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**LITERATURE AS AN INFLUENCING PHASE OF RELIGIOUS REFORMISM
AMONG THE MUSLIMS IN KERALA; A STUDY BASED SANA ULLA
MAKTHI THANGAL**

English

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Early twentieth century was crucial as far as Kerala society was concerned. The period witnessed the upraising of downtrodden sections, the growth of communism and nationalism and the progress of religious-caste organizations, which favored the reformation movements in society, and the period brought significant changes in Muslim community too as in other communities. It must also be said that 20th century was a period in which the Islamic spiritual values and the fundamental principles were altered effectively to give a wider acceptance. The Muslim reformation movements that were gaining momentum in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore areas were of many characteristic features.

Kerala society experienced a series of changes in the first half of the 19th century. The culmination of the Western cultural influence it had received from 16th century onwards through the Portuguese, Dutch and British. From the middle of the 19th century, a variety of socio economic changes happened in throughout Kerala. 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 Sana Ulla Makthi Thangal is of prime concern to the Muslim community because of his polemic engagement with the Christian missionaries and their aggressive proselytization efforts.

Makthi Thangal exposed the Muslims of Kerala to their own lack of understanding of Islam. Thangal realize that only using publish 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.

After the colonization the British government introduced a lot of changes in the field of education for the upliftment of the downtrodden sections of Kerala. Unfortunately the Muslim did not gained much benefit of this educational system. Because the attitude of the Muslims towards modern educational practices was negative due to several social and political reasons. In the meantime these activities helped at least a few in the Muslim community to acquire modern education. These educated Muslims were at the forefront of socio religious reform movements and against the superstitions in the society. Their relentless efforts made the community aware of the importance of modern education.

Formerly no timely changes could be adopted in the religious education of Muslim community and it seems that the majority had no profound knowledge in religious matters. It was in this social context the Muslim reformers came out and their valuable efforts make a evolutionary changes in the socio cultural and educational field. Hence it could possibly be said that tremendous progress in education took place in the later hours of 19th century or in early 20th century.



However, it is true that the attitude towards English education during the colonial period brought in some changes in Islamic community too, resulting in reformative leaders and it can be seen that these reformative leaders succeeded to a certain extent in promoting the need for modern education in the community. The contributions of these leaders in the field of Islamic religious education especially religious education known as *Madrassa* education are valuable. Makthi Thangal, Hamadani Thangal, Chalilakathu Kunjahammad Haji, Vakkom Muhammad Abdulkhader Moulavi, KM Moulavi, E K Moulavi etc. were the eminent personalities who worked for the wellbeing of the Muslim community as well. Efforts taken by these leaders for Muslim reformation and modern education should be taken in to account while we consider Muslim religious education.

Makthi Thangal is being considered as a pioneer social and political reformer among Muslims in Kerala. Thangal was born at Veliyancode, in Malappuaram district in 1847 AD. His forefathers belonged to the *Saqaf* tribe of Arabia¹. According to his own account his genealogical line extends to Abbas-ibn- Abdul Muthalib, an uncle of Prophet Muhammad and so the title '*Sayyid*' and '*Tangal*'. His father was a *Munshi* (Translator from Persian language) under the British here and hence could get modern education and completed primary education from Chavakkad higher elementary school². By the time he had also acquired religious education in traditional mode of practices. In addition to Malayalam and Arabic, he was a proficient in Urdu, Persian, Tamil and English language. He did his higher education in Islamic religious matters from *Dars*³ classes adjacent to mosque at Veliyamcode, Ponnani and Manjeri. Being educated he was appointed as Excise Inspector by the British government⁴. But he resigned from the post in order to devote his whole life for education of the community.

¹ C.K.Kareem, *Kerala Muslim History, Statistics and Directory*, 1981, p.571.

² M.Abdulsamad, *Islam in Kerala*, 1982,p.43.

³ *Dars* is a higher *Madrassa* educational system existed in Kerala within adjacent to the mosque for pursuing studies beyond the normal *Madrassa* system. '*Madrasa*' in Malayalam refers to classes where children receive basic Arabic language and religious instruction; Kerala's 'Arabic Colleges' are the equivalent of north Indian *madrassas*.

⁴ M. Abdulsamad, *Muslim Reformist Movements in Kerala; Work of Sayyid Sanaulla Makthi Tthangal*, Proceedings of South Indian History Congress 12th Annual Section,1991,p.205.



It was in this period when the *Mappila* Muslims of Kerala weren't aware of the Possibilities of education; they blindly accepted the spiritual leaders. Makthi Thangal boldly involved the spiritual and the community matters through his speeches, columns in the news dailies and through his own short books on matters relevant Muslim community in British India. His speeches and articles always had the nature of turning out to be a wake-up call or a ward of encouragements to the Muslim community. He was the first Muslim started news daily, published books and set up printing device on his own pains. He was successful in modernising and nourishing the Muslim community to overcome the challenges and suit the needs of tomorrow through an essential renaissance.

Earlier efforts taken by Makthi Thangal were to defend massive anti Islamic, religious hype initiated by the Christian missionaries. He published number of books and journals for promoting Islamic ideology. His book '*Kathorakutharam*' criticized the Christian dogmas, especially the concept of trinity⁵. It created a sensation in the filed of theological polemics⁶. He also debated through the journal, '*Keralamithra*'. In 1892, he published another work, '*Prakaleetha Porkalam*'. He challenged the Christian priests to come out with a rejoinder to the book and offered an *Inam* of Rs 200. But nobody took the challenge⁷.

The major works of Makthi Thangal were devoted to answering the anti- Islamic propaganda of Christian missionaries. He had also published several booklets in which counter charges were leveled against Christian beliefs and practices of the Church⁸. '*Christiya Vayadappu*', '*Suvisesha Maasam*', '*Madhyapanam Mashih Mathabhimanam*', '*Yudas Pilathoso*', '*Masheeh Matha Mula Nasam*,' '*Christiya Mooda- Proudi Darpanam*', '*Christiya Manapoorva Mosananm*' and '*Neethyalochana*' are his important works, which mostly deal with the charges against Christian ideas. He wanted to establish a press for the propagation of his ideas through booklets. His request for funds was not met by the well to do in the community. Some enthusiastic youth from Alleppey

⁵ The word trinity comes from the Latin word *trinitas* meaning three are one. The trinity expresses the belief that God is one being made up of three distinct persons as father, son and Holy spirit.

⁶ M. Abdulsamad, *Muslim Reformist Movements in Kerala; Work of Sayyid Sanaulla Makthi Thangal*, Proceedings of South Indian History Congress 12th Annual Section, 1991, p.206.

⁷ M. Abdulsamad, *Islam in Kerala*, 1982, p.44.

⁸ A.P. Ibrahimkunju, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala their History and Culture*, 1989, p.230.



enabled him to establish a press at Cochin in 1890⁹. He collected a small coin each from the petty shopkeepers of Cochin and issued biography of prophet Muhammed , entitled '*Nabi Nayanam*'.

Makthi Thangal exhorted the Muslims to become educated. He also urged the *Ulama* to restructure the religious education. He published a good number of articles in English in this regard. Of these, 'Muslim Education' has a prominent position, in which he describes first the system of ongoing religious education¹⁰. Thangal prepared a scheme of education from primary level and published it in the journal '*Salahul Ikwan*'. In this scheme he included Malayalam, Arabic, English and Arithmetic. In order to get fluency in speaking Malayalam, he suggested reading stories from Puranas and Epics. He also prescribed a textbook, '*Muallimul Ikwan*' to teach Malayalam letters to primary *Madrassa* students. Kerala Muslim directory maintain that the '*Muallimul Ikwan*' to Arabi Malayalam is more significant than '*Kerala paniniyam*' to Malayalam for the use of teachers. He prepared an 'Arabic- Malayalam-Sanskrit trilingual directory'. But it was irrecoverably lost.

The most important rival of Makthi Thangal was orthodox *Ulamas* of his own community. He was totally against entry of Hindu rituals in Islamic community. One could see that Muslims were not ready to eliminate all the superstitions that prevailed in the community. So he fight against superstitious beliefs and practices among the Muslim community like *Nerchas*, *Rateeb*, use of long brass lamps for religious ceremonies, belief in *mantras*, charms etc¹¹.

Malabar was the area where in modern education of Muslim community was negligible. Consequently the earlier activities of Makthi Thangal were not that acceptable to Islamic community of Malabar. He was even pelted and abused from various corners of Malabar about which a detailed narration is given in his book '*Makthi Manaklesam*'. He made herculean efforts to publicize his ideas through printed media. He realized that media is the effective way of communicating his reformist ideas with the Islamic community. Weeklies and journals published by him points to his

⁹ *Ibid.*,p.228.

¹⁰ M. Abdulsamad, *Muslim Reformist Movements in Kerala; Work of Sayyid Sanaulla Makthi Thangal*, Proceedings of South Indian History Congress 12th Annual Section,1991,p.206.

¹¹ C.K.Kareem,*op.cit.*,p.572.



efforts. In 1888, '*Sathyaprakasham*', a weekly, was published from Cochin¹². But it was discontinued after nine months on account of lack of popular support. During this period he started an Arabic-Malayalam fortnightly called '*Thuhfat Ul Akhya*', was '*Hidayatul- Ashrar*' severely criticizing of the orthodox *Ulamas*¹³.

In 1902 he published a monthly, '*Nithyajeevan*'. But due to lack of popular support the journal was not continued. Some years later another monthly, '*Paropakari*' was started by him from Calicut which had the same experience as the earlier ones. Due to some financial crisis he had to stop this monthly journal too. In 1909 he started an evening paper named *Turkey Samajaram*¹⁴. One could see that journals contained the reformist ideas had immense impact upon those who were progressive in Muslim community. Hence the efforts taken by him were fruitful.

Thangal had also thought about the promotion of women education and he published another work '*Nabhicharitham*'. The work discusses the importance and relevance of women education in the present scenario. Earlier, the priest classes were reluctant to provide education to women. Even religious education was allowed to women by the priests who were totally against modern education. They were not reluctant even to produce a '*fatwa*¹⁵ restricting women learning writing being it a '*haram*¹⁶. Thangal, through his work, totally rejected this kind of practices followed by the *Ulamas* and attempted to make the community understand the need for modern and Islamic education.

'*Marumakkathayam*¹⁷', which was well practiced in Kerala in the earlier days, was followed to a certain extent in the Muslim community too. Sons were denied of their right to paternal property as per this system. Women were given absolute right over property of father. This system was prevailed

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ A.P.Ibrahimkunjup. *op.cit.*,p.228.

¹⁴ C.K.Kareem, *op.cit.*,p.572.

¹⁵ *Fatwa* is the religious order delivered by the priest of the Muslim community. Later it becomes an order of this community.

¹⁶ Prabhodhanam Magazine, 2009, p.14. *Haram* is an Arabic term meaning sinful. In Islamic jurisprudence, *haram* is used to refer to any act that is forbidden by Islam

¹⁷ Matrilineal system had existed among the tribal people of Kerala from the ancient period itself. Inheritance through the sister's son, the property ownership exists through women's only. The general assumption of the modern historians is that the system that would have existed in the ancient tribals received a new impetus during the nineteenth



among the Muslims of Kannur and certain pockets of Travancore area¹⁸. He emphatically fought against these 'un-Islamic' practices. Makthi Thangal had written several articles in the periodicals like *Salahul Ikwan*, 'Swadeshahimani' of Vakkom Moulavi, 'Sanathana Darmam', 'Malayala Rajyam', *Kerala Sanchari* etc. The most outstanding contribution would have been his Quran translation in to Malayalam. Unfortunately the manuscript was lost. He recalls this in 'Makthi Manaklesham'¹⁹.

During this period, Muslim community was divided in to several small groups in the name of *tariqah*²⁰ like *Ritai*, *Qadiri*, *Nagshabandi*, *chisti*, *saduli* and so on. Disputes, quarrels and prohibition of mosques were common among these groups. He criticized classifications and all these groups, and asserted that *tariqahs* were not allowed in Islam. He organized youths and carried out reforms. He started a cultural organization called 'Muhammadiya Sabha' in 1889 at Kannur and for this he got support from Kannur Sulthan and Ali Raja. Thangal emphasized the necessity of secular education along with religious education for the progress of the community. He fought against the view of orthodox *Ulama* that English is the language of hell and Malayalam as the language of Hindus. And there fore it is 'un-Islamic' to learn these languages. He made fun of the *Musliyors* (religious teachers) committing blunders in teaching and writing on account of their lack of knowledge in local language²¹.

The early educational activities among the Muslims in Kerala are closely allied to *Madrassa* education. During the earlier stages, there were no institutions such as schools or colleges to impart education among the Muslims. Mosque served as the centers of both educational and religious activities. The *Madrassa* are necessary for Muslims for providing basic education. They serve as an important instrument of identity maintenance for the community. The mosque is primarily meant for offering prayers but mosques have also rendered great services in respect of expansion of education. Since the arrival of Islam in Kerala the mosques and *Madrassas* have functioned as centers of religious education both in the sense of giving instruction and in the sense of moral personality among the generation.

¹⁸ M. Abdulsamad, *Muslim Reformist Movements in Kerala; Work of Sayyid Sanaulla Makthi Thangal*, Proceedings of South Indian History Congress 12th Annual Section, 1991, p.206.

¹⁹ K.K.Ali, *Munnu Muslim Parishkarthakkal*, p,19

²⁰ A way of path is the term for a school or order of Sufism.

²¹ Makthi Thangal, *Makthi Manaklesham*., p.267.



One could evaluate the contribution of Thangal in the field of Islamic education especially of *Madrassa* education as most beneficial to Muslim community. The status of *Madrassa* education was at that time awfully bad and the educational system was not equipped to bring in any deeper knowledge about one's own religion. As the religion had got an established structure, formal procedures and practices were supposed to be in a specific manner and the students were given only basic education to perform these. *Mullas*, who conducted *Madrassa* education, were of minimal knowledge about the social systems or sophisticated mode of teaching. They simply followed the traditional *Parrot Recitations*.

The existing social system might have played a vital role in the conversion of people into Islam. The Arabs had been established a friendly towards the native of Kerala, became the real ground behind their arrival was trade. The novel social system which embraced all irrespective of their caste and creed must have attracted them. Under these circumstances people might have responded to Islamic missionaries in a more amicable way. The new converted Muslims mostly illiterate did not fully understand the Islamic teaching. So the first step of the missionaries was to impart the basic Islamic principles to the newly converted followers. They appointed *Quazi* for each mosque. The prime motive of the *Quazis* was to lead the prayer and teach the basic principles to the newly converted followers. This was the background in which Islamic religious education was started in Kerala.

The *Madrassa* educational system had faced a lot of limitation as in the method of teaching and learning process. Thangal interfered in the problem facing by the educational system and challenge to the existing educational system. There were no classroom divisions in *Mdrassa* education those days. It must be Thangal who introduced the system of classroom division in *Madrassa* education²². It is to be noted that Thangal was the first to introduce black boards in classrooms. The orthodox religious heads could not digest the changes brought in by Thangal. Writing Arabic on black boards was intolerably opposed by the orthodox priestly class. Even the novel ideas upheld by Makthi Thangal were strongly opposed by the majority of Muslim priest.

²² A.P.Ibrahimkundu, *Social Reform Movements Among Muslims of Kerala*, 12th South Indian History Congress Proceedings, 1986, p.196.



Makthi Tangal was died on 18th September 1912 at Cochin²³. Apart from his anti-Christian missionary stance, he was perhaps the earliest Muslim scholar to encourage secular education at a time when secular education was not promoted by the orthodox *Ulamas*. He was the first reformist who learn deep in to the religious aspects of both Muslims and Hindus. Makthi Tangal was the opinion that learning Islam with the help of the native Malayalam language is very essential for enlighten of the Muslim community. He considered language as the host and carrier of knowledge and tried to purify the community. He was first enlightened reformer to advocate the importance of Malayalam language and enhance Malayali cultural identity among the Muslim community in Kerala. However he was a great scholar to play an active role in development of secular education as well as religious education among the Muslim community in Kerala. He was successful in modernising and nourishing the Muslim community to overcome the challenges and suit the needs of tomorrow through an essential renaissance.

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²³ A.P.Ibrahimkunju, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala Their History and Culture*,1989,p.230

