

VAKKOM ABDUL QADIR MOULAVI

Biography as History

J.Muhammad Nahar

Introduction

Vakkom Moulavi is known to the Keralites as an enterpriser owning the Swadeshabhimani Press having Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai as its editor, and also a well-known articulator and the shaper of radical political ideas in Travancore. Major historical works on the political mobilization of Kerala, such as that of P.K.K. Menon's, *The History of Kerala* says that, "Abdul Qadir Moulavi of Vakkom a leader of the Muslim community invited Mr. Pillai to be the Editor of his newspaper. Swadeshabhimani published from Anjengo initially and transferred to Trivandrum gave the full assurance that he would have unrestricted freedom to express his own views"¹ This is the way usually Moulavi is represented in most of the historical works.² But this representation did not remain unchallenged till a host of other writers including hagiographers of Moulavi emphasized, sometimes over emphasized him as the initiator of Renaissance movement in Kerala with due importance given to the social reformist aspect of Moulavi's life. The attempt in this paper is to seek different aspects of Moulavi, as the one amongst the imitators of print culture for secular and communitarian aspects.

Muslim community in Kerala

Kerala had its introduction to Islam directly from Arabia in the same way as it had its first contact with the Arabic language directly through Arab merchant sailors trading with Kerala. Islam received a warm reception in Kerala, since its egalitarian principles and message of human brotherhood had a great impact on the caste dominated land. The Travancore state Manual authored by T K Velupillai suggests that the first batch of Muslims reached Malabar in the reign of Caliph Walid in the nineteenth year of the Hijra,

¹ Menon P.K.K., 'The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala', Vol.III, The Regional Records Survey Committee, Trivandrum, 1966 P18

i.e. about 712. AD, which seems he had subscribed form Fra Bartholomew's view.³ Likewise their Malabar counterparts, the rulers of Travancore also received Muslims always with a kind and generous treatment. It is to be noted that in Travancore there were no forcible conversion to Islam occurred, which was a frequent thing in Malabar during the latter part of the 18th century under Hyder Ali and Tipu sultan. Still State's right over the religions were exercised in Islam also, though in a different manner. As TK Velupillai writes, "the permission of the Government was necessary for the opening of mosques, while the right of appointing the priests were reserved in the sovereign himself."⁴ Maharaja's verdicts were taken as final when there were disputes among Muslims on religious matters. More than that, the payment of 'Adiyara' fees was an essential pre-requisite to the exercise of valid authority. Thus it can be very well argued that the sovereign had extending deserved interest towards the Muslims community like what it did with the Hindu and Christian subjects. Sunnis and Shias are the two sects among Muslims in Travancore like in most of other areas where Islam is practiced as religion. However, there existed a big despair in number where Sunnis outnumber Shias in a big way.

Modernist Programme in Kerala.

Kerala society experienced a series of changes in the first half of the 19th century. It was in fact a culmination of the Western cultural influences it had received form 16th century onwards through the Portuguese, Dutch and other foreign traders. They introduced to Kerala various artifacts of machines like Printed books, Printing Press, Steam boats, Machine guns, etc.⁵ Although these were happening at one end, the changes in real sense started from 19th century only, when the total social outlook got changed

² Sreedhara Menon A, 'Survey of Kerala History', Introduction part. And Prof. Lawrenz Lopez, 'A Social History of Modern Kerala', SP Press, Trivandrum, 1982 P 17-232

³ Sadasyathilaka TK Velupillai, 'The Travancore State Manual', Vol. I, The Government of Travancore, 1940, p805.

⁴ Ibid, P812.

⁵ Gopalakrishnan PK, 'Cultural History of Kerala', Kerala Language Institute, Trivandrum, Dec 1974, P503.

both in the societal life and thinking. P.K.Gopalakrishnan argues that European missionary Organizations were the important factor for this cultural awakening.⁶

The Protestant Missionaries like London Mission and Church Mission society did start their activities in Travancore almost in the initial decades of the 19th century. Even though their objective was religious conversion, they used education as a tool for that purpose. They received impetus from the Government through finance aid in quite a few occasions.⁷ They pioneered in establishing colleges and schools all around Kerala in common and Travancore in particular. But the days followed proved that the society was not ready for an immediate change, till in 1888, a person named Nanu Guru, consecrated an idol of Lord Shiva at Aruvippuram, a village in South Travancore.⁸ This man later became famous in another name called Sree Narayana Guru. This particular incident is regarded as the death knell to the Brahmin supremacy, which had its roots from 7th century onwards.

The new era of Kerala history is marked by the division of the Kerala society, one still trying to hold its supremacy by denying every rights to the lower classes and the other due to the influence of the above said incident started challenging their oppressors in an organized way for their just rights. Most of the oppressed castes, say it the Ezhavas, Pulayars, Muslims etc began to think about themselves and thus began to raise voice for their own organizations, own educational institutions, temples, libraries, industrial enterprises and above all a change in the existing rituals and customs of practice. The overarching idea behind all these developments was an urge to relocate them at par with the 'privilege Categories' in the society.

Social Movements in Kerala

The Travancore state was annexed to the British paramount power in and around 1805 to 1809. Through a contract or treaty as maintained, both by the princely state and paramount power Colonel Munro assumed Diwanship to engender bureaucratic as well as

⁶ Ibid, P503

⁷ Ibid, P504

⁸ Chandra Mohan P, 'Popular Culture and Socio-Religious Reform: Narayana Guru and the Ezhavas of Travancore', Studies in History, 1987, P57

other public reforms in Travancore.⁹ It was around during this period missionary activity become quite widespread. From the middle of the 19th century, a variety of socio economic changes happened in Travancore. The abolition of the state monopoly in commodities like pepper and tobacco, growth of small-scale industries, the increase in the demand for coconut products abroad facilitated the growth of the entrepreneurial ability of the Syrian Christians, the Ezhavas and the Muslims of Travancore. A sizeable number of wealthy groups emerged from these communities.¹⁰ The missionary activities attracted the lower castes to the Christian mission institutions due to the discriminatory attitude of the upper castes and the Travancore state. Earlier due to caste prejudices almost all the Government, institution were limited to upper castes only. However, the mission institutions were made accessible to everyone including the Muslims and lower castes. Thus, the Government and the missionaries kept literacy in Travancore comparatively in a better position.¹¹ Thus, the changing economic conditions as well as the spread of modern Western ideas accelerated social awakening.

After realizing the need for an organizational mechanism, Dr. Palpu, Poet Kumaranasan and a host of other educated Ezhava middle class founded *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam* in 1903. Again this was a model for other oppressed classes of Kerala society to initiate with and thus almost on the same lines in 1905 a Pulaya by birth Ayyan Kali organized *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* in Travancore. Along the same line Nairs, formed *Nair Service Society* (NSS) in 1907 with Nambudiris has their own organization called '*Yogakshemasabha*' in the same year. All these associations stressed the importance of education and health in modern social life. This was to facilitate considerable levels of mobility by introducing new customs and modes of livelihood to achieve social status as human beings. The Muslims of Travancore took up the same social reform initiatives as well. Of these, Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi stands apart from others for his introduction of 'Print culture' both for communitarian purpose and for larger political interest of the civil society.

⁹ TK Velupillai, P24-6

¹⁰ Robin Jeffrey, 'Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908', New Delhi, P44

Religious Reform in Islam

Like other lower caste communities, 19th century marked the beginning for a reform within Islam as well. This was a time when some concerned personalities of Muslims community started raising their voices against certain so called 'un Islamic' practices which were inflicted into the religion by the Ulemas of vested interests over a period of time. Amongst these, the role of Sanaullha Makthi Thangal is of prime concern to the Muslim community because of his polemic engagement with the Christian missionaries and their aggressive proselytization efforts.¹²

Sheikh Mahin Hamadani, Veliyamcod Umar Khasi, Moulavi Abdul Karim, Karekat Kunji Poker Musaliyar, C. Seythali kutty Master, Moulana Chalilakath Kunju Ahmad Haji were some names often quoted as the pioneering personalities in the Renaissance and Islahi¹³ movement of Islam in Kerala.¹⁴

Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi-- A short Biography

M. Muhammad Abdul Qadir, who later became famous as Vakkom Moulavi was born in 1873 (1049M:E, Hijra 1250) in a village called Vakkom, in the Chirayinkil taluk of the erstwhile Travancore state.¹⁵ His enlightened and wealthy father who was a prominent trader and influential figure among all other communities engaged a number of scholars from distant places to teach young Abdul Qadir every subject he wished to learn. Within a short span of time because of his inherent talents, he mastered the Arabic

¹¹ Kawashima Koji, 'Hindu state and Christian Missionaries', Oxford University Press, 2000.

¹² His polemical exchanges with the Christian missionaries resulted in the publication of various tracts and pamphlets like 'Katora Kutaram', 'Katora Vajram', 'Parkaleetha Porkalam', etc. All these tracts meant to defend Islam and the Muslims of Kerala against the missionary attacks. It is believed that Makthi thangal initiated public debates on various issues including religious culture and other matters of general concern.

¹³ 'Islahi' is used in Travancore context as religious reformation.

¹⁴ 'Islahi Movements in Kerala- till 1950' Souvenir, Mujahid State Conference, Ernakulam, 2002, p63

¹⁵ 'Vakkom Moulaviyude Therenjeduthe Kruthikal (Selected Writings of Vakkom Moulavi), Ed. By A Muhammad Abda, Vakkom Moulavi Publications, Vakkom, 1979, p13.

language, and acquired profound knowledge on the Holy Quran, Sunnah, Logic, Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic history.¹⁶ Besides this, he learnt different languages like Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit, Tamil and English along with a proficient knowledge in Malayalam.¹⁷

Being a contemporary of Sree Narayana Guru, the famous social reformer, it is learnt that Moulavi interacted with him quite a number of occasions. Sree Narayana Guru's efforts were initially focused more on reforming the customs and practices of Ezhavas with due emphasis on the moral as well as social upliftment. His emphasis on having modern education and industrial training for empowerment was impressive for many Ezhavas to conceive a common platform for themselves to conjoin the efforts taken up by Narayana Guru. Dr. Palpu, the founder member of SNDP Yogam along with the Poet turned social reformist Kumaranasan, had taken up guru's focus on modernization. Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) became a common platform for anti-casteist sentiments of many other lower caste groups in the initial days. Nevertheless, it could not spearhead the momentum of protest due to the sectarian nature of Ezhavas that kept the non-Ezhavas with no other option but to look for different ways of organizing themselves.

Vakkom Moulavi a contemporary of Narayana Guru had a fruitful relation with him. He was initially nominated as a member in the SNDP for his organizational capabilities. All groups appreciated Moulvi's modern outlook and the necessary skills for spearheading the movement. He constituted 'Islamika Paripalana Yogam' along the lines of SNDP. He initiated movements for removing sectarian as well as other difference within the Muslim community of Kerala. Like SNDP, which initiated movements for merging up of various sub castes' into the Ezhava category, Islamika Dharma Paripalana Yogam pioneered the spirit of unification Muslims in Kerala. However, unlike the SNDP, which had a Csteist outlook, Islamika Dharma Paripalana Yogam looked forward for a universal brotherhood of Muslims.

¹⁶ Ibid,p14

¹⁷ Muhammad Kannu, 'Vakkom Moulaviyum Navothana Naayakanmaaram (Vakkom Moulavi and Reformist leaders), Vakkom Moulavi publications, Vakkom, 1982.

His initial efforts were concentrated more on reforming the Muslim community of Kerala along the lines of revivalist attempts of the Egyptian writer and Savant Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abdu, Jamaluddin Afghani, etc. As far as the modern Islamic reformation is concerned Rashid Rida, a disciple of Muhammad Abdu had profound impact on shaping Moulavi's religious as well as moral outlook. The 'AL_MANAAR' magazine, which was published by Rashid Rida, had been into shaping the religious reformist spirits within Islam around the world.¹⁸ Moulavi got influence by the reformist efforts of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Shah Waliyullah of Delhi. However, he was more oriented towards the developments in Egypt and other Arabic world rather than the North Indian reformist. Within Travancore, there were lot of magazines and pamphlets were issued and circulated by various social groups.¹⁹ In this context, Moulavi felt the real need for having a newspaper cum magazine for representing the voices of Muslims in Travancore. For this he had subscribed 'Al-Manaar' from Egypt to spread the ideas of textual and canonized form of Islam much against the wishes of orthodox Ulema's who were into Islamic superstitious practices. To counter their power Moulavi had to disseminate alternate religious moral lessons prescribed in the Quran. Moulavi had intellectual companionship with various luminaries around the Islamic world. In one of his major correspondence with the Moulana Rashid Rida, Moulavi requested him to send him the lost copies of Al-Manaar magazine, which he used to subscribe for quite a long time.²⁰ Moulavi had intellectual friendship with many scholars from north India who were part of the Aligarh movement.

Vakkom Moulavi on Science.

Vakkom Moulavi is very often referred as the Sir Syed Ahammed Khan of Kerala for his modern outlook as well as for his role as the pioneer of modern education among the Muslims. However, the advent Science education came to Travancore in a major way

¹⁸ Muhammed Kannu, P171.

¹⁹ SNDP has started publishing 'VIVEKODAYAM' as its mouthpiece way back in 1904. Nair Service Society had its Nair magazine published from Trivandrum. Malaya Manorama published from Kottayam had a strong Syrian Christian backup.

²⁰ Muhammed Kannu, P3.

through British and Missionary institutions. It did not reach well to the Muslims. This was due to two major reasons. One, Muslims who were seen by the British people as their non-co-operators as well as enemies for their involvement in major uprisings against the British in Malabar from mid nineteenth century onwards.²¹ Secondly, the orthodox Ulema's did not encourage Modern education and they took a negative attitude towards those who received any kind of Education other than the religious one.

Moulavi's efforts were initially focused more on bringing science education at a closer level to the Madrassas, so that his own people could also benefit from the positive impact of rational knowledge. In a provocative statement issued in the volume VI of 'DEEPIKA' titled, "Where we have to imitate the Westerners?" he emphasized that Muslims should look forward to the scientific, technical innovations of Westerners like the invention of Aero plane, Vaccine, Machines, etc. At the same time he cautioned the 'over enthusiasts', who were blaming Islam for the backwardness by saying that Westerner's culture of cursory attitude towards the religion should be kept away from the larger perspective of the community interests.

In 1932, Moulavi took a cursory glance at the superstitious and simpleton nature of Muslims. This, he asserted which kept the Muslims to remain backward. This was more due to their own disregard for modern gadgets and ways of life. In his words "the world is going in a material one. With their intellectual advancement in science and technology, Westerners are having fairly better social and economic life than any other groups in the world. See, they have trains for traveling. Hundreds and thousands of people had earlier used bullock carts, horses, etc for their traveling purpose. However, with train now people of Shoranur can travel easily to Madras for their needs as well as transporting their goods. How many Muslims are traveling in train?"²²

He again persuaded Muslims to find pleasure in the way the Modern Western people were leading their life with postal services, telescope, aero planes, steamships, etc. The advancement that science brought to westerners was unimaginable according to Moulavi. In the next issue of Deepika, he persuaded Muslims to look around for having an open mind. He drew the examples of Nairs, Ezhavas and Syrian Christian groups as

²¹ KN Panikkar, 'Against Lord and State', OUP, New Delhi .

²² Deepika, 1932, Vol IV, P3.

having mobility. This he ascribed to their enterprising spirit. He even expressed his admiration for Syrian Christian Planters in bringing wireless to the High ranges.²³

His admiration for science for 'progress' did not deter him from, making certain other positions, which could come closer to anti-science position. For example in his discussions on photography, he sees it as nothing that much progressive in its true scientific spirit. He goes on to say that as 'pictography' in itself produces icons, which could easily promote unislamic practices. More than that Paintings and portraits are unislamic and to him loyal Muslims should remain away from photography. However, the more explicit form of his ant-science position is expressed with respect to family planning.

"..... Those who lead respectable and successful family life are seen with more than four or five children ".²⁴ He was very much against family planning as a norm to be practiced by Muslims. He quoted various suras from the Quran in support of his arguments. He made a castigating remark on science and its astute ways of rationalizing the external world.

Transformation of Religious and Social Life

Moulavi's foremost attempt was to reformulate the social life of Muslims in Travancore in accordance with the modern age. Muslim community as a whole was remaining away from the modernization attempts that were instituted in Travancore by the princely state as well as by the British paramount and missionaries.²⁵ The major changes that were happening to the different social groups were a revelation to Moulavi to conduct certain levels of changes within the Muslim community. His first attempt was to make the Muslim community to get convinced with the positive sides of western modern education. The merits of schooling as recommended by him for those who prefer Madrassa education. He also looks forward for the education and the upliftment of Muslim women.

²³ Deepika, 1932, Vol II, P13.

²⁴ Deepika, 1933, Vol V P 7.

²⁵ Koji Kawashima, 'Hindu State and Christian Missionaries- Travancore

In fact, Moulavi's efforts on revitalizing his own community got evolved after his encounter with the Egyptian magazine 'Al-Manaar' rather than some of the reformist movements happening within the country.²⁶ This was more due to the experience Kerala Muslims had in their social life. Historically speaking, unlike North Indian Muslims who were having Mughal legacy, the Kerala Muslims had the vast network of oceanic trade with the outside world along with occasional fights with other naval powers like Portuguese, Dutch and later with the British.²⁷ Moreover, the role players were very different in each of the case. The colonial state, other religions and missionaries were the major factor for a resurgent movement in North India whereas in Kerala's case it was in a closer look, a movement which was restricted to the community itself.

In Travancore Moulavi's, efforts were focused more on putting the Muslim community on par with other social groups in this native state. To achieve this, he had to resolve to new ways for mobilizing the people for achieving the 'real' marks of progress like education, employment and healthy life. Unlike other social reformers, Moulavi used printed materials like tracts, pamphlets, magazines, newspaper etc. for attaining his goals.

Makthi Thangal and other predecessors of Vakkom Moulavi exposed the Muslims of Kerala to their own lack of understanding of Islam. Initially there were some attempts from these intellectuals to counter the Christian missionaries and other group's attack on Islam in the public spaces. Moulavi realized that only using print media he could challenge the attacks the Christian missionaries as well, as the orthodox Ulemas who were having control over the transmission of the religious knowledge. He also realizes that every Muslims had to have certain specific standards of religious knowledge, otherwise, they would remain vulnerable to the aggressive conversion attempts of the Christian missionaries. He felt that orthodox Ulemas with their priestly power were exerting more influence on the community for their own personal interests. A command over the Quran and other religions systems of knowledge required the very availability of religious knowledge at least to the reach of common man. For this he published an article in Muslim magazine in 1914. In that, he provided a summary and a detailed historical

²⁶ C H Muhammed Koya, 'Kerala Muslims and Journalism', Personal writings.

²⁷ Sreedhara Menon, 'A Survey of Kerala History', Trivandrum.

account of Islam to provide a better readership of Quran and a better understanding of Islam.

Again, in the year of 1915, he published another detailed chronicle on Islam titled, "Islam Matha Siddhantha Samgraham" or 'A summary of Islamic Religious thought'.²⁸ All these were meant to shatter the orthodox Ulema's vicious hold over the Muslims community. Thus, he made successful attempts to provide the religious knowledge to the masses for overthrowing the Ulemas. Traditionally a large chunk of Muslim population were worshipping 'Shaiks', Jihns, etc. and thus a diversion from the textual form of Islam according to Moulavi where gripped the religion. In these places, worshipping were costly an affair for the ordinary Muslims. For instance, many people have to provide gifts like goats, fowls, cattle, vessels, ornaments, etc. as gifts to the Ulemas for having blessing from the sheikhs. This practice according to Moulavi was unislamic and against the ethics of Islam. Most of these rituals were not having any meanings according to Moulavi and these were very expensive for an average Muslim to conduct he promoted worships in a simplified manner with due emphasis on purity of mind and thought than on the lavishness of conducting of prayer meetings. In addition, he found that the communitarian sense of belonging to the larger community of Islam was absent in these local practices.²⁹

To develop the communitarian consciousness he took various efforts like reforming the customs, practices etc. by providing modern knowledge systems to the people. For him, the Muslims were simply a crowd (Bahujanangal), but to be a Muslim means one is suppose to be part of the Muslim community (Muslim Samudayan). To him 'community' means, they were supposed to possess the moral and religious essence of Islam. The community was having leadership and power over others in earlier times due to their deeper understanding and puritan practice of Islam. Over the years due to moral decline of the people, they lost their power to western powers. To revive their lost glory they had to combine Islamic knowledge with modern scientific knowledge.³⁰

For having a communitarian consciousness he published various magazines like 'Al-Muslim', 'Al-Islam', and 'Deepika' to achieve the horizontal alliance of various sub

²⁸ Selected Writings, P76

²⁹ Vakkom Moulavi, 'Our Position (Nammude Awastha), in the Journal, Al-Islam, 1918 P3.

sects of Muslims in Kerala anchored on the very principle of textual and puritan form of Islam. He even used a different script, Arabic-Malayalam in a larger way by publishing the journal Al-Muslim in this script. For this purpose, he imported a litho press and incorporated it with the existing printing press.³¹ The Kerala Muslims during that time knows to read Arabic and they used Malayalam as the spoken language. Again, the Ulema's put restriction on the Muslims on reading in any language other than Arabic. By realizing this fact, Moulavi whose only idea was to disseminate the 'exact' Islamic knowledge among the masses tried a journal in Arabic Malayalam Script.³²

Swadeshabhimani and the Civil Community

Moulavi started a newspaper under the title 'SWADESHABHIMANI (THE PATRIOT)' which was published from January 19th of 1905. The first issue of Swadeshabhimani proclaimed as its policy is "The betterment of the people and that we will always bring to light grievances of the people, whatever may be the consequences". The need for having a space for articulating the general problems of all people devoid of caste and religious differences could be found in this newspaper. The ideas of civil community having critical understanding of the state power were emerging by this time. Many people including Moulavi felt a general platform for all sections. Mr. Govinda Pillai was the first editor of the newspaper who continued for one year. Corruption, favoritism and red-tapism were the major cause of concern for Swadeshabhimani. All issues relating to the development of civic amenities were addressed in this.³³

However, it became more popular once Mr. Ramakrishna Pillai, known for his fierce criticisms against state was invited to join the Swadeshabhimani press as the editor. He was given full freedom. Together they published articles and news items against Diwanship and princely rule in Travancore. They advocated the implementation of adult franchise and universal application of law and regulations. They stood for responsible government based on voting rights of citizens.

³⁰ Ibid, P5-6

³¹ Muhammed Kannu, P153.

³² Muhammed Kannu, P 178

³³ C H Mukammed Koya, 'Kerala Muslims and Journalism,P4

This was banned in Travancore and Pillai was deported from the state boundaries in 1910. The Press was confiscated and Moulavi had given serious warnings. Though the Press stopped functioning, it created awareness among civil community based on certain universal principles, liberty and democracy. The local Political movements like 'Pouravakasa Samaram' or 'agitation for citizen's rights' of the congress factions of Travancore called Travancore state congress could be ascribed to the efforts taken by this Swadeshabhimani Press. It also paved the way for Abstention movement³⁴, which was leading the Travancore state congress with the backing of all communities of Travancore against the Diwan and Princely rule.

CONCLUSION

Moulavi initiated Press for making Muslim community in its modern fashion. However, efforts were not limited to that of his own community. The attempt was to envisage larger civil communities where within every Muslim individual could have his role as citizens for a responsible government. Moulavi known to the general Kerala society as the enterpriser behind 'Swadeshabhimani Press' had been into the modernization efforts that were initiated by other social reformers. Moulavi tried to combine both the Arabian world's Islamic ideas along with native Muslim's views for achieving the desired levels of mobility. He championed the cause of modern education for Muslims with due emphasis on having its reach to the women among the community. He also pioneered the cause of 'press' for addressing the general issues applicable to everyone. His activities were not limited to the Muslim's of Kerala but were for the whole people of Kerala.

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