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Community organizations and educational development among Muslims: Lessons from the ‘Kerala Experience’

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ABSTRACT

The overall image of Indian Muslims today is of a community deprived of a minimally decent life, having low educational attainment and experiencing socio-cultural stagnation. But, interestingly, Kerala’s Muslims stand out in sharp contrast to their counterparts in most parts of the country as they are doing well, not just in education, but in most other aspects of life as well even as a century ago they were put in a defined image box and appeared to represent a community steeped in illiteracy and poverty. Equally interesting is their story of overcoming barriers to socioeconomic and educational development at the heart of which is the role played by social agencies though not fully captured in the available literature. Against this backdrop, the present paper aims to bring into sharp focus the role of social agencies, notably non-political community organizations, in shaping educational development among Kerala’s Muslims. By foregrounding the ‘Kerala Experience’, this paper argues that structural barriers to education of a community, Muslims in the present case, are neither fixed nor immutable. It is possible for Muslims to address their educational backwardness by themselves through sustained, engaged and organized forms of efforts. The paper also discusses the lessons from the Kerala Experience and ask if the ‘Kerala Model’ is worth emulating for overcoming educational backwardness of Muslims in other parts of the country. Key words: community organization, education, Kerala, Mappila, Muslims, voluntary organizations.

I. Introduction

While Muslim communities have constituted an important thread in India’s social fabric for over a millennium, they seem to have fallen behind the development curve as compared to other socio-religious communities. An emerging body of empirical research has, in recent years, indicated that the enhanced processes of socioeconomic and educational development since Independence have almost bypassed Muslims as a community.¹ Although they appear to experience exclusion across various domains, glaring educational deficits among them vis-à-vis other socio-religious communities have been a

subject of intense public debates and increasing scholarly interest. In such debates, while a relative educational and developmental lag among Muslims is generally acknowledged, what has led to it is marked by deep disagreement. There are also marked differences of opinions as to the possible ways of addressing the problem.

Various explanations, often polemical and empirically unsubstantiated, have been offered to account for educational backwardness among India's Muslims: three stand out. Foremost of these is the view that attributes educational lag among Muslims to their religio-cultural ethos. It has been argued that for Muslims education has intrinsically been linked to religion. Not only does Islam, as is often argued, lay excessive emphasis on teaching of religious texts, Muslims tend to see modern education as opposed to their religio-cultural ethos. It is because of this they give preference to Islamic education imparted in religious seminaries such as madrasas over modern education in schools (Baig, 1974; Borooah & Iyer, 2005; Sharma, 1978; Vajpeyi, 1989). In other words, the educational backwardness of Muslims lies in factors internal to the community; by extension Muslims will continue to lag behind others unless they do away with their preoccupation with religion.

A second view, diametrically opposed to the first, accounts for educational deficits among Muslims by referring to the state's deliberate policy of neglect of the community, or systemic discrimination (Shakir, 1972; Gauba, 1978; Khalidi, 1995). It has been claimed that there are many, often subtle, ways through which discriminatory practices have deprived Muslims of education. In the first place, predominantly Muslim localities are generally marked by the absence of basic amenities including government-run schools, reflecting the state's neglect of and biases against the community. Secondly, Urdu has been driven out of schools as a medium of instruction even at the primary level in north India, where it happens to be the mother tongue of a large number of Muslims (Farouqui, 2002). Thirdly, the school curriculum is heavily culturally biased with disproportionate exposition of Hindu traditions and mythologies that stand in direct conflict with the religious values of Muslims. Put simply, lack of schools in general and of Urdu-medium schools in particular combined with an unfavourable school curriculum have led to exclusion of Muslims in the sphere of education (Vasfi, 1989; Ansari, 1992). Thus, from this point of view, the factors underlying educational deficits among Muslims are external to the community; and hence Muslims are unlikely to do well educationally unless there is fair play in the educational system.

Between these two extreme formulations is a third one that attributes educational backwardness among Muslims to the social and economic conditions in which they are placed. It is argued that relative educational deficits among Muslims are due neither to their indifference to modern education nor to systemic discrimination, but can rather be explained by the prevailing socio-economic conditions experienced by them and the perceived costs and benefits of education in such situations. Historically, the size of the upper/middle strata that value and usually go in for education has been narrower among Muslims than Hindus, and has not expanded to a significant extent in the postcolonial era in the way that it has in other communities. As a result, demand for education among Muslims has been very low, and, as a community, they appear to have fallen behind others (Ahmad, 1981; Alam, 2012). It is implicit in this thesis that increased participation of Muslims in modern education is contingent on

expansion of the social strata whose members see education as the most potent source of maintaining and reinforcing their class position.

While these essentialist/structuralist explanations fall far short of fully explaining the causes of educational backwardness among Muslims,² they share certain common features. First, they have an inherent tendency to look at the problem at the macro level, treating Muslims as a socio-culturally and spatially undifferentiated aggregate. They tend therefore to gloss over socially and spatially differentiated patterns of educational development among Muslims that are in fact markedly similar to those among Hindus (Alam, 2012). Secondly, structural constraints on educational attainment of Muslims are seen as unduly deterministic, completely ignoring the role of human/social agencies that can often be seen to play an important part not only in shaping the disposition of individuals and transforming communities but also in opening up frontiers of possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Against this backdrop, the present article aims to bring into sharp focus the role of social agencies, notably non-political community organizations, in shaping educational development among Muslims. By foregrounding the 'Kerala Experience', this article argues that structural barriers to education of a community, Muslims in the present case, are neither fixed nor immutable. It is possible for Muslims to address their educational backwardness by themselves through sustained, engaged and organized forms of efforts.

The article is organized as follows. After this introductory section, the next provides a brief overview of the socioeconomic history (from early to modern periods) of Muslims in the present day state of Kerala so as to understand the context. The third section aims to capture the trajectories of educational progress among Kerala's Muslims. The fourth section highlights the role and efforts of community-based organizations in shaping the course of educational development among Muslims. The fifth section discusses the lessons from the Kerala experience and also asks if the 'Kerala model' is worth emulating for overcoming educational backwardness of Muslims in other parts of the country. The sixth and final section concludes the discussion.

II. The Muslims of Kerala: Socio-historical Context

Unlike most parts of the Indian subcontinent, Islam arrived in Kerala not in the course of conquest but as a consequence of trade. Scholarly studies suggest that Arabian traders/sailors had begun taking up permanent residence on the south-western coast of India in the early years of Islam. They married local women and the offspring of these unions (between the Arab traders and local women) came to be known as the 'Mappilas'. In course of time, conversion of sections of Malayali Hindus (especially lower castes) to Islamic faith swelled the ranks of Islam's followers (Dale, 1980; Logan, 1951; Miller, 1976; 2015; Prange, 2018). They have, by now, grown to account for slightly over a quarter (26.5%) of Kerala's total population (Census of India, 2011). Although Mappilas are not the only ones who form Kerala's Muslim population, they have, by virtue of their sheer demographic weight, defined and shaped the Muslim public sphere in the state, (Miller, 2015).

The Mappilas remained separated from other Muslim groups in India by history, geography and culture. Historically, as stated above, they are primarily the descendents

of the unions of Arab sailors/traders with local women. Since Mappilas as a community of Islamic faith existed there much before their co-religionists who entered India through the north-western route and spread out in different parts of the Indian subcontinent, they are regarded as the 'oldest' Muslim community of South Asia (Prange, 2018).

Geographically, they remained predominantly concentrated in the Malabar region,³ although a very small fraction also settled elsewhere in and beyond the state. On the significance of Malabar for Mappilas, Gleason had this to say: 'Looking at a map there is no area so extensive with so concentrated a Muslim population in all of peninsular India as in Malabar' (Gleason, 1946). The region continues to home over three-fourths (72%) of Kerala's Muslim population. And yet, two interesting facts remain. The first is that even within the Malabar region Mappilas have been highly unevenly distributed; and the second, never did they form region's majority community.⁴

Culturally, Mappilas remained insulated from Muslim communities elsewhere in the Indian sub-continent in many respects as their patterns of life evolved in harmony with the local socio-cultural system. On the religious plane, they stayed away from the influence of the Indo-Persian Islam that shaped the so-called 'Muslim culture' in most of the rest of India. Even their traditional mosques looked much like the region's Hindu temples, both in their design and in the materials that were used (Prange, 2018). Whereas it was Urdu that eventually became the dominant language of Muslims in North India, Mappilas spoke Malayalam and contributed to its development through the introduction of various Arabic terms that would filter into the vocabulary. Furthermore, not only did they wear *mundus*, the local version of the dhoti, sections of the Mappilas also followed matrilineal practices as practised by other sections of Malabar society (Koya, 1976; Sebastian, 2016). This and other sociocultural practices largely associated with vital events of life such as birth, death and marriage, often viewed as un-Islamic or understood as alien to the Middle-Eastern Islamic societies, the heartland of Islam, continue to constitute a crucial aspect of the everyday life of the Mappilas, despite waves of puritan Islamic trends, aimed at bringing Islam back to its original form (Kunju, 1989; Miller, 2015).

The Islam that the Mappilas practised and their spatially embedded sociocultural practices enabled them to participate in the wider socio-cultural system, to live with their Hindu neighbours in harmony, and to create a niche for themselves in a manner which would not invite hostility either from the general populace or from the rulers in the precolonial era. Rather, the rulers, the Zamorins of Calicut in particular, would provide them patronage. In turn, the Mappilas would fight for them against the European imperial powers (Manickam, 1974; Haridas, 2016). This symbiotic relationship, as most historians agree, helped them not only to survive as a distinct faith community but also to carry on their business and religious activities and prosper and flourish under non-Muslim rule for more than eight centuries (Miller, 1976; 2015).

However, for the Mappilas the situation deteriorated with the advent of European imperial powers. With the advent of the Portuguese, not only did they lose their dominance in trade but they were also pushed inland, a development that had large and adverse economic implications. This is, therefore, seen as the most traumatic event in the history of Mappilas.⁵ The arrival of the British colonial regime marked a further deterioration in their conditions. The colonial discourse on modernity that had become the framework for interpreting religious texts and Muslim history would

plunge them into an unprecedented sociocultural and identity crisis as they were portrayed and labelled negatively as illiterate, deeply conservative and religiously fanatic (Abraham, 2014; Ansari, 2005). The colonial economic order and agrarian policies hit them economically and reduced them to a community of petty traders and agricultural labourers. Furthermore, it pitted them against the Hindu population and thus destroyed amicable communal relations forged over centuries (Dale, 1980).

As a result of these developments, anti-colonial attitudes became deeply entrenched among the Mappilas and in consequence they would oppose everything associated with the colonial regime, including modern education (Ali, 1990; Koya, 1983). As modern education, more accurately English education, was necessary for getting jobs in the British administration and also for transactions in trade and commerce, Mappilas, having been indifferent to modern education, stood away from taking advantage of newer avenues of employment and occupation. In sum, by the end of the nineteenth century Mappilas appeared to represent a defeated, negative, defensive and closed society (Miller, 1976).

III. Educational Development

In the precolonial period, the main educational sites for Muslims were maktabas and madrasas, locally known as *Othupallis* and *Palli Dars*, respectively. Even as these institutions were largely meant for imparting religious education, they were very few in number and most of them were located in cities. Given that only a small fraction of Muslims had access to such institutions, literacy rates were very low. When the British colonial regime introduced the new education system in the nineteenth century the Mappilas held aloof from it for a considerable period of time. There was, however, some progress, as we shall see in the following section, in the early twentieth century. A century later they appeared as one of the highly literate, economically prosperous and forward-looking communities in India. What follows in this section is a brief sketch of the trajectory of Mappilas' engagement with and success in modern education..

As Mappilas were negatively portrayed as a group that needed to be civilized, the earlier colonial census and educational reports provided separate literacy and educational figures for them. Unsurprisingly, Mappilas in these reports appeared to lag way behind other socio-religious communities in terms of literacy and educational attainment. In the first quarter of the twentieth century the literacy rate of Mappila males was half that of Hindu males in the Malabar district, although it increased slowly after 1901. In overall terms, females were less likely than males to be literate but the literacy rate of Mappila females was negligible. By 1931, the female literacy rate among Mappilas was just 1.2%

Table 1. Progress in literacy rates in Malabar: 1901–1931.

Year	Hindus		Muslims	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	20.2	3.7	9.2	0.4
1911	22.2	4.4	11.0	0.5
1921	24.7	6.3	11.8	0.8
1931	26.2	8.2	14.2	1.2

Note: Literacy rates pertain to population of all ages and are expressed in percentages.

Source: Census of India, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931.

Table 2. Progress of Education among Muslims: Malabar District.

	Number of Muslim pupils (public and private)		As % to total Muslim population (1921)	
	1923	1928	1923	1928
Boys	46519	80274	9.4	16.2
Girls	17352	31368	3.5	6.2
Total	63871	111642	6.4	11.1

Note: Number of pupils as on March 31 of 1923 and 1928.

Sources: Director of Public Instruction, 1922–1923 and 1927–1928.

as against 8.2% among Hindus (Table 1). Even worse was their status in terms of English literacy. The number of English literates among Mappilas in 1901 was merely 3 per 10,000 population, as compared to 118 among Hindus in the district. In the following decades, English literacy rates among Mappilas increased only marginally. By 1921, only 10 out of 10,000 Mappilas were literate in English (Census of India 1921[1922]).

Not only did Muslims lag behind Hindus in general, they fared badly even in comparison to certain lower castes among Hindus who had for centuries faced social disabilities and had been prevented from acquiring any kind of education by the higher castes. For instance, the Ezhavas in Travancore were well ahead of Muslims of Malabar in terms of literacy rate in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In 1901 their literacy rate was about 7.3% as against 4.5% among Mappila Muslims. The literacy rate among Ezhavas improved rapidly in the successive decades. By 1931 their literacy rate had increased to 27.3%, thanks to missionary initiatives and social movements.⁶

The Muslims of Malabar were least likely to avail themselves of expanding educational opportunities during the colonial period. For instance, there were 6348 and 393 Muslim boys and girls, respectively, enrolled in different educational institutions in 1880–1881. Of the total number of Muslim pupils (6741), only 2 were in high schools and 24 in middle schools (all of them boys) and none in the colleges. Thus, virtually all of them were concentrated in the primary section. In contrast, there were 130 and 333 pupils among Hindus who were in colleges and high schools, respectively in the same year (Report on Public Instruction in the Madras Presidency, pp. 8–10).

However, the participation of Muslims in various types of educational opportunities seems to have taken off at the close of the first quarter of the twentieth century. For instance, the number of pupils in various educational institutions increased substantially between 1923 and 1928. The pace of progress of schooling among girls was in line with that of boys, although girls still lagged far behind boys (Table 2).

Not much is known about the pace of progress of education among Muslims in the early decades of Independence due to unavailability of hard data. This is in large part

Table 3. Proportion of children attending educational institutions in 1990s.

Religion	Kerala			All India		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
All	82.7	83.6	81.7	59.5	65.7	52.3
Hindus	82.7	82.1	83.2	59.9	66.5	52.2
Muslims	81.4	85.4	77.5	52.3	54.7	46.5
Others	84.5	86.0	83.2	70.2	73.1	67.0

Note: The figures pertain to population aged 5–19.

Source: Calculated by the author from raw data file of NSSO, 50th Round (1993–1994).

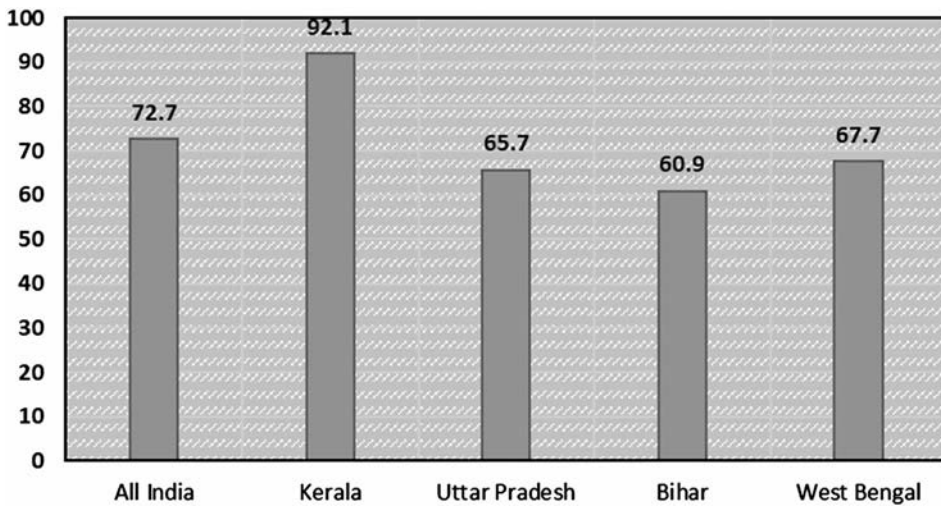


Figure 1. Proportion of Muslim children (aged 5–19) attending educational institutions in 2011–12. Note: All figures are percentages. Source: Derived from the raw data file of NSSO (68th Round).

because the practice of using religion as a category in the presentation of official statistics was abandoned. Neither the Indian census nor any other nodal data collecting agencies, including the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), issued socio-economic statistics cross-classified by religion.⁷ However, according to the *Report of the Commission for the Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions* (1965), in Kerala Muslim students accounted for 13.5% of students enrolled in grades I–X in 1961 as against their share of 17.5% in the state's total population. At the elementary and secondary levels they accounted for about 14% and 6% of total students, respectively. This suggests that although under-representation of Muslims in educational opportunities, especially at higher levels of schooling, continued, the community was fast catching up with other socioreligious communities. By 1990s school participation rate of Muslims had improved remarkably (Table 3).⁸ Seen in overall terms, they had caught up with other socioreligious communities. Alongside the rapidly increasing participation of boys in educational opportunities, girls' participation also made impressive progress, although still lagging behind boys' rates. But given the past educational trajectories of the community and its conservative views on girls' education, this was still quite a feat.

Further progress has been made since 1990s. As the latest available data show (Figure 1), almost all Muslim children in Kerala in the age group 5–19 years are now attending educational institutions, suggesting closure of both gender and inter-religious gaps in schooling. To put it a little differently, Muslims are an integral part of Kerala's schooled society. This is in sharp contrast to school participation rate of Muslim children in many states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, where most of India's Muslims live. Even as overall school participation rate in these states is lower than in the southern states, Muslims do even less well.

These long-term trends in educational development suggest that Kerala's Muslims have come a long way to make their mark in the sphere of education—from opposing modern education to becoming an educationally advanced community. How has this

turnaround become possible? In much of the scholarly literature this transformation is attributed to a combination of wide variety of factors: progressive politics and state policies, impact of Gulf migration, role of political parties, Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in particular, and efforts of community organizations (Ali, 1990; Mohammed, 2007; Salim, 2000). Although a few major works dealing with educational development among Muslims (see for example, Ali, 1990; Mohammed, 2007) document the role of individuals and community organizations, there is little attempt to locate and analyse activities, efforts and public receptions of such organizations in their historically specific social and political context of emergence. The following section is a modest attempt to plug this gap so as to be able to draw out the lessons such organizations offer.

IV. The Role of Community Organizations

In Kerala, organizations led by Muslims had come up in the nineteenth century. But most of these organizations were aimed solely at socio-religious reforms (Abraham, 2014). A marked shift in the nature and objectives of community organizations took place in the early years of the twentieth century as it was around this time that the idea of organized efforts for bringing Muslims to modern education gained wide currency amongst enlightened members of the community. This led to formation of organizations with special focus on promoting modern education among Muslims.⁹ Therefore, this section focuses on the organizations that came up in the twentieth century and worked to bring Muslims to modern education.

The story of community organizations focussed on bringing Muslims into the new education system begins with the 15th All India Muhammedan Educational Conference, held in Madras in 1901. A group of enlightened Muslims from South India had participated in that meeting and, inspired by its efforts and message, some of them came together to form 'The South India Muhammadan Association'. The primary function of this organization was to make representations to the government to promote education among Muslims.¹⁰ As these efforts squared with the colonial regime's mission of 'civilizing' Mappilas through education, the colonial authorities were very positive in their response and measures were put in place to encourage Muslims to participate in the expanding educational opportunities of the time.¹¹

Following the success of the South India Muhammadan Association in creatively engaging with the colonial authorities to create enabling conditions for education among Muslims, community organizations began to spring up in parts of present day Kerala. Although these organizations differed from each other in many respects, the common thread uniting them was educational advancement of the community. The evolution and rise of community organizations among Muslims in the twentieth century can be divided into three distinct temporal phases, each differentiated by organizational activity, strategy and leadership. The first phase ran from 1901 to 1920. Organizations formed during this period namely include the Malabar Muslim Educational Association (MMEA) the Cochin Muslim Education Association, the Malabar Muslim Association (MMA), and Lajnat al-Muhammadiya. These organizations were formed and led by a few learned members of the community who would rather engage with the colonial authorities than involve in community mobilization. By making representations and presenting memoranda, they pressed for the setting up of schools, the appointment of Muslim

Table 4. Some select voluntary organizations led by Muslims.

Organizations	Year of formation	Objectives/activities
Malabar Muslim Educational Association	1911	- Engaging with authorities for opening up educational institutions. - Creation of awareness about modern education.
Cochin Muslim Education Association	1917	Engaging with authorities for addressing educational problems facing Muslims.
Malabar Muslim Association	1919	- Creation of awareness about education. - Representations to authorities to promote educational interests of Muslims.
Kerala Muslim Aikya Sanghom	1922	- Religious reform. - Resolving of sectarian differences. - Advocacy for modern education.
Samastha Kerala Jamiyatul Ulema	1926	- Reform in madrasa education. - Evolving a scheme whereby Muslims could benefit from both religious and modern education.
Rouzathul Uloom Association	1942	- Blending modern education with Islamic traditions. - Establishment of institutions of higher learning along with schools.
Muslim Educational Society	1964	- Creating a class of professionals among Muslims. - Opening top-class educational institutions - Providing scholarship to Muslim students for higher education.
Muslim Service Society	1980	- Providing scholarships to Muslim students for higher education. - Opening educational institutions.
KMC Trust	1994	- Creation of top class institutions for professional courses. - Equipping students for accessing high earning jobs in the labour market.

Source: Sources: Ali (1990); Samad (1998); Mohammed (2007).

teachers and inspectors and securing aid for private schools/madrasas run by members of the community (Ali, 1990; also see Table 4). Thus, activities of the organizations in the first phase were characteristic of pressure/interest groups.

In the second phase (1920s–1940s) the activities of social organizations were to a greater extent marked by *wider civic engagement*. These organizations had dual objectives: socio-religious reforms on the one hand and putting across the message as to how taking to modern education would benefit the community on the other. The most important among such organizations was the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sanghom (KMAS), established in 1922. Interestingly, at the forefront of this organization was a group of reformist Ulema (religious leaders).¹² Given the Mappilas' long standing tradition of hostility towards the British colonial regime; conservative Ulema's considerable

clout over the community and persistent social division, chiefly along sectarian lines, the founding members of KMAS realized that no amount of efforts for spreading modern education would bear fruit without undermining the authority and power of conservative Ulema and engaging various stakeholders. Therefore, the KMAS made some shrewd moves. First, it initiated a socio-religious reform movement for wider civic engagement, and gave various stakeholders due space in the movement. Secondly, not only did it hold conferences and dialogues at various places but also engaged in publishing scholarly material in Malayalam, urging Muslims to eschew superstitions and other un-Islamic practices. Finally, it made the issue of embracing modern education an important element of the movement.¹³ It convincingly argued and put across the message that the root cause of the community's deplorable socioeconomic conditions and exclusion from the emerging colonial public sphere (comprised of and shaped by the educated middle class) was the lack of modern education, and that acquiring modern education was not, in any way, incompatible with their religious belief, rather it would contribute to strengthening Islam. It was, however, not easy to convince the community members of the new path that needed to be followed as conservative ulema opposed the work of the KMAS through lectures and writings (Abraham, 2014). To counter the growing influence of KMAS a section of the conservatives grouped themselves to form Samastha Kerala Jamiyatul Ulama (SKJU) in 1926.

The KMAS survived for only 12 years as it was then merged with the Kerala Muslim Majlis (KMM) but the efforts it made a lasting impact on the community. At one level, it dispelled the suspicion and assuage the fear of traditionalist Mappilas as to modern education. At another level, it contributed to setting up several elementary and high schools managed by the community itself (Abraham, 2014; Ali, 1990). Yet at another level, its positive outcomes created an environment of optimism and enthusiasm and inspired others to carry forward the efforts for empowering the community through education. Its powerful impact nudged even the organizations led by the traditionalists to respond positively. For instance, the SKJU that had come up, as stated above, in response to increasing public reception of KMAS's messages, laid emphasis on reforming the system of madrasa education. It advocated for devising curricula that would blend religious and modern education (Mohammed, 2007; also see Table 4).

The third phase took off in the 1940s. Activities of organizations in this phase basically focused on creating networks of institutions under private (community) management. The desire for creating educational institutions of higher learning was again anchored in a specific context. By 1940s, the steady development of modern education among Muslims had produced a critical mass of students graduating every year from high schools. But the dearth of institutions of higher education proved an impediment to the fulfilment of their desire to pursue higher education. Thus, building on the gains accrued from earlier efforts and in order to be able to plug the unmet needs, organizations such as the Rouzathul Uloom Association (RUA), TKM Educational Trust (TKMET), Muslim Educational Society (MES), and Kunhitharuvai Memorial Charitable Trust Group of Institutions (KMCT) embarked on creating networks of educational institutions.

The RUA made efforts to create institutions of higher learning where students would receive a mix of religious and modern education. In 1948, it started the 'Rouzathul Uloom Arabic College' to offer higher education in Islamic studies up to the postgraduate

level. But its most important achievement was the establishment in 1948 of Farook College, often regarded as the 'Aligarh of Malabar', near Calicut under the leadership of Maulavi Abussabah Ahamedali. Although the college maintained the Islamic context, its founders did not see any conflict between modern education and true religion as they held that the goal of both was humanitarian. As the primary goal was the educational advancement of the community, teaching of modern disciplines held the foreground (Miller, 1976). The college went on to offer graduate degrees in modern disciplines such as English, mathematics, science and commerce. Ever since, the college has expanded in terms of courses offered and students enrolled.¹⁴

Improved economic status (propelled by migration to the Persian Gulf from 1950s onward) and the presence of a critical mass of Mappilas desiring higher education created the context for a 'paradigm shift' in the history of educational advancement of Mappilas. This shift was marked by new leadership (businessmen, entrepreneurs and professionals) and types of educational institutions. For instance, Thangal Kunju Musaliar, a business giant (also known as the 'Cashew King') formed the TKMET which started by opening up an engineering college in 1956, the first such college within the private sector. Its foundation stone was laid by none other than Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India.¹⁵

The most important development in this phase was, however, the birth of the MES in 1964. It was formed by a group of Muslims, mainly doctors, in order to create a class of professionals within the community. Starting off with a series of service institutions and offering scholarships to Mappila students pursuing higher education in the professional and technological fields, it went on to establish educational institutions of higher learning. In 1967, the MES laid the foundation of its first college at Mannarghat, the heart of Mappila territory. In the following years, the number of institutions set up by the MES grew by leaps and bounds. But as it grew in popularity and its social services became widely received and appreciated, many challenges cropped up, especially in the arena of politics. The IUML,¹⁶ which had initially supported the efforts of the MES was becoming increasingly disillusioned as it felt that its claim to be the sole guardian of the community was greatly undermined by the latter's growing popularity. This led to open confrontation and power play. The IUML leaders became involved in disruption of conferences organized by the MES and also made abortive attempts to take it over. Having failed to deter its activities, the IUML leaders used the bogey of religion and engaged in spreading incessant propaganda against the MES, implying that its views and activities were anti-Islamic. But in spite of all this the MES received critical support from the educated section of the community and thus could continue its journey to put in place one of the largest networks of institutions in Kerala (Miller, 1976; Mohammed, 2007). However, for the MES challenges were not over as within the organization a group of members began to feel that it was turning into a private business firm, and thus moving away from its foundational principles. Internal discontent and dissensions eventually led to its split in 1980. The splintered group established yet another organization called Muslim Service Society (MSS). Nevertheless, MES remains a model of successful venture in the arena of education. Today it runs about 150 institutions including 72 English medium schools, 18 Arts and Science Colleges and 10 professional institutions. Most of these are located in the Muslim-dominated parts of Calicut and Mallapuram districts.¹⁷

Following the success of the MES, a flurry of organizations sprang up in the following decades. A great surge in private trusts and charitable organizations founded by Muslims, mostly businessmen and professionals, took place after the 1990s. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1990s combined with expansion of the Muslim middle class and its enhanced ability to raise funds by appealing to the sensitivities of specific Muslim audiences in both the Persian Gulf and Kerala led to a spurt in private educational institutions run and managed by Muslim organizations. As some of these institutions charge hefty fees, they also provided Gulf-based businessmen and professionals with attractive opportunities for investment (Osella & Osella, 2007).

Today, educational institutions owned by Muslims are visible everywhere, making important landmark in the educational institutional landscape that has emerged in the state of Kerala. Currently, according to an estimate, about 19.3% of total number of aided schools and 18.6% of total number of aided colleges (arts, science, engineering, polytechnic, homeo and Ayurveda) in the state are owned by Muslims as against the respective shares of Hindus being 41.4% and 30.9% and of Christians 36.4% and 46.6%. In the Malabar region, aided colleges owned by Muslims (14.2%) outnumber those by Hindus (7.4%) and Christians (5.4%).¹⁸

V. Lessons from the 'Kerala Experience'

It may be recalled that the Muslims of Kerala up until the first quarter of the twentieth century were experiencing decline in all aspects of social life. As a group, they were worst off educationally. Over the span of a century, they became one of the educationally advanced communities of India. The ways through which they pulled themselves out of illiteracy and made a mark in the sphere of education offer immensely valuable insights and lessons on community renewal and educational empowerment.

At the broadest level, the Kerala experience brings into sharp focus the structural constraints posed by religio-cultural value systems, minority status, class locations, or all of them combined. At the same time, it amply demonstrates that the impact of structural impediments is neither fixed nor immutable. The story of Kerala's Muslims is an excellent example of the fact that the environment of structural constraints can be negotiated, altered and/or turned into advantage. Thus, the first lesson that the 'Kerala Experience' offers is that it is possible for communities, including Muslims, to creatively respond to and eventually overpower structural barriers to their socioeconomic and educational advancement.

At another level the 'Kerala Experience' underscores the importance of community organizations as agencies of social change and reordering community life. It demonstrates how such forms of organized structures are capable of critically evaluating the existing conditions, formulating projects for a better collective future and mobilizing the community to realize them, even if in small parts. Thus, the second lesson is that organized forms of efforts help communities to a considerable extent to effectively respond to emerging demands, dilemma and ambiguities of prevailing situation.

Yet at another level, the 'Kerala Experience' marks the significance of seamless transition of organized efforts. Unlike the Aligarh movement,¹⁹ the efforts of community organizations continued unbroken, spanning over a century. As a result, the pace of progress was enhanced and institutional network expanded unabated. This is probably why

the 'Kerala Experience' appears to have made deeper impact and produced more concrete outcomes than the Aligarh movement. The third lesson therefore is that public involvement and organized form of efforts to uplift a population or a specific community educationally bear fruits only if they sustain for over a long period of time. Short-lived campaigns for promoting education do not benefit much.

The 'Kerala Experience' also unfolds many different ways in which community organizations may help uplift a community from the morass of backwardness. In the first place, community organizations have immense potentials for engaging different stakeholders (e.g. political and religious leaders, professionals and other learned members of the community) to foster community spirit in a community with several faultlines. Such a spirit of solidarity is essential for community mobilization for a better collective future. Secondly, such organizations, compared to individuals, are often better positioned to coordinate and leverage with the state and other agencies for securing communitarian interests, including access to education. Finally, they can effectively mobilize and channellise community resources and energy to fulfil a variety of community's unmet needs. As for education, they can help in more ways than one: by generating widespread awareness through sustained campaigns, providing counselling services, extending financial aid to needy students, creating educational institutions and so on. Hence, the fourth lesson that springs from the 'Kerala Experience' is that social groups or communities are likely to be better placed educationally as well as in other aspects of life that are marked by presence of organized structures of guidance and assistance.

And yet, the 'Kerala Experience' lays bare the complex dynamics of the ecosystem of community organizations. It tells us that the operational space of such organizations is one of contestation. At one level, the operations of such organizations are likely to be contested by sections of the community they profess to work for. At another level, inter-organizational conflict may seem unavoidable for even as betterment of the community happens to be their ultimate goal, they tend to compete with each other at the same time, including for community leadership. Therefore, the fifth important lesson emanating from the 'Kerala Experience' is that while community-centric organizations may manifestly well serve their respective communities, they generally have their own 'self interest' as well.

The above discussion thus points to the fact that while community-based organizations do render great services, they are not paragon of virtues. But, all considered, the 'Kerala Experience' presents a unique model of 'self help' and 'self change'. It shows other Muslims, especially those living in the northern and eastern states,²⁰ the path to combat sociocultural inertia in general and remove the cap of educational backwardness in particular.

VI. Concluding Remarks

The overall image of Indian Muslims today is of a community deprived of a minimally decent life, having low educational attainment and experiencing socio-cultural stagnation. But Kerala's Muslims paint altogether a different picture. They are doing well, not just in education, but in most other aspects of life as well without losing their identity as a distinct faith community even as a century ago they were put in a defined image box

and appeared to represent a community steeped in illiteracy and poverty. An important element of this success is the role of community organizations.

Given that Muslims in large parts of India are currently experiencing sociocultural stagnation, educational and economic exclusion, there is much to learn from the 'Kerala Model' of community renewal and 'self-help'. This is, however, neither to privilege it over other ways of addressing the problems facing the community, nor to suggest that a simple emulation of this model will perfectly work in other parts of the country. The point is that in the current situation a wide range of engaged and organized forms of efforts focussed on educational advancement of the community are likely to produce better outcomes.

Notes

1. Of late, religion-based inequalities in socio-economic and educational attainment have spawned a large body of empirical literature in India. See for example, Shariff and Razzack (2006); John and Mutatkar (2005); Sachar (2006); Basant and Shariff (2010); Alam (2012, 2013).
2. Also see Alam (2012) for a critical review of these explanations.
3. Malabar, the locale of Mappila Muslims, has gone through many realignments. It was part of the ancient kingdom of the Cheras until the twelfth century, when the chieftains of this region declared their independence. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the northern part of Malabar was brought under the Kingdom of Mysore, and subsequently became part of the Madras Presidency as an administrative district during the British colonial period. The former Malabar district comprised almost half of Kerala as it now is and extended over the present-day districts of Kannur, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Malappuram and much of Palakkad district. At the time of Independence (in 1947), the Madras Presidency became the Madras State and Malabar continued to remain part of it. With the adjustment of state boundaries on linguistic basis in 1956, the Malayalam-speaking region of Kasaragod was merged with Malabar, which in turn was merged with the state of Travancore-Cochin to form the state of Kerala.
4. As per the 1931 census, Muslims accounted for 32.9% of the Malabar district. However, they were unequally distributed across the talukas within the district. They were about three-fifths of the population of Ernad Taluka; over two fifths in Ponani; over a third in Kurumbranad; and over a fourth in Walluvanad (Census of India, 1932). By and large, the same spatial pattern of concentration continues. At present, they constitute less than half (43.5%) of the region's population. Most of them are concentrated in the Malappuram district where they account for three-fourths (72%) of the total population, followed by Kozhikode (39.2%), Kasaragod (37.2%); Kannur (29.2%), Wayanad (28.6%) and Palakkad (28.9%) (Census of India, 2011).
5. For instance, Miller (1976, p. 84) observes: 'All considered, Islam in Kerala had never been in greater distress since its advent'.
6. The role of non-state actors in educational progress in Kerala has been well documented. In the late nineteenth century, there were various groups of missionaries that were active in setting up schools. By 1908, there were about 2198 schools run by missionaries and indigenous churches (Thakaran, 1984). While the lower castes benefited from these efforts, their literacy and educational status were still deplorably low. However, radical change in the lives of the lower castes took place and social disparities in literacy and schooling began to narrow substantially owing to the impact of largescale social movements initiated in the early twentieth century, especially the ones led by Sree Narayan Guru and Sri Ayyan Kali. At one level, these movements put pressure on the government to declare government schools open for all, a goal that was achieved in 1910. At another level, they led many civil society organizations to spring up. Organizations like Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana

- (SNDP) and Sadhu Jana Paripalana (SJP) created networks of educational institutions. See also Eapen (1985); Mathew (1999).
7. This statistical purdah was finally cast off in the 1990s when the NSSO began to publish figures on a range of socio-economic and educational parameters for religious groups. After much public debate and sustained demand, the Indian Census resumed the practice of publishing educational and economic figures by religion in 2001.
 8. The figures presented in Table 3 and Figure 1 are extracted from the raw data files of National Sample Surveys (50th and 68th rounds). These household surveys with all India coverage (both rural and urban tracts) and very large sample size are conducted by the NSSO. They collect a variety of socio-demographic, educational and economic activity status information for individuals. The extracted raw data files (in SPSS/STATA format) allow researchers to carry out any sort of analysis. The NSSO is an agency within the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India.
 9. It may be noted that the decades leading into the twentieth century saw the emergence of strong caste organizations in Kerala. Not only did these organizations make strenuous efforts to improve the circumstances of their respective castes, they would also press for larger share in educational opportunities and power structures (Mathew, 1999).
 10. On the activities of the South India Muhammadan Association and the coming forward of enlightened Muslims for the promotion of education in the community the Director of Public Instruction of Madras Presidency remarked: 'Recently also a memorial was submitted to Government by the Muhammadan Association of Southern India making suggestions for the improvement of Muhammadan education and praying for further concessions and privileges in the matter of scholarships, appointment, etc. Muhammadans have for many years been prominent in asking for special privileges, but it is now gratifying to observe from the utterances of the leading members of the community the growth of a feeling among them that the best way to work out their salvation is by strenuous efforts to help themselves. The existence of such a feeling is evidenced by the fact that they have started a fund, which so far appears to have elicited a fairly liberal response, for the purpose of helping Muhammadan lads of promise to prosecute their studies in England and qualify for the higher services'. (*Progress of Education in India*, 1901, p. 02, p. 382).
 11. Notable among such measures were grants-in-aid to special schools for Muslims, scholarships for Muslim scholars and appointment of Muslim School Inspectors (Ali, 1990).
 12. It was formed under the leadership of Kottapurath Seethi Muhamad Sahib. Many prominent members of the community including Manappattu P. Kunhahammad Haji, Sheik Hamadani Thangal, E.K Moulavi, K.M Moulavi and Sikhandar Haji were also associated with the Sanghom.
 13. The KMAS published two periodicals – *Muslim Aikyom in Malyalam* and *Al-Irshad* in Arabic-Malyalam to propagate its ideas. It socio-religious reform movement, among other things, rejected the Islamic priesthood and authority of legal schools, and asserted that the *Quran* and *Hadith* were the fundamental authorities to decide upon religious and moral issues in Islam. But the seminal contributions to this movement came from Vakkom Moulavi, one of the founding members of the KMAS. As well as being an Islamic scholar, he was a journalist and wrote extensively in his journal *Muslims* on the need for socio-religious reforms, forging community spirit and shedding the tendency to oppose modern education. In particular, he challenged the view held by conservatives that learning, history, geography, science, mathematics, arts, literature and other topics was un-Islamic. Also see Abraham (2014) for a detailed account of Vakkom Moulavi's contribution to spreading the ideas of KMAS.
 14. Currently, it offers 20 and 15 courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, respectively. In 2017–2018, the total intake was about 3000 students. More importantly, girls (mostly Muslims) constitute the majority of students. For more information see: <https://www.farookcollege.ac.in/library/uploads/2019/01/NIRF-Overall.htm>.
 15. Also see: <https://tkmce.ac.in/tkm-trust>.
 16. After the partition of India in 1947, the All-India Muslim League was disbanded. However, the party was reorganized as the Indian Union Muslim League and became politically very

active in Kerala. It championed the cause of the Muslim community and rose in prominence in the state's electoral politics. It shared power in coalition governments since 1967. By holding the education portfolio in most of them, the IUML has been instrumental in creating educational institutions in the Malabar region (Rahim, 2013).

17. Also see: <http://meskerala.com/institutions-glance/>
18. See, Sebastian (2019). For a list of technical/engineering institutes owned by religious minorities in Kerala see: <https://www.aicte-india.org/downloads/backup%20minority/Kerala.pdf>
19. The 'Aligarh Movement' refers to a congeries of efforts pioneered by Syed Ahmed Khan in the city of Aligarh (situated in the present day state of Uttar Pradesh) in the late nineteenth century to encourage Muslims to take advantage of modern education. Given its impact on the Muslim community, the Aligarh Movement symbolized the renaissance among Muslims. However, it died out rather too early (Lelyveld, 1978).
20. These states include Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Assam, together accounting for over half the Muslim population of India. It is particularly in these states that Muslims cut a sorry figure in terms of educational and economic attainment. They are more likely than others to be poor, to occupy the lower rungs of the occupational structure and to experience lower educational attainment (Sachar, 2006). Worse still, there has been little progress over the years (Kundu, 2014). Moreover, barring a few sporadic individual attempts, there have not been organized efforts within the community for the educational advancement in the past seven decades (Hasnain, 2007).

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