*Islamic Traditionalism in a Globalizing World: Sunni Muslim identity in Kerala, South India**

M. S. VISAKH

School of Global Studies, University of Sussex
Email: visakhms2009@gmail.com

R. SANTHOSH

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Email: rsantho@gmail.com

C. K. MOHAMMED ROSHAN

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Email: ckmroshan@gmail.com

Abstract

In our ethnography among traditionalist Sunni Muslims of Kerala, South India, we observe the emergence of new intellectual critiques of Islamic reformism and a revival of 'traditional' Islamic articulations. A new class of traditionalist Sunni *ulama*, claiming to be 'turbaned professionals', plays an instrumental role in providing epistemic sanctioning to 'traditional' Islamic piety while simultaneously grounding it within the discourses and processes of neoliberal developmentalism. Such assertions of traditionalist Sunni Muslim identity challenge the conventional understanding of Islamic reformism as a hallmark of the progressive understanding of faith and traditionalism as its 'anti-modern' other. The article argues that this discursive shift of Sunni Islamic traditionalism in Kerala since the 1980s from defensive to more assertive forms has to be located in the context of wider socio-economic change within the community facilitated by structural as well as cultural

forces of globalization. We point out that this process traverses the local, national, and global scales of identification, and results in intense negotiations between local identifications and 'true Islamicate global imaginations'. These negotiations bring in new discourses around the question of 'authentic' Islamic practices and sensibilities among the traditionalist Sunni Muslims, forcing us to locate the question of their identity formation beyond the boundaries of communities and the nation states that ensconce them.

Introduction

To promote Shari'ah-compliant investment portfolios in property development, hospitality, conventions, and industrial enterprises, and to offer portfolio management, the Markaz Excellency Club is set to establish a Shari'ah (business) advisory council and a Shari'ah authentication cell for promoting Islamic economic principles within the community and beyond, and to promote a strategic-policy dialogue platform for Islamic banking in the Indian economy.[1]

The foregoing description of the Markaz Excellency Club, one of the many new initiatives of Jamia Markazu Saqafathi Sunniyya (henceforth Markaz), a traditionalist Sunni Muslim organization under the stewardship of Kanthapuram A. P. Aboobacker Musliyar (b. 1939) in the south-west Indian state of Kerala, is quite uncharacteristic of the conventional narrations of Islamic traditionalism. At the outset, it is important to note that the term 'Sunni' in the context of Kerala does not refer to the denominational distinction between Sunni and Shia, as all Muslims in the state are Sunnis following the Shaf'i Madhab. In this article, 'Sunni' is deployed as an emic category to refer to the advocates of traditionalist Islam as opposed to the Salafi-inspired reformists, locally referred to as mujahids. The categories of 'traditionalism' and 'reformism' emerged in Kerala following the rise of Islamic reform movements in the 1920s, which were gradually consolidated as theological positions and structured organizational movements representing the Sunnis and the mujahids, respectively. Yoginder Sikand describes the mujahid movement as 'the Kerala counterpart of the Ahl-i-Hadith in north India'.[2] In contrast, Sunni traditionalism draws parallels with the Barelwi movement that emerged in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh as a reaction to the growing influence of

[1] Markaz Excellency Club, 'Activities', available at http://www.markazexcellency.com/activities.php [accessed 9 December 2020].
[2] Y. Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India*, Delhi: Penguin, 2005.

Deobandis in the early decades of the twentieth century.[3] Hence the terms 'traditionalist' or 'traditionalism' used in this article, as S. N. Eisenstadt observes, refer to 'an ideological mode and stance oriented against the new symbols; it espouses certain parts of the older tradition as the only legitimate symbols of the traditional order and upholds them against "new" trends'.[4] In the context of Kerala, as Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella rightly observe, these are unstable categories discursively produced in the local context through practice and dialogue with significant others and undergo constant shifts in their normative content.[5] Echoing Talal Asad's assertion of Islam as a discursive tradition, several pieces of such recent scholarship have shown how Islamic reformism and traditionalism, rather than conveying any essential set of ideas regarding the historical or contemporary orientation of Muslim societies, are discursively produced in specific socio-historical contexts.[6]

Osella and Osella have argued how the mujahid reformist movement, even while being part of the universalistic reformist orientations within Islam, evolved in the specific social, political, and historical context of twentieth-century socio-religious reforms in modern Kerala.[7] They point out how the mujahid projects of self-making constituted an index

[3] For more details on these movements, see U. Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996; B. D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

[4] S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Post-traditional Societies and the Continuity and Reconstruction of Tradition', *Daedalus*, vol. 102, no. 1, Winter 1973, p. 22.

[5] F. Osella and C. Osella, 'Islamism and Social Reformism in Kerala, South India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2–3, 2008, pp. 317–346. Also see R. Santhosh, 'Contextualising Islamic Contestations: Reformism, Traditionalism and Modernity among Muslims of Kerala', *Indian Anthropologist*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2013, pp. 25–42; N. R. Menon, 'What Do Polemics Do? Religion, Citizenship and Secularism in South Indian Islam', *History of Religions*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2018, pp. 128–164.

[6] T. Asad, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', *Occasional Paper Series*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986, pp. 1–22; T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993; T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003; M. Q. Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002; H. Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-Ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan*, London: The Chicago University Press, 2011; M. Q. Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012; W. B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

[7] Osella and Osella, 'Islamism and Social Reformism in Kerala', pp. 317–346.

of a 'particular mode of engagement with the modern, leading to interrogations of orthopraxy and arousing anxiety over association with practices deemed "backward" and un-modern'.[8] It succeeded in combining Islamic modernism with more generalized ideas about progress via enlightenment, education, and rationality. The reformist movement supported modern/secular education, *Khutba* (Friday prayer) in Malayalam, translation of the Quran into the vernacular, women's entry into mosques, and their advancement through modern education. The mujahids, claiming to represent 'true Islam', believed that such changes are necessary for the progress of the Muslim community in Kerala, steeped in ignorance, superstition, and backwardness. Thus, Islamic reformism in Kerala, as the Osellas observe, assumed wider significance as constituting 'the modern outlook of the Muslim middle classes and as normatized part of a distinctively "progressive" Malayali identity'.[9] Scholars have pointed out that there has been a certain degree of convergence in the direction of the reformist position within the Muslim community, especially in terms of their vision and programmes for a modern Muslim moral community. For instance, Osella and Osella point out how the mujahid emphasis on 'modern/ scientific' and English education prompted the Sunni traditionalists to push for gradual educational reforms within the community.[10] Such scholarly interventions have contributed towards a more contextual understanding of Islamic reformism as well as Muslim-identity dynamics in South Asia, in general, beyond the conventional narratives of reformism as drawing on foreign influences or Wahhabi-inspired.

However, studies that critically look at the discursive formation of Islamic traditionalism in the Kerala context have been relatively scarce. The conventional narratives of Islamic reform in Kerala often portrayed the 'anti-reformist' Sunnis as the other of the modern Muslim moral community of the reformist imagination. Generally described as 'conservative', 'orthodox', and 'anti-modern' in reformist discourses and the public sphere of Kerala, the 'anti-reformist' Sunnis started consolidating as traditionalists in the 1920s 'to defend and protect Kerala's Islamic tradition and to wage a revivalist movement against the new interpretations'.[11] This organized attempt to thwart the reformist

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[8] Ibid., p. 325.

[9] Ibid., p. 338.

[10] Ibid. Also see Santhosh, 'Contextualising Islamic Contestations', pp. 25–42.

[11] *Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama*, Malappuram: Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabhyasa Board, 2014, p. 8.

innovations gradually evolved into a highly vibrant, dynamic, and organizational articulation of traditionalist Islam among Sunnis who form the vast majority of Muslims in Kerala. This transformation, achieved through relentless squabbles with the reformist critiques, signified a new and distinct form of engagement with Islam in modernity. Ever since its beginning in the 1920s, traditionalism has undergone various shifts in its engagement with Islam and the modern. As reflected in the excerpt mentioned at the very beginning of the article, currently various Sunni-Muslim groups in Kerala are aggressively executing their future plan to become a 'guiding light in the development of a knowledge based economy in harmony with a lifestyle defined by moral values'.[12] Given this scenario, we find the case of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim-identity formation in Kerala highly fascinating and instructive of significant changes taking place among Muslims in a globalizing world. As Humeira Iqtidar observes: 'a previous schema of associating reform with Muslim modernists, and stagnation or resistance with traditional or traditionalist thinkers, is particularly redundant in the face of a new generation of scholars who are keen to be defined as traditionalists or at least as being closely bound to the tradition.'[13]

In our ethnographic study, we observe the emergence of new intellectual critiques of Islamic reformism and a revival of 'traditional' Islamic rituals and practices among Sunni Muslims, leading to a decisive shift from defensive to more assertive articulations of the traditionalist identity. An increasing number of Sunni Muslims from diverse social backgrounds proudly identify themselves as traditionalists in opposition to the Salafi reformists and vociferously defend the religious, cultural, symbolic, and ideological markers of 'traditional' Islam in Kerala. The current generation of Sunni scholars stresses the importance of 'traditional' modes of religious education, the centrality of *ulama* in Islamic knowledge transmission, and participation in a host of 'traditional' ritual practices such as *nerchas* (shrine festivals), *milad* (observance of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad), *mawlud*, *mala* (both devotional performative genres celebrating love towards the Prophet and other pious Islamic figures), *Burdha* (a thirteenth-century poem

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[12] H. R. Mansoori, 'Unani Medical College Press Release', available at http://markazunanimedicalcollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/International-Unani-Conference.pdf [accessed 9 December 2020].

[13] H. Iqtidar, 'Redefining "Tradition" in Political Thought', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2016, p. 426.

written by Imam Al-Busiri in praise of Prophet Muhammad), and so on with heightened rigour and enthusiasm. Such conscious attempts to reinvent and articulate 'traditional' Islamic rituals and practices happen in tandem with an intra-Islamic critique of reformism that squarely places it in a larger critique of 'Western' modernity. Sunnis argue that the spiritual, embodied, and affective dimensions of faith that constitute these 'traditional' religious practices stand as living testimonies to their culturally embedded character. According to them, the traditionalists represent the true and universal character of Islam in contrast to the 'narrow scripturalist rationalism' propounded by the reformists. Such traditionalist articulations entail a reconfiguration of authorizing discourses, cultural practices, and modes of sociopolitical and economic engagement among the Sunni Muslims. It is in this context that this article aims to delineate the nature of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim-identity formation in contemporary Kerala and understand the sociopolitical conditions that facilitate it.

We suggest that the discursive shift of Sunni Islamic traditionalism in Kerala from defensive to more assertive forms has to be located in the context of the wider socio-economic change within the community, facilitated by structural as well as cultural forces of globalization, such as heightened transnational connections, global cultural and intellectual flows, the proliferation of electronic media and digital communication technologies, and, in particular, the growth of a neoliberal economy. The transformations brought about by globalization have entailed the emergence of a new traditionalist *ulama* class within the Sunni Muslims. Claiming to be 'turbaned professionals', this Sunni *ulama* class plays an instrumental role in providing epistemic sanctioning to 'traditional' Islamic piety while simultaneously grounding it within the discourses and processes of neoliberal developmentalism in Kerala. The neoliberal restructuring of the economy, which encouraged organized religious groups in Kerala to invest private capital in the market and emerge as development providers without state support, has given a major fillip to such traditionalist Islamic articulations. Concurrently, a series of recent developments pertaining to the growth of radical Islamic puritanism within mujahids that not only weakened the reformist movement, but also challenged the sovereignty of the nation state render greater legitimacy to the theological orientations of Islamic traditionalism in the public sphere of Kerala. Projected as an antidote to the Salafi-inspired, extremist, and puritanical version of Islam, the traditionalist assertions thus take shape under conditions of secularism or sovereign power of

the nation state in regulating religion—a process that faces new threats in an age of virulent Hindutva mobilization across the country.

We also point out that the traditionalist religious practices and identities are asserted and legitimated with reference to a discourse on what we term as 'true Islamicate global imaginations', which connects the localized cultural practices to wider transnational/translocal Islamic theologies and practices in different geographical locations across the globe. Hence, the process of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim-identity formation in contemporary Kerala, we suggest, traverses the local, national, and global scales of identification, and results in intense negotiations between local identifications and 'true Islamicate global imaginations'. Carefully configured and legitimized through a reflective (and selective) engagement with local historical specificities of Islam in Kerala, these negotiations bring in new discourses around the question of 'authentic' Islamic practices and sensibilities among the traditionalist Sunni Muslims. In light of these observations, we argue that the structural and cultural conditions of globalization have not only unsettled the conventional religio-spiritual, economic, and political orientations attached to Sunni Islamic traditionalism in Kerala, but also force us to locate the question of their identity formation within the theoretical framework of late modernity, beyond the boundaries of nation states and the communities ensconced within them.

The critique of Islamic reformism and the making of traditionalist Sunni Muslim identity

Emerging as important players in the state electoral politics, developmental initiatives, civil society, and the Kerala public sphere, Sunni Muslims no longer see themselves as reformism's non-modern other or simply as subjects trying to catch up with the 'modern' reformists. Asserting the specific historical roots of Islam in Kerala, the Sunni traditionalists put forward a new traditionalist discourse of Islam that they believe goes beyond the epistemological limits of reformism derived from instrumental rationality of 'Western' modernity than Islamic ideals. Islamic reformism in Kerala, according to this new traditionalist discourse, thus fails to understand the spiritual, embodied, and affective dimensions of faith, and dismisses the rich cultural lineage of Islam in the region. Sainudeen Mannalamkunnu, one of the prominent scholars to articulate the new traditionalist discourse of Islam, writes:

The reformers' efforts 'rejected tradition and severed roots', and equated reform with English education and affinity to values of western modernity. The questioning of tradition was part of the project of modernity that was suspicious of everything old and embraced everything new as authoritative. Hence the modern rational consciousness cannot access the Islamic value of *dhikr majllis* and *Burdha* recitation, which were spurned as bid'a (forbidden innovation) practices. This attack on Islamic tradition was often misunderstood as Islamic renaissance. Mainstream secular discourses celebrated Muslim personalities who sympathized with Western values in some way or identified themselves with their (western) progressive norms as pioneers of the Islamic renaissance.[14]

Mannalamkunnu argues that the much-hailed Islamic reform, which followed modern epistemic regimes and privileged scientific rationality, logic, and materialist view of history in its attack against tradition, in fact, aided the hegemonic project of Christianity and the imperial West. It produced distorted assumptions about Islamic renaissance and gave rise to erroneous philosophical modes of thinking that exaggerated external achievements bereft of any internal essence.[15] With its focus on the external, as the new traditionalist narrative goes, the 'reformist thought created a religion free of spirituality and spawned rationalist movements that believe in God'.[16] During our interactions with several Sunni scholars, the respondents constantly reminded us of the unique pedagogical character of 'traditional' Islamic knowledge. They highlighted concepts such as *taqlid*, *sanad* (chain of transmission), and *adab* (Islamic tradition of ethics) as central in the process of knowledge transmission in Islam. Muhammad Noorani, a religious scholar from the Sunni sect who currently pursues social-science research in one of the prominent central universities in India, argued:

[14] Quoted in N. R. Menon, '"Islamic Renaissance", Sufism and the Nation-state: A Debate in Kerala', in *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South Asia*, D. Dandekar and T. Tschacher (eds.), Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, pp. 268–269.

[15] Z. Mannalamkunnu, *Kerala Muslim Navodhanam*, Thrissur: Kaizen Books, 2007, p. 54. However, it is to be noted that Mannalamkunnu's critique is targeted not only at the mujahids and other reformist groups, as he thinks the contemporary Sunni groups are equally guilty of embracing the 'Western' modernity that they so vociferously condemn. Actively part of some Sufi tariqas that even the Sunni groups reject as not genuine, Mannalamkunnu often traces the lineage of traditional Islam to the pre-modern *ulama*.

[16] P. A. Abubakkar, 'Aathmeeyathaykkethiraya Kalapangal', in *Kerala Muslim Navodhanam: Punaranweshanathinte Prasakthi*, Calicut: Islamic Publishing Bureau, 2010, p. 80; Menon, 'Islamic Renaissance', p. 270.

Specialization is required in every field. You do not go to a doctor who is not an expert. Do you? What we argue is that knowledge has to be sought from the learned. One cannot randomly read verses from Quran or Hadith and claim that they posses religious knowledge. Who says is as important as what is being said. That has been the tradition in Islam, *sanad*. Also, Islam always gave preference to the oral. In codifying the Hadiths, Imam Bukhari followed the same methodology …. Before doing *ijtihad*, one ought to know whether he is qualified to do it. It requires one to devote his entire lifetime in the study of Islam. Common people may not be able to do that amidst the hardships in life. That is why great scholars like Imam Shafi has gone to such great depth in the study of Islam and wrote the *kitabs*, which we follow. Our own Makhdum has written classic works like Fath ul Mueen. However, the Mujahids do not accept any of them since they believe it constitutes acts of blind imitation. The reformist movement, influenced by western reasoning, broke the *adab* and questioned everything, including the respect given to the scholars and Sufi shrines. It is this instrumental rationality and narrow understanding of religious knowledge that always land them in crisis. There is no methodology or guidance.[17]

Knowledge in Islam, the traditionalists argue, has always been embodied in nature. The traditional *ulama*, by virtue of being the living embodiments of authentic religious knowledge, form a quintessential constituent of the text in Islam and command the sole right to lead the community in matters pertaining to religion and spirituality. The traditionalists believe that the *ulama* are typically committed to, as Zaman observes, 'a historically articulated interpretive tradition with reference to which any particular reading of the foundational or other texts finds meaning or legitimacy in their discourses'.[18] Abid, who is closely associated with one of the traditionalist Sunni groups and writes regularly in their magazines, tells us:

They say the traditionalists were against the translation of Quran into Malayalam. But let me tell you, there was a lived translation of the Quran already very much here. The way our predecessors lived, they were great scholars who embodied the Prophetic ways of living. Translation is not merely translating word by word. Is it? What does translation studies that you guys study tell about the act of translation?[19]

[17] Interview with Mr Muhammad Noorani, 9 September 2017. Name changed for anonymity.
[18] M. Q. Zaman, 'The Scope and Limits of Islamic Cosmopolitanism and the Discursive Language of the "Ulama"', in *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip Hop*, M. Cooke and B. B. Lawrence (eds.), Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 93.
[19] Interview with Mr Abid, 11 December 2017. Name changed for anonymity.

The traditionalist narrative foregrounds the importance of personalized transmission of religious knowledge through *ulama* in creating authentic human beings who, as Rudiger Seesemann describes, 'carry with them the irreplaceable core of scriptural knowledge illuminated by human example in an unbroken chain returning to the Prophet, then via the bridge of revelation to Jibril, and finally to the Almighty Himself'.[20] The Sunni traditionalists thus stress the classical mode of Islamic pedagogy that focuses on total ethical subject formation rather than the narrow transmission of discursive knowledge through written texts. In an article entitled 'Strength of Teacher–Disciple Relationship', Kodambuzha Bava Musliyar writes about *adab*, the ethical tradition in Islam that emphasizes exemplified moral behaviour acquired through religious learning:

In Islam, one who teaches religion is called *muadeep*; a term similar to *sheikh*, *muallim*, *mudaris*, *usthad* etc. *Muadeep* means one who teaches *adab*. *Adab* means proper manners and culture. As Imam Qushairi says, *adab* refers to the meeting of good things in one person … the role of a teacher is to instill good qualities and character in the students. Without *adab*, there is nothing. If you have acquired it, you have acquired everything.[21]

The intellectual articulation of the embodied nature of knowledge in Islam has not only brought to the fore the importance of personalized transmission of religious knowledge, but also rendered new legitimacy to various traditionalist religious rituals termed 'unislamic' by the reformists. It had the effect of reinstating the 'authentic' status of embodied religious practices celebrating Prophetic love such as *mala*, *mawlud*, *Burdha*, and so on that form the constitutive elements of the spiritual–ethical core of 'traditional' Islam in Kerala and essential in attaining true religious knowledge. Abdul Bari, a student at a Sunni dars in Kozhikode, while participating in the Kozhikode city milad rally on 30 November 2017, tells us:

If you ask me whether one finds literal evidence for *milad* celebration in Quran, the answer is perhaps a no. But that is not how you understand Islam. Prophet himself has taught us that the happiness of great moments must be shared. For a Muslim, few occasions could match the happiness of Prophet's birth and taking out a procession to express that love cannot be un-Islamic.[22]

[20] R. Seesemann, 'Embodied Knowledge and the Walking Qu'ran: Lessons for the Study of Islam and Africa', *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, p. 203.

[21] K. B. Musliyar, 'Guru Shishya Bandhangalude Sudridatha', *Risala Special Issue*, February 2007, p. 24.

[22] Interview with Mr Abdul Bari, 30 November 2017. Name changed for anonymity.

The morning following the milad rally, Abdul Bari forwarded to one of us a long WhatsApp message with YouTube links of *milad* celebrations in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Maldives, Yemen, and so on. In one of our subsequent meetings, he explained:

The reformists were able to cheat us for a long time saying that practices like *milad*, *Nercha*, and *Mawlud* go against *towhid* and are found only in Kerala. Since they were educated and commanded high status in society, many falsely believed in them. Now, you can instantly google or search on YouTube to see such practices existing in different parts of the world. And, we feel confident to celebrate them.[23]

What become evident in Abdul Bari's response is how the proliferation of digital communication networks has enabled the Sunnis to associate localized traditional Islamic practices in Kerala with similar practices in different geographical locations across the globe, which legitimizes them as authentically Islamic and furthers their revitalization in local contexts. In a foreword to the translation of Manqoos Mawlud in Malayalam, Abdul Majeed Faizy Parambath writes:

Mawluds, practiced across the Muslim world, faced a decline in the Arabian lands due to Wahhabi oppression. However, they are coming back today. Both small and big *mawlud* performances are spreading across Saudi Arabia and other places. More than three thousand people attended the *mawlud* held in Jeddah on 27 September this year. Scholars from different parts of Saudi Arabia like Sheikh Saqaf, Sheikh Bin Sumaith, Umarul Habeeb led the *mawlud* recitation. A large number of Malayalis also attended the annual *mawlud* conference, which was held in the month of Rajab, commemorating the ascension of Prophets …. Several *mawlud* performances are organized on weekly and monthly basis in places like Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina. Apart from Saudis, mostly people from Sudan and Yemen attend these performances. The participation of Malayalis in such *mawlud* gatherings has also increased a lot in recent times. It is impossible to describe the spiritual experience manifested when the Arabs dressed in white costumes go into a trance, enjoying the rhythm of *mawluds*.[24]

Currently, one observes a revitalization of such embodied religious practices as a symbolic marker of traditionalist Sunni Muslim identity in Kerala. *Mawluds* are often conducted in grand scales across the state during the annual conferences of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim organizations, attracting wide participation from the believers. Attending a Spiritual Conference organized by one of the traditionalist Muslim groups on 4 January 2018, a young Sunni

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[23] Interview with Mr Abdul Bari, 15 December 2017. Name changed for anonymity.
[24] A. M. Faizy Parambath, *Manqoos Mawlud Translation*, Kozhikode: Poonkavanam Books, 2014, pp. 21–22.

scholar in his mid-twenties by name Nawas Saqafi showed us the Al Adkar application on his smartphone that contains the Quran, *mawlud*, *dikr*, and other daily prayers in English, Arabic, and Malayalam. Developed by Islamic Media Mission, the official online media of the organization, the application was launched during the Spiritual Conference and featured Mamburam Baith, Mahlarathul Badriyyath, Manqoos Mawlud, Manqoos Mawlud audio, and so on in Malayalam among others. Sunnis point out how these devotional performative genres are historical records that suggest how the *ulama* are actively involved in the societal affairs in a pluralistic society such as Kerala. *Nerchas* or the shrine festivals also find great prominence in these discourses as living embodiments of traditionalist Islam and as symbols of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and other religious communities in the region. For instance, the Mamburam Makham in Malappuram district has emerged as a major symbolic marker of communal harmony along with frequent invocations of the Mamburam Thangal's deep friendship with his Hindu assistant, Konthu Nair. Legitimizing the authenticity of traditionalist Islam thus, they claim to represent the universal nature of Islam that is inherently plural and accommodative of cultural diversities. Muhammad Noorani reminded us once that 'Islam is like a flowing stream of pure water that reflects and illuminates things beneath it. That is why *urf* (local customs) holds such importance in traditional Islamic knowledge'.

The foray of traditionalist Sunnis into secular education has also contributed to this process of the legitimation of 'traditional' Islamic articulations. An emerging strand of academic scholarship critically engages with the epistemological basis of Salafi Islamic reformism and attempt to reread the 'traditional' lifeworld of Sunni Muslims. Heavily influenced by deconstructionist approaches and postcolonial critiques of religion, secularism, and modernity, these works emphasize the constitutive role of 'traditional' religious rituals such as *mawlud*, termed 'unislamic' by the reformists, in the self-fashioning and ethical subject formation of Mappila Muslims.[25] Such 'traditional' religious practices that celebrate the deeds of Prophet Muhammad and Sufi saints, the

[25] See, for example, A. K. Muneer Hudavi, 'Poetics of Piety: Genre, Self-fashioning, and the Mappila Lifescape', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2016, pp. 423–441. Carool Kersten notes similar developments among young Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia and interrogates the influences of Arabophone and Francophone Muslim intellectuals on the formation of Indonesia's Islamic post-traditionalism; see C. Kersten, 'Islamic Post-traditionalism: Postcolonial and Postmodern Religious Discourse in Indonesia', *SOPHIA*, vol. 54, 2015, pp. 473–489.

argument goes, produce affects of virtuous love and play an integral role in constituting an Islamic moral community in Kerala.

The new traditionalist discourse also challenges the historical narratives that construct a 'progressive' image of reformism by stigmatizing the 'pre-reformist' tradition of Islam in Kerala as 'closed', 'superstitious', and characterized by ignorance of true Islamic tenets. The traditionalists believe that such discourses are highly Eurocentric and obfuscate several attempts of Islamic revival by learned religious scholars and Sufis in Kerala's history. Figures such as Zainudeen Makhdum I (1467–1522), Zainudeen Makhdum II (1532–83), and Qadi Muhammad (d. 1616) regularly appear in the traditionalist counter narrative, highlighting their instrumental role in initiating various forms of Islamic revivalism in Kerala in the precolonial times.[26] The Sunnis often invoke the *dars* in Ponnani established by Makhdums, which attracted many students from different parts of Kerala and India, as the epitome of Islamic revivalism in Kerala. They point out how various Arabic *kitabs* (religious textbooks) written by Makhdums on *tasawuff* (Sufism) and Islamic jurisprudence are accorded high status in the Islamic world. The new traditionalist discourse presents the renaissance activities of traditional *ulama* as constituting an 'epistemological and ontological domain that is fundamentally different from that of the nineteenth and twentieth-century ulama's conceptualization of renaissance'.[27]

Even while trying to distance from both the colonial, nationalist, and Marxist historiography that portrays the *ulama*-led struggles as fanatic, nationalist, or class-based, respectively, the traditionalist counter discourse includes scholars such as Mamburam Thangal (1753–1844), Umer Qadi (1765–1844), and Syed Fazal Tangal (1824–1901), who lived in the colonial times as exemplars of a pious Sufi life. They are portrayed as following Makhdum's tradition of revitalizing Islamic faith by leading the community against European invasions and speaking against social inequalities.[28] However, their anticolonial resistance is portrayed as an embodied Islamic moral virtue internalized through

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[26] For instance, Zainudeen Makhdum II wrote Fath'h-ul-Muin, a classic text in Shafi jurisprudence as well as Tuhfat-ul-Mujahideen, a historical work on the struggle between Mappilas and the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. He also established the renowned Ponnani *dars* in Kerala after acquiring religious education from Mecca and al-Azhar besides serving as the intellectual source for mobilizing the Mappilas against the Portuguese invasion.

[27] Menon, 'Islamic Renaissance', p. 275.

[28] *Kerala Muslim Navodhanam: Punaranweshanathinte Prasakthi.*

particular ways of living in one's community. As Menon notes: 'the interpretation of the nature of the attack and the response to it were embedded in and shaped by Islamic tradition and sense of belonging to a Muslim *ummat* (community).'[29] The reluctance to link such activities of Islamic revival led by traditional *ulama* in the pre-reformist/pre-modern period to modernity, the traditionalists believe, lies in the hegemonic influence of 'Western' Enlightenment thinking in our history writing. Revivalism in Islam, according to the Sunni traditionalists, is neither a novelty nor a rupture. Instead, Islamic tradition, they argue, is always in a continuum of reform, revival, and renewal (*islah*, *ihya*, and *tajdid*).[30] The practice of revival is hence understood as a defining characteristic in Islamic tradition, authorized by Quranic tenets and the Hadith of the Prophet but mediated through learned men or the *ulama*.

The traditionalist critiques have forced reformist organizations such as mujahids and Jamaat-e-Islami to acknowledge the importance of the historical *ulama* figures such as Makhdums, Qadi Muhammad, Mamburam Thangal, and so on in shaping the socio-religious sphere of Muslims in Kerala in the pre-reform period. For instance, Jamaat-e-Islami organized the Kerala Muslim History Conferences in 2013 and 2018 at Kozhikode, apparently an attempt to demonstrate their sensitivity to the glorious past of Islam in Kerala. Further, the reformists have also conceded in a series of their later publications that identifying the beginning of Kerala Islamic reformism with the modern period is problematic, and scholars of high repute have indeed played a significant role in revitalizing Islam since the precolonial period.[31] However, such responses often tend to be an act of selective appropriation as the literary works of these scholars that eulogize Prophet Muhammad and other Sufi saints continue to be criticized and condemned as un-Islamic.[32] Sunni scholars point out that such acts of selective appropriation reflect the deep-rooted crisis of the theological foundations of Salafism and betray their opportunism. Having delineated the nature of the emerging traditionalist Sunni-Muslim-

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[29] Ibid., p. 273.

[30] S. Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality and Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

[31] See, for example, K. T. Hussain, *Kerala Muslingal: Adhinivesha Virudha Porattathinte Prathyayashasthram*, Kozhikode: Islamic Publishing House, 2008.

[32] See, for example, K. T. Hussain's critique of Muhyudeen Mala written by Qadi Muhammad in praise of Sufi Sheikh Abdul Khadir Jeelani. Hussain, *Kerala Muslingal*, pp. 60–61.

identity formation, the next three sections of the article examine the sociopolitical conditions that have facilitated the emergence of this assertive phase of Sunni Islamic traditionalism in Kerala since the last decades of the twentieth century.

Trajectory of assertive Islamic traditionalism

Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama (henceforth Samastha), the traditionalist Sunni Muslim organization, ever since its inception in 1926, has been focused on its founding objective of countering the reformist tendencies and propagating the practices and beliefs of Ahlu Sunnah Wal-Jama'a. Sunni scholars such as Shihabudeen Ahmed Koya Shaliyathi (1885–1954), Varakkal Mullakoya Thangal (d. 1932), Pangil Ahmed Kutty Musliyar (d. 1946), and Abdur Rahman Bafaqi Thangal (1906–73) provided spiritual and organizational leadership to the traditionalists in the initial years. They tried to spread their message primarily through public meetings and theological debates.[33] This period is generally considered to be a defensive phase of Islamic traditionalism in Kerala, as the organization was trying to ward off the reformist criticism and did not embark upon any significant innovation in the traditional modes of religious education.[34]

However, the Samastha has succeeded in expanding its organizational outreach among Sunnis since the 1950s by establishing bureaucratized sub-organizations such as the Samastha Kerala Matha Vidyabhyasa Board (Islamic Educational Board, formed in 1951), Sunni Yuvajana Sangam (SYS, youth organization formed in 1954), Sunni Students' Federation (SSF, formed in 1973), Sunni Mahallu Federation (SMF, formed in 1976), and starting publications such as the *Sunni Times* (1964) under its fold. The modernization of religious education became one of the key agendas for the traditionalists during this period, as is evident in

[33] The Samastha claims to have organized 15 annual conferences between 1927 and 1944, focusing on 'places where the new ideologists had received big attraction and directed the masses to be aware of the leaders and followers of Bida'i sects'. Also, see Menon, 'What Do Polemics Do?', pp. 128–164.
[34] M. H. Panangangara, 'Keraleeya Muslim Charithraparisarathil Samanwaya Vidyabhyasam Aarjicha Idangal', in *Matha Vidyabhyasam: Kalam, Dhesham, Samskaram*, B. M. Nadvi (ed.), Chemmad: Darul Huda Islamic University, 2011, pp. 147–156.

the establishment of modern madrasas and Arabic colleges.[35] The traditionalist madrasas also rescheduled their working hours during this period so that Muslim children could attend regular schools for 'secular' education. The Samastha also established Arabic colleges such as Jamia Nooriya Arabbiya in Pattikkad (1964) for students to pursue higher religious learning, which spatially relocated the place of higher religious learning away from mosques and accompanied significant reforms in pedagogy and syllabus and examination patterns.

The assertive phase of Islamic traditionalism in Kerala can be traced back to the 1980s—a period marked by aggressive attempts at modernization among the traditionalist Sunnis. This new phase in the traditionalist trajectory is closely linked to the establishment of Jamia Markaz Ssaqafat-i-Sunniyya in 1978 under SYS, led by its general secretary Kanthapuram A. P. Aboobacker Musliyar (henceforth Kanthapuram), Samastha general secretary E. K. Aboobacker Musliyar (1914–96), E. K. Hasan Musliyar, and T. K. Kunjahamed Haji, among others. The establishment of Markaz was the result of a decision taken in the state committee meeting of SYS, held on 12 June 1977, to send Syed Kunji Seethikoya Thangal, Syed Fasal Pookoya Thangal, and Kanthapuram to the Gulf countries to raise Rs 500,000 to aid the organizational activities of Samastha. SYS succeeded in obtaining financial resources from the Gulf countries, which included a gift of Rs 500,000 from a prominent industrialist in Abu Dhabi named Abdulla-Al-Kulaibi to build an orphanage in the Kozhikode district. It is important to note that Muhammad Alawi al-Maliki (1944–2004), one of the prominent Sufi scholars from Saudi Arabia, laid the foundation stone for the orphanage building in Markaz in Kozhikode city on 14 April 1978. Ssaqafat Sunniyya Arabic college (established in 1981), a masjid (1982) Ssaqafat Sunniyya boarding madrasa (1982), Markaz high school (1982), typewriting institute (1982), Markaz hospital, and a printing press (1983) were attached to the Markaz in the following years, which initiated a period of aggressive modernization among the traditionalist Sunnis. Kanthapuram describes the instrumental role played by transnational connection with Gulf countries thus:

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[35] The madrasa system was established as an alternative to *Othupallis*, which were fast transforming into schools under the colonial rule that made secular education compulsory in Othupallis in the aftermath of the Malabar rebellion of 1921, arguably intended at combating the 'religious-fanatic' spirit of Mappila Muslims.

It was surprising for many to know that SYS is initiating a big project worth one crore rupees since people have seen the difficulty that we (Sunnis) faced in buying a mosque from Wahhabis for one lakh eleven thousand rupees. It was the discussion with expatriates in various Gulf countries that made us think about expanding the organization …. We did not have many contacts with the Gulf countries during the period apart from a few connections with the Arab *ulama*. It was through them that we formed a relationship with the ruling class. Syed Muhammad Al Maliki's family runs dars in Masjidul harm for centuries and has fought against the political and religious transition in Saudi Arabia… It was Allah's blessing that we could bring such a person to lay the foundation stone for Markaz … Syrian scholar Shayk Mahmood Ibrahimudiq was another prominent Arab who participated in the event.[36]

The 1980s also marked a remarkable shift with the introduction of the 'integrated education' system (*matha-bhauthika samanwaya vidyabhyasam*). It combined religious and secular education, which began to produce large numbers of 'traditional' religious scholars who also possessed degrees in non-religious subjects. Katameri Rahmanniya Arabic College, under the leadership of M. M. Basheer Musliyar (1929–87), became the first Sunni institution to alter the curriculum to provide space for 'integrated education'. M. M. Basheer Musliyar, along with C. H. Haidaroos Musliyar (1930–94), U. Bapputty Haji (1929–2003), and others attempted to initiate changes in the traditional *dars* system under the control of various mosques in a *mahallu* through the organizational reach of SMF.[37] The first-ever 'model *dars*' in Kerala was established in Kottakkal Town Juma Masjid during the 1980s that incorporated subjects such as literature, Islamic history, Urdu, and English language into the curriculum.[38] However, such attempts at imparting 'integrated education' were rather unsuccessful until the establishment of Darul Huda Islamic Academy in 1986 in Chemmad, Malappuram, which was formally upgraded to a university in May 2009 and is currently a member of the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World.

In these traditionalist educational institutions, learning secular subjects is seen as part of the divine mission in the Islamization of knowledge and essential part of *dawah*. Darul Huda, for instance, currently runs a 12-year course that includes subjects such as Mathematics, Science and

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[36] *Markaz Rubi Jubilee Souvenir*, Kozhikode: Jamia Markazu Saqafathi Sunniyya, 2018, pp. 27–29.

[37] Panangangara, 'Keraleeya Muslim Charithraparisarathil', p. 152.

[38] Ibid., p. 160.

Technology, English, Urdu, and Malayalam along with studies on the Quran, Hadith, *fiqh, tasawwuf,* and so on. To be awarded the 'Hudavi' title at the end of the course, the students are mandated to complete a bachelor's degree in humanities or social sciences from a public university. An ISO 9001:2015-certified institute of higher education, Darul Huda has been recognized by international Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. The institution has also signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with International Islamic University, Malaysia; Tripoli University, Libya; Omduranan Islamic University, Sudan; Alzaiem Alzahri University, Khartoum; Al Musthafa International University, Iran; Kuwait University; and Ez-zitouna University, Tunisia, among others.

Taking a cue from these changes, several traditionalist religious educational institutions such as Jamia Nooriya Pattikkad, Jamia Markazu Saqafathi Sunniyya, and others began to adopt the 'integrated-education' pattern in the last three decades, leading to large-scale modernization and the educational uplift of Sunnis in Kerala. An academic governing body named Coordination of Islamic Colleges (CIC) was set up in 2000 and registered with the government of Kerala with the aim to 'mould morally committed professionals, intellectuals and spiritual leaders who are grounded in the Islamic scholarly tradition and conversant with the scientific, cultural, political, and intellectual currents that are shaping the modern society'.[39] With its headquarters in Markazu Tharbiyyathil Islamiyyah Educational Campus in the Malappuram district, CIC runs more than 80 Islamic, arts, and science colleges, and has been instrumental in forming academic tie-ups with universities such as Al-Azhar University and Aligarh Muslim University. The Sunni traditionalists have also started various English medium schools, hospitals, and teacher-training colleges that substantially contributed to the modern educational empowerment of Sunnis. As against the early portrayal of Sunnis as anti-English, the traditionalist Muslim sections currently run hundreds of English medium schools across Kerala. One of the office-bearers of the Ideal Association for Minority Education (IAME), a confederation under one of the Sunni sects for supervising English medium schools, tells us that there are 416 English medium schools registered with IAME that have more than 175,000 students enrolled at various levels.

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[39] Coordination of Islamic Colleges, available at http://www.wafycic.com/index.php [accessed 9 December 2020].

The traditionalists also made use of this educational reform to address a long-standing reformist critique: the reluctance of traditionalists to address issues of women's education and empowerment. Women's modern education, their entry to the mosques, and greater involvement in public affairs have been some of the contentious issues between these theological factions, as the traditionalists steadfastly refused to accept reformist arguments about the empowerment of modern Muslim women. While the reformist organizations such as mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami established separate organizations for women and girls and actively participated in various public events, Sunnis refused to follow suit. However, as a response to the incessant critique of the reformists and in line with the general trend of Kerala with regard to women's education, the traditionalists also introduced a series of educational programmes and institutions for Muslim women. Al-Gaith Islamic and Arts College for Women, affiliated to CIC, offers 'a five-year course in Islamic studies and home science coupled with a university degree in any secular discipline' and awards the 'Al Wafiyya' title to the graduates.[40] The Academy of Women's studies and Islamic Sciences (AWIS) run by the AP Sunni faction offers the Hadiya programme, conceived as a course specially designed for women who have successfully completed their matriculation and are wanting to pursue further studies in Islamic knowledge and tradition, to young women along with higher secondary studies. The upcoming Markaz Knowledge City under the Kanthapuram faction also boasts of Markaz Queensland, which offers courses such as the Integrated Program in Sharia and Life Science, the Integrated Program in Sharia and Humanities, and so on. Similarly, Ma'din Academy inaugurated 'She-Campus' in June 2015, which promises to equip the students with 'a higher secondary education (plus two) of the Kerala State Education Board' along with training in 'Quran, Hadith, Literature, History & Culture of Muslims'. Currently, there is a generalized rhetoric of women's participation in higher education among the traditionalist circles, indexed, for instance, by the ubiquitous pictures of young women in headscarves sitting in front of computers in various colleges. Most of these initiatives into higher education for women are confined to the fields usually considered as 'soft disciplines' such as arts subjects, home science, and Unani, and are imparted in strict 'Islamic

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[40] Markazu Tharbiyyathil Islamiyyah, available at http://markazvalanchery.com/al-gaith.html [accessed 9 December 2020].

atmosphere' that includes either complete exclusivity for women or strict separation between the genders. It is evident that the Islamic discourses on women's higher education in contemporary Kerala cutting across the reformist and traditionalist groups centre on the idea of educated Muslim women (religiously and scientifically) as the core of a 'healthy' family and pious moral community.

The historical roots of the assertive phase of Islamic traditionalism, as the foregoing narrative of the modernization of Sunni Muslims suggests, have to be sought primarily in the organizational outreach of traditionalist Muslim groups. They have been successful in channelling both the direct financial flow from the Gulf countries received as Islamic charity and the socio-economic uplift of Sunnis achieved through large-scale migration to the Gulf countries towards strengthening their economic foundations. The traditionalist organizations significantly contributed to the modernization of traditionalist forms of religious education, as reflected in the entry of Sunni *ulama* into fields hitherto marked as 'secular' and hence forbidden. The renewed self-respect and the dignified status attributed to the new traditionalist *ulama* class who spearhead the traditionalist discourse in the assertive phase thus need to be located in the context of their increasing 'professionalization' in a state such as Kerala. We observe that the traditionalist articulations of the centrality of *ulama* in the religious life of Muslims, coupled with the introduction of 'integrated education', have made the pursuit of religious knowledge for a long time more viable and attractive for the young generation of Sunni Muslims in the current socio-economic context of Kerala. This new-age Sunni *ulama*, by virtue of their altered socio-economic standing and the ability to engage in new intellectual critiques of Salafi Islamic reformism, play a crucial role in providing epistemic sanctioning to 'traditional' Islam in Kerala's local context.

We talked to Dr Zubair Hudavi, chairperson of C. H. Muhammad Koya Chair at the Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala, at his residence in Chekanoor, Malappuram district. Dr Zubair Hudavi is one of the first-generation Hudavis to complete the 12-year integrated course at Darul Huda with a bachelor's and postgraduate degree in sociology, after which he joined the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University, a central university administered by the Government of India in New Delhi, to pursue his doctoral studies in Islamic systems of higher learning. A *khatib* (one who delivers the *khutbah*/Friday sermon) at a Cathedral Mosque in Central Kerala, Zubair Hudavi had also been the joint secretary of the youth and students wing of the Samastha. Dr Zubair Hudavi tells us:

The fact that I am a JNUite and teach in a government college has only increased my acceptance in this field (religious scholarship). It helps me to engage with people interested in religious knowledge, particularly the new generation who are religious but located in secular fields. For instance, I get invited to programs in engineering and medical colleges. My position helps me to engage with the community more. For instance, I give a speech for about half an hour in Malayalam before the Friday prayer in Arabic. Last Friday, I was talking about higher studies options after SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) and the prospects of civil service examination. This is a great inspiration to parents who want their children to pursue higher education, but without forgetting their religion.[41]

The presence of new-age Sunni *ulama* spans the fields ranging from media to academics to religious and secular education. In our interactions with the Sunni *ulama*, they consistently highlighted their self-reliance and increased acceptance from the public. As Abdul Latheef Saqafi, subeditor of a Malayalam daily run by one of the Sunni sects in Kerala, tells us:

Earlier, we were branded as a parasitic class; people who live off others' money, food etc. The financially better off Mujahids, in whose property our forefathers used to work, even branded us all non-Muslims. Is there a bigger insult than that? Now things have changed entirely. People have started recognizing the importance of *ulama*. Also, Sunnis are now way forward in all the fields, which were hitherto unimaginable to enter into.[42]

Another important historical episode in the trajectory of assertive Islamic traditionalism in Kerala is the emergence of Kanthapuram as an influential leader within the Samastha during the 1980s, which led to reinvigorated debates over traditionalist Sunni-Muslim identity. Kanthapuram emerged as the leader of a new group of Sunni Muslims who 'broke away' from the parent organization, citing the Samastha's alleged deviation from its traditionalist Muslim path.[43] Named after him, the AP Sunni faction began articulating a revival of 'traditional' Islam; the criticisms were targeted against what was deemed as the increasing 'Salafization' of Islamic faith and practices under the banner of the Indian Union Muslim League (henceforth the Muslim League),

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[41] Interview with Dr Zubair Hudawi, 19 May 2016.

[42] Interview with Mr Abdul Latheef Saqafi, 5 May 2018. Name changed for anonymity.

[43] While AP Sunnis cite Samastha's deviation from the traditionalist path as the reason for the split, many leaders of Samastha attribute it to the alleged financial irregularities by Kanthapuram pertaining to Areekadu mosque construction and his friction with other prominent leaders within the organization.

among others.[44] The Muslim League was accused of promoting the Salafi ideology within the community, allegedly reflected in the over-representation of reformist leaders within the party as well as declining importance given to the traditional religious scholars.[45] The AP faction's articulation of 'traditional' Islam thus insisted on the non-interference of politics in religious matters and a revival of *ulama*'s role in the leadership of the community. The AP faction's criticism against the Muslim League intensified in the 1990s following the Babri Masjid demolition where they accused the party for being silent on issues that pose a direct threat to the survival of the Muslim community. In particular, the attack was targeted against Panakkad Shihab Thangal, the Muslim League supremo, for adopting a 'moderate' approach in the fight against Hindutva aggression and continuing to align with the Indian National Congress. Not aligning with either the Muslim League or the alternate Muslim political formations that emerged in Kerala in the post-Babri Masjid context, the AP faction insisted on the need for separate platforms to preserve the Sunni ideals. Jam-Iyyathul Ihsania, popularly known as the Sunni Tiger Force, was formed with this intention. Seen as an extremist organization, it became quite active in the districts of northern Kerala during the early 1990s. The Sunni Tiger Force has been accused of being involved in several violent activities, including the murder of an RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) activist activist and Chekannur Moulavi.[46] The AP faction is also considered to be a major force

[44] The Indian Union Muslim League, established on 10 March 1948, emerged as the single largest political party representing Kerala Muslims in the postcolonial period through a unique engagement of religion-based political mobilization of Muslims with secular-democratic politics in India. It succeeded in negotiating the intra-community rift between traditionalists and reformists to a large extent by articulating the need for political unity among Muslims to deal with the imperatives of post-partition democratic politics while simultaneously pushing the Sunni traditionalists towards ideas of moderate reform for community development and progress. See, T. P. Wright Jr, 'The Muslim League in South India since Independence: A Study in Minority Group Political Strategies', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1966, pp. 579–599; J. Chiriyankandath, 'Changing Muslim Politics in Kerala: Identity, Interests and Political Strategies', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1996, pp. 257–271; R. Santhosh and M. S. Visakh, 'Muslim League in Kerala: Exploring the Question of "Being Secular"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 55, no. 7, 2020, pp. 50–57.

[45] Santhosh and Visakh, 'Muslim League in Kerala', pp. 50–57.

[46] Chekannur P. K. Mohammed Abul Hassan Maulavi (b. 1936) was a prolific Islamic scholar who challenged both Sunnis and mujahids based on his theological orientations of Ahle-e Quran. He disappeared from his home on 29 July 1993 and the police have

behind the formation of the Muslim Democratic Party (MDP)—projected as a political party exclusively for Sunnis—during the 1990s, though the Sunni faction has consistently denied all such allegations. It can be reasonably argued that the AP Sunni faction's opportunistic alliance with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (henceforth CPIM) began after the failure of both the Sunni Tiger Force and the MDP, which were short-lived and are currently defunct.

Ever since, the AP Sunni faction has earned the epithet of 'Sickle Sunnis' for unofficially supporting the CPIM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala during several elections.[47] While widely seen as part of their strategy to counter the influence of the EK Sunni faction closely allied with the Muslim League, the AP Sunni faction often acts as a pressure group in state electoral politics and justifies the unofficial support given to political parties as a matter of political bargaining in the interest of the Muslim community. It now stands in opposition to the 'official' section referred to as EK Sunnis who derived the tag from E. K. Aboobacker Musliyar, the general secretary of the Samastha at the time of the organizational split. With the student, youth, and educational organizations that were previously under the Samastha's fold joining either of the two groups, AP and EK Sunnis grew into independent organizational factions claiming to represent the 'traditional' Islam of Ahlu Sunnah Wal-Jama'a. The competition between these two factions in claiming the traditionalist status against what was perceived as the increasing 'Salafization' of Islamic faith and

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confirmed that he was murdered though his body has yet to be recovered. See '"Sunni Tigers" confess to '94 murder', *The Times of India*, published online on 17 October 2019, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/kerala-sunni-tigers-confess-to-94-murder/articleshow/71621547.cms [accessed 9 December 2020]; T. P. Nijeesh, 'One More Sunni Tiger Force Member Arrested for Murder of RSS Worker', *The Times of India*, published online on 2 December 2019, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/one-more-sunni-tiger-force-member-arrested-for-murder-of-rss-worker/articleshow/72332729.cms [accessed 9 December 2020].

[47] M. P. Prashanth, 'Sunni Faction Likely to Support LDF', *The Times of India*, published online on 12 April 2019, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/sunni-faction-likely-to-support-ldf/articleshow/68839999.cms [accessed 9 December 2020]; A. L. Naha, 'Kanthapuram Group May Vote for LDF', *The Hindu*, published online on 7 April 2017, available at https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/kanthapuram-group-may-vote-for-ldf/article17875245.ece [accessed 9 December 2020]; News18 Kerala, 'Malappuram theranjedup: Kanthapurathinte pinthuna LDFnu', *YouTube*, published online on 4 April 2017, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLSNm9DxGpM [accessed 9 December 2020].

practices among Sunnis has also intensified the debates over 'traditional' Islam and Muslim identity in Kerala in the last four decades. In this, the AP Sunni faction has been particularly successful in reconfiguring the traditionalist notions of Islamic piety in tune with the structural imperatives of a liberalizing economy. Such developments make it important to situate the assertive phase of Sunni Islamic traditionalism in Kerala in the background of neoliberal restructuring of the economy in a globalizing age.

Sunni *ulama* as turbaned professionals

Emphasizing the inseparability of economic and religious practice in the process of subjectivation and habituation, Osella and Osella have explored the relationship between Islamic reformism and contemporary forms of capital accumulation in Kerala.[48] They point to the emergence of a class of Muslim entrepreneurs from Kerala at the forefront of India's liberalizing economy, keen on adopting labour practices of global capitalism.[49] While their focus was on the reformists, we find it equally important to analyse how the assertive articulations of Sunni-Muslim identity is predicated on an effective combining of traditionalist notions of Islamic piety and religious knowledge with values of neoliberal developmentalism. We follow Wendy Larner, who notes that neoliberalism creates subjects, institutions, practices, and spaces conducive to the market through various technologies of governance.[50] Even while problematizing the state and its limits by invoking individual choice, neoliberalism 'involves forms of governance that encourage both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market'.[51] The spaces of compatibility between articulated religious ethics and neoliberalism in contemporary times hence need to be sought in their ability to serve as non-antagonistic modes of

[48] F. Osella and C. Osella, 'Muslim Entrepreneurs in Public Life Between India and the Gulf: Making Good and Doing Good', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 15, no. 1, May 2009, pp. 202–221; F. Osella and C. Osella, 'Migration, Neoliberal Capitalism, and Islamic Reform in Kozhikode (Calicut), South India', *International Labor and Working-class History*, no. 79, Spring 2011, pp. 140–160.

[49] Ibid.

[50] W. Larner, 'Neo-liberalism Policy, Ideology, Governmentality', *Studies in Political Economy*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2000, pp. 5–25.

[51] Ibid., p. 12.

governmentality and create particular subjectivities conducive to the market conditions.

As we observe in the field, the sense of self-assurance and confidence among the Sunni activists is buttressed by their bold forays into various avenues opened up in a neoliberal economy. For instance, the Kanthapuram-led AP Sunni faction has embarked upon one of the most ambitious development projects in the state with the upcoming Markaz Knowledge City in Kozhikode district in northern Kerala. Envisaged as a 100-acre integrated township for 'learning, living and leisure' that promises a complete lifestyle solution, Markaz Knowledge City proposes to house the largest mosque in India—named *Shaar-i-Mubarak Grand Masjid*—along with other facilities variously categorized as education, health, career, commercial, and residential. The educational zone comprises an international school, a special school for differently abled children, as well as institutions of higher studies in technology, law, business, and management. The official website of the Knowledge City says:

over the past few decades, the global economy has shifted from being manufacturing centric to a knowledge-driven one. This is an era of privatization and globalization of Indian higher education, the second largest higher education system in the world. India produces the second largest annual output of scientists and engineers in the world. Success in leveraging knowledge and innovation that could contribute to hitech manufacturing and high value-added services is only possible with a sound infrastructure of higher education. The Markaz Knowledge City campus is a self-sustained educational hub providing world class education from pre-school level to post graduate courses.[52]

The health zone has a multi-specialty hospital, a Unani medical college, and a hospital, as well as an Ayurvedic healthcare centre, whereas the commercial zone consists of an information-technology (IT) park and world-class restaurants, hotels, and convention centres. Home to 750 residential units, the residential zone provides more than 40 state-of-the-art facilities and a retirement village, guaranteeing an 'opulence lifestyle without compromising customer expectations'.[53] Markaz Knowledge City also features a Sharia City and Cultural

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[52] Markaz Knowledge City, 'Education', available at http://mkconline.com/education [accessed 9 December 2020].

[53] Markaz Knowledge City, 'Residential/Apartments', available at http://mkconline.com/apartments [accessed 9 December 2020].

Centre well equipped with amenities such as an Islamic museum, academic library, digital seminar hall, and cultural theatre that 'facilitates Islamic teachings based on Quran and relevant Hadith adhering to logic, reason and scientific facts'.[54] Claimed to promote Islamic culture and a rich heritage of 'traditional' Islam in Kerala, the project is being built in collaboration with several leading real-estate firms and is widely touted to be a major commercial venture in northern Kerala. Similarly, the AP Sunni faction has also been engaged in Islamic charity through voluntary organizations such as the Relief and Charitable Foundation of India (RCFI, established in 2000), which receives funds from international charity organizations such as Red Crescent, al-Rahama, and Dubai Charity. RCFI now focuses on areas ranging from education, health, rehabilitation, and orphan care to women empowerment. One of the RCFI brochures reads:

One need not wait for the governmental system to reach aid and assistance to the adversely affected and provide education to the unprivileged. These are now personal responsibilities of each individual, more of business issues and the corporate leaders than the politicians. Relief and Charitable Foundation of India's (RCFI) ideologies are based on the above principles.[55]

In one of our interactions with an office-bearer at the RCFI office in Kozhikode, he explained to us how the students at Markaz offer human-resource support to various charity activities, which they view as part of their religious obligation. The traditionalist discourse, as we see, thus effectively combines religious discourses of true Islamic knowledge with neoliberal notions of individual entrepreneurship, private financial investment, and development. The traditionalists, rather than viewing such engagements as a compromise on religiosity, promote them as integral to 'Islamic' development projects and a constituent element of their pious Islamic subjectivity. They reiterate excellence in 'secular' education and take great pride in promoting skills required for a neoliberal global economy such as professionalism, entrepreneurship, and private financial investment. In the 2015 annual souvenir of the SYS, Kanthapuram describes the Sunni *ulama* as 'turbaned professionals':

Now when I look back, I feel proud. Sunni has become enthusiastic to the youth. *Ulama* have taken back the leadership of the community. Educational institutions

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[54] Markaz Knowledge City, 'Education'.
[55] Relief and Charitable Foundation of India, 'Share to Care', available at http://www.rcfi.in/Brochure.pdf [accessed 9 December 2020].

stand with their head held high everywhere. Our land gets filled with turbaned professionals. I see the divine presence of the turban in university campuses and research desks. Knowledge has retrieved its brightest colour.[56]

Such notions of piety articulated by the traditionalists become, as Mona Atia observes with reference to faith-based organizations in Cairo, a meeting point of the professionalized development industry and religious revival, resulting in the production of a neoliberal Islam that emphasizes 'self-optimization and the cultivation of productive and entrepreneurial subjects'.[57] Pious neoliberalism, as Atia understands, is the discursive combination of religion and economic rationale that encourages individuals to be proactive and entrepreneurial in the interest of furthering their relationship with God.[58] Characterized by the managerial language of self-help and efficiency, pious neoliberal subjects see such activities as fundamental to religious self-realization but remain not inclined to addressing structural issues such as poverty or unequal income distribution.

Such enhanced alliance between religion and economic interest pursued by Sunni Muslims is not without criticism. They are accused of commercializing religion, and especially Kanthapuram has come under severe criticism from many quarters, including other traditionalist Sunni Muslim organizations, for instrumentally using the Islamic faith for business interests. Kanthapuram faced searing umbrage when he announced the possession of a lock of 'holy hair' of the Prophet, as almost every major Muslim religious organization in Kerala immediately questioned its authenticity. Similarly, the proposal to build *Shaar-i-Mubarak Grand Masjid* costing Rs 400 million in Kozhikode to house this 'holy relic' also invited sharp indignation for indulging in extravaganza in the name of religion. The EK Sunni Samastha issued a public statement in which the group accused Kanthapuram of 'deceiving believers in the name of Prophet's hair' and warned that 'such moves may tarnish Islam's image in the public'.[59] Similarly, several videos circulating in social media show Kanthapuram collecting

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[56] *SYS Sixty Year Souvenir*, Kozhikode: IPB Books, 2015, p. 12.

[57] M. Atia, '"A Way to Paradise": Pious Neoliberalism, Islam, and Faith-based Development', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 102, no. 4, 2012, p. 823.

[58] Ibid., pp. 808–827.

[59] P. K. Asheem, '"Holy" Hair Brings Merger Talks between Kerala Muslim Bodies to a Halt', *News18*, published online on 16 November 2018, available at https://www.news18.com/news/india/holy-hair-brings-merger-talks-between-kerala-muslim-bodies-to-a-halt-1941137.html [accessed 9 December 2020].

money from feverish believers who throng him to receive water made holy with his ritualistic blow.[60] His critics label Kanthapuram as a shrewd businessman who exploits believers by using 'traditional' religious symbols for attracting donations and private investments, and running commercial enterprises intended for profit-making.

Such articulations of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim identity in Kerala, the article argues, must be seen in the context of larger structural changes resulting from globalization whereby religious organizations emerge as development providers in a neoliberal economy.[61] Indeed, religious and communal organizations claiming to represent the interests of religious and caste groups have always been instrumental in shaping the democratic political culture and developmental trajectory of modern Kerala.[62] However, the neoliberal turn has facilitated their transformation from being interest groups seeking to secure state resources to development providers promoting private capital investment for community welfare. It is important to note that the post-neoliberal development in India did not lead to the emergence of a minimalist state dictated by the market economy and privatization of hitherto public assets.[63] Instead, the increased inclination of religious organizations to

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[60] *Manthrichoothal*, as it is popularly known among traditional Muslims in Kerala, is a ritual practised by Sunni clergy in which they spit/blow into a bowl of water to treat ailments and to ward off evils.

[61] J. Benthall and J. Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*, London: B. Tauris, 2003; A. Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007; C. Marshall, 'Development and Faith Institutions: Gulfs and Bridges', in *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World*, G. ter Haar (ed.), London: Hurst and Company, 2011; R. Robertson and J. Chirico, 'Humanity, Globalisation, Worldwide Religious Resurgence: A Theoretical Exploration', *Socio Anal*, vol. 46, 1985, pp. 219–242; P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalisation*, London: Sage, 1994; P. Beyer, *The Religious System of Global Society*, London: Routledge, 2006; J. Casanova, 'Religion, The New millennium, and Globalisation', *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2001, pp. 415–441.

[62] G. Mathew, *Communal Road to a Secular Kerala*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989; J. Chiriyankandath, '"Communities at the Polls": Electoral Politics and the Mobilization of Communal Groups in Travancore', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1993, pp. 643–665; Chiriyankandath, 'Changing Muslim Politics in Kerala', pp. 257–271; J. Devika and V. J. Varghese, 'To Survive or to Flourish? Minority Rights and Syrian Christian Community Assertions in Twentieth-century Travancore/Kerala', *History and Sociology of South Asia*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, pp. 103–128.

[63] N. Chandhoke, 'Globality, State, and Collective Imagination: The Indian Experience', in *Facing Globality*, B. Brar and P. Mukherjee (eds.), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

engage in developmental activities needs to be situated in the background of what Neera Chandhoke observes as a larger shift in the rhetoric of globalization since the late 1990s from the language of the market to that of governance, accountability, transparency, democracy, and the indispensability of the state.[64] Various forms of Islamic charity and development activities initiated by traditionalist Muslim religious organizations in Kerala take place in the sphere of the voluntary sector, incorporated on a large scale as a major agent of social development in the context of shifts witnessed due to neoliberal globalization. Hence, the traditionalist interventions can be read in conjunction with the wider decline of secular civil society spaces and the concomitant rise of active forms of religious civil associations in Kerala since the 1990s. Several religious organizations have entered the sphere of civil activism in Kerala through volunteering and charity activities during this period by undergoing significant process of secularization.[65] Such processes of 'de-privatization' of modern religion entail, as we see in the case of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim-identity assertions, religion's abandoning its assigned place in the private sphere and entering the 'undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation, and redrawing of the boundaries'.[66]

The spectre of Salafi radicalism and the traditionalist critique

A series of recent developments pertaining to the growth of radical Islamic puritanism among reformists, evident in the internal splintering within the Mujahids and a fringe group of its followers joining ISIS, has provided crucial fillip to the traditionalist critique against Salafi-inspired reformist movements in Kerala. While such puritanical and exclusivist tendency among the mujahids is a recent trend, emerging in the background of

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[64] Ibid.

[65] M. Warrier, 'Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2003, pp. 213–253; J. Devika, 'Fears of Contagion? Depoliticisation and Recent Conflicts over Politics in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 25, 2007, pp. 2464–2470; R. Santhosh, 'Islamic Activism and Palliative Care: An Analysis from Kerala', in *Religion and Politics of Development*, P. Fountain, R. Bush, and M. R. Feener (eds.), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 83–103.

[66] J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

large-scale migration of Kerala Muslims to Gulf countries, especially to Saudi Arabia, Sunnis emphasize that these tendencies existed right from the inception of mujahid activities in Kerala.[67] Notwithstanding the modernist orientation that defined the early years of Islamic reform in Kerala, the Sunnis make use of the current 'reformist crisis' as an opportunity to delegitimize the progressive orientation of the mujahid movement and even question the validity of Islamic reformism as a useful analytical category and a historical episode. The traditionalist critiques portray the rise of radical Islamic puritanism and the internal splintering of mujahid organizations since the 1990s as an inevitable result of following the faulty methodology of Salafism that relied on excessive rationality and scripturalism to understand Islamic knowledge.

Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen (henceforth KNM), one of the most influential reformist Muslim organizations in Kerala, witnessed its first split in 2002 when the youth wing led by Hussain Madavoor and the senior leadership of the parent organization led by A. P. Abdulla Koya Maudani parted ways over the operational definition of *dawah*.[68] The Sunnis attribute the reasons for the split and the subsequent splintering within KNM on theological grounds to the growing influence of Saudi Arabian Salafism among the reformists.[69] These splinter groups often resort to extreme forms of puritanism, sometimes even leading to the formation of exclusive communes whose followers strive to create a 'perfect Islamic environment'. While Wisdom Islamic Organization

[67] The Sunni traditionalists point out that the radical Islamic puritanical strand within reformism is not altogether new, as one finds early signs of it in the close ties that mujahid movement had developed with Arab religious scholars and Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia such as Umm al Qura University (founded in 1949) in Mecca, Muhammad ibn Saud of Riyadh (founded in 1953), and Islamic University of Madina (founded in 1961) that facilitated Salafi theological indoctrination (colloquially referred to as Saudi Salafism) among Kerala's Muslims during the early years of reform.

[68] While the group led by Hussain Madavoor (also referred to as the Markazudawa faction) provided a broader definition of the idea of *dawat* to include volunteerism and social activism, the official leaders of KNM insisted on its strict interpretation as religious propagation. The Madavoor group's active involvement in the highly acclaimed palliative-care movement of Kerala, for instance, owes much to such forms of secular Islamic activism of this group.

[69] M. P. Prashanth, a journalist in Kozhikode who assiduously follows the intra-community debates within Kerala Muslims, puts the number of splinter groups among mujahids at present as six: KNM official faction, KNM Markazudawa, Wisdom Islamic Organization, Dammaji Subair Mankada group (Ilmusalaf telegram group that is against Yahya Hajoorie), Dammaji Hajoorie group (Al Ilmia telegram group), and Zakkariya Swalahi group.

emerged out of the debate over the ethereal presence of *jinn*, Zubair Mankada's secluded village at Athicaud in Nilambur (Malappuram district) was modelled after al-Wadi's institution in Demmaj in Yemen. One of the leading scholars of KNM, Mankada drew inspirations from Muqbil ibn al-Wadi's (1933–2001) teachings to abandon all 'corrupt' practices and return to a pure Islamic lifestyle and teachings of the Prophet. The traditionalist discourse also highlights how the circulation of *Al-Wala wa-l-bara* (translated as 'loyalty and disavowal') among Kerala Muslims, a concept central to modern Salafi thought, is closely linked to the radical Islamic puritanism propagated by the reformists and finds reflected in the *fatwas* issued by mujahid scholars regarding Muslim participation in religious festivals of other communities.[70]

Such exclusivist and puritanical tendencies, coupled with the significant weakening of the mujahid organizations, provided sufficient ammunition to the traditionalist Sunnis to reiterate the fundamental flaws associated with Salafi pedagogical practices and beliefs followed by the mujahids. The unbridled rational approach combined with narrow scripturalism of Salafism, Sunnis believe, presents a dry, disembedded, and mechanical understanding of Islam detached from the local culture and history. They point out that all the Salafi sympathizers who left Kerala to join ISIS subscribed to a radical view of *towhid* that portrayed Kerala as *dar-al-harb* (abode of war).[71] Mujahid organizations, reeling under the pressure of the traditionalist campaigns' accusing them of radicalizing

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[70] A case has also been registered against Salafi preacher Shamsudheen Palath for delivering hate speeches with the intent of instigating communal divide and disrupting the communal harmony. In the controversial speech delivered in 2014 at Karapparamb (Kozhikode district), Shamsudheen Palath invoked the concept of Al-Wala-Wal_Bara to argue that abstaining from all sorts of genuine emotional and affectionate relationships with non-Muslims (Kafirs) and strong displays of intolerance against them remain fundamental to *dawah* and the propagation of *towhid*.

[71] Reports suggest that the Muslim youth who fled to 'join the Caliphate' were heavily influenced by Salafi ideology and some were even closely linked to the Peace International School, an educational institution run by Salafi activist M. M. Akbar. In many of the propaganda messages sent by these ISIS recruits through digital platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp, one finds constant references to the impossibility of living in a multi-cultural society such as Kerala as a 'true' Muslim. Marked by a condemnation of traditional religious practices including modes of religious education, they emphasize the prospects of understanding 'true' Islam through the Internet and an open acknowledgement of Salafi theological indoctrination for helping to understand *hijra* and the commitment to violent jihad. See M. Varier, 'Voice Note by ISIS Terrorist Declares Peace School in Kerala Has Their Supporters', *The News Minute*, published online on 10 April 2018, available at https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/voice-

the Muslim youth on the one hand and state-security agencies investigating ISIS influence in Kerala on the other, have openly come out against the extremist and radical tendencies visible among a section of its followers. While the ninth Mujahid State Congress held at Kooriyad (Malappuram district) in December 2017 carried 'Religion: Tolerance, Co-existence, Peace' as its central theme, the Markazudawa group has even decided to disown the term 'Salafi' from its nomenclature.[72]

These controversies surrounding radical Islamic puritanism have severely dented the public perception of mujahids, who were once seen as harbingers of Islamic modernity and progressive ideals in Kerala, despite such attempts to distance themselves from the splinter groups. Currently, the mujahid movement and Salafism find themselves mired in a series of controversies that undermine the modern progressive credentials attached to reformism whereas the traditionalist Muslim-identity articulations garner increased legitimacy in the sociopolitical milieu of Kerala. In these articulations, the Sunnis emphasize the embodied character of Islam: a thriving religious tradition deeply embedded in the historical as well as the sociocultural context of its location. The campaigns reiterate 'traditional' Islam as the exemplar of peaceful coexistence with other religious communities and often remind fellow Salafis of the vibrant symbiotic relationship that existed between Hindus and Muslims in Kerala. These organic links are projected in the traditionalist narratives as testimonies to the cultural embeddedness and distinct epistemological as well as pedagogical foundations of 'traditional' Islam in Kerala, which have enabled them to develop a flexible and broader understanding of Islamic faith.

The traditionalist identity articulations of Sunni Muslims have significant implications for the discourses surrounding the question of the national belonging of Kerala Muslims, as reflected in their assertions of nationalist credentials. Sunni Muslims in Kerala, especially the AP faction that advocates non-allegiance to any political parties, spare no opportunity to assert their nationalist credentials and allegiance to the Indian state and its rulers, irrespective of their

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note-isis-terrorist-declares-peace-school-kerala-has-their-supporters-79345   [accessed   9 December 2020].

[72] M. P. Prashanth, 'KNM Faction to Drop "Salafi" Tag, Adopt "Islahi"', *The Times of India*, published online on 8 February 2019, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/knm-faction-to-drop-salafi-tag-adopt-islahi/articleshow/67891463.cms [accessed 9 December 2020].

ideological dispositions. It is notable that the World Sufi Forum, organized by the All India Ulama and Mashaikh Board (AIUMB) in March 2016 and inaugurated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had the leader of the AP faction, Kanthapuram, as the only representative from Kerala. Many reformist groups see such initiatives as enabling the Hindutva discourse, which uses the Barelwi Muslims in North India and its counterparts in Kerala to create a nationalist Muslim identity that syncs well with the political agenda of Hindutva.[73] The Sunnis, however, frequently assert their pride in the Indian heritage and nationality, and juxtapose it with the puritanical Salafi tendencies that decry the boundaries of the nation state as an obstacle in the path towards realizing Muslim Ummah. As Menon rightly observes:

Malayalee Muslim thinking about polemics cannot be detached from the Muslims' status as a religious minority in the Indian nation-state. It is their situation of incomplete, imperfect citizenship and belonging to India, which requires Muslims to repeatedly and perennially perform their loyalty to the nation, that is pertinent to understand their views about polemics.[74]

He elaborates on how the sensibilities, dispositions, and affects that characterize religious polemics are closely aligned to the state's attempt to regulate religion and are hence necessarily intertwined with questions of religion, citizenship, and secularism. Undergirding the discourse on polemics thus becomes the question of whether they conform to and reproduce the prescribed role and place for religion or challenge and subvert it. Hence, these contestations take shape under the conditions of secularism or the sovereign power of the modern nation state that 'seeks to configure what religion is or ought to be, prescribe its proper content, and disperse and ratify subjectivities, ethical norms, and everyday practices'. [75] Extending from Menon's observations, we argue that the traditionalist Sunni-Muslim identity thus emerges in the background of the global attempt by states and non-state actors to push for a 'moderate' and/or 'progressive' Islam. In an age of virulent Hindutva mobilization, however, this renewed nationalistic fervour among the traditionalist Sunni organizations needs to be understood as the result of negotiating the dual challenge that Kerala Muslims face in

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[73] M. P. Prashanth, 'The Sufi Question', *The Times of India*, published online on 13 May 2017, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/tracking-indian-communities/the-sufi-question/ [accessed 9 December 2020].

[74] Menon, 'What Do Polemics Do?', p. 129.

[75] Ibid., p. 128.

contemporary India: resisting majoritarian Hindu communalism while simultaneously countering assertions of radical Islamic puritanism derived from global Salafism.

Making sense of Kerala's Sunni Islamic traditionalism in a globalizing world

The contemporary assertions of Islamic traditionalism among Kerala Muslims, as we have seen, are produced in the discursive context of the wider socio-economic change within the community, facilitated by the structural and cultural conditions of globalized modernity. The rise of radical Islamic puritanism among the reformists has given a new impetus to the articulations of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim identity in Kerala's sociocultural milieu, leading to a reconfiguration of authorizing discourses, cultural practices, and modes of political engagement within Kerala Muslims. The Muslim world in a globalizing age, as Robert Hefner notes, is witnessing a counter-resurgence of pluralized expressions of faith amidst the homogenizing pressures, resulting in a clash between rival carriers of tradition within same nations and civilization.[76]

Such expressions, as in the case of traditionalist Sunni-Muslim identity in Kerala, are not solely dependent on the scriptures, but involve references to complex discursive formulations relating to the self, embodiment, affect, and personification of authority manifested in Islamic theologies and practices across diverse geographical locales. In this process, the new traditionalist discourse relies on the pre-reformist historical glory of Islam in Kerala and combines it with ideas derived from postmodern intellectuals and transnational/translocal Islamic theologies and practices. That is, the traditionalist religious practices and identities are asserted and legitimated with reference to what can be termed as a discourse on 'true Islamicate global imaginations', which connects the localized cultural practices to wider transnational/translocal Islamic theologies and practices in different geographical locations across the globe. Borrowing from Marshall G. S. Hodgson's idea of the 'Islamicate' and further expanding it, we use the term 'true Islamicate global imaginations' as imaginations of particular 'social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims' in

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[76] R. W. Hefner, 'Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 27, 1998, pp. 83–104.

diverse geographies as representing its authentic universal character.[77] While the reformist claims of 'true Islam' carry a global Islamic impulse towards purification that seeks to disembed religious practices from cultural specificities, 'true Islamicate global imaginations' envisage Islamic religious practices as embedded within the cultural context of its existence across diverse geographies. 'True Islamicate global imaginations' thus become imaginations of localities that defy the boundaries of the modern nation state and are inherently translocal in nature. It results in the production of localities that simultaneously become, as Arjun Appadurai notes, 'a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community' expressed through various assertions of agency, sociality, and reproducibility, which yields particular material effects.[78] Localities, as he argues, refer to a 'complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts'.[79] In producing such localities, the new traditionalist discourse questions fundamentally the reformist approach to Islamic faith—an offshoot of Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationality, and progress. Drawing from various postcolonial critiques, the discourse of 'true Islamicate global imaginations' challenges the conventional understanding of Islamic reformism and provides meaningful templates within which traditionalist Islam is authenticated and practised. Exploring the geographical imaginaries in the new traditionalist discourse on Islamic renaissance, Nandagopal Menon observes that it opens up a new way to think about 'religion as a global space of piety and ethical living that necessarily transcends the frontiers of nation-state' and results in the creation of a 'transnational space of intellection'.[80] In doing this, they not only reimagine and re-appropriate for themselves the geographies claimed by the mujahids to be the fountainhead of 'original', 'pure' Islam, but also thereby attempt to detach the identification of those areas with Salafi or reformist thought.

As Peter Mandaville observes, the reflexive and communicative dimensions of globalization entail a pluralization of authority in the Muslim world through disrupting and destabilizing Islamic knowledge

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[77] M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 59.

[78] A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 189.

[79] Ibid., p. 178.

[80] Ibid., p.278.

production in terms of both ontological status and spatial location of authority.[81] While globalization in itself does not initiate such pluralization, the reflexive and communicative dynamics associated with it are seen as representing a major shift in the extent and intensity of debates surrounding the authoritative in Islam. According to him, this shift involves various changes in the textual bases, discursive forms, and personifications of authority that result in innovative forms of authoritative discourse, making the construction of global authority in Islam an uneven and polyvalent process.[82] A process similar to what Appadurai terms as the translocalization of authority: 'local idioms of Islam in such contexts find themselves juxtaposed with, and at times challenged by, material from the wider ummah (Muslim world community).'[83] In the context of Kerala, for instance, the traditionalist Sunni-Muslim identity is produced through intense negotiations between local identifications and 'true Islamicate global imaginations'. In the process of legitimizing and asserting 'traditional' Islam as an antidote to the Salafi-inspired, extremist, puritanical version of Islam through a discourse on 'true Islamicate global imaginations', a wide array of collective articulations of religiosity and Islamic social life specific to Kerala's local context have been either abandoned or altered for the sake of more visibly 'global Islamic' sensibilities. Thus, the notion of a culturally embedded traditionalist Islam in Kerala, despite its claim to represent the inherently local and plural character of Islam, presents an uneasy relationship between local identifications and 'true Islamicate global imaginations'. The simultaneous pressure to represent the local roots while aspiring to be identified with 'true Islamicate global imaginations' necessarily produces several contradictions, and results in the formation of rigid boundaries, theological purification, and conscious reformulations of local identifications.

It is important to note that the articulations of 'true Islamicate global imaginations' are themselves part of discursive legitimations among Kerala Muslims and are influenced by the larger socio-historical context of Islam in the region. The efflorescence of 'true Islamicate global imaginations' representing diverse geographies since the 1980s, facilitated by the technological–infrastructural changes of globalization,

[81] P. Mandaville, 'Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2007, pp. 101–115.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p. 108.

has significantly influenced the Sunni-Muslim-identity assertions in Kerala. Contrary to their assertions, Saudi Arabia continues to exert significant influence in shaping the traditionalist imaginations of the 'true Islamicate global' owing to historical reasons such as large-scale migration to the country and the emergence of Saudi Arabia as the epicentre of the Islamic world in contemporary times.[84] We see widespread use of the *niqab* along with *purdah* among Muslim women affiliated with the Sunni organizations, replacing the older forms of long-sleeved blouse and headscarf. Similarly, the traditionalist *ulama*, especially the AP faction, flaunt a long robe with a turban wrapped around the head in a unique way an exclusive marker of their organizational identity. While these changing dressing styles have nothing much in common with the local Muslim attire in Kerala, these transformations are strongly defended as the most desirable Islamic dress by the Sunni traditionalists.

Similarly, the AP Sunnis who make aggressive forays into the neoliberal economy and display high-level professionalization in religious institutions are resolute in not addressing the modern discourse of gender equality and instead maintain strict gender separation in their organizations. The AP faction leader Kanthapuram, in some of his controversial statements, has asserted that gender equality is against Islam; the inferiority of women is presented as the testimony of the resolute traditionalism of Sunnis that does not vacillate under the pressure of modern/'Western' influences. Even though separate educational institutions of higher studies have been opened for Muslim girls, the Sunnis stubbornly oppose the political participation or engagement of women in public affairs. In a recent controversy over the banning of the *niqab* in colleges under the Muslim Educational Society run by reformist sympathizers, all the Sunni leaders made it clear that, as per Islamic rules, Muslim women are mandated to wear the *niqab* when appearing in front of strangers.[85] While visualizing the vibrant presence of 'turbaned professionals' in a neoliberal world, it appears that the Sunni leadership prefers to imagine women in strict domestic spheres,

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[84] C. Jaffrelot and L. Louer (eds.), *Pan-Islamic Connections: Transnational Networks between South Asia and the Gulf*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017; Osella and Osella, 'Islamism and Social Reformism in Kerala', pp. 317–346.

[85] 'Kerala Niqab Row: Withdraw Circular, or Face Action, Warns Samastha', *The Times of India*, published online on 14 May 2019, available at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/kerala-niqab-row-withdraw-circular-or-face-action-warns-samastha/articleshow/69320409.cms [accessed 9 December 2020].

conforming to the conventional gender roles and safeguarded from the modern discourses on gender justice and equality.

It is important to note that the stubborn refusal of Sunni traditionalists to engage with questions of gender equality is happening at a time when an increasing number of Muslim women are engaging in Kerala's public sphere, thanks to the larger process of secularization that the community has witnessed in the modern period along with other communities in the region. For instance, the Muslim League established the women's wing of the party named the Vanitha League in 1992, which is seen as an imperative arising out of the seventy-third constitutional amendment that mandated 33 per cent reservation of seats for women candidates in local bodies of governance. Being a registered political party playing a pivotal role in the coalition politics of the state, the Muslim League had no other option but to field women in these constituencies. In executing this, the party ignored the opposition from the traditionalist Sunni clergy and went ahead with fielding Muslim women candidates, heralding an era of active Muslim women's participation in elections and politics in Kerala. While these changes have not been smooth and many a times reveal the tensions around the appearance of Muslim women in public spaces, a sizable number of Muslim women have been contesting and getting elected to the local bodies across the state. However, feminist scholars have pointed out how the issue of women's education and empowerment in Kerala has been often limited to producing 'modern' and educated women for the marriage market or to address seat reservations for women.[86] Various Muslim women's groups associated with the reformist organizations such as Jamaat-e-Islami and mujahids have also brought the gender question within the community to the fore, alternating between the language of secular liberal rights and Islamic feminism. They have been increasingly vocal with their participation in a series of agitations and campaigns, including the recent spate of anti-CAA agitations that swept across the country. Thus, the larger structural transformations in modern Kerala significantly shape the discourses of gender within the community, as reflected in the growing gender awareness and assertion among Muslim

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[86] See J. Devika, 'Rockets with Fire in Their Tails? Women Leaders in Kerala's Panchayats', in *Interrogating Women's Leadership and Empowerment*, O. Goyal (ed.), New Delhi: Sage, 2015, pp. 42– 53.

women in the state, and results in serious conflicts with Sunni Islamic traditionalism.[87]

Notwithstanding their critique of 'Western' modernity, it is evident that the traditionalist discourse is emerging within the structural and cultural predicaments of late modernity. As Carool Kersten notes with reference to Islamic post-traditionalism in Indonesia, the traditionalist critiques become instances of 'adoption and adaptation of concepts from varying intellectual provenances and their integration into an anti-hegemonic discourse with postcolonial pretenses'. Such absorption, especially of postmodern philosophical thinking on religion, self, and embodiment, help the traditionalists in interrogating what Kersten calls the 'persistence of hegemonic discourses in the contemporary Muslim intellectualism'.[88]

However, the traditionalist attempts at building an anti-hegemonic discourse against Salafism and 'Western' modernity and a conscious refashioning of the Muslim identity also result in the formation of rigid boundaries and theological purification. Even while claiming Sufi lineage of Islam in Kerala, the Sunni organizations adopt a highly ambiguous position towards independent *tareeqats* that are active among Kerala Muslims. AP and EK Sunni factions function as large corporate entities that compete with each other to provide affiliations and official recognition to these independent *tariqats* and try to co-opt them within their organizational fold. Those who refuse to be co-opted are often subjected to intense scrutiny over their credentials; the members of the community are exhorted not to associate with them.[89] Both the Sunni factions compete with each other to take control of Sufi shrines dotting the religious landscape of Kerala Muslims in their attempt to project themselves as the authentic custodians of 'traditional' Islam.[90] The traditionalists also strongly attempt to ground the religious authority in formally acquired religious knowledge and insist that their followers do not emulate the eccentric Sufi personalities known as *majtubs* who figure

[87] R. Santhosh, 'Beyond the Binaries of Islamic and the Secular: Muslim Women's Voices in Contemporary India', in *Postsecular Feminisms: Religion and Gender in Transnational Context*, N. Deo (ed.), New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, pp. 87–107.

[88] Kersten, 'Islamic Post-traditionalism', p. 487.

[89] A. R. Ottathingal, 'When Sufis Challenge the Dictates of Keralite Islamic Organizations', *Café Dissensus*, published online on 27 October 2013, available at https://cafedissensus.com/2013/10/27/when-sufis-challenge-the-dictates-of-keralite-islamic-organizations/ [accessed 9 December 2020].

[90] Sufi shrines such as Mamburam Makham near Malappuram and C.M. Waliullahi (Madavoor) dargah near Kozhikode have become cites of contention between EK and AP Sunni groups of late.

in the local history of Sufism in Kerala. The believers are instructed to strictly follow the path of Sharia and seek only *barakah* (blessings) from such figures. In our ethnography, we also find strong tendencies to associate traditionalist Islam with scholastic Sufi tradition rather than Sufi figures who do not have formal theological training. In our interviews, the Sunni scholars constantly reiterated that the Sufi figures in Kerala such as Mamburam Thangal were *kithabedutha Sufis* (Sufis of the book): men of high religious learning and defenders of the strict Sharia path. Thus, the traditionalist narratives of its Sufi lineage harbour a fear of moving away from the fundamental scriptures and the path of Sharia. The shrine festivals or *nerchas* have also undergone several transformations, as is evident in the cleansing of several rites, rituals, and religious practices previously associated with these festivities. The rituals and practices, allegedly displaying strong 'Hindu' influences such as procession with caparisoned elephants and drum beatings, have been abandoned for more Islamic rituals such as Quran recital. Religious practices such as *kuthu ratheeb*, heavily criticized for the violent performative content, also seem to be vanishing from the traditionalist articulations. Similarly, despite their criticism against reformists for abandoning 'traditional' religious education under *ulama* in favour of modern madrasas and breaking the *adab*, the traditionalist institutional set-ups for Islamic knowledge transmission in modern institutions function through rational bureaucratic structures. The teacher–student relationship, evaluation of the scholastic ability of the student, appointment and service conditions of faculty members, and so on are based on modern systems of academic practices. Similarly, the paradox of one of the most traditionalist Muslim organizations (AP Sunnis) supporting a communist party (CPIM) is often justified by its leaders as a matter of political expediency in a state such as Kerala, where refraining from coalition party politics is counterproductive to the community's interest.

From our ethnography, we are led to believe that, although translocal religions, as Hefner observes, confront similar predicaments under globalization and 'porous pluralism of late modernity', their response varies in terms of the nature of the resources that each brings to the encounter with modernity.[91] While the structural and cultural conditions of globalization prompted a fringe group of mujahid activists in Kerala to commit themselves to violence and exclusive puritanism,

[91] Hefner, 'Multiple Modernities', pp. 83–104.

the same conditions oriented the Sunni traditionalists towards bolstering an embodied, culturally embedded, and pluralized articulation of faith through a discourse on 'true Islamicate global imaginations'. The fundamental issue that distinguishes rival camps within each tradition in a late-modern age becomes, as Hefner brilliantly observes, their attitude towards politics and the public sphere.[92] The dilemma before the religious actors, such as the traditionalist Sunni Muslims in Kerala, is maintaining a coherent religious world view and balanced social engagement while acknowledging the plural and uncertain predicaments of contemporary modernity.[93] In such contexts, traditionalist Islam in Kerala becomes a highly contested terrain that, rather than leading to a consolidation of a singular notion of identity, is forced to confront contradictory and disparate imaginations of religious self and community.

Conclusion

The structural and cultural transformations brought about by globalization since the 1980s have radically reoriented the nature of Sunni Islamic traditionalism, as reflected in its discursive shift from being defensive to more assertive forms. While these factors have given a new impetus to the traditionalist discourse in building a counter narrative against the reformist other and influences of 'Western' modernity, the traditionalist Sunni identity formation also undergoes structural and cultural predicaments similarly to other religious traditions in a late-modern world. It leads to, on the one hand, increased self-reflexivity and pluralized articulations of faith, but also, on the other, to the formation of rigid boundaries and theological purification.

These transformations of Islamic traditionalism in Kerala point to the importance of paying more attention to the intensifying connections between the local and the global, which significantly redefines the identity dynamics of religious communities in the late-modern era. It forces us to evolve methodological as well as theoretical perspectives that are acutely sensitive to these transformations that cut across the local, national, and global scales of identification. Hence, the new academic endeavours that seek to address the contemporary

[92] Ibid., p. 98.
[93] Ibid.

articulations of Muslim identity in Kerala must move beyond the community-studies paradigm and postcolonial frameworks that tend to view these communities as ensconced within the territories of the modern nation state. An emerging strand of scholarship that attempts to situate Kerala Muslims within the larger history of the Indian Ocean world is oriented in this direction.[94] Our ethnography too leads us to believe that such a theoretical departure is warranted to understand the complex process of Muslim-identity dynamics in a globalizing world.

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[94] See M. Kooria and M. N. Pearson (eds.), *Malabar in the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism in a Maritime Historical Region*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018; S. R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.