

Reclaiming Dignity: The Challenge of Uplifting Kerala's Marginalized Muslim Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Kerala, often hailed as a model state for socio-economic development in India, is home to a diverse Muslim population comprising various sub-groups, including marginalized communities such as the Ossan, Pusalans, and Thangals. Despite the state's commendable strides in education, health, and gender equality, certain marginalized Muslim communities continue to grapple with social, economic, and political exclusion. This essay explores the efforts to mobilize and empower these communities, highlighting their challenges while striving for inclusion and equity.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MARGINALIZED MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN KERALA

The historical marginalization of certain Muslim communities in Kerala stems from a complex interplay of caste-like structures, colonial policies, and socio-economic disparities. Although Islam traditionally emphasizes equality, the Muslim population in Kerala reflects significant stratification, influenced by the broader social hierarchies of the region. The caste-like system among Kerala Muslims mirrors the Hindu varna structure, where occupation and lineage play defining roles in determining social status. Ronald E. Miller categorizes Muslims in Kerala into three broad groups like, Thangals (Considered descendants of Prophet Muhammad, they enjoy a superior status due to their lineage and are often revered as spiritual leaders), Malabarīs (A general category for the majority of Muslims, who include traders, agriculturists, and skilled workers), Ossans and Pusalans – Occupational groups such as barbers (Ossans) and washermen (Pusalans) historically occupied the lower rungs of the hierarchy. Their association with “polluting” professions led to social exclusion, even within the Muslim community.¹ The socio-political structures of the region further entrenched this stratification. Unlike the coastal traders and Thangals, marginalized groups had limited access to land, education, and trade opportunities, confining them to manual labor

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and servitude.

During British colonial rule, Muslims in Kerala experienced systemic discrimination, as the administration favored upper-caste Hindus and Christians for education and government jobs. Marginalized Muslim communities, such as the Ossans, faced a double disadvantage: exclusion from mainstream Muslim networks and neglect by colonial administrators. While the Malabar Rebellion is often seen as a resistance movement led by Mappila Muslims against British oppression and landlord exploitation, marginalized groups like Ossans and Pusalans participated in it without gaining significant socio-economic benefits afterward. Their sacrifices were largely overlooked in post-rebellion narratives dominated by wealthier Mappilas.²

Post-independence land reforms in Kerala played a transformative role in reducing feudal inequalities. However, these reforms disproportionately benefited land-owning Mappilas, leaving marginalized groups with limited access to redistributed land. The rise of educational movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spearheaded by leaders like Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi and E.M.S. Namboodiri Pad, aimed to uplift Muslims through modern education. Yet, marginalized groups often lack the resources to take advantage of these opportunities. Although libraries and study centers increased during this period, they were typically situated in urban areas or elite Muslim neighborhoods, excluding rural and lower-class Muslim communities.³ The post-independence era saw significant strides in social justice through affirmative action policies and government welfare schemes. However, marginalized Muslim groups still struggle to achieve parity due to entrenched socio-economic inequalities and the stigma associated with their occupational identities. Marginalized groups rarely found representation in mainstream political organizations like the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), which prioritized the interests of the dominant Malabari Muslims. Even within cultural and religious spaces, marginalized communities were excluded from leadership roles and significant decision-making processes.

GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS AND NGOS IN MOBILIZING MARGINALIZED MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN KERALA

The socio-economic upliftment of marginalized Muslim communities in Kerala has been significantly driven by grassroots movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These efforts

have sought to address historical disadvantages, empower marginalized sections, and promote socio-economic inclusion. This essay examines the pivotal role played by these movements and organizations in mobilizing these communities, with a focus on education, economic empowerment, and social justice. Grassroots movements in Kerala have been instrumental in reaching the most vulnerable sections of society. They operate at the community level, focusing on immediate and localized issues, thereby ensuring greater accessibility and relevance for marginalized groups. Community Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been a cornerstone of grassroots mobilization, among marginalized Muslims, particularly women. These groups offer platforms for financial inclusion, skill development, and leadership training. The Jagratha Samiti initiative in the Malappuram district has successfully mobilized women from the Ossan community, training them in tailoring and small-scale entrepreneurship. These groups have fostered a sense of collective agency by integrating economic activities with community engagement.⁴ Grassroots education campaigns have targeted high dropout rates and lack of access to quality education among marginalized Muslims. For instance, the Punarjani Movement in Kozhikode organizes evening classes for children from economically backward Muslim families, ensuring their reintegration into formal education systems. The “Learn Together” initiative in Kannur collaborated with local Madrassas to incorporate secular subjects into Islamic education, improving literacy and employability among Ossan youth.⁵

ROLE OF NGOS IN EMPOWERING MARGINALIZED MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

NGOs have complemented grassroots movements by bringing in resources, expertise, and advocacy at broader levels. Their interventions have been particularly effective in bridging gaps in areas like education, healthcare, and women’s empowerment. NGOs like the Solidarity Youth Movement have been pivotal in promoting education among marginalized Muslims. They run free coaching centers, distribute scholarships, and provide learning materials to underprivileged children. The Iqra Foundation operates mobile libraries in rural areas of Malappuram and Palakkad, offering access to books and digital learning tools. By focusing on education, these initiatives aim to break the cycle of poverty and marginalization.⁶ Economic upliftment has been a major focus of NGO activities, with initiatives like microfinance schemes and vocational training

programs. The Bazaar Empowerment Project (BEP) by the Malabar Development Society helps women from the Pusalan community establish small businesses by providing interest-free loans and marketing support. The project has created a network of economically independent women entrepreneurs.⁷

Marginalized Muslim communities often face significant health disparities due to a lack of awareness and access to healthcare. NGOs have addressed this by setting up mobile health camps, awareness campaigns, and affordable clinics. The Shifa Health Initiative in Kozhikode provides free medical check-ups and subsidized treatments for low-income Muslim families. It also conducts workshops on hygiene and nutrition, addressing the root causes of poor health outcomes.⁸ NGOs have also played a critical role in raising awareness about the rights of marginalized Muslims, especially women and youth. The Sahodari Collective has worked extensively in sensitizing rural Muslim women about their legal rights under personal and civil laws. By conducting workshops and legal aid clinics, it has empowered women to seek justice in cases of domestic violence, property disputes, and other issues.⁹ Despite their significant contributions, grassroots movements and NGOs face several challenges in their efforts to mobilize and empower marginalized Muslim communities, such as Social Stigma, Resource Constraints, Governmental Policies, etc. Grassroots movements and NGOs have emerged as crucial agents of change in mobilizing marginalized Muslim communities in Kerala. Their work in education, economic empowerment, health, and rights advocacy has transformed countless lives. However, for these efforts to achieve a sustainable impact, greater collaboration with the government and community leaders is essential. Empowering marginalized Muslim groups requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses structural inequalities while fostering self-reliance and resilience.

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS: KERALA'S EFFORTS TO EMPOWER MARGINALIZED MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

The Kerala government, through its Minority Welfare Department, has introduced numerous schemes aimed at uplifting marginalized Muslim communities. These initiatives focus primarily on education, skill development, and economic empowerment, ensuring that historically disadvantaged groups can access opportunities for upward mobility. Prominent among these is the Pre-Matric Scholarship for Minorities, which provides financial

assistance to Muslim students from economically weaker sections, enabling them to pursue primary and secondary education without financial constraints. This scholarship not only reduces dropout rates but also encourages academic excellence by alleviating the burden on families. Another significant intervention is the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme for Minorities, which includes education-centric schemes and vocational training programs tailored to enhance employability among marginalized Muslim youth.¹⁰

A flagship example of Kerala's targeted approach is the 'Learn and Earn' Initiative, launched in 2018 under the Minority Welfare Department. This program specifically addresses the challenges faced by school dropouts in the Kozhikode and Malappuram districts, areas with high Muslim populations. The initiative is designed to offer a dual benefit: enabling participants to complete their formal education while simultaneously acquiring market-relevant vocational skills.¹¹ This approach ensures that dropouts are not only re-integrated into the education system but also equipped with practical competencies for the job market. The program collaborates with local industrial units, providing hands-on training in trades such as tailoring, plumbing, and IT support. Beneficiaries of the program, such as adolescents from the Ossan and Pusalan communities, have reported improved self-confidence and economic independence. The 'Learn and Earn' Initiative also incorporates community support mechanisms, including mentorship programs and counselling services, to address the emotional and social challenges faced by marginalized youth. By fostering a holistic development model, the initiative exemplifies how targeted government interventions can mitigate educational inequities while empowering disadvantaged communities to break the cycle of poverty and marginalization.

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS: MOBILIZING MARGINALIZED MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

Religious and cultural institutions, particularly mosques and madrassas, have long been central to the socio-economic and spiritual fabric of Kerala's Muslim communities. In addition to their traditional religious roles, these institutions have increasingly become platforms for mobilization and empowerment, especially for marginalized groups. Mosques serve as community hubs, hosting programs on literacy, health awareness, and vocational training, while madrassas emphasize education that

integrates religious and secular knowledge. This dual role has allowed these institutions to address both spiritual needs and socio-economic challenges. A notable example of such efforts is the work of the Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, an influential body of Islamic scholars. This organization promotes inclusive Islamic teachings that encourage education, social justice, and communal harmony.¹² Samastha's initiatives include workshops and seminars aimed at destigmatizing traditional occupations associated with marginalized groups like the Ossans and Pusalans, emphasizing their contributions to society. Furthermore, the organization has established scholarship programs and special classes for economically backward students in madrassas, ensuring their inclusion in mainstream education.

Many madrassas, particularly in districts like Malappuram and Kozhikode, have adopted a reformed curriculum incorporating subjects such as mathematics, science, and computer literacy alongside Islamic studies. This approach equips students with marketable skills while preserving their cultural identity. Programs like 'Madrassa to Modernity', initiated under the aegis of Samastha, have successfully created pathways for madrassa-educated youth to pursue higher education and professional careers.¹³ Additionally, mosques often collaborate with NGOs and government bodies to organize community development programs, ranging from healthcare camps to skill development workshops, benefiting marginalized sections disproportionately.¹⁴ These efforts reflect the potential of religious and cultural institutions to act as catalysts for change within marginalized Muslim communities. By combining traditional values with progressive approaches, mosques and madrassas not only strengthen communal bonds but also address systemic issues like poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion.

CHALLENGES IN MOBILIZING MARGINALIZED MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

Mobilizing marginalized Muslim communities, especially in a diverse and socio-economically varied state like Kerala, presents unique challenges. While grassroots efforts, government programs, and religious institutions have made significant strides, systemic barriers continue to hinder the holistic empowerment of these groups. This essay explores the key challenges faced in mobilizing marginalized Muslim communities, focusing on socio-economic disadvantages, educational disparities, cultural stigmas,

and the inadequacies of policy implementation.

One of the most significant challenges in mobilizing marginalized Muslim communities is the pervasive socio-economic inequality that limits access to resources and opportunities. Many families within these communities rely on traditional, low-income occupations, such as barbers (Ossans), washermen (pusalan), and manual laborers, which often lack job security and adequate wages. This economic precarity perpetuates a cycle of poverty, leaving little room for investment in education or skill development. For instance, in districts like Malappuram and Kozhikode, which have a high concentration of marginalized Muslim groups, the average per capita income remains below the state average. This economic divide makes it challenging for mobilization efforts to gain traction, as individuals prioritize immediate financial needs over long-term development.¹⁵ Education remains a critical barrier to empowerment. Despite improvements in literacy rates among Kerala's Muslims, marginalized groups often lag due to high dropout rates, especially among girls. Factors such as economic hardship, early marriage, and lack of access to quality educational institutions disproportionately affect these communities. For example, a study on dropout rates in rural Kozhikode found that girls from economically backward Muslim families often leave school after primary education to assist in household chores or enter early marriages. Initiatives like scholarships and vocational training programs are frequently underutilized due to a lack of awareness or systemic gaps in implementation.¹⁶ Cultural and social stigmas attached to traditional occupations further marginalize specific Muslim communities. For instance, the Ossan (barber) and Pusalan (washerman) communities have historically faced discrimination within the broader Muslim society. These stigmas often prevent upward mobility and discourage younger generations from pursuing alternative professions or higher education. In addition, gender-based stigma poses significant challenges. Many Muslim women, especially in conservative families, face restrictions on pursuing education or employment. This limits their participation in mobilization programs aimed at economic and social empowerment.¹⁷ Internal divisions based on sects, sub-communities, and caste-like hierarchies among Kerala Muslims further complicate mobilization efforts. Marginalized groups such as the Ossans and Pusalans often feel excluded from mainstream Muslim organizations and initiatives, which are predominantly led by upper-class or influential

groups like the Thangals and affluent traders. This fragmentation weakens collective action and prevents the development of unified strategies for addressing shared challenges. Additionally, political affiliations and ideological differences often create further divides, limiting the effectiveness of community-wide initiatives.¹⁸

While government schemes and programs aim to address these challenges, their implementation often falls short. Bureaucratic delays, lack of transparency, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms frequently undermine the intended impact of initiatives like the Pre-Matric Scholarship for Minorities and the PM's 15-Point Programme. For instance, the Learn and Earn Initiative launched in 2018 faced criticism for its limited reach and lack of follow-up mechanisms. Many potential beneficiaries in remote areas of Malappuram and Palakkad were unaware of the program due to inadequate outreach efforts.¹⁹ Conservative elements within the community sometimes resist efforts to modernize education and employment practices. For instance, integrating secular subjects into madrasa curricula or promoting women's employment is often met with opposition from traditionalists who view such changes as threats to cultural and religious values. This resistance can hinder grassroots movements and NGO initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and modern education. Balancing cultural preservation with progressive change remains a delicate challenge for mobilization efforts.²⁰ Women's participation in mobilization efforts is often constrained by patriarchal norms and socio-cultural barriers. Many marginalized Muslim women lack access to platforms where they can voice their concerns or participate in decision-making processes. Programs aimed at women's empowerment often fail to address these structural barriers effectively. A study in Kasaragod district revealed that only 20% of women from marginalized Muslim communities were aware of government welfare schemes, and even fewer had the autonomy to access them.²¹

Mobilizing marginalized Muslim communities in Kerala requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses the deeply entrenched challenges of socioeconomic inequality, educational disparities, and cultural stigma. While grassroots movements, NGOs, and government interventions have made notable progress, overcoming these barriers demands sustained efforts, greater community involvement, and more inclusive policies. Recognizing and addressing the unique needs of these communities is

essential for fostering true empowerment and ensuring that no section of society is left behind.

PATHWAYS TO EMPOWERMENT

Empowering marginalized Muslim communities requires policies that address their unique challenges. Tailored affirmative actions in education, employment, and political representation can help bridge existing gaps. Strengthening grassroots movements by fostering collaboration between NGOs, religious institutions, and the government is essential for greater outreach and impact. Community-based education programs, like local coaching centers for competitive exams, can provide young members of these communities with better opportunities. Additionally, leadership training programs can encourage individuals from marginalized groups to actively participate in local governance and decision-making actively, ensuring their voices are heard and represented effectively.

CONCLUSION

Empowering marginalized Muslim communities in Kerala is a moral imperative and a pathway to fostering inclusive societal development. Their historical and systemic challenges require a multifaceted approach combining inclusive policies, grassroots mobilization, community-based education, and leadership development. By addressing socio-economic inequalities, dismantling cultural stigmas, and ensuring equitable access to opportunities, it is possible to unlock the potential of these communities and enable them to contribute meaningfully to Kerala's progress. Collaboration between the government, NGOs, religious institutions, and community members is crucial for creating sustainable change. There is a need to organise social awareness classes to propagate the Muslim concept of brotherhood that treats everyone equal. As Kerala strives to uphold its legacy of social reform and equity, the empowerment of its marginalized Muslim population must remain a central focus, ensuring that no group is left behind in the journey toward a more just and prosperous society.

END NOTES:

- 1 Miller, Ronald E., Mappila Muslims of Kerala, p. 45.
- 2 (Dale, Stephen Frederic, The Mappilas of Malabar: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier, p. 127).
- 3 (Kunhammed, P., Education and Social Mobility among Kerala Muslims, p. 89).

- 4 Ahmad, Z., Grassroots Empowerment among Kerala Muslims, p. 78).
- 5 Hameed, M.K., Community Movements and Education Reform, p. 52.
- 6 Iqbal, A., NGOs and Muslim Education in Kerala, p. 104.
- 7 Hussain, T., Livelihood Empowerment through NGOs, p. 67.
- 8 Nazim, F., Health Advocacy and Muslim Welfare, p. 34).
- 9 Rasheed, S., Legal Rights and Marginalized Women in Kerala, p. 119.
- 10 Kerala Minority Welfare Department, Annual Report on Minority Welfare Programs (2019), p. 78.
- 11 Government of India, Evaluation of PM's 15-Point Programme for Minorities (2020), p. 102.
- 12 Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, Annual Report on Community Development Initiatives (2020), p. 56.
- 13 Hameed, M.K., Educational Reforms in Kerala Madrassas (2019), p. 63.
- 14 Ibrahim, A., Mosques as Centers of Social Empowerment in Kerala (2021), p. 87
- 15 Hussain, T., Economic Marginalization of Muslim Communities in Kerala, p. 43
- 16 Rahman, Z., Education and Empowerment Challenges in Kerala, p. 78.
- 17 Ibrahim, A., Cultural Barriers to Muslim Women's Empowerment, p. 64.
- 18 Hameed, M.K., Social Fragmentation and Its Impact on Kerala Muslims, p. 89
- 19 Ahmad, Z., Policy Implementation and Marginalized Groups in Kerala, p. 102.
- 20 Nazim, F., Challenges of Modernization in Kerala's Muslim Community, p. 54
- 21 Rasheed, S., Women and Social Justice in Kerala Muslim Communities, p. 119.

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- 7 Hussain, T. Economic Marginalization of Muslim Communities in Kerala. p. 43.
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- 10 Ibrahim, A. Mosques as Centers of Social Empowerment in Kerala (2021). p. 87.
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- 12 Kunhammed, P. Education and Social Mobility among Kerala Muslims. p. 89.
- 13 Miller, Ronald E. Mappila. Muslims of Kerala. p. 45.
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- 17 Rasheed, S. Legal Rights and Marginalized Women in Kerala. p. 119.
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