Global South Colloquy

February 20, 2019

Globalisation, Migration and Change in Pattern of Cultural Consumption among the Muslims of Kerala

M.H. ILIAS

In less than three generations, Kerala Muslim society transformed from one of the most disengaged parts of colonialism to the beneficiaries of globalisation. Interestingly, Muslims of Kerala have displayed variety of responses to globalisation. The responses were rather selective as certain features of globalisation have been eagerly appropriated, while others have been raucously rejected. Kerala Muslims' engagement with the process of globalisation represents an analytically important case for more than one reason. An enquiry to make sense of this engagement can be done mainly from two interrelated vantage points—religion and culture.

Among the many corollaries of globalisation, it is the migration that acted as a major vehicle of change in the specific context of Muslim society in Kerala integrating the community into a wider economic as well as social expanse. The process from the early eighties had brought many changes to the pattern of religious consumption and helped reconfigure every day religious practices within a pan-Islamic code of conduct. Now the changes are more pertinent—from a rarity only ten years ago, *halal* chicken shops have widely sprung up in migrant pockets. People may see nothing unusual about proliferation of *halal* chicken shops, but it is a pointer offering an especially interesting vantage point from which one can understand how the process of migration and active *Islamisation* intersect in a more circuitous fashion. The piece pays more attention to the subtle social practices that caught most of the 'migration studies scholars' flatfooted.

There is a widely-held trend seeing Muslim diaspora as the agents of creating a Muslim *Umma* globally with collective Islamic identity and uniting spiritual centre. But I find the active *Islamisation* of the lives of migrants as a result of experience of different forms of exclusion and ambiguities which necessitates the need for forming new types of community connections and support networks. This development involves a newfound emphasis on Islam as a means of mobilisation and an bourgeoning popularity of Islamic political activism.[1] This is particularly visible in the diasporic context where the shift does not represent increasing adherence to Islam as a religion but to Islam as an overarching ideology and as a platform that can offer a coherent identity in the host land (Ilias 2015).

The exclusion in the social sphere in the Gulf accentuates the need for community connections and support networks among Muslim communities from different parts sharing the same experience. These cross-cultural identifications always take place not between Malayalee Muslims in the Gulf and local Arab Muslims, but among different diasporic Muslim groups like Muslim labourers from other South Asian and Southeast Asian countries living under similar conditions. Although ethnic differences have acted as a major stumbling block for non-Gulf Arab Islamist groups and Malayali Muslims of similar orientation to draw closer, pro-Western policies and the 'weak and fragile' positions of many of the Gulf monarchies vis-à-vis the United States have now become a rationale for these groups to support each other (Ibid).

Except for special cases, [2] Kerala Muslims in the diaspora play no significant part in religious affairs in the Gulf and only a few voices from them are heard publically. Ethnicity becomes the prime matter of divergence and the Malayalee Muslims are certainly unwelcome because of their attachments to 'indigenous Islam.' Despite the long tradition of religious exchanges between the Arabian Peninsula and many parts of India, Indian Islam is generally perceived by the local Arabs as something not fully refined (Ilias 2011:84-6).

This division has been further complicated by the employer–employee nature of the relationship between the local Arabs and Malayalee Muslims. However, the newly attained 'Islamic' identity appears to be something that is meant to compensate for this alienation. Active Islamisation takes them to the wider 'Islamic expanses' (Osella and Osella 2009). where the differences among the Muslims around the world seem to be blurred. This situation remains conducive to the emergence of various forms of religious movements and expressions characterised mostly by reinvention or reaffirmation of religion in different fashions.

The 'original' Islamic practices and traditions imported from the Gulf often receive wide acceptance in Kerala as they elevate the status and efficacy of an average Muslim in the community. This is more visible among Malayalee Muslims returning from Saudi Arabia – the place that is considered to be the cradle of Islam. People start looking at Islam with a new perspective and the experience of living there becomes a validation of 'original Islam'. Endorsing 'original Islam' often creates a different understanding of 'Indian Islam' and people begin to see the cross-cultural interactions with other communities they had in the past as an aberration, not an asset. The experience of living in the Gulf, along with the adoption of Gulf practices and dress, becomes a means of establishing moral and religious superiority over fellow Muslims (Osella and Osella 2007:8).

Gulf migrants' new-found economic mobility becomes a major source of 'othering' as there is a bourgeoning mystification of their investment. By employing a business and labour practices of global standard, Indian businessmen in the Gulf are at the forefront of India's post-liberalization economy. But the often acerbic debate over their money leads to an apprehension revolving around how this system is being operated with "not-so-intelligent" and "adventuristic investments," seemingly "foolish" transactions, free flow and carefree handling of money. Their financial transactions blur the lines between national economies and between 'legal' and 'unlawful' transactions. Gulf migrants' strange spending pattern also makes a complete dissociation with 'the local' as Gulf is the reference point.

With its instant realisation of the social change, contemporary Malayalam cinema is a handbook to understand how a 'Gulf migrant self' is crated. Even after long three decades of continuity, Gulf

migrants' images are still vilified or often portrayed as an 'outsider' in the main text. He (often a rag-get rich prototype) comes with a purpose to destroy 'otherwise peaceful' upper-caste dominated pristine village life. 'His' money is, continuously, being treated as an agent of destruction (social, economic and environmental as well). There is a marked unwillingness to recognize the role being played by the Gulf money in the film field. Ironically enough, this capital constitutes a large chunk of finance capital in the film industry and ultimately producing different forms of cultural capital through cinema and television productions.

The current phase of Malayali Diaspora has generated a variety of interesting literary expressions. New Imaginations and sensibilities speak of a consistent effort to reimaging the 'nation' and self. With their own artistic resources and aesthetic sense, the Gulf migrants have created a 'subsection' in popular culture. This subsection being used by them to express their emotions, feelings, informal opinions and worldviews encourages a refocusing of aesthetics away from the traditional domains of high culture (Ilias and Hussain 2017).

 'Shattered dreams' of the unsuccessful migrants, the stresses they face at the work place and the breakup of relationships are becoming the major themes. Such productions (in the form of music albums, video footages and You Tube clippings) with new-fangled aesthetic sense are having a discernible effect on the imagination of the diasporic community and are more patronized by the labour class in the gulf. Gulf migrants' engagement with new technology is another significant and interesting phenomenon. Perhaps more striking is the newfound popularity of blogs and websites. Through their personal narration, women bloggers from Kerala transgress several socio-cultural boundaries of permissible expression. Dealing with the dialogic aspects of internet among the Gulf migrant societies, one can assume the presence of a 'virtual-public sphere' with consistent circulation of opinions and worldviews. It would also be interesting to examine the ways in which the diaspora in the Gulf have been making use of new media and globalising technologies.

Notes

1. The situation is conducive to the emergence of various forms of Islamic organisations that push their way mainly through the insecurity of Indian Muslims vis-à-vis the rise of Hindu communalism. Issues like under-representation of Kerala Muslims in government jobs, stereotyping of Muslim images in the media and violation of minority rights also serve as the raison d'être.
2. Salafis from Kerala appears to be an exceptional case as they are seriously being considered on all religious affairs by their counterparts in Saudi.

References

Ilias, M.H. (2015): "Re-conceptualizing 'political': Translocal Indian Politics in the Gulf," in   Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian (eds.), *Contextualizing the Modern Middle Eastern Diaspora*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ilias, M.H. (2011): "South Asian Labour Crisis in Dubai and the Scanty Prospects of Indian Policy in the Arab Gulf Region," *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations,* Vol.4, No. 1 & 2: 84–6.

Ilias, M.H and Shamshad Hussain (2017): *Arabi-Malayalam: Linguistic-Cultural Traditions of Mappila Muslims of Kerala,* New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts.

Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella (2009): "Muslim Entrepreneurs in Public life between India and the Gulf," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15(1) May: 208–209.

Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella (2007): "Muslim Style in South India," *Fashion Theory* 11: 2–3.

The author is Professor and Director, School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.