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MAPPILA WOMEN AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-cultural transformation of Mappila Muslim women in Malabar from their traditionally secluded domestic roles to active participation in entrepreneurship and public life in the post-independence period. Historically confined within patriarchal social structures despite the existence of matrilineal practices in certain regions, Mappila women had limited involvement in trade and public activities, although they lived in prominent centres of commerce such as Calicut and Kannur. The study explores how social reform movements, educational advancement, women’s organizations, and changing socio-political dynamics after independence gradually redefined the identity of Mappila women. Special attention is given to the impact of Muslim reformist movements, the spread of women’s education, Gulf migration, and the emergence of skill training institutions in facilitating women’s entry into entrepreneurship. The research also analyses the role of family background, especially among traditional trading families, in shaping women entrepreneurs. At the same time, it highlights the numerous challenges faced by Mappila women, including patriarchal restrictions, social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion from male-dominated business spaces. Through examples of pioneering entrepreneurs from Malabar, the study demonstrates how Mappila women negotiated cultural expectations while establishing themselves in business and public life. Ultimately, the paper argues that the rise of Mappila women entrepreneurship marked a significant redefinition of gender roles within the community, enabling women to achieve financial independence, social visibility, and cultural agency while remaining connected to their Mappila identity.

INTRODUCTION

Living in an ancient center of trade, the women of Malabar had been acquainted with the business and trade even though they weren’t involved actively. The Mappila Muslim community of Malabar closely associated with religion and locality which entwined together bringing a rich culture into existence. As the life Mappila women were restricted to the closed spaces mostly, the culture of Mappila women developed inside their houses rather than in a public space. There is not much information regarding how the Mappila Muslim women lived their life and carried out their daily activities in the past. Early travelogues and later colonial records neglect to provide detailed information about the women and their socio-cultural status within this marginalized group. From the available sources, it is understood that Muslim girls were raised in a secluded lifestyle as prescribed by their community.¹

When the Malabar rebellion took place in 1921, the entire Mappila community underwent various social changes. Emergence of various religious ideologies and thoughts resulted in reforms and redefining the Mappila community. Most notably, the identity of Mappila women was redefined by the mid twentieth century. With the beginning of the independence movement, many Mappila women came into the public to defend their land but most of them became unsung heroines. Mappila women began to come into the public space more with the advent of the education system. By the 1960s, Mappila community became aware of education and its importance especially in trade centres and urban areas like Calicut. By the movement, the entrepreneurship which was a man’s activity became a women’s activity too. The education and its advocacy got a significant role in promoting women to the public space especially in trade and entrepreneurship. However, the Mappila women entrepreneurs has to cross many boundaries and to tackle many challenges.

¹ Ajmal Mueen MA. (2023). A Study of Mappila Muslim Women in Malabar. Kanpur Philosophers, 10(I (B)), 507-512



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The situation of Mappila women has changed drastically and nowadays many Mappila women of Malabar are indulged in business activities. But the period of Post-independence was a turning point in the history of Mappila women where many voices of change began to be heard. Thus the study make an understanding on that making a Mappila women from cloistered into an accomplished businesswomen was an arduous challenge. By the progress of the society and the community, women rose into importance in day to day life. The advancement of Mappila women in public space was recorded for their penmanship and involving in literary activities but other facet of Mappila women’s public space has not documented extensively. Here, a socio-cultural approach is used for understanding circumstances that lead to the growth of Mappila women entrepreneurship from post-independence to the modern times. And acknowledges the personnel who came forward from cultural premises and the idea of a rather closed social environment. Additionally, the impacts of Mappila women entrepreneurship and how it changed the circumstances and culture of Mappila women is discussed.

Women of Mappila community in Malabar used to be in closed spaces and all the customs and traditions accustomed by the women was intended for the closed spaces specifically the households. Even the matrilineal system existed in some regions like coastal areas of Malabar, the Mappila community was patriarchal in nature. The authority of a woman in the matriarchal system or *Marumakkathayam* was limited, they exercised the power that was associated with inheritance, deaths, births and marriages within the family. However public activities such as trade were foreign to them and restricted. In the beginning of the twentieth century Mappila men of the matrilineal system began to demand more power in the household which led to the passing laws. Such as the acts particularly enacted on the Muslim matriliney: Mappila Succession Act of 1918, Mappila Wills Act of 1928, and Mappila *Marumakkathayam* Act of 1939. So when Madras presidency passed some laws on this the shift of authority of women into women happened.² There was a re-definition of *tharavadu* authority in terms of gender and generation by the early 20th century.³ As noted by Arunima (2003) in the case of *Nayars*, *tharavadu* became a corporate and impartible structure among Muslims as well. Women’s importance and active role in the various ways of social reproduction, like in rituals, customary exchange of cooked food between families, and the management of the *tharavadu* was reduced to their role of sexual reproduction.⁴ However the social status of Muslim women in different groups, such as elite families, religious families, matrilineal families, and in urban and rural areas, varies greatly and makes it hard to generalize about the social history of Mappila women.⁵

The trade centres of Malabar especially Calicut flourished due to its strategic geographical position and continuous contact with Arabs. But after the colonization the decline of the trade centres began as the colonizers especially the British tried to monopolize the trade. During the colonization period, there were families who continued trade by being amicable with British. But the Calicut couldn’t maintain its past glory nor Kannur, among the main centres of trade in Malabar. In all these circumstances women continued to remain in private. Even though they could observe the trade and its proceedings they were restricted from practicing trade.

New wave of reforms

As the independence movement spread throughout the nation, the social circumstances of the Mappila community began to change. The participation of women in the movements were seen in the process. It was the beginning of women coming into the public space. In the beginning of 1930s, many reforms and renaissance within the Mappila community started to take place. The Muslim reformist movement had specific features and characteristics that set it apart from other similar movements in Kerala. The movement aimed to revitalize the religion and society by addressing the evils within, as a part of the long-standing Islamic tradition of *Thajdeed*.⁶ The reformers sought to invigorate the faith and

² Kottakkunnummal, M. (2014). Indigenous Customs and Colonial Law: Contestations in Religion, Gender, and Family among Matrilineal Mappila Muslims in Colonial Malabar, Kerala, c. 1910-1928. *SAGE Open*, 4(1), 2158244014525416.

³ Arunima, G. (2003). *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940*. Delhi, India: Orient Longman

⁴ *Ibid.* p.53

⁵ Ajmal Mueen M A. *Op.cit.* p. 508

⁶ It means renewal, denotes restore the authenticity of Islamic teachings and practices.



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customs, claiming that it had become stagnant, burdened by tradition, and corrupted by superstition and local rituals. They condemned many existing practices as extraneous impurities that had led to the spiritual degradation of Islam and called for a return to the pure form of Islam to address the problem.⁷ Along the reform, It was also the start of redefining the identity of Mappila women. This change does not happen rapidly but gradually. The modern reforms in the Mappila Community began in the 19th century.

According to Mueen Ajmal from the 1920s to 1950s, it is considered a trend-setting period for the women's reform movement.⁸ Many women led movements were started at the community level for Mappila women empowerment. They realised it through spreading the importance of education, forming societies such as *Mahila samjam*, and other. The impact of these movements was slower because the Mappila community which was knitted together with its culture and traditional practices needed much more time to accept.

Mappila women in Post-independence period

After the Independence, as the country was undergoing changes from the bottom, Mappila women was going through the same. The condition of Mappila women improved and by the 1960s and 1970s Mappila women became accustomed to the public space. There were schools and institutions established aiming at women's education and empowerment. However practices like child marriage and discouraging women for higher education still persisted. Prominent Mappila leaders and Muslim reformers formed organisations for establishing schools and libraries aiming at community development. In 1956, a society named 'social service association' was formed in Calicut. Another society named *Yuva Sahiti Samajam* was established in 1974. Under these societies libraries for women and Artisan training Institute were established. Thus the period remarked on the empowerment of Mappila women that resulted in their active participation in public life.

However, in the business and trade field, Malabar had faced a setback. The people who were practicing trade was diminished and many Mappila people were engaged with farming and other less income generating activities. Apart some financially secured families, Mappila community was suffering famine and poverty. As there were various social classes within the Mappila community the Mappila women were affected differently from one another. When the women from economically backward family went out to work for a living, the women from upper class had to stay within the premises of their households. Until the gulf migration after 1970s, the situation persisted. So another major phase that the Mappila community went through was the gulf migration period after Gulf oil boom. Throughout the period Mappila community went through various stages of cultural transformation and social development. Thus, reconstructing the identity of Mappila women in the society.

As the education and its importance spread, Mappila women started to get more exposure in the public space. By the end of the 1950s, more women started to be involved actively in the society. But it was limited to the urban areas than rural areas. This was because rural areas were reluctant to change and the community was much more restricted. Urban areas, trade centres like Kozhikode and Kannur, became epicentres of reforms. And there were various societies which helped women to engage in social activities like journalism, entrepreneurship and other professions that were male dominated before. A woman who was considered as someone to be in her own household taking care of her husband and children and family, had to face a lot of challenges from the community to be in the mainstream of the society. At the beginning, the women were criticised and isolated. But this situation slowly changed as more people and groups came forward emphasizing on empowering women and educating them. Women's education in Malabar had far reaching impacts. The empowerment through education profoundly influenced the emergence of women into the public realms. Also skill training Institutes were established. According to Parappil Mammad Koya, in 1974, a community named '*Yuva Sahiti Samajam*' was formed for progressive reforms. Also Institutes were established for skill training namely 'Artisan Training

⁷ Ajmal Mueen M. A. *loc. cit.*

⁸ Ajmal Mueen M. A. *loc. cit.*



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Institute' in Calicut for women. In the institute they were taught skills like tailoring, embroidery, dress making, etc.⁹ Ensuring education of Mappila women aimed at empowering them. It led to the coming into the public sphere as well.

Mappila women and labour

Parappil Mammad Koya notes that the Mappila women from the backward regions used to go for jobs like coir making and coir products from the coconut husk. Also *beedi theruppu*¹⁰ was another major job that was prevalent among the Mappila women.¹¹ Most of the economically backward Mappila women from urban and coastal areas engaged in the mentioned occupations. The women from rural regions usually engaged with farming and cattle rearing. Also there were Mappila women who went for cooking jobs in times of festivities or cultural occasions. These were some of the common jobs taken by the Mappila women in the colonial period and then immediate post-independence times. Mappila women went for the job out of necessity and to make a livelihood and they were from economically backward families or regions. As for the upper class people, women remained indoors. Only the broad minded people ensured education for the women in upper class families. So the exposure of Mappila women became based on the mind set of the families and its heads -which commonly patriarchal -in the post-independence period. So in most cases, Mappila women were regarded as someone who should be married off at a certain point in their life.

Mappila Women in Entrepreneurship: Key Factors

There are many factors that led to the rise of Mappila women entrepreneurship. In the period after the 1950s the Mappila community witnessed great cultural transformation and changes. The questions around the Mappila women and their identity were heard. So, the Mappila community goes through a phase of reforms and reconstruction at the time. The main factors are listed below.

1. Education and women empowerment

First of all, education and women empowerment facilitated Mappila women to come into the public. The Mappila women were usually confined into their residence and family, they didn't have a public life. At a certain age they got married off. So the life of Mappila women was an insignificant one. And then the advocacy for the education and empowerment of women grew stronger. During the 1950s to 1970s, the Muslim reform movement gained a more structured form, with the foundation of *Nadvathul Mujahideen* and *Jamath'e Islami*, and due to changes in the political landscape. As a result, the call for female education was accepted and the community opened the doors of higher education for girls. Exclusive women-only *Islamiya* colleges such as Chennamangallur, Pulikkal, and Areacode were established, as well as mixed, secular institutions like Farook College, Sir Syed College, and MES College, which paved the way for Muslim girls to attain higher education. Issues such as women's right to enter the mosque, the question of dowry, the ear piercing ceremony, Triple *Talaq*¹², *Arabikalyanam*¹³, etc. Also became a main agenda for the reformers. More women became engaged in organizational activities under the reformist organizations. It was during this period that the need for a specific Muslim women's organization was emphasized by both male and female writers. Muslim journals started to dedicate more space to discussing issues affecting women. Reformist organizations also began to hold special sessions for women at their conferences¹⁴. Also there were community based schools too for empowering at the community level. Schools like Calicut girls high school were established for attaining the goal of women's education. Education played a big role in unlocking potential. This made women to be introduced into the field trade and business.

⁹ Parappil, M. Koya (1994). Kozhikode Muslimkalude charithram

¹⁰ Rolling of beedi, a type of traditional Indian cigarette made by rolling tobacco in tendu leaves.

¹¹ Parappil, M Koya, *Op. cit.*

¹² An instant Islamic divorce by saying "talaq" thrice

¹³ Short-term marriages between Arab men and young women in Kerala.

¹⁴ Ajmal Mueen M A. *Op. cit.* p. 510



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2. Family background and tradition of trade

As many families engaged in trade and business, the women from these families were familiar with the practice. This made them enter the field of entrepreneurship. According to Abida Rasheed, a famous entrepreneur based Calicut, she came to the business because of her family who were traditional traders of Calicut. She was a keen observer of her father's trade from her childhood. And then her sister came into entrepreneurship by setting up a boutique, influenced by this Abida Rasheed came to entrepreneurship too. The involvement of her family in trade made her an entrepreneur.¹⁵ So the family and their engagement in business is an important factor that led to the Mappila women entrepreneurship. The family that was engaged in trade and business usually didn't involve women of the family. It was a male dominated field and even in the matriarchal system, *Kaaranavar* who was the eldest male member of the family managed the business and income source of the family. Women weren't allowed to practice trade. Abida Rasheed also says that her mother had ambitions to become an entrepreneur but the social situation didn't allow her to do so. So most of the Mappila women from business families couldn't practice business but later when the women empowerment spread in the community, being in a business family benefitted many Mappila women to be in entrepreneurship. So the family circumstances and their mind set really played an important part in making a Mappila women an entrepreneur.

3. Changing social dynamics in Post-independence era

Another factor is the changing social situation in the Post-independence period and beyond. As the society and community were progressing due the reforms, women were encouraged to come into the public sphere. Beginning in the 1970s and strengthening in the 1980s, the Muslim community, and women in particular, experienced revolutionary changes. Gulf migration, through cultural exchanges and economic empowerment, changed the community's outlook, broadening their views and opening them to new ideas. *Nadvathul Mujahideen* and *Jamath'e Islami* formed exclusive women's organizations in the 1980s and journals like *Aramam* and *Pudava* were started for women. This period saw a planned and gradual growth in female activism in Malabar. The role of individuals and socio-political organizations in empowering Mappila women was also significant.¹⁶ The Mappila community was influenced by the reform movements. The changing scenario called for women's participation in different areas of public life. The women started to have a public identity. This was beneficial to a greater extent for Mappila women. They came into various fields such as business, media and others. The society was gradually accepting the concept of women in public space which made them carry out their tasks as an entrepreneur and other professionals. The entrepreneurs who had to deal with the society more than any other advantaged more with societal reformation. So the changing social scenario was in favour of Mappila women.

Mappila women in entrepreneurship: major challenges

The entry to a male dominated field in a patriarchal society was not easy for Mappila women. In addition to the technical challenges related to the entrepreneurship they had to face social challenges. These women were regarded as outrageous in society and they didn't accept them. The women had to face discrimination and isolation from the community. Sometimes, they were labelled as rebel who broke traditional social norms. Abida Rasheed points out that when she came to public space she had faced criticism. The people looked at her with despise and she had to face many questions about how she should carry out her social life.¹⁷ The discrimination they had to confront was too strong. The patriarchy limited the participation of women on the ground of ethics and religion. And they justified limiting women in social participation as a dignity loss. So in this situation where the social stigmas still existed but at the same time social reforms happened, women were stuck between the social transitions. Another major challenge that Mappila women confronted as an entrepreneur was lack of having a clear, free space. As the field was dominated by male, women had to make their own space with much difficulty. Sometimes they were not allowed to practice entrepreneurship as freely as they can just because they are women. The social stigma was prevalent and those who came to entrepreneurship had to address them.

¹⁵ Interview with Abida Rasheed, celebrity chef and entrepreneur, 27 November 2024

¹⁶ Ajmal Mueen M. A. *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ Interview with Abida Rasheed, celebrity chef and entrepreneur, 27 November 2024



However, the determination and the support from the like-minded people helped them to survive and tackle all the challenges boldly. There were numerous women entrepreneurs in Calicut alone like Umami Abdullah who was also engaged with literature and Mumtaz, who occupied the textile business and managed a textile store in S M Street of Calicut. She developed the business with her determination in to success now it's one of major store in the city of Calicut. Zainatha of Zain's Hotel undoubtedly belongs to the list of the the Maapila women entrepreneurs. Most of the Mappila women entrepreneurs in the post-independence period chose to be involved in the textiles or food industry. Because it was closely related to them and their culture. Tackling the challenges they not only facilitated the field for themselves but for the coming generations too. Furthermore, they realised the ambitions of thousands of Mappila women who preceded them.

CONCLUSION

The identity of the Mappila women was redefined in the post-independence period. They were finding their spaces in social and public life in the Mappila Community. Entrepreneurship made them strong and determined people. These women as entrepreneurs stayed true to themselves and identities. They projected themselves as a Mappila and the rich culture was reflected in their business. The women who came forward in the field of entrepreneurship were from the families that came and settled in centres of trade like Calicut. But the local Mappila women had to wait more time to come into the public sphere freely. They were more restricted that who came and settled. Apart from being financially independent in a patriarchal society, the Mappila women entrepreneurs could realise their aspirations and change the Social perception about the identity of ideal Mappila women. So the study finds that the emergence of Mappila women in to the field of business was not an easy path. They had to tackle many challenges and obstacles. And they had to face many social stigmas along with the risks in business. Being in a centre of trade helped Mappila women to be familiar with business practices that helped them to become better entrepreneurs. And Post-independence and beyond, now thousands of Mappila women are engaged in entrepreneurship whether small or large, empowering the Mappila community and encouraging them to come into the public sphere while staying true to their Mappila women Identity.

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