

Modernity, Islamic Reform, and the Mappilas of Kerala: The Contributions of Vakkom Moulavi (1873-1932)

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Abstract:

The socio-economic and political changes effected in Kerala by the British and colonial discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century challenged traditional structures of power. This eventually resulted in social mobility within various communities which, as a result, embraced modernity and began to pursue modern education. However, Mappila Muslims' long-standing tradition of struggle against colonial powers and their hatred of British rule had led them to resist the modernization process and consequently become more socially and educationally backward than other communities in Kerala. It was in this context that Vakkom Muhammad Abdul Khadir Moulavi (1873- 1932), who is acknowledged as the "father" of the Muslim socio-religious reform movement in Kerala, undertook to persuade Mappilas to embrace various aspects of modernity, especially modern education. Based mainly on primary sources written in Malayalam, this pioneering study argues that Vakkom Moulavi's thought was largely shaped by the colonial discourse on modernity. It shows how he reinterpreted Islamic principles and Muslim history using the framework of the rational, secular, universal humanism of the European Enlightenment. One result of this was that his reinterpretation precluded the possibility of understanding Islam as discursive tradition, which in turn reified Islam and negated the potential vibrancy of Islamic societies. At the same time his championing of modern education as a means to modernization eventually tore traditional Muslim education from its historical and cultural roots. The study also demonstrates that, because he saw the state as a key agent in the modernization process, he was keen to educate people about their rights and responsibilities. In sum, this analysis of Vakkom Moulavi's career demonstrates that, in order to understand the intellectual framework and activities of modern socio-religious reform movements, these latter need to be studied in the light of colonial discourse on modernity.