

Ulemas and the Internet: A Case Study of Muslim Scholars' Engagement with New Media in Kerala

For last two decades, there has been a burgeoning interest in a strange merge, Islam and the new global media technology. This merger has spawned a tremendous amount of interesting works, works that have, in effect, opened new fields of enquiry. The socio-political manifestation of this merge is a serious point of concern in the academic discourse also. Likewise, the proliferation of new media (especially the internet and satellite television) has energized a multitude of unprecedented expressions in Islamic societies. New political meanings are also being created collaboratively through the circulation of global media technology and the exchange of ideas attached to it within the 'local Islamic context'. However, the potential of the new media to influence the Muslim Societies lies not simply in its contribution to disseminate liberal ideas or instill radical religious ideologies but its ability to form a virtual 'public sphere'¹, where the attitudes and interests of different sorts of Muslims are increasingly defined and shaped.

Numerous studies have noted that the rapid globalization of media and the new opportunities and spaces it provides for different groups imply that diverse voices (especially of women, minorities and exiles) are increasingly being heard in various public spheres². Nevertheless, this development poses some genuine concerns-can the current technological process be pluralized enough to accommodate the activities of Muslims or do they have to create their own spaces around the homogenized spaces-being the major one. This question becomes very relevant, when a large section of population looking

¹Formally, the public sphere is a concept put forward by German critical philosopher Jurgen Habermass The public sphere means to indicate the existence of any space between 'the private' and 'the state', and is a locale within which the state can be criticized. Subscribing to Habermass' view, Corner defines public sphere as being 'the space within a society, independent both of state power and of private, corporate influence, within which information can freely flow and debate on matters of public, civic concern can openly proceed. See Habermass (1992) and Corner (1995). The public sphere is an issue of relevance to the Internet since it is a major site through which the public sphere operates.

² See Mamoun (1999) Edmund (2000) and Dina (2007).

at the newfound popularity of new technology among Muslim youth in suspicious mode³. Similarly there is, indeed, a conceptual danger that in a desire to highlight these 'virtual' public spheres, we simply fall into some orientalist perspectives looking askance at the levels of technological sophistication among Muslims. The extent to which the Internet is opening up new channels of communication for Muslims especially in a minority set up, thus, remains an area requires further enquiry.

One particularly potent argument in this context is of Nancy Frasers'. She has criticized the original conception of public sphere for its alleged exclusion of women and minority groups. In an appreciative criticism, she argues that in original Habermasian formula, participants in this sphere were a part of the educated male elite, who would mediate between society and governmental, economic and other structures⁴. Frasers' use of the term counterpublic⁵ becomes significant in the Muslim minority context. Counterpublics can be seen as the spaces in which different marginalized groups seek to contest exclusion and hegemonic practices.

As happens elsewhere, new means of communication have provided many Muslim groups with an intermediate space and new means of sharing experiences on a "virtual space" beyond their limited conceptual and physical spaces. In the Arab world, scholars have recognized the multiple use of the Internet, both as an enhancer of state power as well as a promoter of new conversations in civil society.⁶ The Internet is, thus, both an opportunity and a challenge. It creates new patterns of interaction and activism, may be in a

³ Access to new means of communication technologies or owning state-of the art electronic gadgets-in others' case determines one's 'mobility', the same forms to be a 'point of serious concern' with regard to Muslim youth in a more security- obsessed global situation. Lap tops and CDs confiscated from Muslim youth become source of worry like Kalashnikov.

⁴ The activities of women and minorities online form an arena where these groups invent and circulate counter-narratives to the hegemonic versions of 'truth'. See Fraser (1992: 122)

⁵ Fraser argues that Habermas' conception of the ideal public sphere was far too narrow, and subordinated groups (women and minorities etc.) create "counterpublics" where they come together in order to challenge the hegemony and assert identities. See Fraser (1992: 121, 23).

⁶ See Wheeler (2006).

subtle manner, despite the state censorship. In western societies, the Internet holds great potential for widening experiences and interactions in the minority set up.

Of the new global means of communication, it is Internet that lays an increasingly central part, if not the most important, in the battle of hearts and minds of Muslims. Though the trajectory began in late 1990s, Internet started playing a major role in Muslim lives in the post 9/11 context. The event and its aftermath had taken Islamic cyberspace to a wider audience simultaneous to stimulating the development of new sites and content from a variety of perspectives previously unimaginable. As a result a broad range of liberal and militant Muslim expressions can be located online. They can contain news, views, informal chats and social networking opportunities that go beyond the traditional ideological and religious frames of reference of many Islamic organizations.

The Internet has also become a significant element of propagation and identity for Muslim individuals and organizations. The complex spectrum of dialogues, cyber networks and various applications of the media in the Islamic world speak, of course, of the presence of a Cyber Islamic Environment.⁷ Gary R Bunt draws attention to this aspect of the cyberspace marks with the proliferation of Islamic websites, chat rooms, e-mails lists and other related media activity-including expressions of beliefs and the articulation of agendas-as a phenomenon heralding a maturity of Cyber Islamic Environments⁸. The extensive application of Internet as a means of projecting Muslim authority and disseminating religious opinions represents a long-term and technologically adept integration of religious symbolism and traditional notions of power⁹.

This development is more conspicuous among the Muslims of Kerala as Kerala Muslim society, since the late 1990s, is witnessing an exponential

⁷ Cyber Islamic environments' is an umbrella term, which according to Bunt "refers to a variety of contexts, perspectives and applications of the media by those who define themselves as Muslims." For further details see Bunt(2003:4-5).

⁸ Bunt (2003:2-3)

⁹ Bunt (2003:2)

growth of new media related activities. The physical signs of this change are very explicit and being reflected in proliferation of Islamic websites, blogs, profiles on the social networking sites, Youtube Clippings and other related sites of expression of beliefs and articulation, rapid development of a market for Islamic tutor CDs and easy availability of popular materials on the net.

The Traditional *ulema*'s engagement with new technology is the most significant and interesting phenomenon. Perhaps, more striking is the newfound popularity of websites and blogs among them for variety of purposes like religious (sometimes political also) mobilization, opinion building and even for fund raising. The increasing popularity of new media has, of course, brought a change in pattern of religious discourses and the ways in which they have been received among Kerala Muslims. The scope of this paper revolves around the different ways in which traditional and modern *ulemas* use the new media for assertion and for winning over the hearts and minds of ordinary Muslims in Kerala. Generally, there is perhaps little point in discussing about Islamic scholars' engagement with new media as their take up in the Internet all over the world doesn't lag behind others, but there is very point in discussing about the case of traditional *ulemas* in Kerala. The enquiry makes sense, especially when these scholars are predominantly having limited access to modern education. It is also interesting to know about the technological sophistications and the means through which these sophistications engender and develop new networking patterns among *ulemas* cutting across the conservative-reform continuum. Another concern of this paper hinges on the change in nature of religious and cultural consumption as a result of the spread of new forms of communication.

Shifting Idioms of Connectivity

Kerala is home to one of the world's most virulently 'glocalized' and even syncretic Muslim traditions in which global and local are almost engineered to mix in prescribed way. Kerala Muslims social history is an odd lot as having very little in common with their pan-Indian counterparts. A complex layering

of historical influences has left its mark on the community and made its history a global or proto-global process with its own internal and external dynamics. The social identity of them is, therefore, structured by a repertoire of different historical events, of which maritime trade and colonialism are the most significant two. Thanks to Kerala's extensive ancient and medieval trade with the outside world Mappilas had more in common with the Muslims of far-flung Hadramawt or Sumatra.

This old pattern of 'global' dynamics remains operative thanks to the new processes like gulf migration and globalization. The circulation of global means of technology with its capacity to breed new forms of connectivity (electronic) among fellow Muslims living in faraway places also has contributed in transforming the character and terms of reference of 'globality' in Mappila life. The line of enquiry also leads to include a large number of Non-Resident Kerlaite (NRKs) living abroad. One important analytic issue about the Kerala Muslim blogosphere centres on the dynamic relationship between Kerala and its diasporas, mainly in the Gulf countries.

Kerala has witnessed an explosion of new media and this transformation has taken place within a specific context with a capacity to absorb and adapt to these new developments. Kerala Muslims' response to new media, however, is an issue that has caught people flatfooted. Scholars attempt to catch it with old butterfly nets or even flirt with the global discourse, when something different is required. It really represents an analytically interesting but intellectually troubling case. The complexity stems from their reaction to globalization, a process that engendered an active spread of new means of interaction. Globalization along with the new mode of connectivity a corollary of the former, is, generally, seen by many Muslim scholars as menacing and threatening to their identity and tradition. But the challenges being made by the process and the way Kerala Muslims respond to them involves quite lot of contradictions.

The enquiry can be started conveniently from the mosaic-like approaches towards the issue of globalization in Kerala. Politically speaking, globalization is a 'term of abuse' or a pejorative term attracts too much of

wrath from people cutting across political lines. People belong to left-right spectrum handle it with a great amount of disinclination. Globalization is conceived of here as yet another cycle of the constant imposition and expansion of European imperialism, from the line of traditional leftist thinking.

Muslims of Kerala, however, have displayed a diverse response. It is rather selective as certain features have been eagerly appropriated, while others have been raucously rejected. Increased global connectivity is one among the features which are being accepted whole-heartedly by Kerala Muslims. The attitude towards newfound connectivity among Kerala Muslims is, thus, shaped by political outlook of various streams of thought and particular ideologies; liberals welcome it; radical conceive of it as an extension of foreign domination and cultural hegemony. To many, it seems to be a major case of aberration or glitch in their normal life. Anyway, despite the shades of opinion, Kerala Muslim society transformed from one of the most disengaged parts of colonialism¹⁰ to the beneficiaries of global media technology in less than one generation. Cyberspace in Kerala has been elevated to new heights as a part of rapid changes in India's communication industries. But the sudden popularity of it among Kerala Muslims needs to be discussed in a different milieu. As discussed elsewhere, the Internet has, in its short existence, become a new public sphere, where people from different streams express themselves and enter into wider interactions with others. This virtual public sphere became a tribune for self-expression and self-disclosure for many groups. Such a space for dialogue is very significant in Kerala's case where street level interactions among different religious communities became limited.

Secondly, there is the issue of a new sense of 'public' emerged in Kerala, which to a considerable extent, is premised, to a large extent, on

¹⁰As a result of their centuries-long agitation against British rule, Mappilas dissociated themselves from all forms of 'colonialism'. They distanced themselves even from modern education. This self-imposed alienation made their social development relatively isolated from the mainstream. See Osellas (2007).

conceptual models of understanding reality than empirical ones. Interestingly, to this new public, Muslims are not real beings, but conceptually created 'objects' or almost like 'fantasies' exist in media that can conveniently be loved or hated, befriended or despised, trusted or suspected. The new media debate must have aided this process.

As happens elsewhere, others' understanding of Muslim society can be influenced by a set of 'transnational' debates taking place in a distant place. Such debates provide inputs to the people for taking positions regarding the issues related to Muslims than the real life experiences. The question, whether Muslims are a part of a particular society thus becomes not simply a local one with so much of cross-cultural perspectives involved. People talk about Muslim identity in a non-empirical form. Islam as a religion and Muslims as a society as well becomes a subject that has to be explained or understood conceptually. Kerala Muslims' group identity and the public sphere, in which they are negotiated, therefore, are increasingly mediated by such 'virtual' practices. Street level interactions become seldom instrumental in creating Muslim identity or understanding a Muslim self in the neighborhood.

Cassette to Cyber-Sermons

The Internet first entered the lives of Kerala Muslims (mainly upper and middle class) in the late 1990s¹¹. But, even before the upper and upper middle class population had any access to the Internet, many theological schools and Arabic colleges with well-presented websites started making inroads into the cyberspace. The Internet quickly became one of the most important tools for indoctrination, especially among the tradition-oriented

¹¹ It is true that new media remains to be a reserve of Muslim elite, where access to technology is expensive, though there are channels for public Internet usage. IT department of the Government of Kerala has opened a network of Internet centres, called *Akshya* Internet cafes all over Kerala with a view to have Internet access for public.

*Sunni*¹² groups. They soon realized the potential of this new space to propagate their ideology. An astonishing amount of religious materials, including the Quran, religious and political texts, and even prayers were digitized and put online in Malayalam and Arabic language. In many of the *Sunni madrassas*, students had access to multiple sources of information that allowed them to have new perspectives and even to question the 'regimes of truth'. The Internet access also permitted them to slip beyond the doctrinal beliefs and to have encounter with other people with different points of view.

The electronic media now play a key mediatory role within an expanding arena of popular Islamic argumentation and deliberation among Muslims of Kerala. The trajectory began with audio-cassettes. Before audio-cassette it was the turn of radio, but unlike in the Arab world, because of the state monopoly, Muslim groups could not utilize radio for religious purpose¹³. In late 1970s and 80s audio-cassettes emerged as a major electronic tool for ideological indoctrination and a vehicle for the transmission of fundamentalist directives. This development was closely paralleled everywhere in the world. Cutting across the denominational lines, cassette sermon as a symbol of Islamic fanaticism caught up the popular imagination and listening to cassette sermons became a common and valued activity for millions of ordinary Muslims around the world. The reason for rapidly increasing popularity of cassettes partly remained 'political'. Iranian revolution and the circulation of Ayathollah Khomeini's recorded audio-cassette messages played a key role in the mobilization of radicals in the Islamic world.¹⁴ During

¹² The Sunni in the context of Kerala refers to those who follow the tradition. This ideological rift between tradition-reform has nothing to do with general Sunni-Shi division.

¹³ As the most popular media of the period, Leaders like President Jamal Abdal-Nasir of Egypt have used this tool skillfully in strengthening the popular base in the Arab world.

¹⁴ The menacing image of the cassette sermon as a symbol of Islamic fanaticism, according to Charles Hirschkind, "goes back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the circulation of Ayattollah Khomeini's recorded missives played a key role in the mobilizations leading up to the overthrow of the Shah. See Hirschkind (2006:2, 4).

this period, sermon tapes provided one of the prime means by which Islamic moral/ethical traditions have been recalibrated to a new political order.¹⁵

Coincidentally, it was Jamaat e- Islami al-Hind staunch supporters of Islamic revolution in Iran, who made cassette tape as a means of communicating religious and political messages popular in Kerala in the mid 1980s. While Islamic cassette sermons in the Arab world recently became associated with a miniscule few groups of underworld of militants and radical preachers, audio-cassettes have spawned interesting literary genres in Kerala; *Kathupattukal* -letters sending in the form of recorded song to spouses and parents back at home been the most dynamic one. Anyway, as has been happened all around the world, cassette-sermons had energized an Islamic revival which was reflected in the popularity of learning Quran, revitalizing Islamic forms of knowledge, participating in mosque study groups etc. especially among younger generation. The popularity of cassette sermon tapes also served the purpose of giving public prominence to new breed of orators with high competency in preaching and recitation techniques and well-designed speeches.

As Muslims of Kerala evolved to current state of sophistication, cassette sermon's inherent limitation and lack of possibility to initiate dialogue paved the way to its rejection.¹⁶ Almost parallel to it, there was the emergence of a new class of preachers with target audiences (mostly educated class) different from those of the classical *ulema*. These new Islamic 'cyber-evangelists' made their message relevant in ways different from traditional *ulema*, adapting their topics more appealing to the educated public¹⁷. Monotonous "*hurries* or angels of paradise" genre, which were often being told in *va'lu*-a sort night preaching-gave way to 'televangelism' or PowerPoint presentations. Among the majority Sunni folk, traditional *va'lu*,

¹⁵ Hirschkind (2006:2)

¹⁶ Cassette enables only an extension of one-sided authoritative discourse. Dialogues are difficult to pick up in such a media.

¹⁷ This phenomenon was not unique to Kerala but with world-wide spread producing techno-savvy new generation preachers. The development was very palpable in Kerala with the emergence of generation new cyber-evangelists like M.M.Akbar and Rahmathulla Kasimi representing two different streams; tradition and reform. These two people were the pioneers in introducing technologically equipped preaching.

which once acted a means for massive indoctrination lost its charm and replaced or abandoned for more advanced and effective mode of preaching with the help of novel electronic gadgets like LCD projector. While the new generation of preachers becoming the opinion leaders of the community, the mosques and *madrassas* like elsewhere, have once again become the anchors of new forms of public association.

Also to add, in the 1990s and the early 2000s Kerala witnessed a resurgence of faithfulness and public activities unprecedented in modern Kerala Muslim history. The physical signs of this change were very explicit; in mosque construction, proliferation of *halal* chicken shops and Quran learning classes and women switching over to *purdah*. The rapid development of a market for inexpensive Islamic books, easy availability of popular materials, tutor CDs and magazines was the other factor that heightened public's interest in religion. These literatures provided best means for people, who had a very little opportunity to study in *madrassas* or religious schools and to familiarize themselves with the fundamentals of their faith. Equipped with these newfound technological sophistications, a growing battalion of youngsters engaged with and sharpened their religious traditions they have inherited. This general mood was equally shared by the 'letters to the editors' appeared in popular Muslim magazines, with which people (mainly women) shared real issues, anxieties, tastes which hardly find expressions in public.¹⁸

In the early 2000 this trend was flourished further with the Internet. Websites and blogs now represent new communication genres for ordinary Muslims, Islamic movements and *ulemas*. Most Muslim groups use their websites and blogs as tools to propagate their political, ideological and religious ideas and the extensive application of the internet as a means of disseminating religious opinions. With frequent writing, posting views and visuals, the *ulemas* could demystify the blogosphere. It is quite interesting to

¹⁸ Women expressed their genuine concern regarding the thorny issues like globalization, though the answers to them were mostly evasive. Scholars, generally, were indifferent to these questions and some of them were of the opinion that too many questions could distort beliefs.

probe into, why internet is so appealing to them? A number of reasons have contributed to the expansion of blogs of which economic reasons are, no doubt, significant. Unlike other media, websites can be launched with very few economic resources. Blogging also has emerged as a versatile, easy to launch, and easy to re-launch medium. Likewise, certain religious views are safer, fast and smooth to articulate in cyberspace than in real space.

Interactive websites and blogs with Islamic content spreading across the world may be a persuasive factor encouraging *ulemas* to enter into by enhancing the appeal of the medium. Interactive websites and blogs are especially valuable in maintaining connection with their disciples across space, and in neutralizing the physical borders. Some of the modern *ulemas* take advantage of the Internet to have wide reach for their speeches among larger and anonymous public. The rapid increase in the diasporic use of Internet is the other significant phenomenon to be discussed in this context. The new media (satellite television and Internet) has got much of relevance in the maintenance of community and religious connection for the Gulf migrants. The use of Internet by the Muslim migrants demonstrates how a 'micro-virtual' Muslim community is being thrived by sharing experiences and circulating religious knowledge across space. The extensive presence of liberal voices in cyberspace can also be a motivating factor for the conservative *ulemas* to make a strong presence on the blogosphere. Blog writing by women bloggers, especially, has become an important challenge for them. While the majority retains their traditional non-techno-savvy position with regard to religious opinion and authority and a number of authorities and individuals have sought to challenge or negate Internet's influence, there is subtle change among *ulemas* cutting across the tradition-reform spectrum.

Islamizing Blogosphere?

As discussed earlier, the new technologies have brought a deep-seated change in pattern of religious and cultural consumptions among the Kerala Muslims. The recorded speeches and YouTube clippings of sermons have

extended the audiences for several imams¹⁹. People cutting across traditional-modern continuum seek online theological guidance from *ulemas* on each issue. Although contents seem to have not acquired much of sophistication, cyber-sermons as a symbol of active Islamization has caught up the popular imagination. The sermon may be derived from the Internet, but being disseminated through traditional channels and the traditional mode of theological indoctrination is still operative. Yet there is a lot to be said about the way in which *ulemas* have engaged with these new media forms as this engagement has evolved encompassing a whole new level of conceptual understanding.

The Internet has become a way of making themselves publicly visible and expressive for many marginalized groups including women and minorities all over the world. Given rising connectedness and new technologies that make individual mobility across the borders theoretically possible, this development may not seem surprising. But the trend has been a significant social advance, making possible the exploration of new avenues that were previously precluded.

Through their personal narration, women bloggers from Kerala transgress several socio-cultural boundaries. With many tender themes of love and sex, blogs always push the boundaries of permissible expression. Throughout Kerala, blogs may be proved to be an invaluable tool, not just for regular communication. The women seem rather free to speak through such networks that also offer increasingly sophisticated entertainment and ways of communication. Long solitary work culture inside homes may be fuelling increase in time spent on these sites. The presence of Muslim women in the most popular social network orkut is a testimony to this popularity. Orkut provides a site of a multitude of expression for women folk and provide a site for a whole host of overlapping and interlocking cultural structures. As they wrestle with new uncertainties and new choices, many Muslim women are the front-runners of these developments. They speak 'politics' through their

¹⁹ Sermons are being telecast in 'live' or recorded formats, or transcribed and circulated by e-mail, discussion rooms and the web.

own concerns in a subtle manner. Nevertheless, the obsession with social networking, which according to a recent survey by the author²⁰, is categorically no longer the preserve of teenagers and house wives, but has been adopted by a growing army of *ulemas*, determined to link up with acquaintances and students.

The use of the Internet by *ulemas* reflects an outward vision combined with a global target audience of Malayalees, while also paying attention to locals. The Internet enables to make focused discussions and to disseminate their message to followers or to interested observers, especially in the Gulf. Ordinary Muslims have begun to use the internet to find answers to questions related to faith and practice. There is, in fact, a rapid increase in the number of takers for popular Islamic authorities and their *fatwas*²¹. Nonetheless, it does not mean that there are not liberal voices which often appear with counter-fatwas to those of conservative clergies in many politically sensitive issues.

The Internet has many uses for religious scholars' organizations. Of particular interest in this regard is [www. nicheoftruth.org](http://www.nicheoftruth.org), a website dedicated to online Da'wa. Niche of truth²² maintains the website with efforts "to convince Muslims and enlighten others of the excellence of Islam, its teachings and values." The Website provides a wide-range of online services like weekly online classes. The group conducts a correspondence course online for those who are interested in learning about the religion. This course is only for non-Muslims and "help in imparting a reasonable knowledge about Islamic teachings and principles." Niche of truth's online magazine in Malayalam *Sneha Smavadam* concentrates only on *da'wa* related topics. They maintain a moderate voice denouncing violence and terrorism through website and inculcate the futility of present forms of Jihad by pronouncing

²⁰ This survey was conducted by the author as a part of an ongoing project on Muslim scholars' engagement with the new media.

²¹ Ulemas were up in arms on the Internet, when the issue of soccer spree in Muslim dominated Malappuarm district of Kerala came. Some of them went to the extent of issuing online fatwas to denounce it as a purely escapist form of mass entertainment involving so much of Islamic elements.

²² A front organization of Kerala Nadvathul Mujahiddin (KNM), which was formed in 1950, under the leadership of the Salafi scholars.

the need of tolerance. Creative Media a wing of Niche of Truth releases audio and video CDs which give reply to the criticisms leveled against Islam by its 'enemies.' The website also promotes the sale of books and pamphlets and tutor discs published by the organization. Giving 'scholarly' advises for the needy people on prophets teaching, practicability of Quranic verses, orientation programmes for newly converted Muslims, nichoftruth.org has made deep inroads into the moderate Muslim mind.

Radical voice is well-represented by Imam's council's²³ website. It is supposed to be the most radical among the groups that maintain websites with explicit political purpose. Imam's council and its parent organization National Democratic Front (Known popularly by its acronym NDF) push their way through the insecurity of migrant Muslims who live mainly in the gulf countries vis-à-vis the rise of Hindu communalism. Through a variety of websites, the NDF has succeeded in administrating an element of fear.²⁴ Islam as a faith and Muslims as a whole have been presented under something of a siege in a climate of growing 'Islamophobia.' With recurring sensational demands on issues like rebuilding of Babri Masjid, implementation of reservation policies and virulent attack on Sangh-Parivar organizations (secular organizations as well for their soft stand on Hindu communalism), the NDF could take the lead among Muslim organizations. The Internet is used by the NDF to post messages about the groups' mission statements and to relay photographs, audio and video messages with explicit political content and footages of sensitive issues and groups' activities. Their website is often used to post the latest news related to the NDF and its affiliates.

The most comprehensive website among tradition-oriented *sunni* folk is www.islamonnet.com. This site is maintained by Samastha Kerala

²³ *Ulemas* wing of the National Democratic Party an extremist group emerged in response to the insecurity lurked among the Muslims during the post-Babri period.

²⁴ So is, to a certain extent, true with Hindu communal organizations also. While 'un-Islamic' pro-western policies compounding with week-kneed options of many of the Gulf countries in the present international scenario becomes a rallying point for Muslim migrants to identify with the radicals, the ill-treatment towards Hindu migrant labours on religious grounds becomes a considerable reason for spread of communalism among Hindu migrants.

Jamiyyathul Ulema, a council of eminent Muslim scholars established in 1926, to serve the religious needs of Muslims in Kerala. The obvious mandate of this website is to present a *sunni* version of Islam to the world. To fulfill this objective, www.islamonnet.com renders a wide-range of services including issuance of *fatwas* on different issues. The service of a pool of *sunni* scholars is available online to give answers to the questions of believers. There is discussion forum to mediate regular discussions on issues relating to Islam and Muslims, basic Islamic teachings and Islamic spirit and manner. Additionally, the option of online quiz is there with the purpose of updating general knowledge of visitors. www.Islamonnet.com offers a section dedicated to downloading *khutbas*, *mawlid*s and various *duas*.

Another popular *sunni* site is www.islamkerala.com , being maintained by another *sunni* faction led by A.P. Aboobacker Musliar (known popularly as Kanthapuram) with a stated purpose to “educate Kerala Muslims in the spirit of Quran, *sunna* and traditions. This site endeavors to promote “a dialogue in consonance with Islamic teachings and in an Islamic spirit” may be interpreted variously as an embodiment of conservatism and tradition. The discussions, however, are not limited to religious affairs. There are debates on controversial issues like decriminalization of homosexuality and women’s reservation bill. As a part of online service, it provides access to e-books containing *mawlid*s²⁵ and prayer songs. It also sells lectures and *khutbas* on tape, video, and CD. There is a photo gallery of different places suggested for *ziyarat*. Online *ziyarat* to some of the shrines, mausoleums and historically important places is the unique feature of this site. www.islamkerala.com also gives details on the Prophet Mohammed’s *muajizats* (procession of divine powers) and *karamats* (miracles) for those who are interested in such topics.

The website www.muslimpath.com, which is claimed to be an “effort to spread and propagate the right path of Islam all over the world” is the other popular site maintained by the same group. This sites concern revolves around the activities of enemies who are inside Islam by name, “opening sub

²⁵ Works praising the possession of divine powers and miracles of the Prophet and his companions or saintly figures in the form of songs constitute the bulk of Islamic literature in Kerala.

folders in the great portals; or opening their own portals, are continuously spreading false ideas among unblemished people.” The obvious reason behind the creation of this e-Da'wa cell is, therefore, to tackle the efforts of other Islamic groups in Kerala.

Jama't e-Islami al-Hind²⁶ a moderate voice among the political Islamist group maintains the website www.jihkerala.org. The site claims that Jamaat-e-Islami Hind has developed “a distinctive style and methodology in propagating the message of Islam in the indigenous society.” Anyway, by giving importance to news and views, this site stands apart from others. Through the analysis of news, this site speaks politics in a subtle manner though the site's overall political orientation is difficult to ascertain. This site also allows group members and supporters to find out about the groups' latest actions. However, the major purpose of the site is to give publicity to the social welfare programmes like drinking water projects in rural Kerala undertaken by the organization. The range of items given, however, is too vast; from better parenting to how to plan your holiday.

Apart from these, there are some independent sites without the patronage of any Islamic organizations. Their purposes range from providing guidelines on how to convert to Islam to timing of daily prayers. www.slideshare.net/islahitube/thouheed provides recorded speeches of *Salafi* leaders with downloading options. This site also keeps an index of debates taken place between their leaders and *sunni* scholars regarding the issue of tomb worshipping and stuff like that. Websites act as a convenient way for collecting money donations for some organizations. While some websites gives health and medical information, some sites provide tip for the Muslim businessmen how to investment their money intelligently. The business information also includes financial news, product or services. The Internet is also used by the groups to sell books, tapes, CDs, and other materials.

As a collaborative venue blog's popularity is, generally, high among Kerala Muslims. Muslim blogs provide not only the news of the events

²⁶ An organization founded in 1941 under the leadership of the eminent revivalist scholar Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi.

happening locally or globally but also instantaneous comments on each issue. What sets blog apart from other internet sources is their personal way in communicating with growing power to mobilize people behind a cause. Blogging like many sensitive issues like Gujarat carnage had fertilized a series of heated online discussions. Blogs gained a boost in popularity during the days of Gujarat carnage, when mainstream Malayalam media showed a lukewarm interest in the issue²⁷. They emerged as important sources of news and visuals though much of the Muslim blogs in Kerala are filters taking information from other similar sources and trying to present in a more 'authentic way'.²⁸

Among scholars and students of religion, in particular, the blogging phenomenon is represented as dynamic and evolving. They have utilized the blogosphere as a 'classical social network' and blogs proved to be an invaluable tool for them not just for regular communication, but a new communication genre for various sorts of mobilization. There are some recognizable genres and categories of blogs among *ulema* bloggers. A radical section of *ulemas* is developing powerful political voices analyzing national and international issues. Extremists among them write more about politics little about spiritual. Their approach to religion is much more political than spiritual. They discuss issues ranging from international issues (like the issue of Palestine) to local or national socio-political issues (like reservation) and their political opinions range from more conservative to reformist. Political blogs, sometimes, spread hawkish views and most of such bloggers are young and well educated. Nevertheless, this genre show extreme diversity to accommodate private concerns also; most notably personal diaries,

²⁷ As a sort of citizen journalism, blogs are reshaping current media practice in Kerala. Media attention to blogs has grown from a thin proportion to the increase in the number of blogs posted and the interesting issues they handled.

²⁸ Muslim blogs, generally, give readers the impression that they are getting unmediated raw information. Blogs provide users with an audience and relatively audible voice; they also offer an alternative media space where news ignored by mainstream media can be published.

photologs, and some clear examples of attempts at creative writing. Some of the blogs remain a platform for expressing views, opinions and polemics rather than disseminating information and news.

Conclusion

The Internet in the Muslim world has been a site of political struggle through the use of chat rooms, e-mail and websites. The events of September 11, especially, catalyzed a cyberwar and today, after the event, we are becoming more aware of the connections between Islamic fundamentalism and cyberspace. But the scholars' engagement with diverse forms of electronic communication and the new media in Kerala, can not be seen in this context. There are, of course indications of active Islamization through the spread of new media among Kerala Muslims though the depth of it is a subject of debate. No doubt, new Islamic beliefs and practices are pervading some of the aspects of social as well as political relations than ever before. But the new 'Islamic turn' in Kerala is largely a product of several interlinked factors and the global religio-political developments not being the significant one.

Even in the new politico-religious context, Muslim communalism in Kerala can't be placed under the common rubric of 'political Islam' and there are only a few takers for this theory. Examining the recent developments, one can say, in no uncertain terms, that the community's connection with the global *ummah* (whether real or imagined) remains undeveloped and their globalist expansion looks less striking. The emergence of communalism among Muslims rather has some local roots and they specifically include decade-long competition among communities for representation in politics and government, cold war among the community-based interest groups that often does not develop into major rifts. The only pan-Indian phenomenon which makes profound influence on it is virulent Hindu nationalism that is often mild in form and expression in Kerala.

The proliferation of websites and blogs, therefore, illustrates a different story. A broad-brush painting of all such developments as leading

'inevitably' towards the making of Pax Islamica²⁹ on the Internet looks less catchy. The developments do not reveal the solidarity of vision among the groups or they do not converge in their agreement on the establishment of a Pax Islamica. The Internet is seldom used by the Islamic groups in Kerala to respond to changing global political climate. A close look at the cyberwar would reveal that the rift is among different Muslim groups, not essentially between Muslim and non-Muslim organizations and the cyberspace is an extend zone in which conflicts among various Islamic groups are carried out.

Nonetheless, these deliberative practices are oriented toward a sort of politics, which becomes an embarrassment to conventional understandings. Their purpose is anyway not to contribute to the formation of a virtual *umma*. Rather, these activities collectively constitute to the formation of an Islamic counterpublic in a minority set up. There is, of course, a dialogic aspect in this with which many individuals negotiate their identity and articulate their positions. New technologies may enable an extension of an authoritative religious discourse. But at the same time, the spaces they mediate, at least in Kerala's context, must be understood as self-organizing constituted mainly by the circulation of discourses with less reach and control of any external agencies. Both the *ulemas* and ordinary Muslims are exercising their free agency in the context of these independent discourses and are shaping the conditions of their collective existence without any external norms or formal mediations.

Bibliography

1. Chopra, Rohit, 2005, "Islam and the Internet in South Asia" <http://www.goethe.de/ges/phi/prj/ffs/the/iss/fa1748723.htm> accessed on 10th March, 2010.

²⁹This Pax Islamica normally communicates through website's or blog's statements on the necessity of establishing a global Muslim community with stress on Jihad.

2. Corner, Joseph, 1995, "Television: Form and Public Address, in Edward Arnold et al (eds.), *The Media in Australia: Industries, texts, Audiences* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin)
3. Eickelman, Dale, 1992, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in contemporary Arab Societies", *American Ethnologist*, 19, no.4, November, pp. 643-55
4. Fandy, Mamoun, 1999, "Cyber resistance; Saudi Oppostion between Globalization and Localization", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 41, no.1, 1999, January, pp. 124-147
5. Fandy, Mamoun, 2000, "Information Technology, Trust, and Social Change in the Arab World Author", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 378-394.
6. Fraser, Nancy, 1992, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in ", in Calhoun, *Habermass and Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press), pp.120-23
7. Gary R. Burnt, 2003, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*, (London: Pluto Press)
8. Ghareeb, Edmund, 2000, "New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assesment", *Middle Eastern Journal*, vol. 54, no.3, Summer, pp. 395-418.
9. Habermass, Jurgen, 1992, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", in Calhoun, *Habermass and Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press), pp. 421-426.
10. Katz, J.E., Rice, R.E., 2002, *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement and Interaction* (MIT Press: Cambridge, M.A.)
11. Khatib, Lina, 2003, "Communicating Islamic Fundamentalism as Global Citizenship", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 27, no.1, pp. 389-409
12. Matar, Dina, "Heya TV: A Feminist Counterpublic for Arab Women", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 27, No.3, 2007, pp.13-24.

- 13.Hirschkind, Charles, 2006, *The Ethical Soundscape: Casette sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press)
- 14.Hirschkind Charles, and Larkin, Brian, 2008, "Media and the Political Forms of Religion", *Social Text*, 96, vol.26, no.3, pp.1-13
- 15.Osella, Filippo and Osella, Caroline, 2007, "Muslim Entrepreneurs between India and the Gulf", *ISIM Review*, 19, Spring, pp.8-9
- 16.Wheeler, Deborah, 2006, "Empowering Publics: Information Technology and Democratization in the Arab World-Lesson from Internet Cafes and Beyond", *Research Report*, Oxford Internet Institute, July.