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## MALAY CULTURE ASSIMILATION ON MUSLIM MALABARI COMMUNITIES IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

The Malabari community is a Muslim minority in Malaysia. People from Kerala in India has been living in Malaya since the days of the Malacca Sultanate. One theory of the spread of Islam to Malaya connected with minority communities that of the Shafi'i sect. Majority of the community presently lives in the states of Johore, Selangor, Perak, Malacca and Penang. The study's focus was to examine the assimilation of Malay culture in the life of Muslim Malabar by looking at the social and cultural aspects that included the assimilation of language communication, education, traditional dress, and wedding. This research was a "non-experimental" study that concentrated on field studies and interviews. Study data were collected through interviews and surveys. The outcomes revealed that the language of the Muslim Malabari community is losing their identity in Malaysia. They already assimilate the Malay culture in their daily lives. This paper also presented some ideas to maintain their identity in Malaysia and recommended further documentation and research to preserve and uphold their customs and traditions not to stay relevant.

Keywords: Muslim Malabari, assimilation, communication, Malay culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a unique land. This Southeast Asian country inherited cultural and ethnic heterogeneity from Asian civilisation. Malaysia's uniqueness is apparent in the diversity of customs and traditions of a society of various religions, races, and cultures. The three largest groups of ethnicities in Malaysia are Malays, Chinese and Indians. This multi-ethnic society lives together, harmoniously and constitutes solid friendships. Every race earnestly maintains their customs and traditions so that they stay relevant with times. Minor conflicts and misunderstandings sometimes happen amongst them. Nevertheless, any feelings of disagreement and opposition resolved through diplomacy and prudence. These three ethnic groups are united with loyal friendship, national principles and the Malaysian constitution. Eventually, these three ethnic groups constitute the plural society in line with the vision of nation-building. The concept of a plural society is expected to support congeniality in diversity among multiple races.

J.S.Furnivall was the first scholar to propose plural society based on his studies in Indonesia and Burma. M.G. Smith (1960) defined a plural society as a society with many cultures, social divisions and disputes. However, Van Den Berghe (2001), distinguished social plural in society by dividing society into several corporate groups rather than culture. Cultural pluralisation exists from several ethnic groups. Assimilation often emerges in groups of plural societies. When the process of assimilation occurs, the majority ethnicity dominates the minority ethnicity.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the history of the Malabari community in Kerala, India.
2. Identify the origins of the Malabari community in Malaysia.
3. Describe the cultural assimilation in Malabari society in Malaysia.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was a ‘non-experimental’ study. This field-based study referred to historical writings in several libraries such as the University of Malaya (UM) Library, Tun Seri Lanang Library in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and the National Library in Kuala Lumpur. Besides, sample interviews were selected among the Malabari communities in Johore and Negeri Sembilan. Four people were interviewed in the past two months, from October to December 2018. This research renders a distinct understanding of the history, the origins of society and cultural assimilation with the community of Muslims Malabari in Malaysia. This study also empowers more research, presentation of papers, and books on the assimilation of Malabari culture and society.

## ASILIMATION

The term assimilation comes from the Latin word, ‘assimilare’ which means “to be equal” (D. Hendropuspito, 1989). In English, it is named as ‘assimilation. In the Malay language is called ‘asimilasi’. Assimilation transpires in several stages over a long period (Paul B. Horton Chester L. Hunt. 1990). These processes progressively reduce the differences within the community group until the formation of assimilation takes place. This process is known as the melting process. Assimilation is formed when the culture of the majority dominates the culture of the minority. Minorities will lose their selfhood and national identity to the majority.

Harrold Abramson (1994) described assimilation as a process that leads to increased equality in society. J. Milton Yinger (1985) established assimilation as reducing differences that may happen when two or more smaller societies or cultural groups meet. It arises when the assimilation of ethnic minority groups embraces the majority group’s culture.

### Types of assimilation

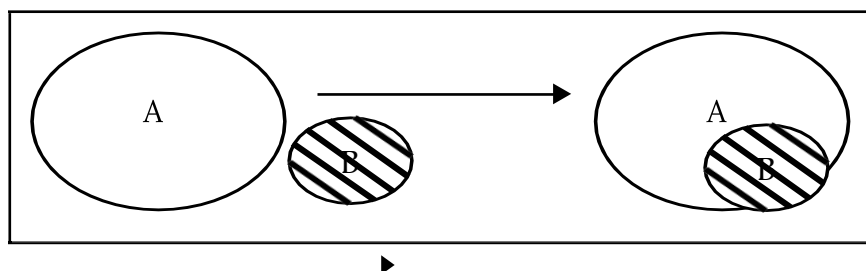


Figure 1: One-way Assimilation

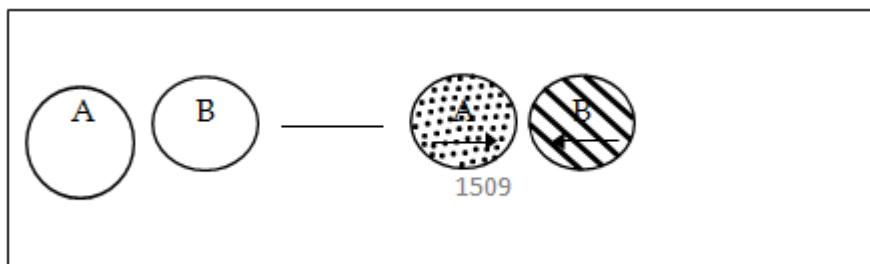


Figure 2: Two-way Assimilation

(Hamidah, 2009)

Assimilation devises two impacts on society. First, societies that accept assimilation lose their culture and identity. They will transform the culture into a novel group. Secondly, the assimilated society will follow the culture due to the incorporation of minority culture with the majority society's culture, and the two groups work together. One-way assimilation process (refer figure 1) and two-way assimilation process (refer figure 2)

## MALAY DEFINITION

Asmah Hj Omar (1993) asserted that Malay is used in a broad and narrow sense. In a broad sense, the term refers to Austronesian peoples on the Malay Peninsula and the Malay Archipelago area, including Indonesia. In a broad sense, UNESCO (1972) applied the name to ethnic Malays in the peninsula, including the Malays in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Madagascar. The term also applies to the Malay ethnic group who speak the Malay language. These groups of people live in the Malay Peninsula, the east coast of Sumatra and Brunei. This ethnic language is the Malay language that is recognised as the national language of the country known as Malaysia. In Indonesia, it is known as the Indonesian language.

## MALABARI ORIGINS

According to Forbes (1991), the coastal area of Malabar has received the arrival of Arab traders since the early days of the beginning of Islam. Kerala is one of the nations positioned on the coast of Malabar, and Arab traders have visited it since the beginning of Islam.

King Cheraman Perumal, who was the last king of the Chera kingdom, had sailed to Arabia to embrace Islam. At that time, the Arabs had established close trade relations with the state of Malabar. Arab traders brought goods from Malabar to Yemen and the Hejaz via the Persian Gulf. Hazarmouth in Yemen is a well-known Arab market for goods from Malabar. According to historical records, there were two people whom the king had sailed to Arabia to embrace Islam. The first king reverted to Islam before the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. His Islamic name was Tajuddin. While on the voyage back to Malabar, he died and his followers spread Islam in Malabar.

A group of Islamic preachers led by Sheikh Saharuddin Bin Taqiyuddin arrived in Malabar after visiting Mount Adam in India. King Banapperumal, who received this news, invited them to the palace and inquired about the purpose of their arrival in Malabar. The preachers explained the fundamentals of Islam to him. He was attracted to Islam's qualities and uniqueness and joined this group of preachers to India to revert to Islam. He was 57 years old when he met the Prophet Muhammad PBUH and reverted to Islam and studied Islam's basics. On his way back to Malabar, he fell ill and died. After his death, Sharif Bin Malik, Malik Bin dinar and Malik Bin Habib resumed their journey to Malabar, and they landed at Kadunggallur. Malik

Bin Dinar constructed a mosque in Kadunggallur as a centre of worship and the spread of Islamic da'wah.

Miller (1991) in his study on the Malabar community stated that the 'Mapilla' community, existed in Kerala before Islam reached the North of India, namely before Muhammad Kassim conquered Sind in 93-95 Hijara / 711-713 AD.

He affirmed:

*The Arab trade with Malabar existed for centuries before the advent of Islam, and became more vibrant in the 4th century AD, then continued until the era of European modernisation. The Muslim Arab traders have brought their religious beliefs to Kerala, where some settled and married the local Malayali community. (Miller, 1991: 458).*

The arrival and spread of Islam in Malabar lead to the existence of Muslim Malabari community in Malabar. The Malabari community has migrated in three stages to Malaya and formed the Muslim Malabari community in Malaysia.

## **MALABARI SOCIETY IN MALAYSIA**

In Malaysia, the Malays and other races have not recognised Malabaris very well. They continuously assume the Muslim Malabari community as Muslim Indian. This statement and assumption are entirely incorrect. In the local historical record, this community only exists in a few places. One of them is about the theory of the arrival of Islam from the Malabar region.

The Malabari community is categorised under the Muslim Indian group in Malaysia. The Muslim Indian in Malaysia is a minority community among Muslims in Malaysia. According to the statistics of the total Muslim population in Malaysia, they are the second largest after Muslim Malays. (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). There are no specific statistics for the Malabari community. This community is a minority living in the states of Johore, Selangor, Malacca and Penang. The people who used to come from Kerala are of Shafi'e sect and speak Malayalam. In Kerala, this community is known as 'Mappila'. 'Mappila' is a nickname for the Muslim Malabari community.

The Muslim Indian community is formerly from Tamil Nadu while the Muslim Malabari community is from Kerala. Although Tamil Nadu and Kerala are geographically defined as South India, these two states hold entirely distinctive customs, languages and lifestyles.

The arrival of Indians in Malaya groups can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, they came to Malaya as merchants, traders, adventurers and arms supplier. This group had been in Penang before the arrival of Francis Light (Sandhu 1969). The merchants' Muslim Indians have been in Penang around 1770 (Omar Yusoff, 2005). Kapitan Keling had married a Malay woman from Batu Uban, Penang. Since 1736, he has settled in Batu Uban (Omar Yusoff, 2005).

The second stage took place around 1787. It was the arrival of the Indians as labourers working in farms, such as black pepper plantations (1790), sugarcane (1830), coffee (1870), rubber (1877) and those working with the British government. Many of these workers were married to local girls. (Sandhu, 1969).

According to Azharuddin (2008), the arrival of Muslim India to Malaya is independent rather than through British Kangany system. They were not involved in plantation activities but were more concentrated in major urban areas in small businesses such as food, gold, clothing, grocery stores, books and magazines, and money exchange businesses. This circumstance remained until Malaya's independence. This fact is also

agreed by some researchers, for example, Nagata, who explained that:

*To safeguard their trade interests and skills, most Muslims Indian tend to concentrate in urban areas, as noted, in contrast to Hindu labourers who are more concentrated in the farm.*

Around 1789, Penang was used as a place of exile for prisoners from India. Those who have committed murder, robbery, political offences were placed in Penang. Offenders sentenced to seven years and above were placed in Penang. These prisoners were brought from different places in India, such as Bengal, Gujarat, Malabar and Tamil Nadu.

Since 1860, many prisoners who have served their sentences did not return to their country of origin. They made Penang their new country. These prisoners integrated entirely with the lifestyle of the local community in Penang. In other words, they have undergone cultural assimilation. (McNair, 1899). Many of them married local women. They also ventured into business fields such as opening grocery stores, raising cattle, becoming labourers and working with the British government. (McNair, 1899).

Table 1: The Earliest Muslim-Indian Family Members Arrived in Malaysia

Birthplace of respondent	Great-grandparent	Grandfather	Father / Mother	Respondents themselves	Siblings
Malaysia	29	38	40	40	-
Southern India	6	18	80	80	6
Northern India	1	6	11	11	1
Pakistan	-	-	2	2	3
Bangladesh	2	-	2	2	-
Others	1	-	1	1	-
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>36 (13.0)</b>	<b>62 (22.5)</b>	<b>136 (49.3)</b>	<b>32 (11.6)</b>	<b>10 (3.6)</b>

(Jaafar, 1990)

There has been no census attended by the Malaysian authority on the Muslim Indian community, especially in language and economy. Therefore, this paper only adopted Jaafar's study from 1987 to 1990 entitled, 'Socio-economy of the Muslim Indian community in Malaysia' for a single reference. The data in his study supported the writing of this paper

Table 2: Date of Early Muslim Indian Family Members Arriving in Malaysia

Ethnicity	Before 1990	1901-1920	1921-1940	1941-1960	After 1960
Tamil	35	43	61	70	4
Malayalam	3	7	9	4	1
Punjabi	1	2	1	-	-
Hindi	1	1	6	1	-
Pakistani	3	3	6	2	-
Others	4	-	5	3	-
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>47 (17.0)</b>	<b>56 (20.3)</b>	<b>88 (31.9)</b>	<b>80 (29.0)</b>	<b>5 (1.8)</b>

(Jaafar, 1990)

Jaafar's study (1990) recorded that the average Muslim Indian community in Malaysia speaks Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi and Punjabi. Based on the facts, it can be concluded that most Muslim Indians in Malaysia are from Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Malayalam-speaking Indian community comes from Kerala.

There are no sources that document the Malabari community's settlement areas in Malaysia now or in the past. Nonetheless, through interviews, it was noted that they live in several places in Peninsular Malaysia, such as in Johore, Malacca, Penang, Kedah, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Perak.

Among the evidence of the influence of the Muslim Malabari's arrival is 'Kampong Malabar', around Transfer Road and Malabar Mosque in Jalan Pantai, Penang. It confirms the existence of Malabari community in Penang (Mohamed, 2001). Malaysian Malabari Association (PMM) is an organisation that acts as the parent body for the Malabari Muslim community in Malaysia. Their association building is located at the following address: 19A, Persiaran Desa Ampang 1, Taman Sri Ampang, 68000 Ampang, Selangor Darul Ehsan; 160-3-5, Maluri Complex, Jalan Jejaka, Taman Maluri 55100 Cheras, Kuala Lumpur. Several Malabari associations are also influential apart from the above association, the Kerala Muslim Jamaat Association located in Selayang, Selangor.

Most of the Muslim Malabari communities can be found in the State of Johore. Johore Malabari Muslim Congregation is put under the governance of Tuan Haji Maidin Bin Hussein. They arranged many activities for the Muslim Malabari communities in Johore such as Maulud Reading Competition, Prophet Muhammad PBUH Maulud Celebration, Quran Recitation Competition, Islamic and Education Quiz. They too, rendered Single Mother and Children Orphans Assistance in the month of Ramadan every year. This association's building is located Jamaat Malabar Muslim Johor, No 176, Wisma Jemaah Malabar, Jalan Belimbing Satu, 81400 Senai, Johor Darul Takzim.

## **CULTURAL ASSIMILATION OF MALABARI COMMUNITY**

The Muslim Malabari community has undergone cultural assimilation in language, customs and food. Language, customs, and food have been influenced by the Malays' culture who are the majority.

### **Language**

During the assimilation, these minority groups lose cultural components such as their native language (Eitzen & Zinn, 1988). The language of the Malabari people is Malayalam. Malayalam, which consists of 56 letters, is one of the 22 official languages of India. It is the language of communication of 36 million people worldwide. This language has been recognised as the official language in Kerala located in South India. This language belongs to the Dravidian language group. The four largest Dravidian languages that are widespread in India's southern region are Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. Malayalam is derived from Tamil. According to Caldwell Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Tulu and Kodagu are very well-established and robust languages. The Tamil language hugely affects the Malayalam language. Furthermore, the effect of the Namboothiri group's influence on Kerala's cultural development, the Kerala people's trade relations, and Kerala's Portuguese occupation also inspired the growth of this language.

The Mappila community (Malabar Kerala) has created Malayalam Arabic writing. Malayalam Arabic writing uses Arabic alphabets to write Malayalam. Arabic with 28 letters has been used to produce 53 Malayalam phonemes by placing extra dots above or below the letters without changing the letters' shape. This language is comparable to Jawi writing which uses Arabic for writing.

According to a teacher named Sulaiman Moiden, a Johore State Muslim Malabari Congregation Education Exco in an interview with him, most of the current generation of teenagers and children are not competent in Malayalam. It is because parents at home do not speak Malayalam to their children. The reluctance of these parents demotivates their children's to learn Malayalam. Moreover, some parents feel embarrassed and do not want to converse in Malayalam as they live in the Malay community. For instance, for those living in the Malay majority. Their children go to school in a Malay school, befriend Malays children, and engage in Malaysian cultural activities. The assimilation of Malay culture has changed the language they speak. They believe by speaking Malayalam, it gives a negative perception of themselves in Malay society.

Moreover, according to him, Malayalam is not taught as a language in our country. Malayalam language class' short-term courses are not offered at any language institution. The Malayalam language is also not practised in Malabari *madrassa* in the state of Johore. The books used in the *madrassa* run by the Muslim Malabari Congregation in the state of Johore are not in Malayalam but Arabic Malayalam. Malayalam is Kerala's official language, while Arabic Malayalam is the Malayalam language influenced by Arabic writing. Students in these *madrassas* are fluent in Malayalam and read Malayalam Arabic. He recommended parents who aspire their children to master the Malayalam language to send their children to *madrassa* after school hours or weekends. He has the vision to offer the Malayalam language in the *madrassas* under the Education Bureau of the Muslim Malabari Congregation of the Johore State.

Language assimilation happened, and it involved the Malay language as a part of pertinent conversational language among Muslim Malabari communities in Malaysia. If this phenomenon remains, then the Malabari people will lose their selfhood and identity.

### **Custom**

Customs and traditions during puberty experience are a distinct ingredient in the life of the Muslim Malabari community. When a girl reaches puberty, she will not be allowed to go out of the house for 10-15 days by her family. Neighbours celebrate girls who have just reached their puberty. They visit the girls with many handicrafts such as fruits, eggs, milk and sweets. Mothers, grandmothers, and sisters give these girls various valuable advice such as dressing correctly, minding speech, and being polite when talking to older people. They also teach the girls religious aspects such as forbidden acts when one has a menstrual cycle, in detail.

In terms of food, these girls will be asked to eat raw eggs mixed with sesame oil for two weeks. Sesame oil is believed to strengthen the spine and strengthen the waist. They are also given various types of herbal soups, and cooks are prepared using high-quality ghee.

Generally, on the 10th day, after these girls complete their *ghusl*, indicating that they are free from the major *hadath*, a ceremony attended only by close relatives is held to celebrate them. The girl's head is rubbed with sesame oil, and his whole body is rubbed with turmeric. The mother or grandmother will teach the child how to perform *ghusl*. Traditional soaps made from grounded green beans and the bark of the pulai trees are used for bathing. 'Siakkah' powder is applied as a hair shampoo. The girl will be bathed in the river. Next, the girl is dressed in new clothes and jewellery. A prayer service will be held in the evening.

According to Mrs Alimah Abu Bakar, this culture has now undergone assimilation. It is because most of these girls go to school and their parents work. Children are involved in co-curricular activities and extra classes. The act of confining a child for 10-15 days without communication with the outside world will cause emotional tension in the girl's soul. Also, the perception of the community, especially neighbours,

should be considered. These girls will rest for two or three days, and the mother will accompany them at home. Next, the girl will continue the routine of life as usual. Some Malay culture, such as giving gifts to the girl that reaches puberty is still practised in Muslim Malabari community. Nevertheless, these customs hitting puberty are no longer practised today. This custom has experienced assimilation. Now, puberty has become commonplace in Malabari society. The level of education, environment and lifestyle changes encourages the Malabari community to observe puberty through the girls' self-experience changes.

### Food

The traditional food of the Malabari people is a reflection of their nation's identity. This traditional food is mandatory in most ceremonies such as weddings, *tahlil* ceremonies, *maulids* and Eid celebrations. Among the traditional Malabari foods are *patri*, *puttu* and various types of *appam*. Most of these traditional foods are made from rice flour.

*Patri* is made from rice flour, salt and water. All these ingredients are blended and spread without oil and heated. This simple dish is easy to prepare. This dish is usually served with meat or chicken curry. *Puttu* is another traditional food of the Malabari people. The ingredients needed to prepare *puttu* are rice flour, grated coconut, sugar water and bamboo. These ingredients are mixed and then kneaded with coconut mixed with sugar and finally put in a bamboo container wrapped in a piece of cloth. The bamboo is then placed on boiling water. *Puttu* is usually served with bananas and sugar.

The Malabari love *appam*. 'Vella appam' is a type of *appam* prepared from rice flour, coconut, salt and water. All these ingredients are mixed and then kneaded until well blended. *Vella appam* is a type of fried food. This *appam* is served with chicken curry and meat. Malabari provides 'chakra chore; (sweet rice) to celebrate *Nisfu Syaaban*. Almost every home prepares this dish. The ingredients needed to prepare this 'chakara chore' are Indian rice, palm sugar, cinnamon, coconut and cashews. All the ingredients were incorporated with rice and cooked on the fire until cooked. This dish is also made during the *Nisfu Syaaban* prayer ceremony at the *congregation's surau* or mosque to eat.

According to Ustaz Syed Ali, traditional Malabari food is gradually forgotten among the Malabari community. It is because the younger generation is not competent at cooking traditional food of the Malabari people. He also believed the previous generation does not teach their children how to prepare traditional food. According to him, Malabari youths do not appreciate the traditional food of their nation.

In his interview, he expressed his appreciation towards Mrs Aminah's efforts, which provided services to sell *patri* at affordable prices for various occasions. He expressed his admiration for Puan Aminah who tried to value the food tradition of the Malabari community. The younger generation, prefer the traditional Malay dishes like *nasi lemak*, and cakes. Nowadays, it is hard to find traditional food in most ceremonies at home and in Malabari *surau*s. Assimilation also happened in the context of traditional food of the Malabari community.

Mrs Aminah, in her interview, stated her willingness to teach the younger generation to prepare various food recipes inherited from her grandmother and mother. Various modern electronic appliances can speed up traditional food preparation, such as *puttu* and *appam*. She also urged that Malabari association and non-governmental organisations hold short-term cooking courses for the Malabari community and the multi-ethnic community in our country.

### CONCLUSION

The Malabari communities are undergoing critical cultural assimilation in the field of language, customs



and traditional food. Multiple measures need to be taken to curb the assimilation of this culture. Among the steps to be taken include the position of parents. Parents should introduce the culture of Muslims Malabari since childhood to their children. Nevertheless, one concern arises, and it is about ways of educating children. If the parents themselves do not recognise their race, how do they teach the children? The answer is, parents should send their children to the cultural classes of the Malabari community. These classes will afford exposure and enlightenment to children about their traditional heritage. It will motivate the instinct of exploration in the soul of the children. They will start attempting to explore the culture of their race.

Additionally, Malabari organisations and associations should hold several Malayalam language classes, cultural classes and various cultural activities. These classes should be held on weekends or during the school holiday season. Qualified local instructors or professional instructors should be invited from Kerala, India. Besides, these organisations and associations also need to work with Kerala's bodies and associations to share various information from cultural aspects. This collaboration can be strengthened through seminars, workshops and bilateral visits from time to time.

Moreover, the Johore Muslim Malabari Congregation (JMMNJ) needs to introduce Malayalam language classes in 17 *madrasas* under their management in the State of Johore. It is possible to do so because JMMNJ is an instrumental organisation in Johore. The contribution and commitment of JMMNJ in upholding Islamic pillars and disseminating it in the State of Johore, particularly among the Malabari community cannot be overlooked and denied by any party. JMMNJ, through the Education Bureau, needs to form a Malayalam language education syllabus for *madrasa* students in the State of Johore. This syllabus must be simple in the form of notes and multimedia. The application of multimedia is quintessential for the teaching of Malayalam language in these *madrasas*. The Education Bureau may form a Malayalam language syllabus drafters team consisting of pedagogical experts, Malayalam language experts, and multimedia experts. Teachers from Kerala, who are the chief teaching staff in most *madrasas* in our country, can achieve this vision. The complete syllabus should be shared with individuals, associations and non-governmental organisations throughout Malaysia. The Malayalam language is the central pillar in defending the culture of the Malabari communities.

Besides, multiple parties such as individuals, associations, organisations and corporate companies of Malabari must execute efforts in documenting the history of the Malabari. Documentation in the form of books and papers is crucial for future generation reference. Also, documentation will encourage more writing of papers, theses and academic training on this community. Documentation can also be done in the form of short films. This short film should be uploaded in many media outlets such as 'Youtube' and spread extensively through the 'WhatsApp' application for public viewing. It certainly gives numerous information about Malabari to the plural society in our land.

Ergo, cultural assimilation is a phenomenon in every society. Existing assimilation cannot be corrected or undone. Nonetheless, various systematised measures can be taken to dodge profound assimilation in the future. Every race must preserve their culture to be a legacy for forthcoming generations. Indeed, erosion of culture signifies the loss of national identity.

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