

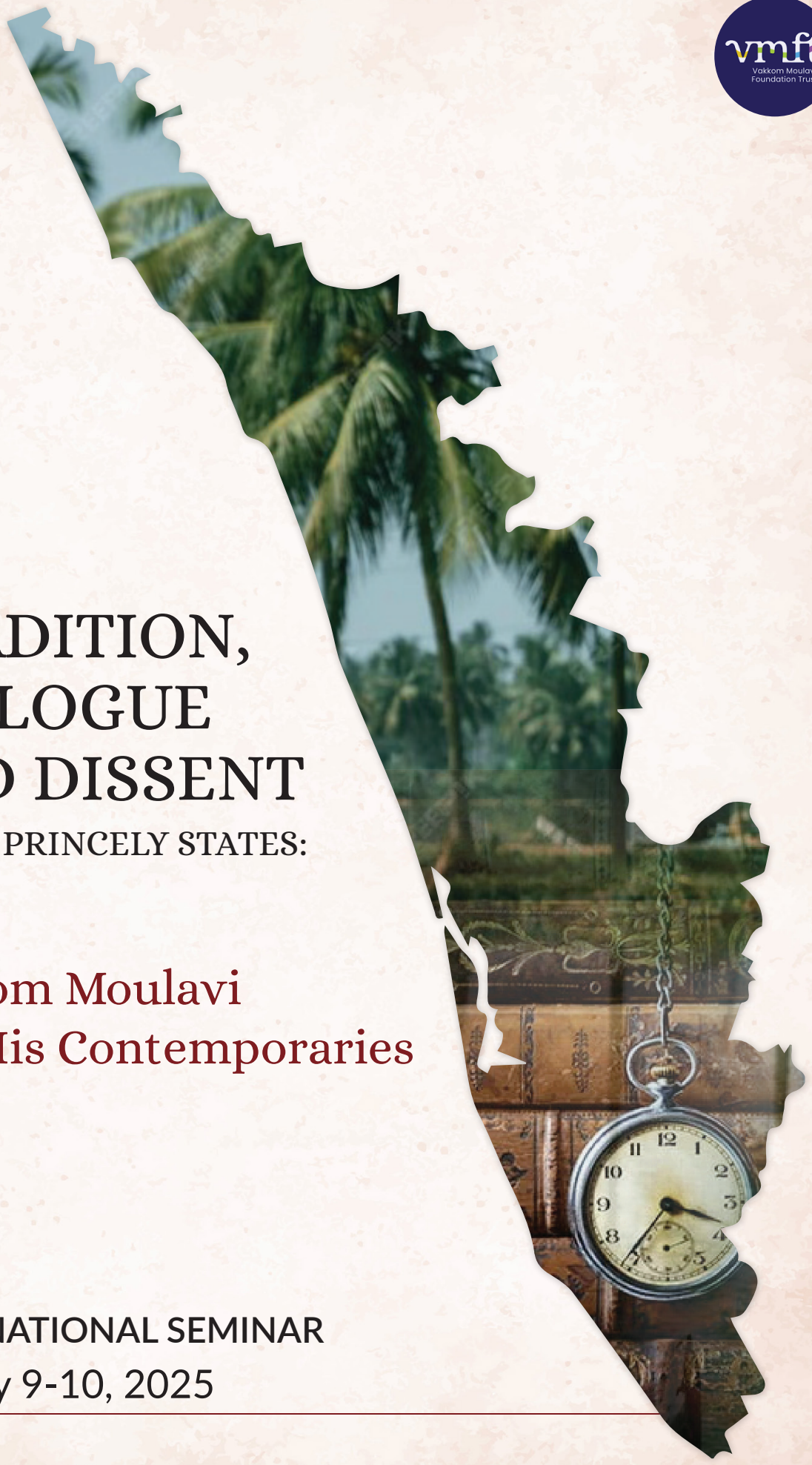


TRADITION, DIALOGUE AND DISSENT

IN THE PRINCELY STATES:

Vakkom Moulavi
and His Contemporaries

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR
January 9-10, 2025



ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Vakkom Moulavi Foundation Trust (VMFT), in collaboration with the Department of Islamic and West Asian Studies, University of Kerala, organized a two-day international seminar between January 9-10, 2025, titled “Tradition, Dialogue and Dissent in the Princely States – Vakkom Moulavi and His Contemporaries”. The seminar highlighted the intellectual and social contributions of Vakkom Mohammed Abdul Khader Moulavi (1873-1932), the great journalist, educationist and social reformer of the early 20th century in Travancore, placing these contributions in the context of the political and social movements of the time. The seminar sessions covered the work of other social reformers in Travancore, the social, political, and educational reforms in other princely states and British India, as well as Islamic modernism in other countries. The seminar program was curated by Dr Dilip Menon, Professor of History, Dept. of International Relations at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. A snapshot of sessions and speakers is provided at the end of this document.

This report of the seminar is being published by VMFT for a wider audience. Dr S. Harikrishnan, Seminar Coordinator and postdoctoral researcher at Dublin City University, drafted the report of the seminar. Aahana Balan, Research Scholar (University of Kerala) and Ayana Krishnan (Research Scholar, Centre for Development Studies) contributed notes on the sessions as inputs for the report.

ABOUT VMFT

Constituted in the year 1986, Vakkom Moulavi Foundation Trust (VMFT) has been a powerful presence in the social and cultural landscape of Kerala. With the goal of advancing Kerala’s overall development, it focuses on three broad thematic areas: Inclusive Governance, Education for the Future, and Science and Technology for Social Transformation. As a memorial to Vakkom Muhammad Abdul Khader Moulavi (1879-1932), the Foundation publishes his works and promotes research on his contributions, to shed light on the historical forces that shaped Kerala’s development in the early 20th century.



Dr A. Suhair
Chairperson



Dr Sajitha Bashir
Executive Vice-Chairperson



Prof. Jameela Begum
President



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INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on Kerala has generally been viewed through the lens of “exceptionalism” of the state and its people. More recent conversations have highlighted the need to move towards reimagining a broader landscape of Kerala Modernity by expanding its temporal and spatial boundaries. On one hand, this means linking Kerala’s story with larger global geographies and other regions of colonial India, while on the other, it includes the need to imagine a social structure that extends beyond the dominant castes, classes, genders and religions, when we relook at the region. This approach seeks to reassess the contributions of many figures who have arguably been sidelined or are made to play a secondary role in popular imaginations of social and political reform in Kerala. It is against this backdrop that the Vakkom Moulavi Foundation Trust (VMFT), in collaboration with the Department of Islamic and West Asian Studies, University of Kerala, and the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, University of Witwatersrand hosted a two-day conference on *Tradition, Dialogue, and Dissent in the Princely States: Vakkom Moulavi and His Contemporaries* in January 2025. By revisiting the idea of modernity in Kerala, the conference encouraged a deeper understanding of its complexities, shedding light on previously overlooked aspects and figures who shaped the region’s social, religious, and educational transformation.

This was also the first international conference to engage specifically with the works of Vakkom Moulavi, whose contributions were central to creating a democratic public and literary sphere in the former Princely State of Travancore. His initiatives ranged from pioneering independent journalism in a repressive monarchy to engaging with global Islamic modernity through connections with Egyptian modernism and advocating for female literacy within his community via Arabi-Malayalam. His work as both a Muslim reformer and a promoter of inter-community civic engagement positions him as a key figure in the broader re-imagining of Kerala’s modernity.

Furthermore, the conference challenged traditional narratives of Indian Muslim history, which have often been framed by the British colonial experience as culminating in the partition of India. By incorporating the concept of Indian Ocean Islam and examining the princely states, scholars introduced new paradigms for understanding religion in India. These perspectives emphasize a transnational view of Islam, connecting Kerala to broader Islamic networks and fostering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Islam, modernity, and community in the region.



SESSION 1

Vakkom Moulavi: Reform, Politics, Thought

Professor Dilip Menon began proceedings with a talk on the need for a reimagination of the public sphere in Kerala, and situating Vakkom Moulavi's contributions within this broader historical and cultural framework, distinct from dominant British narratives. In his presentation, Menon made three main arguments. First, he emphasized that Kerala must not merely be studied as a small state on the southern tip of the Indian peninsula, as is often done. Rather, academic work must engage with a broader geographical landscape that extends both to other princely states within colonial India, and the many lands across the Indian Ocean and Europe with which Kerala has had political, social, and economic relations. He iterated that Moulavi's reformist efforts were shaped by such transnational influences from across the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and the broader Muslim world. Moulavi's contribution to shaping the early public sphere in Kerala, therefore, must be placed within this larger global context.

Menon then addressed the need to think beyond the colonial period as the determining element in shaping modernity in India, reminding us that both spatially and temporally, the colonial empire constitutes only a portion—albeit an influential portion—of our history. He suggested, instead, the need for what he calls a “para-colonial” reading of history, where we study the colonial period not as a rupture or a reference point from which we look at our past, but as a continuity in India's—and indeed, Kerala's—long and rich history. Finally, Menon turned focus on what these reimaginings offer to the larger discussion on the public sphere in Kerala. Here, the role of thinkers like Vakkom Moulavi in establishing and promoting print journalism must be understood as serving a dual purpose: reporting on contemporary issues while

fostering an educated public. This reflects a shift towards creating informed citizens who would engage with governance and social issues, extending beyond narrow sectarian and religious lines, promoting a dynamic dialogue between different cultures, religions, and ideologies.

Menon's introduction of these broad themes was enriched by Mahmood Kooria, who explored Moulavi's journal *al-Islam*, published in Arabic-Malayalam, in his presentation. Kooria noted that there has been considerable neglect of Moulavi's contributions to Arabic-Malayalam literature, highlighting the linguistic barriers that hinder broader readership of journals like *al-Islam*. Using archives of the magazine digitized by the VMFT, Kooria observed how the first issue of *al-Islam*, published in 1918, had curiously different descriptions of the publication in Arabic-Malayalam, Arabic and English. While it was introduced as a *maasika-pathra-grantham* (magazine-newspaper-book) in “the Malabari language and Arabic-Malayalam script”, in Arabic and Arabic-Malayalam, *al-Islam* was introduced as a “religious, social and moral review ... in Malayalam language and in Arabi-Malayalam characters” to the English audience. The Arabic script is not merely a writing system but serves as a global cultural bridge across diverse linguistic landscapes. The use of different scripts by Moulavi illustrates a deeper connection to cultural identity.



Vol.1 (1918) of *al-Islam* with descriptions of the magazine in Arabic Malayalam, Arabic and English



Prof. Dilip Menon: Vakkom Maulavi: Reform, Politics and Thought

Kooria argued that these scribal practices are more than mere writing techniques; they embody the rich heritage of the communities involved, challenging the notion of a monolithic cultural identity. Noting that Arabic script facilitated the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, particularly in marginalized communities, Kooria discussed the interplay of gender and script in Moulavi's work, including the progressive stance on women's education, particularly in the context of religious instruction and societal roles. Moulavi argued that elevating men's status would consequently improve women's standing; a view that marks a progressive but constrained approach to gender equality that indicates a complex understanding of gender interdependence within the socio-religious framework of the time. Kooria concluded by acknowledging the efforts of the VMFT in archiving, digitizing, preserving and promoting historical texts for future generations.

The historical context—crucial to reading Moulavi's religious reform—was the focus of the next talk by Professor K. M. Seethi. Placing Moulavi's contributions within the broader narrative of social reform movements in the region, Seethi discussed the uneven recognition that various reformers have received within common notions of history and the reasons behind the marginalization of Moulavi's contributions.

He called out mainstream social histories for relegating Moulavi's role to the footnotes, often as the "proprietor" of *Svadesabhimani*, ignoring his large corpus of other works and publications. Seethi argued that it was only in the last three decades, thanks to the efforts of organizations like the VMFT, that there has been a re-evaluation of Vakkom Moulavi's legacy, emphasizing his modernizing efforts and intellectual contributions to Islamic thought. He critiqued both nationalist and Marxist historiographies for their failure to address the complexities of Kerala's social reform movements, ultimately calling for a more nuanced understanding of Moulavi's role in shaping modern Islamic discourse in Kerala. Seethi concluded by quoting from *Islam Matha Siddhanta Samgraham*, where Moulavi states that while "the law of Islam concerning spiritual matters are eternal ... the laws concerning temporal matters are not immutable, and hence, depending on the conditions of time and space, they are subject to change".


The conversation on Islamic reform was expanded by M. S. Visakh and Dayal Paleri who engaged with the thoughts of Manappatt Kunhu Mohamed Haji, popularly known as Manappadan, and the activities of institutional movements like the Aikya Sangham, established in 1922 and considered "the most successful organisational expression of Vakkom



Moulavi's reformist activities". Aikya Sangham not only served as a catalyst for educational upliftment but also laid the groundwork for a broader organizational framework for Muslim activism in Kerala starting from the 1920s, reflecting a significant shift in how reformism was practised, moving from individual efforts to collective action. Visakh and Paleri note that Manappadan did not confine himself to religious themes, but participated actively in the political landscape of the princely state of Cochin, highlighting the intersection of religion and politics; the need for communal harmony; and deeper engagement with

contemporary discourses and inter-religious dialogue. Manappadan also engaged in his works with Darwinian and Marxist views of humanity, shaping a unique philosophical stance that merits more scholarship. Visakh and Paleri conclude that these understudied strands of the reform movement in the early 20th century reflect a tension between tradition and modernity, with thinkers like Manappadan advocating for a modern understanding of religion that also respects its spiritual essence. It is from vantage points like these that a rethinking of the coordinates of Islamic reformism in Kerala is warranted.

The four papers in this session introduced, effectively, the scope that a scholarly engagement like the conference opens up both to academia and the general public and stressed the need to situate these thoughts and thinkers within the specificities of Kerala, without allowing this "rootedness" to limit our interpretations of their thoughts. While Kooria's paper focussed on the use of language—specifically, of script—as a bridge between regions, cultures and societies, Visakh and Paleri discussed the possibilities of reading Islamic reform movements not in isolation, but within the context of how a "modern secular public" was being shaped in early 20th century Kerala. Together, they provide a more textured engagement with the broader themes introduced by Seethi and Menon about the need to transcend a short-sighted, narrow and exclusionary reading of history, towards a broader, complex, inclusive one.



SESSION 2

Looking “Outwards”: Islam and the Public Sphere in the Princely States

Chitralekha Zutshi spoke about the negotiation of identity in early 20th century Jammu and Kashmir, exploring the development of Islamic identity in the region influenced by Sufi mystics since the 14th century. The talk highlights the role of shrines, which were not only spiritual sites but also centres of political power, especially during the region’s transition to Islam. The formation of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 under Dogra rule, with a Hindu elite ruling over a Muslim majority, led to the political and economic marginalization of Kashmiri Muslims. In response, late 19th century reform movements focused on education, contesting shrine control, and addressing grievances with the Dogra administration. Zutshi then focussed on the emergence of a movement for a pluralistic Kashmir led by leaders like Sheikh Abdullah in the 20th century, challenging traditional religious leaders. In Kashmir, religious sites like shrines also doubled up as spaces for political mobilization for a movement that cut across religious lines to integrate Hindus, Sikhs and other minorities.

While Zutshi’s talk focussed on the movements that negotiated religious identity in Kashmir, Razak Khan’s paper shone a light on the often overlooked role of gender at the heart of the project of male reformism in Muslim princely states. He argued that reformism should be understood as a discourse involving both men and women and specifically addressed the question of public/private by thinking about the “long-term history of Muslim women’s presence in courts”. Reflecting on the conversations over previous sessions, Khan reminded the audience about the curious absence of women within studies of Moulavi’s students and disciples. Such absence—or sometimes, misrepresentation—of women’s contributions within traditional archives reflects the need to reassess such material to uncover invisibilities within our reading of history. Consequently, his paper focused on his previous work on Rampur, a princely state established in 1774. Khan tied the efforts of Moulavi with contemporaries in other parts of the subcontinent

who played a role in propagating the print medium as a space of possibilities for “public opinion-making”. A broader perspective on history, emphasizing the creation of public spaces for creating public opinions rather than focusing solely on rulers and their wives, is necessary. Khan also briefly addressed his ongoing work on how Muslim women in princely states have historically engaged with the law to assert their rights, with debates on Muslim personal law predating the post-colonial period in India.

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley presented her paper on Sultan Jahan (1858-1930), the Begum of Bhopal and her role in promoting a modern form of Muslim identity through diet, health, and education. Sultan Jahan ruled Bhopal from 1901 to 1926 and was known for advocating women’s education, health, and social reform. She introduced various reforms, including schools, hospitals, and magazines, while promoting a form of Muslim modernism that balanced Islamic traditions with colonial scientific knowledge. Lambert-Hurley stressed that the princely context of Bhopal was important because it allowed Sultan Jahan to experiment with new ideas, unlike British-controlled regions. The Begum creatively adapted colonial models to Islamic and local cultural norms, making reforms feel indigenous and emphasizing that women were not just subjects of reform but active agents of it, challenging stereotypes about princely states being either backward or blindly following British governance. Sultan Jahan also innovatively used food and cuisine as a tool to communicate her vision of modern Islam, and her texts on health, diet, and consumption blended Unani medical practices with colonial scientific ideas. She promoted a balanced diet and healthy eating as part of a broader effort to shape Muslim identity and create responsible citizens. Her multivolume series on household management (especially Volume 2 on health) aimed to empower Muslim women by teaching them to manage their own health and that of their families, giving them agency within their traditional roles as wives and mothers.



Introduction to the Seminar by Dr Sajitha Bashir, Executive Vice Chairperson, VMFT

Roy Bar Sadeh's presentation explored the influence of *Al-Manar*, a prominent Islamic reformist journal founded by Rashid Rida in Egypt in 1898, on South Asia. *Al-Manar* was widely circulated across the Muslim world, including in South Asia, and addressed issues such as Islamic reform, religious coexistence, and modernity. Rida promoted independent legal reasoning and the study of Arabic as a unifying, trans-religious language. Sadeh argues that *Al-Manar* contributed to the negotiation of religious differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in South Asia and emphasized a specific Arab identity (*"Arabiyyat"*) that framed Arabic as a language of religious and intellectual revival, open to all Muslims regardless of ethnicity. The journal was influential in India, particularly in North India, where it engaged with major reform movements like Deoband, Aligarh, and Ahmadiyya. Rashid Rida's 1912 visit to India aimed to raise funds for his Cairo-based madrasa and for studying Indian Islamic reform institutions. Although his visit did not secure significant financial support, it helped strengthen intellectual ties between Cairo and Indian reformists, particularly within Bombay's Arab mercantile communities. Vakkom Moulavi was hugely influenced by the conceptualisation of Islamic modernity and reform in the *Al-Manar* and was a

subscriber to the journal. His own work referred to the discussions happening on its pages linking Travancore to a wider world of oceanic Islam.

While the closely intertwined nature of religion and politics in Kashmiri reform movement was the focus of Zutshi's paper, both Razak and Lambert-Hurley challenged the stereotypes about princely states—specifically women leaders in these states being conservative and ignorant—to explore the innovative ways in which they engaged with public and legal matters on the one hand, and that of caregivers within their homes on the other. Together, their papers focussed on the centrality of women's agency in shaping Muslim identity while creatively adapting colonial models and tools of the public sphere to local cultural norms. Lastly, Roy Bar Sadeh's analysis of *Al-Manar* illustrates the transnational spread of reformist ideas, emphasizing Arabic as a unifying language for religious and intellectual revival, placing similar efforts from the Indian subcontinent within the larger socio-political landscape of religious reform. Together, the papers in this panel reflect the dynamic intersections of religion, politics, gender, and identity in shaping Muslim reform movements across geographies beyond the south-western coast of the Indian subcontinent.

The common themes underlying the papers discussed on Day 1 reflected a broader, transnational approach to Islamic reform movements, the negotiation of religious and political identities, and the centrality of gender in shaping these processes. These talks together emphasized the importance of recognizing the intersections of religion, politics, gender, and modernity in shaping Muslim identity and reform across geographies—both within the Indian subcontinent, and beyond.



SESSION 3



Social Reform Movements in Travancore

The second day of the conference opened with a roundtable on social reform in Travancore. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of rapid social and political transformation in Kerala. As has been discussed in previous sessions, Vakkom Moulavi's efforts to bring religious reform must be read in parallel with similar efforts that were also ushering other communities in Travancore towards a new imagination of society. While much academic scholarship has focussed on dominant caste-led reforms—especially the Namboothiri and Nair reforms—this session aimed to bring together experts working on the various reform movements that emerged from underrepresented castes and religious groups. The session brought together Sanal Mohan, Vinil Paul, Ajay Sekher, P. K. Yasser Arafath and Udaya Kumar, to explore the main themes and ideas that influenced these movements. The interplay of caste, religion and modernity as a striking feature across these different strands of reform is something that was highlighted by all the speakers in this session.

The discussion was important, as Udaya Kumar argued, for our attempt to locate the various spatial and temporal coordinates of the advent of modernity in Kerala. It is also crucial for a critical rethinking of *navodhanam* (commonly translated as “renaissance”) in

the Kerala context, and differentiate this thought from other ideations of these movements, for instance, in Vakkom Moulavi's work, where he chooses to use the words *parishkaram* (reform) and *naveekaranam* (renovation or modernization). To Kumar, these ideas are closely tied with the notion of a social construct that transcends religion and caste. Kumar laid out the contradictions and negotiations within social movements at the time by discussing Sree Narayana Guru's writings and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana before (SNDP) movement; while the former focussed on imagining a world without caste, the latter specifically worked towards the upliftment of Ezhava community. Kumar illustrates how although Guru's writings were mostly in Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam, and drew on anecdotes wrapped in humour to make people think critically, his disciples like Palpu used a speculative history to imagine a wider geography that spanned from Indonesia to Mexico that contrasted with colonial and Brahminical imaginations of geography at the time.

Ajay Sekher spoke of Buddhist reforms in Kerala during this period dating as early as the 1890s when the Chakya Buddhist Society was formed in the Nilgiris, placing these developments within the broader Indian context. Sekher specifically detailed the conversations



Roundtable: Social Reform Movements in Travancore

happening within Buddhist reform movements with figures like Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Mithavadi C. Krishnan, Justice Ayyankutti and others, reminding one of the many ways in which these movements inspired and conversed with each other. These developments were important in the development of a modern Buddhist discourse in Kerala. Sekher also elaborated on the use of Malayalam in expressing Buddhist philosophies and social critiques at the time, demonstrating the power of vernacular languages in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for change within the religion. Sekher specifically spoke about the role of leaders like Sahodaran Ayyappan and Mithavadi C. Krishnan, who like many disciples of Guru, took *panchasheela* and followed the *ashtanga marga* of Buddhism. Ayyappan's 1934 work, *Buddha Kandham*—a collection of poems—and numerous editorials and commentaries on the subject also illustrate the use of print medium to popularize these ideas.

P. K. Yasser Arafath spoke about Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Thangal (popularly known as Makti Thangal) and Muslim reform in Malabar, emphasizing the distinct nature of modernity in the region, shaped by its colonial context. Thangal, the first Muslim to write Malayalam prose with *Kadora Kudaram* (1886), was pivotal in redefining the role of language and modernity for Muslims in the 19th century. His concept of the *parishkari Muslim* reflected the need to reconcile modernity with the local Mappila identity, questioning what it meant to be a good Mappila within a colonial territory. Thangal believed in the importance of language, but unlike Vakkom Moulavi, advocated for a hierarchy of languages and the removal of Arabi-Malayalam. Thangal reconciled ideas of multiple forms of local and national loyalties and emphasized familiarity with three kinds of languages: the state language (Rajya Bhasha), mother tongue (Mathr Bhasha), and local language (Nattu Bhasha). Thangal's focus was on creating an employable Muslim community, one that was rooted in its vernacular identity, specifically as Malayali Mappilas, rather than adopting a pan-Islamic or transnational worldview. He was a colonial loyalist, arguing that loyalty to the

colonial state was crucial for progress and success, even as he maintained a critical intellectual stance towards it. Thangal believed that there was “no power without knowledge” and created a binary between *Parishkaram* (reform) and *Parihasam* (mockery), reflecting his nuanced approach to modernity.

Arafath's discussion on Thangal is interesting also because it points towards the differences that emerge within the reform movement between princely states like Travancore, Bhopal and Kashmir, and that which emerged in the colonial context in Malabar. By contrast, Travancore remains a distinct political and social space in Poykayil Yohannan's work, Sanal Mohan argued. The discourse around slavery, Mohan argued, reveals the global dimensions of social justice movements, and works of Yohannan resonate with wider narratives of resistance against oppression, drawing parallels between local struggles and global histories of exploitation. Similarly, Vinil Paul's talk focussed on Ayyankali's reform efforts that intended to transform caste-based discrimination into a vision of citizenship and public space in Travancore. Paul emphasized the secular stance that was a constant in Ayyankali's activism which relied more on an emphasis on democracy rather than invoking religious symbolisms or doctrines. Ayyankali's political radicalism is often oversimplified. He did not participate in temple entry movements, instead using modern methods of agitation, such as petitions, to advance his cause. Although tracing their location specifically to the social context of Travancore, Sanal Mohan and Vinil Paul reminded the audience of the many ways in which Yohannan and Ayyankali's reformism intersected with broader themes of social justice and religious engagement that were shaping modernity in Kerala in the early 20th century.

Even while noting the tensions between religious traditions and modernity and the need for a nuanced understanding of how these reformers navigated their identities within colonial frameworks while striving for a collective betterment of their communities, the panel teased out the following common themes that become evident from these seemingly disparate strands of reform:

- The interplay of religion and modernity appeared to be a central theme particularly in the works of Guru, Thangal, Palpu and Yohannan, challenging the popular notion that the attempt at conceiving a “modern” public sphere must essentially focus on the secularisation of discourse.
- The role of language both as a medium of communication, but also as a means of empowerment, is closely tied to education. While on one hand, language remained closely tied with identity in the region, on the other, the proliferation of print media was seen as being pivotal in educating common masses across religious and caste differences. Translations and writings of figures like Sahodaran Ayyappan played a crucial role in

making Buddhist and reformist ideas accessible to the Malayali public. Their efforts not only enriched the literary landscape but also served as catalysts for social change and awareness.

- The evolving role of women within these movements, and the advocacy for their inclusion is an important dimension. The discussions noted that while women were often marginalized, there was a growing recognition of their importance in the social reform narrative.

Together, these attempts were aimed at creating a localized identity while also engaging with global discourses on modernisation and reform.



The session concluded with reflections on how the themes of modernity and social reform continue to resonate in contemporary Kerala society. As we continue to grapple with issues of caste, identity, and social justice, the historical insights provided by these thinkers offer valuable lessons for contemporary activists and scholars seeking to address ongoing inequalities in society. The legacy of these reformers continues to influence contemporary discussions on identity, social justice, and community empowerment in Kerala.



SESSION
4

Debating the “Modern”

This session brought together three papers that explored the idea of the “public sphere” in the modern period, with cases from Kerala, Hyderabad and Patna. The first by M. H. Ilias explored various approaches to modernity within Kerala’s Muslim community, with a focus on Makti Thangal, whose contributions to Islamic reform in Kerala were also touched upon by P. K. Yasser Arafath in the previous session. Thangal was part of a unique Salafi tradition in Kerala, which deviated from strict theological interpretations and was seen as modern and progressive, in contrast to the global perception of Salafism as puritanical. His ideas emphasized the need to integrate modernity with Islamic principles, promoting independent legal reasoning (*ijtihad*) and opposing saint worship. Kerala had three major responses to modernity: Westernization (embracing colonial modernity), Rejectionism (rejecting Western influence), and Synthesis (seeking a balance, as seen in Thangal’s work). Thangal argued that modernity had roots in Islamic thought, not solely in Europe, and engaged in debate with missionary activities in his works like *Kadore Koodaram* and *Christiya Vaayadappu*. Ilias concluded that reading Thangal’s contribution, especially his critique of Western epistemology, opens up possibilities of engaging much more critically with questions of modernity in the contemporary context.

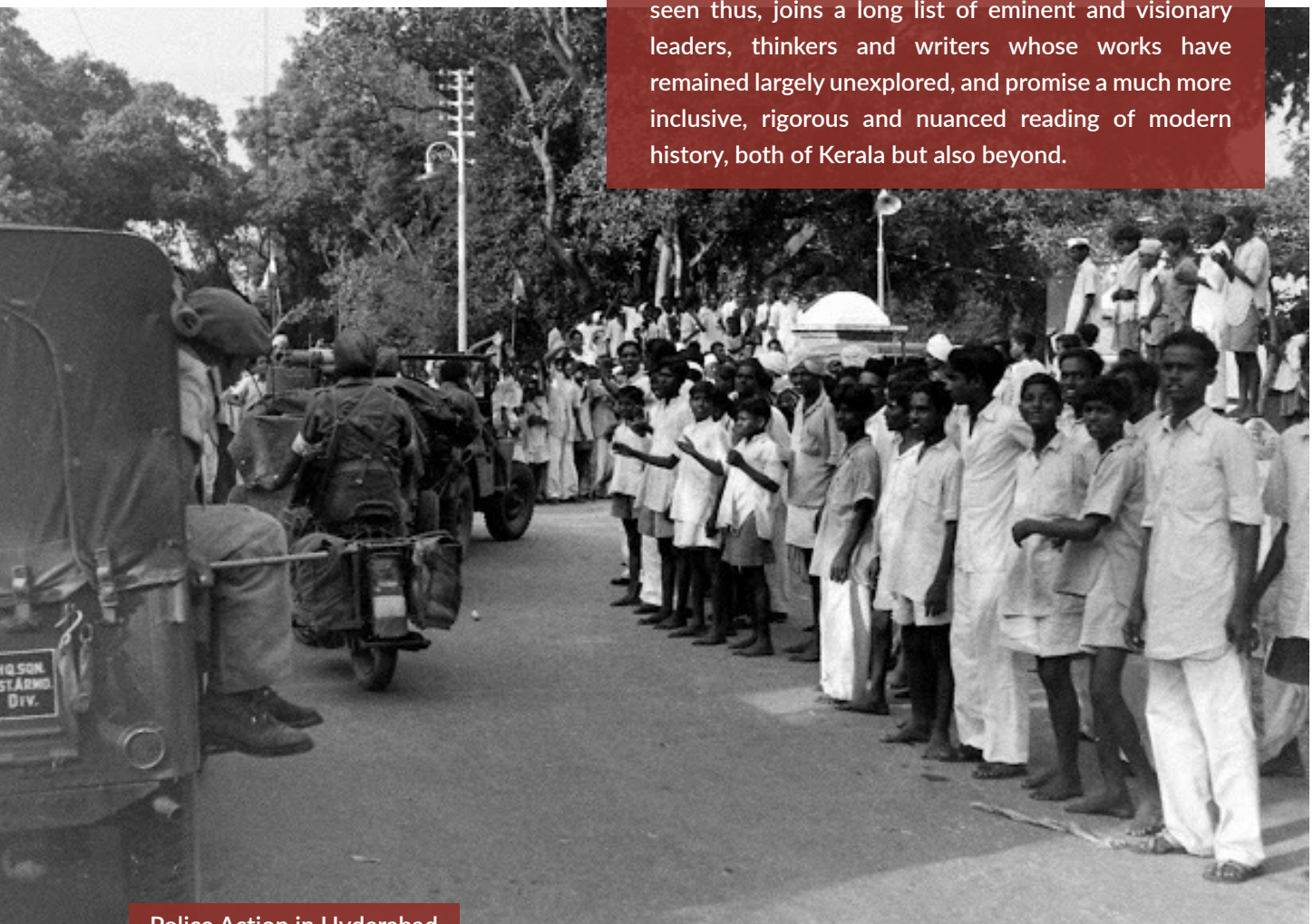
The importance of pedagogy or educational spaces within such a reform movement was also the focus of Manisha Priyam’s talk, where she brought attention to universities as key sites of modernity and dissent in India. Using Patna University as a case study, she explores their roles in promoting pluralism, linguistic diversity, and educational reform. Priyam argues that universities were not just colonial constructs but also spaces for resistance and reform. The history of Patna University challenges the view that Muslims were solely traditionalist, showing their active engagement with modernity. For example, affluent Muslim noblemen donated to Patna University, which was a demand from the local public rather than a British initiative. Key figures in this reform movement included Phani Bhushan Ganguli, a scientist and principal who

advocated for multilingual education and engaged in intellectual discussions on women’s education and industrial training, and Lady Imam, a progressive Muslim woman who fought for women’s higher education and participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Sir Syed Sultan Ahmed, the first Indian Vice Chancellor of Patna University, and Rashid Un Nisa, the first Indian woman Urdu novelist, also played significant roles in shaping higher education and social reform. Priyam concludes that the demand for self-governance in this region is closely linked with the demand for a separate university and high court, further demonstrating the critical role of universities in the socio-political landscape of colonial India.

The last paper in this session by Afsar Mohammad focussed on gender discourse in Hyderabad and how Muslim women were defined within public debates, particularly during the 1940s. Despite being traditionally overlooked, Muslim women were increasingly involved in politics, education, and social reform. Hyderabad’s modernity was shaped by Islamic reformism, language politics, and tensions between orthodoxy and modernity, with urbanity playing a significant role in shaping the new Muslim identity. Mohammad argues for the importance of studying the connected histories of South Indian Muslims, suggesting that Telugu, Urdu, and Tamil-speaking Muslims should be studied together rather than separately. Hyderabad’s complex cultural environment, where both Muslim and non-Muslim writers contributed to Urdu and Telugu literary cultures, was crucial to the formation of Muslim consciousness. Much like in other parts of the Indian subcontinent discussed over the previous sessions, Mohammad pointed towards the importance of print culture in reshaping Muslim identities and documenting ordinary Muslim lives in the 20th century. As in the case of Rampur, Bhopal and other regions where we have seen women writers engage with the reform movement during this period, Muslim women writers in Hyderabad challenged mainstream portrayals of their agency, offering new perspectives on modern Muslim femininity. Mohammad discusses four key

literary representations of “New Muslim Women” highlighting characters who symbolise various forms of modernity, blending tradition and Western influences, and embodying political activism. Despite these significant contributions, Muslim women remain marginalized within official histories of Hyderabad. Mohammad calls for more research on gender discourse in South Indian Muslim communities to further understand the complex intersection of gender, identity, and modernity.

Read together, the four sessions offered a previously unexplored lens from which one could think through the idea of the Islamic inflections of Indian modernity. By bringing together conversations on princely states of Travancore, Hyderabad, Kashmir, Bhopal, and Rampur as also the wider currents of thought in the Indian Ocean, the speakers expanded the scope of engaging with themes like modernity, religion and reform beyond the lens of the “colony” from which mainstream narratives of history often get written. Instead, what we see is the rich tapestry where the various movements, while functioning within their local and regional contexts, also are in constant engagement with the larger developments in religious and political reforms that happen in other parts of the colony, the sub-continent, and indeed, the world. Vakkom Moulavi, seen thus, joins a long list of eminent and visionary leaders, thinkers and writers whose works have remained largely unexplored, and promise a much more inclusive, rigorous and nuanced reading of modern history, both of Kerala but also beyond.



Police Action in Hyderabad

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr Dilip M. Menon

Dr Dilip M. Menon is the Mellon Chair in Indian Studies and Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa at the University of Witwatersrand. A historian of South Asia, he is known for his interdisciplinary work on caste, socialism, and equality in modern India.

Educated at Delhi, Oxford, and Cambridge, where he earned his PhD, Dr Menon is also a translator of Malayalam and a writer on film, theatre, and literature. His notable works include *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime*, *The Blindness of Insight*, and *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900–1948*.



Dr Mahmood Kooria

Prof. Mahmood Kooria, recipient of the Infosys Prize 2024 in Humanities and Social Sciences, is an internationally acclaimed historian specializing in maritime Islam and the intellectual history of Shafi'i Islam, with a focus on Kerala in the pre-modern and early modern periods.

He is the author of *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shafi'i Texts Across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean* (2022) and co-editor of *Malabar in the Indian Ocean and Islamic Law in the Indian Ocean*. Prof. Kooria holds a PhD in Global History from Leiden University and has taught at leading institutions, including Ashoka University and Leiden University.



Dr K. M. Seethi

Dr K. M. Seethi is an ICSSR Senior Fellow and Director of the Inter University Centre for Social Science Research and Extension (IUCSSRE) at Mahatma Gandhi University. He has previously served as Dean of Social Sciences, Senior Professor and Director of the School of International Relations and Politics, and Honorary Director of the KN Raj Centre at the same university.

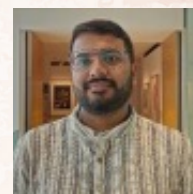
An accomplished editor, Dr Seethi currently leads the *Journal of State and Society* and has previously edited the *South Asian Journal of Diplomacy* and the *Indian Journal of Politics and International Relations*. He has authored several books, including *Enduring Dilemma: Flashpoints in Kashmir and India-Pakistan Relations* and *The Arab World: Beyond and Beneath the Arab Spring*, and has published over 375 research articles in prestigious journals and media outlets.



Dr M. S. Visakh

Dr Visakh is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati. His research focuses on the sociology of religion, culture and globalization, religion and development, and the intersections of identity and politics. He holds a PhD in Sociology from IIT Madras and has an impressive academic trajectory. He was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex (2020–2022), where he was also an Honorary Research Fellow. He was also a Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley (2016–2017).

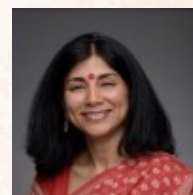
Dr Dayal Paleri is an Assistant Professor of Social Science at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru. He holds an Integrated Masters' in Political Science from the University of Hyderabad and a PhD in Political Science from IIT Madras, where he received the Institute Research Award for Excellence in PhD Research. His research spans Indian politics and governance, the political sociology of religion and nonreligion, peace studies, new atheism, and state-civil society relations in postcolonial Kerala. His interdisciplinary PhD research examined inter-religious peacebuilding in central Kerala using ethnographic methods.



Dr Dayal Paleri

Dr Chitralekha Zutshi is a distinguished historian specializing in Kashmir, Modern South Asia, and the Indian Ocean World. She is an endowed chair Professor of History at the College of William and Mary, USA, and has published extensively on Islamicate identities, nationalism, and historical thought.

She is the author of *Kashmir: Oxford India Short Introductions* (2019) and *Kashmir's Contested Pasts* (2014), which received the Honorable Mention for the Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy Book Prize. She serves on the International Advisory Board of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* and has received the Plumeri Award for Faculty Excellence.



Dr Chitralekha Zutshi

Dr Razak Khan is a Research Fellow in Global History at the Department of History, Free University, Berlin. His research focuses on the intersections of family, law, and democracy in South Asia, with a current project titled "Unfamiliar: Family, Law, and Democracy in South Asia", which examines debates around minorities and family law in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

He is the author of *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Rampur* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and has co-edited *Nodes of Translation: Intellectual History between Modern India and Germany* (De Gruyter, 2024). Dr Khan's work bridges intellectual history, emotions, and identity, contributing valuable insights into the cultural and legal histories of South Asia.



Dr Razak Khan

SPEAKER PROFILES



**Professor Siobhan
Lambert-Hurley**

Professor Siobhan Lambert-Hurley is a cultural historian specializing in women, gender, and Islam in modern South Asia. She is a faculty member at the University of Sheffield and has led numerous interdisciplinary projects funded by prestigious organizations such as the Leverhulme Trust, AHRC, and British Academy.

Her acclaimed works include *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2018), *Atiya's Journeys: A Muslim Woman from Colonial Bombay to Edwardian Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2010), and *Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women* (Indiana University Press, 2022). Her current Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship (2024–27) focuses on food histories in Muslim South Asia. Professor Lambert-Hurley's research bridges autobiography, travel writing, and food history, offering groundbreaking insights into Muslim identities and cultural transformations.



Dr Roy Bar Sadeh

Dr Roy Bar Sadeh is a Lecturer in the History of the Islamic World at the University of Manchester. His research explores how communities in the Middle East, South Asia, and Eurasia engaged with regional and international debates on sovereignty, citizenship, and religious and social difference during the 19th and 20th centuries.

His book, (2023) examines the role of South Asia's Muslims in the global history of minority rights and identity. The book challenges conventional narratives by showing how Muslim thinkers in colonial India reimagined the concept of a "minority" to propose visionary models of social justice and political empowerment in dialogue with movements across the British, Ottoman, and Tsarist empires and the Soviet Union.



Dr Sanal Mohan

Dr Sanal Mohan is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, India. A historian and social anthropologist, his research explores colonial modernity, Dalit movements, and Christianity in India, with a particular focus on social transformation and identity among Dalits in colonial Kerala.

His notable research includes analyzing the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha movement and its role in shaping Dalit social and religious identities in Kerala. His work, supported by the Social Science Research Council, New York, and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, combines historical and ethnographic methodologies to examine the intersections of religion, social movements, and caste.

Dr Vinil Paul is a historian and educator with a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, specializing in the social and cultural transformations of colonial and modern Kerala. His research delves into diverse topics, including slavery, Protestant Christian missionary movements, Dalit Christians, colonial hunting practices, agricultural labor, and global history.

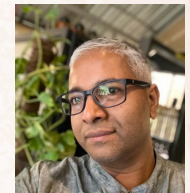
An accomplished author, Dr Paul has published critically acclaimed works such as *Adimakeralatthinte Adrishya Charithram* (2021), *Dalit Charithra Dhamsanam* (2022), *Manchadikkari* (2022), and *Mrigaya: Keralatthinte Nayatt Charithram* (2022). His scholarly contributions have earned him prestigious accolades, including the Scaria Zacharia Award and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Endowment Award.



Dr Vinil Paul

Dr Ajay Sekher is an Associate Professor of English at Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala, and founder-coordinator of the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the university.

Dr Sekher's research focuses on caste and gender in postcolonial Indian fiction, as well as Dalit literature and culture. His notable works include *Representing the Margin: Caste and Gender in Indian Fiction* (2008), *Sahodaran Ayyappan: Towards a Democratic Future* (2012), and *Buddhism and Kerala* (2021, 2023). An accomplished translator, he has brought the works of Toni Morrison and Poykayil Appachan into Malayalam. Dr Sekher is also a member of the Governing Board of the Kerala State Encyclopedia Institute and the Board of Studies in English at MA College, Kothamangalam.



Dr Ajay Sekher

Dr P. K. Yasser Arafath is a historian of medieval and early modern India, currently serving as a faculty member in the Department of History, University of Delhi. His research focuses on Kerala's intellectual traditions, Arabi-Malayalam literature, Indian Ocean communities, and the cultural history of the body, hygiene, and gastro-politics. He also explores the history of science and technology.

His first book, *Sultana's Sisters: Genres, Gender, and Genealogy in South Asian Muslim Women's Fiction* (co-edited with Haris Qadeer), was published by Routledge in 2021.

Dr Arafath has held prestigious fellowships, including those from the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).



Dr P. K. Yasser Arafath



Dr Udaya Kumar

Dr Udaya Kumar is a Professor at the Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature, and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). An expert in literary and cultural theory, his research focuses on autobiographical writing, emotions in political life, and cultural histories of the body.

He is the author of *The Joycean Labyrinth: Repetition, Time and Tradition in Ulysses* (Oxford University Press, 1991) and *Writing the First Person: Literature, History and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (Permanent Black, 2016). His scholarship also includes influential essays on Kamala Das, Sree Narayana Guru, and the political affect in Indian literature.



Professor M.H. Ilias

Professor M. H. Ilias is a distinguished scholar and currently serves as a Professor at the School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. He earned his PhD in International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Prof. Ilias's research spans a wide range of areas, including the sociology of conflict, comparative religion, Islamic movements in South Asia, Jewish diaspora, Hadrami migration, and cultural studies of West Asia. His notable publications include *Society and Change in the Contemporary Gulf*, *Off-Campus Orientalism*, and *India-West Asia Relations: Understanding Cultural Interplays*. He has also produced documentaries on South India's cultural relations with the Arab world.



Dr Afsar Mohammad

Dr Afsar Mohammad is a Senior Lecturer in Foreign Languages at the South Asia Studies Department, University of Pennsylvania. A scholar of South Asian Islam and Hinduism, his research focuses on shared devotional practices, vernacular Sufi poetics, and the socio-cultural transformations in Andhra and Telangana, particularly the impact of the Police Action in Hyderabad and the subsequent marginalization of Hyderabad Muslims. He is the author of *The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India* (Oxford University Press, 2013), *A Garden of Mirrors: Vernacular Sufi Poetics in South India* (2016) and *Remaking History: 1948 Police Action and the Muslims of Hyderabad* (2023).

Dr Mohammad is also a celebrated Telugu poet and literary critic, with four volumes of poetry and numerous essays to his credit. His writings explore themes of resistance, identity, and the Hindu-Muslim cultural interface in South India. For his contributions to Telugu literature, he has received the prestigious Saraswathi Bhasha Samman.

Dr Manisha Priyam is a Professor of Education Policy at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), New Delhi. With over two decades of experience in education policy, she specializes in higher education reforms, primary education policy, decentralization, and urban social policy. Dr Priyam holds a PhD in International Development from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where her research examined the politics of education policy reforms in a comparative perspective. Her work bridges academic research and practical policymaking, involving collaboration with policymakers, donors, and administrators.

She is the author of *The Contested Policies of Education Reforms in India: Aligning Opportunities with Interests* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and has contributed towards several scholarly publications, including *Social Dynamics of the Urban* (Springer, 2017).



Dr Manisha Priyam

Seminar Coordinator

Dr S Harikrishnan is a postdoctoral researcher at Dublin City University. His research explores the role of social spaces in shaping political and social relations. He is the author of *Social Spaces and the Public Sphere: A Spatial History of Modernity in Kerala*, and a founding editor of *Ala*, a monthly blog on Kerala. Hari's works have appeared in multiple journals and leading online and print media in India and Ireland. He is a photographer who has exhibited works in Ireland, South Africa, and India.



Dr S Harikrishnan

Seminar Co-Organiser

Ashraf A., widely recognized as **Ashraf Kadakkal**, is HOD of the Department of Islamic and West Asian Studies at the University of Kerala, where he has been serving since 2005.

He is a prolific writer, contributing to leading English and Malayalam dailies and periodicals. He is also a familiar face on television, appearing as an expert on West Asian Studies and socio-political matters on prominent channels.

He is Chairman of the Board of Studies at the Universities of Kerala. As a member of an expert committee, he is actively involved in establishing an Islamic Heritage Museum at Kodungallur, Kerala, a significant project by the Kerala government. Member, Board of Management, Centre for Heritage Studies, Govt. of Kerala, Ashraf Kadakkal has served as the General Secretary of the Kerala University Teachers Organisation (KUTO).



Dr Ashraf Kadakkal

Glimpses from the enriching sessions conducted
as part of the two-day international seminar
held on January 9-10, 2025





vmft.tvpm@gmail.com

www.vmft.org

Vakkom Moulavi Road

Thekkummoodu Junction

Thiruvananthapuram - 695037

Kerala

