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The Muslim Middle Class and Religious Reform in Early 20th Century Kerala: Class, Modernity and The Contest Over Tradition

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Introduction

The history of the Muslim community in Kerala is often narrated through the lens of anti-colonial resistance, particularly the struggles of the Mappila peasantry in Malabar. However, parallel to these agrarian uprisings, a different kind of transformation was taking place in the coastal town of Kodungallur—one defined not by armed rebellion, but by intellectual negotiation and social restructuring. From the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, Kodungallur served as the incubator for a powerful wave of religious and social reform initiatives. This paper examines these developments, positing that the reformist movement was largely a project of the emerging Muslim middle class.

The significance of this study lies in its shift of focus from event history to social history. It investigates how the unique historical factors of Kodungallur—its legacy of trade, its port status, and crucially, the presence of a wealthy and educated middle class—created a fertile ground for reformist ideologies. While these initiatives undoubtedly advanced educational and social progress, they also generated deep organizational tendencies and ideological divergences. This paper explores how the drive for "modernity" among the Kodungallur elite led to a contest over tradition, creating a rupture between the scripturalist aspirations of the middle class and the lived reality of the ordinary Mappila.

The majority of Muslims in Kerala are Sunnis[1]. Over the course of history, they migrated and settled in different regions, shaping their customs and practices according to local contexts. However, this diversity came under challenge at a certain point, mainly due to the communal divisions reinforced by colonial census classifications based on religion, as well as the identity crisis triggered by the

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problems and uprisings of the Malabar tenants culminated in Malabar rebellion[2]. At the same time, global reformist currents within Islam had begun to influence Malayali Muslims by the late nineteenth century[3]. These were inspired by the reformist efforts of figures such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan[4]. Their central aim was to unify religion, discard localized practices, and reinterpret Islam in line with Salafi ideals, redirecting local Islam towards the Qur'an and a more universal framework. Many among them also supported the British administration, arguing that Muslims should pursue government service for advancement. However, in Malabar—especially among the traditional tenant-peasant Mappilas—such approaches and pro-government attitudes were largely rejected[5].

Thus, the reformers in Kerala sought to modernize Muslim society through initiatives such as promoting modern education, systematizing religious instruction, abolishing local customs, redefining family and marital relations, and building a Qur'an-based Islamic community. From the second decade of the twentieth century, efforts were made to bring Kerala Muslims together under a single organization.

Two reformist strands were visible within the community: one "pre-modern" and the other "modern."[6] Both aimed to shape an Islamic order based on the Qur'an and Hadith, but they differed in their attitude towards Western ideas. While the former rejected them entirely, the latter believed that acquiring modern education was not incompatible with building an Islamic society rooted in scripture. This latter current was essentially linked to Salafism, or Wahhabism. It is against this backdrop that the religious, social, and political transformations within the Kerala Muslim community in the early twentieth century must be understood.

As a result of early reformist initiatives, various organizations and associations emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, though their activities remained localized. Kodungallur, in general, part of the Cochin state, held special significance in Kerala's history, in particular, in the Muslim reformism. From ancient trade links to the activities of religious propagation groups, its shores witnessed significant encounters. It became a major center of reform not only because it was home to prominent Islamic institutions but also because of its educated middle-class

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Muslims. For instance, the early reformist leader Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal had many disciples in Kodungallur. Similarly, Sheikh Hamadani, in the early twentieth century, chose Kodungallur as his field of activity, with the support of wealthy local patrons like Seethi Muhammad Sahib and Manappat Kunj Muhammad Haji[7].

The growing need for a platform to address community problems and promote social, religious, educational, and economic reforms led to the establishment of the Muslim Aikya Sangham in Kodungallur[8]. Many researchers view it as a reorganization of the earlier Nishpaksha Sangham. Influenced by the Khilafat Movement and the global crisis of Muslim identity, certain leaders came to believe that reform based on the Qur'an and Sunnah was essential. Historian Dr. P. P. Abdul Razak points out that this conviction paved the way for the founding of the Muslim Aikya Sangham.[9]

Prior to this, Kerala lacked a broad-based Muslim reform movement. Moreover, colonial rule had weakened ties with North India and the Arab world. The Mappilas' religious outlook remained largely shaped by traditional Arab Sunni influences, with little Wahhabi impact until the early twentieth century. The emergence of reformist organizations in Kodungallur—led by figures such as K. M. Moulavi, Moidu Moulavi, Manappat P. Kunj Muhammad Haji, Manappat Kochu Moidheen, Seethi Muhammad, K. M. Seethi Sahib, and Muhammed Abdurahiman—was a turning point. They were deeply influenced by Sanaullah Makthi Thangal, Sheikh Hamadani, and Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi.

These reformers viewed Kerala Muslims as steeped in superstition and deviating from Islam's foundational principles. They also feared the cultural influence of Christian missionaries. Thus, what began as isolated individual efforts in the late nineteenth century evolved into a more organized movement by the early twentieth century, particularly centered in Kodungallur.

Nevertheless, differences of opinion persisted among leaders regarding organizational activities. For example, Moidu Moulavi was warned by Abdurahiman Sahib in Madras not to immerse himself too quickly in the Aikya Sangham due to growing conflicts between Wahhabis and Sunnis, suggesting instead that the focus should first be on running newspapers[10].

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The Aikya Sangham also provided refuge and assistance to Malabar Mappilas who fled to Kodungallur during the 1921 rebellion, with leaders such as Seethi Sahib's father, Manappat Kunhahammad Haji, and Panapparambil Kunhippokker Kutti Sahib extending support. Initially, the refugees experienced considerable shock and severe discomfort, but due to the supportive behavior of the Muslim citizens of Kodungallur, they eventually returned. Thereafter, K. M. Moulavi shifted his activities to Ponnani[11].

This episode highlights the fact that Muslim leaders and the wider community of that time held diverse opinions regarding reform and related issues. Leaders operating from Kodungallur in particular were socially distinct, belonging to affluent, educated middle-class families. Consequently, their perspectives on social questions did not always resonate with the everyday concerns of ordinary Muslims in other regions. These differences of opinion later manifested in fatwas and other public statements. For instance, during the third conference of the Aikya Sangham held in Kozhikode, when decisions were made against practices like kodikoothi nercha (a festival offering) and ear-piercing ceremonies for girls, a section of traditionalists opposed this stance and issued fatwas in support of such customs. P. K. Moosakutti Haji of Munambam, for example, objected to ear piercing and the custom of taking jewellery as pledges. Some journals were also published during this period, and many activists advocated for women's education. Among them were C. Seydalikutty Master from Tirur and Mandayappuram Bava Mooppan, who served as a school assistant inspector[12].

Similar differences emerged over attitudes toward the British government. Wealthy Muslim notables with commercial interests often supported the colonial administration to secure benefits, and at times, even betrayed the rebellious Mappilas by siding with the authorities.

As noted earlier, Kodungallur became the focal point of these reform activities largely due to the pioneering efforts of Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal and Sheikh Hamadani. Sanaullah Makthi Thangal sought to resist the cultural influence of missionaries and promoted both modern and religious education[13]. Through works like Kador Kudaram, Parkalitha Porkalam, and Makthi Samvada Vijayam, he criticized superstitions, excessive spending on marriages, and the matrilineal

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marumakkathayam system. He also took a firm stand against traditional ulama and pseudo-Sufi figures[14].

Sheikh Hamadani, too, began his reform activities from Kodungallur. His disciple Seethi Muhammad Sahib became president of the Lajnatul Hamdania society that Hamadani had founded at Azhikode for social reform, where he also established a primary school[15]. He later helped found the Cochin Muslim Educational Conference and set up a branch of the Maunatul Islam Sabha at Azhikode for religious purposes[16]. In his book Ilfathul Islam, he urged Muslims to end internal conflicts and abstain from immoral practices. This work greatly influenced reformers such as E. K. Moulavi[17].

Manappat Kunju Muhammad Haji established the Eriyad Lajnatul Islam in Kodungallur, seeking to reform religious education. He also set up a school there, which admitted students regardless of caste or religion, including those from oppressed communities[18].

The central figure who influenced all these reform leaders was Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi. His journals The Muslim and Al-Islam had many subscribers in Kodungallur. Later, Vakkom Moulavi was invited to inaugurate the annual program of the Lajnatul Hamdania held in Kodungallur, which deeply inspired local reformists[19]. He worked to eliminate superstitions and shirk from Islam, which led traditional ulama to label him a "Wahhabi." By building alliances between religious leaders and newly educated middle-class Muslims, he spread the ideas of the Aikya Sangham movement throughout Kerala.

However, bitter feuds among wealthy families such as the Padiyattu clan stirred internal conflicts in the community. Peace was only restored after the death of Manappat Hydros Haji, thanks to the efforts of his son Kunju Muhammad Haji. It was also during this period that the Malabar Rebellion reached its peak, leading to the exile of many rebels to Kodungallur. On the advice of M. C. C. Abdurahiman and E. K. Moulavi, K. M. Moulavi also arrived in Kodungallur. E. K. Moulavi, a Mujahid thinker, emphasized that alongside religious education, intellectual education was equally important[20]. With the support of Seethi Muhammad and Kunju Muhammad Haji, these reformers pursued their initiatives. They also drew inspiration from Vakkom Moulavi,

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and K. M. Moulavi even accompanied him to the 1921 Kerala State Khilafat Conference[21].

Yet, new disagreements surfaced among wealthy families, with Seethi Muhammad and Kunju Muhammad Haji eventually withdrawing. Following this, Sheikh Hamadani suggested the formation of a new organization to campaign against social evils. Since they had severed ties with others, the group was named the Nishpaksha Sangham founded in 1922[22]. Along with Seethi Muhammad and Kunju Muhammad Haji, leaders such as K. M. Seethi Sahib, K. M. Moulavi, and E. K. Moulavi were also part of it. As the group began intervening in issues across different parts of Kerala, several branches were formed, and it eventually evolved into the Muslim Aikya Sangham.

Conclusion

From 1498 onward, it can be seen that Muslims in Kerala generally prioritized anti-colonial struggles over internal social reform. Consequently, many Muslims opposed the English language and, to an extent, modern intellectual education, adhering instead to rote learning of Arabic without understanding its meaning[23]. The practice of nagdam (mere recitation of the Qur'an) was prevalent, as noted in Moidu Moulavi's autobiography[24]. Geographical divisions also fragmented the community, and the qazis and other scholars who led them lacked the knowledge to understand global social changes.

The reform movements centered in Kodungallur during the early 20th century were not merely religious revivals; they were the articulate expressions of a rising Muslim middle class grappling with modernity. The antiquity of Islam in Kerala and Kodungallur's historic role as a port provided the backdrop, but it was the "affluent, educated middle class" that acted as the engine of change.

This class utilized the tools of colonial modernity—print media, rational organizations, and modern schools to challenge the stagnation of the traditional community. By establishing the Muslim Aikya Sangham and promoting a scripturalist version of Islam, they sought to purge the community of "superstitions" and integrate it into the modern world. However, this project was contested. It triggered a profound struggle over the definition of tradition, pitting the modernizing elite against the orthodox ulama and the traditional peasantry.

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While archaeological studies have explored Kodungallur's ancient past, the modern contributions of its middle class to Kerala Muslim society remain a fertile ground for research. The legacy of Kodungallur is a testament to the complexity of reform: it was a movement that advanced social progress and education, yet simultaneously exposed the deep class and ideological fissures that would define the community's politics for decades to come.

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