

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology  
of Egypt / Egyptology

## **COSMOPOLITANISM, MODERNITY, AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS: PERSPECTIVES FROM KERALA, INDIA**

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**Hemanth M, Cosmopolitanism, Modernity, and Cultural Dynamics: Perspectives from Kerala, India- PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 17(7), ISSN 1567-214x**

### **Abstract:**

Kerala as a state in India is popular for its human development index comparable with many of the European countries. Kerala's model of development has grabbed the attention of academicians all across the world. Neither agrarian nor industrial, the economic growth model of Kerala is a unique phenomenon, where cross-cultural interactions played a quintessential role. The amalgamation of modern Enlightenment thoughts along with the traditional values together contributed in shaping this society, where cosmopolitanism emerged as a predominant approach and outlook. Cosmopolitanism in Kerala is a highly complex cultural process, which plays a rudimentary role in the holistic growth that it attains in multiple domains of social life. This study

aims to critically trace the historical roots of cosmopolitanism, cross-cultural interactions, and to further analyze how it has fundamentally moulded the modernity of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, culture, migration, renaissance, coexistence.

Culture is a decisive sociological construct intrinsically related to identity formation in diverse domains of social life. It “locates man in time” and “links man with his lineage and heritage from which he picks up various primordial traits” (Khubchandani 50). Culture in relation to society is not a standing pool but an ever-flowing stream with dynamic cross-currents which accommodates and assimilates diverse elements in its due course. No culture or civilization can claim an exclusive status in the contemporary world of cultural pluralism and social inclusiveness. Like many other pluralistic societies, India is the motherland of religious diverseness, linguistic heterogeneousness, ritualistic multifariousness and of innumerable cultural nuances. The soul of cultural heterogeneity lies in its unity and Kerala as an Indian state offers a best example for such a multiple cultural co-existence. Since society is the basic text to understand culture in its multiple manifestations, this study intends to explore the reasons behind the origin of cosmopolitan Kerala identity, its nature, merits, and demerits through critically analyzing the social, political, and economic modernity of the state, with special emphasis on the functions that cultural cross-currents played in its formation.

Kerala as a state in the country of India has always mesmerized the world through its excellent performance in social and human development which makes it comparable with many of the developed countries. This model “of social development, through which developmentalism came to be projected as the unique cultural feature” and “Kerala has functioned since then as a heterotopia for left-leaning developmentalist social scientists of the Anglo-American academia” (Devika 128). Currently, Keralite is a broad notion of co-existence, through accommodating people from different religious, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The term *Malayali identity* is inadequate in this twenty first century to express the representation of all co-existing in the state. The state witnessed a huge migration of laborers and IT professionals from other parts of the country in this era, and they constitute a significant portion of the demography. Hence, *Malayali identity* is only an ingredient in the broad Kerala identity which in turn is highly complex due to its basic cosmopolitan nature.

From a global perspective, the philosophical roots of modern cosmopolitanism begin with the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant who considered cosmopolitan law as the guiding value for the creation of a peaceful global community. In his essay *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Kant defines cosmopolitan right as the universal right of humanity parallel with the global civic rights (Taylor 20). Kant’s cosmopolitanism is fundamentally based on the universal concept of hospitality which he considered as the pillar of a peaceful universal community with dignified

coexistence (Corradetti 432). Moreover, the theoretical discussions of Jacques Derrida on hospitality and Emmanuel Levinas on ethics provided a philosophical framework for the concept of cosmopolitanism where self and the Other unites with the fundamental responsibility of protecting universal morality.

The cosmopolitanism in modern Kerala can trace its ideological background in the great Renaissance movement of the late nineteenth century, which was greatly influenced by Western Enlightenment thoughts. There begins “the cosmopolitanism of the Malayalee who was part of the mobile colonial elite pegged itself on an equally elite and mobile ‘casteist cosmopolitanism’ that was deemed indigenous” (Devika 130). The state witnessed the birth of new orientations in the social, cultural and religious realms. Kerala renaissance was fundamentally a reaction against the unjust social discriminations and atrocities prevailed in the society. The period witnessed the emergence of great revolutionary sage Sree Narayana Guru. It marked the beginning of a great social movement that challenged the unjust practices and norms of Brahmanical Hindu rule in Travancore. His disciples, through the establishment of SNDP Yogam, fought against social, cultural and religious untouchability. It finally resulted in “enforcing proportionate representation” through “preferential treatment to disadvantaged social classes for purposes of remedying past discrimination” (Freeman 26).

What Narayana Guru did was a great cultural reformation through introducing a reformed way of life which even can compete with any civilized

way of living- rational, pragmatic and universal but deeply spiritual. He emphasized the need for a cosmopolitan outlook both through his teachings and actions. He advocated inter- caste, inter-religious marriages and even encouraged the marriage of people with different nationalities. His views on education, marriage, family, religion and above all, about humanity, are rooted in egalitarian liberal principles. His prophetic vision even encouraged the society to turn into small scale entrepreneurship for creating economic self-reliance. The period also witnessed the massive social activism of different community leaders who all shared the Guru. Moreover, at the same time, English education began to spread all across the state under the leadership of Christian missionaries. They started educating students irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The English education created a new elite class from all communities and they turned towards Western knowledge with great reverence. Furthermore, the new genres in literature like novels were introduced in Malayalam during this era. The joint family system gave way to nuclear families and matriarchy gave way to patriarchy.

In Kerala, political revolution was the child of cultural reformation and social renaissance. Hence, the polity that developed in Kerala during the first half of twentieth century directly imbibed the egalitarian values of renaissance. It found its expression in the national movement under the leadership of Indian National Congress. Later, the state witnessed the upsurge of Communist ideology in the grass root level. It was in Kerala that Communist Party formed its first democratic government in Asia and

“Communist propaganda in the 1930s significantly expanded the mental map of those who came under the sway of the movement” (Devika 132). The political consciousness emerged in Kerala began to share global outlook and actively engaged in a continuous political discourse. Poland, China or Russia no longer remained to be foreign in the political landscape of Kerala.

Migration, both internal and international, played a significant role in shaping the cosmopolitan Kerala modernity. The state witnessed the assimilation of different cultural groups including even Jews during different stages of its history. The most substantial cultural diffusion occurred during the period of European colonialism. The mass proselytization of inhabitants to Christianity and the imposition of European mode of education happened during this time. These phases of cultural interactions created space for multiple social identities and has elaborated its cosmopolitanism. Today, almost all the major religious groups- Hindus, Muslims, Christians and many others, share a bonded coexistence in the social, economic and cultural milieu of the state.

Moreover, the immigration of Keralites to other parts of the world played a quintessential role in shaping the global outreach of the state. This immense scale of migration in search of fortune took place greatly during the second half of twentieth century. This included the migration of skilled as well as the unskilled laborers to various foreign countries, particularly to the Middle East nations. This created not only an economic boom, but also an immense cultural assimilation. This large-scale immigration of Keralites to

other parts of the world can be considered as one of the most prominent reasons for the shaping of cosmopolitanism in Kerala. The modernity of the state “is inextricably bound with the intertwined histories of migration and transnationalism, and of shifting, diverse cosmopolitanism” (Devika 129). Caroline Osello and Filippo Osello demonstrates the uniqueness of this migration when they observe:

We have seen that Malayali migrants not only routinely move children back and forth between places and willingly undertake major shifts of residence, but that migrants also involve children, on periodic visits ‘back home’, in a whirlwind of visits and tours, in which hardly any day will be like another. Neither do children appear to be permanently adversely affected by all this, nor do families expect them to be. While mothers fret over the unavailability of food items or the heat, they expect children to ‘adjust’ within weeks; adults admit to wanting the best of both worlds and to being committed to both, but do not expect any psychological trauma to result from this multifocality. The idea that people are and should be flexible and adaptable is part of a generalized early adjustment to Malayali family life and styles of sociability, and it later serves migrants well (164).

The emergence of cosmopolitan modernity in Kerala can better be described as a two-way process: one by the process of immigration both internal as well as external, and then, by dynamic cultural interactions through innumerable modes and means of inter- relations. The society never hesitated to assimilate with these imported cultural elements because the renaissance

movement held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have made the social landscape appropriate for such cultural interactions. It provided voice to the marginalized including women.

Women empowerment can also be traced as a pillar in shaping the Kerala modernity. The educational opportunities coupled with the availability of jobs in foreign countries empowered them both socially and economically. Furthermore, as Caroline and Filippo observe, the “Movement out of Kerala is for women migrants often characterized as broadening their own possibilities of autonomous movement, enhancing the life-chances of children, and increasing the range of domestic consumption...” (164). It would not have been possible for women to utilize such opportunities if the cultural worldview of the society was narrow minded.

The educational institutions started under Christian missionaries played a major role in implementing the social justice of educating all irrespective of their social standing. These educational institutions offered a Western style not only in education but also in life pattern. Moreover, the “missionary discourse also espoused a cosmopolitanism” through “a powerful critique of traditional caste hierarchies” (Devika 131). The cultural intermixing that occurred during this era was not of elitist nature since it happened uniformly in all the major communities irrespective of their position in the caste hierarchy. In fact, this cultural intermixing was greatly beneficial to the under-privileged of the society. Ezhavas or Thiyyas are the major beneficiaries of this cultural intermixing and its related social dynamics. They



were traditionally unprivileged in the caste hierarchy but their progress in the state during the twentieth century is highly astonishing. On the one hand, the cultural reformation took place in Ezhava community under the leadership of Narayana Guru paved the way for their cultural emancipation. On the other hand, their large-scale immigration in search of economic fortune contributed greatly for their financial, social and political growth. The same is the case of Muslims of Malabar, another major community progressed significantly through foreign money. However, the “subaltern cosmopolitanism, which expanded with the wider geographical spread, was often suffused with a feeling for the homeland” (133).

The traditional cultural norms and values, both social and religious, gave way to new cultural codes during the twentieth century. However, the new cultural patterns emerged out of the former are not static but dynamic in nature and are in flux with the pulse of the age. Hence, the cultural identity of Kerala is an ever evolving one and this evolutionary nature reflects in its adaptability irrespective of space and time. This cultural dynamism finds its reflection in diverse domains of social life. The approach towards language, literature, festivals, rituals, food, and clothing underwent a serious alteration and is continuously altering as a result of this cultural dynamism. The society is highly dynamic in diverse fields and progress in those fields are inextricably linked to the diversity.

Unlike many other south Indian states, Kerala society is cordially receptive to any linguistic culture irrespective of its nature. The immigration

to Gulf countries offers more opportunities for learning new languages and also for acquiring new ways of living. A major portion of the population is familiar to these multiple language identities and this linguistic diversity contributed greatly in shaping its cosmopolitan worldview. The Malayalam literature through its constant discourse with the social truths reflects the cultural nuances of the age. The influence of European literature in the scholastic landscape of the society is vividly evident from the modes and styles of new narratives. It even portrays the life of migrant workers from other states in Kerala, as well as the life of Keralites in Middle East. This inclusive nature of Malayalam literature including poetry, fiction, drama and film contributed greatly in moulding cosmopolitanism in Kerala. The festivals and rituals of the state proclaims its secular outlook and are marvelous examples of cultural co-existence. Onam, Christmas, Vishu, Easter, Eid al – Fitr etc. are the major festivals and Kerala society harmoniously celebrates it without any sectarian distinctions. The growing presence of ‘guest labourers’ from other states of the country further promotes the enculturation of different traditions and customs. The emergence of new festivals and rituals in the cultural domain during this era suggests the assimilatory nature of Kerala culture. Another field of rich multifariousness is in the food culture, which offers another example for inclusive cultural plurality. The state is the hub of delicious varieties of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food items, mostly famous for non- vegetarian dishes. The state is a mini-Europe in terms of non-vegetarian and alcohol consumption which also suggests its hybrid cultural identity.

In this era of liberal democracy, the Kerala model cosmopolitanism celebrates the politics of cultural pluralism in every domain of social life. It proclaims the egalitarian notion of inclusive co-existence and cultural transaction through deliberately neglecting cultural barriers deeply rooted in social restrictions. It respects the significance of every social group irrespective of majority or minority status through providing opportunities for expressing their cultural identity. Through these self-expressions, different social groups recognize as well as assert their social identity. This sort of cultural dynamism in a society helps in creating “increased self- reliance, ability to take the point of view of others, and the ability to develop workable rather than overly idealistic policies” (Brislin 15).

Kerala modernity deliberately minimizes the hegemony of any particular culture over the rest by performing congenial distribution of cultural roles and functions. It offers the people of society the democratic ideal of choice, thereby empowering libertarian notions over cultural authoritarianism. It works on the basis of a receptive principle that receives alien cultures through the evaluative eye of a reformed society. It has a great sociological significance in forming the individual identity and in structuring the social pillars of the society.

The progress of Kerala, in social, economic, political and cultural domains, is directly or indirectly linked to this cosmopolitan identity. It provides a marvelous example for adaptive skill which in turn is the soul of existence from the beginning of human history. However, any form of

alteration in the existing cultural milieu of a group or society can affect their social standing either positively or negatively through the process of evaluation, especially in a multi-cultural social environment. In other words, culture plays a quintessential role in the emancipation as well as the degeneration of a society. A deep analysis of cosmopolitanism in Kerala society also poses several issues which require special attention. On the one side, progressives hail this cosmopolitan cultural model as the celebration of libertarian spirit which in turn is the foundation of democratic enthusiasm. On the other side, traditionalists criticize this cosmopolitanism for its basic arbitrariness and fluid nature which they consider as a great threat to the strength of basic social structure.

The immigration of highly skilled professionals from Kerala to foreign countries raises the issue of brain drain and the inability of a society to progressively channelize its skilled assets. Cosmopolitanism in this sense emerges out to be a threat for the development goals of the nation through empowering internal human resource wealth. It also poses the moral issue of leaving one's roots and culture in order to embrace an alien one. At the same time, the migration of laborers and IT professionals from other parts of the country to the state has twin sides. On the one hand, it helps in strengthening the unity of the nation through melting the cultural and linguistic barriers. On the other hand, it results in increasing social tension between the migrants and the original inhabitants like that happened in many parts of the country. The

emergence of negative stereotypes in relation to the migrant laborers is a serious challenge to the cosmopolitan legacy of the state.

The liberal lifestyle rooted mainly in Western culture raises several issues in the social institutions of marriage, family, politics and religion. Ironically enough this state of highest literacy rate is famous also for high rate of psychosomatic disorders like many European countries. The environmental concern of the state is not satisfactory and animal rights suffer a huge neglect in the state. The agricultural as well as the industrial production rate is comparatively very low due to an economic vision rooted in foreign money. People who migrated to foreign countries in search of economic fortunes even face strong identity crisis in their own homeland due to immense cultural expatriation. The strong family planning poses the issue of low human resource index which can possibly create huge setback in the future.

In conclusion, the cosmopolitanism in Kerala society is a highly complex cultural model intrinsically related to the progress that the state attained in diverse domains of social life. It is an example for cultural coexistence and inter-mixing, that has both positive and negative repercussions. However, a close analysis of this cultural model reveals the significance of cosmopolitanism in this era of globalization where people become “more accepting and tolerant of people from other cultures, and more aware that solutions to important problems demand contributions which transcend national borders” (Brislin 294). It offers cultural choice as well as cultural

liberty to the people, which is highly significant in a modern world of liberal democracy.

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