



MODERNITY AND ISLAM: THE KERALA WOMEN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

Muslim women are considered as most marginalized group in Indian society. The study about Muslim women in Malabar is a wide area of research. Here, the present paper tries to make a peep into the position of Muslim women in the reform held in the 20th century in Kerala. The paper tries to analyze the question of 'how the Muslim reformers take up the problem of emancipation of Muslim women'. The paper also traces the counter currents in the reform among Muslim community in Kerala. There are some glimpses about the women reformers from Malabar region. The present paper also tells about the short history of Muslim women teachers called 'Mollachis' or 'Penusthads'.

Key Words: Muslim Women, Malabar, Islamic Reform

Introduction:

The modernization of societies, including the formation of national states, the organization of capitalist economies, technological and scientific developments, and the cultural and social changes that accompany these phenomenon, has generated religious movements among Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Hindus, and others. Like many of these movements Islamic revival movements may be understood as a reaction against modernity, but more profoundly they are also an expression of modernity.

¹ At the same time, the Islamic revival movements are not a new phenomenon. The past history of Islamic societies contains many examples of reform and revival that developed as a response to changing political and economic conditions. These movements may be traced back to the example of

¹ Ira M. Lapidus Reviewed, *Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms*, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 40, No. 4 Published by: BRILL (1997), pp.444-460

Prophet himself whose own life constituted an Islamic response to conditions of "modernization" in his own society.

The position of women in Muslim societies has been a significant concern in academic literature. With the increasing focus in Islamism over the last half of the century, particularly since the Iranian revolution and the emergence of the *Islamic Feminism*, an immense amount of literature has been produced on women in Islam. In fact, until recently, the most of the literature on Muslim women situations focuses primarily on Middle Eastern context while the real heart of Islam in terms of population and also of the theological and political innovations of modern Islam lies in South and Southeast Asia.

The academic literature produced in Western universities focusing the relationship between Islam and women, across the disciplines of sociology, history, politics and anthropology can be divided very broadly into four categories.² The first category, according to its treatment towards women considers Islam as yet another patriarchal religion, possibly much worse than other religions. The second stream – the secularist- has presented Islam as a willing pawn in the hands of oppressive state, political elite, and social structures. The third stream, according to Humeira Iqtidar, is optimized by Fathima Mernissi and Riffat Hassan, as their religion has been distorted by patriarchal interpretations. They look for answers within the revealed text and practice of the prophet and never suspect an inherent patriarchal thrust in Quran or Islam. The fourth stream of literature is the most recent one. Its proponents suggest a suspension of predefined categories to understand the relationship between women and Islam.

The reformist movements among Muslim community in modern world were begun by 20th century. It is argued that it was not a beginning but a continuation of the early reformist activities by different groups and individuals throughout the history of Islam. The peculiar feature of this modern reformist movement was its style and structure. Being independent in nature and area these all movements shows an interconnection in its theme and philosophy. There existed a deep and pervasive intellectual link but was not visible.

There were different types of reformist movements emerged in the Islamic world. While few of them are concentrated on the treatment of 'un-Islamic' within the Islam or concentrated in the reformation of the religion based on the Quranic texts, the others gives importance to the political and philosophical questions raised by the colonial modernity and European intervention. The wave of Islamic revival reached almost all part of the world, but the style and effect varied.

The main center of Islamic reform was Egypt. Jamaludhin Afgani, Muhammed Abdu, Rasheed Rida were the early proponents of the '*Arab Islamic Revival*'. The contemporary wave of Islamic revival movements which

² Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jama'at –e –Islami and Jam'at –ud-da'wa in Urban Pakistan*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2011., pp 131-134

advocate for the so called 'political Islam' has its origin in the 1920s and 1930s with the founding of the Society of Muslim Brothers called '*Al Iqwan ul Muslimun*' (The Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna in 1929, and the *Jama'at-E Islami* in India founded by Abu 'Ala Maududi in 1941. These all efforts are considered as a reaction towards the colonial challenge against Islam by which they tried to uphold the concept of '*Muslim Ummah*' or the universal brotherhood of Muslim community. Apart from the different objectives like recovering of *Khilafa*, creation of unity among the Muslims and the states, empowerment of the community through modernization and education, the emancipation of Muslim women was one of the vital arenas of interest to these movements.³

Kerala was not an exception to the wave of Islamic reform of the early 20th century. The reformist movements of Kerala were different in style and character. Some of them were 'acculturative' while the others are indigenous in nature.⁴ The first group was highly influenced by the Arab- Egyptian reformist leaders like Rashid Ridha, Muhammed Abdu, etc. Abu Sabah Moulavi, a noted reformist, was one of the main participants in the debate between Moulana Muhammad Ali and Rashid Ridha. He wrote a long article in four volumes of *Al Akbar* magazine published from Cairo in connection with the debate between Muhammed Ali and Rasheed Ridha. Abu Sabah was a student of Al Azhar University, Cairo during that time.⁵ The international link of these reformist was highly influenced the Muslim reformist movements in Kerala. *Al Manar* magazine published by Rasheed Ridha from Egypt and Islamic Review of Khoja Kamal from England was the two major journals highly influenced by the Muslim reformers of Kerala. Vakkom Moulavi was a serious reader of *Al Manar* magazine and it highly influenced journals called *Al Murshid* and *Al Manar* published by early Muslim reformists of Kerala. The second group of reformers was not connected to any international reformist ideology and was independent in nature. These group of religious resorted to Quran and Hadeeth for their reformist activity and were sometimes belongs to the so called orthodoxy.

The reform among the Muslims in Kerala did not have a uniform and unlined character due to the particular circumstances under which it emerged and developed. The experience of south Kerala and North Kerala was different as they were undergone in different experiences. The Muslim reform process

³ Mujeebrahman Kinaloor, Colonial AAdhunikathayum Islamika Navodhanavum, in Prabhodhanam arupatham vaarshika pathip, Kozhikode, P 315

⁴ The both terms are coined by Kenneth W Jones on the nature of socio religious reform movements in colonial India in '*Socio Religious Reform Movements in British India*, 1994

⁵ V A Kabeer, Muslim Navodhanam; Chila Paarshwa Chitrangal, Kerala Muslim Navodhana Charitram- Prabodhanam Special Suppliment, April 1998, P 41

in Kerala, extending over half a century since 1880s, had different engagements with modernity. The question of Muslim women reform in Kerala leads to a different answers on its modes of operandi. One type of reform was from the part of male reformers who were always been interested to the matter. On the other hand there can be see another group of women leaders from/within the community. The present article is mainly concentrates on the second.

The reformist activity among the Muslims of Kerala was molded in a milieu in which the conservative *Ulema* was declared *Fathwa* against teaching girls to write and read as *Haram* ie, religiously prohibited.⁶ It is interesting to note that the articles and discussions supporting girl's education were also sometimes defensive in nature. An article on '*Sthree vidyabhyasam*' (Girls Education) in woman session (*Vanitha Pankthi*) of *Chinthakan* magazine (1954 November) pointed out the aim of educating girls as making them good wife and good women and not to make them socially empowered. Being supporting women education, the author stood against making them BA or MA Graduates and added that those who graduated in modern education stream will become disobedient to their husbands and their family life will be collapsed.⁷ But we can't generalize these *fathwa* and attitude of the conservative *Ulema* as the policy of the whole community. There can be seen enrolment of huge number of Muslim girls into government schools for general education even from the Muslim majority villages.⁸ In 1925, 14 girl students were enrolled at Kodyathur GMUP School out of the total number of 44 and the total enrolment number of Muslim girls to government primary school at Kodyathur reached to 27 out of 70 in 1940. It is interesting to note that the total enrolment of girls' students in 2010 was reached to 29 out of 52.⁹ There were no restrictions from the part of parents to enroll into the primary education. But it was not encouraged to continue after the primary education and the society was keen interested to make them get married as early as possible.

Othupalli had an important role in the history of Muslim education in Kerala. Students would gather in learning circles or *Othupallis* to read a text or set of texts under the guidance of a spiritual teacher. The name was a composite form of two Malayalam words 'Othu' (recite) and 'Palli' (mosque). It is a sort of primary school for religious and Arabic education for both boys and girls. Girls were allowed to get only *Othupalli* knowledge in the morning. The method of teaching was oral. A teacher, who was called 'Mullah',

⁶ Al Bayan, Book 1, Vol 4,5, March 1930, P 28

⁷ Shamsudhin Sahib thodupuzha, *Sthree vidyabhyasam* in *Chinthakan Magazine*, Vol 2, Issue 11, 01 November 1954, p. 325

⁸ See Ajmal Mueen MA, *Muslim women education in Malabar,-A village scenario*, Beyond the Margines-Proceedings of UGC Sponsored National Seminar, Department of History, Sir Syed College, Taliparamba, 2011, p 82

⁹ *Ibid*

‘Musaliyar’ or ‘Mollaka’, would recite the lesson and the students would be asked to recite the same repeatedly until they memorize it.¹⁰ Teacher would write Arabic alphabets on a wooden slate by a bamboo pen and ask them to read it. During the process of learning pen, pencil, book, black board or chalks were not used.¹¹ The latest study revealed many Muslim women were also engaged in the teaching of Islamic texts during that time. These teachers called as *Mollachi* or *Pen Usthad*.¹² This group was very popular in the early part of 21st century. This group of women religious teachers spread in almost all part of Kerala may be a rarest rare group in this country and may not be seen in other communities and religion. Unfortunately, there were not held any serious academic research to find out this group of women teachers and to analyze their role in educating the society.

Alappuzha Pulikkal Rukyabeevi, Ambalapuzha kacherimukkil Fathimabeevi, Veliyamkot TK Fathima Musliyar, Parappanangadi Usthad Nabeesa, Ayisha, Fathima, Kunjamina of Ponnani, koottilalngadi Biyyunni Mollachi, Patterkadav Srmbikkal Fathima, Kazargod Kumbalayil Imbichi Ittha and her daughter Nabeesa were some of the names belonged to the formerly mentioned group.¹³ They conducted classes within their houses or a room called *othupura* near to their houses. Reading of Quran was the main item of teaching. Basics and practical sessions of Islamic theology and activities were also taught. Both girls and boys are entered into the classes. Beyond being a religious activity, they considered it as a profession to meet their day to day expenses. Their participation in socio religious life of Kerala has yet to be researched.

We can also see many individuals worked for the emancipation of women during the same era. There were many women who were worked for the same but many of them were not listed even now. Muthubeevi, M Aleema Beevi, TC Kunjachumma, were the very few of them. These individuals strived for reform through educational activities, writings articles, conducting meetings and seminars, campaigning etc. they have got support from the reformers and sometimes they became a part of the emerging reformist movements in Kerala.

Muthubeevi (Also called as Biyyatha) was one of them. She was born to Yusuf Koya Thangal and Khadeeja Kutty at Pulikkal Nareekuth Kalathil Tharavadu in the present Malapuram district in 1910. She studied at Pulikkal Madrasathul Munavara till fifth standard and then her family had migrated to Kozhikode in 1928. Being ambitious girls of that time, she applied for teachers training. She was not selected as it was mandatory to complete at least 8th

¹⁰ William Logan., *Malabar Manual*, P.198.

¹¹ Muhammad Ali. K.T., *Op ct*, P. 38.

¹² Sadarudheen Vazhakad, Othupallikalil Poothulalnja Jeevithangal, *Prabhadanam Weekly*, Vol 70, Issue 12, 23 August 2013

¹³ *Ibid*

standard to apply for the training. She has got support from the education superintendent Gafoor Sha.¹⁴

When the manager of Madrasathul Muhammadiya, KV Mamukoya Sahib, started the initial process of beginning a Muslim school at Kundungal in Kozhikode, she approached him and asked for an appointment at the school as a teacher. The school was named as *Nagaram Mappila Girls High School* and made it an exclusive center for girls education. They have got permission to start school but didn't have a piece of land to start the school. Meanwhile, Mamukoya died. The movement to give education to Muslim girls faced severe protest by the orthodoxy. They strived to make hindrance in getting a piece of land for the school. At last Khan Bahadoor Attakoya Thangal, the leader of Muslim Aikya Sangam provided the land where they started a school. Muthubeevi was appointed as the head mistress of the school. She strived a lot to enroll girls to the school. Later, the school was shifted to Idiyangara and was converted to government school. The school was later named as Parappil Government Lower Primary School but even then the school was locally called as *Beeveente School* ie, the school of Muthubeevi.¹⁵

The life of Muthubeevi was extremely challenging. She may be one of the very rare women among the women reformers due to many reasons. Almost all female reformers got support from their family or at least from their husbands. But Muthubeevi was attacked by the orthodoxy. She was presented to the public as bad woman who taught the language of the hell.¹⁶ Her husband, Qasim Koya Thangal divorced her due to her participation in educational activity. She was later married to Kodinji Hydros Koya Thangal.¹⁷ But we cannot say that the case of Muthubeevi was a one and only case. There were few others who strived for the cause of educating girls.

The socio-religious reform in Kerala among all religions in 19th century was almost same in nature. The modern education played a vital role in framing and consolidating the reform. Apart from modern education, the emergence of printing press, middle class and the empowerment of a public sphere, etc paved the way for a platform for free thinkers. The newly emerged middleclass started to question the existing social customs and situations. It can be seen in the contemporary literatures and novels.¹⁸ *Muslim Aikya Sangam*, the early reformist movement in Kerala was formed in 1920s. They conducted annual conferences and resolved many resolutions. The second annual conference of Aikya Sangam held at Aluvai in 1924 asked in its resolution to educate Muslim girls and asked to initiate efforts to start

¹⁴ PMA Gafoor, MuslimStreekal Velichathilek, *Shabab Weekly, Issue 35, Vol 12, 21 October 2011*

¹⁵ PP Muhammed Parappil, *Kozhikotte Muslimkalude Charitram*, Kozhikode, 1994, P 434

¹⁶ PMA Gafoor, *Ibid*

¹⁷ PP Muhammed Parappil, *Ibid*

¹⁸ See O. Chandumenon, *Indulekha*, the first Malayalam novel.

educational institutions for girls' education. *Kerala Jam-iyathul Ulama (1924)*, *Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen*, *Jama'ath-e-islami*, etc were the other major organizations strived for the emancipation of muslim women before independence. Apart from these mainstream organizations, there were many different groups and individuals strived for the same. There were published many magazines with the same intension during 1930-1960s. *AL Manar*, *AL Ansari*, *Chinthakan*, *Nisaul Islam*, *Muslim Sahakari*, ect., stood for the intension of reform the community. Even though, the question of the continuity of the early reform is a topic of debate. It is argued that the reformist activity among the Muslims were hijacked by the mainstream organizations and not developed into a wider range after 1960s.