh, and Islamic history. Students resided in seminaries within the mosque complex, training to become experts in Islamic theology, teachers, or mosque functionaries. Upon completion, they received designations like *musaliars* or *maulavis*. This system, similar to Malabar's ancient *gurukula* model, emphasized oral discourse, with students gathered around a lamp (*nilavilakku*) as the chief *Mudari* recited and taught. Mosques provide an intimate setting for Islamic education, facilitating a personalized process of knowledge transfer from teacher to student¹⁷. Religious students who studied at mosques in Malabar and received financial support from the mosques' income.

Mosques and associated mahals not only signify the presence of the Muslim community but also reflect their influence in the area. The requirement of local authority approval for mosque construction highlights the community's relationship with the regional power structure¹⁸.

Waqf property Governance - Mosques often held *waqf* properties endowed lands whose income supported religious functions, maintenance, and welfare activities. *Waqf* provided the economic basis for mosque activities and staff salaries. Control over *waqf* administration was a key governance mechanism, often handled by *mahal committees* or appointed *mutawallis*. In pre-modern periods, *waqf* revenues were sometimes linked to Indian Ocean trade or financed by influential families. The governance of *waqf* lands also influenced social status, as community leaders managed these endowments and allocated resources for community needs such as education, burial grounds, and charity¹⁹.

Collective Identity in Malabar

Collective identity refers to the shared sense of belonging, historical consciousness, and social solidarity that binds a community together. In Malabar, between 1498 and 1947, mosques played a crucial role in shaping and

sustaining the collective identity of the Muslim community. Beyond their religious function, mosques acted as social, cultural, and political institutions that mediated the community's response to colonial interventions, economic transformations, and social challenges. This period witnessed the gradual consolidation of a distinct Malabar Muslim identity, in which mosques served as central sites of meaning-making and collective action²⁰. Prior to European intervention, Islam in Malabar had developed through trade, intermarriage, and cultural accommodation. Mosques reflected this syncretic social environment and were deeply embedded in local society. The arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 disrupted existing power structures and heightened the need for collective self-definition among Muslims. Mosques functioned as spaces where shared religious practices reinforced a sense of unity across occupational and regional differences. Friday congregations, festivals, and communal rituals fostered a collective consciousness rooted in Islam while remaining responsive to local customs. In this context, mosques became anchors of communal continuity and identity preservation²¹.

The Portuguese period marked a critical phase in the consolidation of Muslim collective identity in Malabar. Economic marginalization, violence against Muslim traders, and attempts to control maritime networks created a shared experience of oppression. Mosques emerged as safe spaces where collective grievances could be expressed and interpreted through religious narratives. Sermons emphasized unity, moral discipline, and resistance to external domination. The shared experience of persecution strengthened intra-community bonds and contributed to the formation of a collective identity defined in opposition to colonial power. Thus, mosques functioned as sites of identity consolidation through resistance.

During the Dutch and Mysorean periods, mosques became institutional bases for religious authority and social regulation. The *ulama* associated with mosques played a central role in defining normative behavior and communal values. Mosques regulated life-cycle rituals such as marriage, inheritance, and burial, reinforcing a shared moral and legal framework. Under Tipu Sultan, the association between Islam and political authority further enhanced the symbolic significance of mosques. This period strengthened the perception of mosques as guardians of a distinct Muslim identity, rooted in religious norms and collective memory.

British colonial rule introduced new economic pressures and social hierarchies, particularly affecting the Mappila Muslim peasantry. Land reforms, tenancy laws, and the consolidation of landlord power intensified social discontent. Mosques played a key role in rearticulating collective identity in response to these changes. Religious discourse framed economic exploitation and social injustice as collective concerns, encouraging solidarity among Muslims across class divisions. The mosque thus became a space where identity was constructed not only in religious terms but also through shared socio-economic experiences.

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 represented a watershed in the history of Muslim collective identity in Malabar. Mosques functioned as centers for communication, mobilization, and symbolic resistance. Religious narratives articulated in mosques linked faith with resistance against colonial authority and agrarian oppression. British surveillance and repression of mosques further reinforced their symbolic role as markers of Muslim identity. The events of 1921 intensified the politicization of collective identity, embedding memories of struggle and sacrifice within mosque-centered community life.

In the post-1921 period, Malabar Muslims increasingly engaged with modern education, print culture, and reform movements. Mosques adapted to these changes by incorporating madrasas, libraries, and discussion forums. Mosques became spaces where tradition and reform intersected, shaping a modern Muslim identity grounded in both religious heritage and socio-political awareness. Participation in nationalist movements and public debates further expanded the scope of collective identity beyond purely religious boundaries. During this phase, mosques contributed to the formation of a plural and dynamic collective identity.

Conclusion

Between 1498 and 1947, mosques in Malabar played a multifaceted role that extended far beyond religious worship. They acted as centers of social solidarity, political leadership, resistance to colonial domination, and educational reform. As socio-political institutions, Malabar mosques shaped collective identity, facilitated public participation, and mediated the relationship between the Muslim community and shifting political powers. Studying mosques as socio-political institutions provides crucial insights into the historical dynamics of Malabar society and the broader anti-colonial experience in South India. Malabar mosques were foundational to the governance of Muslim communities in the region. Through qadis, *mahal committees*, waqf institutions, and educational functions, the mosque acted as a central focus of religious authority, social governance, dispute resolution, and community identity. Between 1498 and 1947, mosques in Malabar played a central role in the construction and evolution of Muslim collective identity. Through ritual practice, moral regulation, political discourse, and community organization, mosques functioned as institutions that sustained unity, articulated shared experiences, and transmitted collective memory across generations. The study of mosques as sites of collective identity reveals the complex interplay between religion, society, and politics in Malabar's historical experience.

End note

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