



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Empowering Change- An Organizational Effort For The Educational Advancement Of Muslim Women In Kerala - A Study

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Abstract

Islam prioritizes education and the pursuit of knowledge of the faith. The religion encourages its followers to see knowledge not only in matters of Faith but also in various fields of human understanding. The Quran emphasizes the transmission of knowledge as a central purpose of divine Revelation and the mission of the prophets. It holds in high esteem those who pursue learning, elevating society's status.

the study examines a group of visionary leaders and the reformers' organisations who identify superstition, child marriage, polygamy, unilateral divorce, and the rigid practice of the Purda system as key factors contributing to the backwardness of Muslim women in Kerala. Recognising these challenges, they endeavoured to uplift women by promoting awareness and education as tools for empowerment and transformation. These social reformers correctly adopted a common strategy, the dissemination of education, particularly secular education, among the entire community, with a special focus on Muslim women. They realised that education was the only viable solution to the deep-rooted social issues faced by the community. In doing so, they reaffirmed the Islamic principle that values knowledge and intellectual growth. This paper highlights the efforts of these leaders to spread the concept of modern education through the establishment of various social, educational, and political organizations. In addition, it explores the role of the government in recognizing these issues and implementing initiatives aimed at promoting educational and social reform within the Muslim community.

Keywords

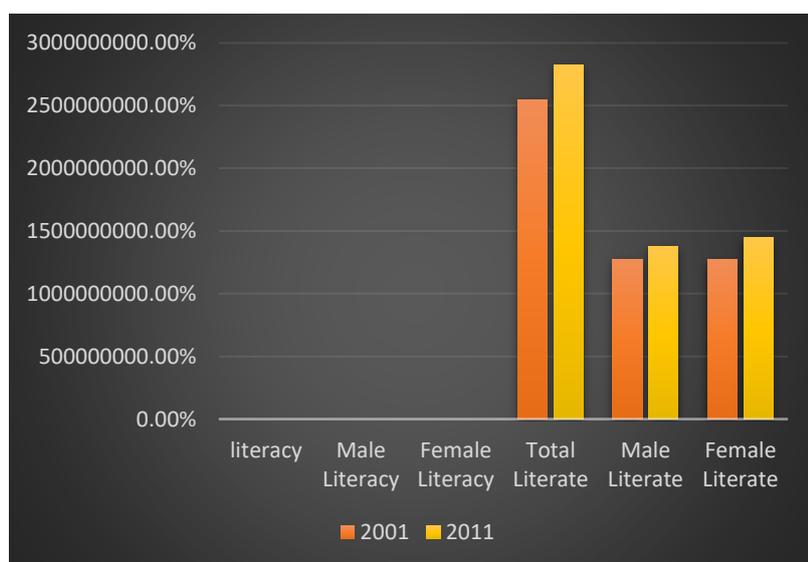
Polygamy, Purda, Islahi Movement, Othupalli, Margadeepam

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion that gives high priority and insists that all, male and female, should acquire education without any discrimination. This is mentioned in the Quran. The first Quranic revelation to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) started with the glorious word "Iqra," which means "read". This verse indicates the importance of education to Muslims. Islam supports extensive education for both men and women. The Quran encourages the pursuit of knowledge as a religious obligation. Surah Al-Zumar says, "Say, 'Are

those who know equal to those who do not know?"¹This verse emphasizes the value of seeking knowledge regardless of gender.

According to the Household Social Consumption: Education in India as part of the 75th round survey conducted on July 2017- June 2018 by the National Statistical Office (NSO), the literacy rate among persons of 7 years above for different states, Kerala is in the first position for highest literacy rate than other states. (Male-97.4%, Female-95.2%)². From this survey, it is clear that Kerala fulfills its preamble of the Kerala Educational Act 1958, "WHEREAS it is deemed necessary to provide for the better organization and development of educational institutions in the State, providing a varied and comprehensive educational service throughout the State;"³



The given data shows that, according to the 2011 census, Kerala possesses a much higher literacy rate than other states. Kerala has the highest rates of female literacy (91.98%) and overall literacy (93.91%). Kerala's Muslim community comprises 26.56% of the state's population. Additionally, they are India's most literate Muslims. In Kerala, 93.23% of Muslims are literate. It is significantly lower than the Christian (96.49%) and Hindu (93.49%) communities.

The 2011 census showed that Muslim women achieved 93.23% literacy, which is a very proud achievement. because Muslims were India's most disenfranchised group before independence. Kerala is in a similar scenario. From a site of superstition and reactionary beliefs, Muslims in Kerala have evolved into a conservative segment of society. Muslim women in Kerala were the victims of behaviours that the Quran does not condone, such as polygamy, child marriage, and unilateral divorce. Many women's lives have been destroyed as a result of the false belief that a woman's existence should be confined within closed boundaries and the shadow of the veil. Despite the emphasis on equality and justice between men and women in the Quran, the arbitrary maintenance of male dominance in all cultural, social, and economic spheres, including divorce, education, employment, politics, etc., unfavourably affected the advancement of women. There was a deviation in many issues related to marriage prescribed in the Quran. A girl's life aspirations were stifled even before she could marry at a young age. Early marriage prevented them from receiving an education and, more significantly, led to stress on both a physical and emotional level. Among Muslims in Kerala, the dowry system, which the Quran strongly condemns, became a common practice. As a result, financial responsibilities increased. While buying and giving

dowry in Islam is wrong, Muslims are the ones who provide the most dowry in Kerala today. There might be serious repercussions from this.

In the early days, Muslim women's education was confined only to religious education in small mosques, in religious schools called othupalli, and at home. Even religious education was improper. They were limited to recitation without understanding the in-depth meaning of the Quran. Muslims fought against modern education with both hands, while Hindus and Christians welcomed it when the British arrived and recognized its importance. However, among Muslims, some leaders like Vakkom Maulavi, Makthi Thangal, etc, promoted modern education with special consideration for Muslim women. As a result, a group of leaders and organizations came forward, highlighting the importance of modern secular education to liberate Muslim women from social tyranny and achieve progress. This has contributed to Muslim women's current social and educational achievements.

Background of Muslim social resurgence in Kerala

The backwardness and darkness of ignorance of the Muslims in Kerala were contributed to some extent by the anti-knowledge attitudes of the Ulama of those days. The Ulama were those who did not understand the true essence of the Quran and indulged in superstitions. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim."⁴ However, the ulama attempted to restrict themselves to religious education alone and to advance Islam by limiting women's educational rights without fully comprehending the implications of this remark. But in response to all of this, the Islahi Movement brought out reformers like Makthi Thangal and Vakkom Mauolavi. Muslim women have become stronger due to all their endeavours and adherence to their path, and several women have established themselves in the social, political, and educational spheres.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslim social reformers and their reform reminded us of the high status given to women in Islam. Some leaders deserve recognition for their work, like Sayyed Sanaullah Makti Tangal, Sheik Hamadani Tangal, Chalilakattu Kunjahammad Haji and, Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi. As a result of their efforts, by giving importance to religious education and in addition to secular education, Muslim women have taken a new step from the darkness of ignorance to the world of knowledge.

Hamadani Tangal, who purified Muslims and brought unity among them. Tangal's primary achievement was the establishment of the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham, which led reformative initiatives to encourage Muslims to pursue secular education. To implement an integrated educational system that included religious and secular courses, he founded the Muslim Conference.⁵ However, the absence of community support made his attempts ineffective. Additionally, Tangal wrote articles in the journal Muslim, urging young men to contribute to the advancement of education, especially for women. He urged the government to provide for the teaching of Arabic to Muslim pupils in secular institutions in addition to Malayalam and English. A new chapter in the cultural revival of Muslims in Travancore began with the establishment of Lajnatul Muhammadiyah in Alappuzha, which was the result of Tangal's spiritual leadership. He founded organizations like Lajnatul Islam Sangham and Lajnatul Hamadaniya at Eriyad, which were crucial to the growth of Muslims in Kerala, particularly in the area of education.⁶ Although Tangal died in 1922, his social and educational endeavors were an inspiration to other reformers in Kerala's Muslim minority.

During the late nineteenth century, Sanaullah Makti Tangal was a prominent religious and social reformer in Kerala. He thought that Muslims' savage customs stemmed from a lack of knowledge about both religion and secular subjects. In addition to encouraging Muslims to study Malayalam and English, he called on the Ulama to reform religious education. Additionally, he advocated education for women, stating that women are "mothers and moulders of the future generation."⁷ Even though secular education was frowned upon by the traditional Ulama, he was the first Muslim academic to advocate for it. To unite young people and implement changes, he founded the Mohammadiya Sabha, a cultural organization, in

Kannur in 1889. It took action to address the issues and challenges faced by Muslims in the realm of education, particularly concerning women. He released an educational plan in Salahul Ikhwan in 1906 that included mathematics, English, Arabic, and Malayalam. Although Tangal died in 1912, his work helped to hasten the rise of religious ideas and reformism.

Chalilakattu Kunjahmad Haji, a prominent educationist, revolutionized the Muslim educational outlook. Born in Tirur, he taught at Darses attached to Pulikkal, Mahe, and Peringadi mosques. Haji introduced reforms such as introducing classes according to student standards, preparing text books, and incorporating jurisprudence and theology into higher classes. He introduced Basic Arithmetic, General Science, and the Malayalam Alphabet in primary classes, along with Logic, Astronomy, and Geography as nonreligious subjects.⁸ He also modernized the Arabi-Malayalam dialect through his book *Taswirul Huruf*. Haji encouraged students to read newspapers in different languages and sent their daughters to school, defying orthodox dictums. He is considered a pioneer of the Islahi Movement.

One of Kerala's first Muslim social and religious reformers was Muhammad Abdul Qadir Moulavi. Moulavi viewed progress in the Muslim community as dependent on radical changes in religious and social attitudes. He appealed to their intellect rather than their feelings and emotions, concentrating on the social renewal of the Muslim community. In 1905, Maulavi founded *Swadeshabhimani*, a weekly newspaper in Kerala aimed at promoting the welfare of the people. The newspaper's first editor, C.P. Govinda Pillai, left to become editor of another newspaper, and K. Rama Krishna Pillai, later known as *Swadeshabhimani*, took over. *Swadeshabhimani* exposed the nepotism and corruption of the Travancore royal family, its dependents, and high-ranking officials. The government banned the newspaper on 1910 September 26th and exiled K. Ramakrishna Pillai.⁹ After *Swadeshabhimani*'s closure, Maulavi focused on reforming the Muslim community. The newspaper's impact on political history in Kerala is undeniable.

He attempted to purge the decaying Muslim culture of all customs and ideas that were not in line with Islam, presenting it as the most logical faith. Moulavi encouraged the society to expand education among Muslim women and advocated for their education. He put pressure on the government to enact liberal policies to support Muslim education by publishing the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference proceedings and the remarks of prominent educationists. The Muslim community was hesitant to abandon its sluggishness despite these amenities. Moulavi urged powerful community members to work hard to end the public's indifference to education and pledged to speak to the administration once again if any workable solutions emerged. After 1916, Moulavi began working on theological reform. To expose erroneous ideas and behaviours and provide an accurate explanation of Islam, he founded the periodical *Al-Islam* in Arabi-Malayalam in 1918, which disseminated the principles of *Al-Minar*.¹⁰ In *Al-Islam*, there are valuable articles on religious matters, such as definitions of *Islah* (reform) and emphasis on praying only to Allah instead of imploring help from venerated persons. Moulavi maintained that women are on par with men in both spiritual and secular endeavors, underscoring the significance of women's rights and standing in contemporary education. By encouraging knowledge and cultivating virtues, he sought to re-establish women's rights and make them aware of them. Numerous local organizations that supported reformist ideologies had an impact on Moulavi's attempts to disseminate education and change Muslim culture. In Kerala, the *Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham Nilakkamukku* (1918) was a well-known group dedicated to advancing Muslim education.¹¹ The orthodox Ulama and their vested interests opposed the early Muslim leaders' efforts, but they made the Muslim masses enthusiastic about education.

Major organizations and their contributions towards the educational progress of Muslim women in Kerala.

The aforementioned leaders' efforts have been extremely helpful in elevating women to higher echelons of society and illuminating contemporary education from a conservative perspective. The growth of Muslim women we witness today was made possible by their bravery, work for women, and organizational competence. Many local organizations and schools were founded by leaders such as Vakkom Maulavi to support Muslim women's education and English education. The educational efforts of Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi in Travancore and Cochin encouraged Kerala Muslims to abandon un-Islamic practices, adopt English education, and develop progressive movements. To promote education among the Muslims of Malabar, he established regional groups like as Lajnatt ul-Muhammadiyah Sangham of Alappuzha and Lajnatt ul-Hamadani of Azhikkode. He established the All Travancore Muslim Mahajana Sabha to unify these groups and activities. He called on the government of Travancore to take the required actions to help Muslims and effect change among them.

Several regions of Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore extended strong support to the Aligarh Muslim University movement. In 1911, a primary school was established in Azhikkode, while Kodungallor emerged as a prominent centre for Muslim education in the Cochin state. In Kozhikode, the Himayathil Islam school played a pioneering role by offering free secular and religious education. This institution was supported by the Himayathul Islam Saba, which was founded in 1891, with the Mission of educating the Muslims of Malabar., The Ma'unatt-ul-Islam Saba, established in 1900, significantly contributed to Muslim education through its branches spread across South Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. To further promote education among Muslims, the Lajnathul Muhammadiya Sangam was formed in 1915. In 1918, a government elementary school in Alappuzha was upgraded to a high school, marking another milestone in the community's educational development. Following the Malabar rebellion of 1921, the JDT Islam Sabha was established to educate orphaned children, helping them become responsible citizens and protecting them from the cycle of poverty. In Kodungallor, the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangam was founded with the twin objectives of promoting modern education and uplifting the Muslim Community socially and economically. The 1940s witnessed a renewed momentum in the educational activities of the Muslim Community. organizations such as Rouzath ul Uloom Association and other local bodies made significant contributions to the advancement of higher education. A major turning point came with the visionary efforts of Moulavi Abdussabah Ali, who aspired to establish a Muslim University in Eranad, one of the most educationally backward regions of Malabar. His efforts led to the establishment of Farook College, Farook High School, and Farook Training College. The founding of Farook College marked a transformative era for Kerala's Muslim community, catalysing long-lasting reforms and progress. It played a crucial role in reshaping the community's social, political, and educational landscape.

In addition to the aforementioned institutions and organizations, numerous Muslim student organizations have emerged over the years. These organizations have actively worked for the upliftment of students by addressing campus-related issues and promoting access to higher education for all. prominent. Among them are the Muslim Students Federation(MSF), affiliated with the Indian Union Muslim League, the Students' Islamic organization, the student wing of Jamat Islami, the Sunni Students Federation under Samastha Kerala, and the fraternity movement, affiliated with the welfare part of India. Several other student organizations have also played a pivotal Role in promoting student welfare and empowerment. Each of these organizations has established Sister Wings focused on the empowerment of Muslim girls. These wings are committed to bringing Muslim women to the Forefront of society by fostering leadership, education, and active participation in social discourse. In parallel with these organizational efforts, the government of Kerala has implemented various scholarship and stipend programs aimed at promoting higher education among Muslims and other backward classes. Notable among these are the Muhammad scholarship and the post-Matrix scholarship. However, the Ministry of minority Affairs has discontinued the pre-matric scholarship for minority students in classes 1 through 8 enrolled in

government and aided schools. As per the revised guidelines from the central government, only students in class 9 and class 10 are eligible for this scholarship starting from the 2020-23 Financial year.¹² To address this gap, the Kerala state government has introduced a new initiative -the Margadeepam scholarship, which will be launched in the 2024-25 financial year. This program is designed to support minority students in classes 1 to 8 who have been excluded from the Central scholarship scheme. The provision of these scholarships, particularly for Muslim girls and other marginalized communities, represents one of Kerala, most significant contributions toward educational advancement and social inclusion.

Conclusion

The innovative efforts of a handful of social activists and consistent government backing led to the growth and educational success of Muslim women in Kerala. The status of Muslims in Kerala was extremely inferior to that of other communities. The Muslim community, which was extremely regressive in all social, cultural, economic, and educational spheres, was helped to make the advancements it is experiencing now by the efforts of leaders like Sayyed Sanaulah Makti Tangal, Sheik Hamadani Tangal, Chalilakattu Kunjahmad Haji and, Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi. Muslim women in Kerala are currently leading the way in the fields of academia, society, and politics, questioning long-standing conventions and redefining their societal roles. The advancements made, however, serve as a starting point for future generations rather than a final destination. To guarantee that this momentum not only continues but also picks up speed, community involvement, inclusive policies, and ongoing vigilance are crucial. This will enable Muslim women to assert their legitimate position as equal contributors to the creation of an educated and just society.

Reference

- ¹ Quran, Surah Al-Zumar (39:9)
- ² Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India NSS 75th Round, JULY 2017 – JUNE 2018, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation Table 2.1
- ³ The Kerala Education Act, 1958(Act 6 of 1959), Dated: Feb, 24 1959.
- ⁴ Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Sunan Ibn Maajah-220.
- ⁵ Syed Mohideen Shah.1972. Islam in Kerala, P. 53
- ⁶ Syed Muhammad P.A (ed), Kerala Muslim Directory Ernakulam, p. 578
- ⁷ Abdul Samaed., Islam in Kerala, p. 46
- ⁸ Ibid., p.50
- ⁹⁹⁹⁹ Radhakrishnan. R.2016.Keralathinte sthreesakthicharithram(Mal),p.177
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.178
- ¹¹ Muhammad Kannu , *Vakkom Maulavi* p. 35
- ¹² <https://margadeepam.kerala.gov.in>