The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 10 | October 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Access without Parity: Kerala Muslims in Higher Education, 2016–2021: Attainment, Drivers and Persistent Gaps

Ramshad Khan R

Research Scholar, Department of Islamic History, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Email: ramshadkhanr94@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-1804-0070

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24492435

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 25-10-2026

Accepted: 13-11-2026

Published: 20-11-2026

Keywords:

Kerala Muslims, higher education, gross enrolment ratio, gender parity, Gulf migration, minority welfare, Mappila, development experience

ABSTRACT

Kerala's Muslims are frequently cited as an exception to the educational disadvantage of Muslims in India. This paper examines whether, and on what terms, that reputation held in higher education between 2016–17 and 2020–21. Drawing on the All India Survey on Higher Education, published analyses of religion-specific enrolment, successive rounds of the Kerala Migration Survey and policy documents, it traces patterns of participation, the forces behind them and the role of state policy. The findings point to access without parity. Muslim enrolment in Kerala continued to rise in 2020–21, when it fell by 8.53 per cent nationally, and the community's estimated Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 20.35 per cent was more than twice the national Muslim figure. Women were at the forefront, with an estimated GER of 25.16 per cent against 15.80 per cent for men. These gains rested on a century of social reform, Gulf migration and remittances, a large network of community-managed aided and self-financing institutions, and a reservation and scholarship framework that covers the community as a whole. Yet the Muslim GER remained less than half of Kerala's overall GER of 43.2 per cent, implying that Muslims made up only about one-eighth of higher education enrolment against roughly a quarter of the population. Participation depended heavily on fee-charging self-financing colleges

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

and remittance incomes, male enrolment was weak, and targeted support proved legally and politically fragile, as the 2021 High Court judgment on minority scholarships showed. The paper argues that the next phase requires public investment in Malabar, a quality agenda for the self-financing sector, support for the school-to-college transition of boys and better religion-disaggregated data.

1. Introduction

Kerala's Muslims are often described as the exception in India's long debate on minority education. At the national level, the Sachar Committee found that Muslims lagged behind most other socio-religious groups at almost every stage of schooling and were particularly under-represented in higher education (Prime Minister's High Level Committee, 2006). In Kerala, where Muslims numbered 88.7 lakh at the 2011 Census, or 26.56 per cent of the state's population (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2015), the picture has been different for some time. Literacy is close to universal, girls outnumber boys in colleges, and community organisations run a substantial share of the state's educational institutions.

That difference, however, is easy to overstate. Being better off than Muslims elsewhere in India is not the same as being on an equal footing with other Keralites. This paper argues that the experience of Kerala Muslims in higher education between 2016 and 2021 is best described as one of *access without parity*. Enrolment rose for most of the period and, unusually, continued to rise in the pandemic year of 2020–21, when Muslim enrolment fell sharply across the country. Women drove much of the growth. Yet the community's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education remained less than half of the state average, and a large part of its participation depended on self-financing institutions, scholarships and household incomes tied to Gulf migration, all of which proved vulnerable to shocks.

The paper addresses four questions. First, how did Muslim participation in higher education in Kerala change between 2016–17 and 2020–21, in absolute terms, relative to Muslims elsewhere and relative to other Keralites? Second, what explains the community's comparatively strong performance, and in particular the striking advantage of women? Third, how did state policy, from reservation and scholarships to the regulation of private colleges and the reform commissions of 2021, shape these outcomes? Fourth, which structural gaps persisted at the end of the period, and what do they imply for policy?

The analysis is based on published secondary data and policy documents. Several figures that circulate widely in discussions of the subject, including some that appeared in an earlier draft of this paper, could not be traced to any official source and have been excluded. Where the paper relies on estimates, as it must for religion-specific enrolment ratios, the basis of the estimate is stated. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 sketches the historical background. Section 3 sets out the conceptual framework, and Section 4 describes the data and methods. Sections 5 to 7 examine participation, its drivers and state policy. Section 8 discusses persistent challenges, and Sections 9 and 10 draw out the implications.

2. From Backwardness to Expansion: A Historical Note

Any account of Muslim education in Kerala has to begin with the regional divide between Malabar and the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin. About 72 per cent of Kerala's Muslims live in the Malabar districts, which were part of the Madras Presidency under British rule (Sebastian, 2019). In Travancore and Cochin, Muslim literacy was broadly comparable to that of the general population by the time the state was formed in 1956. In Malabar, it lagged far behind. Colonial agrarian policy, repeated peasant uprisings and their violent suppression, culminating in the rebellion of 1921, left the Mappila community deeply suspicious of colonial institutions, including modern schools. Government efforts to reach Mappila children through special schools had only limited success before the 1920s (Sebastian, 2019).

Change came from within the community as well as from the state. A succession of reformers, including Sayyid Sanaulla Makti Thangal in the late nineteenth century, Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi in southern Kerala and K. M. Moulavi in Malabar, argued that modern and secular education was compatible with Islam and essential to the community's future. The Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham, founded in 1922, became an important platform for this argument, and Farook College, opened in 1948, was one of the first institutions of higher learning established by the community in Malabar (Sebastian, 2019). Debates about the education of Muslim girls were already under way in the reformist press of the 1930s (Majeed & Najeeb, 2024).

After 1956, politics reinforced these efforts. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) held the education portfolio in several coalition governments, most notably under C. H. Muhammed Koya, during whose tenure the University of Calicut was established in 1968 (Sebastian, 2019). The Muslim Educational Society (MES), founded in 1964 by a group of young professionals, built a network of schools and colleges across the state. From the 1970s, migration to the Gulf transformed household incomes in Muslim-majority districts. When Kerala opened higher education to private self-financing institutions around 2000, Muslim

trusts and organisations, drawing on Gulf-linked savings, entered the sector on a large scale (Sebastian, 2019).

By 2016, then, the community had moved from marked educational backwardness to broad participation within roughly two generations. The question for the period studied here is not whether Kerala Muslims had caught up with Muslims elsewhere, which they clearly had, but whether they had caught up with other Keralites, and on what terms.

3. Conceptual Framework

Three bodies of theory inform the analysis. The first is the capability approach of Sen (1999), which treats development as the expansion of the real freedoms people have to lead lives they value. From this perspective, enrolment matters less as a statistic than as an indicator of whether young people, and young women in particular, have a genuine choice about whether and what to study, and whether that choice translates into wider freedoms in work, marriage and public life.

The second is Bourdieu's (1986) account of economic, cultural and social capital. Higher education is both a product of these forms of capital and a means of converting one into another. Gulf remittances supply economic capital; parental education and reformist ideas supply cultural capital; and community organisations, kinship networks and political representation supply social capital. The Kerala Muslim case is unusual in the extent to which community institutions have converted collective economic resources into educational opportunity for individuals.

The third is the New Economics of Labour Migration, which treats migration as a household strategy for diversifying income and managing risk rather than as an individual decision (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Applied to Kerala, it helps explain why remittances have been invested heavily in children's education, and why the education of daughters, who are less likely than sons to migrate for work, has become a household priority. It also highlights the vulnerability of such strategies to shocks in destination economies, a point that became concrete in 2020.

4. Data and Methods

The study is descriptive and analytical and relies entirely on secondary sources. No primary data were collected. Four types of sources were used. The first is the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) conducted by the Ministry of Education, which provides state-wise enrolment, GER and gender parity figures (Ministry of Education, 2023, 2024). The second is Mehta's (2023) analysis of AISHE and

UDISE+ data on Muslim education, which provides the only consistent series of Muslim enrolment and Muslim GER for 2016–17 to 2020–21 at national and state levels. The third is the Kerala Migration Survey series conducted by the Centre for Development Studies and its successors (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019; International Institute of Migration and Development & Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, 2024). The fourth comprises policy documents, court judgments and official announcements on reservation, scholarships and higher education reform, together with peer-reviewed and policy research on Muslim education in Kerala.

Two limitations need to be stated plainly. First, AISHE does not collect the religion of every student in every institution with equal completeness, so Muslim enrolment figures should be read as indicative rather than exact. Second, because the 2021 Census was not conducted, religion-specific GERs must be calculated against projected populations. Mehta (2023) estimates the Muslim population aged 18–23 by applying 2011 Census religious shares to official population projections. Since Muslims in Kerala have a younger age structure than the state average, this procedure probably underestimates the size of the Muslim youth population and therefore, if anything, overstates the Muslim GER. The gap between Muslims and other communities reported below is thus likely to be a conservative estimate.

The period from 2016–17 to 2020–21 corresponds to the first term of the Left Democratic Front government and to the five most recent years covered in Mehta's series. References to 2021–22 are included where they help to interpret the end of the period.

5. Patterns of Participation, 2016–2021

5.1 The National Context

At the national level, Muslim enrolment in higher education rose from 17.39 lakh in 2016–17 to a peak of 21.01 lakh in 2019–20 and then fell to 19.22 lakh in 2020–21, a decline of 1,79,147 students or 8.53 per cent in a single year (Mehta, 2023; Porecha, 2023). Over the same period, the Muslim share of total enrolment fell from 4.87 to 4.64 per cent, and the Muslim GER, after rising from 8.24 per cent in 2016–17 to 9.79 per cent in 2019–20, dropped to 8.91 per cent in 2020–21, against a national GER for all communities of 27.3 per cent (Table 1). The decline in 2020–21 was concentrated in a few large states: Uttar Pradesh alone accounted for a fall of 58,365 Muslim students (Mehta, 2023).

Table 1 *Muslim Enrolment and Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education, India, 2016–17 to 2020–21*

Year	Muslim enrolment	Total enrolment	Muslim share (%)	Muslim GER (%)
2016–17	17,39,218	3,57,05,905	4.87	8.24
2017–18	18,37,609	3,66,42,378	5.01	8.66
2018–19	19,59,004	3,73,99,388	5.24	9.18
2019–20	21,00,860	3,85,36,359	5.45	9.79
2020–21	19,21,713	4,13,80,713	4.64	8.91

Note. GER = Gross Enrolment Ratio (enrolment as a percentage of the population aged 18–23). Muslim GER is estimated by Mehta (2023) using projected population and the 2011 Census Muslim share of 14.23 per cent. The national GER for all communities was 27.3 per cent in 2020–21. Data from Mehta (2023), based on AISHE.

5.2 Kerala Muslims: Ahead of Muslims Elsewhere, Behind Other Keralites

Kerala was one of a small number of states in which Muslim enrolment in higher education *increased* in 2020–21, by 4,902 students (Mehta, 2023). Mehta's (2023) estimates put the Muslim GER in Kerala at 20.35 per cent in 2020–21, more than twice the national Muslim figure. This is a real achievement, and it is consistent with the long-run story told in Section 2.

Two comparisons, however, temper the picture (Table 2). The first is with other southern states. Kerala's Muslim GER was below that of Muslims in Telangana (33.55 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (27.59 per cent), and only modestly above Karnataka (15.78 per cent). Kerala therefore stands out among states with large Muslim populations, but it is not the national leader in Muslim higher education that some popular accounts suggest. The second, and more important, comparison is with other Keralites. The state's overall GER in 2020–21 was 43.2 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2023). The Muslim GER of 20.35 per cent was less than half of this.

Table 2 *Muslim Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education by Sex, Selected States, 2020–21*

State / group	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Telangana (Muslims)	33.55	33.27	33.84
Tamil Nadu (Muslims)	27.59	30.34	24.68
Kerala (Muslims)	20.35	15.80	25.16
Karnataka (Muslims)	15.78	15.97	15.57
Andhra Pradesh (Muslims)	10.12	10.75	9.44
West Bengal (Muslims)	8.46	7.67	9.30
Bihar (Muslims)	6.13	5.90	6.39
Uttar Pradesh (Muslims)	5.43	4.70	6.26
India (Muslims)	8.91	8.44	9.43
Kerala (all communities)	43.2	34.5	52.3
India (all communities)	27.3	26.7	27.9

Note. Muslim GERs are estimates by Mehta (2023) based on AISHE 2020–21 enrolment and projected Muslim population aged 18–23. Figures for all communities are from AISHE 2020–21 (Ministry of Education, 2023).

A simple calculation illustrates what this gap means. If Muslims made up about 26.6 per cent of Kerala's population aged 18–23, as the 2011 Census share implies, and had a GER of 20.35 per cent against 43.2 per cent for the state as a whole, then Muslim students would have accounted for only about one-eighth (roughly 12.5 per cent) of higher education enrolment in the state, around half of their population share. This estimate should be treated with caution given the data limitations noted in Section 4, but it is consistent with the earlier observation that Muslim-managed institutions, though numerous, account for a smaller share

of aided and self-financing colleges than the community's share of the population (Sebastian, 2019). The often-repeated statement that "43 per cent of Kerala Muslims pursue higher education" appears to confuse the state's overall GER with the Muslim GER and is not supported by the data.

5.3 The Gender Reversal

The most striking feature of Muslim participation in Kerala is the advantage of women. In 2020–21 the Muslim female GER was estimated at 25.16 per cent against 15.80 per cent for Muslim men, implying that roughly six in ten Muslim students in the state were women (Mehta, 2023). This mirrors, in sharper form, a state-wide pattern: Kerala recorded the highest gender parity index in higher education among the states in 2020–21, at 1.52, with a female GER of 52.3 per cent against 34.5 per cent for men (Ministry of Education, 2023). At the national level, by contrast, the Muslim female GER (9.43 per cent) was only slightly above the male figure (8.44 per cent).

The reasons for the reversal are discussed in Section 6, but one point should be made here. The low male GER is not simply the flip side of women's success. It reflects a pattern in which young Muslim men leave education after school or after a first degree to enter work, often through migration or family business, while young women continue to study. Whether this is a sign of empowerment for women, of foreclosed options for men, or both, is a question that enrolment statistics alone cannot answer.

5.4 Resilience in the Pandemic Year

Kerala's modest increase in Muslim enrolment in 2020–21 stands in contrast to the national decline. Several factors probably contributed: a dense network of colleges close to where students live, which reduced the need to travel or relocate; the state's relatively strong digital infrastructure and the rapid shift of universities to online teaching; continued payment of state scholarships; and the presence of community institutions with an interest in retaining students. At the same time, the pandemic triggered large-scale return migration from the Gulf, and many returning workers lost their incomes. The full effect of this shock on household spending on education may not have shown up until later years. The fall in Kerala's overall GER from 43.2 per cent in 2020–21 to 41.3 per cent in 2021–22 (Ministry of Education, 2024), which coincided with a sharp rise in the number of students leaving Kerala to study abroad (International Institute of Migration and Development & Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, 2024), suggests that the state's higher education system was already under new kinds of pressure by the end of the period.

6. Drivers of Participation

6.1 Gulf Migration and Remittances

Migration to the Gulf is the single most important economic factor in the recent educational history of Kerala's Muslims. The Kerala Migration Survey 2018 estimated that the state had about 21 lakh emigrants, nearly nine in ten of them in the Gulf countries, and that total remittances in 2018 amounted to ₹85,092 crore (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). Muslims, who form about a quarter of the population, accounted for about 42 per cent of emigrants, and Malappuram district received the largest share of remittances. Muslims have made up the largest share of emigrants in every round of the survey since 1998 (Table 3).

Table 3 *Distribution of Emigrants from Kerala by Religion, Selected Kerala Migration Survey Rounds (%)*

Survey round	Hindus	Muslims	Christians
1998	29.5	50.7	19.9
2008	37.7	41.1	21.2
2014	36.3	41.3	22.4
2018	35	42	24
2023	35.2	41.9	22.3

Note. Muslims formed 26.56 per cent of Kerala's population in 2011. Figures for 1998–2014 as compiled by Sebastian (2019); 2018 from Rajan and Zachariah (2019), rounded; 2023 from the Kerala Migration Survey 2023 (International Institute of Migration and Development & Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, 2024).

Sebastian (2019) argues that the effect of remittances on Muslim education became visible only after a lag of a generation, because early earnings went first into repaying debts, buying land and building houses. Once households reached a threshold of security, spending on children's education rose, and community-level surpluses financed the expansion of self-financing colleges. The New Economics of Labour Migration offers a useful lens here: for a household in which the son is expected to migrate, investing in a daughter's

education is both a form of insurance and a source of status, particularly in marriage markets that increasingly value educated brides.

Migration is, however, a double-edged support. The 2018 survey already recorded a decline in the number of emigrants since 2013 and a rise in return migration, with Malappuram having the largest number of returnees (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). The pandemic accelerated return migration. A model of educational advancement that rests heavily on remittance income is therefore exposed to labour market changes in the Gulf over which neither families nor the state have any control.

6.2 Community Institutions

Community-managed institutions have been the second pillar of expansion. Sebastian's (2019) compilation shows that, of 204 aided colleges in Kerala, 38 (18.6 per cent) were managed by Muslim organisations, compared with 95 managed by Christian bodies and 63 by Hindu organisations. In the self-financing sector, about 154 of 890 institutions (17.3 per cent) bore names identifying them as Muslim-managed. The MES alone ran 149 institutions in 2019, including seven aided and 28 self-financing arts and science colleges, five engineering colleges and four medical, dental or nursing institutions (Sebastian, 2019). Claims that MES or any single Muslim body runs more than 100 colleges overstate the position; the figure of about 150 refers to all MES institutions, including schools, hostels and training centres.

These institutions matter for reasons beyond their number. They are located disproportionately in Malabar, close to Muslim population centres, and many offer women's colleges and hostels that make it easier for families to send daughters to study. Their role has not been free of controversy. When the MES banned face veils in its institutions in 2019, the decision was opposed by some religious organisations, illustrating the ways in which questions about women's education and public visibility remain contested within the community (Sebastian, 2019).

6.3 Reform Movements and Changing Attitudes

The reformist tradition described in Section 2 continued to shape attitudes during the period. Organisations across the doctrinal spectrum, from reformist (Mujahid) groups to the traditionalist Sunni bodies, have built schools, colleges and Arabic colleges that combine religious and secular instruction. Osella and Osella (2008) show how reformist ideas about education, respectability and modern religiosity became part of a broader project of middle-class aspiration among Kerala Muslims. Their work also cautions against treating reform as a single, unified force; competing organisations hold different views on, among other things, the appropriate public role of women.

6.4 Reservation and State Scholarships

Kerala treats almost all Muslims, other than those in the creamy layer, as a backward class, with a separate sub-quota within the reservation for Other Backward Classes. The shares are often misreported. In 2020, according to the state's Backward Classes Development Department, Muslims were entitled to 12 per cent of posts in state government employment, 8 per cent of seats in professional degree courses and 7 per cent of seats in arts and science courses (Backward Classes Development Department, 2020; see Table 4). These quotas are smaller than the community's population share. Their importance lies less in their size than in the fact that they extend to the whole community rather than to selected sub-groups, as in many other states.

Table 4 *Reservation for Muslims Within the Other Backward Classes Quota in Kerala, 2020*

Category	Muslim sub-quota (%)	Total OBC quota (%)
State government employment	12	40
Professional degree courses	8	30
Arts and science courses	7	20
Higher secondary (HSE / VHSE)	7 / 8	28 / 30

Note. OBC = Other Backward Classes. Educational quotas as listed by the Backward Classes Development Department (2020); the 12 per cent employment sub-quota within the 40 per cent OBC reservation is the long-standing state rule. Quotas apply to Muslims outside the creamy layer.

Scholarships constitute the second form of state support. Following the Sachar Committee, the Government of Kerala appointed a committee chaired by Paloli Mohammed Kutty, whose report was approved in May 2008 (Government of Kerala, 2008). Its recommendations led to a separate minority welfare department, coaching centres for competitive examinations and a scholarship scheme for Muslim girls in higher education, later named after C. H. Muhammed Koya. By 2021–22 the scheme offered ₹5,000 a year for undergraduate students, ₹6,000 for postgraduates and ₹7,000 for professional courses, with a hostel stipend of ₹13,000 in lieu of the scholarship for students living in recognised hostels (Directorate of

Minority Welfare, 2021). Scholarships for minority students in nursing and paramedical courses, and central schemes such as the post-matric and merit-cum-means scholarships, provided further support.

The amounts involved are modest relative to the cost of higher education, particularly in self-financing colleges. Their significance is partly symbolic and partly practical: they signal state endorsement of girls' education and can make the difference for households at the margin. Their value, and the framework within which they were allocated, became the subject of litigation at the very end of the period, as discussed in Section 7.

7. State Strategies in Higher Education, 2016–2021

Kerala's higher education strategy during the period was not designed specifically for Muslims, but several of its elements had particular consequences for the community. Three can be distinguished.

The first was the regulation of the self-financing sector. Admission and fee regulatory committees established under the state's 2006 legislation on professional colleges, which prohibits capitation fees and regulates admissions and fees, continued to oversee admissions and fees in professional colleges. Given the community's heavy presence in this sector, both as managers and as students, the balance between access, affordability and quality in self-financing colleges is of direct importance to Muslim students. The evidence available does not allow a systematic assessment of quality differences between self-financing and public institutions attended by Muslim students, and this remains an important gap.

The second was investment in public institutions and new programmes, alongside a growing emphasis on research and quality. Infrastructure in government and aided colleges was upgraded through state and central funding, and new programmes in emerging fields were introduced. Towards the end of the period, in September 2021, the government constituted three commissions: a Commission for Reforms in Higher Education chaired by Shyam B. Menon, a commission on university law reform chaired by N. K. Jayakumar, and a commission on examination reform chaired by C. T. Aravindakumar (Srivastava, 2021). The Menon Commission's report, submitted in 2022, stressed the need to combine quantitative expansion with access for under-privileged students (Jayaramu, 2022). These initiatives point to a shift in emphasis from expanding access to improving quality, a shift that matters for a community whose gains have so far been mainly quantitative.

The third concerns the legal and political framework of minority welfare. In May 2021, the High Court of Kerala quashed the government orders under which merit-cum-means scholarships for minorities, including the C. H. Muhammed Koya scheme, were distributed in a ratio of 80 per cent to Muslims and 20

per cent to Latin Catholics and converted Christians, holding that the state must treat all notified minorities equally and allocate benefits in accordance with population (*Justine Pallivathukkal v. State of Kerala*, 2021). In July 2021 the state cabinet decided to replace the 80:20 formula with a population-based ratio, reducing the Muslim share to roughly 60 per cent (Onmanorama, 2021). Shortly after the study period, the central government discontinued the Maulana Azad National Fellowship for minority research scholars from 2022–23 and restricted pre-matric scholarships to Classes 9 and 10 (Press Information Bureau, 2022). Together, these decisions show that targeted support for Muslim education rests on a legally and politically contested foundation.

8. Persistent Challenges

8.1 The Parity Gap

The central finding of this paper is the persistence of a parity gap. A Muslim GER of about 20 per cent against a state average of over 40 per cent means that, even in Kerala, a young Muslim is roughly half as likely as the average young Keralite to be enrolled in higher education. The gap is especially wide for men. Explaining it requires attention to factors that operate before college: secondary-level dropout among Muslim students in Kerala, estimated at 11.91 per cent, is low by national standards but not negligible (Porecha, 2023), and a weaker transition from higher secondary to college among boys appears to account for much of the difference.

8.2 Dependence on the Self-Financing Sector

The expansion of Muslim participation has been closely tied to the growth of self-financing colleges. These institutions have widened access, especially in Malabar, where public provision historically lagged. But they charge higher fees than government and aided colleges, vary considerably in quality and are vulnerable to falling demand. When remittance incomes fall, households that depend on them are likely to feel the burden of fees first. The concentration of Muslim students in this sector, if confirmed by better data, would imply that the community bears a disproportionate share of the cost and risk of higher education in Kerala.

8.3 Disciplines, Elite Institutions and Research

A common concern in the literature is that Muslim students are concentrated in conventional arts and commerce programmes and under-represented in elite national institutions and in doctoral research. Publicly available data do not allow this to be tested rigorously for Kerala Muslims, because religion-specific

enrolment is not readily available by discipline and institution type at the state level. The concern is plausible and widely shared, but it should be treated as a hypothesis requiring evidence rather than as an established finding. The discontinuation of the Maulana Azad National Fellowship is likely to make the research pipeline narrower still.

8.4 Education Without Employment?

The gender reversal in enrolment has not been matched by a comparable shift in women's employment. Kerala as a whole has long combined high female education with low female labour force participation, and the pattern is more pronounced among Muslim women. The Kerala Migration Survey 2023 also recorded that female emigrants from Kerala were far more likely than male emigrants to hold degrees (International Institute of Migration and Development & Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, 2024), suggesting that for some educated women, opportunity increasingly lies outside the state. If higher education does not translate into work or wider choices, its contribution to capabilities in Sen's sense is incomplete.

8.5 Regional Disparities

Finally, the regional legacy described in Section 2 has not disappeared. Malabar, home to most of Kerala's Muslims, historically had fewer government colleges and seats per head of population than southern and central Kerala, which is one reason why community and self-financing institutions grew so rapidly there. Persistent complaints about shortages of higher secondary and college seats in the Malabar districts suggest that public provision has still not fully caught up with demand.

9. Discussion

The evidence reviewed here supports neither of the two dominant narratives about Kerala Muslims and higher education. The first, celebratory narrative presents Kerala as a model of minority inclusion in which Muslims have achieved parity. The data show that this is not yet the case. The second, pessimistic narrative assimilates Kerala Muslims into a national story of exclusion and decline. This, too, is inaccurate: Kerala's Muslims have made substantial gains, their enrolment kept rising when it fell nationally, and their women now participate in higher education at rates well above those of Muslim men in Kerala and of Muslims elsewhere in India.

The concept of access without parity captures this middle ground. In terms of the frameworks set out in Section 3, the community has been remarkably successful in converting economic capital from migration

and social capital from community organisation into educational access. It has been less successful, so far, in converting access into the kinds of cultural capital, professional credentials and positions in elite institutions that yield the highest returns, and in ensuring that women's education translates into wider freedoms. The household strategy described by the New Economics of Labour Migration, in which sons migrate and daughters study, has produced the gender reversal, but it has also tied the community's educational fortunes to remittance flows.

The policy implications follow from this diagnosis. Expanding access further will require public investment in Malabar, where the community is concentrated, and support for male students at the transition from school to college. Improving the returns to access will require attention to quality and accreditation in the self-financing sector, pathways into professional and research careers, and links between higher education and employment for women. Protecting the gains already made will require a stable and legally robust framework for targeted support, one that can withstand the kind of challenge that the scholarship litigation of 2021 represented.

10. Conclusion

Between 2016 and 2021, Kerala's Muslims consolidated their position as the best-educated large Muslim community among the major states of India, with a GER in higher education more than twice the national Muslim average, enrolment that continued to grow through the pandemic, and a female participation rate that far outstripped that of men. These gains were built on a century of reform, two generations of Gulf migration, a dense network of community institutions and a reservation and scholarship framework that covers the community as a whole.

Yet the period also revealed the limits of this model. The Muslim GER remained less than half of the state average; much of the community's participation depended on self-financing colleges and remittance incomes; male participation was weak; and the scholarships and fellowships that supported Muslim students proved legally and politically fragile. The central task for the next phase is therefore not simply to expand enrolment but to close the parity gap with other Keralites and to ensure that higher education delivers the wider freedoms it promises.

Three directions for policy stand out. The first is targeted public investment in higher education in the Malabar districts, including new government and aided college seats and support for the transition of Muslim boys from school to college. The second is a quality agenda for the self-financing sector, with strengthened accreditation and transparent fee regulation, combined with mentoring and preparatory support

to widen access to professional programmes, research degrees and national institutions. The third is a stable framework for scholarships that reflects demonstrated educational need and is designed to withstand legal scrutiny. For research, the most urgent need is for religion-disaggregated data on discipline, institution type and graduate outcomes, without which the qualitative dimension of the community's development experience cannot be assessed with confidence.

References

Backward Classes Development Department. (2020). *Educational reservation: Other Backward Classes*. Government of Kerala. https://bcdd.kerala.gov.in/reservation/educational-reservation/

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.

Directorate of Minority Welfare. (2021). *C. H. Muhammed Koya Scholarship 2021–22: Notification*. Government of Kerala. http://www.minoritywelfare.kerala.gov.in

Government of Kerala. (2008). *Report submitted before the Government of Kerala by the committee under the chairmanship of Paloli Mohammed Kutty, Minister for Local Self Government, regarding the implementation of Justice Sachar Commission Report in Kerala* [Approved by G.O.(Ms.) No. 148/08/GAD dated 6 May 2008]. Government of Kerala.

International Institute of Migration and Development & Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation. (2024). *Kerala Migration Survey 2023* [Report]. https://iimad.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/KMS-2023-Report.pdf

Jayaramu, P. S. (2022, September 3). Report of the Commission for Reforms in Higher Education in Kerala, 2022. *Mainstream, 60*(37). https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article12688.html

Justine Pallivathukkal v. State of Kerala, 2021 SCC OnLine Ker 2551 (High Court of Kerala, May 28, 2021).

Majeed, R., & Najeeb, P. M. (2024). Re-forming the Muslim woman: Contextualising the Arabic-Malayalam novel *Khadeejakutty* in the history of Muslim educational reforms in Kerala. *Ishal Paithrkam*, (36).

Mehta, A. C. (2023). *The state of Muslim education in India: A data-driven analysis based on UDISE+ and AISHE*. Education for All in India. https://educationforallinindia.com/muslims-gross-enrolment-ratio-at-higher-education-level-2020-21/

Ministry of Education. (2023). *All India Survey on Higher Education 2020–21*. Department of Higher Education, Government of India.

Ministry of Education. (2024). *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021–22*. Department of Higher Education, Government of India.

Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2015). *Census of India 2011: Population by religious community* (Table C-1). Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

Onmanorama. (2021, July 15). Kerala government changes minority scholarship ratio. https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2021/07/15/kerala-government-minority-scholarship-students-ratio-changed.html

Osella, F., & Osella, C. (2008). Islamism and social reform in Kerala, South India. *Modern Asian Studies, 42*(2–3), 317–346.

Porecha, M. (2023, November). Muslim student strength in higher education fell by 1.79 lakh in 2020–21. *The Hindu*.

Press Information Bureau. (2022, December 8). *Scholarships for minority students* [Press release]. Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1881893

Prime Minister's High Level Committee. (2006). *Social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India: A report*. Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India.

Rajan, S. I., & Zachariah, K. C. (2019). *Emigration and remittances: New evidences from the Kerala Migration Survey 2018* (Working Paper No. 483). Centre for Development Studies.

Sebastian, J. (2019). *Under representation of Muslims in higher education: How and why the Kerala story is somewhat different?* [Research paper submitted to Vikas Anvesh Foundation]. Institute for Enterprise Culture & Entrepreneurship Development. https://www.vikasanvesh.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Why-is-Kerala-Story-Different.pdf

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Srivastava, A. (2021, September 10). Kerala government sets up 3 panels to overhaul higher education, names members. *Careers360*. https://news.careers360.com/kerala-government-sets-up-3-panels-overhaul-higher-education-names-members

Stark, O., & Bloom, D. E. (1985). The new economics of labor migration. *The American Economic Review, 75*(2), 173–178.