

**Women, Politics and Religion:**

**Multiple perspectives on women among the Muslim Organisations of Kerala**

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There is a widely held assumption in scholarship which represents a tenuous position for women and their participation as having been historically persecuted by all patriarchal cultures/religions. Religious ideologies appear to cast women as the repositories of tradition and culture, their bodies made the potent symbols of collective identity. In this paper, I argue, that a critical redefinition and a thorough reassessment of religious traditions including contesting several entrenched questionable assumptions about women need to be engaged with. Taking different religious organisations and their views concerning women in Muslim community, as a point of departure, I shall attempt to sketch out the various perspectives of organisations of the Muslim community in Kerala regarding the terrain of women's lives and their bodies and the resultant debates among the Muslims on the same. The major religious organisations in Kerala such as Sunni, Mujahid or Jamaat-e-Islami, have their own stand concerning what may be termed "appropriate behaviour" for women in their everyday lives (*adab*). There are differences and variations from one group to another are in turn dependent upon their understanding and the interpretation of the Quran. To understand the multiple interpretations about women and their roles from each 'sect', we need to go further into their theological interpretations about women and their roles. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine, the differing positions of organisations (religious)/ and

enquire into how they see women's lives and their behaviour. This paper seeks to gather different viewpoints and through this, exposes the fact that the religious authority is not singular, unitary and one dimensional. Finally, the paper explores the situation of women in Muslim community in Kerala because of the varying portrayal of women through multiple understandings of the Text. Do these varied understandings of women's lives, as claimed by reformists, part of 'tradition', or are they a command from the God through the Text?

The dominant section of Muslims, Sunnis here is identified by their conventional beliefs, practices and adherence to the strict laws of Shafi School of practice. While the other two major organisations such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Mujahids are seen as movement within the Sunni community, the traditional Sunnis are opposing them. The time confronted them with the split and philosophical changes according to the context, Sunnis had split in to three; later Mujahids were also split in to three, and the Jamaat-e-Islami changed their objectives with a view of indigenisation as critics said. The debates between the organisations of the Muslims of Kerala had commenced in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century itself. Public debates in Kerala between 'reformist' and 'traditionalist' Muslims produces shifts in practice and works continually to generate and redefine the focus of 'reform' and 'anti-reform'. Different sections promote

various ideologies of understanding Islamic practices. The impulse of Islamism to eradicate the evil practices and work towards purification is also deeply rooted and is produced itself through practice and dialogue with significant others, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The reformism works against the veneration of saintly persons as a result reaches in forefront to promote *Ijtihad*<sup>i</sup> instead of *Taqlid*<sup>ii</sup>. The traditional Ulemas promote *Taqlid* to traditional forefathers. The Mujahid leader Hussein Madavoor says that actually we are not reformist but we are trying to return to “true Islam”. The Sunnis are denying the rights of women especially entry in to mosque and they are doing prayer at saint tombs and dargahs, which is strictly prohibited in Islam. He says that the Muslim should follow the God (Allah) and the words of prophet i.e. ahulu Sunnah, rather than following the fiqh<sup>iii</sup>. The majority of Kerala Muslims are Sunnis of the Shafi<sup>iv</sup> School. But since the rise of reformism these days the term ‘Sunni’ is used to mean ‘orthodox’ or ‘traditionalist’ Muslims. The reformist section doesn’t give any priority to any schools of thought such as the Shafi, Hanafi, Hambali and Maliki<sup>v</sup>. Approximately 90% of Muslims in Kerala are Sunnis. And nearly 8% are Mujahid and only few belong to Jamaat-e-Islami. The reformists section Jamaat-e-Islami consider no need to follow any Schools of practice, but advise the followers that we can either follow or reject them and Mujahid section doesn’t follow any kind of Schools and its various practices. The constant conflicts that had occurred between the Mujahids and Sunni section in Kerala were due to the diverse approach towards each issue. So here I want to sketch out the differential treatment

towards the women community from both these sections. The section such as Sunni, Mujahids and Jamaat-e-Islami makes the interpretations of the text based on their understandings and their ideological basis. The claims for true Islam come from each section with their own interpretations of text. So according to each section, women can prove their adherence as a true Muslim through following the stipulated practice of religion. But the major question is whether the stringent laws, roles and duties catered by the religion to its women followers were actually originated from the text or by the construction of old patriarchal mind. The same question is asked by the new reformist movement in Kerala with simple variations, that the textual interpretations of religious practices and the stringent laws are actually accorded by the God’s command or through the patriarchal tradition that is the through blind adherence to the old interpretations of religion. For example, when I take a major debate among the Muslims of Kerala especially among the Sunni, Mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami followers regarding the women’s entry to the mosque, the Sunni section follows the Madhabs and so the interpretations comes to them from what the tradition says to them to do, the interpretations of Quran and the Prophet’s life through the interpretations of these scholars and their followers. At the same time, the Mujahid section completely denies the role of tradition and the interpretations of imams of Madhabs. The Mujahid sects promote independent reasoning. The third sect is Jamaat-e-Islami group which takes a different stance from other sections. They also promote the independent reasoning along with the adherence to the religious scholars.

The major questions that arise amongst the scholars regarding the teachings of Islam are one or many. Why the differences arise from a single text? If it is single, there is no difference that one can attain salvation through different paths of action, of knowledge, of devotion. So according to Burgel, here in Islam one can define three domains, sharia (the Law), Tariqa (the way of the Sufis and saints), and adab, that are analytically distinguishable and have their respective specialists seen in tension with each other. Yet they all emerge at core, as attempts to codify and embody the practice of the Prophet, so in some way they remain ultimately the same in mainstream Islam (Burgel, 1987:187). So concerning the domains of Islam, we can analyse the story between the Prophet Mohammed and one of His companion. According to Tanzil, Rahman, “the Prophet Mohammed, once passing on the responsibilities of rules and conduct of people of Yemen to his follower Mua’d, Prophet inquired of him as to how he would proceed with the decisions in cases before him. As Islam sets defined rules and regulations to the followers, Mua’d replied to the prophet that he would depend the guidance of Kitab Allah (Quran), then prophet said to Mua’d that, if you do not find anything to guide you in Kitab Allah and you feel like you fail to get the path to solve the problem, what would you do then? He replied that I would depend on the guidance and the way of life that I had learned from our last prophet. The Prophet asked again - In that case what would do you if you do not find anything from both the Kitab Allah and from the Sunnah of your prophet? Then Mua’d replied that I would then come to a decision through my own lights and understandings. It is said

that the Prophet placed his hand on his breast and said, Praise be to Allah who showed the true light to my representative and made him adhere to the principles to which I am agreeable” (Tanzil Rahman, 1966. pp.200). In this context we can see the adab is something different from the Sunnah of prophet. The Adab is something that we have to follow for good things. Adab are not the way of life of the prophet as no Sunnah but it is a tradition that every Muslim has to follow this. The word Adab and its implications is not a religious origin but it has some religious experiences with in it. The word “Adab” literally means civility and decorum. It indicates modes of behaviour and discipline of the mind and manner in the conduct of one’s life by which one is trained in any excellence or profession. It sets forth praiseworthy qualities and dispositions of a man in profusion and demands of him to shun those aspects of conduct that are evil.

Since adab first emerged as a non-religious code of moral and social behaviour, professional knowledge, etc. anyone can follow in their life as a tradition. The term, which is not mentioned in the Qur’an, comes from some other sources was used as a translation for both Greek *paideia* and Persian *farhang* (culture). So the word “adab” and its usage was a non-religious code of norms based on the Persian tradition of court ethics and Greek philosophy. Adab was an authentic alternative to the *sharia* where an accurate distinction is not available one can use and follow the adab and later only adab gradually became Islamicized. Due to varying interpretations of sharia laws, people believe that they were misled and became troubled to get the original sources

and due to the unavailable sources of original texts the Adab became a prominent thing among the Muslim community. So Adab has nothing with religion but it has something with the tradition. However, some elements of this secular adab could and even did live on in Indian Islamic society. So according to Burgel, the scholar Peter Brown is therefore partly mistaken in his starting from a concept of adab, whose peak is in the internalization of the sharia and a large measure of identification with the life of the Prophet(Burgel, 1987:188).

The traditional section of Muslims i.e. Sunni Muslims in Kerala considered home is the best place for women. According to them it is for their security and for goodness only. So those for protecting her life don't show her beauty to the unknown persons. Her beauty can be show only to her husband for her sake and to get grace from the God and should not be allowed to use perfumes while she is going outside and in her husband's absence. So indirectly be inclined to say that home is the best place for women. There may be temptation for mixing up with men and it will lead to many unethical and immoral activities. The two Imams of the Islam such as Imam Hanifa and Imam Malik said, 'their prayers in their houses are better for them'. According to Imam Malik, elderly respectable women can attend the feasts prayer and the prayer for rain. The Sunni sect in Kerala believes that we should follow their opinion because we are following their practices of religion. The scholar Abd-al-Hamid Siddiqui states that "Imam Hanifa even discouraged women from going to the Mosque for the Friday prayer and the two feasts" (Siddiqui, 1961:493). The Sunni

organisations are interpreting the women's entry to mosque on the basis of the comment made by Aisha, the wife of prophet, who says "if the messenger of Allah had been what the women innovated after him, he would have stopped them from attending prayers in the mosque"(Tamil Islam, 2013:1). The Sunni organisations allege that after the period of the messenger the situation got completely changed and the women started to do bad things and on this occasion the religious scholars understood that if women are allowed to attend prayers in the mosque, it will lead to *fitna*. Prophet Muhammed once said, "Surely your prayer in your house is better than your prayer with me" (ibid, pp.1).Once Prophet said "for our women, to offer her prayer in her chamber is of greater merit than to offer it in her courtyard, in her courtyard than in the mosque of her people, in the mosque of her people than in the congregational mosque and in the congregational mosque than going out for prayer in Eid day. The women used to attend prayers in Prophet's mosque. So the Sunni Muslims considered this as a tradition and the command of the Prophet. It has some goodness in doing prayer in the prophet's mosques (ibid, pp.1).

The argument by the Mujahids in Kerala to promote *Ijtihad* (the independent reasoning) is that to use own intelligence to differentiate do's and don'ts of Islam without adhering to the tradition. According to them, due to different types of foreign and indigenus invasion the pure Islamic practices were corrupted and these various interpretations of the text and its practices were against the pure Islamic concept because it was corrupted by the clergy with patriarchal mindset and most

of the interpretation of sacred text were polluted because of the patriarchal kind of inventions from the text. For them they are mostly dependent upon the religious text and the way of life of Prophet through the independent reasoning. So they are against the adherence to *taqlid* of the previous Islamic scholars. The Mujahids put forward their argument through the sacred text. They are mostly against the *madhab* because these madhabs were responsible for the false interpretation of the religion. Hence many evidences came forward in favour of women's participation in the public sphere. For that they depended upon the sacred text of the religion. The main argument put forward by the Mujahids, according to Khader Karuvampoyil, about the women's entry into the mosque is that chapter two of the *Quran* explains to the believers that 'Preventing anybody from entering the mosque for prayers amounted to the destruction of the mosque itself'. Another argument is that women had free access to the mosques in Mecca and Medina from the days of the Prophet and so those who objected the entry of women have failed to pinpoint what is un-Islamic in doing so (Khader, 2011:61). The Mujahids believe that women folk can go to the mosque, but they should keep their decorum and modesty inside the mosque. There were so many hadiths clearly approving entry of the women folk into the mosque.

While considering the views of Jamaat-e-Islami group of Kerala they take different stance from both groups. Then how did the idea of discouraging Muslim women from attending the mosque come about? According to them, we can have and follow any of the Madhabs but it will not be the last word; the last word should be

the Quran and way of life of the Prophet. They take the stances as a new reformist movement with concern for Muslim women; hearing from the dialogues of a Jamaat leader O Abdurahiman. According to him those who are opposing the entry of women in mosques are doing so out of ignorance. People are deliberately turning a blind eye to the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Mohammad, both of which unambiguously support the freedom of women to offer their prayers in the mosque. There is nothing un-Islamic in it. If it is un-Islamic how women are allowed in historic mosques like Mecca and Medina? The women of Mecca and Medina have the right to enter the mosque premises. Then why these organisations are taking a blind approach towards women's rights. Women have been entering these mosques from the days of the Prophet and he himself had given the sanction to them to do their prayers in a separate area inside the mosque. Even in the Gulf, where the rules are followed more stringently, there is no bar on women entering mosques. It is still unknown whether anybody has so far been able to convince us what is un-Islamic in the entry of women into mosques. I think conservative sections especially the religious scholars in the community are against women getting more enlightened. They feel once the people become more aware of their rights their hegemony will end. There were many who had objected to the rendering of the discourses in Malayalam. The Jamaat leader said that those who objected to the practice were those persons who wanted to bind the common Muslims in the clutches of superstition by creating a smokescreen. The concept of Madhab and *taqleed* was on the wrong path once the followers

started imitating the imams blindly and giving the holy Quran and Sunnah of prophet a second place. This is the weakness that is apparent in the scholars of every Sunni sect in Kerala. In all the issue they take the opinions of Imams for granted and tries to convince the point that they stand for (Abdurahiman, 1997:237).

The Indian Union Muslim league (IUML) (the league) is a powerful political party supported entirely by Muslims with Sunni groups in particular, it has repeatedly won in the assembly elections in Malabar region. The Muslim League in Kerala claims the full support of the community with a secular face. The leaders of Muslim League specially cater the needs of Sunni Muslims, because Muslim community in Kerala is dominated by the Sunni section. The religious body of Sunnis have a high hold in the party, this we can touch through the words of one of their state women's wing leader. Jose reported that the chairperson of the women's wing of the IUML, Khamarunnisa Anwar, said she personally believed there should be no gender discrimination; she avoided taking a public stand by discussing the issue at the state committee meeting. She said *fatwas* (religious edict) against the entry of women in mosques were wrong and un-Islamic was her personal opinion and not that of the party (D. Jose, 1996:1). The position as women is diverting from the patriarchal political frame of mind of the party. Later the Ulemas were also criticized her comments as un-Islamic.

Ibn Hazan stated in the beginning when he started speaking, it is not allowed for them to go out using perfumes or dresses in fancy kinds or bright colours. If they are going outside, whether it may be towards mosque or to somewhere they should not

use perfumes and don't wear fancy dress because there may be a chance for arising *fitna* (temptation, secession, upheaval, chaos, atrocities, bad discussions, all types of negative happenings) around them. The interesting thing is that these arguments come from all sections, irrespective of their stance as reformist or traditionalist. For that all the sections allege the words of Zaynab, wife of Abdullah Ibn Masud, said if any one likes to come for the prayer with us, don't touch perfume. Here in the first session we analysed what was the argument put forward by those mainstream organisations in Kerala to make their stance clear and through this ideological interpretations they claim that they are the true Islam calling others as false. So such a society that stipulates women to do certain kind of codes is not at all new phenomena. We can check their understanding of women and their rights inclined in the religion through their approaches towards them. Sometimes the organisations try to look themselves for their clarifications in their own approaches. For example Abdurahiman noted that one of the largest Muslim youth organisations of Kerala under E K Sunni's, Samastha Kerala Sunni Student Federation made an advice to their parental clergy organisation. In the current scenario we can't forbid women to go outside, for different purposes they have to go to the public places. Those things are clear to all even our previous scholars of religion. We can construct women-only mosques and can prevent the *fitna* while enter in to the common (men's) mosques (Abdurahiman, 1997:44.). This issue clearly means that they understand the need of women but we can't do anything against our forefathers and their practices. But at the same time the report remained that we can't allow them for the mixed

prayer because the Imams of Madhab discouraged the practices. Abdurahiman states that another argument put forwarded by the Sunni orthodox section (A.P section in particular) is that the stitching and tailoring works for women can be done only at her home. So they are bringing a false “hadith” to promote women to do the tailoring works instead of getting education. According to them, the education according to them is immoral code of conduct because women will lose her chastity and her privacy through getting education. But the Jamaat-e-Islami rejects this hadith as false. And they bring the prophet’s command to get education and save women from ignorance (ibid, 1997:44). According to the Sunni sections, Islam had rendered some excuses to women folk as a sign of justice due to her vulnerability. And it never intended to promote superiority of men and denial of the right of women. Prophet didn’t force women folk to attend the mass prayer on the ground of her special nature due to the trauma that she undergoes through her menses, pregnancy and delivery along with the obligations in home. On this ground Sunni section believes that home is the best place for women to do her prayer. How the Sunni community looks at the public intervention and use of women is the biggest question. For example in 2007, in a television programme discussion about women’s entry in the mosque and related rights among the Muslims of Kerala, one of the prominent Muslim leaders Kanthapuram A P Aboobacker Musliyar was an invitee. But he refused to participate in the programme because of participation of women in the debate. Both Mujahid and Jamaat leaders were present in the debate along with non-Muslim brothers and sisters. While in the

programme due to the absence of Kanthapuram A P Aboobakar Musliyar the programme anchor called him by phone. While talking to him, he severely criticised the Mujahid participants because they are sitting with women which Islam has strictly prohibited. He added that the Mujahids and Jamaat leaders will do all this because they are doing wrong in Islam, God has strictly prohibited this but these leaders are moving from Islam to non-Islam, as a true believer I can’t come for such a discussion (this video is available through the following link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_XaT9n0G6s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_XaT9n0G6s)).

By conclusion the paper seeks a different view points from Sunni, Mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami organisations of Kerala and by finding their positions, I reach at a conclusion that the religious authority is not a singular and unitary. The question of religious authority whether it is singular or plural is very relevant. The point of traditionalist Muslims is that the concern about the women comes from the God’s command and the women folk should follow the rules and commands of the almighty, then only the god will give them Jannah (heaven). The reformist sections criticized the interpretation of religious text by the clergy community; because they allege that the interpretation comes from the traditionalist Muslims are biased and men-centric. That is the reason they stipulate women to do the particular behaviour. According to them the various interpretations are the major problem, so we have to use the *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to make it practical instead of *taqlid* (submission to the previous scholars). The paper explores the present situation and varied portrayal of the

Muslim women folk in the community through the multiple understanding of the text. It sketches out the various interpretations of the several organisations of Muslim community regarding the

terrain of women's lives and their bodies and shows the resultant multi-level interpretations and understandings of the religious text and hadiths among the Muslim organisations in Kerala.

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<sup>i</sup> *Ijtihad* is the making and interpretation of Islamic law (sharia) by personal effort, through our own reasoning without follow of any school of law and its practices.

<sup>ii</sup> *Taqid* is the just opposite of the *Ijtihad*, here the common people follow the decisions of religious scholars without necessarily examining the scripture, so that followers can't question the reason of that decision.

<sup>iii</sup> The Quran gives clear instruction on many issues, such as how to perform the ritual purification before the obligatory daily prayers, but on other issues, some Muslims believe the Qur'an alone is not enough to make things clear, In Some topics the Qur'an and *Sunnah* are silent. In those cases the Muslim jurists try to arrive at conclusions by other means. Sunni jurists use analogy and historical consensus of the community. The conclusions arrived at with the aid of these additional tools constitute a wider array of laws than the Sharia consists of, and is called *fiqh*.

<sup>iv</sup> Sunni Muslims prefer one *madhab* out of the four (normally a regional preference) but also believe that *ijtihad* must be exercised by the contemporary scholars capable of doing so.

<sup>v</sup> A good number Sunnis believe the *Shari'a* was codified and blocked (not changeable) by the tenth century." In other words, following the tenth century, "independent reasoning [among Sunni Muslims] was no longer allowed in Islamic jurisprudence and Muslims were to be conventional to the rulings of long-ago authorities." The four *Shari'a* schools are Hanafi, Malik, Shafi, and Hanbali (Hanbali is the legal school adopted by the Saudis).