

Status claims among Muslims in Malabar, South India

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Abstract

This note shares preliminary reflections on the way status claims are being made by Muslims in Malabar, South India, by conducting family gatherings. These claims complicate the existing notions of status based on the identity of each social group. To show these complications, I share stories of two family gatherings.

KEYWORDS: family gatherings, status, caste, Muslims, Malabar, South India

Social hierarchy among Muslims

The idea of caste, which is understood to be the organising principle of Hindu societies on the Indian subcontinent, was understood to have determined social hierarchical practices among Muslims too. While there is no consensus whether the term ‘caste’ itself should be used to denote social hierarchy, owing to the lack of a religious ideology sustaining these practices among Muslims, the notion of hierarchy determining Muslim social lives is acknowledged in the scholarly parlance. Scholars, including Imtiaz Ahmad (1978), Zarina Bhatti (1996), use the term *caste* arguing that most of the features of the Hindu caste system like occupational specialization, endogamy, commensal restrictions are also observable among Muslims. While egalitarian aspects are asserted by Muslims in general as characterising the core of their religion, their practices are mediated by practices of hierarchy. Scholars following these arguments have assigned this scenario as a result of the larger living environment. They argue that Islam has accommodated such hierarchical practices to survive in an alien environment. Some other scholars, such as Sayed Ali (2002), have emphasised the ethnicity undergirding the social hierarchy among Muslims in the subcontinent. They argue that it is not larger living environments that determine the hierarchy to a great extent, but the specific formations of Muslim communities in the subcontinent.

I have noted elsewhere (2017) that the hierarchy among Muslims in Malabar should not be understood as an influence of the larger living environment or a result of specific socio-cultural formations. They are in fact sustained by Islamic juristic concepts and cultural categories such as purity, morality, piety and knowledge. On the basis of these categories, Muslims in Malabar are divided into mainly four social groups: Thangals (sayyid),

Mappilas, Ossans (barbers) and Pusalans (fishermen). Thangals claim to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and claim their high status owing to that lineage. Mappilas, who form the majority of Muslims and placed second in the hierarchy, are converts from earlier Hindu castes of both high and low status. Ossans are barbers; their men used to conduct circumcision, and their women used to act as midwives. Due to their proximity or involvement with blood and unhygienic conditions, they are considered to be low in status by other Muslims. Pusalans are fishermen among Muslims; other Muslims consider them to be in the lowest rung of hierarchy due to their lack of piety (as a result of the nature of their occupation, they fail to perform prayers on time) and general uncultured behaviour. All these social groups are endogamous; whenever marriages occur between them, they are hypergamous in nature.

In recent times, many family lineages within these social groups have started organising family gatherings to assert status that sometimes complicates the hitherto existing social divisions on the basis of group identities. I will provide a synoptic view of claims made by two family lineages within these social groups below. Then I will reflect on the way they complicate, critique and undermine status based on group identity.

Cheerangan

While I was doing the fieldwork in early 2015 among Pusalans in Malabar, one of the members during a groupinterview claimed that his family and some others in the seashore were not in fact Pusalans but belonged to a great family lineage called *Cheerangan*. However, he was not ready to dwell upon this claim much during the interview. Once the interview was over, he secretly suggested that I should go along with him to his house, so that he could show me many things to prove his claim. Once there, he showed me, with conspicuous pride, a membership card, yearly calendar, and a souvenir brought out as part of the family gathering. Their family lineage had been registered in the state Societies Registration Act, 1860 in India. He elaborated how their family lineage was formed in Malabar. He had come to know the story of his lineage quite recently through the gathering and reading the souvenir. The family lineage claims their descent from a barrack commander of Tipu Sultan (a great ruler of Mysore who invaded Malabar in 1789) who had settled in the inland area of Malabar. He married a woman of the locality and settled there without joining Tipu when his army retreated. He was originally from Srirangapatanam and was known in the locality as 'Shreerangan', someone who has come from Srirangapatanam. Since the lower castes were not allowed to pronounce the sound 'sh' due to their low status in Kerala, they pronounced the term as Cheerangan. They claim to be high in status among Muslims (after Thangals) since their forefather was originally a Muslim, unlike the majority of Muslims in Malabar who are converts from lower castes among Hindus.

Nambankunnan

During the same period, I also encountered many barbers who had participated in a family gathering among them. They asserted that barbers in Kerala have different family lineage names today, but they originally belonged to a single lineage called Nambankunnan. They

claimed that barbers have high status among Muslims (after Thangals) in Malabar because their forefather was originally a Muslim. Their story goes like this: when Malik Dinar and twelve people came to Kerala, probably in the 8th century AD to propagate Islam, they were already in wedlock or got married to local women. When a baby boy was born to one of them, they were confused regarding the conduct of the ritual of tonsure (which is usually done on the seventh day) and circumcision. Since there was no consensus reached, one of the twelve members volunteered to do the job if the aunt of the baby was ready to hold the baby in her hands. This holding of the baby by aunt was highlighted to show the honour of the job. The barbers claim to have descended from this original Muslim. However, there was a slight twist to this narrative when I asked Mappilas about barbers' claims of occupying high status among Muslims. According to them, it was not voluntarism on the part of a member of the missionary; rather, he was forced to do the job because he was not very good at the activities of propagating Islam.

These new practices of conducting family gatherings to make status claims among Muslims is not based on the social identity of the group as earlier mentioned. These are newer ways of establishing such claims in a locality.

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Povzetek

V tem zapisu so predstavljene preliminarne refleksije o tem, kako muslimani v Malabarju v južni Indiji zahtevajo svoj status s pomočjo družinskih srečanj. Ti zahtevki zapletajo obstoječe ideje o status, ki temeljijo na identiteti posamezne družbene skupine. Prikaz teh zapletov je predstavljen v zgodbah iz dveh družinskih srečanj.

KLUJČNE BESEDE: družinska srečanja, status, kasta, Muslimani, Malabar, južna Indija

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