

Identity Crisis Of Minorities In Democratic India: The Case Of Indian Union Muslim League And A Successful Response In Kerala Under Ch Mohammad Koya

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how CH Mohammad Koya's visionary leadership and the strategic evolution of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala transformed minority politics from identity-based isolation to inclusive democratic engagement. In a national context where Muslims often face socio-economic marginalization, negative stereotyping, and political underrepresentation despite constitutional safeguards, Kerala offers a striking contrast. Through coalition politics, educational reforms, welfare policies, and advocacy for constitutional values, Koya repositioned the IUML as a legitimate force for social justice and secular governance. The study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical approach, drawing on primary sources including Koya's speeches, party records, and legislative debates alongside academic literature and government reports such as the Sachar Committee Report. The analysis, grounded in theories of multiculturalism, identity politics, and minority rights, reveals that Koya's inclusive model fostered communal harmony and empowered marginalized communities without compromising democratic principles. Kerala's experience under Koya's leadership thus offers a replicable framework for addressing minority identity crises in India, demonstrating that minority politics, when rooted in constitutionalism and constructive engagement, can serve as a catalyst for equitable development and democratic pluralism.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Minorities, Democratic India, IUML Communal harmony, Minority empowerment, Coalition Politics, Inclusive Governance and Educational reforms

INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has adopted a democratic and secular Constitution that guarantees equal rights to all citizens, including religious minorities. While legal protections ensure religious freedom and cultural autonomy, the Muslim community in India continues to face structural marginalization, socio-economic disadvantages, and negative stereotyping. This has created a persistent identity crisis, where Muslims are constitutionally protected yet politically alienated, often seen as outsiders in the national discourse (Engineer, 2003; Sachar Committee Report, 2006).

This duality is reflected in their limited representation in public institutions, disparities in education and employment, and vulnerability during communal unrest. However, Kerala presents a noteworthy contrast. Known for its high literacy and vibrant civic life, the state has nurtured a unique model of inclusive politics. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), far from being sectarian, has emerged as a legitimate democratic player. It has consistently contributed to governance through coalition politics within both the UDF and LDF alliances, challenging the perception of minority politics as inherently communal (Frank, 1991; Thomas, 2018). A key figure in this transformation was CH Mohammad Koya, whose leadership repositioned the IUML as a party committed to constitutional values and inclusive development. Through educational reforms, advocacy for backward community reservations, and active participation in Common Minimum Programme-based governance, Koya's politics emphasized collaboration over confrontation. This paper examines how Koya's

inclusive vision and Kerala's pluralistic political culture together created a model of minority empowerment that stands as a powerful counter to the rising communal polarization in contemporary India.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology to explore how the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), under the leadership of CH Mohammad Koya, responded to the identity crisis of Muslims within India's democratic framework, with a particular focus on Kerala. Utilizing a case study approach, the research investigates the socio-political evolution of the IUML in Kerala, examining how the party strategically facilitated the inclusion of a historically marginalized community into the democratic process. The aim is to understand how democratic engagement was used to protect and advance minority rights, and how Koya's leadership contributed to fostering communal harmony and effective political representation. The study draws on a range of documentary and secondary sources, including academic literature, peer-reviewed articles, and key government reports such as the Sachar Committee Report (2006). It also incorporates primary materials like CH Mohammad Koya's speeches, writings, IUML party documents, and legislative transcripts, along with newspaper archives that contextualize public and political responses to the party's initiatives.

The analysis is grounded in theoretical frameworks related to multiculturalism, identity politics, and minority rights, drawing on the works of scholars such as Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, and Amartya Sen. Concepts like the politics of recognition, constitutional safeguards, and the negotiation between group identity and national integration are used to interpret the IUML's approach to minority empowerment. The study is geographically limited to Kerala and temporally focuses on the 1960s to 1980s, the period during which Koya's political influence was most significant. While acknowledging broader national dynamics, the research centers on localized political strategies that enabled Kerala's Muslim community to assert their democratic rights. One limitation is the exclusive reliance on archival and textual data, with no direct interviews or fieldwork. However, the extensive availability of historical documents ensures a well-supported analysis of the IUML's transformative role in Kerala's political landscape.

CH Mohammad Koya's Vision and Implementation of Minority Politics in Kerala

1. Alliance Politics and the Role of Common Minimum Programs

Kerala's high literacy, progressive social indicators, and tradition of coalition politics have fostered an inclusive political culture (Frank, 1991). Within this environment, the IUML emerged as a key democratic actor, aligning with both the Congress-led UDF and at times forming tactical ties with the Left, reflecting its political adaptability and commitment to secular governance (Thomas, 2018). This coalition-based strategy allowed the IUML to transcend sectarian labels and position itself as a mainstream party defending minority rights.

Under CH Mohammad Koya's leadership, the IUML effectively used Common Minimum Programs (CMPs) to embed minority concerns such as education, employment, and representation into broader governance agendas. By negotiating for the inclusion of these rights in CMPs, Koya institutionalized community interests within coalition politics without fueling communal divides (Siddique, 2008). Muslim League became part of the left alliance and contested in the 1967 election and became part of the government under *EMS Namboothiripad*. The establishment of Calicut University and the formation of Malappuram district were the two important demands that muslim league negotiated with left parties to become part of the alliance. After formation of the governments those two demands of Muslm league were implemented. This model demonstrated how minority politics could contribute constructively to secular, inclusive governance.

2. Commitment to Indian Nationalism

CH Mohammad Koya strongly upheld the ideals of Indian nationalism, even in the aftermath of Partition and rising communal sentiments. He rejected separatist ideologies and firmly believed that Muslims were an integral part of the Indian nation. For Koya, India was the rightful homeland of its Muslim citizens, where they deserved to live with dignity and equality. His vision emphasized unity and inclusiveness, advocating for a democratic India in which all communities could thrive within the framework of the Constitution. At an early age, he became associated with the *Chandrika* daily and later went on to become its editor. Through his writings, he educated the Muslim community of Kerala about the constitutional provisions for the protection of minority rights. He consistently appealed to readers to join the mainstream of Kerala politics. He also encouraged young people to contribute articles and literary works to the *Chandrika* weekly, fostering a culture of intellectual and literary engagement among the youth.

3. Advocacy for Constitutionalism and Democratic Engagement

A staunch believer in the Indian Constitution, CH Mohammad Koya viewed it as the most powerful instrument to safeguard minority rights. He actively promoted democratic participation as the legitimate means to secure political representation, educational opportunities, and religious freedoms for Muslims. Throughout his political career, Koya remained committed to lawful and peaceful methods of addressing community issues. His advocacy for constitutional values, secular governance, and cooperative politics reflected his deep trust in democratic institutions and processes.

4. Constructive Politics

CH Mohammed Koya played a pivotal role in reshaping the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) into a key democratic force in Kerala by promoting a vision of inclusive and constructive politics. He consistently encouraged Muslims to engage actively in democratic institutions, stressing that integration and political maturity not extremism were essential for communal progress. His leadership emphasized interfaith cooperation, equitable justice, and the rejection of identity-based politics. A striking example of his balanced stance was his statement at a Nair Service Society (NSS) meeting: "I will neither snatch the rights of other communities nor compromise on the rights of Muslims." This encapsulated his commitment to both communal harmony and the protection of minority rights, underscoring a political philosophy rooted in democratic engagement and mutual respect.

5. Promoting Communal Harmony and Inclusive Growth

Throughout his political life, Koya championed **communal amity**. During communal tensions, he was known to personally intervene and mediate peace, earning respect across communities. His balanced rhetoric and inclusive leadership made IUML acceptable not just to Muslims, but also to other social groups. His rejection of communalism was not merely rhetorical; he institutionalized this through policy initiatives and public behavior. His presence in multi-faith forums and consistent dialogue with Hindu, Christian, and Dalit leaders fostered a culture of mutual trust (Varshney, 2002). KG Marar, the leader of the Jan Sangh in Kerala, once remarked that 'C' stands for Christian, 'H' for Hindu, and 'M' for Muslim. This remark indeed reflects the recognition and respect CH Mohammed Koya commanded across communities. It was CH Mohammad Koya who introduced SC/ST student reservations in aided colleges, reflecting his deep commitment to inclusive growth.

6. Countering the Communal Allegation

A frequent criticism of the IUML was that it was a communal party. CH Mohammad Koya addressed this allegation head-on by showcasing data to prove that Muslims in Kerala were educationally and economically backward, thereby justifying targeted welfare schemes under constitutional provisions (Gopalakrishnan, 2004). By pushing for affirmative action, not just as a Muslim demand but as a constitutional necessity, Koya reframed the IUML's image as one of social justice advocacy rather than communal politics. His use of empirical evidence in legislative debates was particularly effective in shifting public perception.

7. Educational Empowerment and Social Reforms

One of CH Koya's most enduring legacies is his role in the educational upliftment of Kerala's Muslim community. Recognizing education as the key to empowerment, he facilitated the establishment of educational institutions under minority management. This was a strategic use of Article 30 of the Indian Constitution, which provides minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions. He also introduced scholarships for Muslim girls, thereby addressing gender disparities. Another reform was declaring Friday as a holiday in certain schools, to ensure that Muslim students could attend congregational prayers without missing academic instruction a symbolic yet impactful measure that encouraged school attendance (Koya, 1985). The establishment of the University of Calicut and the Cochin University of Science and Technology were significant achievements of CH Muhammed Koya in the higher education sector of Kerala. These institutions played a crucial role in expanding access to quality education, particularly for students from the Malabar region and other marginalized communities. His efforts reflected a long-term vision for educational empowerment and regional development through institutional infrastructure.

8. Reservation and Welfare Policies

CH Koya was a driving force in implementing reservations for backward Muslims in Kerala's educational and employment sectors. Through meticulous data presentation and consistent advocacy, he convinced his coalition partners of the necessity for such measures. When some criticized C.H. Mohammed Koya for granting reservations to the backward communities, he responded with a poignant remark: "*Why should other children grumble when a mother gives the weakest baby more milk than the others?*" Koya went on to formulate an alliance of backward communities in Kerala and led a campaign for the implementation of the constitutional provisions of reservation in the state. As a result, the Kerala government appointed a commission to identify the backward communities, leading to the implementation of reservation policies. However, recent studies have revealed that the benefits of reservation were disproportionately availed by the more forward sections among the backward communities. In response, the reservation system was restructured, and a policy of communal rotation was introduced to ensure that all backward communities could fairly benefit from the reservation system.

These initiatives were not communal in nature but were grounded in the constitutional mandate for uplifting backward classes (Article 15(4) and Article 16(4)). As a result, Muslims in Kerala benefitted from structured welfare, reducing the economic gap and strengthening their democratic participation.

9. Towards Egalitarian Politics: From Sectarianism to Joint Action

Unlike leaders who advocated for communal isolation, CH Koya believed in joint action across communities. He envisioned an egalitarian society where different religious and social groups collaborated for mutual progress. His leadership steered the IUML away from religious exclusivism and towards issue-based alliances, focusing on education, healthcare, and employment. This approach allowed the IUML to work alongside Dalit movements, Christian welfare groups, and even upper-caste Hindu organizations for shared objectives. When the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) was invited by Mannath Padmanabhan, the social reformer and founder of the Nair Service Society, to join the Liberation Struggle against the first EMS government, it accepted the invitation and actively participated in the movement. His secular practicality helped dissolve religious divides and positioned the IUML as a key player in Kerala's development narrative (Panikkar, 1998). "The initiative taken by CH Mohammad Koya to form a backward community alliance was a strategic move aimed at uniting marginalized groups to collectively advocate for their rights, ensure better political representation, and promote equitable access to education and employment opportunities."

10. Support given to progressive legislation

The first government of Kerala under *EMS Namboothiripad* introduced two progressive legislations like education bill and land reform bill in the Kerala legislative assembly. These legislations contained many unconstitutional provisions and it was challenged before the court of law. The CH had mentioned those unconstitutional provisions in them during the debates in the legislative assembly. But he never totally rejected those legislations even though they were objected by the right wing groups of Kerala. CH wholeheartedly support the land reforms. Later the education bill was enacted when CH was handling the education portfolio.

DISCUSSIONS

CH Mohammad Koya played a pivotal role in transforming minority politics in Kerala into a force for democratic inclusion and secular development. Under his leadership, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) strategically participated in coalition politics by aligning with both the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and, at times, forming tactical ties with the Left. He was instrumental in embedding minority concerns especially education, employment, and representation into Common Minimum Programs (CMPs), thereby institutionalizing Muslim interests within broader governance agendas. This inclusive approach allowed the IUML to transcend sectarian labels and function as a mainstream party advocating for constitutional rights. Koya consistently rejected separatist ideologies, asserting that Muslims were an inseparable part of the Indian nation. His firm belief in Indian nationalism, along with his dedication to secular governance, underscored his commitment to a democratic India where all communities could coexist with dignity and equality.

Beyond political alignment, CH Mohammad Koya's contributions extended deeply into the realms of social reform and educational empowerment. He facilitated the establishment of educational institutions under minority management, promoted scholarships for Muslim girls, and supported symbolic but meaningful measures like Friday holidays in schools to accommodate religious practices. These efforts were grounded in the belief that education was central to the community's advancement. Koya also played a major role in securing reservations for SC/ST students in aided colleges and for backward Muslims in education and employment, using constitutional provisions such as Article 15(4) and Article 16(4) to justify targeted welfare policies. He emphasized joint action with other marginalized communities Dalits, Christians, and even upper-caste Hindus through issue-based collaborations aimed at uplifting the socially and economically disadvantaged. His strategic initiative to form a backward community alliance reflected a commitment to collective advocacy and political empowerment across community lines.

CH Koya was also known for his principled yet pragmatic approach to legislative matters. He actively participated in debates on key progressive legislations like the Land Reforms Bill and the Education Bill introduced by the first EMS Namboothiripad government. While he pointed out unconstitutional elements in these bills, he did not outright oppose them. Instead, he expressed conditional support, recognizing their long-term value for social transformation. His later role as the Education Minister further allowed him to oversee and implement the very reforms he had constructively critiqued. Throughout his career, he countered the allegation of communalism against the IUML by relying on data to show the socio-economic backwardness of Muslims in Kerala, effectively repositioning the party's image as one rooted in social justice. His statement at an NSS meeting "I will neither snatch the rights of other communities nor compromise on the rights of Muslims" captured his balanced and inclusive political philosophy, one that combined firm advocacy for minority rights with a deep respect for communal harmony and democratic principles.

CONCLUSION

CH Mohammad Koya's political legacy marks a transformative chapter in the history of minority politics in India. At a time when Muslims across the country were grappling with issues of identity, representation, and socio-economic exclusion, Koya offered an alternative path rooted in constitutionalism, democratic participation, and inclusive governance. His leadership of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala helped dismantle the stereotype of communal minority politics by aligning Muslim demands with universal

principles of social justice, secularism, and development. Through coalition-building, strategic use of Common Minimum Programs, and targeted welfare measures such as education reform and reservations, Koya successfully integrated community interests into the mainstream political discourse without compromising the secular fabric of the state.

His commitment to Indian nationalism, interfaith cooperation, and egalitarian politics enabled the IUML to evolve into a legitimate and constructive political force. Koya's emphasis on educational empowerment, especially for women, and his ability to navigate ideological differences within coalition politics demonstrated not only political acumen but also a visionary understanding of social transformation. He grounded his advocacy in empirical evidence and constitutional rights, making a compelling case for affirmative action that transcended communal lines.

Kerala's political experience under Koya's influence stands in contrast to the rising communal polarization in other parts of India. His leadership illustrates that identity-based politics, when anchored in democratic ideals and institutional engagement, can promote equity, harmony, and sustainable development. The model established by CH Mohammad Koya offers critical insights for addressing the minority identity crisis in India, emphasizing that true empowerment lies not in isolation but in participatory governance, cross-community solidarity, and unwavering adherence to constitutional values. His life and politics remain a blueprint for ethical, inclusive, and democratic leadership in a pluralistic society.

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