



The Historical Evolution of Islamic Education in 20th Century Kerala: Institutional Reform and Contemporary Transformation

Sayid Habeeb Rahman K. P,¹ Maimoonath A. P²

^{1,2}Farook College (Autonomous) University of Calicut, Calicut, India
habeebjifri@farookcollege.ac.in,¹ maimoonath@farookcollege.ac.in²

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Abstract:

Kerala has developed a distinctive model of Islamic education in India by successfully integrating classical Islamic scholarly traditions with modern educational practices. This study aims to analyze the historical development of Islamic education in Kerala, particularly the transformation from mosque-based *dars* systems into modern, integrated Islamic educational institutions, as well as to identify the factors that have supported their continuity and development. This study employs a qualitative-historical approach, utilizing data from institutional histories, scholarly literature, organizational archives, institutional reports, and relevant documents. The data were analyzed using historical and thematic analysis by tracing changes in institutional structures, curricula, organizational arrangements, and pedagogical practices across different periods in the development of Islamic education in Kerala. The findings indicate that the transformation of Islamic education in Kerala has been influenced by the roles of visionary *ulama* and scholars, community involvement, curriculum modernization, the strengthening of institutional autonomy, the expansion of Islamic education to higher levels, and increased access to education for women. These developments have been further strengthened by philanthropic support, the migration of Kerala communities to the Gulf countries, the utilization of digital technologies, and international academic collaboration. These factors have enabled Islamic educational institutions to respond to social changes and contemporary educational demands without abandoning their Islamic foundations. This study concludes that the Kerala experience demonstrates a model of integration between tradition and modernity through integrated curricula, academic innovation, institutional strengthening, and community support. These findings provide a relevant perspective for advancing the discourse on Islamic educational reform in the context of contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Transformation, Islamic Education, Integration, Curriculum Modernization.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala occupies a distinctive position in the Islamic intellectual tradition of South Asia. Located on the southwest coast of India, the region developed a unique educational culture through centuries of peaceful interaction with Arab merchants, scholars, and missionaries.¹ Unlike many parts of the Indian subcontinent, where Islamic education was often associated with political patronage, its development in Kerala was largely community driven. Mosques initially served as centres of Islamic learning and nurtured generations of scholars while remaining closely connected to local society. This community based tradition enabled Islamic education to develop continuously while preserving its classical intellectual foundations.²

The history of Islamic education in Kerala reflects a continuous process of institutional development and educational reform. It began with the *Othupalli* and *Dars* systems centred on mosques and gradually expanded into *madrasas*, Arabic colleges, *Sharia* colleges, integrated *Da'wah* institutions, and research oriented centres of higher learning. This

¹ Roland E. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Orient Longman, 1976), 39.

² U. Muhammad, *Educational Empowerment of Kerala Muslims: A Socio-Historical Perspective* (Other Books, 2007), 47.

transformation introduced new pedagogical methods, curriculum reforms, and administrative structures while retaining the core principles of classical Islamic scholarship. Reformers such as Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdom and Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji played important roles in reorganizing curricula, modernizing teaching methods, and strengthening educational institutions.³

A major stage in this transformation occurred after Indian independence. Community participation, charitable endowments, and, later, Gulf migration provided substantial support for the expansion of Arabic colleges, Islamic colleges, universities, research centres, and educational organizations. At the same time, curricula increasingly incorporated modern disciplines, research methodology, information technology, and professional education alongside the classical Islamic sciences. The expansion of integrated institutions, women access to Islamic education, digital learning, and international academic collaboration further strengthened Kerala position as an important centre of Islamic higher education in South Asia.⁴

Previous studies have examined various aspects of Muslim education in Kerala, including educational empowerment, the development of Muslim educational systems, traditional knowledge practices, and the early transmission of Islamic knowledge. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to the long term institutional transformation of Islamic education, particularly the transition from traditional mosque and *Dars* based systems to modern and integrated institutions. The institutional reforms of the post-independence period, changes in teaching and learning methods, the influence of Gulf migration, the integration of religious and secular education, curriculum reform, institutional governance, educational leadership, digital learning, and international academic collaboration have also not been comprehensively examined within a single historical framework.

Against this background, this article examines the historical evolution and institutional transformation of Islamic education in Kerala. It traces the development from the traditional *Dars* system to modern integrated colleges and universities, with particular attention to institutional reform, curriculum and pedagogical change, educational leadership, and the social, economic, and intellectual forces that shaped these developments. It also examines the roles of community participation, globalization, and international cooperation in the modernization of Islamic education.

The novelty of this study lies in bringing institutional history, curriculum reform, educational leadership, community participation, and contemporary pedagogical transformation into a single analytical framework. Rather than merely describing institutional development, the study examines how institutional reforms, pedagogical innovations, socio economic changes, and community initiatives collectively transformed Islamic education in the post-independence period. This approach provides a more comprehensive interpretation of Kerala Islamic educational experience and contributes to the broader scholarship on Islamic educational reform in South Asia.

The significance of this study extends beyond Kerala. Its experience demonstrates how

³ Sayid Habeeb Rahman K. P., "Development of Islamic Religious Sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after Independence," (New Delhi), 2025, 135, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/433024>.

⁴ Rahman K. P., "Development of Islamic Religious Sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after Independence," 178.

Islamic educational institutions can preserve classical Islamic scholarship while responding to the demands of contemporary higher education. The Kerala model therefore offers a relevant perspective for current discussions on curriculum reform, institutional governance, educational leadership, quality assurance, and higher education policy in Muslim societies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-historical research design to trace the development and transformation of Islamic pedagogy in Kerala, from the traditional *Dars* system to the establishment of modern, integrated Islamic educational institutions. The historical approach is used to examine institutional development, curriculum reform, pedagogical practices, and educational leadership within the social, cultural, intellectual, political, and historical contexts of Kerala Muslim society. The study also investigates the relationship between traditional and modern Islamic education, as well as the responses of Muslim scholars and educational institutions to changing societal needs.

The research data are derived from documentary and archival sources, interviews, and a review of the relevant literature. Primary sources include scholarly works by Muslim scholars, institutional records, curriculum documents, administrative reports, government publications, manuscripts, and archival materials related to Islamic education. Particular attention is given to the Calicut Muslim Association School (CMAS),⁵ established by Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji (1857-1919) in 1880 as one of the early initiatives to integrate traditional Islamic education with modern education. Its curriculum combined Islamic studies (*diniyat*) with English, mathematics, geography, and basic science. The principal sources concerning Calicut Muslim Association School (CMAS) include the CMAS *Logbook* (1880-1910), the *Al-Islam* archives (1891-1898), and William Logan's diaries (1885-1887). These sources are used to reconstruct the institutional development of Calicut Muslim Association School CMAS, the ideas underlying curriculum reform, and Kunjahammed Haji relationship with the colonial administration.

Another important primary source is *Majmū'at al-Khutab* (1912), a work by Kunjahammed Haji that is examined to understand his conception of education as *fard al-'ayn* and the intellectual and religious context underlying his educational reform ideas in the Muslim community of Kerala. The study also draws on institutional records, curriculum documents, administrative reports, and government publications to reconstruct changes in educational organization, curriculum, teaching methods, and administration. Field research and library consultations were conducted at the *Darul Quthub Al-Azhariyya* Library in Chaliyam and the *Markaz* Library at *Jamia Markaz*, Kozhikode. To strengthen the documentary evidence, interviews were conducted with Muslim scholars, educators, librarians, and archival managers, namely Asaf Noorani, Abdul Hakeem Azhari, and Ibrahim Saqafi Punnath. The interviews primarily served to provide contextual information and strengthen the interpretation of documentary evidence, particularly concerning institutional history, educational administration, archival preservation, and the transmission of Islamic knowledge.

⁵ Jaseena C, *The Unsung Hero of the Educational Renaissance: Pioneering Role of Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji in Modernizing Kerala Muslims*, 28, no. 2 (2022): 315, <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v28i02.10724>.

Secondary sources include books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, encyclopedias, directories, institutional publications, and previous studies on Islamic education and the history of Kerala Muslim community. Among the principal references are the study by Shafeeq Hussain Vazhathodi (2011) on the foundations and curriculum of Islamic education and the study by Habeeb Rahman (2025) on the development of Islamic sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after independence.

Data analysis was conducted through the stages of heuristic inquiry, external criticism, internal criticism, interpretation, and historical synthesis. The data were organized chronologically and thematically to identify patterns of continuity and change in educational institutions, curricula, pedagogical practices, educational leadership, and community participation. Source triangulation was employed by comparing archival materials, institutional documents, primary scholarly works, government sources, secondary literature, and interview data. External criticism was used to assess the authenticity, provenance, date, and contextual background of the sources, whereas internal criticism was employed to evaluate their content, perspectives, purposes, and evidentiary value. The findings were subsequently interpreted within the broader social, cultural, intellectual, political, and educational contexts of Kerala in order to explain the transformation of Islamic education from the traditional *Dars* system toward an educational model that integrates Islamic sciences with modern fields of knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Background of Islamic Education in Kerala

Islam was spread to Kerala through peaceful commercial and cultural interactions between Arab merchants and the Malabar Coast centuries before Muslim political authority was established in most other parts of the Indian subcontinent. These first contacts gradually helped the spread of Islam among the local communities and created the need for systematic religious instruction. It is believed that the tradition of organized Islamic education in India began with the building of the first mosque in India at Kodungallur in the time of Malik ibn Dinar. From their inception, mosques were not only places of worship, but also centers for the teaching of the Qur'an, Islamic beliefs and practices.⁶

The rising Muslim population, especially through conversions among marginalized groups, created a greater demand for religious education. Historical sources show that Muslim merchants were instrumental in supporting education by providing funds for scholars and students. Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdum in *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* mentions attempts to raise community resources for the education of new converts to Islam which shows the value placed on religious learning in early Kerala Muslim society.⁷

The *Dars* tradition was the first organized system of advanced Islamic education. The *Dars* system was conducted in mosques and for several centuries was the major institution for higher Islamic learning. Its curriculum included the principal branches of Islamic knowledge, such as Qur'anic studies, hadith, jurisprudence based on the Shafi'i school of law, Arabic

⁶ K. M. Bahauddin, *Kerala Muslim History* (Other Books, 2012), 41.

⁷ Zainuddin Makhdum, *Tuhfat Al-Mujahidin: A Historical Epic of the Sixteenth Century* (Islamic Book Trust, 2006), 38.

grammar and literature, theology, logic, philosophy, astronomy and mathematics.⁸ The inclusion of rational and practical sciences along with the religious disciplines is indicative of the all-inclusive character of the classical Islamic pedagogy in Kerala.

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The *Othupalli* system was the basic religious education system along with the *Dars* tradition. These *Othupalli* schools, generally operated by a single teacher, taught children Qur'anic recitation, basic Arabic reading, Islamic beliefs and basic religious practices. The *Othupalli* was the foundation of religious literacy and prepared students for further education in the *Dars* system or for informed participation in Muslim religious life. Some *Othupallis* began to include elementary secular subjects during the colonial period, the first attempts to adapt Islamic education to changing educational demands.¹⁰

Subsequently, some of the mosques gained prominence as educational institutions, drawing students from various parts of Kerala and neighbouring regions. Among the prominent mosque based centres of learning were the *Dars* at Tanur *Valiya Kulangara* Mosque and the Friday Masjid at Ponnani, while other important *durūs* were conducted at Kodungallur, Quilon, Calicut, Chaliyam, and Tanur. The Ponnani *Dars*, in particular, developed into a renowned centre of Islamic learning and attracted scholars and students from different regions.¹¹ The permanent presence of students in these institutions turned mosques into active intellectual communities that promoted scholarship and public religious activity. Local rulers, particularly the Zamorins of Calicut, fostered the growth of Islamic education by providing land for the construction of mosques and encouraging the activities of Muslim scholars.¹² Therefore, the interplay of religious leadership, local communities and political authorities forged a stable environment for the flourishing of Islamic educational institutions for centuries. Thus, by the dawn of the modern era there was a well rooted

⁸ Unais Koduvayakkal, *Indian Madrasahs: Evolution and Growth with Special Reference to Kerala Model*, 5, no. 2 (2021): 195, <https://doi.org/10.52115/apjir.947587>.

⁹ Salah Zaimeche, *Education in Islam: The Role of the Mosque* (Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization, 2002), 73.

¹⁰ Koduvayakkal, *Indian Madrasahs: Evolution and Growth with Special Reference to Kerala Model*, 211.

¹¹ Shamsulla Khadiri, *Pracheena Malabar* (Other Books, 2010), 62.

¹² A. P. Ibrahim Kunju, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: Their History and Culture* (Sandhya Publications, 1989), 77.

tradition for education in Kerala marked by intense community engagement, continuity in academic activities and sustainability through institutions. Thus, the historical roots of Islamic education in Kerala point to a vibrant educational system grounded firmly in the religious commitment but sensitive to social realities. The *Dars* and *Othupalli* traditions provided the institutional framework that the reformers later developed and modernized. This ensured the continuity of Islamic scholarship and established the foundation for modern educational developments.

Reform of Education and Transformation of Institution

During the 16th century, Ponnani, Malabar witnessed a significant milestone in the development of Islamic education in Kerala, particularly through the scholarly and institutional contributions of Shaykh Zainuddeen Makhdum I and Shaykh Zainuddeen Makhdum II. Their intellectual formation was tied closely to the larger networks of Islamic learning that crisscrossed the Indian Ocean. After his early studies in Kerala, Zainuddeen Makhdum I travelled to Makkah and spent seven years in advanced studies, before proceeding to Cairo, where he spent another five years, especially in the scholarly environment of al-Azhar. His long residence in the major centers of Islamic learning afforded him the opportunity to experience well-established traditions of religious learning and educational organization.¹³

Following in the academic footsteps of his grandfather, Zainuddeen Makhdum II too spent a long period studying abroad. He received his elementary education in Ponnani and then proceeded to Makkah where he spent about ten years studying under eminent scholars of Islamic law, Hadith and other branches of Islamic knowledge. His studies with prominent scholars increased his expertise especially in *fiqh* and *Hadith* and connected him to wider intellectual networks of the Muslim world. Later he returned to Malabar and continued the scholarly and educational tradition started by Makhdum I.¹⁴

The educational activities of the two Makhdums in Ponnani were a testament to their international scholarly exposure. Makhdum tried to reproduce and adapt to the local context of Malabar the intellectual environment which he had experienced in the Hijaz and Cairo. He returned to Kerala and established a mosque with an attached Islamic learning center at Ponnani and strengthened the *dars* system. The educational model worked out at Ponnani was influenced by the wider tradition of Islamic scholarship which he had encountered in his studies abroad.¹⁵ In this sense, Ponnani was a meeting point of global Islamic scholarship and local educational needs of Kerala Muslims.

This tradition is continued by Makhdum II in his long teaching career at Ponnani. His scholarship and writings laid the intellectual foundations of the educational system, and his works such as *Fath al-Mu'in* and *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* became influential texts in the religious and intellectual life of Malabar. The contributions of the two Makhdums were not limited to the transmission of religious knowledge, but also the adaptation of the scholarly

¹³ Abdul Vahid K., *The Thangal Kings of Malabar: A Study of Sayyid Fazal Mouladdavila and Sayyid Husain Shihabuddin As Influential Leaders in Nineteenth Century Malabar*, 4, no. 2 (2025): 128, <https://ejournal.uiidalwa.ac.id/index.php/batuthah/article/view/3123>.

¹⁴ Kunju, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: Their History and Culture*, 67.

¹⁵ Khan P. Hassan Shareef K. P and Shebeeb, *The Traditional Islamic Curriculum of Pallidars in Malabar: A Content Analysis of Min Nawabigi Ulama'i Malaibar*, 5, no. 1 (2025): 29, <https://ejournal.uiidalwa.ac.id/index.php/al-jadwa/article/view/3316>.

traditions encountered in prestigious centers of Islamic learning abroad to the institutional milieu of Ponnani. Through their teaching, organising the *dars* system, and producing religious literature, they helped turn Ponnani into a major center of Islamic learning in Kerala, later known as the Mecca of Malabar.¹⁶

The early 20th century witnessed the beginning of an educational reform that revolutionized the structure and pedagogy of Islamic education in Malabar, all due to the trailblazing initiatives of Kunhahammad Haji. He realized that the traditional *Dars* system had to be structurally changed to cater to the new educational needs. He brought in a number of innovations which modernized the institutional practices keeping the religious essence of Islamic learning.¹⁷

One of his most important contributions was the implementation of graded curricula, replacing the previous self-paced system with a series of annual classes that allowed for systematic advancement. Regular timetables created a better discipline and more efficient instruction while modern classroom facilities, such as desks, benches and blackboards, created a more conducive learning environment. He also demanded the teaching of Arabic and English languages and some scientific subjects. He believed that religious scholars should have more broader intellectual capabilities to deal with the current society. Textbooks were standardized and teaching methods were improved, which provided more consistency in education and changed classroom instruction from rote memorisation to more comprehension and analytical learning.

These reforms were first introduced at *Darul Uloom*, Vazhakkad, which later became a model for modern Islamic educational institutions in Kerala. Kunhahammad Haji also played a role in the development of the curriculum through his writings on astronomy (*Ilm al-Falak*), showing that scientific knowledge could be incorporated into Islamic education without compromising its theological foundation.¹⁸ The success of *Darul Uloom* resulted in the establishment of many Sharia Colleges throughout Kerala, many of which followed its curriculum with minor changes and maintained relations with established centres of Islamic learning such as *Baqiyathu Salihath* in Vellore. Several leading twentieth century scholars who carried the reform movement forward were educated or taught in these institutions.

This move from the traditional *Dars* system to formal schooling was a significant pedagogical change. Classical *Dars* education focused on individual learning, mastery of subjects, and flexible study periods that often lasted for many years, with scholarly competence valued more than formal certification. The reformed institutional model, however, introduced structured academic calendars, standardized examinations, time bound completion and recognized qualifications (*Sanad*). This transformation brought Islamic education in line with modern educational standards, but without losing sight of the central aim of producing scholars who were steeped in the intellectual tradition of Islam. Thus, in Kerala, the classical pedagogical legacy was not discarded while modernizing the

¹⁶ Suresh Kumaradas Semiya P. M and, *Matriarchs of Malabar: A Cultural Study of the Matrilineal Legacy of the Muslim Community in Kuttichira*, 5, no. 1 (2026): 60, <https://ejournal.uiidalwa.ac.id/index.php/batuthah/article/view/3842>.

¹⁷ Shameer Ta, *Modernity and Reformist Rhetoric among the Muslims of Malabar*, 5, no. 2 (2020): 71, <https://iupress.org/journals/jims/>.

¹⁸ Ibrahim Badhusha Parakkallil, *An Intellectual Legacy: Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji's Role in Modernizing Madrasa Education*, 3, no. 1 (2025): 131, <https://doi.org/10.61166/fadlan.v3i1.90>.

organizational structure of Islamic education.

Institutional Development of Islamic Education in Kerala: Post Independence Period

Kerala saw a special phase of growth of Islamic education in the decades after Indian independence in 1947. The rapid growth of educational institutions was a response to the growing public demand and organizational reforms which introduced greater uniformity in the curriculum, examinations and administration of institutions. The era saw the rise of education boards which controlled madrasa education and laid down uniform academic standards for thousands of affiliated institutions. The *Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabhyasa* Board and the *Samastha Kerala Sunni* Education Board have emerged as significant coordinating agencies, extending their educational networks beyond Kerala to other states of India and to Muslim communities abroad.¹⁹

Standardization enhanced the quality and credibility of Islamic education by establishing common syllabi, teacher training mechanisms and uniform assessment procedures. Arabic colleges and higher Islamic institutions bloomed throughout the state especially in the Malabar region which became the main centre for Islamic higher learning in Kerala. They increasingly blended traditional Islamic sciences with modern academic disciplines, thus broadening educational prospects for Muslim students while adhering to traditional scholarship.

The 1970 economic transformation was further accelerated by the Gulf migration, and this in turn promoted educational development. The financial contributions of expatriate Keralites and philanthropic organizations in West Asia helped educational institutions to expand their campuses, improve infrastructure, establish libraries and provide free education, accommodation and food for students. Equally important was the intellectual interchange that accompanied migration. Students and scholars were in close academic contact with universities and academic institutions in the Arab world, which helped in the exchange of ideas, curricula, publications, and teaching practices. This interaction had a deep impact on the development of Islamic scholarship in Kerala and triggered what many scholars have termed an era of extraordinary institutional expansion and intellectual productivity.²⁰ The current number of Islamic educational institutions functioning in the state exceeds two thousand, which is a proof of the durability of these developments. Community participation has been an integral part of the system of Islamic education in Kerala.²¹ Unlike many educational systems that depend heavily on government funds, Islamic institutions in Kerala have largely developed through voluntary public support and community based fundraising. This model has ensured institutional autonomy, enhanced community ownership and has allowed quick response to emerging educational needs. Many institutions have succeeded in providing high levels of accessibility through the efforts of local communities and expatriate donors who provide education for free, especially to students of economically disadvantaged background.

The growth of organized Islamic associations also gave further impetus to the

¹⁹ Rahman K. P., "Development of Islamic Religious Sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after Independence," 79.

²⁰ Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil, *The Gulf Migrant Archives in Kerala: Reading Borders and Belonging* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 45.

²¹ Rahman K. P., "Development of Islamic Religious Sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after Independence," 261.

expansion of Islamic education in post independence Kerala. Although *Samastha Kerala Jam'iyathul Ulama* was established at Kozhikode in 1926, its educational activities expanded considerably in the post independence period through the development of organized *madrassa* networks and educational board. *Samastha Kerala Jam'iyathul Ulama*, along with its educational wings and other Islamic organizations, played an important role in expanding and coordinating the *madrassa* system. Their activities included the establishment of *madrassas*, development and revision of curricula, conduct of standardized examinations, coordination and training of teachers, and mobilization of community resources for educational purposes. The *Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabhyasa* Board provided an organized framework for *madrassa* education and helped extend the network of affiliated institutions beyond Kerala to neighbouring states and *Malayali* Muslim communities abroad.²² Through these organizational structures, Islamic education became increasingly standardized while retaining its traditional religious orientation. The combined efforts of educational boards, religious organizations, teachers, local communities, and expatriate supporters consequently provided a strong institutional foundation for the continued expansion and modernization of Islamic education in Kerala.

Major Islamic Centres of Learning in Kerala

The phenomenal growth of Islamic education in Kerala is evident from the emergence of a number of institutions combining classical scholarship and modern academic practices. These institutions, notwithstanding differences in ideological orientation, administrative structure and curricular emphasis, are unified by a common commitment to the preservation of Islamic intellectual traditions within the framework of contemporary educational needs. They have collectively made Kerala one of the leading centers of Islamic higher education in South Asia.

One of the earliest institutions to adopt an integrated model of Islamic higher education after Indian independence was *Al Jamia Al Islamia*, Shanthapuram, established in 1955. It is divided into Senior Secondary, Undergraduate and Postgraduate departments. It offers specialized programmes in Islamic Studies (*Usool al-Din*), Islamic Jurisprudence (*Sharia*), Qur'anic Studies, *Hadith*, Comparative Religion, Arabic and English. The institution combines traditional Islamic sciences with contemporary disciplines and allows students to obtain both religious qualifications and state recognized academic credentials, thus enabling them to participate in higher education and professional careers.

Another landmark institution is *Jamia Nooriyya Arabia*, Pattikad, which was established in 1964 under the initiative of *Samastha Kerala Jam'iyathul Ulama*. *Jamia Nooriyya* is one of the most prestigious institutions for advanced Islamic scholarship in Kerala, often considered to be dedicated to postgraduate religious studies, particularly in the *Shafi'i* legal tradition. It assigns great importance to Qur'anic exegesis, *Hadith*, jurisprudence and classical Islamic sciences in its curriculum and produces graduates who are granted the title of Moulavy Fazil Al Faizy. The institution draws students from Kerala and neighboring states. The network of more than fifty affiliated junior colleges has contributed a lot in standardization and co-ordination of Islamic higher education. The religious scholarship, public leadership and curriculum development of Kerala were greatly influenced by the noted

²² Koduvayakkal, *Indian Madrasahs: Evolution and Growth with Special Reference to Kerala Model*, 190.

scholars and community leaders associated with *Jamia Nooriyya*.²³

Jamia Nadwiya, Edavanna, founded in 1964, is another example of the variety of Islamic educational institutions in Kerala. The institution was established by *Kerala Nadvaathul Mujahideen* and represents the *Salafi* intellectual tradition mainly focusing on Islamic propagation (*Da'wah*), comparative religion and inter faith engagement. Its curriculum trains graduates to address contemporary religious challenges through dialogue, scholarship and community outreach, with a focus on scriptural studies and reform oriented Islamic thought.

The *Jamia Sa-adiya Arabia*, Kasaragod, in northern Kerala, established in 1971, has emerged as a leading centre for Islamic education and social service. Under the guidance of the *Samastha Kerala Jam'iyyathul Ulama*, the institution offers a ten year course in Islamic theology and religious sciences, which leads to the title of Moulavi Fazil Sa-adi. The curriculum is centred on Qur'anic studies, *Hadith*, jurisprudence, theology and Arabic and it has academic linkages with Al Azhar University, Aligarh Muslim University, Hamdard University and Maulana Azad National Urdu University. The huge student body and vast library of the institution testify to its growing role in higher Islamic learning and research.

The new phase of the unification of religious and secular education began with the establishment of the *Rahmaniya Arabic College*, Katameri, in 1972. The college had a well organized academic programme in phases from higher secondary to post graduate specialization and research. Students study advanced Islamic sciences along with academic degrees recognized by the universities, reflecting Kerala commitment to combine religious scholarship with mainstream higher education. This model of institution has provided greater educational and professional opportunities for graduates while maintaining high standards in classical Islamic disciplines.

One of the major developments in contemporary Islamic higher education is the establishment of *Jamia Darul Huda al-Islamia*, Chemmad, in 1986. *Darul Huda* is conceived as an institution that integrates traditional Islamic scholarship and modern university education. It has developed a vast academic network through affiliated colleges spread in different parts of India and through its membership in international bodies like the Federation of Islamic Universities and the League of Islamic Universities. The academic structure of the university includes secondary, undergraduate, postgraduate specialization, and research in various faculties such as *Sharia*, *Usul al-Din*, *Da'wah*, Humanities, Languages, and Education. Research, publication and academic dissemination are major components of its educational mission, reflected in scholarly journals, textbooks, translations and other academic publications that make a significant contribution to contemporary Islamic scholarship.²⁴

Together, these institutions exemplify the diversity and dynamism of Islamic higher education in Kerala. They have retained the core tenets of classical Islamic learning but have incorporated structured curricula, research oriented programmes, modern pedagogical approaches, and national and international academic collaborations. Their ongoing expansion

²³ Rahman K. P., "Development of Islamic Religious Sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after Independence," 141.

²⁴ Rahman K. P., "Development of Islamic Religious Sciences in Karnataka and Kerala after Independence," 157.

is proof of Kerala success in bridging tradition and modernity, producing scholars capable of engaging with both the Islamic intellectual heritage and the demands of contemporary society.

Islamic Institutional Dynamics and Modern Educational Reform

One of the features of the transformation of Islamic education in Kerala has been its sustained institutional innovation without deviating from its classical intellectual heritage. The transition from the traditional *Dars* system to organized *Sharia* Colleges, and later to integrated *Da'wa* Colleges, is a dynamic process of educational reform that has allowed Islamic institutions to respond effectively to changing social and academic demands. This change has not replaced the traditional system but has modernized it into an institutional structure that is focused on academic quality, professional relevance and intellectual engagement.

One of the most important developments since the 1990 has been the emergence of *Da'wa* Colleges, established to bridge the long standing separation between religious and secular education. These colleges, unlike the previous institutions, have both the streams of education in a single campus through an integrated curriculum. Students study Islamic sciences alongside modern academic subjects, allowing them to learn religious scholarship and gain university recognized qualifications. This model of education has been so popular that more than two hundred *Da'wa* colleges have been established in Kerala and neighboring states, producing a new generation of scholars who are fully engaged in education, social service, public administration, media and community leadership.

Another significant development has been the rapid expansion of Islamic education for women. The Muslim women of Kerala had access to elementary madrasa education, but until the late 20th century there were few opportunities for higher religious education. However, since the 1990, a large number of institutions have been created across the state for women higher Islamic education.²⁵ These institutions offer integrated programs incorporating Qur'anic studies, *Hadith*, jurisprudence, theology, Arabic and modern academic subjects, producing female scholars, educators and community leaders. The *hadiya* program under *Jamia Markaz* is an example of the growing focus on involving women in Islamic scholarship and research.²⁶

Another significant feature of the recent educational reform is the mushrooming of *Hifz al-Qur'an* colleges. Specialized institutions for Qur'an memorization were once few and far between in Kerala, but have increased exponentially over the last three decades. Many now learn systematic Qur'anic memorization along with formal school education, allowing students to pursue religious and secular studies simultaneously. The adoption of internationally recognized standards has enabled Kerala students to participate successfully in global Qur'an recitation and memorization competitions, boosting the international reputation of the state Islamic educational institutions.²⁷

²⁵ Jibin V. K. C. Naseema, *Educational Status of Muslim Women in Malabar Region of Kerala*, 2, no. 1 (2016): 23, <https://publications.cukashmir.ac.in/index.php/jrie/article/view/136>.

²⁶ Mohammad Hafeez, *Towards the Development of Education System among the Muslims in Kerala: An Assessment*, 8, no. 2 (2015): 121, https://www.muslimsocieties.org/vol-8-no-2_towards_the_development_of_education_system/.

²⁷ Abdul Qadir, *System of Islamic Education: Tradition and Modernisation* (Global Vision Publishing House, 2012), 67.

The modernization of Islamic education has been centred on curriculum reform. Institutions have been gradually incorporating English, social sciences, comparative religion, research methodology, information technology and some of the professional disciplines together with the core disciplines of Qur'anic sciences, *Hadith*, jurisprudence, theology, Arabic language, logic, ethics and spirituality inherited from the Ponnani tradition. This balanced curriculum reflects an educational philosophy that aims to preserve classical Islamic scholarship while equipping graduates with the analytical and professional skills needed in modern society.²⁸

The *madrassa* system, evolved from the traditional *Othupalli*, still remains the base of Islamic religious education in Kerala. The coordination is primarily through educational boards like the *Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabhyasa* Board and the *Samastha Kerala Sunni* Education Board, and more than 15,000 *madrassas* affiliated to them are functioning inside and outside Kerala, maintaining uniform standards in elementary Islamic education and creating a strong pipeline for higher religious studies.²⁹ Above this level, there is an organized *Sharia* College system offering structured under, post graduate and research programme and networks of affiliated *Da'wa* colleges maintain academic consistency through centralized curriculum development and standardized assessment.³⁰

Kerala Islamic education system has several institutional features. Most colleges are fully residential and offer free education, accommodation and meals paid for by the community so that students from all economic background can have equal access. Competitive entrance examinations and admission on merit have raised the standard of academic performance, especially in integrated institutions. Classroom learning enhances leadership development and communication skills as student organizations actively promote debates, literary festivals, public speaking, publications and community service. These activities have produced graduates who are not only religious scholars, but also effective teachers, writers, and public intellectuals.³¹

The quality of Islamic higher education has been further strengthened by modern infrastructure. Today, the major institutions have well-equipped campuses, extensive libraries, digital repositories, manuscript preservation projects, research centres, scholarships and student welfare programme. The *Markaz* Central Islamic Library and digitalization of manuscripts by several institutions have significantly expanded access to rare Islamic materials and supported sophisticated academic research. At the same time collaboration with national universities and well-known international institutions, including Al-Azhar University, the Islamic University of Madinah, the International Islamic University Malaysia and other centres of Islamic learning around the world, have provided opportunities for academic exchange, postgraduate education and joint research. Such partnerships have helped the institutions of Kerala to retain their international academic standards, while remaining

²⁸ C, *The Unsung Hero of the Educational Renaissance: Pioneering Role of Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji in Modernizing Kerala Muslims*, 84.

²⁹ Mujeibur Rahman, "Development and Modernisation of Religious Education in Kerala: Role of Samastha Kerala Jam'eyyat ul-Ulama" (PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2006), 75.

³⁰ Akhlaque Ahmad, "Education in Medieval India: A Critical Study," paper presented at Paper presented at the International Seminar on Islamic History, Art and Culture in South Asia., 1986, 94, <https://www.scribd.com/document/972944547/medieval-education-system>.

³¹ Ahmad Aijazuddin, *Muslims in India: Their Educational, Demographic and Socio-Economic Status with Inter-Community Comparisons Based on Field Survey Conducted in 1991* (South Asia Books, 1994), 81.

rooted to their indigenous scholarly tradition.³²

Current Trends, Globalization and the Future

The 21st century has seen a new phase in the evolution of Islamic education in Kerala with the increasing integration of traditional scholarship with modern educational practices, digital technologies, international collaboration and research oriented learning. These developments have brought Kerala to the forefront as one of the premier centers of Islamic higher education in South Asia, while maintaining the intellectual continuity of its classical scholarly tradition. Another important aspect of present day Islamic education in Kerala is the increasing emphasis on integrated education.³³ Today most major institutions have adopted a common academic paradigm of religious and secular studies, allowing students to follow a course of Islamic scholarship with a university recognised academic degree. The Coordination of Islamic Colleges and other such organizations have played an important role in standardising integrated curricula across their member institutions. This model allows flexible academic pathways for students to pursue professional education in medicine, engineering, management, law and other disciplines while undertaking advanced training in Islamic sciences. Consequently, graduates are increasingly involved not only as religious scholars, but also as professionals, educators, administrators and public intellectuals.³⁴ Digital technology has also reshaped Islamic pedagogy. Classical Islamic texts are now more accessible to students and researchers due to the adoption of online education, digital learning platforms, electronic libraries and virtual academic resources by major institutions. The digitisation of manuscripts, online publication of journals and books, and use of institutional websites and social media have extended the reach of Islamic scholarship beyond geographical boundaries. These developments have enhanced communication between institutions and their stakeholders and have created new opportunities for distance education and lifelong learning.³⁵

Globalization has also transformed the Islamic educational landscape in Kerala. Institutions that once served the local community now draw students from all over India and abroad. The increasing demand for Kerala integrated education model has resulted in many colleges opening up their branches in different states of India. At the same time, partnerships with international universities have enabled student exchange programme, collaborative research, faculty development and academic mobility. Kerala leading institutions have extended scholarships and financial assistance to the graduates for higher studies at internationally acclaimed centres of Islamic learning, thus amplifying the global academic footprint of Kerala scholars.³⁶

Another notable development is the development of a stronger research culture in Islamic educational institutions. We have seen the emergence of dedicated research department, postgraduate specialization (*Thakhassus*) programme, peer-reviewed journals

³² Mohammad Akhlaq Ahmad, *Traditional Education among Muslims* (B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1985), 58.

³³ Alam Arshad, *Inside a Madrasa* (Routledge, 2011), 73.

³⁴ Stephen F. Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* (Clarendon Press, 1980), 128.

³⁵ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Kerala Muslims: A Historical Perspective* (Ajanta Publications, 1995), 92.

³⁶ Mohammad Hafeez, "Towards the Development of Education System among the Muslims in Kerala: An Assessment," *Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2015): 45

and academic publishing initiatives. Institutions regularly organize national and international conferences, seminars and workshops for the promotion of scholarly dialogue across intellectual traditions. The writing of dissertations, the making of text books, translation projects and the publishing of research journals have added to the growth of original scholarship and raised the academic credibility of the Islamic higher education in Kerala.³⁷

Despite these accomplishments, a number of challenges remain. The curricula should be continually reformed so that they remain relevant, without compromising the integrity of classical Islamic sciences. There needs to be a greater focus on employability, interdisciplinary research, doctoral education and recognition of religious qualifications in the wider higher education sector. Likewise, the growth of digital learning, greater international collaboration and greater curricular coordination among institutions remain important priorities for future development. The extent to which the Islamic educational institutions in Kerala can sustain their tradition of excellence and effectively respond to the changing demands of the 21st century will depend on the way these challenges are met.

The Kerala Model of Islamic Education: Characteristics, Global Interface and Future Prospects

Kerala has evolved a unique model of Islamic education which is significantly different from many other Muslim education systems in South Asia. Its distinctiveness is its capacity to preserve classical Islamic scholarship alongside modern academic disciplines, institutional innovation and community participation. Kerala institutions have not replaced the traditional learning, but they have gradually reformed the existing educational structures, creating an educational framework that combines the religious authenticity with contemporary relevance.³⁸

A distinguishing feature of the Kerala model is the thorough integration of religious and secular education. The establishment of integrated *Da'wa* colleges and affiliated institutions allow students to study Islamic sciences and university recognized academic programs simultaneously within the same campus.³⁹ This integrated approach has bridged the long-standing gap between religious and modern education, and has enabled the graduates to contribute effectively in religious scholarship, higher education, administration, social service, and various professional fields. The model has also shown remarkable sustainability through community participation and public philanthropy, with most institutions running without major government funding. These institutions have been able to provide free education, residential facilities, scholarships and student welfare programme while maintaining institutional autonomy thanks to community ownership, voluntary contributions and charitable endowments.⁴⁰

Another distinguishing feature is that the residential educational tradition derived from the classical *Dars* system is continued. Residential campuses provide close contact between teachers and students, promote disciplined academic life and strengthen the moral and spiritual aspects of education. This model, together with merit-based admissions, and

³⁷ Rahman, *Development of Islamic Religious Sciences*, 268

³⁸ P. K. Gopalakrishnan, *Keralathinte Samskarika Charithram* (Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1974), 125.

³⁹ V. A. Ahmad Kabeer, *Muslim Movements in Kerala* (Chelavoor Publishing House, 1987), 132.

⁴⁰ K. T. Mohammed Ali, *Development of Education among the Mappilas of Malabar 1800-1965* (Nunes Publishers, 1990), 84.

generous financial support, enables access to quality Islamic education for able students from all socio economic strata.⁴¹ The adaptability and replicability of the Kerala model of education, beyond the regional context, is further demonstrated by the increasing number of campuses affiliated to it in other Indian states.⁴²

The boom in Islamic schools after the 1970 was closely connected to the economic transformation brought by migration to the Gulf. The financial remittances of expatriate Keralites and the charitable support from West Asian donors provided a major boost to the educational infrastructure by helping to build campuses, libraries, research centres, hostels and digital facilities. These resources also enabled the provision of free education, scholarships, stipends and funding for research thereby making higher Islamic education accessible to a larger segment of the society.⁴³ Beyond the financial support, the Gulf relationships generated significant intellectual exchanges through student mobility, faculty collaboration, access to current scholarship, and international accreditation. These exchanges linked the institutions of Kerala to global trends in education but also consolidated their place in wider networks of Islamic learning.⁴⁴

The study of Islamic education in Kerala is supported by a rich body of institutional documentation, including archival records, annual reports, official publications, organisational documents, digital repositories and academic journals. Most major institutions have well organised libraries, professional websites and regular publications to keep their institutional history and academic activities alive. This voluminous documentation provides useful resources to researchers and makes a significant contribution to the historiography of Islamic education in South Asia.

CONCLUSION

The history of Islamic education in Kerala demonstrates a continuous process of adaptation and institutional transformation while preserving its classical Islamic foundations. From the traditional *Dars* and *Othupalli* systems, Islamic education developed into *madrasas*, Arabic and *Sharia* colleges, integrated *Da'wah* institutions, and higher research centres. This transformation was shaped by scholarly leadership, curriculum and pedagogical reform, community participation, educational organizations, and philanthropic support, particularly through Gulf migration.

The contemporary Kerala model shows that modernization and religious continuity can develop together. The integration of modern disciplines, women education, research, digital technologies, and national and international academic collaboration has enabled Islamic educational institutions to respond to contemporary needs while maintaining their religious identity. Thus, the Kerala experience represents a distinctive model of educational adaptation that connects classical Islamic knowledge with modern academic practices, changing social realities, and global intellectual networks.

⁴¹ Qadir, *System of Islamic Education: Tradition and Modernisation*, 52.

⁴² K. K. N. Kurup, *The Legacy of Islam in Kerala: A Study of the Mappilas of Kerala* (Samayam Publications, 2000), 43.

⁴³ Rahman, *Development of Islamic Religious Sciences*, 197

⁴⁴ T. K. Ravindran, *Institutions and Movements in Kerala History* (Charithram Publications, 1978), 57.

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