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Muslim Entrepreneurs between India & the Gulf

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Kerala- and Gulf-based businessmen are at the forefront of India's post-liberalization economy. They are sharp innovators who have adopted the business and labour practices of global capitalism in both Kerala and the Gulf. Embodying the dream of success of all Kerala Muslims, these entrepreneurs enjoy a very public presence. Ostensibly concerned with the "upliftment" of the whole community, they are involved in community associations, orphanages, schools, trade organizations, and everyday politics. Their orientation towards "modernization" of social practices—in education, in particular—is intimately enmeshed with, on the one hand, an effort to produce a "Muslim modernity" (where the main referent points are the Gulf and, more recently, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and, on the other, the pursuit of particular business interests.

The role of Kerala middle class elites in the development of reform movements and political organizations is neither an unusual nor recent phenomenon. As among their Hindu counterparts, early twentieth century orientations towards socio-religious reform, modernization, and progress found support especially amongst the educated Muslim middle-classes. We see many "community leaders"—wealthy and typically Anglophile traders/businessmen—enthusiastically embracing colonial-driven modernization and building "modern" schools with the blessings of the colonial administration and the support of a growing reformist ulama.

But the conditions for modernist transformation amongst Muslims were significantly different from other communities. Muslim reformism had to deal with the aftermath of the 1921 Mappila rebellion, which confirmed to many the anti-Islamic nature of British rule. In reaction, rural Muslims distanced themselves from modern education, privileging Arabi-Malayalam over English, and even over written Malayalam. Islamic reformist ulama, on the contrary, took on the banner of modern education and social reform, building schools where science was taught alongside religious subjects. For the traditionalist ulama—in whose practices and orientations the majority of Kerala Muslims recognize themselves—generalized opposition to Islamic reformism was extended to a rejection of all forms of education promoted by the latter. In other words, outside the limited sphere of the educated urban middle classes and reformist ulama—for whom modern education increasingly stood for the whole project of modernization and reform—attempts to introduce "English" education were viewed with suspicion, or rejected outright.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Hindu middle classes had little problems in convincing their caste fellows of the links between western education, socio-religious reform, and progress. Middle class Muslims had by contrast to walk a far rockier path to establish ideological and political hegemony over the community. Almost sixty years on, in a state proud of its people's full literacy, education remains the yardstick by which Muslim progress is measured and imagined. It is by presenting themselves as enlightened educationalists and by promoting modern education that contemporary entrepreneurs inscribe their specific business interests and practices in the rhetoric of the "common good," thereby legitimizing their claims to leadership within the wider community.

Contextualising Kerala Muslim businessmen

Kerala Muslim businessmen are neither reminiscent of the big-scale Indian entrepreneurs nor even of their close Tamil neighbours. Unlike the latter, they by no means all come from "good families"; but what we focus most on is relations with the community. While Tamil Hindu businessmen seem concerned with personal salvation and indulge in

In recent years the role of wealthy entrepreneurs in Muslim political, religious, and social life has been largely neglected. The authors reverse this trend by considering the practices and orientations of some Kerala Muslim businessmen, who unite the pursuit of particular business interests with efforts to produce a Muslim modernity.

pursuit of Vedanta or holy-men, Kerala's entrepreneurs have a strongly congregationalist focus and a sharp sense of duty towards the wider Muslim community, towards contemporary re-imaginings of the *dar ul Islam*. They feel themselves morally accountable to the wider community, responsible for its development, and guided by a vision

of the steps that need to be taken.

Contemporary Tamil leaders are abandoning traditional dynastic business and re-structuring enterprises through Japanese or American business plans and management techniques. Their Kerala counterparts follow a similar path—they are enthusiastic supporters of the sharp labour practices of global capitalism—but they turn their back on the wholesale adoption of American styles, instead searching for Islamic business models. This brings them into dialogue with contemporary global Islam in its reformist and modernist trends. It is their attempts to craft identities as "modern Muslims" which most strongly flavours these men's lives. Their preoccupations with how to shift the Muslim community away from practices or lifestyles considered "backward" and towards modern Islam is what marks out the parameters of their life-goals. This brings them far closer to Malay entrepreneurs or to some Arab businessmen who are, indeed, often their patrons or partners.

While many Muslim businessmen have no direct political involvement, they all exercise considerable influence in the community's political and social life. They might be chided—or admired—for being behind-the-scene "king makers" who keep politicians in their pockets to forward their own business interests, but they are also praised for caring about ordinary Muslims. We are not talking here about members of an ill-defined Muslim middle class, but about a relatively small group of extremely wealthy men who have a prominent public presence and are recognized as community leaders.

Many Gulf-based entrepreneurs present their lives as rags to riches tales, where "traditional" Muslim skills of the bazaar—such as risk taking, hard work, familiarity with the politics of *wasta* (Arabic: favours, contacts)—are combined with the adoption of modern business techniques to achieve success. They thrive in the Gulf because they have an affinity to Arabs, but they also benefit from close links with local politicians who support their investments in Kerala. These men's rags to riches tales mark them out as iconic figures for all Muslims, an image they are keen to cultivate. But they are not distant heroes: any Muslim will know someone—a friend or relative—who works for them and has a story to tell. And here a degree of accountability creeps in. These men are subject to wide public criticisms. As we might expect, the established middle classes commonly discount such men on the grounds that they are nouveaux riche with no family history. They are also sometimes portrayed simply as having extended the slippery rules of business beyond the usual rule-bending so taken for granted by all business people. And those who are employed by them might have different—and negative—experiences of their apparent enlightened benevolence.

Kerala-based businessmen are of course even more visible and prominent in local public life than their Gulf-based counterparts. While the latter make major donations and initiate grand projects, the Kerala-based men are often those who implement the grand projects on the ground, working continually in the public sphere to shape projects of change and reform. These local entrepreneurs assert continuity between their families' past involvement in the bazaar economy and their present wealth. But there is also rupture: foreseeing the decline of bazaar-based trade, they moved into entirely novel businesses where they introduced new—and extremely controversial for Kerala—labour and production practices.

Business interests and community "upliftment"

The relationship between private interests and public good, the advancement of business while apparently working for the "upliftment" of the whole community, unfolds in these entrepreneurs' efforts to link the need for education to reform and future progress of Kerala Muslims. And they do not just talk about education: they promote and build schools, colleges, and universities in both Kerala and the Gulf through various private trusts or charitable organizations. If necessary, funds are raised by appealing to the sensitivities of specific Muslim audiences in both Gulf and Kerala. Potential Arab donors are presented with the chance of bestowing benevolent generosity to support "backward" Muslims' development and participating in the renaissance of Islamic culture and values. Kerala Muslims, especially Gulf migrants, are offered the chance of doing good for the community, and also, as many of these educational institutions charge hefty fees, with a very attractive investment opportunity.

Migration and Gulf business-led investment has brought the development, as among all other communities, of private services which are Muslim-owned and Muslim-run, and which then come to be perceived as specifically Muslim and to attract a Muslim clientele. There is an often-expressed argument that such investment is necessary in order to encourage Muslims towards development. This in turn has also been reinforced by political events: locally, the emergence of strong and successful Hindu and Christian organizations which have built a whole string of community-owned services; nationally, the rise of Hindu nationalism; and internationally, widespread Islamophobia, all contributing to a sense of being a "community under siege" which needs to stick together and be self-reliant. Muslims, it is argued, need to build networks of professionals, skilled workers, and businessmen to strengthen the community and to provide economic and political leadership.

This long-term project, fostered by many wealthy businessmen, has a much wider objective—that of participating in a worldwide renaissance of Islamic moral values and culture. An Islamic renaissance, it is popularly argued, would not just rid Kerala of the social problems brought to bear on Muslim lives by globalization, but also set the basis for counteracting "American imperialism." While a pan-Islamic orientation is not new, it has been significantly strengthened over the last 30 years. Gulf migration brought thousands of Malayali Muslims close to what they consider the heartland of Islam and has exposed them to life in Muslim-majority countries. This has renewed a sense of participation to the wider dar-ul-Islam—which is, of course, open to very different interpretations and experiences on the opposite shores of the Indian Ocean—while also enabling them to tap into the business opportunities it opens up.

Amongst Kerala Muslims the Gulf stands for the successful blending of Islam with cutting edge technologies and modern business practices. Regardless of individual migrants' experiences, Dubai's skyscrapers, Kuwait's sprawling oil refineries, or Riyadh's opulent neighbourhoods stand for a world wherein Muslims are both wealthy and self-confident; a stark contrast to the circumstances of the many Muslims in India. The Gulf demonstrates that scientific or technological knowledge need not be in contradiction to Islam, but can be mastered to generate wealth for the well being of Muslims and to strengthen Islam. Gulf-based Malayali businessmen have been successful not just because they have been lucky to be in the right place at the right time, but because they manage to combine an inclination for risk taking in business with an affinity for the politics of Arab *wasta*, with modern forms of management learnt in the Gulf. Their experiences suggest that entering and succeeding in the global labour market requires more than "traditional"



PHOTO BY FILIPPO & CAROLINE OSELLA

business acumen: it demands scientific skills and familiarity with new technologies such as those taught in emerging Muslim schools and colleges.

In the practices of Kerala Muslim businessmen and entrepreneurs we see some tensions between old and new business styles. But "know-who" has not been abandoned for "know-how." Because of the layering of services and the complexity of contemporary business, where flexibility and sub-sub-contracting are the norm, contacts are undoubtedly important and "know-how" is often inseparable from "know-who." In networking across the Gulf, Malayali Muslims have a great advantage, because of both Arabic language facility and their long-time contacts and familiarity with the region. And entrepreneurship can stand at the core of a Muslim identity and of contemporary reformulations of Muslim morality. Here it allows—indeed it encourages—ideas of a productive interplay between business and morality, where material progress and religious reform become intertwined indexes of modernity.

Gulf migrant families arriving at Kozhikode (Calicut) airport

Muslim entrepreneurs are deeply rooted in the public sphere and are committed to action within it. Religious obligations are taken as examples of Islam's preoccupation with social responsibility, while reformists try to re-shape obligations into more engaged forms. When successful Muslims plan what needs to be done for the common good in their own community, education becomes the core focus of charitable and activist energies. They believe in the possibility of a win-win situation: the uplift of the entire Muslim community and access to a flexible and qualified workforce shaped into global standards. But the Muslim community is outstripped every time by the achievements of Kerala's Christians and Hindus. The Christian community and its educational institutions are felt to offer both top class education and necessary training in rational and systematic lifestyles. But any simple emulation of such institutions is, for contemporary community leaders, no longer feasible. The early twentieth century Muslim elite were, like the Hindu elites of the time, happy to adopt practices drawn from both colonial and local Christian modern. Today, Kerala's intimate and longstanding links to the Arab Gulf provide a direct example of the existence of another modern—a properly Islamic modern, a modern stripped of what are perceived as the excesses of Western modernity.

Ultimately, then, public sphere activity focused on education has a dual effect. It satisfies the moral and communitarian requirements of Muslim elites; but we take as an equally motivating factor the aim of producing the sort of workforce that these men feel they need: a workforce of young men who are flexible, educated, and equally competent in English and Arabic speaking environments. And yet, just as in the early part of the twentieth century, middle class elite hegemonic projects might prove to be elusive. Islamist organizations have been extremely vociferous in their critique of the globalization process to which these contemporary entrepreneurs have associated themselves. This far-reaching moral critique of public and private life—which increasingly targets the not-so-Islamic behaviour of many Arab Muslims—has led some Islamist organizations to declare full support to the left parties during the recent assembly elections, contributing to the defeat of many candidates closely connected to leading entrepreneurs.

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