

The Status of Muslims in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper, endeavours to evaluate the religious faith, tolerance and the influence of modernisation process and its impact on the Muslim minority of Kerala, along with the evaluation of the overall development and stagnation of the community in various aspects of life. The paper also discusses at length the socio-political, economic, educational achievements of the Muslim community of Kerala and their position in a swiftly changing society. It is one of the queer turns of history that a people who might have guided the society should have stranded by the wayside. Moreover, the problems and prospects of the Muslims of Kerala in the paper are briefly discussed.

Muslims of Kerala have been an integral part of the region's history. Their problem has never been one of identity; rather it has been one of insularity and reluctance to take a front line position in the changing society. It is one of the queer turns of history that a people who might have guided the society should have stranded by the wayside.

Though there are differences of opinion regarding the precise date of the advent of Islam in Kerala, it is fairly certain that Muslims had become a distinct community in this part of the country by the ninth century of Christian era. In the seven centuries that followed, the Muslims of Kerala reached the zenith of their glory and prosperity owing mainly to the tolerance, support and co-operation of the Hindu rulers of Kerala and its people. In terms of which population Kerala having been estimated as 3, 18, 38,619

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out of which Muslims were 78, 63, 842.¹

In a backward country where the pace of change is very slow one has to be rather cautious in advocating reforms. While one can be unsparing in one's campaign against superstitions one will have to show more circumspection when it comes to certain practices regarded as integral to religion. Creative synthesis rather than complete substitution by something never regarded as integral to religion would be more helpful. As far as Kerala Muslims are concerned the pace of change has been relatively more slow to the point of being tortuous. As a backward community, Muslims have benefited but little from industrialization in the State. Right from the British period the Muslims failed to produce any entrepreneurial class. Their ideational moorings, therefore, remained feudal. Even today, the majority of Muslims in the state continue to be economically backward and thus have very little stake in the present system. They, therefore, hardly feel any functional need for modern reforms. It is only the upper classes with high stakes in big business and industries feel the pressures for fundamental changes in age-old traditions and religious laws which become positive hindrance in their functioning. Among Hindus too it is the bourgeois intellectuals who fight for reforms whereas the masses continue to be deeply religious and even superstitious. What matters, therefore, is pressure for change rather than its abstract perception.

Also, around the traditional social structure there develops powerful vested interests. Any process of change tends to erode their authority. These interests who have fairly good hold over the masses oppose all such changes which affect their socio-religious authority. When changes are affected in society the hold of narrow minded tradition artists is loosened as their services are then no longer required to dispense justice and hence their opposition to all such changes.

The winds of change from the modern world have swept through the seemingly impregnable defenses of the community's tradition. Political, social, economic, and educational pressures have brought irresistible influences to bear on its life. These influences have combined, quite unexpectedly, to produce a lively and hopeful scene. Although the various

pressures have produced some loosening impact on Islamic faith and obedience, the residual stability and loyalty of the Muslims are so strong that they have nevertheless compelled the new influences in turn to relate to Islam. The influence of Muslim religious life is forcing the scope of Islamic concern on Kerala to be widened and deepened, a process that parallels and contends with the compartmentalization of faith and life.

The variety of influences combines with the different sects of Muslims to produce a great diversity in feeling. Both lower and upper class Muslims, intellectuals, youth, students, orthodox or communist or progressive Muslims, men and women, all have their own dynamics. Even within categories such as these, subtleties of Muslim personality and the range of Muslim loyalties make description and generalization difficult. The one constant in the variety has been the inner sense of pride within the community over any Muslim leader or Muslim achievement. This, in the final analysis, appears more powerful than the sectionalism has demonstrated the comparative unity of the community.

Muslim leadership, sharing the great ability and diversity of Malayali leadership in general, is, in a sense, an awesome resource. There is every indication of ample capacity within its ranks to face the challenges and pressures of the modern world in a positive way. Its very abundance and variety, however, tends to be a check on rapid and least the majority of leaders can share and which can both motivate and define efforts for community progress becomes correspondingly intense.

The Indian Union Muslim League is a religious-oriented political party of the Muslims of Kerala. The leaders of the Muslim League consider their party being the sole political representative of the Muslim community, a political party of the Muslim minority in India having every right to organise themselves politically.² It is not merely a political party but a pressure group acting on behalf of the Muslim community. Other political parties in the state individually or collectively, at one time or other, have accepted the Muslim League as a political party removing its stigma as a communal group, and made alliance with it. The leaders of the Kerala Muslim League have made significant contributions towards the economic and educational progress of

the Muslims in general and of the state in particular.

The Muslim community in Kerala as a strong religious minority has several leverages compared to its compatriots in the rest of the country. Unlike in the north religious fanaticism as such is totally absent in Kerala. From times immemorial, religious toleration is the hallmark of the life of the Keralites. Here a Muslim's next door neighbour is a Hindu or a Christian. Temples, mosques and churches co-exist peacefully in adjacent compounds. Several instances may be cited to show that the members of the three major communities have great respect for each other's religion. The socio-economic and political pattern is that of intermingling. The communal harmony which arose from religious toleration in Kerala is proverbial. In spite of this, it is really unfortunate that a few riots broke out in Malabar by the ruling Hindu-British forces and the landless Muslim peasants for land between 1836 to 1919, called the 'Malabar Rebellions' or the 'Mappila Riots', seemed it to have communal by a few historians. The Muslims of Kerala had not given any serious consideration to the demand for the creation of Pakistan though they also had echoed the demand of their co-religionists in the North. The demand for *Mappilasthan* - a separate state for the Muslims of Kerala - was neither seriously made nor was it even taken seriously. Consequent upon this, the attitude of other communities towards the Muslims of Kerala, after the creation of Pakistan, was not significantly altered unlike in the North. Muslims of Kerala are first and foremost Keralites, being the children of the soil. Malayalam is the mother-tongue of the Kerala Muslims and generally none of them speaks Urdu and Arabic unlike the north Indian Muslims. Nearly ninety-nine percent of the Muslims of Kerala are converts or their descendants, and therefore, there are no fundamental differences between Muslims of Kerala and the non-Muslims in social attitudes. The activity of various Muslim educational bodies and organizations have brought about a qualitative change in the condition of the community in the State.

The Muslims of Kerala, like their counterparts did not clamour for special privileges or Government jobs. They have been self-reliant traders, merchants, fishermen and peasants. Many Muslims of Kerala braved the

seas in country boats and sailed to the Arab countries either for trade or in search of jobs, and some of them even settled down there. They still maintain contact with their kith and kin in Kerala.

While the Nairs, the Ezhavas (two Hindu sub-communities) and the Christians of Kerala could have educated elite of their own community, the Muslims lag behind and hence have been very slow in taking advantage of the Western education. The consequences of this educational backwardness of Kerala Muslims can be analysed in terms of socio-economic aspects of life. The employment position of any community is based on its educational attainment. At the end of 2000, as a total of 4,70,275 state government and the state owned public autonomous institutions based posts; Nairs, Christians and other forward communities collectively held 1,83,307 as compared to 46,500 held by Muslims. The Ezhavas, another backward community, were well ahead of the Muslims enjoyed 1,00,269 posts. With respect to the influential gazetted officer positions the Muslim percentage was even lower, as a total of 67,825 such posts, Nairs, Christians and forward communities holding 31,171 appointments, Ezhavas alone held 13,391 as compared to the Muslim 6,476.³ All this indicate that the bargaining power of Muslims in the employment market is generally weak mainly owing to the educational backwardness. The question of rivalry between the Muslim elite and the elite of other communities did not arise. The vast majority of the Muslims are either below the poverty line or just above it. The poor among the Muslims, invariably strike an emotional identity sections of the other communities in their aspirations and struggles towards making better their common lot. Therefore, the community as such did not pose any challenge or threat to the well-to-do people of other communities. They were not rivals but were almost always subservient to the Hindu landlords. The leadership of the Muslim socio-political organizations in Kerala has been in the hands of conservative or orthodox Muslims. They could adjust themselves to leaders of other communities without much difficulty.⁴ The upper class Hindus or the Christians had no reason to be afraid of them. As already mentioned, the Kerala Muslims are not religious fanatics; but numerically a majority, they are religious enough to resist the onslaught of Communism.

Far from considering this secular situation, Muslims of today look back on this period as a comparatively prosperous period for Muslims in Kerala. One cannot overlook, meanwhile, the stagnation of the Muslim community. They have so many customs and rites which are unhealthy and un-Islamic. Often the non-Muslims world fails to view the Muslim problems objectively, because it overlooks the ideology that governs Muslim life. This ideology teaches fraternity and equality between man and man, cutting across all distinctions of class, caste, and colour. The history poses a challenge to the contention or feeling that Muslims must have political power to be true Muslims, to be secure and to advance. It is also significant for Muslims to live, secular state and actively participating in the decision-making process. As Indian Muslims symbolize the possibility of minority living for the total Muslim group in the world, Kerala Muslims, by virtue of their long experience, signal that possibility to Indian Muslims.⁵ The significant question relates to the minority psychology exemplified by Muslims in Kerala and Muslims in India. A strong minority tends toward to effect a sheltered existence. It is small enough to lack security and large enough to be able to create a defensive shell. In those areas of Kerala, where Muslims were so few that they were forced to relate in a more open way with their environment, such as in sections of South Kerala, the development was generally more progressive. In Malabar, despite the common living patterns, Muslim numbers enabled them to carry on a ghetto-like existence which fostered defensiveness, perpetuated weaknesses, and retarded progress. The Muslim mental and social ghetto was broken open not by introspective and community action but by external forces too powerful to resist. The community psychology today is a combination of continuing protective attitudes and a new confidence and aggressiveness. It is now in a much better position to face the question of extent of integration that a minority community, and specifically a Muslim minority community in India, must be able to afford to live successfully with its environment and to progress with it, and the extent, that it cannot afford in order to retain identity and faith. As Muslims struggle with this question they assume a continuing significance for Muslims in India.

The primary importance of the Kerala Muslims for the Muslim world is the demonstration that it is possible under the right circumstances for a Muslim community to make necessary changes. Perhaps no Muslim community has been locked in a tighter mould than the Muslims of Kerala. Within eighty years of the last disaster in 1921, and especially within the past thirty five years, however, the Muslims have become a remarkably changed community in Kerala. Through the remarkably multifarious activities of the Indian Union Muslim League in the coalition political set up of Kerala since 1967, the Muslim community has had such a long record of achievements. Its achievements in the name of the community may be catalogued as political, economic, social and educational. It increased its seats in the Assembly, Parliament, and local self governing institutions in the state. It has its representatives in the various Government committees and University bodies. In Malappuram district, the new industrial, agricultural and irrigation projects, the new municipalities of Tirur and Malappuram, the crash-programme for Malappuram, the increased facilities for fishing, trading, means of transport and communication net-work etc., are indeed its significant economic achievements. The district is an everlasting memorial to the Muslim League and the community. Tremendous improvements in the field of agriculture, industry, fishing, and transportation have accelerated the economic progress of the Muslims. The guarantee of minority religious interests, the fostering of Islamic culture and heritage through religious studies, the establishment of Islamic cultural centres, the reservation of 'jobs' for Muslims in public services, award of pension and *thamrapathra* (a reward and recognition for the freedom fighters) to the participants of the Malabar Rebellion and their dependents and special ration for Muslims during their festivals are the cardinal gains in the social field. In the educational field also it had several achievements. The establishment of the Calicut University and a number of colleges and schools under the (M.E.S) and other Muslim organizations, the institution of Islamic History as a faculty in the Universities of Kerala, the facilities for Muslim Schools and Arabic teachers, the provision for reservation of seats and fee concession for the Muslim students in the various centres of learning are some of the

educational gains. They have achieved some change and at the same time have, by and large, remained faithful Muslims. They therefore represent, and are increasingly recognised as such, a symbol of hope for other Muslims. Though these efforts met with stiff resistance from the conservative section of the Muslims, in the long run, these measures definitely have influenced the Muslims in accepting modernisation. A major index of modernisation of any society is the position of its women vis-a-vis men. In the absence of education, Muslim women were considered inferior to men and consequently their status became exceedingly low. The more balanced opportunities are given to men and women, the larger the role women have in society and consequently the higher their status will be. Accordingly, education has formed a key element in Government arranged programmes for the improvement of the status of women. Kerala state stands first in India in literacy. The percentage of female literates in 2001 is 87.86 percent; whereas for the whole of India it is 54.16 percent. Kerala has the highest percentage of female literates among the states of India.⁶ However, the percentage of literacy rate in the northern districts of Kerala shows less than the state average. They are also the districts which have the largest proportion of Muslims in the population. The traditional social customs and practices in the name of religion followed by the Muslims created in them an indifference to secular education.⁷ The recent trends in the field of higher education reveal that their performance has been steadily improving. However, the level of educational attainment of Muslim women in Kerala is much lower than that of their counterparts in other communities.

Following the Rebellion of 1921, the Government resolved to concentrate more on Muslim education and took several measures for their reawakening. The leaders of the community also realised that traditional opposition to the Government and refusal to the benefit of modern education had placed Muslims in difficult situation. The abject condition of the community called for social reform through modern educational activities. Educated Muslim leaders like K.M. Seethi Saheb and others were of the view that special schools were required for the upliftment of the community and for safeguarding the cultural integrity of the Muslims. Under their

inspiring leadership, several voluntary agencies were formed which established numerous primary and secondary schools in different parts of Kerala. This dispelled the apprehension of a cultural threat posed by modern education and in due course, this brought about a salutary change in the attitude of the Muslims towards secular education. This gave an impetus to the Muslims in higher education too. The birth of Farook College in 1948 was itself an important event in educational progress of the Muslims. After the formation of state of Kerala in 1956, the Government evinced keen interest and gave all encouragement for improving education among the Muslims who came under the category of 'Other Backward Communities' (O. B. C.). The general awakening of the Muslims in the 1960s led to the formation of several big agencies like the Muslim Educational Society, Kozhikode, Muslim Educational Associations at Kannur, Thrissur, and Ernakulam; and the Central Travancore Muslim Educational Trust at Alapuzha, signifying a definite advance towards higher education. By 1970, 30 percent of the college students in Malappuram and Kozhikode districts were Muslims, showing a development of major significance.⁸ Almost all eligible Muslim children were enrolled in elementary schools by 1972. Although they continued to leave schools in large numbers after the first compulsory five years of education, the community had taken a definite turn on a new road. Their widespread involvement in education that followed would have been impossible but for the yeomen services rendered by the voluntary agencies. The dynamic activities of the voluntary agencies were a pace-setter for the community in educational advancement and social progress. The Justice K.K. Narendran Commission which was appointed by the Government of Kerala, in February 2000 to look into the educational problems of backward communities in the state points out that, "at the same time Muslims another major community among the backward classes have not fared so well. The main reason for this is nothing but educational backwardness. Better educational standards of Ezhavas taken as a whole give them a good leverage in competing for government jobs at least in the recruitment for lower categories. If the Muslim community and its leaders take more interest in the matter of education and make a concert effort, this

community too can also reach a similar level of educational advancement in the near future. The other communities among the backward classes can also improve their presence in the public services by paying more attention for the education of their children”⁹ This makes clear the low educational level of the Muslims in Kerala in general.

Nevertheless, the Muslims of Kerala face a series of unsolved problems. Social progress, including the overcoming of habits detrimental to health, is a pressing need. The issue of family planning has become a controversial one. There are problems in the areas of methodological approach solving of the community needs. The lack of a having objective discussions on the issues is felt, while the need for mechanisms for organising community development is too partially met. The view that political victory is practically equivalent to the community's progress though challenged, by same yet it remains strong. Psychological problems exist, including a continuing sense of persecution, which is partly a residue from the past, partly stemming from the minority position. It is also related to real disparities and intermittent communal violence elsewhere in India. Intellectual development still lags as a large numbers of Muslims hold the pre-modern outlook. The Muslim political leadership in Kerala is yet feudal in its outlook and caters to minority upper class sentiments. Firstly, the Muslim orthodox leadership belonging to this category are so much pre-occupied with issues like Muslim Personal Laws or religious identity of Muslims that they just cannot think of the formidable socio-economic problems facing the community. Secondly, these leaders find it very easy to reach the leadership hierarchy by overemphasizing highly emotional issues. Most of them are demagogues rather than sincere leaders with a vision of the future.

Quite a few Muslims are aware of the opportunist character of the Muslim leadership. Thus commenting on the Milli Convention in October 1977, Sultan Shahin wrote in *The Indian Express*: “Prominent Muslim politicians, scholars and divines from all parties of the country gathered in the capital recently to discuss the problems of Muslims. The convention can be taken as representative of the entire Muslim leadership of this country. The

collective wisdom of the Muslim leadership resulted in the passage of seven resolutions. As many as six of them, incredible though it may sound, were related in one way or the other to Muslim Personal Law.”¹⁰ Shahin then goes on to ask: “Why this abnormal obsession with Muslim Personal Law? This is particularly surprising in view of the fact that at the moment there is no move either by the Government or by any section of the people to force any change in the Personal Law. Their concern for the Personal Law which has rightly or wrongly become a symbol of their religious identity is quite understandable. But their obsession with it to the exclusion of all other problems is inexplicable. Obviously the leadership is hopelessly out of step with the real challenges facing the Muslims.”¹¹ This hopelessly backward-looking leadership not only refuses to do anything for eradicating various social evils prevalent among the Muslims, it vehemently opposes anyone who does so.

The Muslim leadership in India, especially in Kerala, is guilty of callously neglecting the real problems of the Muslim masses. They have simply used highly sensational issues which appeal to the middle class Muslims to establish their leadership. The vast majority of the community in Kerala live below the poverty line. Large numbers among them are farm workers, headload workers, fishermen, rickshaw pullers, butchers, drivers, small-scale shop owners, coolies etc. But instead of taking up such concrete problems pertaining to the vast masses of Muslims, these leaders, in keeping with the tradition established by the Muslim League, which represented the upper class and feudal interests, raise cultural or religious issues which provide emotional satisfaction to a negligible minority of middle-class Muslims who are most vocal.

The businessmen in the Muslim community have had a capitalist orientation, and this has enabled them to achieve major success in import-export, timber, construction, and merchandising enterprises. They were individualistic, and not oriented to co-operative action for community uplift. Furthermore, the Christians in Kerala controlled the banks and insurance companies, thus also managing larger industrial developments. These factors combined with the concentration on personal interests, a lack of dynamic leadership, and the absence of a forum for generating joinaction,

make the Muslim business leadership ineffective in meeting the community's economic problems. At various levels individual Muslims are struggling for the improvement of the lot of Muslims in the economic front. As a whole, however, the community leaders seemed baffled and inert, while ordinary Muslims continue to suffer. It was into this vacuum that the Communist movement entered to become one of the most powerful of the stimuli playing upon Muslims. A very startling aspect of Muslim life was the sudden and major impact of that movement on an apparently conservative Muslim community.

Orthodoxy also laid down that they should take no part as a community, whether in politics, socio-educational matters except under the guidance of a leader or leaders. The quality of leadership is largely determined by the followers. Those educated and sensitive, who were affected by the unfortunate situation in which their community found itself, had to discover the means by which the greatest response could be evoked and to use these means as much effectively as possible they could.

The opportunist and obscurantist Muslim theological leadership is partly responsible for the backwardness and the lack of modern education among the Muslims. This leadership is more interested in running those *madaris* in which it has acquired vested interest. The Muslim *wakf* fund certainly can finance in a modest way a statewide project for modern education for Muslims. This sum today is being spent either on running *madrassas* or celebrating death anniversaries of saints and similar other things. After the oil revolution in the Middle East, some of the Arab countries are donating money to various institutions of Muslims. Unfortunately these donations are utilised only for building mosques or establishing purely religious educational institutions. These funds, certainly not scanty, if not quite sufficient, can be utilised to run modern educational institutions for Muslims as well. However, there does not appear to be such possibility in the near future. Not only this but the opportunist Muslim leadership oppose other agencies like 'Muslim Educational Society' (M.E.S.), that spreads modern education among Muslims. This society has done admirable work in spreading modern education among the Muslims. However, the Muslim

League, after its initial co-operation, sought to take it under its own control and when it failed to do so it launched a campaign of character assassination against the office bearers of the society. This should be a good example of how political leadership, in view of its own vested interests, tries to oppose any constructive work which can benefit Muslims. It is for the Muslim intelligentsia to draw proper lessons from such betrayal by the Muslim League of a worthy cause of education.

The same opportunism the Muslim leadership has shown in bargaining with other political parties. The Muslim League and its groups who make frequent political alliances with the ruling front governments have been led to neglect the real problems facing the Muslims masses. They strike bargains on the same issues like Muslim Personal Law, the status of Arabic and the demand for reservation of jobs for Muslims in the services. These opportunistic alliances both in the centre and in the state instead of doing any good to the community benefit the leaders themselves. None of these leaders has set any example of sacrifice of the lures of office for the good of the community. Of course, one can argue that this is a reflection of the general malady in the country, but certainly the leaders of a deprived group have to show far more sense of uprightness and alacrity. The present Muslim leadership should equip itself with such caliber and vision.

Important attitudinal problems require solution to enable effective dealing with issues that perturb the community. Three correlative principles confronting the Muslims are realism, freedom, and courage. The first relates to the common practice of refusing to admit that change has happened or if it has happened that it has anything to do with Islam, or if it has something to do with Islam that may have anything new¹². Associated with the problem of realism is that of freedom. Both realism and freedom is the correlated problem of courage. The old fear of the new world and its discoveries and demands has not disappeared. It is felt more by religious leaders than by laity. Such weaknesses lead to failure and provide opportunity may be used to non-Muslims to have wrong image about Islam and the community. However effort is steadily made from within the community itself to overcome such fears and to face the new issues squarely and with hope.

Muslims have moved from the position of being a negative force to the position of being a positive one. How they address themselves to their still undeveloped possibilities and unsolved problems will determine their place as an enduring symbol of resurgent modern Muslim community for the Indian nation. Whether the community will move forward unitedly, empowered by a new Islamic dynamism, or it will follow two separate streams - the orthodox and modernist is not clear. What is clear is that the Muslims stand in need of, and some are in search of, both a focus and a power that can direct their life. The Messianic mission of voluntary agencies has shaken the Muslims out of their complacency and to set them thinking in terms of social reform so that they could compete with other fraternal communities who have gone ahead of them socially and economically. They have also succeeded in getting them to realise that communal isolationism was suicidal to the community and their success depend on their readiness to stand shoulder to shoulder with the educated fraternal communities in a spirit of equality and never in the defeatist attitude of a downtrodden class.¹⁵ Moreover, the advent of Islam in Kerala gave birth to a vital new cultural tradition in which the finest elements of the traditional Kerala culture mingled to produce a unique synthesis. In this way the Muslim masses are an integral part of Kerala's mainstream. This is reflected in all aspects of Kerala's culture, its art and architecture, language and literature, folklores, social manners, and way of life.

Notes And References

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5. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 288-291.
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11. Ibid.
12. Mohammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*, London: Oxford Univerisity Press, 1964, p. 222.
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14. E.V. Abdurrahman Faizi, "Communal Disturbance", *Al-Munir* (Annual), Lucknow: 1972, pp. 18-24.
15. In the development of education among Muslims in Kerala, contribution of Mawlana Abu'sabah, the founder of Farook College (popularly known as the Aligrah of the south) and its sister institutions, Farook College of Education and Farook Arabic College in the same complex is also significant. Similarly Jamia Dawatual Islam (J D T Islam) Manglore, Islamic College Shantapuram, Islahiya College

Chena, M.E.S Colleges etc. at various palces have their own role in the educational development of the state. (C.Editor).

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17. In the development of education among Muslims in Kerala, contribution of Mawana Abdulkalam, the founder of Feroze College (popularly known as the Aligarh of the south) and his wife institution, Feroze College of Education and Feroze Arabic College in the same context is also significant. Similarly Jamia Dawatul Islam (J.D.I.) (Islam) Mangalore, Islamic College, Shreeganesh, Islamic College