



e-ISSN: 2980-2628 | www.jomiss.com.tr

CİLT 2, SAYI 2, Aralık 2024 | VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2, December 2024

## Atıf Bilgisi | Reference Information

Noushad Mk, "Gulf Migration and Socio-Economic Transformation of the Mappila Community in Kerala",  
*JOMISS*, C. 2, S. 2, Aralık 2024, s. 153-168.

## Makale Türü | Article Type

Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

DOI No: 10.29329/jomiss.2024.1088.5

## Geliş Tarihi | Received Date

24 Ekim 2024 | 24 October 2024

## Kabul Tarihi | Accepted Date

23 Aralık 2024 | 23 December 2024

## Gulf Migration and Socio-Economic Transformation of the Mappila Community in Kerala

### Körfez Göçü ve Kerala'daki Mappila Topluluğunun Sosyo-Ekonomik Dönüşümü

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## Özet

Bu çalışma, Kerala'daki Mappila toplumunun 19. ve 20. yüzyıllarda Arap Yarımadası'na göçle birlikte geçirdiği sosyo-ekonomik, kültürel ve eğitimsel dönüşümleri incelemektedir. Sömürge yönetimi altında tarihsel olarak ötekileştirilen Mappila'lar, Körfez'de inşaat, petrol endüstrileri ve hem resmi hem de gayri resmi diğer sektörlerde iş buldukları fırsatlar aramışlardır. Bu göçler, Arabistan ile uzun süredir devam eden dini ve kültürel bağlar tarafından kolaylaştırılmış ve Mappilalar Kerala'daki örgün eğitim ve istihdam sistemlerinden dışlandıkları için başlangıçta ekonomik gereklilikten kaynaklanmıştır. Körfez'den gelen havaleler topluluğun ekonomik konumunu önemli ölçüde güçlendirmiş, sosyal hareketliliği ve toprak edinimini mümkün kılarak geleneksel kast ve sınıf hiyerarşilerini değiştirmiştir. Göç aynı zamanda Mappila'ları eğitim yoluyla güçlendirmiş, sömürgeci marjinalleştirmeye meydan okumuş ve kozmopolit bir kimliği teşvik etmiştir. Bu çalışma, göç olgusunun yalnızca yoksulluktan kaçmanın bir yolu değil, aynı zamanda Kerala'nın sosyo-politik manzarasını yeniden şekillendirmede kritik bir güç olduğunu; daha eşitlikçi bir topluma katkıda bulunan ve Mappila'ların toplum içindeki konumunu yeniden tanımlayan kapsayıcı bir araç olarak hareket ettiğini savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mappila Göçü, Malabar Mappilaları, Körfez Göçü, Kerala Müslümanları, Mappila İşgücü Hareketliliği.

## Abstract

This work explores the socio-economic, cultural, and educational transformations of the Mappila community in Kerala, driven by migration to the Arabian Peninsula in the 19th and 20th centuries. Historically marginalised under colonial rule, the Mappilas sought opportunities in the Gulf, where they found work in construction, oil industries, and other sectors, both formal and informal sectors. These migrations were facilitated by longstanding religious and cultural ties with Arabia and were initially driven by economic necessity, as Mappilas faced exclusion from formal education and employment systems in Kerala. Remittances from the Gulf significantly enhanced the community's economic standing, enabling social mobility and land acquisition, which altered the traditional caste and class hierarchies. Migration also empowered the Mappilas through education, challenging colonial marginalisation and fostering a cosmopolitan identity. This work argues that the migration phenomenon was not only a means of escaping poverty but also a critical force in reshaping the socio-political landscape of Kerala; it acted as an inclusive tool contributing to a more equitable society and redefining the Mappilas' position within it.

**Keywords:** Mappila Migration, Mappilas of Malabar, Gulf Migration, Kerala Muslims, Mappila Labour Mobility.

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## Introduction

The Mappilas<sup>1</sup> of the Malabar Coast are the product of a rich and complex historical relationship between Kerala and the Arab world, built upon centuries of trade, cultural exchange, and geographical proximity. Situated on opposite shores of the Arabian Sea, Kerala and the Arabian Peninsula were, in many ways, natural trading partners, their position along key maritime routes enhancing their interconnectedness. This strategic location allowed the Malabar Coast to become a significant hub for international trade long before European colonisation, with traders from across the Indian Ocean converging there. Among these traders, Arabs held a particularly dominant role in the spice trade, which was the lifeblood of the region's economy. They were the principal suppliers of spices to the European market, which, until Vasco da Gama's historic voyage<sup>2</sup> around Africa in the late 15th century, relied on intermediaries rather than direct access to India.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Arab interest in Malabar extended beyond spices; the region's rich forests, particularly its teak wood, were another valuable resource sought by Arab traders. The high-quality timber from Malabar, specifically from places like Kallai in Kozhikode and Nilambur, was ideal for shipbuilding, adding another dimension to the trade relations between Arabs and the Malabar Coast. This demand for teak would later draw the British to the region, where they exploited the forests and constructed the Shoranur-Nilambur railway<sup>4</sup> to transport the prized wood. The economic significance of these resources reinforced the Arab traders' presence and influence in Malabar, allowing them to establish long-lasting commercial networks that continued even after European powers entered the scene.

However, the relationship between the Arabs and the Malabar region was not just commercial; it was deeply social and cultural as well. Long before the advent of Islam, Arab traders had established connections with the people of Malabar, forming bonds that transcended economic interests. Inter-marriage between Arab traders and local women became common, and the offspring of these unions -known as Mappilas- would come to play a crucial role in the cultural and social landscape of the region. The Arab settlers who married into the local communities formed small but significant settlements along the Malabar coast, from Kozhikode to smaller towns. Their influence was not confined to Kerala alone; Arab traders established similar communities in Chaul (Goa), Kalyan (Maharashtra), and Nala Sopara (Mumbai). These settlements became centres of cross-cultural exchange, where languages, religions, and customs were shared and adapted, further enriching the local culture.

The Mappilas, descendants of Arab-local unions, carved out a prominent social position in Kerala despite the region's rigid caste-based society. Scholars such as Gopal Guru have explored how marginalized communities navigate socioeconomic exclusion within entrenched caste hierarchies.

1 Malabar Muslims or Muslim Mappilas, is a member of the Muslim community found predominantly in Kerala and Lakshadweep islands in Southern India. The term Mappila is used to denote people of semitic religion, Used to describe Malabar Muslims in Northern Kerala, and Mar thoma Nazarenes (Saint Thomas Christians) in southern Kerala. (For more details, see Ines G. Zupanov, *Missionary Tropics: The Catholic Frontier in India (16th–17th centuries)*, University of Michigan, Michigan 2005, p.99). Muslims of Kerala make up 26.56% of the population of the state (2011), and as a religious group they are the second largest group after Hindus (54.73%). Muslims share the common language of Malayalam with the other religious communities of Kerala.

2 Vasco da Gama (born c. 1460, Sines, Portugal—died December 24, 1524, Cochin, India) was a Portuguese navigator whose voyages to India (1497–99, 1502–03, 1524) opened up the sea route from western Europe to the East by way of the Cape of Good Hope. His expedition reached Mombasa (now in Kenya) on April 7 and dropped anchor at Malindi (also now in Kenya) on April 14, where a Gujarati pilot who knew the route to Calicut, on the southwest coast of India, was taken aboard. After a 23-day run across the Indian Ocean, the Ghats Mountains of India were sighted, and Calicut was reached on May 20. (for more details, see Felipe Fernandez-Armesto and Eila M.J. Campbell, "Vasco da Gama", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vasco-da-Gama>, Access date: 9.10.2024).

3 K. G. Jayne, *Vasco-da-Gama and His Successors*, Methuen & Co., London 1910, p.66.

4 Shoranur Junction, an NSG–3 category station under the Palakkad division of Southern Railway, is located in Shoranur, Palakkad District, Kerala. The Nilambur Road line, added in 1927, is single-tracked and now electrified. The teak plantations along this route symbolise British-era exploitation, with trees grown from seeds spilt during colonial teakwood transportation from Nilambur.

While Kerala's caste system often side-lined groups outside its framework, the Mappilas managed to attain social standing through their critical role in trade and their integration into local culture via intermarriage and shared religious practices. This fusion of Arab and Kerala traditions fostered a cosmopolitan ethos among the Mappilas, who skilfully blended Islamic and indigenous customs. As Arab traders became more deeply integrated into Kerala society, their influence expanded beyond commerce to shape the region's culture, language, and religion. Notably, the spread of Islam in Kerala was closely tied to these traders, who introduced the faith and established a thriving Muslim community along the coastal areas.

The close relationship between Arab traders and local rulers also played a crucial role in solidifying this connection. The rulers of Kerala understood the immense economic potential that Arab merchants brought to the region, and they actively fostered these relationships to ensure continued prosperity. As a result, Arab merchants became integral to the international trade networks of Kerala's rulers, enjoying privileges and protection that allowed them to thrive in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. These ties between Arabs and Kerala's rulers further cemented the Arabs' influence in the region, allowing them to navigate the challenges posed by the arrival of European powers and the eventual colonisation of India.

Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory explains the global economic system as a hierarchy consisting of core, semi-periphery, and periphery regions. Migration is often driven by economic inequalities and historical trade relationships between these regions. The historical trade networks between Kerala and the Arabian Peninsula created enduring economic and cultural ties. In the 20th century, the oil-rich Gulf region (semi-periphery/core) attracted labour from peripheral regions like Kerala, which was economically marginalized during and after colonial rule. This aligns with the theory's focus on the mobility of labour driven by global economic shifts. The deep-rooted relationship between the Mappilas of Malabar and the Arab world, born from centuries of trade and cultural exchange, laid the foundation for the later waves of migration that followed the discovery of oil in the Gulf region. The establishment of this Arab-Mappila network, characterised by shared economic ventures and social integration, provided the groundwork for the large-scale migration of Mappilas to the Gulf in the 20th century. When the Gulf countries experienced rapid economic transformation following the discovery of oil, Mappilas were among the first to seize the opportunity, drawing on their historical ties and familiarity with the Arab world. Their migration to the Gulf was not merely economic but also a continuation of centuries of cross-cultural exchange, which had long defined the relationship between Malabar and the Arabian Peninsula. This migration further reinforced the enduring legacy of Arab-Mappila connections, as the Mappila diaspora became key contributors to the Gulf's development while maintaining strong links to their homeland in Kerala.<sup>5</sup>

The Mappilas of Malabar strategically employed a powerful tool -education and migration- that played a crucial role in shaping the community's identity and resilience in the face of both colonial and post-colonial challenges. These two strategies were deeply interconnected and helped the Mappilas respond to the socio-political upheavals brought by colonial rule while also preserving and strengthening their distinct socio-cultural framework. Both migration and education became essential mechanisms through which the Mappilas navigated the pressures of colonialism, enabling them to maintain a unique social location within the broader socio-political landscape of Malabar. Migration, in particular, took on various dimensions across different historical periods, reflecting the adaptability of the Mappilas to shifting socio-economic and political conditions. The earliest patterns of Mappila migration can be traced to their settlements along the coastal regions of Malabar, where the community's historical connections with Arab traders established a foundation for socio-economic mobility.<sup>6</sup> The coastal settlements became hubs of trade and commerce, fostering cross-cultural exchanges that linked the Mappilas with the broader Indian Ocean world. However, as colonial rule intensified and economic pressures mounted, many Mappilas began moving inland, resettling in the

5 For more details, see Kunniparampil Curien Zachariah, Elangikal Thomas Mathew, Sebastian Irudaya Rajan, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala: Dimensions, Differentials and Consequences*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad 2003.

6 Thomas J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation*, C. Hurst and Company, London 1982, pp. 23-25.

hinterlands of Malabar. This migration was often driven by land dispossession, economic hardship, and social marginalisation under colonial policies, which disproportionately affected the Muslim community.

Pierre Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory emphasises the value of social networks and relationships in accessing resources and opportunities. The historical Arab-Mappila networks served as a form of social capital. These ties facilitated migration by providing connections, familiarity with the culture and language of the Gulf, and community support structures. Migrants leveraged this historical social capital to navigate opportunities in the Gulf, which became critical during the 20th-century migration wave. In the 20th century, another wave of migration emerged as a response to the rapid economic transformation of the Gulf region following the discovery of oil. Mappilas, drawing on their historical ties to the Arab world, began migrating to the Gulf in search of new economic opportunities. This wave of Gulf migration not only provided the Mappila community with a new source of economic sustenance but also played a pivotal role in shaping the development of education in Malabar. The remittances sent back by Mappilas working in the Gulf fuelled the establishment of private schools, colleges, and religious institutions, laying the foundation for a parallel educational system that operated outside the direct influence of colonial powers.

This parallel educational system served as a form of resistance against colonial policies, which often sought to marginalise non-European forms of knowledge and culture. By investing in education, the Mappilas were able to preserve their cultural and religious identity while simultaneously challenging the colonial hegemony that sought to undermine local traditions. The development of Mappila education during this period was not only an act of cultural preservation but also a means of social mobility, as it empowered future generations with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate both local and global challenges. At the same time, the Mappila education was fed by the migrants' remittance in an intense way.

### **Mappila Migration and Migration Pattern**

Mappila migration from Kerala to the Gulf countries in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was driven by a complex interplay of socio-cultural, educational, and economic factors. The historiography of the Mappila community has, for a long time, been shaped by colonial and imperial writers, whose limited understanding of Mappila life and culture, combined with their often-hostile attitudes, contributed to a distorted and negative portrayal of the community. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said (*Orientalism*) and Gayatri Spivak (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*) critique such colonial portrayals, arguing that imperialist narratives often stereotype and delegitimise colonised subjects to justify domination. This bias in historical writing failed to capture the nuanced realities of the Mappilas, whose experiences in Kerala were marked by social exclusion and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Most Mappilas resided in the Malabar region, which itself became a symbol of regional marginalisation under colonial rule. Before colonial intervention, however, Malabar was a prosperous and wealthy region closely connected to major trading ports in the Arabian Peninsula. The cosmopolitan ports of Calicut and Ponnani were key hubs through which Arab traders maintained robust commercial ties with Malabar, facilitating the exchange of goods, people, and ideas between the Arab world and Kerala.<sup>8</sup> This long-standing interaction fostered a deep cultural and social intimacy between the two regions, contributing to the development of a unique socio-religious fabric in the coastal towns of Malabar.

In the context of Mappila migration to the Gulf, it is important to recognise that the earliest migrations likely occurred alongside Hajj pilgrims and traders who travelled to Arabian countries, particularly Mecca. Many Mappilas who accompanied these pilgrimages settled in Mecca for extended periods, receiving education and religious instruction before returning to their homeland. These early educational exchanges played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual and institutional

7 For further details, see Samad Kunnakkavu (ed.), *Malabar: Vivechanathinte Kanakkupusthakam* (Mal.), Forum for Malabar Right, Calicut 2013.

8 M. H. Ilias, "Memories and Narrations of 'Nations' Past: Accounts of Early Migrants from Kerala in the Gulf in the Post-Oil Era", *Oxford Middle East Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018, p. 74.



foundations of Mappila education in Kerala. Upon their return, these individuals became teachers and leaders within their community, contributing to the spread of religious and cultural knowledge. This educational network, rooted in the connections between Kerala and the Arabian Peninsula, was a key factor in the community's development, and it laid the groundwork for the later waves of migration that would take place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A combination of cosmopolitan aspirations and severe social challenges such as unemployment, poverty, lack of education, and different forms of social exclusion compelled the Mappilas to explore migration opportunities. This migration pattern can be analysed through Everett Lee's Push-Pull Theory of migration, which frames socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment as 'push' factors driving individuals to leave their homeland, and the demand for labour, higher wages, and cultural familiarity in the Gulf as 'pull' factors attracting them to the Arabian Peninsula. The economic boom in the Persian Gulf following the discovery of oil created a high demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour, with expatriates from African and Asian countries being employed in large numbers, primarily in oil camps.<sup>9</sup> This migration pattern can be analysed through the lens of dependency theory (e.g., Andre Gunder Frank), which argues that the development of wealthy Gulf economies is often reliant on the labour and resources of peripheral nations like India, reinforcing unequal global economic structures. Mappilas, as part of this labour migration, became essential contributors to the Gulf's infrastructural growth while simultaneously being situated within a framework that perpetuates global inequalities.

During British colonial rule, the Mappilas were largely excluded from the formal modern education system, choosing instead to follow their own educational traditions in the Arabic or Arabi-Malayalam languages, the unique system of Mappilas in Kerala.<sup>10</sup> Historically, the Mappilas had been concentrated in Kerala's coastal cities, where they engaged in trade and commerce, particularly in the Indian Ocean. However, the arrival of European colonial forces, beginning with Vasco da Gama's expedition and the arrival of the São Gabriel in the 16th century, disrupted their livelihoods. From that point on, the Mappilas were increasingly viewed as rivals to colonial authority, and a stereotype of them as a rebellious and criminal community began to take hold, a view that was further amplified during British rule.

Migration for the Mappilas became a necessity due to worsening conditions of poverty and unemployment. The cultural and religious similarities between the Mappilas and the Gulf region encouraged many to seek opportunities there, and migration became increasingly common. Most of the early migrants were uneducated or lacked formal qualifications, and this pattern of undocumented, uneducated migration continued until the early 1970s.<sup>11</sup> As a result, many of these early migrants were left without social or job security in their host countries, facing significant challenges as they sought to build new lives abroad. The prospect of higher wages in the Arabian Gulf attracted Mappilas seeking to escape chronic poverty and unemployment. As colonial forces pushed Mappilas out of their traditional livelihoods in Kerala's coastal trade, migration became a viable alternative to overcome their social and economic hardships. The rapid expansion of infrastructure in the Gulf, particularly in construction and the oil industry, created a high demand for labour from Asian and African countries. For the Mappilas, migration was facilitated by their historical connections with Arabia, particularly through the longstanding relationships between Mappila scholars, *ulamas*,<sup>12</sup> and

9 Ian J. Seccombe and R.I. Lawless, "Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies: 1910-1950", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 20, No.3, Autumn, 1986, pp. 548-574.

10 P. T. Noufal, "An alternative literacy movement and literature: A Case of Malabar", *Contemporary Literary Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 9, September 2017, pp. 74-80.

11 Ian J. Seccombe, "Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf: Evolution and Characteristics 1920-1950", *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, Bulletin, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1983, pp. 3-5.

12 According to Encyclopedia Britannica, 'ulama', the learned of Islam, those who possess the quality of 'ilm, "learning," in its widest sense. From the 'ulama', who are versed theoretically and practically in the Muslim sciences, come the religious teachers of the Islamic community-theologians, canon lawyers (muftis), judges (qadis), professors-and high state religious officials like the shaykh al-Islam. In a narrower sense, 'ulama' may refer to a council of learned men

the Arab world, as well as the presence of Mappila expatriates already settled there. This made the transition to life in the Gulf easier for the Mappilas compared to other communities in Kerala.

The subsequent history of the community, marked by significant economic and educational growth, demonstrates that migration to Arabia became a successful tool in combating poverty and unemployment. The influx of Mappila migrants, combined with the Arabian influence on trade and migration, had a profound impact on the development of Kerala's coastal cities, particularly Ponnani and Calicut, where Mappilas played a dominant role in foreign trade.<sup>13</sup> This migration not only alleviated the economic struggles of the Mappilas but also contributed to shaping the socio-economic fabric of these coastal cities, reinforcing their historical ties with the Arab world. The first wave of Mappila migration to the Gulf, occurring before the 1970s, was largely composed of informal workers who were often undocumented or engaged in illegal employment.<sup>14</sup> A variety of severe social and economic pressures drove Mappilas to seek livelihoods in Arabia, where they found new opportunities for employment. The presence of earlier Mappila migrants, many of whom were relatives or community members, provided crucial social and economic support, fostering a sense of security and encouraging further migration.<sup>15</sup> As the Mappila presence in the Gulf grew, this migration had a transformative effect on the community back in Kerala, particularly in terms of educational and economic advancements.<sup>16</sup> The establishment of numerous educational institutions across the region can be seen as a reflection of the long-standing ties between Mappilas and Mappila migration to Gulf countries.

The impact of Mappila migration to the Gulf extended beyond mere economic benefit; it symbolised a new era of socio-cultural, economic, and educational prosperity. The symbolic 'fragrance' of Gulf migration was evident not only in the success and opulence associated with returnees but also in the material belongings and wealth they brought back, which created a tangible sense of allure for younger generations.<sup>17</sup> By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the aspiration to migrate to the Gulf had become deeply embedded in the dreams of young Mappilas, with success stories of migrants fuelling these ambitions.<sup>18</sup>

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the material wealth and social status of Gulf returnees became powerful markers of identity and aspiration within the Mappila community. The possessions brought back -luxury goods, modern appliances, and even newly constructed homes- were imbued with symbolic value, representing not only individual success but also communal progress and modernity. These markers of identity redefined social norms and aspirations, fostering a collective imagination of prosperity tied to Gulf migration. The growing number of Mappila migrants also led to the development of a stronger collective consciousness about their rights and social responsibilities, resulting in the formation of various organisations and community bodies. This migration wave not only reshaped the individual lives of migrants but also created a cultural and economic bridge between Kerala and the Gulf, influencing the community's social dynamics and aspirations for generations to come.

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holding government appointments in a Muslim state. (Asma Afsaruddin, "ulamā" *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ulama>, Access date: 12.02.2020.

13 Mehrdad Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture of South India: The Sultanate of Ma'bar and the Traditions of the Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts (Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa)*, Psychology Press, London 2003, p. 144.

14 Prakash C. Jain, "Indian Migration to the Gulf Countries: Past and Present", *India Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2, (April-June), 2005, pp. 50-81.

15 Jain, "Indian Migration to the Gulf Countries: Past and Present", pp. 50-81.

16 Ginu Zacharia Oommen, *Gulf Migration, Social Remittances and Religion: The Changing dynamics of Kerala Christians*, Working paper, India Centre for Migration, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, <https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf/GulfMigrationSocialRemittancesandReligion.pdf>, Access date: 10.09.2024.

17 Seccombe, "Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf: Evolution ...", pp. 3-5.

18 S. Irudaya Rajan and Prem C. Saxena, *India's Low-Skilled Migration to the Middle East: Policies, Politics and Challenges*, Palgrave MacMillan, Singapore 2019, p. 219.

### From Margins to Mobility: Migration and the Struggle Against Social Exclusion

The migration of any segment of society is often driven by a variety of social, economic, political, cultural, or educational factors and sometimes by a combination of these causes. In the case of Mappila migration, several key ‘pull’ factors played a significant role, with social, economic, and educational considerations being paramount. Historically, Mappila migration can be understood as a response to social exclusion, acting as a remedy to counter the marginalisation they faced.<sup>19</sup>

During colonial rule, the Mappila community endured numerous conflicts, hostilities, and mistreatment, which left them socially, educationally, and psychologically weakened. The colonial experience fostered feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and ‘otherness’<sup>20</sup> within the community. In this context, migration for both educational and occupational purposes became a means for Mappilas to seek social security and escape the cycle of criminalisation, unrest, and colonial oppression. By migrating, they found an opportunity to break free from the colonial-imposed stigma and regain control over their social and economic future.

Migration played a transformative role in breaking down caste and class complexities, as well as occupational stratification, within the Mappila community. Traditionally, Mappila caste groups such as *Ossans*<sup>21</sup> and *Pusalans*<sup>22</sup> were categorised based on their occupations -often in professions like fishing or barbering- and faced rigid social boundaries that made it difficult to move into different occupational fields.<sup>23</sup> However, in Gulf countries, where many Mappilas migrated, these individuals were able to pursue new careers outside their conventional trades. The absence of deeply ingrained stereotypes allowed them to break free from the stigmatisation that had previously defined their social standing within the community.

The ‘Gulf’ label, often associated with migration to the Arabian Peninsula, brought with it new social status and prestige for these groups, elevating their standing in Kerala society. The oil boom in the Gulf during the late 20th century further accelerated this migration, providing unprecedented opportunities for Mappilas to escape the confines of their traditional caste roles. For example, the barber caste, long marginalised and stigmatised in social matters such as marriage, found that migration to the Gulf allowed them to transcend these limitations. In many cases, Mappilas who returned from the Gulf were no longer bound by the rigid social hierarchies that had once excluded them, leading to a gradual erosion of caste-based discrimination both in the host countries and upon their return to Kerala.<sup>24</sup>

19 B. A. Prakash, “Gulf Migration and Its Economic Impact: The Kerala Experience”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 50 (Dec. 12-18), 1998, pp. 3209-3213.

20 For more details, see K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1989.

21 There is a Muslim community known as Ossan in Kerala. Among the Muslims of the central Malabar Coast, the Ossan men were the traditional barbers and circumcisers (Northern Kerala). The Ossan women were experts in pregnant women’s pre- and post-delivery care (midwifery). The Ossans were the lowest rank in the Kerala Muslim community’s social ‘hierarchy,’ and were an integral part of Kerala’s Muslim village communities. The original form of the term Ossan is thought to be ‘Otthaan,’ which is derived from the Arabic word ‘Khatthaan,’ which means a skilful circumcision practitioner. The Ossans were once regarded as a low-status group among Kerala’s Muslims. In some parts of Kerala, Marriage alliances of Ossan community members with financially privileged Muslim families are still a rare case. For more details, see M. K. A. Siddidqui (ed.), *Marginal Muslim Communities in India*, Institute of Objective Studies, New Delhi 2017, pp. 501-514.

22 Pusalans is a Muslim community with low community status in Kerala, India. The Pusalans were the traditional sea fisherman of the central Malabar Coast, and were previously a low-status community among Kerala’s Muslims (Northern Kerala). They are primarily the converts from the Mukkuva community, a low caste among Kerala Hindus in Kerala. For further details, see Siddidqui (ed.), *Marginal Muslim Communities in India*, pp. 501-514.

23 Which the Gulf migration accelerated, many people from these communities migrated to Gulf and engaged with different occupations. Some they continued their traditional occupations there in Gulf countries too.

24 Once a person goes to Gulf, their social status changes as their gain financial stability. Even though the person was earning better money at the home place, the ‘Gulf’ status and the ‘Gulf money’ changed their social status (some extend) which made them ‘more acceptable’ in the society.

As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argued, the caste system is sustained through rigid social and occupational boundaries. Migration to the Gulf provided Mappilas with an opportunity to escape these boundaries, challenging the casteist structures that had defined their lives in Kerala and fostering a shift towards greater social integration. For many Mappila ‘caste groups,’ migration became a means of escaping the deeply entrenched caste practices, enabling them to overcome the stigma and restrictions that had defined their lives. It provided not only economic opportunities but also a pathway to social mobility and integration, reshaping the traditional social order within the Mappila community.<sup>25</sup>

### **Global Connections: Migration and the Rise of Mappila Cosmopolitanism**

In analysing the migration patterns of Mappilas, it is evident that there was substantial migration into Malabar during medieval times, with traders and missionaries making up a significant portion of this influx.<sup>26</sup> Countries such as Yemen, Oman, Egypt, Iraq,<sup>27</sup> Saudi Arabia,<sup>28</sup> and Persia<sup>29</sup> were prominent in these historical migrations, resulting in numerous Arab settlements in Calicut and its surrounding areas.<sup>30</sup>

In the post-colonial era, a reverse migration trend emerged, with Mappilas seeking fortunes in Gulf countries. This movement intensified in the post-oil period, particularly during the second half of the 20th century, when countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain became key destinations for Mappila migrants.<sup>31</sup> Coastal cities in these Arab countries each have distinct narratives of Mappila migration, such as Khor Fakkan in present-day UAE, which became a significant site for Mappila settlers.<sup>32</sup> This migration wave was not limited to the Mappilas; other communities from Kerala also turned to the Gulf as a destination for new opportunities, especially in the latter half of the 20th century.

Among the Mappila migrants, there was a significant number of illegal migrants who crossed the Arabian Sea aboard traditional boats like *Urus*<sup>33</sup> and *Pathemaris*<sup>34</sup> without any official travel documents or legal permission for international mobility.<sup>35</sup> For many Kerala migrants, the

25 Ilias, “Memories and Narrations of “Nations” Past: Accounts of Early Migrants ...”, p. 76.

26 For more details, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002.

27 Iraqis mostly arrived during the Mysorean rule in Malabar, particularly at the reign of Tipu Sultan.

28 The Mysorean sultan, Tipu sultan himself is a descendant of a Saudi family in Hijaz. Historians say that the Asaf Jahi Dynasty claimed Arab ancestry from Asir Province and Tipu Sultan from the Bani Hashim of Hijaz Province in Arabia.

29 Most of the Sufi missionaries were claimed that they were from Persia. Most of the Sunny sayyids of Kerala are from these roots. At the same time, a section of Historians claim that the upper caste Hindu converts to Islam in Kerala obtained the ‘sayyid’ title to conserve their ‘caste status’ in the society.

30 For more details, see Ammad Kunnath, *The rise and growth of Ponnani from 1498 AD To 1792 AD*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calicut, 2015.

31 For more details, see Prema A. Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2004, p. 93.

32 Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration ...*, p. 93

33 Uru is a type of dhow manufactured in Beypore, Kerala, on India’s southern coast. It is also known as Fat Boat in English. Since ancient times, the Arabs have utilised this form of the boat as trading vessels, and Urus are still constructed and shipped from Beypore, Kozhikode, to Arab countries. These boats were made of a variety of woods, the most common of which was Teak wood. Previously, Teak was harvested from Nilambur forests, but now Malaysian Teak is used. Near the Beypore port, a few boat-building yards can still be seen.

34 Pathemari, also known as the country Dhow, is the generic name for various traditional sailing vessels used in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region that include one or more masts, a settee, and sometimes lateen sails. Dhows are often trading vessels that travel along the shores of Eastern Arabia, East Africa, Yemen, and coastal South Asia, including Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, to transport heavy things such as fruit, fresh water, and other heavy merchandise. Pathemaris used to transport passengers from Mumbai to Gulf countries in the second half of the twentieth century. People from several parts of India, especially Malabar, travelled to the Gulf through Mumbai. Mappila had to fly to Mumbai first before heading to the Gulf in Pathemaris.

35 For more details, see the report, Beypore-made 11<sup>th</sup>-century heritage vessel ‘Uru’ to be displayed in Qatar during FIFA 2022, Mathrubhumi, 21 November 2021.



only viable route to Dubai was through Khor Fakkan, via illegal ‘launches’<sup>36</sup> from Mumbai. Due to the clandestine nature of these voyages, the boats never docked at Khor Fakkan’s shores, leaving passengers no choice but to swim ashore.<sup>37</sup>

Upon reaching the coast, many migrants had to flee and hide to avoid detection by security forces or the police. This risky undertaking exemplifies a broader phenomenon of ‘self-exclusion,’ where individuals expose themselves to extreme danger out of necessity, often for the survival of their families or communities. Social vulnerabilities in Kerala, including illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and societal neglect, forced many Mappilas to take these perilous journeys. According to theories of social exclusion, marginalised groups, particularly those facing systemic discrimination and barriers, often resort to such perilous migration routes as a means of escaping socio-economic hardships. The Mappilas, grappling with poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and societal neglect in Kerala, were forced to take these extreme measures. Additionally, Bourdieu’s theory of social capital further illuminates this dynamic, suggesting that the lack of access to traditional routes and resources, due to a lack of social capital or community networks that could facilitate legal migration, pushed these individuals into clandestine mobility. In the absence of legitimate means to access opportunities, these migrants relied on risky networks outside the formal structures of society, highlighting how the lack of social capital and exclusion from mainstream channels of mobility forced them into the margins of the global migration system. The crossing was treacherous, and many lost their lives to the sea in their attempts to reach land. Khor Fakkan thus became the gateway for Mappila migration to Dubai, a crucial point of entry despite its risks.<sup>38</sup> From 1965 to 1977, the British controlled the security of this sea area under the Oman Sultanate, adding another layer of complexity to the already dangerous journey.<sup>39</sup>

The socio-economic structure of the Mappila community, as well as that of the broader Malayali society, underwent a profound transformation largely influenced by the migration to Arabian lands.<sup>40</sup> Historically, the Mappilas -many of whom were early converts from lower-caste Hindu communities- faced severe social and economic hardships. These individuals were subjected to systemic exploitation, marginalisation, and social exclusion, which deprived them of basic rights, including access to education and meaningful employment.<sup>41</sup> As a result, they were largely relegated to the peripheries of society, unable to enjoy even a minimal standard of social life.<sup>42</sup> However, the opportunity for migration to the Arabian Peninsula, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, opened new doors for the economically disadvantaged segments of the Mappila community. The remittances from these migrants provided a much-needed financial lifeline, enabling them to break free from the chains of poverty and subjugation. With this newfound wealth, many Mappilas were able to purchase land from other community members in Kerala, a critical step towards improving their socio-economic standing. This transformation can be understood through Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach, which stresses the importance of economic and social freedoms in shaping individual well-being. By providing the Mappilas with the financial means to improve their material circumstances, migration expanded their capabilities, enabling them to access new opportunities and pursue a more fulfilling life. The migration thus served not only as a financial lifeline but also as a means of overcoming socio-economic exclusion, fostering greater social mobility within the Mappila community. This migration-induced financial empowerment played a pivotal role in reshaping the economic and social fabric of the community. It provided an alternative path to

36 A launch is a large desi boat largely carried sailing vessels powered by sail or oars. This was one of the powerful transportation mediums during the early time when the advanced machine boats were not in the picture. Mumbai was one of the centres, from where Launches set their journey in a frequent interval to a different part of the world.

37 For more details, see M.C.A. Nasar, “Paradeshathinte Aadima Mudra”, *Mudra*, Gulf Madhyamam special issue, 2012.

38 Nasar, “Paradeshathinte Aadima Mudra”, p. 9.

39 Nasar, “Paradeshathinte Aadima Mudra”, p. 9.

40 Kunnath, *The rise and growth of Ponnani from ...*, 2015.

41 Stephen F. Dale, “Trade, Conversion and the Growth of the Islamic Community of Kerala, South India”, *Studia Islamica*, No. 71, 1990, p. 162.

42 C. J. Fuller, *The Nayars Today*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, pp. 11-12.

mobility and upward integration, complementing the government's Land Reformation Act, which also aimed at addressing historic inequalities in land ownership and fostering social justice. The migration to Arabia was instrumental in constructing a more equitable society, offering the Mappilas a way out of their historically disadvantaged position and contributing significantly to the broader goal of equality and justice in Kerala's socio-economic landscape.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

The migration of Mappilas to the Arabian Peninsula, driven by socio-economic exclusion, emerged as a pivotal force that not only transformed the community's social and economic status but also reshaped the broader socio-political landscape of Kerala. Initially a survival mechanism for a marginalised population, this migration led to profound changes in the Mappila community's fortunes, providing them with the financial means to escape poverty, challenge caste-based hierarchies, and secure land ownership, which was historically a symbol of power. This transformation was not confined to individual families but contributed to a broader societal shift in Kerala, where the economic and social mobility of the Mappilas facilitated greater integration into the mainstream. The legacy of Mappila migration highlights important themes in migration studies, particularly the role of remittances and the transformative power of global mobility in reshaping local societies. The migration experience also offers insights into the dynamics of social exclusion and the lengths to which marginalised groups will go to escape their socio-economic predicaments. In this context, the Mappilas' journey to the Gulf countries exemplifies the intersection of local oppression and global opportunities, illustrating how transnational migration can empower communities to break free from historical marginalisation.

From a theoretical perspective, the Mappila migration story can be examined through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which emphasises the importance of networks and resources in enabling mobility. In the case of Mappilas, the lack of social capital within Kerala, compounded by systemic exclusion, forced them to rely on alternative, often clandestine, pathways for migration. The migration provided them with not only economic capital but also a new form of social capital, allowing them to reintegrate into their communities with new status and opportunities. Additionally, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach offers a framework to understand the empowerment that migration provided to the Mappilas. Migration expanded their capabilities by offering access to new economic and social resources, which in turn allowed for the reimagining of their social standing and the dismantling of caste-based barriers. Sen's emphasis on the role of freedoms and opportunities in human development aligns with the transformative effect migration had on the Mappila community, as it provided them with the means to achieve a higher quality of life and break free from the constraints imposed by their historical marginalisation.

Furthermore, the Mappila migration story challenges conventional narratives of migration, emphasising the agency of migrant communities in utilising global pathways to enhance their social and economic standing. This phenomenon adds a crucial layer to the understanding of regional migration trends, demonstrating that migration can serve as a catalyst for not just individual but collective empowerment. In global migration discourses, the Mappila case underscores the importance of recognising how socio-political structures and historical contexts influence migration patterns, providing valuable insights into the long-term impacts of migration on both local and global scales. Thus, the Mappila migration stands as a powerful example of how communities facing exclusion and marginalisation can leverage migration not only for survival but also for social justice, reshaping their futures and contributing to broader societal transformations. By integrating theoretical perspectives like social capital and capabilities, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of migration, illustrating its potential as a transformative force that can challenge entrenched socio-economic structures and offer new pathways for social mobility and justice.

In addressing contemporary challenges, it is essential to recognise the evolving dynamics of Mappila migration in recent decades. Changing Gulf migration policies, including stricter labour regulations and nationalisation initiatives, have significantly reshaped migration patterns,

43 For more details, see Stephen F. Dale, "Trade, Conversion and the Growth ...", p. 162.

compelling many Mappilas to reconsider their socio-economic strategies. Furthermore, the socio-political implications of return migration have introduced new complexities, such as challenges in reintegration, shifts in family structures, and the pressures of adapting to a rapidly modernising Kerala. Addressing these issues necessitates further research into how these transformations impact the collective identity, economic stability, and social mobility of the Mappila community, both regionally and transnationally. Incorporating these aspects ensures a more comprehensive understanding of their migration experience and its multifaceted implications.

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## Extended Abstract

The migration of the Mappila community from Kerala to the Arabian Peninsula has been a pivotal force in shaping Kerala's socio-economic and cultural landscape. This work explores the intricate relationship between Mappila migration, education, social mobility, and cultural preservation, offering an in-depth analysis of the historical and contemporary impact of this migration on both the Mappila community and broader Malayali society.

One of the central themes of the article is the Mappilas' creation of an independent educational system, which became a vital tool for resisting colonial hegemony. The British colonial administration often sought to marginalise non-European forms of knowledge and culture, sidelining traditional educational practices in Kerala. In response, the Mappilas developed their own educational infrastructure, particularly in the Arabi-Malayalam system, which blended Islamic religious teachings with local traditions. This parallel educational system allowed the Mappilas to preserve their cultural and religious identity, serving as a form of resistance to colonial policies that aimed to impose European cultural norms. The Mappila education system also became a means of social mobility. Through investment in education, fuelled by remittances from migrants to the Gulf, the community was able to empower future generations with the skills necessary to navigate both local and global challenges. This interplay between migration, remittance, and education was crucial in the community's upward mobility.

This work traces the historical roots of Mappila migration, situating it within the broader socio-economic and political dynamics of the region. Before the onset of European colonialism, the Malabar region, where the Mappilas primarily resided, was a prosperous and wealthy area, deeply integrated into the global trading network through its cosmopolitan ports of Calicut and Ponnani. The Mappilas had long-standing connections with Arab traders, and this historical interaction fostered a unique socio-religious fabric along Kerala's coast.

Early Mappila migration was often linked to pilgrimage and religious instruction. Many Mappilas accompanied Hajj pilgrims to Mecca, where they often stayed for extended periods, receiving education and religious training. Upon their return to Kerala, they brought back knowledge that significantly shaped the intellectual foundations of the Mappila community. These early educational exchanges laid the groundwork for the later waves of migration in the 20th and 21st centuries. With the arrival of European colonial forces, beginning with Vasco da Gama in the 16th century, the Mappilas' traditional livelihoods in coastal trade were increasingly disrupted. The community faced severe social exclusion and discrimination under both Portuguese and British rule. Colonial authorities often portrayed the Mappilas as rebellious and criminal, and the British administration's exclusion of Mappilas from formal education further marginalised the community.

In this context of social, economic, and educational exclusion, migration to the Arabian Peninsula became a necessity for the Mappilas. The discovery of oil in the Gulf created a demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour, and Mappilas, with their historical ties to the Arab world, found migration to be a viable alternative to escape poverty and unemployment in Kerala. Early Mappila migrants were largely uneducated and undocumented, which left them vulnerable to exploitation, but their remittances back to Kerala significantly improved the financial standing of their families and communities.

This work emphasises the profound impact of Gulf migration on the Mappila community. Remittances from the Gulf not only alleviated poverty but also transformed the socio-economic fabric of Kerala's coastal cities, particularly Ponnani and Calicut, where the Mappilas played a dominant role in foreign trade. Migration brought material wealth, social status, and educational opportunities, leading to a significant shift in the community's aspirations and social standing. For the Mappilas, migration also acted as a means of escaping the rigid caste-class-based occupational stratification that had historically limited their mobility within Kerala. In the Gulf, many Mappilas were able to pursue careers outside their traditional trades, breaking free from the occupational stigmas that had previously defined their social status. Migration thus became a tool for challenging caste hierarchies and promoting social mobility, both within the Gulf and upon return to Kerala.

The Gulf migration also fostered a sense of cosmopolitanism among the Mappilas. The long-standing connections between Kerala and the Arabian Peninsula were further strengthened by the migration wave of the 20th century, with Mappila expatriates in countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman contributing to the development of a transnational network of trade, education, and religious learning. This cosmopolitanism not only shaped the individual lives of Mappila migrants but also influenced the broader social and cultural dynamics of the Mappila community in Kerala. This work argues that Mappila migration should be understood as a response to the social exclusion and marginalisation faced by the community under colonial rule. Migration offered a means for the Mappilas to escape the cycle of criminalisation, unrest, and poverty imposed by colonial authorities. It also provided an opportunity for the community to regain control over their social and economic future. Migration played a transformative role in breaking down caste and class barriers within the Mappila community. In Gulf countries, Mappilas from lower-caste backgrounds were able to transcend the social stigmas associated with their traditional occupations, gaining new social status and economic security. The ‘Gulf’ label became a symbol of success and upward mobility, particularly for those from marginalised caste groups (whether they were converted to Islam from a lower caste community in the Hindu social hierarchy).

The work concludes by highlighting the lasting legacy of the Mappila migration to the Arabian Peninsula. What began as a quest for economic survival among a community marginalised by colonial rule evolved into a movement that significantly altered the fortunes of the Mappilas. Migration provided the financial resources necessary to challenge the socio-economic hierarchies that had historically confined the community, enabling them to achieve greater social mobility and economic security. The remittances from Gulf migrants not only improved the financial standing of individual families but also contributed to broader social change in Kerala. Many Mappilas used their newfound wealth to purchase land and invest in education, further strengthening their position within Malayali society. The migration-induced financial empowerment played a pivotal role in reshaping the economic and social fabric of the community, complementing government efforts to address historic inequalities through land reform and social justice initiatives. The Mappila migration to the Gulf stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the community. By leveraging global opportunities, the Mappilas were able to overcome the challenges of colonial oppression and social exclusion, contributing to the broader history of Kerala’s development and the construction of a more equitable and inclusive society.

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<b>Yazar Katkı Oranı</b> ----- <b>Author Contribution Percentage</b>	Eşit Equal
<b>Makale Adı</b> ----- <b>Article Name</b>	Gulf Migration and Socio-Economic Transformation of the Mappila Community in Kerala Körfez Göçü ve Kerala'daki Mappila Topluluğunun Sosyo-Ekonomik Dönüşümü
<b>Geliş - Kabul Tarihi</b> ----- <b>Received-Accepted Date</b>	24 Ekim 2024 - 23 Aralık 2024 24 October 2024 - 23 December 2024
<b>Hakem Sayısı</b> ----- <b>Reviewers</b>	<b>Ön İnceleme:</b> Beş iç hakem (Editör, Yayın Kurulu, Alan Editörü, Türkçe ve İngilizce Dil Editörleri) <b>İçerik İnceleme:</b> İki dış hakem <b>Preview:</b> Five internal reviewer (Editor, Editorial Board, Field Editor, Turkish and English Language Editors ) <b>Content Review:</b> Two external reviewer.
<b>Etik</b> ----- <b>Ethic</b>	Bu çalışmada etik ilkelere uyulmuştur. Ethical principles were followed in this study.
<b>Benzerlik Taraması</b> ----- <b>Plagiarism Checks</b>	Yapıldı – İntihal.Net Done – İntihal.Net
<b>Çıkar Çatışması</b> ----- <b>Conflict of Interest</b>	Çıkar çatışması yoktur. There is no conflict of interest.
<b>Finansman</b> ----- <b>Grant Support</b>	
<b>Etik Beyan</b> ----- <b>Ethical Statement</b>	
<b>Etik Kurul İzni</b> ----- <b>Ethics Committee Approval</b>	
<b>Telif Hakkı</b> ----- <b>Copyright</b>	Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler. Authors retain the copyright of their article.