

HISTORICISING THE WOMEN EDUCATION IN COLONIAL MALABAR : A CASE STUDY OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY FROM 1900-1947

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Abstract:

Malabar, situated on the southwestern coast of the Indian subcontinent, witnessed a significant transformation under British rule. The 19th century was a period of profound social, economic, and political changes, with colonial policies influencing various aspects of life, including education. In this era, the prevailing educational landscape was predominantly male-centric, with limited opportunities for women, especially those from conservative Muslim families. For Muslim women in colonial Malabar, access to education was hindered by a multitude of barriers. Societal norms, based on patriarchal traditions and religious conservatism, often dictated that a woman's primary role was within the confines of her home. Consequently, investing in their education was deemed unnecessary or even taboo. Moreover, the lack of infrastructure, financial constraints, and the absence of formal educational institutions fitted to their needs further enhanced the challenges faced by Muslim women seeking education.

Index Terms - Malabar, colonial policies, patriarchal traditions, religious conservatism, infrastructure, financial constraints.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of education among Muslim women in colonial Malabar is a narrative of resilience, perseverance, and gradual empowerment. In a period marked by colonial intrusion, socio-religious conservatism, and evolving notions of gender roles, Muslim women navigated through multifaceted challenges to secure their right to education. This article delves into the detailed historical context, the pioneering efforts of reformers, and the transformative impact of education on Muslim women in colonial Malabar. The advent of education among Muslim women in colonial Malabar heralded a transformative journey. Empowered with knowledge and skills, these women became catalysts for change within their communities. Education not only expanded their intellectual horizons but also empowered them to actively participate in socio-political discourse and engage with emerging nationalist movements. Moreover, educated women were better equipped to contribute to their families' economic well-being, breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency. The present paper embark on a journey through the colonial period from 1900 to 1947, exploring the contours of Muslim education in colonial India, with a particular focus on Malabar. It delve into the challenges faced, the initiatives undertaken, and the socio-political dynamics that shaped the educational experiences of Muslims during this transformative era. It is an attempt to unravel the complexities of Muslim education in colonial Malabar, shedding light on its significance in the broader narrative of colonial history and the struggle for educational empowerment.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the late second half of the 19th century, the literacy rate of Muslim girls across British India was very low compared to that of Hindu counterparts as well as Muslim boys.¹ Till the last decades of the 19th century, there were no government or aided schools for Mappila girls in Malabar. A few mappila girls who learnt to read and write were mostly hailed from well to do families. They were taught at home. The female members of Arakkal royal family, Koyas, Keyis, and Maliyekkal families of North Malabar got the opportunity to get educated along with the male members.² The colonial period from 1900 to 1947 stands as a pivotal epoch in the history of Muslim education in India, marked by a complex interplay of colonial policies, socio-cultural dynamics, and indigenous reform efforts. This period witnessed drastic transformations in the educational scenario of colonial India, including the region of Malabar, where the

Muslim community played a dominant role. Against the backdrop of British colonial rule and the emerging nationalist movement, the education of Muslims underwent a multifaceted evolution, characterized by both challenges and opportunities. During this era, colonial administrators introduced educational reforms aimed at modernizing Indian society and creating a cadre of educated subjects capable of serving the British Raj. However, these reforms often intersected with deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and religious traditions, presenting both obstacles and avenues for advancement in Muslim education. Within the Muslim community, there emerged a wide number of responses ranging from resistance to adaptation, as reformers grappled with the tension between preserving Islamic identity and embracing modernity.

The period under review witnessed significant strides in Muslim education, with the establishment of schools, colleges, and educational institutions catering to the needs of the Muslim populace. Missionary efforts, government initiatives, and indigenous reform movements contributed to the expansion of educational opportunities for Muslims, as much as with varying degrees of success and contention. Moreover, the emergence of Muslim leaders and intellectuals played a crucial role in shaping educational discourse and advocating for the rights of Muslim learners. The western educated Muslims began to redefine their religion in tune with the values of western science, reason and secular education.³

Even though the Muslim community in Malabar was dominant in terms of population, they were much backward in the realm of education. In the early centuries, education for Muslim women in Malabar was primarily informal and centered around religious instruction within the confines of the home and community. While access to formal education was limited, women often received basic literacy and religious teachings from family members or local scholars. With the establishment of Islamic institutions and centers of learning during the medieval period, opportunities for education was further expanded. Though the curriculum was often focused on religious studies, women could access education through informal gatherings, mosques, and madrasas.

The religious constraints and poor economic conditions were also kept the Muslim women out of the purview of education. During the pre colonial period, education among the Muslim women were limited to the traditional religious education imparted through the institutions like *Othupalli*, *Dars* and *Madrasas* which were acted as the centre of religious learning that disseminated the ideals of Islam. *Othupallis* were the single teacher institution established outside a mosque under a teacher called *Mulla*. Most of the *Othupallis* were functioned in the abodes of the *Mullas*.⁴ The only learning tool used here was a wooden slate, polished with white clay on which the *Mulla* used to write the passages from *Quran*. The lessons were recited several times until the passages on the wooden slate is memorised⁵. The *Dars* were the higher classes conducted inside the mosques under the control of a priest called *Musaliar*. *Madrasas* were the centres of informal education exclusively meant for teaching religion. The subjects like Science, Mathematics, and Social Sciences were neglected from the scheme of education. The primary aim of education during this period was shaping Muslim personality.

Despite these formidable challenges, the landscape gradually began to shift, with the pioneering efforts of reformers and visionaries within the Muslim community. The Muslim reform movement in Kerala was primarily a reflection of colonial modernity and religious reform within it.⁶ Reformers like Chalilakath Kunhahammed Haji, Hamdani Thangal, Vakkom Abdul Khadar Maulavi, K.M.Moulavi and Sayid Sana Ullah Makti Thangal emphasised the need of procuring modern education. They were well versed in English, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Arabic, Persian, Tamil etc. They began to learn Malayalam and English, which were denied to the Muslims as the language of *Kafirs* or non-believers. The reformers asked their fellow members to attain modern education through mother tongue. Both Makti Thangal and Vakkom Maulavi strongly advocated this view. Vakkom Maulavi, through his journals *Muslim*, *Al-Islam*, *Deepika* and *Swadeshbhimani* endeavored to educate the Muslim community in general and women in particular. The educational programme envisaged by Makti Thangal comprised English and Arithmetic along with religious learning. Like other reformers, he also propagated his ideals through the journals published by him such as *Satyaprakasam*, and *Tuhfat ul Akhyar*. He wrote against the Ulema. His publications include *Nabi Nanayam*, *Paropakari*, *Nitya Jivan*, and *Muslim Vidhyabyasam*. Chalilalakath Kunhahammed Haji and his student K.M.Moulavi introduced several *madrasa* education reforms including the class room system, which taught basic Arithmetic, General Science, Malayalam, Logic, Astronomy and Geography. He realised the fact that *madrasa* is the only institution used by the Muslims to obtain knowledge and was convinced the need of secular education along with religious education through the *madrasas*.⁷ K.M.Moulavi championed the cause of women education at a time, when the major section of the Muslim community under the *Ulama*

posed stiff opposition to women education as well as modern education. ⁸Hamdani Thangal, a nominated member in the *Sri Mulam Praja Assembly*, forced the Travancore Government to introduce the learning of Arabic as well as English and Malayalam. Most of these reformers supported the cause of women education.

The reformist organisations such as Muhammediya Sabha of Kannur, Chirayinkizh Muhammediyya Sangham of Alappuzha, Muslim Aikhya Sangham in Kodungallur, Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulema etc. also stood for the propagation of modern education among the Muslims along with religious education. Various Muslim organisations like Travancore Muslim Mahajan Sabha, Malabar Muslim Association and Kerala Muslim Association were also stressed the need for western education and championed the cause of liberal secular education. ⁹Muhammad Abdur Rahiman Sahib and his wife played pivotal role in advocating female education. They established schools and madrasas that provided girls with basic literacy and religious instruction, challenging prevailing norms and promoting the idea of education as a fundamental right for all, irrespective of gender. The Muslim social reform characterised by fostering modern western education, scientific temper, reason, secularism etc. marked the Muslim engagement with colonial modernity.¹⁰The reform movements undertaken by these scholars could not accomplish their aims immediately since a section of the community and the Ulama kept aloof from these changes. Therefore, the Muslim reform movements, unlike other social reform movements never became a mass movement in Kerala.¹¹

Kerala witnessed significant social and economic changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The most prominent among them was the establishment of British colonial rule and the subsequent introduction of modern education. A series of socio-economic-political and military policies implemented by the colonial government had created a lasting impact on the development of Kerala society from early 19th century onwards.¹² Colonial modernity posed challenges to every religious groups including Islam in Kerala.¹³ The colonial era, particularly from the 19th century onwards, brought significant changes to the educational landscape of Malabar. British colonial policies, coupled with socio-religious reforms within the Muslim community, led to the emergence of formal educational institutions for both boys and girls. The advent of European colonial forces, especially, Britain resulted in far reaching transformations in the arena of education in Malabar region. The nineteenth century witnessed a cultural and ideological struggle against the backward elements of traditional culture on the one hand, and the fast hegemonizing colonial culture and ideology on the other.¹⁴ Subsequently, efforts were made to provide formal education irrespective of caste, creed and gender which revolutionised the field of education. Several schools and formal education centres were established under the aegis of the colonial government. The Basel Evangelical Mission took the leading role in spreading education among the masses in Malabar. Both girls and boys schools were established in different parts of Malabar under the initiative of B. E. M. Most of them were under the local management, set up on the model of government institutions.¹⁵

As a reflection of Malabar rebellion of 1921, the colonial authorities began to concentrate on Mappila education especially in Muslim majority areas. Consequently, a Muslim Training School was started in Malappuram, for providing training to Muslim teachers.¹⁶ In north Malabar, Thalassery, being a major British settlement, became a hub of modern education mainly because of the avenues of trade. The rich and progressive families of the area realized the value of education in trade as well as public life. The educated female members of these families entered in the public life of Malabar and acted as catalyst for the social transformation.¹⁷ T. C. Kunhachumma and her grand daughter Maliyekkal Mariyumma were the two great leaders of women enlightenment in north Malabar. The financial strength of the family along with the support of her husband Kadan Kandi Kuttியamu Haji enabled Kunhachumma to actively participate in public domain.¹⁸ Till her death in 1945, she continued her public life and unquenchable desire for social reform. Kunhachuma formed The Tellichery Muslim Mahila Samajam in 1933 in the courtyard of her home. Members were enrolled from his family as well as from the neighbourhood.¹⁹ She was a member of the woman's wing of Indian Union Muslim League and attended its annual meeting held at Patna in 1938. She was the only woman representative from Kerala elected the member of the women' wing of the party. The legacy of the Maliyekkal T.C.Kunhachumma was carried forward by Maliyekkal Mariyumma. Mariyumma is the first Muslim woman from northern Kerala to get English education. Mariyumma had joined the Sacred Heart Convent in Thalassery in 1938, at a time when the Muslim conservative families were forbidden from attending schools and learning any language other than Arabic. She had studied till the Fifth Forum, which is equivalent to the present 10th standard in the school. She stands as an icon of progressive Muslims in North Kerala and would be an inspiration for generations to come. Undoubtedly,

the Maliyekkal family acted as the nucleus of Muslim reform movement in north Malabar and exerted a high degree of influence in the social-political-and cultural realm of Muslim community in Malabar.

3. CONCLUSION

The advent of education among Muslim women in colonial Malabar heralded a transformative journey. Empowered with knowledge and skills, these women became catalysts for change within their communities. The legacy of Muslim women's education in colonial Malabar endures as a testament to the resilience of individuals and communities in the face of adversity. While the challenges may have evolved over time, the principles of access, equity, and empowerment remain as relevant today as they were in the past. Efforts to promote education among Muslim women continue, driven by a commitment to realizing their full potential and fostering inclusive development.

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