Kerala History and Studies Journal
Published by the Kerala History Conference
ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

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Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/21

Date of Release 28.11.2026

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Tradition in Transition: Muslim Reform Movements and Community Responses in Kerala

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Islam has had a long and continuous presence in Kerala since the beginning of Islam in Arabia. The early maritime trade relations between Arab merchants and the Malabar coast facilitated the expansion of Islam in Kerala. These interactions greatly contributed to the establishment of Islam in the region. From the earliest phase of Islamic expansion, a considerable portion of the indigenous population was attracted to the new religious ideas for various social, cultural and economic reasons. The Arabs founded numerous mosques along Kerala's coastal areas, which functioned not only as spaces of worship but also as centres for religious learning, community interaction, and the propagation of Islamic teachings. Consequently, these institutions played a pivotal role in the early consolidation of Islamic identity in Kerala.

The paper, *Tradition in Transition: Muslim Reform Movements and Community Responses in Kerala*, tries to focus on the emergence and evolution of reformist ideologies within Kerala's Muslim community. The article investigates how reform movements challenged, reinterpreted, and reconfigured longstanding religious and social practices among the Muslim community in Kerala. It also points out how various sections of the community responded to these reformist movements. The paper further interrogates the dynamic interplay between reformist and traditionalist currents, assessing the extent to which this dialectic shaped Muslim identity, community life, social mobility, gender roles, and religious practices in Kerala. Moreover, the paper engages with the institutional dimensions of reform movements, analyzing the influence of global and pan-Islamic currents as well as local sociocultural conditions on the trajectory of reform.

Historically, Kerala's Islamic landscape developed through plural Sunni traditions. Over time, these traditions incorporated local customs, ritual practices and cultural expressions, resulting in a distinctly Malayali expression of Islam. Before the rise of

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reform movements, the Muslim community largely adhered to these inherited Sunni practices under the guidance of traditional *ulema* and hereditary religious scholars.

The early decades of the twentieth century were a turning point in the history of Kerala. Colonial intervention completely dismantled the prevailing social structures. The new ideas strongly influenced the social spectrum of colonial Kerala. The impact of social reform movements also contributed to the progress of various caste- and religion-based organizations. As with other communities in Kerala, this period brought significant changes within the Muslim community as well. The ideological shifts could be seen in the traditional religious beliefs that had long persisted within the Muslim society.

The history of Islamic reformist ideas also begins in Arabia. The ideological views of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab had a substantial influence on reformist ideologies within Arabian societies. They opposed shirk, or polytheism, and emphasized the oneness of God[1]. He argued that associating any person, object, or entity with divine powers must be completely rejected, as such power belongs to God alone. The reformist ideology pointed out that certain common practices followed by the traditional Islamic community are not a part of Islamic belief. The practices such as offering vows, praying to saints, visiting tombs, and engaging in any prayer ceremony that involves seeking intercession from a third party—could lead to *shirk*. The reformist ideology of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab condemned such specific practices.

Following Wahhabism, the prolongation of the Islamic religious reform movement spread across the world. The movement also came to India. A section of religious leaders within the Muslim community adopted these new ideas and attempted to propagate them among Muslims. It is in this context that the history of Muslim reform movements began in Kerala. Reformist influences from the broader Arabian world, predominantly Wahhabi reformist ideas, and Islamic modernist interpretations entered the social spectrum of the Muslims of Kerala. The new ideology travelled through travel, print culture, and returning migrants from the Middle East. These new ideological insights challenged conventional religious practices that followed their

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age-old traditions. The existing traditional popular rituals and local customs had become an integral part of their life[2].

The reformative leaders emphasized the words of Prophet Muhammad to justify their activities. They referred to the prophetic tradition stating that, *in every century, a Muslim reformer would arise with the primary responsibility of safeguarding the community from wrongdoing and from superfluous religious practices*[3]. Using this tradition as an authoritative basis, the reform thinkers sought to disseminate their ideas widely within the community. During the initial stage, their efforts were not fully successful. The people belonging to the traditional followers were not ready to change their traditional beliefs and practices.

In a certain context, the reformist movement claims that the modernisation of Islam. The comparison between Islam and modernity must be evaluated on theological, philosophical, and socio-cultural levels. It involves two distinct worldviews centred around Islamic philosophy. One side is beliefs and values rooted in the concept of *tawhid*. The other is based on the European worldview shaped by philosophical rationality and humanism. Which is established during the period of the Enlightenment[4]. A major section of reformers attempted to identify and adopt elements of modernity that were compatible with Islamic thought. But another group displayed a tendency to reject such innovative ideas altogether.

In the history of the Islamic reformist movement in Kerala, consider such ideological debate about whether the concept of modernisationa and traditional. The evolution of Islamic revivalist movements in Kerala is deeply influenced by the ideas of reformist leaders. The intellectual reformist leaders such as Imam Ibn Taymiyyah (A.H. 661–728), Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (A.H. 957–1034), Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (A.H. 1114–1176), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (A.H. 1115–1206), and Jamaluddin al-Afghani (A.H. 1255–1315) were great part this movement. Equally important were the contributions of modern reformers including Muhammad Abduh (A.D. 1849–1905), his disciple Rashid Rida (A.D. 1856–1935), and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (A.D. 1817–1898). Together, these thinkers expressed a coherent reform agenda aimed at restoring Islamic teachings to their foundational purity and at rectifying the socio-religious deviations that had become entrenched within Muslim society.

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Concerning the reformist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Muslims of Kerala were generally nominal in their religious identity and lacked a proper understanding of Islamic principles. The early traditional Muslim followers were practising indigenous character on their daily life. In other words, the views of reformative groups, they had deviated from the path of *Tawhid*, the essence of Islamic belief[5]. Some of the traditional Muslim practices were listed under the category of *bid'ah* (innovations in religion). During the 19th century, the social condition of the Muslim community was not promising. There was no formal system of religious education at that time. The Qur'an was not properly taught. The madrassa educational system was not common in every Muslim locality.

The rise of reformist movements in Kerala is considered in this context. The movement was also known as the Mujahid Movement, sought to reinterpret Islamic teachings through a scripturalist lens. The ideology emphasized the concept of *tawḥīd*. They discouraged practices of *bidʿa*. The leaders of reformist movements focused on promoting education and rational inquiry. This period also witnessed the development of a "modern Muslim" identity. The modern concept is totally different from the European concept of colonial modernity.

The establishment of the *Muslim Aikya Sangham* in 1922 marked a significant turning point in the history of the Islamic reform movement in Kerala[6]. The subsequent formation of the Kerala Jam'iyyathul Ulama strengthened this ideological development. The body of religious scholars had played a leading role in the development of reformist ideas among the Muslim community[7]. With the emergence of these institutional frameworks, the *Islahi* [8](reformist) movement attained a more systematic and organised form.

The *Islahi* movement aimed to describe the two fundamental concepts in Islam, *Sunnah* and *Bid'ah*[9]. The term *Sunnah*[10] denotes "the prescribed path," representing the authentic practices of the Prophet. Over time, the Muslim community had incorporated various practices as part of their life and beliefs. Most of these activities and practices were not in the structure of Islamic beliefs. And sometimes those were considered un-Islamic. The reformist groups were classified as *Bid'ah*[11]. The reformist groups argue that *Bid'ah* falls outside the tenets of Islam. Reformist scholars

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contended that adherence to such innovations represented a significant deviation from the true Islamic community.

Islamic reformist groups were fundamentally opposed to the prevailing practices within the Muslim community. They tried to promote and disseminate reformist ideas. They used magazines as a tool for spreading their ideas. The organization launched a monthly magazine, *Al-Islam*, with its inaugural issue published in 1918 in Arabic-Malayalam[12]. The magazine's editorial board published numerous articles that aligned with the organization's stated objectives. In addition, the publication addressed a wide array of issues, including the status of Muslim women in contemporary society. It also addressed the significance of Arabic language education. The theological concepts of *Tawhid* and *Shirk* were clearly explained. They also gave more importance of prayer in Islam[13]. The initiatives of the reformist leaders quickly gained attention. The reformative ideas were extensively discussed within the Muslim community. Naturally, it reflected the widespread impact of their efforts in a relatively short period of time.

As a continuation of reformist efforts, the *Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham* was established in 1918 at Nilakkamukku, Thiruvananthapuram. Vakkom Maulavi served as the president of the association[14]. The association was established under the model of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam. The primary objective of the Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham was to promote intellectual and religious awareness within the Muslim community of Kerala. The Sangham organized seminars and lectures in various parts of Kerala to promote reformative ideas. They undertook the publication of numerous books for promoting reformative insight among the community. In addition, to cultivate a new culture of reading and scholarship among Kerala's Muslims, they started libraries[15].

Another important reformative association named *Kerala Jam'iyyathul Ulema*, organised at Aluva in 1924. The association was established under the provisions of the Society Act of 1860[16]. The organization's primary objective was to provide religious training to the Muslim community[17]. The founding leaders of the organizations were including K.M. Maulavi, E.K. Maulavi, and A.C.C. Abdurahman Maulavi. However, the organization was short-lived. The orthodox sections of the Muslim community

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gradually withdrew from the association. And subsequently established the *Samastha Kerala Jam'iyyathul Ulama* in 1926. From this period we can see the beginning of two distinct groups within the Muslim community of Kerala. The organization of Samastha emerged as the representative of the traditional Muslim community.

From this period onwards, divisions began to emerge within the Muslim community, largely around debates over whether certain religious and social practices were Islamic or un-Islamic. The major problems of this period were the emergence of intense debates within Islam itself regarding religious practices. The traditional Muslim group had to accept local influences within conventional Islamic values. The reformist ideas created significant shifts in the lifestyle of some sections of the Muslim community. This affected traditional practices of rituals, beliefs, and funeral practices of the Muslim community. However, the new ideological positions put forward by the reform movement were not readily accepted by the traditional scholars. This led to intense debates and disputes within the Muslim community.

The continuation of this reformist process culminated in the establishment of the *Kerala Naduathul Mujahidin* (KNM). The association was founded in April 1950. The organisation emerged under the leadership of scholars associated with the various *Islahi* (reformist) movements in Kerala[18]. The objectives of the KNM were closely aligned with those of the broader *Islah* movement in the region. The movement promoted an authentic understanding of Islam grounded in strict monotheism. Central to its mission was the dissemination of what it regarded as the true message of Islam. It was free from perceived innovations and traditionalist deviations.

The reformative leaders understood that the fundamental problem of the Muslim community was the lack of religious education. Scholars started to intitated to starte systematic religious education for the community. They believed that education must reorganise the community. Consequently, they established an extensive network of *madrasas* across the region. The existing system of madrassa education faced numerous limitations. Consequently, the primary initiative of the *Islahi* movements involved modernising the existing *madrasa* system in Kerala.[19]. These scholars emphasized the problems of the traditional model of education. They introduced

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comprehensive reforms aimed at transforming various dimensions of religious education. However, the reception of these changes was mixed. Large sections of the traditional Muslim community were reluctant to embrace such structural reforms in the field of madrassa education. In the initial stage, a smaller group of Muslims welcomed and adopted the reformist initiatives with genuine enthusiasm.

The initial efforts of the reformist leaders were to implement substantive changes in the field of *madrasa* education. It marked a significant development of both primary and higher levels of religious instruction in Kerala. As a result of these reforms, religious education became more systematised. The educational system became more institutionalised. They introduced modern pedagogical principles. Within a short span of time, a considerable number of *madrasas* were established across Muslim-populated regions, reflecting the widespread influence of these initiatives. The Kerala Naduvathul Mujahidin (KNM) Educational Board emerged as the leading institution overseeing *madrasa* activities in the state. This board was established in Ramanattukara, located in the Malappuram district. The board played a pivotal role in coordinating and standardising reformist educational efforts in Kerala[20].

In the social context of Muslims in Kerala, reformist efforts had significant influence. The primary aim of reformism was to eliminate practices that were traditionally followed but were considered un-Islamic. They also questioned the gender differences existing in the field of madrassa education. The reformist leaders tried to protect the status and rights of women in the field of madrassa education and secular education. The ideas of the Renaissance were discussed at a broad intellectual level. The movement addressed the complex contemporary challenges faced by the Muslim community. In pursuing these objectives, reformist thinkers maintained an intellectual engagement with the institutional and epistemological frameworks of the concept of modernity. At the same time, safeguarding the overall unity of the Muslim community from ideological and cultural perspectives. The ideas associated with Westernization remained a fundamental characteristic of Renaissance thought.

The reformative efforts were visible in the field of madrasa education. The *Islahī* movement emerged as a formal socio-religious organization that emphasized the centralization of education. The movement spread throughout Kerala. It gave special

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attention to education as a means of overcoming the religious and social challenges The special attentions alo given to Muslim women. For a long time, the social condition of the Muslim community, especially the girls, did not allow them to get religious and secular education. The movement played a crucial role in establishing major educational institutions and schools across Kerala. At the same time, it stressed the necessity of modern education for both men and women, beyond gender differences, and actively encouraged such initiatives.

Another important reformist group that greatly influenced Muslim social reform activities in Kerala was Jamaat-e-Islami. This organization also influenced the growth of Islamic revivalist movements across the world. It was founded in 1941 under the leadership of Syed Abul A'la Maududi in Aurangabad. The fundamental ideology of Jamaat-e-Islami is strictly related to the concept of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God) [21]. In the activities of the organisation in Kerala for the enhancement of the Muslim community. The organization incorporated some of the modern approaches proposed by the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen. The organisation also questioned many traditional beliefs and practices followed by the conventional Muslim society in Kerala. In the social context of Kerala, it is a fact that local beliefs and customs had greatly influenced ordinary Muslim communities. A large section of the indigenous Muslim community was converted from diffent religious and classes. Naturally, their traditional practices were also imbibed into their life. The social reformers tried to highlight the traditions followed by the local muslims. The reformers tried to eradicate the practices by using the possibilities of the print media. By giving importance to modern education, these reformers experimented with new changes within religious education.

Reformist leaders accepted the idea of "progress" promoted by the concept of colonial modernity. In this context, Muslim reformers in Kerala prioritized scientific and modern education among the community. Religious reform and women's empowerment were the central ideas of their reformist movement. However, in its early stages, the reformist movement had to face significant opposition from traditional ulama and the indigenous muslim community in different parts of Kerala. They did not accept the ideas of un-Islamic beliefs. A large section of the local

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population had gradually embraced Islam due to various reasons. the existing social conditions, arab trade relations, mutha marriage, and caste compartmentalizations are some of the reasons for Islamic development in Kerala. Naturally, local cultural practices coexisted in their everyday lives alongside Islamic doctrinal norms. For many people, these practices were not considered as Islamic philosophical ideas. It was as part of the expressions of assimilation in their daily life. Therefore, it can be said that the perspective of the traditional community did not fall strictly within the framework of the idea of religious reform. In fact, alternative thinking in response to colonial dominance cannot be understood solely within a religious or social framework. The political context of colonial domination also significantly influenced the development of such social thought.

The socio-political circumstances prevailing in Malabar during this period influenced a large section of traditional Islamic ulamas as well. They were not willing to accept the educational methods that emerged as part of colonial rule. The concept of "language of hell" also kept the traditional Muslim community away from modern education. The traditional Muslim society in Kerala, mostly engaged in agriculture. The colonial intervention in Malabar severely affected the ordinary life of the agrarian community. The main reason for this was that the agricultural policies pursued by the colonial administration had inflicted severe shocks on the socio-economic life of the Mappila Muslims. As a result, resistance to colonial rule became inseparably linked with resistance to the English language. Similarly, they could not accept the colonial interpretation of modernity that was being imposed upon them.

Nevertheless, the emergence of reformist ideas played a decisive role in reconstructing these perspectives. The gradual acceptance of modern education by a large section of the Muslim community should be regarded as one of the most significant achievements of the reform movement. The changes that occurred among the Muslim community in Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin should be seen as an excellent example of this. It is a fact that the reformist leaders' transformation of educational reform into the primary means of propagating their ideas faced strong opposition in the early period. However, their sustained efforts over time bore witness not only to the spread of English education but also to remarkable structural changes

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in the field of religious education. This marked a decisive shift in the intellectual and cultural advancement of the Muslim community in Kerala.

Endnotes

1. Syed Moideensha,et.al., (ed.), *Islamika Darshanam* (Mal.),1995, p.2
2. M.Abdul Samad, *Islam in Kerala Groups and Movements in 20"" Century*,1998, p.26
3. K.M.Seethi, *'Kerala Muslingal Navodhana Munnettam'*, Farook College Golden Jubilee Souvenir (Mai.), p.86
4. Ajmal Mueen M. A, *Historic Roots of Islamic Revival and Muslim Reformism in Kerala*, IJRAR October 2018, Volume 5, Issue 4 ,www.ijrar.org visited on 18-10-2025
5. A.Abdussalam Sullami, *Muslingalude Anacharangal Oru Samagra Veekshanam* (Mai.), 1998, p.l.
6. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India, *Modern Asian Studies* 42, 2/3 (2008), p.321
7. Abdul Jabar Thripanachi, 'Keralathele Muslim Vidhyabhyasathapanangal Uthbavavum Valarchayum', Mujahid State Conference Souvenir, 1996, p.93.
8. The Islahi Movement in Kerala emerged as a significant socio-religious reform initiative aimed at revitalizing the Muslim community through religious, educational, and social reforms.
9. Abdu Aneez Madani, 'Sunnath Bidahth'(Mal.), Mujahid State Conference Souvenir,1992, p.87.
10. Sunni Islam refers primarily to the customary practices of Prophet Mvihairvmad. The term Sunni derives from Sunnah and has the general meaning of customary practices. This practice, this Sunnath is preserved in the Hadith, the tradition that consists of the accounts of what the Prophet said or did and sometimes with his tacit approval of an action. See more details on Salvation, Souvenir on the International exhibition of Islam, 2006, p.83
11. The term *Bid'ah* refers to beliefs and practices traditionally followed by certain segments of the Muslim community that contradict the fundamental tenets of Islam. Such beliefs are considered deviations from the core principles of the faith. Reformist scholars argued that *Bid'ah* violates the purity of Islamic doctrine and causes the community to deviate from the true path prescribed in the Qur'an and Sunnah
12. M.Muliammad Kannu, Vakkam Maulaviyum Navodhana Nayakanmarum (Mal.), 1982, p.30.
13. *Ibid*.
14. M. Abdulsamad, *op.cit*,p.68.
15. E.K.Ahammadkutty, 'Salafi Movements in India, A Historical survey', Mujahid State Conference Souvenir, 1992, p.20
16. The society Act xxi of 1860 as per No.52 of 1931-1932, See more details on Constitution of the Kerala Jame-at- Ulama, p.2.
17. E.Moudu Maulavi, Maulaviyude Athmakatha Autobiography (Mal.), 1985, p.9
18. Abdul Majeed Varanakkara, Keralathile Salafi Sangadanagal, Salafi Prabhodanavum Lakshyavum Margavum (selected Essays)', Mujahid State Conference Sovenir,1991,p.l00.
19. 'Nammude Madrasa Prasthanam', *Kerala Naduvathul Mujahiden Annual Souvenir*, 1968, p.30.
20. P.Muhammad Kuttassery, 'Madrasa Prasthanam Charithravum Dauthyavum' (Mal.), Thiruragadi Nurul Islam Madrasa 60"' Annual Souvenir,p.46
21. Sayyid Abdu Ala Maududi, *Islaminde Sandesham* (Mal.),1996, p.l4.

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