

FROM MARGIN TO MAINSTREAM: MUSLIM WOMEN IN MALABAR POLITICS

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Abstract

The political participation of Muslim women in Malabar has evolved from historical marginalization to a gradually increasing presence in public life, shaped largely by educational advancement, social reform movements, and community activism. Historically, patriarchal norms, conservative interpretations of religion, and the minority status of Muslims in India restricted women's access to education, social mobility, and political engagement. The social renaissance in Kerala, spearheaded by religious reformers, educational initiatives, and community organizations, provided Muslim women with opportunities to acquire education, thereby laying the foundation for their involvement in political processes. Despite these advancements, representation of Muslim women in electoral politics—particularly in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies—remains limited, though local governance participation has shown measurable improvement. This study examines the historical trajectory and contemporary patterns of Muslim women's political participation in the Valluvanad region, highlighting the influence of education, community organizations, and political mobilization. Findings reveal that increased access to education, combined with sustained social reform, has enabled Muslim women to gradually claim their space in decision-making, contributing to social, economic, and political transformation within their communities. The study underscores the ongoing structural, cultural, and institutional challenges that continue to constrain full political inclusion, while emphasizing education as the key driver of empowerment.

Keywords: Malabar, Valluvanad, Muslim Women, Political Participation, Social Reform, Education, Renaissance, Gender Empowerment

Introduction

Muslim women worldwide face various forms of discrimination shaped by socio-economic and political factors. Their rights gained international attention during the 1994 Washington Conference and the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, which highlighted their challenges and sought solutions. While debates persist regarding women's status in Islam, Muslim women comprise over half of the human resource in the Islamic world, making their empowerment vital for societal development.

The Islamic concept of polity, established by Prophet Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs, emphasizes that sovereignty belongs to Allah, with governance acting as a trustee (Khalifa/Amir) to uphold divine guidance. Historically, Muslim women were marginalized, excluded from education, and limited in social and political participation, often due to conservative religious interpretations and societal norms. In India, this marginalization was compounded by minority status and political polarization.

The Sachar Committee Report (2006) highlighted the educational and socioeconomic backwardness of the Muslim community, prompting targeted reforms. Subsequent Renaissance movements and the efforts of social reformers and community organizations provided modern

education for Muslim women, enhancing their social, economic, and political status. These transformations enabled their entry into politics, allowing them to address community-specific issues and advocate for public solutions (Dominic, 2011; Sachar Committee, 2006).

Focus of the Study

This paper examines the changing role of Muslim women in Malabar politics, highlighting how traditional gender norms both constrained and shaped their political empowerment. It explores the role of community organizations in promoting women's education and its influence on social, familial, and political structures. The study identifies historical barriers such as patriarchal interpretations of religion, socio-cultural restrictions, and limited education and key factors like reforms and social movements that enabled gradual political participation. It also considers the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of women in politics and their impact on governance and community development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine Muslim women's political participation in Malabar, with a focus on Valluvanad. A descriptive-analytical design was used, combining historical analysis to trace social, cultural, and educational factors influencing political engagement, alongside contemporary data to assess electoral representation. The study area includes Mannarkkad (Palakkad) and Ottapalam, Pattambi, Attappady, and Perinthalmanna (Malappuram), regions historically significant during the Malabar Rebellion.

The population comprised Muslim women active in local, state, and national politics. Quantitative data were sourced from the Election Commission of India and Panchayat records, covering Lok Sabha, Kerala Legislative Assembly, and local body elections. Qualitative insights were gathered via purposive interviews with women leaders, activists, and community reformers to understand their experiences and challenges. Secondary sources, including historical records, scholarly articles, government reports (e.g., Sachar Committee, 2006), newspapers, and archival materials, documented historical trends and engagement patterns.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, surveys, and questionnaires targeting women voters and elected representatives, capturing demographic, educational, and political information. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean) and comparative charts, while qualitative data underwent content analysis to identify recurring themes such as education, social reform, patriarchal barriers, and political mobilization, with crossvalidation from secondary sources ensuring accuracy and reliability.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Islam is believed to have reached Malabar as early as the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, making it one of the earliest Muslim settlements outside the Arabian Peninsula. Arab merchants had long-established maritime trade routes with the Malabar Coast, particularly through ports such as Muziris, Kollam, Ponnani, and Calicut (Panikkar, 1960). With the rise of Islam, these traders continued their commercial interactions and gradually introduced the religion to the region through peaceful exchange and social contact.

A prominent legend associated with the arrival of Islam in Kerala is the story of Cheraman Perumal, the last king of the Chera dynasty. According to tradition, the king witnessed the miraculous splitting of the moon by the Prophet Muhammad. Fascinated by the event, he

traveled to Mecca, embraced Islam, and assumed the name Tajuddin. Before his death in Arabia, he instructed Arab missionaries to continue spreading Islam in Kerala. Among these early missionaries, Malik ibn Dinar is credited with founding several mosques, including the Cheraman Juma Mosque at Kodungallur (c. 629 CE), often regarded as the first mosque in India (Miller, 1976).

Early Muslim settlements thus emerged in coastal trade centers such as Kodungallur, Kollam, Kozhikode, Ponnani, and Kasaragod. These communities, formed largely through intermarriages between Arab traders and local women, developed into the distinct Mappila (or Moplah) identity, which combined Arab-Islamic elements with indigenous Dravidian traditions (Dale, 1980). Over the centuries, the Mappilas played a vital role in maritime commerce, religious scholarship, and political resistance. They were particularly influential under the Zamorins of Calicut, who employed Muslim admirals in their naval forces to resist Portuguese dominance during the 15th–16th centuries (Kurup, 2006). The Mappilas later became central participants in anti-colonial struggles, most notably the Malabar Rebellion of 1921.

Valluvanad, an important chiefdom that emerged in central Kerala during the 12th century, also became a significant center of the Malabar Rebellion. Geographically, Valluvanad stretched from the Bharathapuzha (Nila) River in the south to the Panthaloore Hills in the north, bordered by the Arabian Sea in the west and the Attapadi highlands in the east. Its capital was Angadipuram, famed for the Thirumandhamkunnu Temple, which later shifted to Perinthalmanna under British rule (Menon, 2007).

Within Valluvanad, Muslim women remained educationally and socially marginalized until the early 20th century. Patriarchal family structures limited women's participation in decision-making, and educational opportunities were disproportionately directed toward men (Brenner, 1996). Consequently, women's representation in social, economic, and political life was minimal, and their voices were largely absent from public decision-making spaces.

The renaissance movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, along with the sustained efforts of reformist religious and social organizations, brought significant change. These initiatives promoted female education among Muslims, which in turn facilitated women's gradual entry into public and political life (Osella & Osella, 2000). Increased access to education allowed Muslim women to articulate their concerns in public spaces, engage in leadership roles, and participate in decision-making processes across both public and private spheres. This shift not only enhanced their visibility but also contributed to wider social, economic, and political transformations within Malabar society.

Political Participation: From Grassroots to Electoral Politics

Political participation encompasses citizens' engagement in electoral processes and policymaking, enabling their interests and needs to be represented in governance (Verba et al., 1995). In India, Muslims, as a minority, have historically sought to organize politically within a secular democracy (Hasan, 1997). In Kerala, politics was traditionally male dominated, yet women gradually gained entry into modern political institutions, although their presence remained limited (Devika, 2006). Beyond addressing immediate concerns, women's participation brings gender perspectives into policymaking (Chhachhi, 1993).

The Muslim community in Kerala has a long tradition of socio-political activism, including anti-colonial struggles, with women supporting and mobilizing alongside men (Miller, 1976). Early texts like Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoom's *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* (16th century) reflect this

political consciousness (Dale, 1980). Islamic teachings affirm gender equality in social and religious duties (Qur'an 51:56, Abdel Haleem, 2004), but local cultural norms and colonial disruptions marginalized women, compounded by limited access to modern education (Osella & Osella, 2000).

Late 19th- and early 20th-century social reform and Muslim community initiatives expanded women's education, facilitating their entry into public and political life (Panikkar, 1960). Organizations like the Vanitha League and Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama played key roles in mobilizing women and safeguarding rights (Rahman, 2002; Randathani, 2007). Post-independence, constitutional provisions, including the 73rd Am This paper examines the changing role of Muslim women in Malabar politics, highlighting how traditional gender norms both constrained and shaped their political empowerment. It explores the role of community organizations in promoting women's education and its influence on social, familial, and political structures. The study identifies historical barriers—such as patriarchal interpretations of religion, sociocultural restrictions, and limited education—and key factors like reforms and social movements that enabled gradual political participation. It also considers the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of women in politics and their impact on governance and community development. endment (1992), and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) further strengthened opportunities for women's political participation across all spheres (Forbes, 1996; Government of India, 2001).

Table 1 *Voting participation of women in Kerala in the Lok Sabha Elections*

Year of Election	No. of Women Electors	No. of Women Voters	% of Women voters over Women Electors	Total Percentage
1971	5139311	3253219	63.30	64.53
1977	5785394	4606133	79.62	79.20
1980	6705964	4075655	60.78	62.16
1984	7226590	5630991	77.92	77.13
1991	9942152	7274240	73.17	73.32
1996	10631488	7478493	70.34	71.11
2004	10957045	7567329	69.06	71.45
2009	11330955	8220848	72.55	73.17
2014	12592375	9283321	73.72	73.94
2019	13468657	10611007	78.78	77.84
2024	14336133	10302515	71.86	72.04

Source: Election Commission of India

Table 1 indicates, the voting percentage of women in the general elections to the Lok Sabha held in India is lower than the total voting percentage. Except for the years 1977, 1984 and 2019, the overall average has increased in general elections in all other years, while the average for women has decreased. Although women's voting participation has considerable one but their political participation in Lok Sabha elections as a candidate is very low level.

Performance of Muslim Women Candidate in Lok Sabha Election in Kerala

Year	Total No. of Seats	No. of Women Contestants	Total No. of Women Elected	Total No. of Muslim Women Elected
1957	16	01	0	0
1962	18	01	0	0
1967	19	03	01	0
1971	19	05	01	0
1977	20	03	0	0
1980	20	02	01	0
1984	20	07	0	0
1991	20	10	02	0
1996	20	10	0	0
1999	20	13	01	0
2004	20	15	02	0
2009	20	15	0	0
2014	20	27	01	0
2019	20	24	01	0
2024	20	25	01	0

Source: Election Commission of India

Although the Muslim community is a very significant minority in Kerala, The political participation of Muslim women as a candidate in the Lok Sabha Election is not in figure till the last General Election of 2024.

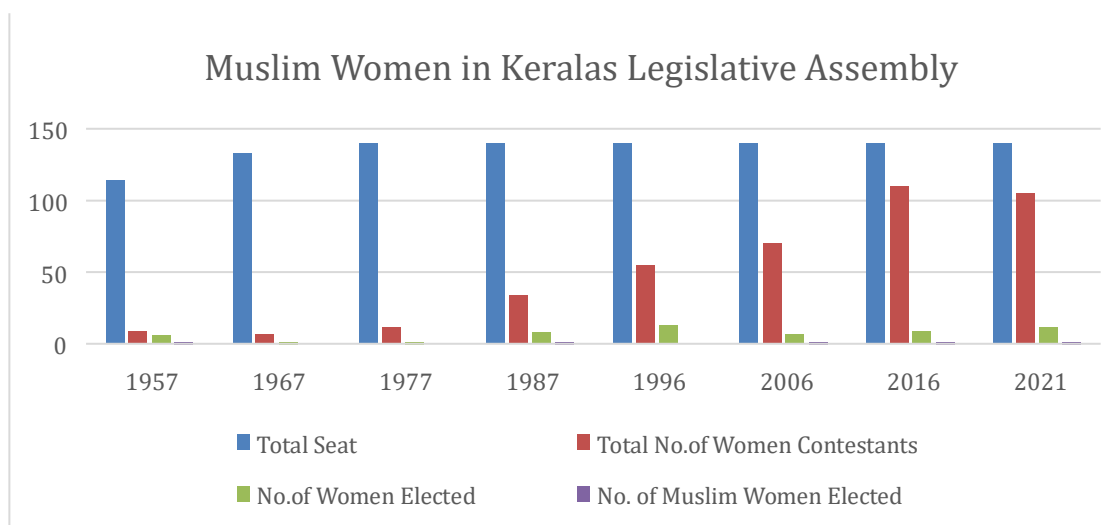
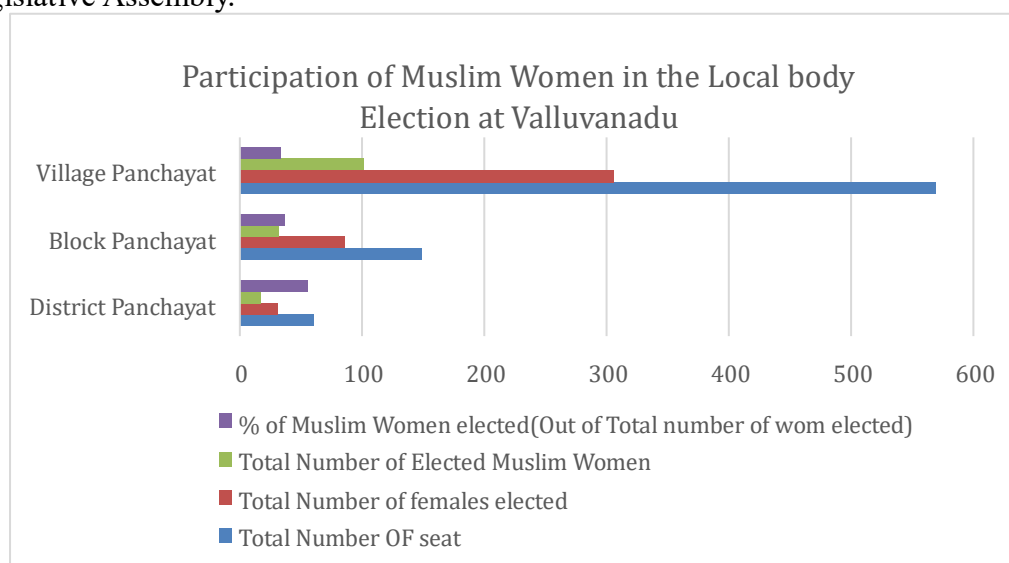


Figure 1 *Performance of Muslim Women Candidate in Kerala Legislative Assembly*

Election

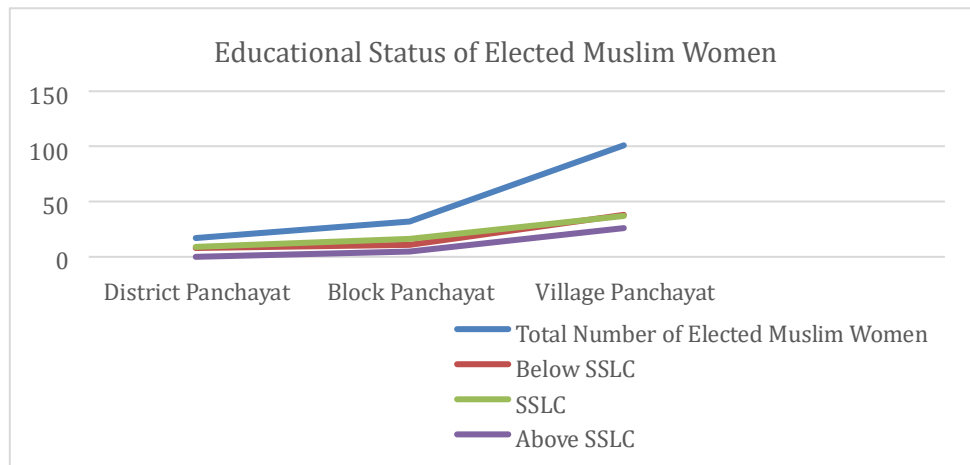
Participation of Muslim women in the general elections held for the Kerala Legislative Assembly was very low. In the general elections held to the Kerala Legislative Assembly, Muslim women participated only in the years 1957, 1987, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2002. We can see that Muslim women did not participate at all in all the remaining elections to Kerala's Legislative Assembly.



Source: e Gramswaraj

Figure 2 *Performance of Muslim Women Candidate in Local body Election at Valluvanadu-2020*

The study was conducted in the taluks of Mannarakkad taluk in Palakkad district, Ottapalam, Pattambi, Attappady and Perinthalmanna taluk in Malappuram district as part of Valluvanad. The participation of Muslim women as elected candidates in the three-tier Panchayat elections held in these areas has been comparatively better.



Source: eGramswaraj

Figure 3 Educational Status of Elected Muslim Women in the Local body-2020

Muslim women gained knowledge from the alienated state of education and through it entered the political process. Muslim women with an SSLC or higher education are the ones who are most likely to enter the political process and participate in key decisions regarding the political state.

DISCUSSIONS ON CONTENTS

Historical Context and Marginalization

Muslim women in Malabar were historically excluded from education, social institutions, and political life due to patriarchal norms, conservative religious interpretations, and the community's minority status (Panikkar, 1960; Miller, 1976; Dale, 1980). Colonial disruptions and local cultural practices further limited their access to education and public spaces, keeping them largely invisible in decision-making (Brenner, 1996; Osella & Osella, 2000).

Education and Social Reform as Catalysts

Education played a pivotal role in empowering Muslim women. Social reform movements, religious organizations, and community initiatives gradually improved access to schooling, enabling women to engage in public and political spheres (Dominic, 2011; Rahman, 2002). Literacy was emphasized as key to domestic, social, and community upliftment, while print media provided platforms for debate and awareness. Higher educational attainment, especially beyond SSLC, strongly correlated with women's political participation and leadership.

Political Participation and Ongoing Challenges

Muslim women's involvement in politics has grown, particularly at the local level, though representation in higher offices remains limited (Election Commission of India, 2024; eGramswaraj). Despite supportive constitutional provisions and policies (Government of India, 2001; Forbes, 1996), challenges such as minority marginalization, economic dependency, patriarchal culture, social gatekeeping, and lack of mentorship persist. Organizations like the Vanitha League and Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama have been crucial in mobilizing women and fostering empowerment through education and social reform (Rahman, 2002; Randathani, 2007).

CONCLUSION

- 1 Muslim women were historically excluded from decision-making spaces and marginalized due to lack of education and awareness.
- 2 The Malabar Rebellion exposed the illiteracy of the community, highlighting the urgent need for women's education.
- 3 Reformers like Halima Bibi emphasized women's education as essential for domestic improvement, public participation, and community upliftment.
- 4 The rise of magazines and print culture created platforms to debate social and political issues, including women's rights.
- 5 The 19th-century Indian renaissance, driven by media, public spaces, and a questioning middle class, challenged oppressive customs and focused on women's upliftment.
- 6 Reformers in Kerala recognized the invisibility of women in society and initiated movements to secure women's rights and social elevation.
- 7 Muslim women gradually entered political and cultural arenas, voicing their opinions and advocating for recognition in public spaces.
- 8 The Muslim women's movement in Kerala has gained international attention, generating both enthusiasm and criticism.
- 9 Access to education has been the primary driver of empowerment, enabling Muslim women to participate actively in public, social, and political life.

Challenges

Muslim women in Malabar face multiple challenges that hinder their political participation. Intersectional marginalization, as a minority within a minority, limits their political autonomy and decision-making power. Migration patterns and economic dependency further restrict consistent engagement in public life. A deeply entrenched patriarchal political culture often sidelines women's voices, while religious and social gatekeeping imposes additional constraints on their mobility and leadership opportunities. Moreover, the lack of mentorship and structured political grooming prevents many women from acquiring the skills, networks, and confidence necessary to navigate the political arena effectively. Together, these factors create a complex environment that continues to impede the full political empowerment of Muslim women in the region.

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