

Transnational *Salafi* Networks from India and Negotiating Identity in the Gulf

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News

The migration of Indian Muslims to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States has generated various forms of transnational religious moorings in the host countries. They are transnational in the sense that they are originated in India, impacted by even minute currents within the cultural/religious intricacies and specificities of the region yet are increasingly felt, identified and consumed in the Gulf by the Indian Muslims in diaspora.

Summary

This work focuses on a set of questions; how India-centered *Salafi* groups as transnational entities are perceived by the expatriate Indian Muslims in the Gulf; how are the modern subjectivities formed in the context of transnational migration and religious puritanism corresponding with each other in the contemporary discourse on *Salafism* among the Indian Muslims in the Gulf; and how does *Gulf Salafism* from Kerala negotiate its identity in both *Salafi* and non-*Salafi*-dominated settings? This work has taken the case study of *Gulf Salafism*, a movement that emerged among the *Salafis* of Kerala in the Gulf insisting on the need of a radical redefinition of the term *Salafiyyat* (emulation of the pious ancestors) against the popular term *Islahiyyat* (reform) by tracing their intellectual lineage solely to the revivalist scholar Ibn Taymiyya, through Abd al-Wahhab who eschewed a line of thought insisting on literal, self-contained understanding of the *Quran* and *Sunna*.

Key Words

South Asian migration in the GCC Countries, Salafism, Wahhabism, Gulf Salafism, Transnational Salafi networks.

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Analysis:

Introduction

The migration of Indian Muslims to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States has generated various forms of transnational religious moorings in the host countries. They are transnational in the sense that they are originated in India, impacted by even minute currents within the cultural/religious intricacies and specificities of the region yet are increasingly felt, identified and consumed in the Gulf by the Indian Muslims in diaspora.¹ Taking cues from the experience of *Salafis* of Kerala, South India in two GCC countries (Saudi Arabia and UAE), this work focuses on a set of questions; how India-specific *Salafism* as a transnational entity is perceived by the expatriate Indian Muslims and their organizations in the Gulf; how are the modern subjectivities formed in the context of transnational migration and religious puritanism corresponding with each other in the contemporary discourse on *Salafism* among the Indian Muslims in the Gulf; and how does each stream of *Salafism* from Kerala negotiate its identity in both *Salafi* (Saudi Arabia) and non-*Salafi*-dominated (UAE) settings?

There are not many studies adequately dealing with the presence of various forms of transnational politics among South Asian immigrants in the Gulf. Similarly, no major attempts have so far been made to study various uncertainties faced by Muslim migrants from South Asia vis-à-vis their counterparts in the Arab world, though the conflict between globalized Western values and Islamic norms has often been debated with reference to the Muslim diaspora in Europe and America. This is particularly significant in the context of a widely-held trend which views the Muslim diaspora everywhere as the agents of creating a Muslim *umma* globally. Scholars like Malik have questioned this tendency to attribute to the global Muslim diaspora a collective Islamic identity and a single agenda of creating a global Islamic *umma*.² This is also important as the significance of the Salafi movement across the world is currently understood mainly in terms of some of its politically extremist offshoots. Much of the current media debates on the Salafi movement globally have aided in popularizing a *jihadi-Salafi* stereotype that quite often creates an obstacle to understanding nuances within the movement. The issue is more conspicuous with the public perception of the movement as a subject that is explained and understood through the concerns of the state's intelligence agencies and security studies experts. This image becomes more pertinent

¹ M.H.Ilias, 2015, "Malayalee Migrants and Translocal Kerala Politics in the Gulf: Re-conceptualizing 'political'", in *Contextualizing the Modern Middle Eastern Diaspora*, Anthony Gorman & Sossie Kasbarian (ed.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 303-337.

² Jamal Malik. Jamal, 2004, "Muslims in the West: A Muslim Diaspora", www.zuercher-lehrhaus.ch/eaf/cms/upload/docs/12Malik.pdf.

with the media dissections of the movement's identity which has been increasingly mediated only by the radical versions of it in the current global political context.

The focus is given to *Gulf Salafism*, a movement that emerged among the *Salafis* of Kerala in the Gulf insisting on the need of a radical redefinition of the term *Salafiyyat* (emulation of the pious ancestors) against the popular term *Islahiyyat* (reform) by tracing their intellectual lineage solely to the revivalist scholar Ibn Taymiyya, through Abd al-Wahhab who eschewed a line of thought insisting on literal, self-contained understanding of the *Quran* and *Sunna*. This new literalist turn has been influenced largely by the modern Saudi *Salafi* scholars like Abd al-Aziz ibn Bass and Nasr al-Din Albani. The influence of it is said to have brought and circulated amongst the *Salafis* of Kerala by first generation Saudi educated scholars. Emulating corresponding movements in the Gulf, *Gulf Salafism* stresses on the superiority of *Salafiyyat* and maintains an intolerant attitude toward other Islamic movements especially Sufis, casting doubt on their 'contaminated' beliefs.³ They are also intolerant of other Kerala-based *Salafi* groups for latter's alleged dilution of the ideology in order to adjust with specific cultural and political context of Kerala and hold a critical view of prevailing practices either for being inclined to secular traditions or for adopting local customs.

The term *Gulf Salafism* is a locally coined one finding expression only in popular Islamic discourse in Kerala and the Gulf and is yet to find a place in the academic debates. Referring mainly to the changes brought by the Gulf-educated *Salafi* scholars to the way how the idea of *Salafism* has been redefined, one can say that the term gathers its sense as a non-theoretical one being legitimated mainly by public discourse. As a popular notion, *Gulf Salafism* has made an entry in to the public domain through a set of ideas and processes including the redefinition of *Salafiyyat* by as something tracing its origin exclusively to revivalist scholars like Ibn Taymiyya and Abd al-Wahhab.⁴ These developments are seen by some as an alleged closure of the gates of *ijtihad* that sealed door to independent interpretations and criticisms from within. The *Gulf Salafis* are perceived widely by a large section among Kerala Muslims in diaspora as those participate in wider *Salafi* currents with a sense of participating in a 'universal' renaissance of Islamic 'moral values and culture'.

Historically, the *Salafi* tradition in Kerala has been simultaneously pan-Islamic taking inspiration from a multitude of strands popular in the wider Islamic world and

³ K.K. Sakkariya Swalahi, 2002, *Gulf Salfis and Islahi Movement in Kerala* (Malayalam), (Palakkad: Islahi Publishing House).

⁴ Sullami, M.I.Muhammed, , 2002, *Gulf Salafism and Mujahid Movement* (Malayalam), (Malappuram: Alfurqan Publication).

also local with roots in Kerala specific social and historical contexts.⁵ A cursory glance through the history of it seems to confirm the diversity of the contexts and various streams coexisted within the movement.⁶ This diversity had been well reflected in the political positions of the early *Salafi* leaders who were keenly aware of the difference between themselves and the puritan *Wahhabi-Salafi* reformism in Saudi Arabia. Though they had greatly valued the contributions of Saudi *Salafi* scholars like Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab and translated their writings in Malayalam, politically they kept a safe distance from *Saudi-Wahhabi* tradition because of its anti-Ottoman ideology.⁷ Endorsing *Wahhabism* theologically did not mean that they were unaware of the perils that their Saudi counterparts created politically. Rather, they maintained close ties with the Egyptian reform-oriented *Salafi* tradition called *al-Salafiyya al-tanwiriyya*. The movement also displayed a remarkable adaptability to the political circumstances existed in Kerala.

Things changed for the *Salafi* movement in the 1970s and 80s with the Saudi sponsored puritan version of *Wahhabism* started making deep inroads into the community with massive migration of Kerala Muslims to the Gulf countries. The Gulf connection also culminated in the creation of a huge army of Saudi-educated scholars who were assigned by the Saudi State officially to popularize *Saudi-Wahhabi* brand of *Salafism*. With the oil-generated economic boom, Saudi Arabia played a lead role in financing groups and movements in Kerala and the Gulf. The physical sign of *Saudisation* of *Salafism* was explicit in the construction of large *Salafi* mosques in remote corners of the state and in rapid development of a market for *tafsir* or interpretations of the Quran published from Saudi and easy availability of popular materials on the movement. In response to a pressing political need to forestall the burgeoning wave of Iranian revolution-inspired Islamic political activism promoted chiefly by *Jama't e-Islami*, Saudi based organisations generously offered scholarships to young men who wanted to study in the institutions of higher learning in the Gulf.

The GCC countries are now the major theatres of conflict among the *Salafis* from Kerala as almost all Kerala-specific issues make a ripple in the region. The factional feud among the *Salafis* there is now more visible with the emergence of a set of new traditions influenced by their counterparts in Kuwait, Qatar and Yemen. While a section is engaged in reviving the earlier *tanwiriyya* orientation of the past, others are

⁵ Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, "Introduction" in Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella (ed.), 2013, *Islamic Reform in South Asia* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press)

⁶ P.Muhammed Kuttaserry, 1982, *Introduction to the History of Islahi Movement* (Malayalam)(Calicut:Kerala Nadwatul Mujahiddin)

⁷ Sullami, *Gulf Salafism and Mujahid Movement*

attempting to mobilize people along new lines. *Jinn vivadam* or the controversy over divinity attributed to *jinn*s and turning to them for help at difficult times or making them as mediators in prayers is the new bone of contention among the *Salafis*. While a small section following their counterparts in the Gulf stands for *jinn*'s divinity, others see this as something tantamount to *shirk* or polytheism. Inspired by their counterparts in the Arab world, another exclusivist section called *takfiris* seeks sources in medieval Hanbalite moralism and modern *Saudi-Wahhabite* literalism in legitimizing their position—seeing the cross-religious mingling of Muslims back in Kerala as an aberration to the fundamentals of Islam.

Between Kerala and the Gulf

On the identity front, endorsement of *Gulf Salafism* appears to be a result of exclusions and ambiguities of different sorts which necessitate various transnational community connections and support networks. Except for special cases, Kerala Muslims in diaspora play no significant part in religious affairs in the Gulf and only a few voices from them are heard publicly.⁸ Nationality and ethnicity becomes the prime matter of divergence and the Indian Muslims, especially in Saudi Arabia, are certainly unwelcome because of their attachments to 'indigenous Islam'. Despite the long tradition of religious exchanges between the Arabian Peninsula and many parts of India, Indian Islam is generally perceived by the local Arabs as something not fully refined. This division has been further complicated by the employer–employee nature of the relationship between the local Arabs and Malayali Muslims. However, the newly attained *Gulf Salafi* identity appears to be something that is meant to compensate for this alienation. The *Salafization* of religious life takes them to the wider 'Islamic expanses', where the differences among the Muslims around the world seem to be blurred.⁹

The religious practice and consumption also tend to reflect this transformation. The 'original *Salafi*' practices and traditions absorbed from the Gulf often receive wide acceptance as they elevate the status and efficacy of an average Muslim in the community in Kerala.¹⁰ This is more visible among Malayali Muslims in Saudi Arabia—people start looking at Islam with a new perspective and the experience of living there becomes a validation of 'original Islam'. Endorsing 'original Islam' often creates a different understanding of 'Indian Islam' and people begin to see the cross-cultural interactions with other communities they had in Kerala in the past as an aberration, not an asset. The

⁸ Ilias, "Malayalee Migrants and Translocal Kerala Politics in the Gulf"

⁹ Osella and Osella, "Introduction"

¹⁰ Ibid.

experience of living in the Gulf, along with the adoption of Gulf practices and dress, also becomes a means of establishing moral and religious superiority over fellow Muslims).¹¹

New media play a key mediatory role in an expanding arena of popular *Salafi* argumentations and deliberations. It also provides many young *Salafis* from Gulf with an intermediate space for sharing experiences on a 'virtual space' beyond their limited physical spaces. Parallel to this, there is the emergence of a new class of Malayali *Salafi* preachers distinct from those of the classical *ulema* with target audiences (mostly the educated classes) in the Gulf.¹² The traditional means of indoctrination centred mainly on Quran learning and moral studies classes lost its appeal with the more effective mode of preaching with topics related to contemporary religious-political issues. Educated youth among the Muslim migrants from Kerala are the major audience of such preaching conducted privately with the screening of supporting video footage of major international Muslim issues. The rapid development of a market for inexpensive *Salafi* literature and the easy availability of popular materials, tutor CDs and magazines also exemplify this heightened public interest in Salafism.

However, with a limited reach outside the community, *Gulf Salafism* finds no substantial resonance among the nationals in the predominantly non-*Salafi* context of UAE. It is deemed to be private and taking no organizational forms in the country. *Gulf Salafism* takes many different informal institutional forms, but the State in UAE never fully containing the everyday experience of such spaces. Operating from within the permissible legal boundaries, their activities also never pose any real threat to the state or exacerbate worries about national political coherence. Unlike the *Ikhwanis* from Egypt, the Gulf Malayali *Salafists* operative styles do not attract widespread tensions in the host society. The experience of *Salafis* from Kerala in Saudi Arabia illustrates a different story. Different kinds of *Salafi* networks are formed forging connections between and among individuals and organizations from various regions in the country. These cross-cultural identifications among *Salafis* always take place not between the expatriates and the locals, but among different groups from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Southern Arabia and Eastern Africa living under similar conditions. Although ethnic difference act as a major stumbling block for politically active non-GCC Arab *Salafi* groups and Malayali *Salafis* of similar orientation to draw closer, pro-western policies and the

¹¹ Anna Lindberg, 2009, "Islamisation, Modernisation, or Globalisation? Changed Gender Relations among South Indian Muslims," *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 32:1.

¹² M.H. Ilias, "Ulemas and the Internet: A Case Study of Muslim Scholars' Engagement with New Media in Kerala",
<https://www.iaaw.huberlin.de/en/transregion/mediality/publications/papers/ilias>

'weak and fragile' positions of the Saudi administration vis-a-vis the US have now become a rationale for these two groups to support each other.¹³

Conclusion

The scope of networking of *Salafis* from Kerala cannot be limited to the Gulf region only. Different kinds of networks are formed, intertwined and traversed at the global level. These networks connect Gulf *Salafis* across boundaries of space and culture and they help introduce and sustain a complex web of texts and new interpretations that are crucial to the establishment of both local and transnational *Salafi* identities. These networks along with the texts shared formed a common repository of ideas and meanings which in turn fostered a consciousness of belonging to a transnational community. These movements are significant precisely because they did not rely on old networks of mobilization.

Gulf *Salafism* is a pointer offering an especially interesting vantage point from which to understand how the process of migration and active *Salafization* of life intersect in a more circuitous fashion. The process of migration, at least, has incorporated the indigenous Muslim community from Kerala into a wider Islamic world and has helped reconfigure every day religious practices within a unified pan-Islamic code of conduct. It is important to understand *Gulf Salafism*-that is articulated against many of the concepts, sensibilities, and practices associated with the *Islahi* or reform movement which was in wider circulation in Kerala and influenced many Muslim expatriates from Kerala in the Gulf in the early phase of diaspora.

¹³ Ilias, "Malayalee Migrants and Translocal Kerala Politics in the Gulf"