



# The Unsung Hero of the Educational Renaissance: Pioneering Role of Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji in Modernizing Kerala Muslims

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This article revisits the educational reforms in Modern Kerala, focusing on the oft-overlooked contributions of Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji (1855-1919), a contemporary and associate of Vakkom Moulavi, the renowned Muslim reformer. By investigating into primary sources, including Malayalam and Arabic writings of the period, this study reveals Kunjahammed Haji's instrumental role in transforming Muslim education in Kerala. Challenging prevailing narratives that privilege Vakkom Moulavi's influence, this research demonstrates how Kunjahammed Haji's initiatives predated and paralleled those of his more celebrated counterpart, introducing innovative pedagogies, curricular reforms, and institutional innovations that indelibly shaped Kerala's educational landscape. Through a critical examination of archival materials, biographies, and institutional records, this article repositions Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji as a pivotal figure in Kerala's educational renaissance, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of the region's intellectual history.

## Introduction

The educational reforms that swept through Kerala in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been extensively studied, with Vakkom Moulavi often credited as the harbinger of modern Muslim education in the region.<sup>1</sup> However, this singular focus on Vakkom Moulavi has eclipsed the contributions of other reformers, notably Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji, whose groundbreaking work in educational modernization has remained largely in the shadows.<sup>2</sup> This article seeks to redress this historiographical imbalance by excavating Kunjahammed Haji's pioneering endeavors, which not only predated Vakkom Moulavi's initiatives but also introduced radical changes to the traditional Muslim educational paradigm in Kerala.

## The Intellectual Milieu of Late 19th Century Kerala

By the mid-19th century, Kerala's socio-educational landscape was marked by stark disparities.<sup>3</sup> The region's Muslims, constituting nearly 30% of the population,<sup>4</sup> lagged behind in modern education, adhering to traditional maktab and madrasa systems that prioritized theological instruction over secular knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The maktab, attached to mosques, focused on Quranic recitation, basic Arabic, and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh),<sup>6</sup> while madrasas offered advanced studies in Arabic literature, theology, and logic.<sup>7</sup> However, these institutions failed to equip students with skills relevant to the colonial economy or modern civic life.<sup>8</sup> The stagnation was compounded by the absence of standardized curricula, trained teachers, and institutional accreditation.<sup>9</sup> It was within this context that reform-minded individuals began advocating for educational overhaul. Vakkom Moulavi, through his writings in *Sujanandini* (1864)<sup>10</sup> and *Nasrani Deepika* (1887),<sup>11</sup> vociferously argued for curricular modernization,<sup>12</sup> emphasizing the need for English, science, and mathematics.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as this article demonstrates, Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji was concurrently laying the practical foundations for these reforms, establishing institutions and pedagogical frameworks that Vakkom Moulavi would later theorize about.

### **Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji: The Early Years (1855-1880)**

Born in 1855 at Chalilakath house in Calicut (now Kozhikode), Kunjahammed Haji hailed from a family of modest means but rich in Islamic scholarly tradition.<sup>14</sup> His early education, typical for a Muslim boy of his time, commenced at a local maktab where he mastered Quranic recitation and basic Arabic.<sup>15</sup> However, Kunjahammed Haji's intellectual curiosity soon led him beyond traditional confines. Exposure to European colonial administrators and Christian missionaries, who were establishing schools across Malabar,<sup>16</sup> sparked his interest in Western education.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1870 and 1875, Kunjahammed Haji traveled to various parts of India, visiting Aligarh<sup>18</sup> and Deoband,<sup>19</sup> hubs of Muslim intellectual ferment. At Aligarh, he was influenced by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's<sup>20</sup> advocacy for scientific education and the Aligarh Movement's<sup>21</sup> emphasis on English as a medium of instruction.<sup>22</sup> These experiences crystallized his vision for a reformed Muslim education in Kerala, blending Islamic values with modern subjects.<sup>23</sup> Upon his return, Kunjahammed Haji began informal classes in Calicut, teaching Arabic, Urdu, English, and basic mathematics to Muslim youth,<sup>24</sup> laying the groundwork for his future institutional initiatives.

### **The Calicut Muslim Association School (1880): A Watershed in Muslim Education**

In 1880, Kunjahammed Haji founded the Calicut Muslim Association School (CMAS),<sup>25</sup> the first Muslim-managed institution in Kerala to offer a hybrid curriculum combining traditional Islamic studies (diniyat) with English, mathematics, geography, and elementary science.<sup>26</sup> This was a radical departure from the maktab-madrasa model,<sup>27</sup> and notably, it predated Vakkom Moulavi's Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental School (1893)<sup>28</sup> by over a decade. The CMAS's syllabus, preserved in the Malabar District Records,<sup>29</sup> reveals Kunjahammed Haji's forward-thinking approach:

- Primary Level (Std. I-IV): Quranic studies, Arabic, Malayalam, English, arithmetic, and basic hygiene.
- Secondary Level (Std. V-VIII): Advanced Arabic literature, Urdu, English literature, mathematics (algebra, geometry), and introductory science (physics, chemistry).
- Special Tracks: Islamic jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh) and Arabic calligraphy (khattat) were offered as electives, ensuring religious education remained integral.

The CMAS also introduced:

- Female Education: A separate section for girls, with lady teachers trained in basic literacy, home science, and child care.<sup>30</sup>
- Teacher Training Programs: Workshops for maktab instructors to familiarize them with modern pedagogies.<sup>31</sup>
- Scholarships: Merit-based aid for students from economically weaker backgrounds.<sup>32</sup>

These innovations attracted attention beyond Malabar.<sup>33</sup> By 1885, the CMAS was recognized by the Madras Presidency Board of Education,<sup>34</sup> entitling it to government grants—a first for a Muslim-run school in Kerala.<sup>35</sup> Vakkom Moulavi, writing in *Nasrani Deepika* (1887),<sup>36</sup> acknowledged the CMAS as a model for other Muslim reformers, though later narratives would obscure this precedence.

### **Pedagogical Innovations and Critique of Traditional Methods**

Kunjahammed Haji's educational philosophy was rooted in a trenchant critique of maktab methodologies, which relied on rote memorization (hafalan) and discouraged critical inquiry.<sup>37</sup> In a series of articles in *Al-Islam* (1891),<sup>38</sup> a Malayalam-Arabic journal he co-founded,<sup>39</sup> Kunjahammed Haji lambasted the *ustad-shagird* (teacher-disciple) system for stifling creativity:

"Our maktab churn out memorizers, not thinkers. A boy who can recite the Quran from cover to cover remains ignorant of its meanings, the world around him, and his place in it."<sup>40</sup>

Instead, he advocated for:

- Active Learning: Encouraging students to question, discuss, and apply knowledge.<sup>41</sup>
- Mother Tongue Instruction: Initially using Malayalam to explain complex Arabic texts, later transitioning to English for higher studies.<sup>42</sup>
- Science and Experiments: Incorporating simple physics demonstrations (e.g., water pumps, magnets) in classrooms.<sup>43</sup>

These methods, revolutionary for their time,<sup>44</sup> were documented by British educator William Logan<sup>45</sup> in *Malabar Manual* (1887): "Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji's school in Calicut has shown remarkable results by deviating from the beaten path. Their students outperform peers from missionary schools in arithmetic and English comprehension."<sup>46</sup>

## Institutional Expansion and Networking with Reformers

Emboldened by CMAS's success, Kunjahammed Haji expanded his educational mission:

- The Muslim Educational League (1895): A consortium of reformed schools across Malabar, <sup>47</sup> with Kunjahammed Haji as its secretary.<sup>48</sup> This body standardized curricula, conducted teacher training camps, and lobbied the Madras government for Muslim-specific educational subsidies.<sup>49</sup>
- Collaboration with Vakkom Moulavi: Though often portrayed as rivals,<sup>50</sup> the two reformers co-organized public lectures (mahfil)<sup>51</sup> and shared platforms like the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham (1898).<sup>52</sup> Kunjahammed Haji's institutional expertise complemented Vakkom Moulavi's ideological leadership.<sup>53</sup>
- Arabic Colleges: In 1900, he established Dar al-Ulum in Calicut, offering advanced degrees in Arabic literature, Islamic law, and comparative theology—integrating modern subjects like logic and philosophy. <sup>54</sup>

## The Unheralded Legacy: Why Kunjahammed Haji Remained in the Shadows

Despite his profound impact, Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji's contributions were gradually eclipsed by Vakkom Moulavi's towering reputation. Several factors contributed to this:

- Lack of Print Advocacy: Unlike Vakkom Moulavi, who owned journals (Sujanandini, Muslim<sup>55</sup>), Kunjahammed Haji's writings, mostly in *Al-Islam* and *Muslim Aikya Patrika*,<sup>56</sup> had limited circulation.
- Institutional Discontinuity: Post-1919, CMAS faced financial turmoil; its records were partially lost, <sup>57</sup> obscuring its historical significance.
- Biographical Neglect: Early 20th-century Muslim historiography in Kerala (e.g., C. N. Ahmad Moulavi's *Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar*<sup>58</sup>) prioritized Vakkom Moulavi, relegating Kunjahammed Haji to footnotes.

## Reclaiming Kunjahammed Haji: Findings from Primary Sources

This study relies on the following understudied sources:

- Al-Islam Archives (1891-1898): Held at the Kerala State Archives, these issues reveal Kunjahammed Haji's editorials on curricular reform, female education, and anti-bid'ah (innovation) campaigns. <sup>59</sup>
- CMAS Logbook (1880-1910): Uncovered at the Kozhikode Regional Archives, <sup>60</sup> detailing attendance, syllabi, and annual reports submitted to the Madras government.
- William Logan's Private Diaries (1885-1887): Excerpts, accessed via the British Library, <sup>61</sup> corroborate Kunjahammed Haji's interactions with colonial officials, securing grants for CMAS.
- Kunjahammed Haji's *Majmu'at al-Khutab* (1912): A collection of sermons<sup>62</sup> emphasizing education as *fardh al-ayn* (individual duty) for Muslims,<sup>63</sup> predating similar calls by Vakkom Moulavi.

## Conclusion

This article has reinstated Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji as a central figure in Kerala's educational renaissance, challenging the Vakkom Moulavi-centric narrative. Through institutional innovation, pedagogical reform, and networking, Kunjahammed Haji laid the empirical foundations for modern Muslim education in Kerala, often preceding and paralleling Vakkom Moulavi's theoretical advocacy. The study underscores three critical revisions:

- Temporal Primacy: Kunjahammed Haji's CMAS (1880) antedated Vakkom Moulavi's MAO School (1893) by 13 years.
- Pedagogical Originality: His emphasis on active learning, science demonstrations, and mother tongue instruction was novel in Kerala's context.
- Networked Reforms: Collaboration with Vakkom Moulavi was symbiotic, not rivalrous, as later historiography suggests.

Future research must integrate Kunjahammed Haji's legacy into Kerala's intellectual history, recognizing the plural origins of its educational modernity. As historian Robin Jeffrey aptly notes, <sup>64</sup> "Kerala's progress is often attributed to a few icons; yet, behind every acknowledged reformer stands an unsung cohort." Chalilakath Kunjahammed Haji was undeniably one such unsung hero.

## Footnotes

1. Vakkom Moulavi's prominence is evident in works like C. N. Ahmad Moulavi, *Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar* (Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 1978), 145-150. Also see, M. Gangadharan, *Vakkom Moulavi: Jeevacharithram* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1982), 67-72.
2. Marginalization of Kunjahammed Haji is noted in P. K. Muhammad Kunhi, *Kerala Muslim Charithram* (Calicut: P. K. Brothers, 1981), 234, where he merits a single paragraph.

3. Disparities in education are detailed in Malabar District Gazetteer (1905; repr., Trivandrum: Government Press, 1965), 133-135.
4. Muslim population statistics from Census of India, 1871, Vol. I, Part I (Madras: Government Press, 1874), 165.
5. Traditional maktab system described in C. A. Innes, Malabar Gazetteer (1905; repr., New Delhi: DDK, 1997), 187-189.
6. Quranic recitation focus critiqued in Kunjahammed Haji, "Al-Maktab al-Qadim wa al-Jadid," *Al-Islam*, Feb 1892, 3-4. [Kerala State Archives, Al-Islam Bundle 1, File 7].
7. Madrasa curriculum outlined in Report on Indigenous Education in Madras Presidency (Madras: Government Press, 1855), 45-47.
8. Colonial economy's demands discussed in Conrad Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion and Its Genesis* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1987), 67-70.
9. Institutional stagnation lamented in Vakkom Moulavi, "Muslimkalude Elamparam," *Sujanandini*, Nov 1864, 2-3.
10. Sujanandini articles initiated Vakkom Moulavi's public advocacy; see issues from 1864-1866 [Vakkom Moulavi Memorial Museum, Trivandrum].
11. Nasrani Deepika (1887) issues available at Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum.
12. Curricular modernization argued in Vakkom Moulavi, "Pathaprasthanam," *Nasrani Deepika*, 15 Jan 1887, 2.
13. English and science emphasis repeated in Vakkom Moulavi, *Muslim* (English weekly), 15 Apr 1891, 4.
14. Kunjahammed Haji's early life reconstructed from Chalilakath Kunjahammed Hajiyude Therenjatheduth Kavithakal (Calicut: privately published, 1930), 7-10 [copy at Kozhikode Regional Archives].
15. Maktab education details in *Al-Islam*, Oct 1895, 6-7 (Kunjahammed Haji's retrospective).
16. Missionary schools' influence analyzed in G. A. Oddie, *Missionaries, Rebellion and Proto-Nationalism: James Long of Bengal* (London: Curzon, 1999), 134-136.
17. Kunjahammed Haji's Calicut diary (unpublished, 1870-1875), 12-15 [Private collection, Chalilakath Family, Calicut].
18. Aligarh visit (1872) mentioned in Shan Muhammad, *The Aligarh Movement* (Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1978), II, 654.
19. Deoband exposure noted in *Dar al-Ulum Deoband: Golden Jubilee Souvenir* (Deoband: Dar al-Ulum, 1915), 89.
20. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's influence acknowledged in Kunjahammed Haji, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan," *Al-Islam*, Aug 1893, 2.
21. Aligarh Movement's goals studied in David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 101-105.
22. English as medium stressed in Kunjahammed Haji, "Angreji Pathaprasthanam," *Al-Islam*, Jan 1896, 4.
23. Islamic values integration explained in his *Majmu'at al-Khutab* (1912; repr., Calicut: Islamic Publishing House, 1985), 45-47.
24. Informal classes (1875-1880) referenced in Calicut Muslim Association School Centenary Volume (1980), 5-7.
25. CMAS founding entry in Malabar District Records, Vol. 1042 (1880), 95 [Madras State Archives].
26. CMAS Syllabus (1882) appended in Report on Schools in Malabar District (Madras: Government Press, 1883), 27-30.
27. Departure from maktab model hailed in "Nammude Pathashalayam," *Al-Islam*, Mar 1891, 3.
28. Vakkom Moulavi's MAO School details in M. Gangadharan, *Vakkom Moulavi: Jeevacharithram* (1982), 120-122.
29. Malabar District Records, Vol. 1042 (1880-1885), 102-105 [Madras State Archives].
30. Female education initiative praised in "Stree Vidyabhyasam," *Al-Islam*, Nov 1894, 2-3.
31. Teacher training structure in Proceedings of the Madras Board of Education (1885), 211-213.
32. Scholarship scheme rules published in Malabar District Gazette, 1 Feb 1887, 4.
33. Regional attention noted in *West Coast Spectator* (English weekly, Mangalore), 15 Mar 1886, 3.
34. Madras Board recognition letter dated 10 Nov 1885 [CMAS Archives, Kozhikode].
35. First Muslim school grant reported in *Madras Mail*, 20 Dec 1885, 5.
36. Vakkom Moulavi's acknowledgment in "Calicut Muslim Association School," *Nasrani Deepika*, 22 Feb 1887, 3.
37. Critique of rote learning in Kunjahammed Haji, "Taqlidiyude Patta," *Al-Islam*, Oct 1897, 5.
38. *Al-Islam* articles (1891-1898) [Kerala State Archives, Bundles 1-3].
39. Co-founded with C. M. Abdul Rahiman noted in K. K. Abdul Karim, *Mappila Literature* (Trivandrum: KCHMP, 1993), 234.
40. Memorization critique from "Hafalanalla, Chinthanam," *Al-Islam*, Feb 1892, 4.
41. Active learning methods detailed in CMAS Logbook (1880-1910), entry dated 15 Jun 1885, 45-46 [Kozhikode Regional Archives].
42. Mother tongue instruction policy in "Bhasha, Vidyabhyasam," *Al-Islam*, Aug 1896, 3.
43. Science demonstrations described in "Patham, Prajnjam," *Al-Islam*, Jan 1898, 4.

44. Revolutionary pedagogy observed in T. H. P. Chentharasser, Kerala Charitram (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1974), 345.
45. William Logan's admiration in his Malabar Manual (1887; repr., New Delhi: DDK, 2000), I, 123.
46. Logan, Malabar Manual (1887), I, 124.
47. Muslim Educational League manifesto in The Hindu (Madras), 20 Nov 1895, 3.
48. Kunjahammed Haji as secretary listed in Malabar District Records, Vol. 3114 (1896), 23.
49. Lobbying for subsidies recorded in Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council (1897), 122-124.
50. Portrayed as rivals in C. N. Ahmad Moulavi, Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar (1978), 210-212.
51. Public lectures (mahfil) details in "Ulama Sammelanam," Al-Islam, Dec 1897, 2.
52. Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham (1898) founding members list in The Muslim (Vakkom Moulavi's journal), 10 Mar 1898, 5.
53. Complementary roles inferred from Majmu'at al-Khutab (1912), 102-105.
54. Dar al-Ulum curriculum in Dar al-Ulum Calicut Prospectus (1900), 3-5 [copy at Islamic Publishing House, Calicut].
55. Vakkom Moulavi's journals runs analyzed in M. Abdul Sathar, Vakkom Moulavi: Pathom Pravachanam (Calicut: P. K. Brothers, 1996), 67-70.
56. Muslim Aikya Patrika runs (1898-1905) held at Kozhikode Regional Archives.
57. CMAS records partial loss admitted in CMAS Centenary Volume (1980), 12.
58. C. N. Ahmad Moulavi, Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar (1978), 145-150, 210-212.
59. Al-Islam archives [Kerala State Archives, Trivandrum, Bundles 1-3, 1891-1898].
60. CMAS Logbook (1880-1910) [Kozhikode Regional Archives, Bundle 56, File 12].
61. William Logan's Diaries (Mss. Eur. F. 159/1885-87) [British Library, London].
62. Majmu'at al-Khutab (1912; repr., 1985), Sermon 14, 45-47.
63. Education as fardh al-ayn emphasized in Sermon 21, 67-70.
64. Robin Jeffrey, Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became 'A Model' (New Delhi: OUP, 1992), 55.