Malappuram in Karachi

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The tiny Malayali community in Karachi has shrunk over the years. Those who remain wait in vain for a passage to India

The nondescript apartment looks like an average home in Karachi. Its the bar of Chandrika herbal soap in the bathroom and the Mathrubhoomi calendar on the wall, ubiquitous to Malayali homes,that betrays the lineage of its occupants. The flats octogenarian owner,BM Kutty,came to Karachi from Kerala in search of greener pastures in 1949,a time when Karachi was just a train ride away from Mumbai. Since then,the political activist has spent six decades of his life as a Pakistani national.

Kutty is part of the shrinking community of Malayalis settled in Karachi. Unlike some Muslims of north India who migrated to Pakistan during Partition,the migration of Malayali Muslims had a different context. The first exodus from Kerala to Karachi took place in 1921,the year of the Mappila Revolt,when landless Malabar Muslims (Mappilas) of Malappuram district in north Kerala

launched an armed rebellion against the British and upper-caste Hindus. The uprising was brutally crushed after the British proclaimed martial law,and the Karachi chapter of Mappilas was born.

Many Mappilas fled to Mumbai or Karachi. Here,they started from scratch with nothing but a kettle and cups,delivering tea to offices. Soon,they were running paan shops and hotels, says Kutty. Today,most Malayalis in Karachi are small-time owners of shops and restaurants. One can find an odd Malabari restaurant in the city,the masala dosa on the menus of many non-Malabari restaurants,and Malabar betel leaves from Kerala in Karachis paan stalls. But few of the citys Mappilas speak Malayalam. At schools run by the Malabar Muslim Jamaat,established in 1920,a handful of students can speak Malayalam,but second-generation Malayalis are more fluent in Urdu than in their native tongue.

According to the Malabar Muslim Jamaat,the Malayali population in the city is dwindling. From 64,000 in 1986,they are one-tenth of that figure now,living in middle-class colonies like Mahmudabad,Gulshan-e-Iqbal,Shershah and the Muslim Malabari colony.

For Karachis Mappilas,visiting relatives in Kerala was never a hassle,even after Partition,says Kutty. But after the 1965 India-Pakistan war,the scene changed,as ties between the two countries soured,and trade and travel links were snapped. Those who managed to get a visa

went to meet their families in Kerala; some tried to stay on as fugitives in their own homeland only to be deported. Some with wives and children in Kerala got remarried in Karachi. A few others with means managed to get Indian passports, says Kutty,who recently published his autobiography Sixty Years in Self-Exile: No Regrets. A few hundred Pakistani Malayalis continue to retrace their steps back home,mainly to Keralas northern districts,and are fighting to reclaim their Indian citizenship. But they have to be content with living on long-stay visas until the Indian government decides on their fate.

Why would some of Karachis Mappilas want to return to Kerala? The first set of Mappila migrants and others such as Kutty had come here in search of better job prospects. In the Seventies,Malayalis on their way to the Gulf found Karachi their accidental homeland. Abdul Kadar,54,from Tirur in Kerala,landed on the Karachi coast in 1976. A travel agent charged me and several others Rs 700 each,promising to take us from Mumbai to Dubai by sea. Our motor launch set sail and when it finally docked,we were told that we were at our destination. I got off along with the others. I realised that I had been duped and brought to Karachi instead, says Kadar. Stranded in a foreign land with no passport,Kadar was forced to get a Pakistani passport by claiming that he was born there.

This soon turned out to be his nemesis. Kadar started off in earnest with a paan store in Karachi. Every paisa

earned was used to educate his four children and build a house for his family in Kerala,a house that could never become his home.

His visa application,asking to be allowed to visit his ailing wife,has been turned down thrice. He needed to submit more than a dozen documents for an Indian visa,including a letter from his wife Fatima stating that she was willing to host a Pakistani national and take full responsibility for his good conduct. Despite such a declaration,visa officials wanted to know how is it that he was born in Pakistan when his parents have been in Kerala all along.

His friend Abdul Majeed (51),who unwittingly landed in Balochistan in 1979 in pursuit of the Gulf dream,blames the maverick Malayali spirit for his woes. Who would have thought that I would end up living in Pakistan for the rest of my life? But then,isnt there a joke about the enterprising Malayali who offered Neil Armstrong a cup of tea as soon as he landed on the moon? says Majeed,who started off as a tea vendor and today runs a stationery store in Karachis bustling Saddar Bazaar. Majeed had last applied for an Indian visa in 1998 to meet his dying mother in Alleppey in Kerala. When the visa finally arrived,cutting through the reams of bureaucracy,his mother was dead. I still dream of returning home along with my wife and children. In Kerala,my family owns plenty of land and coconut groves but even money cant help me get back to my mathrubhoomi, he says.

For many like NV Pillai (name changed),the endless journey back home began three years ago when after 59 years of living in Karachi,he decided to shift to India with his wife and three sons. A majority of the Malayalis have returned to India over the years. For me,the sense of alienation was even greater as I was a Malayali Hindu. I stayed on all these years for the sake of my childrens education but decided to leave when ethnic clashes in Karachi started mounting, he says.

Back in India,Pillai lives in a twilight zone having forfeited his right to earn a living,buy property or travel freely. Pillai has no choice but to live with his family at a relatives place in the Thane district of Maharashtra. His son cannot work in the merchant navy despite being a marine engineer as he is still a Pakistani,and any travel,even to the adjoining Mumbai district,requires prior police permission. I have knocked on the doors of several government officials but they all tell me that three years is not a long time. Several Malayalis have been in this state of uncertainty for over a decade. I,too,should learn to live with it, he says.



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