



## **Translation Challenges: Problematizing Arabi-Malayalam**

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Arabi-Malayalam is a unique language that was formed in Kerala centuries before the era of colonisation when the Arabs traded with Malabar. Basically Malayalam written in the Arabic script, it is a hybrid language born out of the amalgamation of the transliteration of these two languages and the translation of two cultures, namely Malabarian and Arabian. Once extensively in vogue in literary as well as non-literary circles, this ancient language saw a gradual decline in the post-independence years. The paper tries to study how the growth and development of this language with its inherent hybrid nature became the mother tongue of an entire group of people, intersecting the borders of religion and caste. It also traces out the literary tradition that simultaneously grew along with the spoken variety of the language. The paper analyses the challenges involved in bringing out new translations of old Arabi-Malayalam texts, along with identifying some of the sociological and linguistic factors that led to the almost invisible existence of this language in the present day. It concludes with a brief outline of the recent attempts at digitising ancient works and manuscripts in the language in order to revive Arabi-Malayalam that once lent a bilingual identity to the people of Malabar.

**Keywords:** Arabi-Malayalam, bilingualism, multilingualism, translation and transliteration.

Arabi-Malayalam is a unique language that interweaves mainly the languages of Arabic and Malayalam in its hybrid compass. Since its inception at a time when the Arabs traded with Malabar (the Northern regions of Kerala), centuries before the era of colonisation or even the advent of Islam, it had evolved and adapted itself to represent the pluralistic cultural identity of the Malabarians. In its growth from being simply a mixed tongue to being the sole mouthpiece of a people enabling cultural exchange by means of a vast range of literary and non-literary texts, Arabi-Malayalam has essentially thrived on the dynamic process of to-and-fro translations. The paper studies this inherent comparative nature of the Arabi-Malayalam language and its literature, and probes into how and why present-day translations tend to leave out this grand old language from the vibrant multilingual canvas of India.

While transliteration as a process of linguistic transfer involves only the script-based, phonetic representation of a text in another language, translation involves semantic transfer, with the meaning getting conveyed in the target language, mindful of cultural nuances, idioms and context. Being a hybrid language with a super-imposed script of Malayalam written in Arabic, Arabi-Malayalam has integrated the processes of transliteration and translation into its linguistic dynamics. The rich canon of literature is a testament to the amount of to-and-fro translations that were once carried out in the language. After briefly detailing the origin, evolution and literary significance of Arabi-Malayalam, the paper delves into the complexities and challenges involved in translating works from Arabi-Malayalam into other languages in the present.

### **History of Arabi-Malayalam: The Philological Basis**

Arabi-Malayalam is the linguistic product of the centuries-long trade relations between Arabs and Keralites that existed even before the Christian era. Mappilas consisted of both the offspring of Arab traders and local women, as well as lower-caste converts to Islam (Cheerangote, 2016). Arabi-Malayalam came into existence and got consolidated as the mother tongue of the Mappilas, carrying along their unique cultural baggage.

Along with its development as the oral or colloquial vernacular of the socio-cultural group, it is worth noting that Arabi-Malayalam also grew up as a distinct written form of communication. At the time of the origin of the Arabi-Malayalam script and language, a uniform Malayalam script was not in existence. Vattezhuthu and Kolezhuthu were the prevailing modes of writing but were not developed homogeneously to be used by all the people of Kerala. Malayalam was not standardized in its present form. Prodded on by such a historical necessity, it is logical to state that the oral tongue of Malayalam came to be written in the Arabic script (either by Arab traders or native Mappilas) for the propagation of Islam. Since the natives of those times were not familiar with the prevailing modes of scripts, the Arabs chose to modify the Arabic script (in which the natives were literate enough by learning to recite the Quran) by including the extra Malayalam phonemes so that the converts/natives could read and understand the Islamic principles for themselves. At first limited to the religious domain, Arabi-Malayalam rose up gradually as a medium for creative expression. When prose and poetry arose, the process of hybridisation was intensified with more words borrowed from other South Indian languages and from Hindi, Urdu and Persian.

### **Transliteration and Beyond**

As Lachman M. Khubchandani says in his essay “Sources and Targets: Translation as a Cultural Filter,” there are societies centred mainly around an oral milieu like India’s and societies organised around the written tradition as in the West (Khubchandani, 2002). Viewing Arabi-Malayalam from this vantage point, it can be seen that the Arabic script was made flexible in order to render a form of writing for the then script less Malayalam in the largely oral Keralite community of Malabar. The Arabic alphabet consisting of only 28 letters was extended to accomodate several sounds in Malayalam by adding diacritical marks. In the same way, a few Arabic phonemes with no parallel in Malayalam were included in the Arabi-Malayalam alphabet. Thus, the incorporation of mutually exclusive letters found in the alphabetical patterns of the two source languages Malayalam and Arabic into the derivative Arabi-Malayalam alphabet made the latter rich with a variety of sounds and phonemes, i.e., a total of 56 letters.

The Arabi-Malayalam script is also called Ponnani script or Khatafunnani script which is an Abjad script. All the vowel and consonant sounds in Malayalam that did not feature in the Arabic alphabet were not at once given a representation/notation in the Arabi-Malayalam script. Rather, this was a process that evolved down the centuries, with various scholars as well as contexts contributing to the growth of the Arabi-Malayalam letters in terms of their notation, pronunciation and usage. Given below is the list of Arabi-Malayalam letters, along with the IPA notations.

خ	ح	ج	ج	ج	ث	ت	پ	ب	ا
ഖ്	ഹ്	ജ്	ഞ്	ജ്	സ്	ത്	പ്	ബ്	ഌ
[k <sup>h</sup> ]	[h]	[ɟ]	[ɲ]	[dʒ]	[s]	[t]	[p]	[b]	[ɔ/ʌ]
ش	س	ز	ز	ر	ر	د	ذ	ظ	د
ശ്	സ്	ഴ്	സ്	റ്	ർ	ദ്	സ്	ഡ്	ദ്
[ʃ]	[s]	[z]	[s]	[r/ɾ]	[r]	[d]	[s]	[ɖ]	[ɖ]
ف	غ	غ	ع	ظ	ط	ض	ض	ص	نبی
ഫ്	ഘ്	ഘ്	സ്	ത്	ശ്	ദ്	സ്	ഷ്	
[f]	[ɣ]	[ɣ <sup>h</sup> ]	[ɔ/ʌ]	[s]	[t]	[ɬ]	[ɖ]	[s]	[ʃ]
ی	و	و	ن	ن	م	ل	گ	ك	ق
യ്	വ്	ഹ്	ന്	ന്	മ്	ൽ	ഗ്	ക്	ക്
[j]	[v]	[h]	[n]	[n/ɳ]	[m]	[l]	[g]	[k]	[k]
أ	اي	أى	أ	أو	أ	إى	إ	آ	أ
ഓ	ഐ	ഏ	ഐ	ഉ	ഉ	ഊ	ഊ	ഋ	ഠ
[o]	[ai]	[e:]	[e]	[u:]	[u]	[i:]	[i]	[a:]	[a]
هـ	هـ	هـ	چه	چه	ته	په	به	أف	أو
ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ചെ	ചെ	തെ	പെ	ബെ	ഔ	ഔ
[h]	[ɖ <sup>h</sup> ]	[ɖ <sup>h</sup> ]	[tʃ <sup>h</sup> ]	[dʒ <sup>h</sup> ]	[tʰ]	[pʰ]	[bʰ]	[aʊ]	[o:]
			ل	ل	گه	كه	ز	ز	
			ഈ	ഈ	ഐ	ഖ്	ജ്	ജ്	
			ഐ	ഐ	ഐ	ഖ്	ജ്	ജ്	
			[li:]	[li]	[ɣ <sup>h</sup> ]	[k <sup>h</sup> ]	[ri:]	[ri]	

ح, خ, ز, د, ذ, ض, ط, ظ, غ, ع, ق are only used in Arabic loanwords.

What is significant about Arabi-Malayalam is that the language attained a full growth in Malabar even before the Malayalam language reached its independent stature by freeing from the clutches of Tamil and Sanskrit (Kolangadan, 1988). In other words, Arabi-Malayalam could boast of its own script prior to the consolidation of the standard Malayalam script. Because of the richness of its linguistic diversity as well as the incorporation of a wide variety of texts, Arabi-Malayalam cannot be distilled down as merely the transliteration of Malayalam in the Arabic language.

### **As a Bilingual Mixed Tongue**

Arabi-Malayalam can be described as a bilingual mixed language with Dravidian roots. As Donald Winford explains, “Bilingual mixed or intertwined languages arose in settings involving long-term contact between two ethnic groups leading to bilingualism and increasing mixture of the languages. In these cases, that mixture is conventionalized as a community norm, resulting in the creation of hybrid languages” (qtd. in Cheerangote, 2016). A probe into the historical roots of the formation of Arabi-Malayalam shows that long-term contact between the ethnic groups of Arabs and Malayalees of Malabar gave birth to this bilingual mixed tongue which got conventionalized amongst the Mappila community circles and thereby cemented its distinct linguistic identity.

Arabi-Malayalam is neither a dialect, nor a pidgin. It is also not simply the superimposition of the script of one language over the phonological system of another. A fully grown language, it is an ethnographic amalgamation between Arabic and Malayalam. It became the self-realization of a religious minority in Kerala – the Mappilas.

The evolution of Arabi-Malayalam from its parent languages was not a linguistic phenomenon that can be termed co-incidental. Several instances of such combined languages can be discerned worldwide. “Fusion of Arabic with local languages at least in terms of the development of script is found in most of the parts of the world” (Cheerangote, 2016). As seen in the light of this statement, similar occurrences of linguistic fusion can be identified in the existence of Arwi in South India and Urdu in North India. While Lisan ul-Arwi

(Arabi-Tamil) was a rigorous practice among the Muslims of Tamil Nadu, Urdu had been formed through the cultural contact of Arabic with Hindi, Punjabi and Sindhi scripts. The existence of languages like Arabu-Telugu and Arabu-Bengali also point towards similar processes of linguistic hybridisation. Likewise, the Kurosoni tongue (Suriyani Malayalam or Hebrew-Malayalam) had been in vogue among the Jews of Kerala centuries ago. Having attained their respective peak periods of intellectual and literary activities, these mixed languages have ebbed over time, the cultural residues of which can be detected throughout various parts of India. Arabi-Malayalam has contributed to the growth of the Malayalam language – many words from Arabic have entered Malayalam through Arabi-Malayalam.

### **As a Canon of Literature**

Though it is not known when exactly Arabi-Malayalam was formed, it is generally surmised that the language was fully in existence by the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. While the language grew up as a spoken variety of the Mappilas by imbibing words from a range of languages due to cultural interactions, the form of writing it had developed inevitably led to the birth of written literature. The foundation of Arabi-Malayalam literature was laid out by Khazi Muhammad in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. At a time when Thunchath Ezhuthachchan was engaged in freeing the Malayalam language from the clutches of Tamil and Sanskrit, Khazi Muhammad, a great scholar and litterateur who was a contemporary to Ezhuthachchan, penned *Muhyidheen Mala* in 1607, a hagiographic epic poem that praised the life of the saint Muhyidheen Abdul Khader Jilani who lived during the eleventh century. This iconic eulogy that triggered off Arabi-Malayalam literature aligns itself to the Bhakti tradition of the time. Although the poet had written many scholarly works in Arabic like *Fath 'hul Mubeen*, he chose to write the aforementioned work in Arabi-Malayalam, in order to reach out to the laymen who constituted the majority of the Mappila community. Sprawling a whole genre of *maalas* or hagiographic poetry in Arabi-Malayalam, this momentous work came to be read and recited in every Mappila household for centuries to come. Believed to have the power to alleviate diseases and sorrows, this epic song became widely

popular among women, many of whom gained literacy and education by means of learning to read this very poem.

Another significant work in Arabi-Malayalam that appeared over a century later is *Kappappaattu* by Kunhaayin Musliyar. This long philosophical poem that allegorizes man to a ship and his/her life to the journey of the ship can be compared to the Old English poems like *Widsith*, *Seafarer* and *Wanderer*. Musliyar also has penned *Noolmadh* consisting of 666 lines, overflowing with the love for Prophet Muhammad.

Coming down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Arabi-Malayalam literature was given such a vital boost by the eternal works of Moyinkutty Vaidyar (1852-1892). He touched upon a variety of topics with his pen – historical Islamic battle-songs as *Badr Maala* and *Uhd Maala*, a contemporary political episode of Malabar in *Malappuram Padappaattu* to a romantic epic as *Badrul Muneer Husnul Jamal*. *Malappuram Padappaattu* as a revolutionary poem had a great influence on the fighters of the Khilafat Movement in the early twentieth century and the British government banned the work at the time of the 1921 Malabar Rebellion. A polyglot scholar well-versed in Arabic, Urdu, Sanskrit, Malayalam and Tamil, Vaidyar enriched the Arabi-Malayalam tapestry as a dense multilingual canvas. Difficult to translate, this polyphony of linguistic varieties in Vaidyar's works is a testimony to the great craftsmanship of the poet. His works also contributed to the Arabi-Malayalam vocabulary, as he was a great linguistic innovator who coined new words in his works like Shakespeare did. The great literary canvas of Arabi-Malayalam has since been renovated and replenished by numerous other writers.

Arabi-Malayalam periodicals had an important role in the social reformation and transformation of the Mappilas – preaching the basic tenets of Islam, evaluating religious practices for the commoners of Malabar, warning them against evil practices based on several superstitions (Cheerangote, 2016). There are texts and publications in the language detailing non-European ways of measuring and weighing that throw light on how activities such as boatbuilding and mosque construction were carried out in those days. In its heyday, the vast body of Arabi-Malayalam writing has not left any walk of

Malabarian life untouched, as it comprised texts ranging from medicine, agriculture, astronomy, astrology, travelogues, history and literature (both prose and verse) to business, architecture, dictionaries, biographies, periodicals etc.

### **As a Voice of the Voiceless: Socio-Linguistic Aspects**

One of the essential strengths of Arabi-Malayalam is that it was wilfully used as a tool against the caste-based oppression prevalent in Kerala. At a time when people belonging to the so-called low castes were forbidden from using the then ‘pure Malayalam,’ they converted to Islam and embraced the hybrid tongue readily. Arabi-Malayalam thus became their lingua franca. It rose up distinctly as a cultural alternative to the elite Sanskritized Brahminical social order of the pre-Renaissance period and later stood up against the cultural imperialism of the West.

Arabi-Malayalam literature became popularised in the daily lives of the local folk. The community gained widespread literacy – almost all the members learnt the hybrid alphabet and could read religious books in the Arabi-Malayalam language. Just as Ezhuthachchan’s *Adhyathma Ramayanam Kilippattu* was read in domestic circles regularly in the evenings, so also *Muhyiyudheen Mala* was recited daily in Mappila households. Thus, Arabi-Malayalam literature did not remain solely within the circle of the elite educated classes but transcended its linguistic boundaries to become infused with the cultural climate of Malabar (Muhammadkunhi, 1988). Here, Arabi-Malayalam can be seen to have assumed the same role performed by the burgeoning Malayalam language and literature in its formative years, that of imparting a new identity to the masses from their erstwhile marginalised positions imposed by the hierarchical caste system. Furthermore, this hybrid tongue also brought the light of letters down to women of those times, most of whom were secluded in their conservative families. Thus, Arabi-Malayalam, hand in hand with the nascent form of what was to become the mainstream Malayalam language, has been instrumental in leading people forward to a path of cultural modernity.



Yet another quintessential quality of Arabi-Malayalam in the Malabarian milieu of acculturation and synthesis is the complete absence of any imperialistic aims in the linguistic give-and-take process. The Arabs who came to Malabar never had the motive of colonisation or occupation unlike the Europeans who came afterwards (Muhammadkunhi, 1988). This socio-historical fact must be one reason behind the absolute fusion of Arabic and Malayalam in the texture of Arabi-Malayalam with no trace of linguistic hegemony or hierarchy. Here, Arabic and Malayalam can be thought of as ‘adstrate languages’ – both the languages have maintained equilibrium in their social and political status (Cheerangote, 2016). Arabic was assimilated into Malayalam and other Indian languages in a more intimate way than the colonial imprint of English. That Malayalam was not yet standardised at the time could be one reason behind this kind of an organic synthesis with the foreign Arabic tongue (Kolangadan, 1988). The widespread use of standard Malayalam later led to the erasure of this language which was once so vibrant in the literary as well as quotidian aspects of Malabarian life.

### **Growth of Arabi-Malayalam by Means of Translation**

Though India was multilingual even in the precolonial and colonial times and languages mixed and inter-mixed resulting in the birth and shaping of relatively new tongues from existing old ones, there was little of actual translation among the Indian languages (Khubchandani, 2002). However, Arabi-Malayalam which was quick to revert to the written word made ample use of the translation process. There had been many translations of Sanskrit and other Indian language texts into Arabi-Malayalam which is why many ancient books and treatises related to medicine, astronomy, agriculture etc. are to be found in this bilingual tongue. This points to how Arabi-Malayalam as a language flourished as a direct result of the translation process; it grew up on these foundations of knowledge transfer and cultural exchange.

As a result of the widespread translation of several Indian and foreign texts into Arabi-Malayalam – a humongous task undertaken enthusiastically by writers down the centuries continuing

well into the twentieth century – many of the important texts and treatises were readily available and read by the Mappila community. Since a large majority of these people including women were literate in this bilingual tongue, these texts touching a range of topics from medicine to philosophy could easily disseminate among the local folk without any elitist or hierarchical concerns. Thus, it can be said that much before the first waves of renaissance started awakening the Malayalee community of Kerala in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mappilas as a cultural group were far ahead in the fields of knowledge and cultural consciousness. This explains the reason why they were seen to be spearheading many of the uprisings and revolts against the invading imperialist forces in history, from the Kunhalis aiding the Zamorins against the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to Ali Musliyar and Variankunnath Kunhammad Haji bearing the brunt of the Malabar revolts in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reach of Arabi-Malayalam once was such that even European missionaries in Malabar had translated the Bible into Arabi-Malayalam (Kolangadan, 1988).

The introduction of printing in Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was best utilized by the Mappila community; it paved the way for the extensive circulation of a number of Arabi-Malayalam texts. Both literary and non-literary texts gained wide footing in this way. Many important medicinal texts including *Ashtanga Hridayam* was translated into Arabi-Malayalam and it reached every Mappila household as both theory and practice. In this manner, when many Sanskrit texts remained inscrutable to the general Malayalam speaking community, they were available in the average Mappila household by means of its Arabi-Malayalam translations. Apart from such translated discourses, original and localized medicinal knowledge of the Mappilas found its way to numerous works written primarily in Arabi-Malayalam. There were treatises and articles exclusively on many a disease, in both prose and verse form as well as in the form of printed books and hand-written manuscripts. Known as '*paattu vaidyam*,' some medicinal books were penned as verse, among which Pattalath Kunhi Mahinkutty Vaidyar's *Vaidya Jnanam* (1889) is a famed example. At a time when many epidemics were rapidly spreading throughout

Malabar, these versified medicinal treatises reached the local folk in a faster way. This led to the democratization of the treasure-house of traditional medicinal knowledge.

### **Translating Arabi-Malayalam: Challenges**

One of the greatest merits of Arabi-Malayalam language and literature is that it caused such an upsurge in the literacy level of the average Malabarian folk, popularising it beyond the borders of gender, class and even caste. With the modernisation and standardisation of the Malayalam language as well as its adoption into the official circles of governance after the 1950s, Arabi-Malayalam came to be studied less and less, losing its visibility and vitality as a language (K. O. Shamsudheen, 1978). This state of the hybrid language in the post-independence period necessitated transliterations and translations into Malayalam and other languages, as part of a linguistic survival strategy.

Some of the Arabi-Malayalam works were transliterated to/ published in the Malayalam script so that Malayalee readers unfamiliar with the bilingual mixed tongue got a taste of the vibrant mode of literature pertaining to the Mappila subculture. Punnayurkulam Bappu's publication of Vaidyar's *Badrul Muneer-Husnul Jamal* in the Malayalam script is an example. Since Arabi-Malayalam works still retain the amalgamation of several words from many languages, it is not readily understood by an average Malayalee reader even when it is written down word by word in Malayalam.

Similar to Malayalam transliterations, the process of translation too erodes much of the linguistic diversity and richness of Arabi-Malayalam works. Vaidyar's *Husnul Jamal* was translated to Malayalam by the renowned writer M. N. Karassery and was in turn translated into English by K. M. Ajirkutty. Both the translations stand up to literary merit as stand-alone works and have put across the story of the Persian princess Husnul Jamal in simplistic terms akin to children's literature. However, Vaidyar's work that can boast of a rich verse tradition became plain prose in the translated version; the very genre got changed in the process. This points to the untranslatability of Vaidyar's works or Arabi-Malayalam literature in general.

Translation as a process comes with its own inherent challenges, based as it is on the linguistic as well as socio-cultural peculiarities of source languages and target languages. This makes the following question pertinent: why is translation not easily possible in the case of Arabi-Malayalam works? The answer is that it calls largely for a multilingual competence. Not simply the mixture of Arabic and Malayalam, Arabi-Malayalam stands as a hybrid language with the confluence of more than half a dozen languages – Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada, Persian, Farsi and Urdu in addition to the conspicuous Arabic and Malayalam varieties. For example, the density and diversity of Vaidyar's vocabulary seen in his works, which is one of its essential strengths, make it a herculean task at reading and appreciation for an average reader less acquainted with the terrain of Arabi-Malayalam. It was music and the sing-song nature of the poem that made Vaidyar's works popular in the public psyche of Mappilas, who otherwise would not be able to traverse the linguistically dense terrain (Ajirkutty, 2006). Here, the strengths of Arabi-Malayalam itself turn out to be its weaknesses.

Vaidyar's rendition of the battle of Badr begins by invoking the name of almighty God and the letter 'alif' that abounds with the oneness and greatness of God. These alliterative lines are an interesting combination of Arabic, Malayalam and Tamil words and inflections. The terse, rhyming lines are hardly intelligible for a modern Malayalee reader for two reasons: the disappearance of several old Malayalam terms with Tamil origins from the modern vocabulary, and the well-suffused and organic integration of Arabic diction into the tapestry of Malayalam words. The terseness and rhyming quality of Vaidyar's lines in Arabic are lost in the lengthy, transliterated version into Malayalam. This ethos is once again lost in translations into standard Malayalam or any other languages.

Many of the prominent works in Arabi-Malayalam were translated into Malayalam in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These counterparts in pure Malayalam gave a wider circulation to the works as they reached a more heterogeneous readership in the whole of Kerala. From Malayalam, some of them found its way to English translations as well. However, the works get diluted and 'twice removed from

The famed opening lines of Vaidyar's *Badr Qissappaattu* are shown in the following images:

لِين  
 أَحَدًا يَلِيَّ الْإِلَهَ الْإِلَهَ لَا مَكْرِمَ  
 أَيْمَ كُلِّي كُتِبَ أَذْنُ نَمُ قُرْآنِ  
 بَحْرُ أَقْزَانِ قُرْضًا مُضْدًا أَذْكَي  
 بَدَا أَقْبَلُ كَبْرًا كَوْنُ لَوْ دَنَّا مَدَن  
 وَخَدَا أَصْبَحِي مَرْقَبَةً أَرْقَبِي  
 وَهَذَا فَيْلُ أَيْلٍ أَكْثَرُ أَهْلُهُ  
 مَحْضًا أَقْدَمًا فَيْسَبْرُ نِدَا كُضِنَ  
 مَعَهُ الْأَمَامُ الْإِلَهَ الرَّحِيمُ يَنْدُ  
 أَوْ كَلِمَاتُ مَا كَرَبْنَا عَالَمًا أَذْنُ نَمُ  
 أَكْبَرُ خَلْقِي نَعْمَتِي خَيْرٌ مِنْ شَكْرِي  
 جُودُ قُرْبِي خَيْرٌ مِنْ بَصَرِي صَلَوَاتِي  
 سُبْحَانِي أَوْ لَوْ الْإِلَهَ مَكْنُونِي  
 أَدْمُ بَرٍّ لِكَيْفِ نَدِي كَوْدِي أَدْنُو  
 أَصْبَحُ كَرِيمًا أَمْدَانِي نَدَا كُضَامُ  
 نِيدُ مَقْنُونِي أَوْ رُودُ دَبْرِي نَدَا كُضَامُ  
 نِيدُ نَمُ بَعْدَهُ كَوْنِي نَدَا كُضَامُ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
 الْإِلَهَ أَشْجَرُ قُرْضًا بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 أَصْبَحُ الْإِلَهَ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 بِرِشْدُكَ بَلَدِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 بِرِشْتِ أَتَدِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 وَضَرُ قُرْبِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 وَهِيَ قُرْمُخِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 مَعْتَلِكُنِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 وَبِهِ الْإِلَهَ فِي أَذْنُ اللَّهِ  
 أَكْبَرُ نَزْعُ شَمْسِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 أَكْبَرُ نَزْعُ شَمْسِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 جُودُكَ السَّلَامُ عَلَى رَسُولِي  
 نُوَيْدِي طَلْعُ نَدِي اللَّهِ  
 أَكْمُ جَدْرِي أَمْدَانِي بِسْمِ اللَّهِ  
 أَصْبَحُ صَحْبِي أَوْ رُودُ اللَّهِ  
 نِيدُ مَقْنُونِي وَرُودُ اللَّهِ  
 نِيدُ نَمُ بَعْدَهُ كَوْنِي نَدَا كُضَامُ

reality' or the original by the time they make their appearance in English. A good instance of this was when Vaidyar's work got translated into English by F. Fawcett during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the British journal *The Indian Antiquary: A Journal of Oriental Research* edited by Richard Canac Temple. A biased and distorted version of the original text, Fawcett's translation clearly showed his disdain of Mappilas by representing them as uneducated war-mongerers who were fond of violence and fighting. But, it has to be noted that Fawcett never read the original text for the purpose of translation. He translated them from the bits and pieces of the poem he heard from the then police inspector of Kozhikkode, T. Kannan. Even while approaching Vaidyar's text from a prejudiced perspective, he could not but praise and appreciate the literary talents of the great bard.

Other linguistic challenges that obstruct translation include the dialect-centric nature of Arabi-Malayalam and the usage of subaltern oral words. There are many idioms and phrases unique to Arabi-Malayalam that do not have their equivalents in mainstream Malayalam like '*alifum baayum othuka*,' '*panniye chaakkittu pashoone arukkuka*,' and '*innathe sulthan naalathe fakir*'. Rich with local colour, the nativistic charm of the language tends to defend itself within its multilingual fortress. Furthermore, when it comes to Arabi-Malayalam, many of the native words undergo slight transformation, especially in the pronunciation of certain phonemes like 'sh' for 'zh', 'b' for 'v', 't' for 'd', and 'f' for 'p'. Consequently words like *azhaku*, *vannam*, *devi*, and *pirake* become *ashaku*, *bannam*, *tevi* and *firake* respectively.

There is the complexity arising due to inflections in Arabi-Malayalam works that tend to be multilingual in nature. That is to say, the word-root of Arabic origin is conjoined with native suffixes, thereby leading to the intricate association of two or more languages, as in *shamsinte*, a combination of the Arabic *shams* and the Malayalam suffix *nte*, meaning 'the sun's'. Another intertwined occurrence of Arabic and Malayalam can be seen in the formation of compound words both in the spoken and literary forms, where one part is Arabic or any other foreign language and the other, native. A famed example

is the word *shajarkomb* in Vaidyar's *Husnul Jamal*, artistically yoking the Arabic *shajar* and the Malayalam *komb* to mean the branch of a tree. Given below are the lines from *Ibrahim Ibn Adham Qissappaattu* (written by M. A. Imbichi Avarkal) in its original and transliterated versions.

Here the words like *dahabaayathum* and *shujaaor* are instances of Arabic words fused with Malayalam inflections. Adjectives like *shujaa* (brave) and main verbs like *dahaba* (past tense of 'go') are merged with Malabarisan usages such as '-or' (-



*avar* or a suffix entailing plural nouns) and ‘-*ayathum*’ respectively. Words like *surooraal* (happily) is a multilingual mixture of Arabic, Urdu and Malayalam. This seemingly organic synthesis of words from multiple languages adds to its unique charm. Dr. P. Sakir Hussain’s rendition of this work in Malayalam consists of a transliterated version accompanied by a translated note in prose. This shows the linguistic loss as well as genre transformation that inevitably characterises translations of Arabi-Malayalam works.

The alphabetic structure of Arabi-Malayalam has also undergone many changes down the centuries. Tracking this representation of its phonemes, it can be seen that all of those sounds unique to Malayalam had got one-to-one correspondence in Arabi-Malayalam only from the beginning of the twentieth century. This means that the plethora of works penned in Arabi-Malayalam prior to this period including those of the great poet Vaidyar had made use of the erstwhile alphabet system. To cite an instance, the ‘p’ sound in Malayalam words were written down in Arabi-Malayalam using the Arabic ‘f’ in works such as Vaidyar’s *Badarpadappaattu*. Taken together, these features that add up to the multilingual complexity of works penned in Arabi-Malayalam make their translation fall short of the original. Many of the modern translations of Arabi-Malayalam works, owing to the above mentioned phonetic and linguistic challenges, fail to highlight their rich literary heritage.

When it comes to the actual process of translation in the present day, Arabi-Malayalam is often relegated to being an ‘inferior’ language. There is a tendency to replace the original word with its modern Malayalam counterpart in many of the present-day editions of classical Arabi-Malayalam works, an instance of which being the usage of *swalpm* instead of *thoppam* in recent editions of *Muhyidheen Mala* (Dr. P. A. Abubakkar, 36). Such intrusions tend to distort the original work. In the same way, many of the commonly used words in Arabi-Malayalam acclimatised to the Malabarian culture are seen as ‘corruptions’ of the original words in the present-day Malayalam and hence they are replaced by their modern counterparts in recent translations. These serve to eclipse the vibrancy of the oral subculture of Malabar from which the word takes its origin.



As Arabi-Malayalam literature comes to be absorbed into the mainstream Malayalam literary landscape and becomes a part and parcel of it through half-baked translations and improvisations, the original Arabi-Malayalam literature as such takes a backseat. The altered cultural milieu in the modern digital age has broken away from the cultural ethos of the erstwhile centuries that once became the fertile soil for the growth of Arabi-Malayalam literature.

The question remains unanswered whether it is possible to replenish the fading glory of this language. Its historical duty served to the full, Arabi-Malayalam now has shrunk to the academic and aesthetic circles of Mappila literature. Arabi-Malayalam continues to be used in textbooks in the *madrasas* or Islamic education centres in Kerala. However, the hybrid language is merely used as a transliteration tool; the language appears devoid of all its subtle nuances. Many of the Arabi-Malayalam poems are still sung as part of oppanas and other performances, but they are seldom identified as belonging to a great tradition, let alone understood and studied. The real worth of such works fails to be appreciated.

### **The Task of Reviving Arabi-Malayalam**

The need to preserve surviving Arabi-Malayalam literature through scientific documentation has become more pronounced than ever. One of the recent efforts to revitalise this antique tongue has kicked off as a project for the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) titled 'Mathematical Practices of the Indian Ocean World in Coastal Islamic Communities of the Coromandel and Malabar, South India.' Executed by the Centre for Islamic Tamil Cultural Research, Tiruchi, in collaboration with Kerala's Mahatma Gandhi University, this year-long project has surveyed and digitised notes, theological texts, printed manuals, publications and textbooks from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ranging in source from personal collections to libraries of Arabic colleges and religious institutions, the documents have proved to be a treasure-house of ethnic, non-European knowledges including indigenous mathematical practices and Ayurvedic home cures. A significant step in archival record keeping, the project has unearthed

rare collections in Arabi-Malayalam and Arabi-Tamil and has made their digitised versions available on the British Library's website.

Other initiatives to bring the outmoded mixed tongue into the modern period includes the introduction of a Unicode for Arabi-Malayalam by the University of Calicut's C. H. Mohammed Koya Chair for Studies on Developing Societies. This is a step towards recovering more documents through computerisation. Unicode provides a range of code points for Arabic letters, which can be used to represent the Arabi-Malayalam script. Some examples of Unicode code points for Arabi-Malayalam letters are:

- ا (U+0627) for ആ (ā)
- ب (U+0628) for ബ (b)
- پ (U+067E) for പ (p)
- ت (U+062A) for ത (t)
- گ (U+06AF) for ഗ (g)

Arabi-Malayalam also uses additional letters and digraphs to represent sounds that are not found in Arabic. These letters and digraphs can be represented using Unicode code points, such as:

- ڃ (U+06BF) for ങ്ങ (ñ)
- ڄ (U+06FA) for ണ്ണ (ṣ)
- څ (U+0698) for ഴ (ḷ)

One of the challenges in encoding Arabi-Malayalam using Unicode is the representation of vowel sounds and diacritical marks. Since Arabi-Malayalam uses a combination of vowel signs and diacritical marks to indicate vowel sounds, the representation using Unicode becomes complex. However, it can be solved by using a combination of Unicode points and careful font selection, thereby representing the Arabi-Malayalam script as accurately as possible.

The accuracy of the digitised content needs to be ensured by keeping out misinterpretations, emissions or distortions, thus maintaining the integrity and authenticity of original works. Fostering collaboration among institutions, governments and tech companies to develop and implement effective security policies is an important way to preserve Arabi-Malayalam digital content. Furthermore, modern encryption techniques and digital protection tools can be utilised to safeguard such digital content from cyber threats.

In addition to creating digital repositories and archives, Arabi-Malayalam works can be preserved for posterity through fresh translations. Recent translators like Thoppil Muhammad Meeran, Sarah Abubakkar and K. M. Ajirkutty have successfully put across classical works to Tamil, Kannada and English respectively. Adaptations of ancient Arabi-Malayalam medicinal texts and other publications into modern languages could also open up new discourses to engage with. To rejuvenate translation processes from Arabi-Malayalam, bilingual or multilingual dictionaries and annotated editions that help bridge the inadequacy of linguistic competence of both translators and the reading public, can be brought forth. Similarly, translation training programmes can be organised as part of internships in universities and other study centres. As part of continuing this cultural legacy, there is a need to teach the Arabi-Malayalam script to the new generation in terms of not only reading and writing, but also creating poetry, prose and other imaginative renderings in the language. The inheritors of this iconic vestige should be encouraged with scholarships, funded projects and other incentives, and may be appointed at cultural centres such as the Kerala Sahitya Academy, Thrissur, Vaidyar Academy, Kondotty and Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Tirur. There are ongoing efforts to promote Arabi-Malayalam, including the establishment of a study centre at the Malayalam University. In these ways, Arabi-Malayalam needs to be studied, reinvigorated and brought to the fore as a linguistic variety that mouthed the aspirations of a people for centuries altogether.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the longstanding impact in the socio-linguistic circles of Malabar, Arabi-Malayalam tends to fall into oblivion today. It needs to be revived by preserving the existing texts in the hybrid tongue in the form of digital repositories and archives as well as by optimising translations of foundational Arabi-Malayalam texts into Malayalam, English and other languages. There are, however, difficulties associated with this translation process as Arabi-Malayalam works present a dense multilingual canvas suffused with Arabic, Malayalam, Tamil,

Urdu and Persian languages. Translated versions thus suffer basic linguistic losses such as oversimplification, genre change and cultural gaps, thereby failing to capture the spirit of the original texts. These pitfalls in translation should be rectified through Unicode representations, linguistic innovations and annotated editions of the texts as well as conscious and rigorous attempts at resurrecting the bygone glory of Arabi-Malayalam in the academia.

### Glossary

*Abjad* script – A writing system that gives prominence to consonants, leaving out vowels to the conjecture of readers.

*alif* – the first letter in the Arabic alphabet.

*ashaku* – beauty; Arabi-Malayalam word for *azhaku*

*bannam* – bodyweight or fatness

Dravidian – relating to a family of languages spoken in South India and Sri Lanka. The Dravidian roots of Arabi-Malayalam means its Malayalam and Tamil lineage.

*firake* – behind; Arabi-Malayalam for *pirake*

*suuroor* – happiness

*tevi* – goddess; Malabar variant of *devi*

*thoppam* – a local variant of *swalpm* meaning a little.

Vattezhuthu and Kolezhuthu – ancient writing systems used for Malayalam. Vattezhuthu evolved from the Brahmi script and kolezhuthu developed as a variant of the former. The former had distinctive round letters while the latter takes its name from the stylus used to write on palm leaves.

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