

The Mukkuvas Through The Ages

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Synopsis:

The overall changes occurred in the social, economic, cultural and religious life of the Mukkuvas community is highly commendable.

The Mukkuva fishermen of Travancore trace their origin from the age of Indus Valley Civilization. They played a key role in shaping the Indus Valley Civilization. Fishing evolved as their chief economic activity. It preceded even agriculture and farming. With the arrival of the Aryans, they migrated to the southern part of the Indian peninsular. During the Sangham age they occupied the Neithel land, one among the five important land divisions. They found their means of livelihood from the tender mercy of the rough sea. It was the Christian missionaries who played a predominant role to mould their life status. Even before the advent of the Europeans, there were conversions made to Christianity among the Mukkuvas by St. Thomas but primary evidences are scanty. It was St. Francis Xavier who made mass conversion of the Mukkuvas to Christianity.

This article takes us through the ages of Mukkuvas with historical evidences.



The **Mukkuva fishermen** of Travancore trace their origin from the age of Indus Valley Civilization. From the seals unearthed at Mohenjo-Daro on the banks of river Indus and Lothal on the Kathiawar coast, it seems that the Minas and the Parathavas, the two major groups of fishermen played a key role in shaping the Indus valley civilisation. The other terms for fishermen such as Mukkuvas and Arayas must have evolved due to certain other reasons. The term

Mukkuvan has been derived from the word 'mung', meaning to dive. They had engaged not only in fishing but also in pearl fishing. Another view is that they inhabit predominantly the 'mukku', meaning the corner. That is, they are settled at the corner of the nation, in south Travancore. Another sub-sect is Arayans, a term even now used to entitle the headman of the Mukkuvas.

The primary occupation of the Mukkuvas is fishing. This occupation evolved as a chief economic activity during the heyday of the Indus Valley Civilization. It preceded even agriculture and forming. Before practicing agriculture and farming, man practiced fishing

and hunting as the means of his livelihood. Its keenness was more felt during the stages of the emergence of civilizations than the recent centuries present. When man started his struggle for existence, he always relied on the vast and wide waters. So ancient civilizations keenly flourished on the banks of rivers.

With the advent of the Aryans, the real inhabitants of Indus Valley regions had to undergo a lot of problems from the new comers. So the Indus people namely Dravidians migrated to the southern part of India through sea and land routes. The fishermen who were well versed in sea voyage came through sea routes by loyal boats and yachts and settled in the coastal regions of modern States of Kerala and Tamilnadu. Others came through the land routes and settled in hilly regions, forest and plain lands. Even after the struggle with the Aryans, the struggling nature of the Mukkuvas became an unending one like the unending waves of the sea for their survival. While they were in the south, it was with the sea and its tides, cyclone and rain.

Other than fishing, the Mukkuvas had involved in ship building and trading also. They had control over trade in South India. The Inland Fisheries of Kerala is a unique one for all the fishermen of Indian Ocean. According to Barbosa, a group of Mukkuva fishermen involved in Navigation. Sometimes they involved in the preparation of salt, fish-vending, net-making and preservation of fish were their subsidiary occupations. The ships of the Zamorin were also driven by them.



In the Sangham age, the fishermen occupied the Neithel Land, i.e. the sea and coastal regions, which is one among the five important Land divisions. The Sangham

works like Ahananuru and Kuruntogai find references to fishermen communities, especially about their economic and social life. The fishermen caught a variety of fishes using strong and structural nets. They used fast moving CATAMARAMs (made of woods) and chisels to catch fishes. In Ahananuru, there are references to the Chera rulers, Senguttuvan and the city Muziri alias Kodungallur where the ordinary people engaged in selling of fishes and got them exchanged for baskets of paddy.

The Mukkuvas were once an integral part of the erstwhile Hindu society. They became the easy victims of several evils following the Aryanisation of South India. Their social status was reduced. So they took asylum at the extreme end of the landscape. They found their means of livelihood from the tender mercy of the rough sea. It was the Christian missionaries, who played a dominant role in shaping the life status of the Mukkuvas to regain their former position.



As per the tradition St Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, reached the ancient port of Muzuri in Cranganore by sea and worked among the fishermen of Travancore and converted them to Christianity at Cranganore, Palayur, Quilon, and few other places. There are evidences like Churches and Relics associated with the apostle in South India. The tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore is popular in all the European countries. According to Jawaharlal Nehru, Christianity had a firm hold in South India long before Europe turned to it. Nothing is incredible in the feasibility of the visit of St. Thomas to South India. The Vatican also endorsed the view of the visit of St. Thomas in India.

St. Jerome and Eusebius of Caesarea support the apostolate of St. Bartholomew in India. In 345 AD, a foreign merchant Prince Knayi Thomas came to Mahadevar Pattanum near Cranganore along with four hundred priests, a Bishop and some Deacons and settled therewith the permission of Cheraman Perumal. Later they were granted land on which Churches, houses, and shops were built, besides few other privileges. Then Roman emperor Constantine deputed Theophilus to India in 354 AD to preach the Gospel. By that time, the persecution of Christians in Persia seemed to have brought a number of Christian refugees to Malabar Coast. After their arrival, the Christian community was strengthened in the coast. In due course Mahadevar Pattanum emerged as a Christian centre in the north and Kollem in the south. The Christian settlements of the fishermen rose at Thiruvithamcode, Kollam, Kayamkulam and Muttom.

The accounts of the foreign travelers furnish few information about the fishing communities. The accounts of the Chinese traveler, Fa-Hien, furnish certain reliable information about the life style of the Mukkuva community of the West coast. Pliny too provided a detailed account on the developments of the fishermen. The accounts of the Marco Polo narrate the existence of Christians and Jews in Kollam and its vicinities. In 1329, the Diocese of Kollam was formed and John Catalandi was episcopally ordained the first Bishop by Pop John XXII at Avignon. With the papal orders and letters the new Bishop set out to India, but information are scanty about the successors. Joannes De Marignolly, Papal Legate, who visited Malabar in 1348 testifies the existence of a Latin rite Church at Kollam. This Church had connection with Rome and practiced Latin form of worship. The Church was adorned with fine paintings. The Holy law was taught there. Before leaving India, Marignolly erected a marble pillar at Cape Comorin with a stone cross on it. It was blessed with the presence of a multitude of people. He was carried on the shoulders of the chiefs like a palanquin. Such type of Christian fishermen settlements were found from Karachi to Cape Comorin and from Cape Comorin to Mylapore.



There is a stone inscription at the Chinna Muttom (alias Muttom or Kumari Muttom), near Cape Comorin, which is depicted the Royal Edict of 1494. The King of Travancore of the time perhaps Unni Kerela Trivadi granted tax exemptions to the residents of Kumar Muttom and also authorized the levy of light tax from the fishermen's transport boats called 'uru and

sampan' that passed through the Kovilkulam in Kumari Muttom, carrying paddy and other cargo to and fro along the coast. From this aggregate income, we are enlightened that there were Christians on the coastal region even before the advent of the European missionaries.

A new era ushered in the life of the Mukkuva fishermen of Travancore with the advent of the Europeans. On the 20th May 1498, Vasco Da Gama reached Cappucaud, a few miles north of Calicut on the Malabar coast. He reported that more than two lakhs Christian existed in that region before his advent. They were not properly preached the doctrines of Christianity. On the second Voyage to Calicut, Vasco Da Gama met a group of Mukkuvas on the Arabian Sea while engaged in fishing. He talked with them and a few of them were taken to Portugal on his return journey from India. Later, they were recruited for the Portuguese navy as warriors. They besought him to intercede with the Portuguese King to become their ruler and protector. Thus began the Protectorate of the Portuguese King. The Latin order became a prominent Christian order in the State.



Pedro Alvarez Cabral on his return journey to Portugal brought to the notice of the Portugal King and people about the Indian Christians. He extended his support to the Jesuit missionaries for conversion work. A group of eight Franciscan missionaries and nine other priests accompanied Cabral to India. The Franciscans were the first to

establish their religious residences in India. After learning the native language, they worked with considerable success especially from the coast of Bassein to Santhome. From Cochin, moving southwards along the coast, a number of people from the fisher-folks were converted. The harvest of conversion proceeded as far as Cape Comorian and beyond the limits of Travancore towards the coast.

The Arel of Cochin, the headman of the Mukkuvas with all his family members numbering more than one thousand was converted to Christianity. The new converts were all fishermen, boatmen, and sailors. The relatives of the Arel settled in the neighboring Kingdoms also followed his example due to his influence. The Raja of Cochin soon summoned Arel and privileges and the honours conferred on him were withdrawn. But nothing could make them renounce the new faith which they had embraced. In turns, the Portuguese Captain Duarte De Lemos in the name of the Portugese King conferred some titled on the Arel. With the involvement of King of Portugel, the dispute was settled in favour of the converts. The Raja of Cochin assured through a letter that all would be well and that the Arel and his men would have nothing to fear on the score. Having an eye on these incidents, the royal nobility and Panikkars too sought conversion to the Christian faith.

According to a report submitted to the King of Portugal on 27th December 1514, there were three hundred and forty four converts in that year whom ninety five were Muslims, seven were Nairs, and one hundred and sixty belonged to Tiyas and Mukkuvas. The Church did not merely secede from the organization of the people. Knowing the pitiable and pathetic poverty stricken condition of the converts, the Portuguese missionaries extended economic help. During the Governorship of Alfonsa De Albuquerque, conversion was virtually banned in Cochin and Cannanore. It was due to the bitter relationship between the ruler and Governor.

The Queen of Travancore was sympathetic towards the Christian missionary activities. By a treaty signed with the missionaries on 25th Septemeber 1516, the Queen of Travancore allowed her subjects, both Hindus and Muslims to embrace Christianity. In practice, the Christian missionaries could not prevent certain social evils such as untouchability and few other inhuman practices. Though Christianity preaches the universal brotherhood of man, it could not maintain such principles in the day-to-day life. When Christianity missionaries were more sympathetic towards lower castes, it created lot of troubles to the missionaries.

The life of the Mukkuvas in Travancore was abundantly influenced by Christianity and its missionaries. The involvement of the missionaries in their life greatly helped them for a change in their life style. This redoubled with the advent of the various other missionaries such as St. Francis Xavier. Thereafter Christianity was deep rooted on the coastal villages of Travancore.

The European came to India not for the merely purpose of trade and religious conversion, but they were the catalyst for social change. In the India society, with their advent the process got a new and surprising turn. They laid the foundation of a modern state, introduced modern technology, revolutionised the mean of communication, introduced a new education system, illegalized many inhuman social customs, and encouraged the activities of the Christian missionaries.



The changes occurred in social, economic, cultural, and religious life of the Mukkuva fishermen of Travancore coast is highly commendable. Comparing the changes occurred in other parts of the world, it is dreary. As a mark of change, the Mukkuvas in large numbers embraced Christianity and got asylum in the hands of Christian missionaries. The changes were further accelerated by St. Francis Xavier, a priest of the 'Society of Jesus'. In the social hierarchy, their position was given a boost. Untouchability practiced in a little was eradicated. The missionaries gave much priority to education. By founding schools in important places, education was given a boost. A College and Residence was founded at Kollam, the former mostly for the boys of Cape mission and the latter for the members of the Society of Jesus.

Fr. Henriques, the successor of St. Francis Xavier went so far as to tolerate separate places of worship for different castes within the Church. But he was sympathetic towards the native people and helped them to be ordained as priests. Out of his effort, Peter Louis,

a new convert from Kollam in 1547 was sent to Goa for priesthood studies and he became the first native clergy of the order of the Society of Jesus.

By 1600, between Kollam and Cape Comorin, there were forty four Christian settlements. There are assistances of struggle between the fishermen and Muslims. The Christian fishermen of Kollam were often disturbed by the Turks. Even they were prohibited to use certain streets. When this was brought to the knowledge of the King of Travancore, the Turks were heavily fined. Thus the Christian missionaries of Europe worked for the socio-economic upliftment of the Mukkuvas. The Mukkuvas occupied a predominant status in the social hierarchy.

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