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INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE ISLAMIC THOUGHT: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SAYYED ISMAIL (1936-2010)

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****ABSTRACT****

This paper examines the intellectual contributions of Sayyed Ismail Bukhari (1936-2010), a great scholar, author and reformer from South India. Sayyed Ismail, who is also locally known as Panoor Thangal, produced seminal works on Quranic exegesis, hadith, fiqh and theology during his lifetime. Despite the profound personality and pivotal works, no serious studies are found which critically scrutinise his theses on Islamic thought and religious studies. In addition, his books, mainly written in Arabic and some of them even published in some Arab countries, shed light on his Islamic thought, which upholds the dimensions of relevantization of Islamic knowledge. He exclusively chose Arabic, not his mother tongue Malayalam, in his writings for a reason. His target audience is not limited to his community in Kerala only but also the Muslim world. This paper analyses his works to further understand the contributions and impacts of Sayyed Ismail to Islamic thought in light of his various academic engagements and activism. Sayyed Ismail is indeed a reformer from Kerala whose reform works involve bringing the Muslim communities to champion the cause of humanity based on the teachings of Islam.

**Keywords:** Sayyed Ismail Bukhari; South India; Islamic thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Islam in Kerala traces back to the era of the Prophet Muhammad. A team led by the Prophet’s companion Malik ibn Dinar came to Kerala, and their noble and magnetic character attracted people to Islam. Malabar Coast, which forms the northern part of Kerala, became a busy market with foreign traders who came for its spices, aromatic wood, and hardwood. The Hindu rulers then were wholeheartedly welcoming the international traders offering various grants and facilities. This approach enticed more merchants from the middle east to Kerala and resulted in a long-lasting relationship between Malabar and Arabia (Shana Salim, 2017). Other than trade products, the locals and internationals exchanged their culture, religion and character. In this trade-off, two major imports to Kerala were Christianity and Islam.

Cheraman Perumal was one of the earliest people in India to embrace Islam (Haseena V.A, 2015). He witnessed the splitting of the moon and knew that it occurred as a miracle of Prophet Muhammad. This incident led him to Makkah and embraced Islam with a new name Tajuddeen. The oldest mosque in the Indian subcontinent, Cheraman Juma Masjid in Kodungallur, Kerala, was built in 629 AD. Thus, Islam reached the shores of Kerala long before its advent in northern parts of India.

Over the years, several influential Islamic Indian scholars emerged from Kerala. One prominent example is Zainuddin Makhdoom II (d. 1583 CE), the author of Tuhfat al-Mujāhidīn, the first historical work of Kerala by a Keralite. His treatise on Shafiite Jurisprudence, Fath al-Muʿīn, has been used as the textbook in India, Egypt, Malaysia, Java, Singapore, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia (Sareef and Abdul Majeed, 2017). However, not many are there on the list to hold an international reputation after him. Among the reasons are, firstly, Keralite scholars in a few last hundred years focused on teaching and da’wah, not much in writings. Secondly, the language became a barrier because most available written works are in either Malayalam or Arabi Malayalam that is made by writing Malayalam while using the Arabic script.

Against this predominant trend, Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddin Pookkoya Thangal took a different way by writing all of his works in Arabic which are worthy of international attention. He is an Islamic scholar, philosopher and educationist from a rural village of Panoor in the Kannur district of Kerala. He is locally known as Panoor Thangal. He has seminal works in various Islamic specialisations such as the science of the Qur’an (ʿulūm al-Qur'an), Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), the science of the prophetic sayings (ḥadīth), Islamic history (tārīkh al-islām) and Islamic theology (ʿaqīdah). Even though he has an adequate amount of pivotal works in various Islamic sciences written in Arabic, they still have not attained proper attention at an international level. This inattention may be due to the unawareness of people about him and his works. Still, a lot more needs to be publicised to utilise his intellectual contributions.

The current study explores more about the career, achievements and intellectual contributions of Sayyed Ismail. This study analyses him, his educational background, significant works and evaluates how vital is his contributions to Islamic thought. In addition, this study will critically analyse his role in the internationalisation of Islamic thought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study on Sayyed Ismail’s intellectual contribution requires a proper review of existing literature. This literature is in the form of books, theses, journal articles, and internet sources. This review will follow the categories, namely the history of Muslims in Kerala and India, the writing about Sayyed’s life and his contributions to Islam in Kerala and beyond. This review is done in such a way as to understand the extent of studies made about him and his contributions and identify gaps that the present research will later on address. Details of some works are given below:

In the article *‘ʿAla Hāmišhi Tafāsir: The Kerala Presence in the Interpretation of the Qur’an’*, Hudawi (2019) mentions Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddeen’s historical background. The author also mentions several works written by the Sayyed such as ʿAqīdah (creed), Manṭiq (logic), Tārīkẖ (history) and in Kalām (theology). However, the main discussion in this article is the tafsīr ʿAla Hāmihi Tafāsir.

Moreover, an article entitled *‘Panur Thangal’* published by Islam Kavadam (2021), also discusses the contributions of Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddeen in tafsīr.

The journal article *‘The Relevance of Tafsīr al-Jalālayn among the Muslims of Malabar’* written by Muhammed Unais Kunnakkadan and et al. (2020) provides the reason behind choosing *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* as the basis of Sayyed Ismail’s tafsīr. The authors mentioned several Muslim scholars who worked on Tafsīr Al-Jalālayn in Malabar, and Sayyed Ismail is one of them.

The book entitled *‘Panoor Thangal; A multi-dimensional reading’*,written by M. A. Salam Rahmani Koottalungal (2018), published by Nibrasul Ulama Student Federation Zahra College of Islamic Sciences, focuses on the intellectual legacy of the Sayyed Ismail. He contributed immensely to the cause of the development of the Muslim community. He brought about drastic changes in education, combining the aspects of material and spiritual elements. The author mentioned the views of Sayyed Ismail on some issues such as on the policy of Islamic education, religion and sciences, scholarship, jihad etc.

The book *Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddin Pookkoya Thangal of Panoor: Life and Career* by K.K.N Kurup, (2012) discusses the role of Sayyed Ismail as a Muslim scholar and educationist in Kerala. This book gives an overall picture of Sayyed Ismail and his life and achievements.

The article entitled *Sayyed Ismail Shihab Al-Din Al-Bukhari Al-Malibari (Panoor Thangal) (1936-2010): His vivid life and valuable services* written by Mahmood (2021) discusses the historical background of Sayyed Ismail’s life and his educational background. The author states that Sayyed has exceptional skills in writing, teaching and administration. This article focuses more on the contribution of the Sayyed in the field of education.

A booklet *Search for identity: A Report of the visit of a Cultural Team from Kerala to Qatar* written by K.K.N Kurup (2012) explains a cultural team's visit from Kerala to Qatar. The purpose of the visit was to promote Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddeen's tafsir. The author mentioned the formation of Zahra Centre for Indo-Arab Research and Heritage Studies in this visit and the aim of the Centre. The booklet provides further understanding about Sayyed and his followers' efforts to expand his contributions beyond Kerala.

The thesis entitled *‘Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddin Al-Bukhari and his role in Islamic Jurisprudence’* written by Umar Farouk (2015) discusses Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddeen’s contribution to Islamic Jurisprudence focusing on his views on modern fiqh issues. It notes that Sayyed Ismail Shihabuddeen has a good understanding of various subjects, including Tafsīr, Ḥadīth, Fiqh, ʿAqīdah and others. Moreover, Sayyed’s contribution was not only limited to the intellectual community, but he also made an unparalleled social contribution by founding Jamia Zahra in Panoor.

The MA thesis entitled *Sayyed Ismail Shihab al-Din al-Bukhari and his method in Ala Hāmishi Tafāsir: An Analytical Study with Special Reference to its Scientific Explanations* written by Murshid (2020) discusses the life of the Sayyed Ismail and his contributions in Kerala.

The MA thesis *Samasta's Methodology of Ifta': An Analytical Study of Selected Fatawa on Marriage and Divorce* by Sayyed Mohamed Muhsin (2015) provides insights into the development of Islam in Kerala and the different ways of religious activism therein.

BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF SAYYED ISMAIL

Sayyed Ismail was born in Karota, Manjeshwar, initially in the South Kanara district, in January 1936, to Hussain Koyamma Thangal and Kunju Beevi. His father was an expert in Ayurvedic and Unani medicine and was also knowledgeable in spiritual subjects. For his mother, it was the second marriage after her previous husband died. She had a daughter Fathima in that relationship. Hussain Koyamma Thangal had two sons in Kunju Beevi. Unfortunately, his wife and a baby girl died following the delivery when the second boy was two years old. Shihabuddin Pookkoya Thangal was the second boy, while Sirajuddin U.K.Attakkoya Thangal was the first (K.K.N. Kurup, 2012).

After the death of his mother, Sayyed Ismail grew up with his maternal uncle. He learned Islamic subjects from Abdurahiman Musliar, EK Abu Bakar Musliyar, Allamakutty Musliyar and Ullal Thangal. In 1957, he joined Darul Uloom Deoband, where he studied for two years, from where he learned the Urdu language. In Deoband, he studied from Hussain Ahmad Madani, Fakruddin Ahmad and Muhammad Twayyib. In Darul Uloom, he excelled in studies and got a first prize gold medal for the composition of an elegy (Abdul Rashid al-Wafi, 2018).

After returning from Dar al-Uloom, he spent around 12 years teaching sharīʿah subjects through the dars system in various localities in Kerala. In between, he learned English from Advocate Ibrahim (MA Salam Rahmani, 45).

Over the years, he realised the need for a paradigm shift in the educational system to meet the challenges of time and make religious education more effective. This realisation gradually led him to form a college, namely Jamia Zahra, which became a pioneering centre of integrated education of ʿaqlī and naqlī knowledge in Kerala.

He also tried to integrate physical and spiritual knowledge and established an institute named Thaqāfatul Islam Arabic College in 1971. Nevertheless, he could not proceed with this college; therefore, he established a new college for integrated education, al-Madrasat al-Zahra Islamic and Arts College, in 1975. In 1986, this college was renamed as Jamia Zahra. Unlike his contemporary scholars, he was proficient in English. He studied in Darul Uloom Deoband for two years; as a result, he was proficient in Urdu. After graduating from Darul Uloom , he started teaching in Dars system, a traditional Islamic education model in Kerala, sited in mosques.

He was fully dedicated and doing his job in the service of knowledge without any salary or material benefit. He was running away from things of name and fame. He was not interested in being published about him in newspapers. He even refused to receive the awards offered by some organisations in Kerala for his contributions to the ummah. He was following the Qadiri Sufi order.

On May 10, 2010, he passed away. Some days before his demise, he gave an amount to his son, assigning him to use a part of it for janāzah, the second part for distributing among his close relatives and the third part if anyone claims any debt from him. He assured as far as he remembered he has no debt with anyone except with Almighty Allah.

INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

Sayyed Ismail left behind a great legacy of seminal works in Arabic that are worthy of research attention, and some of them are used in several universities in the Gulf countries. His proficiency in Arabic is explicit in these works. He wrote in different specialisations such as Quranic exegesis, hadīth, jurisprudence, logic, theology, history among others. His roles as a teacher, theologian, and philosopher made him a prolific writer in Arabic. He left behind a remarkable legacy of intellectual contributions, which remain testimonies of his dedication, hard work, erudition and scholarship (MA Salam Rahmani, 42-43).

He mastered Arabic by regular reading Arabic magazines published from Gulf countries. He also kept a close relationship with Arab scholars, writers and philosophers and whenever he returns from overseas, he made sure to bring several books in Arabic and English. Releventization of Islamic knowledge was his main objective in mastering Arabic. Therefore, he presented the major works of classical Islamic scholars in contemporary style and attractive format. He appreciated the position of Arabic in Islam as well as the international audience. Arabic is the language of the Qur’ān and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (KKN Kuru,p (39-42).

His tireless efforts in writing books were not motivated by promotion or any material benefits; rather, it was for helping his students and disseminating the knowledge in a meaningful way. He consistently made himself busy engaging with educational activities.

His main aim in writing books is to assist teachers and students in mastering that particular subject in simple and accessible ways. As far as his quranic exegesis is concerned, one of the reasons is his realisation that fabricated explanations and Isralite stories are injected in some book of tafsīr, which are powerful to cause damage to Islam and the Prophet. In addition, he wanted to read the Qur’ān in the light of discoveries of modern science and to relevantize it so that the people can comprehend its message and relevance in a better way. In his write-ups, he mainly focused on the numerous miracles in the creation of this world and the unique power of Almighty, keeping in line with reasonable and logical articulation.

The famous historian of Kerala, K.K.N. Kurup expects that revitalising the legacy of Sayyed Ismail, for example, his tafsīr, can strengthen the cultural relationship, academic exchanges and dissemination of knowledge between Gulf countries and Kerala.

Below is given the names of Arabic books written by Sayyed Ismail with a brief introduction about each of them.

ʿAlā Hāmish al-Tafāsīr: Taʿlīqāt ʿalā Tafsīr al-Jalālayn’

*Category: Tafsir*

*Volumes: 7*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

*Year: 2007*

The magnum opus of Sayyed Ismail is the *ʿAlā Hāmish al-Tafāsīr: Taʿlīqāt ʿalā Tafsīr al-Jalālayn’*. This book proves his ingenuity and skill in the art of classification and composition of a scholarly work. Being a non-Arab, though writing a comprehensive tafsīr of the Qur’ān is challenging, he accomplished it. He is the only scholar from Kerala who holds the record of writing a complete and detailed tafsīr of the Qur’ān in Arabic in the known history so far. He dedicated nine years from 1419 to 1428 AH corresponding to the year 1998 to 2007 AD to complete this great work.

This tafsīr comprises seven huge volumes, which is prepared benefitting from the classical and contemporary interpretations. It includes references from the tafsīr of Jāmiʿ al-Bayān of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 AD) to the exegesis of Sheikh Tantawi (d. 2010). It also incorporates quotes from modern books and scientific works.

Ādāb al-Muslim fī Manhaj al-Islām

*Category: Tasawwuf*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It is a book of Islamic ethics. It discusses ethical aspects a Muslim should uphold and extend towards his family, children, properties, etc.

Ṣafwat al-Kalām fī Mabādi’ ʿAqā’id al-Islām

*Category: Aqidah*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It discusses Islamic theology. It deals with faith, resurrection, ākhirah, awliyā’ and Sufi rituals. It is prepared for helping students understand the essential theological matters of Islam, and he has included easy examples to explain the logic thereof.

Al-Manṭiq fī Sharaḥ al-Tahdhīb

*Category: Mantiq (logic)*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

*Year: 1422 AH*

It is an explanation of the book of logic written by Saʿd al-Din al-Taftāzānī, in which he explains the definition of logic, its purpose, history, and other topics of logic. It is also written in an easy way in order to facilitate students and teachers of this subject.

Al-Kalām fī Sharaḥ al-ʿAqā’id al-Shafiʿiyyah

*Category: Aqidah*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It is the complete commentary of Sharḥ al-ʿAqā’id by Abū Ḥasan ʿUmar al-Nasafī. In this book, he responds to the arguments of atheists, rationalists and unbelievers, and it includes a discussion about black magic, demons, and other aspects.

Niqātun min Tārīkh al-Islām

*Category: Tarikh (Islamic history)*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It attempts to tell the history of the prophets from the first Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Al-Nibrās fī Maslak al-Fiqh al-Shāfiʿī

*Category: Fiqh*

*Volumes: Three*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

*Year: 2006*

The three volumes deal with various juristic chapters in al-Fiqh al-Shāfiʿī, including purity, prayer, zakat, fasting, jihad, transactions, inheritance, wills, marriage, divorce, penal law, oaths, sacrifices, hunting, judiciary, testimony and other jurisprudence.

Al-Madārij fī Taqrīr al-Ghāyat wa al-Taqrīb

*Category: Fiqh*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It is the commentary of *Matn al-Ghāyat wa al-Taqrīb* by Abū al-Shujāʿ Aḥmad al-Aṣfahānī.

Al-Mirqāt fī ʿAqīdat al-Islām

*Category: Aqidah*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It is also a small book about the belief system of Islam. It is also prepared mainly for assisting teachers and students who learn about the *ʿaqīdah* and remove the doubts and ambiguities about theology from people’s minds.

Shadharāt al-Dhahab

*Category: Tarikh (Islamic history)*

*Publisher: Jamʿiyyat Ṭullāb Nibrās al-ʿUlamā’, Jāmiʿah al-Zahrā, Kerala, India*

It is a book of Islamic ethics to be upheld in various walks of Muslim life, particularly in interpersonal relationships.

Collection of Arabic Khutbas

Sayyed Ismail was a skilled orator with eloquence, accuracy in expression, and precise brevity in the statement. In general, khātib in Kerala use *al-Khuṭab* *al-Nabatiyyah* for Friday sermons. Unlike his peer scholars, he wrote himself and gave sermons (khuṭbah) in Arabic at the Jami Mosque of Panoor every Friday since 1992. He had a collection of six hundred written khuṭbahs. These khuṭbahs are of different topics with the contemporary relevance of that time. In Kerala, Friday khutbas are generally delivered in Arabic, except the mosques that follow Wahhabism (K.K.N. Kurup,2012).

RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM **IN** KERALA

Sayyed Ismail has significantly contributed to the cause of raising the profile of the Muslim community. He brought his sincere efforts into the field of education. From the early 1970s, he focused on integrated education, and Jamia al-Zahra became its realisation at an institutional level. Now Az-Zahra University has completed 40 years of service in the academic and cultural life of the Muslim community of Kerala.

Jamia Al-Zahra is a group of colleges, institutes, schools, charitable projects, and humanitarian services. Jamia Zahra is now a well-known educational institution. It provides education from pre-school to post-graduate levels through various institutions (M.A. Salam, 2018).

1. Zahra College of Islamic Sciences
2. Zahra High School and Higher Secondary School
3. Zahra College of Art & Sciences
4. Zahra Public School
5. Zahra Centre School, Perod
6. Tharbiya College for Women
7. Other Institution (Zahra Research Library, Thanakkottur Up School, Muhiyudheeen Mosque, and Zahra Kids Garden at Puliyavu.)

As a scholar, he is distinguished among Kerala scholars because of his expertise in various subjects, a good number of teachers, being a member of the Sayyid family, equal involvement in academia and activism, linguistic skills, exclusive writing in Arabic, remarkable research in classical and modern works, close contact with Arab scholars and philosophers, relevantization of Islamic knowledge, community engagement, authorship of complete tafsir in Arabic, publication of tafsīr from the Arab country, sufi personality, exclusion from public programs and parties, interest in science subjects (Murshid, 2020).

He viewed that though the world has gone far in terms of technological heights on the one side, it has gone deep in terms of moral deterioration. Science and technology were supposed to be used for the progress of humanity, but it has ended up causing more adverse effects to humanity. Against this background, he thought it is the high need to produce a creative and dynamic Muslim youth with a strong background in Islamic sciences but well-versed in human knowledge, science, and technology. As a result, his initial plan was to create an opportunity for learning the sharīah without disrupting schooling or education at the colleges.

Despite his seminal contributions to Islam in Kerala and beyond, he is not a well-known figure even in Kerala. Probably, his unpopularity is due to some reasons: firstly, his major works are in the Arabic language, which is not accessible for ordinary people in Kerala. Secondly, he was not working jointly with any leading organisations/religious platforms in the state. He chose his style and team, which also resulted in less popularity. Thirdly, he was against the publicity or fame for him as a person; rather he intended to reach out to people through his works, mainly international audience.

CONCLUSION

Sayyed Ismail is one of the pioneers of integrated education in Kerala. He prepared a syllabus in which he included both Aqlī and Naqlī knowledge (Human and Revealed knowledge). He realised that only such a syllabus could nurture a generation who can understand the modern world's undercurrents and communicate with people in a most understood language. He thought that integration would broaden the dimensions of da’wah in the contemporary world.

His initial aim was to facilitate his students to learn the major texts in contemporary, coherent, and most understood ways. In this attempt, he attempted to relevantize them and present the issues connecting with contemporary matters. He dedicated himself to the purpose of the educative mission via teaching, writing and running institutions. He got a lot of tawfiqh and divine agency to fulfil these works in a magnanimous way.

Through his writings, he wanted to elevate the station of ummah in terms of education and philosophy and to equip them to address the needs of time. He wanted to protect the fellow-people from the potential threats of concomitant consequences of modern education and technological advancements. He believed that science and technology should lead people to learn and comprehend more about the countless wonders in the creation of this universe. As a result, people can understand more about the Creator and build a genuine conviction about him, thus reaching a strong tawhidic paradigm. However, the current trend is just the opposite because science is widely used to spread corruption and people are morally deteriorated. He propagated to study the Quran in the latest scientific discoveries which will prove the imitability of the Quran and uniqueness of Quranic messages. In addition, he advocated for integrated education of revelation and reason, as one of the vital ways to improve the situation of ummah.

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