

# Reviving Unity, Reshaping Society: Exploring The Theories Behind Community Reform Movements Among The Mappilas Of Malabar

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## **Astract:**

The Mappilas of Malabar, a distinctive Muslim community in Kerala, India, have long been engaged in a complex interplay of tradition, modernity, and socio-political dynamics. Central to their narrative are the reform movements that have sought to address social justice, educational empowerment, and religious renewal. This exploration delves into the catalysts and theories behind these movements, tracing their historical context, visionary leadership, and theoretical underpinnings. Drawing from diverse ideological currents, including Islamic modernism and nationalist ideologies, the inquiry illuminates how these movements intersect and diverge, shaping strategies for societal transformation. In this paper looking into how far the theory or the concept 'Assabiyya' of Ibn Khaldun is applicable in the Community reform Movements and the solidarity feeling among the Mappilas of Malabar. Through this inquiry, we aim to unravel the theory of Asabiyya is applicable in the socio-reform movements of Malabar.

**Key Words:** Ibn Khaldun, Asabiyya, Mappilas, Reform Movements, Education.

## **Introduction**

In the rich tapestry of Indian society, the Mappilas of Malabar, a vibrant Muslim community in the southern state of Kerala, have long been recognized for their distinctive cultural heritage and socio-political dynamics. Over the centuries, the Mappilas

have navigated a complex interplay of tradition and modernity, religion and politics, shaping their community's identity and aspirations. The community reform movements emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among the Mappilas of Malabar characterized by a fervent quest for social justice, educational empowerment, and religious renewal, have been pivotal in reshaping the Mappila community's trajectory. They represent a continuum of struggles and aspirations, rooted in both local exigencies and broader currents of global socio-political thought. This exploration seeks to unravel the multifaceted catalysts and theoretical underpinnings that have propelled these reform movements forward, illuminating their significance within the larger tapestry of Indian society.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a profound curiosity, What impels a community to introspect, challenge its own conventions, and strive for transformation? To answer this question, we delve into the historical context, examining the socio-economic conditions, colonial encounters, and intellectual ferment that provided fertile ground for reformist ideas to take root among the Mappilas. Moreover, we interrogate the role of visionary leaders, intellectual luminaries, and grassroots activists whose endeavors catalyzed these movements, infusing them with dynamism and resilience.

Furthermore, we scrutinize the diverse theoretical frameworks that have informed and inspired Mappila reformists, ranging from Islamic modernism and nationalist ideologies to socialist critiques of inequality. By tracing the contours of these ideological currents, we elucidate how they intersected and diverged, shaping the strategies, tactics, and discourses of reformist endeavors. The Mappilas maintained a dynamism in all the fields of reform works and always keep a solidarity feeling (Asabiyya) among themembers of the community.

The concept of "Asabiyya",<sup>1</sup> as elucidated in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, refers to the 'spirit of kinship' in the context of family or tribe, where 'asaba' denotes male relations within the male lineage. Initially found in Hadith, where the prophet censures asabiyya as inconsistent with the principles of Islam, the term gained prominence due to its utilization by Ibn Khaldun. He incorporated this concept as the cornerstone of his historical interpretation and state doctrine. For Ibn Khaldun, asabiyya represents the fundamental cohesive force

in human society and serves as the underlying driving force in historical processes. In his perspective, *asabiyya*, or social solidarity, stands at the core of his theories regarding the ascent and decline of civilizations.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, it serves as a foundation for economic progress and political equilibrium. In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun underscores the significance of cultivating a sense of solidarity. The relevance of Ibn Khaldun's concept of social solidarity extends to the contemporary world and holds considerable importance. While the exploration of Ibn Khaldun's *Aṣabiyyah* theory is not a novel endeavour in academic circles, scholars in disciplines such as sociology, political science, and philosophy have consistently engaged in discussions and debates, scrutinizing various facets of this theory.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a noticeable gap in exploring this theory concerning the modern era, particularly within the context of the Muslim world. It seems that only a limited number of scholars have delved into this aspect. In brief, Ibn Khaldun's concept of '*Asabiyya* can be comprehended as a shared notion or sentiment among members of a group, grounded in the belief that they share a common ancestry'.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing and potent sentiment revolves around the idea of sharing familial ties, a sentiment commonly observed among the Bedouin, fostering a sense of superiority among group members over others.

The robust *Asabiyya* among the Bedouin enabled them to conquer urban or settled populations in towns, leading to the establishment of their own dynasties. Over time, as they transitioned to a settled and sedentary lifestyle, their sense of '*Asabiyya* weakened. Eventually, another group with a more robust sense of *Asabiyya* emerged, defeating the Bedouin and replacing their dynasty with a new one. While this pattern is commonly associated with the Bedouin, Simon contends that it is not exclusive to nomadic groups.

Therefore, it is suggested that this concept is applicable to various groups in diverse situations, including contemporary contexts. In an alternative interpretation, *Asabiyya* holds a central position in Ibn Khaldun's concept of *Al-Umrān*,<sup>5</sup> which involves the comprehensive study of societal development, encompassing all stages from its origins as a nomadic state to its evolution into an organized state of sedentary citizens, and eventually, its decline. The concept of *Al-Umrān* is also

referred to as the science of history.<sup>6</sup> Initially, Ibn Khaldun aimed to engage with this science to distinguish truth from falsehood in historical accounts, recognizing a blend of facts and fictions. These interpretations form part of the ongoing scholarly debates surrounding Ibn Khaldun and his theories on *Asabiyya* and *Al-'Umrān*.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, discussions on Ibn Khaldun's theories in the context of the modern era remain limited. This raises the question of whether applying the *Asabiyya* theory is relevant in the present day. Scholars like Alatas and Kayapinar express optimistic perspectives, asserting that there is a promising future for this theory. According to Kayapinar, Ibn Khaldun's concept of *Asabiyya* holds significant potential for the future of political theory and can be expanded and applied to comprehend and explain contemporary politics.<sup>8</sup> Alatas emphasizes the ongoing relevance of Ibn Khaldun's works, suggesting that they should be continuously read, examined, and analysed due to their applicability beyond his own era.<sup>9</sup> In essence, Ibn Khaldun's '*Asabiyya* theory finds a place in the modern period, presenting itself as a potential alternative form of social solidarity for the contemporary world and the foreseeable future, specifically for fostering unity. As a result, this paper delves into the practical applicability of the theory in the modern period, particularly within the Muslim world, given the myriad challenges and issues facing the Muslim community from both internal and external sources in today's context.

The historical significance of Malabar as a pivotal point in the international trade route between Kerala and the Middle East dates to ancient times. The emergence of Islam in Kerala can be largely attributed to the flourishing trade ties with Arabs. The Arab settlements in the region played a crucial role in the gradual and sustained growth of Islam, driven by political, social, and economic factors. The support extended by local rulers, particularly the Zamorins who governed Calicut at the time, played a key role in the origin and spread of Islam in Kerala. These rulers, such as the Zamorins, fostered an environment conducive to the development of Islam, contributing to its establishment and progression in the region.<sup>10</sup>

It is noteworthy that Islam in India likely commenced in Kerala, with the Mappilas being recognized as descendants of the first Indian Muslims. While there were indications of Muslim piratical activities along the northwest coast during the

era of Caliph Umar, the recorded history points to Muhammed Ibn Qasim's conquest of Sind as the initial instance of a permanent Muslim presence in India. Importantly, well before Muslims settled in northern India, Southern India already hosted Muslim colonies, highlighting the early and enduring connection between Islam and the region.<sup>11</sup>

Islam found its way into Kerala through Arab traders as early as the seventh or eighth century AD. The progression of Islam in Kerala was gradual, evolving over centuries to become the second most prominent religion in the state after Hinduism and Christianity. The tolerant stance of native rulers significantly contributed to the growth of Islam in the region. The Zamorin of Calicut, for instance, actively encouraged individuals from lower castes to embrace Islam, particularly to bolster the workforce for managing his naval fleet.<sup>12</sup>

However, the traditional system faced relatively minor disruptions during the Portuguese and Dutch periods. Substantial changes occurred with the invasion of Malabar by Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan. Scholars like Ibrahim Kunju and Roland E. Miller argue that economic improvement played a crucial role in the Islamization of Malabar. Besides the patronage of rulers like the Zamorins, economic prospects attracted lower-caste Hindus to convert to Islam, especially until the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> The social aspect of Islam's spread in Kerala is intertwined with the rigid caste system prevailing in the region. Downtrodden castes, such as the Cherumans, faced persecution by higher-caste Brahmins and Nairs who owned the land.<sup>14</sup> The lower castes engaged in agriculture for low wages. Roland Miller suggests that the presence of affluent Arab merchants in coastal settlements was a major draw for Hindu outcastes. Economic interests and religious tolerance interacted positively, and the number of Arabs in trading ports, including those who married and settled in the region, increased steadily over the centuries.

Inter-caste marriages between Arabs and local Hindu women in coastal regions significantly contributed to the dense Muslim population in Malabar.<sup>15</sup> The spread of Islam was further propelled by the missionary efforts of figures like Malik Ibn Dinar, the Makhdums family of Ponnani, and Sufi saints and religious preachers who gained influence among lower-caste Hindus.<sup>16</sup>

During the era of the Zamorins, the Mappilas of Malabar emerged as the primary Muslim community in Kerala,

flourishing under their rule. However, the arrival of the Portuguese altered the landscape of Kerala's economic activities and posed a threat to the cultural and economic dominance of the Muslim community. The Portuguese intervention disrupted the trade monopoly that Muslims had previously enjoyed.<sup>17</sup>

The resistance put forth by the Muslims against colonial powers, especially the Portuguese, was deeply rooted in religious motivations. The struggle for existence against external forces was fundamentally a religious one, with the Muslim community rallying together based on a sense of social solidarity or *Asabiyya* grounded in their shared faith. Religion played a pivotal role in uniting the Mappila community, fostering a spirit of *asabiyya* that was crucial for maintaining cohesion.

The Muslim elite groups played a vital role in supporting the community by establishing educational institutions for the welfare of its members. The promotion of *asabiyya* was deemed necessary to bind people together, encourage altruism, and cultivate a sense of cooperation, ultimately fostering social harmony. *Asabiyya*, according to Ibn Khaldun, serves as a decisive and unifying force in the rise and development of a civilization, binding groups together through common language, norms, trust, culture, and a shared code of behavior.<sup>18</sup>

In Malabar, the force of *asabiyya* among Mappilas was rooted in the basic ideology of Islam, particularly the concept of *Thouheed*, emphasizing the Unity of God. Additionally, the use of Arabic and Arabi-Malayalam as the language of communication among the common people learning religious teachings, the recitation of the Quran in Arabic, and the adherence to Islamic norms and codes of behavior all served as forces of *asabiyya* that promoted unity among Mappilas of Malabar. This *Asabiyya* force was the also helped the formation of different reform organisations and their activities in Malabar that promoted educational empowerment and socio-political awareness among the community.

The arrival of the Portuguese in Malabar coast triggered a resilient spirit of resistance among the Mappilas in Malabar, with Islam serving as a unifying force against colonialism. The anti-colonial sentiment, deeply influenced in the minds of the Mappilas through prolonged struggles against Western powers in Malabar, was driven by *asabiyya* or group

feelings. This sentiment extended to active participation in the Indian freedom movement, notably exemplified by the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. Despite British officials categorizing the Muslim agitation as religiously oriented, the rebellion's roots lay in European imperialism and the distressing conditions faced by the agricultural class in Malabar.

The socio-religious reform movements and national movements provided a political orientation for Muslims, leading to their active involvement in legislative assemblies. Representations in Sree Mulam Praja Sabha and Travancore Legislative Assembly reflected the development of political consciousness and democratization within the Mappila community. The inclusion of Muslims in Kerala politics accelerated their political influence.

Communal and religious ideologies acted as cohesive forces, aligning with political and national movements to resist colonialism. This pattern, observed in the struggle of the north, permeated the southern resistance. Movements like Non-cooperation and Khilafat, with the support of the Congress, gained momentum in British Malabar immediately after first World War. However, as evidenced in the case of Malabar, nationalist elements often operated beneath religious ideologies, particularly concerning the Mappilas during and after the 1921 revolt.

The socio-political landscape in Kerala provided fertile ground for religious ideologies of reform and revival, especially in the aftermath of the post-rebellion despondency. Various religious reform movements, focusing on the restoration of Islamic purity, flourished in Kerala, with the Islahi movement being a significant one. Inspired by the teachings of early Islamic leaders such as Ibn Taymiya, Abdul Wahhab, Jamaludin Afghani, and others.<sup>19</sup> The other movements like Samastha Kerala Jemmiyathul Ulama, Jamaet e Islami Kerala etc worked with the principles of the theory of Asabiyya. So the Muslims of Kerala actively engaged in religious and social transformation.

The Malabar mappilas emerged as an organised form after the rebellion of 1921, which the formation of Kerala Muslim Aikya Samghamin 1922 at Kodungallur under the leadership of K M Maulavi, Manappat Kunchi Mohammed Haji, E K Moulavi and Thangal. Before this organisation there formed 'Nishpaksha sangham" (neutral Group) to solve the age old family feud among the elite Muslims of Kodungallur. The same

leaders also were the founding members of this organisation. The success of Nishpaksha Sangham in their objectives which encouraged them to start Aikya Sangham. This movement worked with the base of Islamic solidarity (Asabiyya), cooperation, mutual understanding and empowering the community members through imparting religious and secular education and socio-political awareness. So under Aikya Sangham many educational activities started and many institutions were founded. Started awareness programmes against un-Islamic practices and preached the classical Islam.

After Aikya Sangham many organisations and movements started in Malabar like Kerala Jemmiyathul Ulama (KJU), Samastha Kerala Jemmiyathul Ulama (SKJU) Mujahid Movement, Jamaat e Islami, etc with various aims and objectives. All these movements worked among the Mappilas of Malabar unified them in any one of the organisations. Under these organisations the Mappilas of Malabar attained significant achievements in the field of education, political awareness, socio-cultural progress, employment and economic development, and religious awakening. The spirit of cooperation and solidarity among the members of the organisations worked in a competitive mode for the progress of the community which resulted in their revival from age-old clutches of superstitions and historical backwardness in all fields especially education. Now the Mappila students both boys and girls reached all the premier institutions in all India and even abroad. Their achievement in education and employment has been widely recognized and appreciated.

### **Conclusion**

The social solidarity of the Mappilas of Malabar under the banner of Islam and their harmonious life in the Malayali culture was the force behind the development of Muslims in Kerala. They showed their presence in left and right politics along with the sole political party of the community i.e., Muslim League. Even though there existed different political parties religious organisations among them the string that united for development is religious asabiyya or group feeling of Islam. The reform organisations uphold, maintain freedom and honour of the members of the community and to work for the ever increasing strength, prosperity and happiness of the people. To secure and protect the rights and interests of the Muslims and other minorities in the state and to promote mutual understanding, goodwill, amity, cordiality, harmony and unity



between the Muslims and every other community of India. The different community organisations were formed in Malabar with the spirit of Assabiyya, mutual understanding and solidarity which worked together and achieved a lot in the different walks of life of the Mappilas of Malabar.Top of Form

#### Notes and References.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a notion of social commonality with stress on solidarity, group feeling, consciousness of shared purpose and social organisation. It originated in the context of tribes and clans. "When there is a general change of conditions," notes Ibn Khaldun, "it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered, as if it were a new and repeated creation, a world brought into existence anew. Therefore, there is need at this time that someone should systematically set down the situation of the world among all regions and races, as well as the customs and sectarian beliefs that have changed for their adherents." Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Abridged Edition.1, Princeton University Press, 2015, p.65.

<sup>2</sup> Asyraf wajdi Dusuki, Ibn Khaldun's concept of social solidarity and its implication to group based lending scheme, paper presented at Monash University 4th International Islamic Banking and finance conference. Kuala Lumpur, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Asyia in ab Halim, The application of Ibn Khaldun's theory of Asabiyyah to the modern period with special reference to the Malaya Muslim community in Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> Mahmoud Dhaouadi, 'Ibn Khaldūn: The Founding Father of Eastern Sociology', *International Sociology*, 5, (1990) see <http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/5/3/319> (accessed May 19, 2009), p 325.

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Simon, *Ibn Khaldun's Science of Human Culture*, (trans) Fuad Baali, New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p 49

<sup>6</sup> Dhaouadi identified Ibn Khaldūn's concept of Al-'Umran as 'Ibn Khaldūn's New Science', see Mahmoud Dhaouadi, 'Ibn Khaldūn: The Founding Father of Eastern Sociology', *International Sociology*, 5, 1990, p 320

<sup>7</sup> Mohammad Abdullah Enan, *Ibn Khaldūn: His Life and Works*, Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2007, p 88.

<sup>8</sup> M. Akif Kayapinar, 'Ibn Khaldun's concept of Asabiyya: An Alternative Tool for Understanding Long-term Politics?' *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 36, 2008, p 405

<sup>9</sup> Syed Farid Alatas, 'The Historical Sociology of Muslim Societies: Khaldūnian Applications', *International Sociology*, 22, (2007), see <http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/22/3/267> (accessed January 19, 2024), p 270

<sup>10</sup> Roland E Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A study in Islamic Trends*, p.39

<sup>11</sup> M. Gangadharan, *Mappila Padanagal (Malayalam)*, Other Books, Calicut, 2004, p.143.

<sup>12</sup> LRS Lekshmi, *The Malabar Muslims a different perspective*, P. 10

<sup>13</sup> A P Ibrahim Kunju, *Mysore Kerala relations in the Eighteenth Century*, TVM, 1975, p.231.

<sup>14</sup> M.Gangadaran, op, cit, p. 144

<sup>15</sup> William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Madras, 1951, p.151

<sup>16</sup> Hussain Randathani, *Mappila Muslims : A study on Society and Anti-colonial struggles*, other bookscalicut, 2016, p.34.

<sup>17</sup> Sayed Mohideen Shah, *Islam In Kerala*, The Muslim Educational Association, Thrichur, 1974, p.48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Khaldun, N J Dawood (ed), *The Muqaddima: An Introduction to History*, Prinston University Press, 1969, p.113.

<sup>19</sup> L.R.S. Lakshmi, *The Malabar Muslims, A Different Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi (2012) p.111.