Religious Identity and Political Mobilization: A Study of Changing Patterns of Minority Politics in Kerala

MUHAMMED ANEES
Research Scholar,
University of Hyderabad

Abstract:

This study explores the evolving landscape of minority politics in Kerala, with a focus on the emergence of new Muslim political mobilization in response to the growing crisis of Indian secularism. It argues that the shifting political engagement among Kerala's Muslim communities reflects a broader trend of disenchantment with conventional secular platforms and mainstream parties, which are increasingly seen as inadequate in addressing the community's concerns amid rising majoritarian pressures. In this context, new forms of political expression—often grassroots, identity-assertive, and issue-based—have gained traction, seeking to reclaim democratic space and articulate alternative visions of justice, dignity, and citizenship. By analyzing these movements within Kerala's unique socio-political environment, the study reveals how regional minority mobilization is being redefined in ways that both challenge and reimagine the secular democratic framework in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Minority Politics, Political Mobilization, Muslim Politics, Social Movements*

1. Introduction

Kerala, a state on the southwestern coast of India, is home to one of the country's most distinct Muslim communities, constituting approximately 24.7% of the population—the second largest religious group after Hindus (Government of India Census 2011). The political identity and modes of assertion adopted by Kerala's Muslims differ significantly from those in other Indian states, largely due to the region's unique historical, cultural, and socio-economic context. While Muslim political formations in other parts of India have often emerged in reaction to communal violence, state neglect, or the fallout of Partition, the trajectory in Kerala reflects a more sustained and autonomous evolution shaped by maritime histories, peaceful conversions, cultural assimilation, and commercial agency (Hassan, 1992:180; Osella & Osella, 2008:142).

Islam arrived in Kerala through trade and maritime contact with the Arab world, rather than conquest (Dale, 1980:45). The legend of Cheraman Perumal, the Chera king who is said to have embraced Islam during the Prophet's lifetime, symbolizes the syncretic beginnings of the faith in the region (Wink, 1997:112). This early contact fostered the growth of a Muslim population deeply rooted in Kerala's social fabric. Over centuries, the Mappila Muslims of Malabar developed a hybrid identity, integrating local language, customs, and cultural practices, which facilitated a degree of religious coexistence and social mobility uncommon in many other parts of South Asia (Koya, 1983:74; Panikkar, 2002:205).

Unlike in northern India, Muslims in Kerala never experienced prolonged periods of political dominance, nor were they favored by ruling establishments. Instead, they were primarily merchants, peasants, and fishermen, often positioned on the economic margins and subjected to caste-based exclusion and colonial repression (Miller, 1992:118; Freitag, 1990:97). The colonial period (1498–1947) was particularly transformative, marked by economic disenfranchisement under Portuguese, Dutch, and later British rule, and by episodes of fierce resistance, most notably the Malabar Rebellion

of 1921. This rebellion, though often reduced to a case of religious extremism, was in fact a complex response to a confluence of factors: colonial brutality, agrarian exploitation, and the marginalization of converted lower-caste peasants (Fawcett, quoted in Miller, 1992:115).

Its aftermath left deep scars—economic devastation, social dislocation, and a political awakening that would shape the trajectory of Muslim politics in the region. Post-rebellion, Muslim political engagement in Kerala took a more organized and representative form. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) emerged as a key political actor, sustaining electoral relevance for over five decades through strategic alliances, democratic participation, and its capacity to articulate the aspirations of the community within the secular framework of the Indian republic (Engineer, 2004:78; Hasan, 2009:223). This stands in contrast to many northern states, where Partition-induced trauma, communal violence, and elite migration fractured the continuity of Muslim political leadership (Brass, 2003:163). In Kerala, however, cultural and linguistic integration acted as a stabilizing force. The absence of large-scale communal riots, the relatively mixed residential patterns, and continued cultural commonalities across religious communities helped reduce the likelihood of sectarianism or secessionism (Wright, 1966:92; Panikkar 1995:60).

This article argues that the political mobilization of Muslims in Kerala—rooted in a distinct history of identity formation, cultural integration, and resistance—presents an alternative model of minority politics in India. In the contemporary moment, as Indian secularism faces deep structural and ideological crises, the Kerala experience offers critical insights into how minority communities negotiate power, identity, and belonging without succumbing to separatist or communalist pressures. By tracing the historical evolution and examining the current shifts in Muslim political mobilization, this study seeks to situate Kerala within broader debates on the future of secularism, minority rights, and identity politics in India.

2. Methodoloy
This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative mixed methods approach to explore the political mobilization of Muslims in Kerala, emphasizing its historical roots, cultural context, and evolving dynamics. It begins with an in-depth historical and archival analysis that draws from colonial records, political memoirs, party manifestos, community histories, and legislative documents. In addition to textual analysis, the study incorporates fieldwork to ground theoretical insights in lived experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with political leaders, party workers, journalists, community organizers, and scholars in districts such as Malappuram, Kozhikode, and Kasaragod—regions with significant Muslim populations and active political engagement. These interviews offer firsthand perspectives on how contemporary political mobilization is experienced, strategized, and contested. Further, the study includes a quantitative analysis of electoral data from the 1990s to the present, focusing on voting patterns, party performance, constituency shifts, and demographic correlations. This combination of historical, ethnographic, and statistical approaches allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Kerala's Muslim community continues to shape and respond to the broader political landscape of India.

3. Historical Roots of Mappila Political Identity
The emergence of modern political consciousness among Muslims in Malabar during the early 20th century marked a significant shift in the community's social and political orientation. A new leadership, increasingly drawn towards modern education and political engagement, began to take shape. Several organizations were established to work among Muslims in the region, such as the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham (1922), Young Muslims Association (1926), and Muslim Majlis (1930). These developments sparked debates within the community about whether the focus of such organizations should remain religious or expand into political activism (Muhammad 1964:241). It was during this period of transformation that the Muslim League emerged as a political force in Kerala,

following its victory over Indian National Congress leader Muhammad Abdurahman Sahib in the 1934 Central Legislative Assembly election.

Roland E. Miller (1992) describes the period from 1921 to 1947 as the "entry of the Mappilas into formal political life," marked by a gradual consolidation of political identity. This process culminated in the Muslim League's dominance in the 1945 elections, where it swept the reserved Muslim seats in Malabar under the Madras Presidency. The Indian National Congress, which had alienated many Mappilas after passing a resolution condemning the 1921 Mappila Rebellion, lost its influence in the region. The League, in contrast, garnered support through figures like Sayyid Abdur Rahman Bafaqi Thangal—a revered spiritual leader who provided both religious and political leadership (Miller 1992:161).

Kerala remained relatively unaffected by the violent aftermath of Partition, yet the Malabar branch of the Muslim League supported the broader agenda of the All-India Muslim League, including the demand for Pakistan. Miller identifies this as an "irony," considering the Mappila community's centuries-long tradition of coexistence with Hindus. However, this support may have been driven by pragmatic hopes for peace, as one League leader stated: "The moment Pakistan is given, the country will enjoy peace and harmony." Additionally, the cultural and geographic distinctiveness of Malabar— with its high concentration of Muslims—may have influenced the League's demand for a separate Muslim-majority province in South Malabar, proposed in the Madras Legislative Assembly in June 1947. Though the proposal was not pursued further, it reflected the uncertainties of the time rather than a secessionist agenda.

In contrast to their North Indian counterparts, Muslim political engagement in post-independence Kerala was a continuation of earlier patterns. The Mappila community maintained a consistent presence in legislative politics from the 1940s onward, primarily through the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). While the League was dismantled in several parts of India following Partition, the Madras Presidency branch, under the leadership of Muhammad Ismail, resolved to continue operating. A significant resolution passed on March 10, 1948, with 23 votes in favor and 7 against, stated that the League would henceforth focus on the "religious, cultural, educational, and economic interests of Muslims in the Union."

Muslim League's political strategies evolved over time. Political scientist Theodore Wright (1966:581) identified five major approaches adopted by the party: striving for separate representation, forming alliances with the Congress Party, aligning with opposition parties, integrating individuals into dominant parties, and working through non-political or minority-based organizations. In the immediate post-independence period, the Muslim League supported a democratic government in Madras under C. Rajagopalachari, although the Congress Party was reluctant to formally align with them due to its desire to portray itself as the sole national party and to deflect the "burden of Partition."

The formation of Kerala state in 1956 was a turning point in the history of Muslim politics. The IUML won 8 seats in the 1957 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections, and continued to expand its influence: 11 seats in 1960 and 1965, 14 in 1967, 12 in 1970, 16 in 1977, 19 in 1980, 18 in 1982, 14 in 1987, and 19 in 1991. Throughout this period, the League engaged in strategic alliance politics with both Left (Communist) and Right (Congress) fronts, aiming to cooperate with any parties or individuals willing to support Muslim interests. As Ashutosh Varshney (2002:165) notes, "The League's formula was to be small, be moderate, let caste dominate, and stay in Government."

Miller (1992:172) underscores that the Mappila community's entry into mainstream politics had a transformative impact. It redirected energy away from violent resistance toward political negotiation, instilled a sense of pride and respectability, and forced leaders to communicate, compromise, and

broaden their perspectives. This political engagement cultivated awareness of wider socio-political currents and fostered a pragmatic ethos of alliance-building.

Three key factors enabled the IUML to maintain its political relevance in post-independence Kerala. First was the socio-political composition of the state, where a significant portion of Muslims—across various religious and sectarian lines—supported the League, allowing it to function as an influential pressure group. Second, the geographic concentration of nearly 70% of the state's Muslims in Malabar strengthened the League's electoral base. Third, the historical weakness of the Congress Party in Malabar, combined with the League's strategic pragmatism, gave it enduring political leverage (Chiriyankandath, 1996:258). While the IUML's identity-based politics has often been criticized as communal, its sustained electoral success and commitment to constitutional democratic processes have also earned it credibility as a model of minority political engagement within the Indian context.

4. Shifting Trends in Muslim Politics in 1990s Kerala: Crisis, Mobilization, and Transformation

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in the trajectory of Muslim politics in Kerala. This period saw the emergence of new political organisations and shifts in the ideological orientations of the Muslim community, occurring amidst national political turmoil, rising communalism, and growing skepticism about the sustainability of secularism. Against this backdrop, several new political movements surfaced, challenging the long-standing dominance of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and reshaping the political landscape of Malabar.

Despite the IUML's continued dominance among the Mappila Muslim population since the pre-independence era, other major political formations, such as the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], established and maintained a significant presence within the community. While Congress had lost its central position in Muslim politics with the rise of IUML in the 1930s, it retained electoral strength in Muslim-majority constituencies and counted several prominent Muslim leaders among its ranks, such as Muhammad Abdurahman Sahib. Similarly, both the CPI and CPI(M) managed to develop a modest but influential support base among Mappilas, especially by addressing pressing issues like unemployment and socio-economic backwardness.

Roland E. Miller observes that communism gained traction within sections of the Mappila community as it presented both ideological challenges and opportunities: "Communism in turn made unexpectedly rapid inroads to the Mappila community, aided by its own contributions to that community's uplift, producing secularising tendencies and setting loose forces of change" (Miller, 1992:203). Yet, religious leadership strongly opposed Marxist critiques of religion, limiting deeper penetration of communist ideology. Even so, the early alliances between IUML and Communist parties fostered a political softening and created avenues for negotiation between ideological opposites.

Pinarayi Vijayan, former CPI(M) state secretary, argued that the Communist movement had long supported Mappilas, pointing to the introduction of Muslim reservations by Kerala's first Communist government in 1957 as a pioneering example (Vijayan, 2013:19). Nevertheless, Miller notes the ambivalent effect of communism—bringing both secularisation and material advancement, while reducing emphasis on religion. Though it did not displace the IUML, leftist influence served as a persistent ideological pressure and helped pave the way for alternative political expressions.

5. Emergence of New Trends and Catalysts for Change

Several factors contributed to the fragmentation and diversification of Muslim political expression in the 1990s. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 sent shockwaves through India's Muslim community and triggered introspection within the IUML. Accusations of inaction were levelled against both Congress and the IUML for their inability to prevent the attack. As Ashutosh Varshney notes, the IUML's national wing considered withdrawing support from Congress-led governments in protest,

while the state unit chose a moderate course, asserting that the demolition was a national tragedy rather than a communal one (Varshney 2002:165). However, this perceived passivity sowed seeds of discontent among sections of the Muslim electorate, particularly the youth.

The large-scale migration of Mappila Muslims to Gulf countries, especially from the 1970s onward, created a new socio-economic class within the community. The newly affluent Gulf-returnees challenged the traditional dominance of land-owning and business elites in local politics. This transformation disrupted old class hierarchies and created an assertive middle class that funded religious, educational, and political institutions. Migration redefined political influence and empowered newer actors within Muslim society (Osella and Osella, 2009).

The increasing exposure to global Islamic movements—particularly following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Gulf War—brought international discourses into local politics. Historical ties with the Arab world, long interrupted by colonial interventions, were revived through migration and political sympathies. The influence of Salafi thought and modernist thinkers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh also penetrated reformist movements in Kerala. Transnational political events—including the U.S. invasion of Iraq—spurred anti-imperialist sentiment. The hartal in Kerala following the execution of Saddam Hussein illustrates the extent to which global events affected local political expressions. As Chiriyankandath (1996) observes: "The Gulf boom helped give Mappilas a sense of self-confidence and, via the new intensity of contact with coreligionists outside Kerala, a consciousness of the breadth and horizons of their faith… [but] changes in the local and national environment remained more significant in shaping political attitudes."

The 1990s witnessed a media revolution within Kerala's Muslim community. The launch of Siraj (1984) and Madhyamam (1987) newspapers catalyzed critical engagement with mainstream Muslim leadership. These platforms provided a space for internal scrutiny and fostered political awareness. At the same time, increased access to education among Mappilas contributed to a more informed and participatory political culture, especially among the younger generation.

Organisational affiliations played a decisive role in Muslim political life. In the 1990s, transformations in religious organisations—both in their functioning and ideological stances—altered the political equations. Support from these bodies became crucial for electoral success. As a result, political parties, including the IUML, had to constantly negotiate and recalibrate their positions to align with influential religious currents.

6. New Muslim Politics and Critique of Traditional Parties

While many Indian states experienced large-scale communal violence and political disruption following the rise of Hindu nationalism and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, Kerala remained relatively calm on the surface. However, beneath this apparent calm, significant socio-political transformations were taking place—especially within the Muslim community. One of the most notable changes was the emergence of new political organisations that challenged the long-standing dominance of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML).

As mentioned earlier, several factors contributed to the transformation of Muslim League politics during this period. The influx of Gulf wealth had strengthened the material base of the party's traditional supporters—landowners, traders, and the rural elite. This bolstered their grip on local politics and allowed the Muslim League to maintain its position. However, critics argued that the party catered primarily to the interests of the affluent, while ignoring the needs and aspirations of the poorer sections of the community. Ironically, it was the Gulf migration—an avenue largely pursued by poorer Mappilas—that facilitated access to education and employment, creating a new, socially mobile class that the Muslim League failed to engage meaningfully.

This emerging socio-economic group, along with a technologically savvy and better-educated youth population, began to question the Muslim League's political relevance and effectiveness. The party's responses to these transformations were largely inadequate. It was in this context that new organisations, formed within the Muslim community itself, began to voice strong criticism of the League's policies and political alliances.

Kerala witnessed several communal outbreaks during this period. While communal violence in the first three decades of Kerala's statehood had been rare—resulting in only five deaths—the period between October 1990 and December 1992 saw six outbreaks, causing 30 deaths.

In January 1993, the formation of a new political outfit—the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The PDP sought to expand its reach beyond communal lines, claiming to represent Dalits and backward classes alongside Muslims. This strategic move aimed to rebrand the organisation and distance it from communal labels, positioning it instead as a broad-based social justice platform. The PDP soon entered the electoral arena, directly challenging the Muslim League.

The Muslim League's leadership viewed this new movement with concern. PK Kunjalikkutty, a prominent League leader, commented that such organisations "attract youth to fundamentalism by raising catchy slogans" and warned that following these groups would lead the community into educational and political setbacks. Nevertheless, these movements had already begun to exert a significant influence on the League, challenging its monopoly over Muslim political representation.

Parallel to the rise of the PDP was a major internal crisis within the Muslim League itself. This was triggered by disagreements between the national and state leadership, especially in response to the Babri Masjid demolition. Ebrahim Sulaiman Sait, the national president of the Muslim League, supported the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee's call to boycott Republic Day. However, the Kerala state unit of the League refused to comply, prioritising their role in the state government and political alliances over symbolic protest. This divergence marked a growing rift within the party.

Sulaiman Sait viewed the demolition of the Babri Masjid as symbolic of the erosion of secularism and the rule of law in India. In contrast, the state leadership preferred pragmatic politics and continuity within the United Democratic Front (UDF). The rise of the ISS and its popularity among sections of the Mappila youth further pressured the League into action. For instance, in July 1992, the League organised state-wide sit-in protests (dharnas) against the temple construction at Ayodhya—a rare assertive gesture. However, the party remained divided.

As tensions grew, Sait eventually resigned from the League. In April 1994, he announced the formation of a new political party—the Indian National League (INL)—at an All-India Muslim Political Convention in New Delhi. His new platform advocated for the restoration of the Babri Masjid, the creation of a Ministry of Minority Affairs at the Centre, reconciliation in Kashmir, and reservation of public sector jobs for Muslims. He also sought to build solidarity with Dalits, backward classes, and other marginalised groups, signalling a shift from communal identity to a broader socio-political agenda.

The emergence of the PDP and INL posed serious challenges to the Muslim League. Both parties attracted a segment of the Muslim electorate, leading to a noticeable decline in the League's vote share in subsequent elections. These developments marked a significant turning point in the political landscape of Kerala's Muslim community, introducing new voices and reshaping the contours of Muslim politics in the state.

7. Critique of Secular Patronage

The Congress party, on the other hand, offered Muslims a space within its larger secular-national framework but stopped short of addressing structural inequalities or deeper socio-political anxieties. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the Congress central government's failure to prevent it or hold accountable those responsible, further eroded the credibility of its secular claims. This was a moment of rupture: it exposed the limitations of so-called secular parties in defending minority rights in the face of rising majoritarianism.

It was within this context that the rhetoric of "true representation" and "community protection" gained traction. The emergence of PDP and INL symbolised not just a reaction to communal violence, but a critique of how traditional secularism had become transactional, selective, and at times complicit in the marginalisation of Muslim voices. These new parties rejected the passive politics of symbolic inclusion and sought to construct new platforms rooted in dignity, assertion, and social justice.

The PDP's appeal to Dalits and backward classes was particularly telling. It attempted to reframe Muslim politics not just as a minority grievance narrative, but as part of a larger struggle against systemic marginalisation. Similarly, Sulaiman Sait's INL explicitly criticised both communal and pseudo-secular forces, advocating for a politics that could engage more critically with the state while forging solidarity with other oppressed communities.

Moreover, this period witnessed a generational and ideological shift in political expectations among Kerala's Muslim youth. The return of migrants from the Gulf, exposure to global political currents, growing access to education, and the proliferation of community-centric print media contributed to a more politically conscious and assertive demographic. This emerging group, especially educated youth and students, began to view the IUML's leadership as outdated, self-serving, and unwilling to challenge the systemic roots of marginalisation. Their frustration was not only with what the League failed to do, but with its overall inability to evolve. For them, the League's rigid hierarchical structure, its dependence on coalition politics, and its preference for negotiation over confrontation seemed increasingly disconnected from the urgency of their lived realities—such as religious profiling, joblessness, and the global Muslim experience of marginalisation. The younger generation demanded a politics that was not simply about community protection but about ethical governance, equal opportunity, and bold ideological clarity. They were no longer satisfied with a form of secularism that operated only during elections and failed to address their real fears and aspirations.

In short, the crisis of the Muslim League and the rise of alternative political formations must be understood not only in terms of communal tensions but also as a fundamental critique of the politics of representation. Traditional secular parties had long practiced a version of inclusion that relied on symbolic gestures and patronage, but these were no longer adequate for a generation seeking dignity, participation, and justice.

8. Mobilization of Marginality and Protection

The political behaviour of Kerala's Muslim community underwent significant transformations from the early 1990s onwards, marked by a shift from elite-negotiated representation towards a more assertive, grassroots-driven mobilization. This transformation cannot be understood solely within the framework of conventional electoral politics. Rather, it reflects a deeper sociopolitical reorientation shaped by structural marginalization, perceived insecurities, and the emergence of a rights-based discourse within the community.

The language of protection and marginality began to dominate the political narrative, particularly after the traumatic events surrounding the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the rise of Hindu nationalist forces across India. While Kerala remained largely insulated from the scale of violence seen in states

like Gujarat or Uttar Pradesh, Muslims in the state increasingly felt the symbolic violence and erosion of secular legitimacy in Indian democracy (Hasan 1992). The inability of mainstream secular parties—notably the Congress and the Left—to respond meaningfully to these shifts created political openings for new movements, actors, and ideologies.

Within the framework of social movement theory, particularly the works of Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, the developments in Kerala can be interpreted through the lens of "political opportunity structures" and "contentious politics." As Tilly argues, movements emerge when existing institutions fail to accommodate evolving collective claims, and new actors begin to challenge the status quo through organized contention (Tilly 2004). The decline in the Muslim League's representational efficacy and the erosion of trust in Left secularism were key institutional failures that catalyzed the emergence of alternative Muslim political expressions.

The emergence of organizations like the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Indian National League (INL), and National Development Front (NDF) exemplifies this mobilization from below. These groups framed Muslim marginalization not merely as a religious issue, but as one of democratic disenfranchisement and developmental deprivation. They reframed the Muslim identity from being a passive, protected minority to an active, rights-claiming constituency. This reframing of identity is a core component of new social movements, as discussed by Tarrow (1998), where collective action becomes rooted in perceived injustice and framed through culturally resonant symbols.

This mobilization of protection also intersected with Kerala's unique socio-economic landscape, particularly the Gulf migration economy, which gave rise to a new Muslim middle class. While the traditional political leadership of the Muslim League was seen as representing the interests of the landed elite and merchant classes, this emerging middle class—many of whom had benefited from Gulf remittances and global exposure—sought more accountable, transparent, and proactive leadership. They were disillusioned with status-quo politics and began supporting movements and organizations that reflected their aspirations for education, dignity, and global Islamic solidarity.

The Sachar Committee Report (2006) played a pivotal role in amplifying this transformation. The report, which exposed the socio-economic backwardness of Muslims across India, was particularly resonant in Kerala where Muslims had often been portrayed as socio-economically advanced compared to other Indian states. The report's empirical grounding shattered this myth and offered a powerful cognitive opening for political mobilization (McAdam 1996). In regions like Malabar, the findings were widely disseminated through religious sermons, student groups, and local publications, contributing to an emergent political awareness among youth and marginalized subgroups within the community.

This mobilization was not limited to electoral politics but extended into the domain of civil society and welfare. The decline of state-driven development, especially in peripheral Muslim-majority regions, enabled the rise of non-state welfare organizations—run by charities, religious groups, and reformist movements. These entities provided education, healthcare, and relief services, becoming de facto providers of state functions. In doing so, they created what Partha Chatterjee calls "political society" (Chatterjee, 2004), where claims to rights are negotiated outside the domain of formal state mechanisms, often through community-based institutions.

Furthermore, the rise of non-state welfare networks resulted in the politicization of everyday life. These organizations shaped political subjectivities by introducing concepts of Islamic governance, justice, and ummah consciousness, often through informal education and social media platforms. This phenomenon aligns with the ideas of Manuel Castells on networked social movements, where new

technologies and informal channels play a central role in mobilizing and shaping collective identities (Castells, 2012).

The result was the rise of a new right-consciousness among Muslims in Kerala. This did not imply a shift towards conservatism per se, but rather an assertion of civil rights, entitlements, and political dignity and began to assert political agency through both electoral and non-electoral means. These developments had profound implications for voter behavior and political participation. Studies and field reports from the late 2000s onward indicated higher voter turnout in Muslim-majority constituencies, especially among youth and first-time voters. Moreover, traditional vote banks began to fragment, as new political groups challenged the hegemony of the Muslim League. While the League maintained a significant presence, it was increasingly forced to respond to issues it had long ignored, such as reservations, minority rights, and educational backwardness.

Political scientist Ashutosh Varshney's (2002) work on ethnic conflict and civic life helps contextualize these shifts. Varshney emphasizes the role of civil society networks in either mitigating or exacerbating ethnic tensions. In Kerala, the dense networks of intercommunal civic engagement—combined with relatively robust institutions—prevented the kind of large-scale violence seen elsewhere. However, within the Muslim community itself, intra-community civic activism led to the rise of multiple centers of political influence, resulting in both greater democratization and increased factionalism.

This mobilization of marginality and protection among Kerala's Muslims from the 1990s onward reflects a paradigmatic shift in minority politics. No longer confined to elite bargaining or coalition politics, Muslim political expression in Kerala has become diverse, rights-oriented, and embedded in civil society. It critiques the limitations of Indian secularism, reclaims identity through welfare and education, and asserts democratic rights through grassroots activism. As the social bases of support change and as political awareness deepens, the Muslim community is not merely reacting to majoritarianism but proactively shaping its future in the Indian public sphere.

9. Conclusion

Since the 1990s, Muslim political mobilization in Kerala has undergone a profound transformation, marking a decisive shift from traditional elite-led representation and secular patronage toward a more assertive, grassroots-oriented, and rights-based political engagement. Catalyzed by structural marginality, cultural anxieties, and the inadequacies of mainstream political platforms, this evolution reflects a broader struggle for dignity, justice, and substantive citizenship. The emergence of new actors like the PDP and INL, the expanding role of non-state welfare organizations, and the influence of the Sachar Committee Report have all deepened political consciousness within the community. Framed by social movement theory (Tilly 2004; Tarrow 1998), this mobilization represents both a strategic response to exclusion and a constructive assertion of identity and protection. It has challenged the monopoly of traditional parties like the IUML, while encouraging greater pluralism, civic activism, and non-electoral participation. Kerala thus offers a distinctive model of minority mobilization in India—one that is forward-looking, institutionally grounded, and capable of negotiating both democratic inclusion and autonomy. Yet, sustaining this momentum requires constant vigilance against internal divisions and external threats, ensuring that the pursuit of justice and empowerment remains resilient in the face of a changing political landscape.

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