

**The Politics of Conflict Resolution:  
A Study of the Mediation Practices of Sayyid Muhammad Ali Shihab**

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### Abstract

The paper examines conflict resolution methods and techniques practiced by Sayyid Muhammad Ali Shihab (1936-2009) and his role in community building in a pluralist society. He is a Muslim religious and political leader from Kerala, a south Indian state. The population of Kerala is religiously diverse with 54.73 % Hindus, 26.56 % Muslims and 18.38 % Christians. The state is known for its composite culture and religious harmony. He was the state president of Indian Union Muslim League, the third-largest political party in the state from 1975 to 2009 and the Qazi (religious authority) of many Mahals (Muslim association centered in a mosque in a specific geographical location). He headed many religious and educational institutions across the state and practiced traditional Islamic healing. As a person belonging to the Sayyid family (descendants of prophet Muhammed) who migrated to Kerala from Yemen around 300 years ago, he already possessed a traditional authority over the Muslim population of the region. As a leader, he was the center of the conflict resolution in his society. Tuesday was the day of the week he entirely dedicated to problem-solving practices and public interactions. Hence, every Tuesday, people from and outside of the Muslim community visited him to solve their personal problems, interpersonal quarrels, inter-community conflicts, and the issues in everyday working of the Mahals. His popularity in the field was widely accepted as there was a time when he was assigned mediation by the High Court of Kerala. The study examines how he practiced conflict resolution as a principle of his political engagement and as a tool for strengthening religious harmony, especially in the post-Babari Masjid demolition of 1992.

**Keywords:** Islam, Muslim, India, conflict resolution, politics

## Introduction

The inter-community relationship in India has invited the attention of scholars of politics, sociology, economics, and other disciplines. Most of the scholastic contribution presents a conflicting picture of post-colonial India regarding the relationship between communities (Palshikar & Deshpande, 2019; Brass, 2003; Varshney, 2002). It is because the modern Indian state is culturally and religiously diverse; the imagination of the nation continued to be very diverse. It opened ways to the emergence of conflicting interests. The political discourses in the post-colonial India are very much communally sensitive as it is centered around the perspectives, questions and demands of competing communities on history, memory and the contemporary politics (Chandra, 1984; Das, 1990; Engineer, 1984). In 2016, Pew Research Center ranked India first in its index of social hostilities involving religion (Pew Research Center, 2016).

At the same time, the popular and academic discourse about Kerala - a south Indian state - was different as the public opinion and the studies described it as a space for coexistence among religious communities. The population of Kerala consists of 54.73 % of Hindus, 26.56 % of Muslims and 18.38 % of Christians (Population Census, 2011; Zachariah, 2016). The composition of three religious communities in Kerala has invited the attention of scholars on many aspects of shared socio-cultural space. George Mathew's (1989) work, *Communal Road to Secular Kerala*, is a seminal work that deals with many issues of inter-community relationships and its political implications in Kerala.

The Muslim political experiments and engagements in the post-1947 Kerala have an important role in the constitution of the current political culture of the state (Aziz, 1992; Lakshmi, 2012). Muslim political choices in the state are diverse as the community members work in communist parties, Indian National Congress, and other political parties. Still, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) has dominance over others in representing Muslim members. IUML is the successor of All India Muslim League (AIML) in India after India-Pakistan partition. Currently, it is the third-largest party in the state of Kerala. It has a considerable presence in Tamil Nadu and a nominal presence in other parts of India. Electorally, politics in Kerala is a contest between two alliances: Left Democratic Front and United Democratic Front. IUML is a member of the later. The political trend in the state supports one of the alliances after another in the subsequent elections. Usually, IUML wins its pockets whether its alliance succeeds or fails.

The politics of IUML is a compelling case for scholars of conflict resolution in traditional societies. Ideologically, IUML proposes Muslim politics and stands for Muslim rights specifically. Being a political party that primarily focuses on a religious community in a secular state, IUML had to engage with discourses that invalidates its legitimacy. The political opponents tagged it as a communal party. (In India, the words *communal* and *communalism* have a negative connotation. It is because the words are used in opposition to secular and secularism.) The label centers on the argument that it is communal to organize politically on a religious identity in a secular country.

There were multiple efforts to ban IUML by the central government. The communalism tag also was a prime reason for the dismissal or failure of the League in its pockets in north India after independence. Hence, maintaining good relations with other communities was an essential tool in IUML politics and its political development. Therefore, mediation, solving, or preventing conflicts between communities were a vital tool for the politics and the political development of IUML. In this context, the study addresses the conflict resolution practices of Sayyid Muhammad Ali Shihab (Shihab Thangal

hereafter as he was popularly known) who was the president of Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) from 1975 to 2009 and the importance of these conflict resolution practices in the political identity formation of IUML and Muslim politics.

Conflict resolution is generally conceptualized as practices, methods, and processes intended to solve a conflict and retain peace and normalcy. Academically, it is a multidisciplinary study area and widely deliberated topic, especially in International Relations, Political Science, Social Work and Management Studies. Prominent scholars in the field have explained multiple ways and strategies to deal with conflict or analyzed how societies engage with it and documented the cultural differences of those engagements. For instance, Allan E. Barsky (2017) proposes five approaches to conflict resolution: rights, power, therapeutic, interests and transformation, and their application to the different range of conflict manifestation. John Bossy (2003) discusses conflict resolution practices in the West. John Paul Lederach (2010) criticizes limiting studies on conflict resolution to proposing strategies or analyzing practices as the above said works propose. Instead, he advocates for including spirituality, imagination, and creativity. Some scholars question the universality of western notions of conflict resolution. For instance, Avruch (1998) discusses the importance of considering the culture and local contexts while applying the methods, and Salem (1993) analyzes the western notions from the context of the Middle East.

In short, conflict resolution in the current literature, both mainstream and critical literature, begins after “conflict.” In other words, the focus of the studies are societies or persons affected by conflicts or problems, and the objective is to solve and deal with the situation. The present research, while building on the current concepts, also departs from them. It is because it advocates for the necessity of incorporating the society’s potential for conflicts in the scope of conflict resolution studies. The case addressed in this study is the mediation practices of a community leader. The society and situations he dealt are different from a conflict zone. But, his practices are intended to prevent conflicts and maintain prevailing peace in a multi-religious society that has a history of inter-community conflicts during the British period, and the relationship between same communities continues to be strained in some other parts of the country. Hence, the term conflict resolution used in this study accommodates practices intended to sustain normalcy and peace. The case is significant for the advancement of conflict resolution studies and practices in different contexts. This is because the study deals with the role of mediation and the power of community leaders in fostering peaceful coexistence in multi-religious societies.

Methodologically, the study is built on the methodological and theoretical perspectives of poststructuralist discourse analysis. According to the poststructuralist discourse analysis proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, the meaning of an act, statement, event, and individual appears and sustains through the hegemonic articulation of that meaning (Torfing, 1999). These articulations constitute the identity of the subject. Discourse analysis is the analysis of the formation of the meanings. The study analyzes discourses about Shihab Thangal, especially those that concern his conflict resolution and mediation practices, and examines how his mediation and discourses about it constitute his politics, personality, Muslim League politics and the society in which he lives. The primary materials of the study are political practices, articles, and statements of Shihab Thangal as well as memoirs published about him.

### Shihab Thangal; Family, Education, and the Beginning of his Political Career

Shihab Thangal was born in a Sayyid Family of Panakkad on May 04, 1936. Panakkad is a village in Malappuram district, a district in Malabar region of Kerala. Malappuram is a state that has 70.24% Muslim population (Census, 2011). The Sayyids are descendants of prophet Muhammed. Scholars have studied the movements of Sayyid families from Yemen and other Arab countries to different locations across the Indian Ocean (Ho, 2006; Dale, 1997). Shihab Thangal's ancestors also migrated to Kerala from Hadhramaut, Yemen (Kanthapuram, 2011). His father, PMSA Pookkoya Thangal, with Sayyid Abdu Rahman Bafaqi was very instrumental in developing Muslim political consciousness. They were top leaders of the Muslim League in Malabar during the end of colonialism and the first and second decades of post-colonial India (Vadakara, 2015; Gangadharan, 1995).

He completed secondary education from Madrasathul Muhammadiyah Higher Secondary School in March 1953 (Vadakara, 2011). Then he joined Dars (a popular system of religious education in Kerala where Muslim clerics teach Islamic texts at the Mosques and students stay there to study) at Thalakkadathur from 1953-55. After, he moved to another Dars at Kanancheri in 1956 with a famous scholar in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Ponmala Moideen Musliyar. Later he left for Cairo to join Al Azhar University for higher studies, and studied there during 1958-61. He moved to Cairo University from 1961 to 1966, studying Arabic literature and Sufism. While he was a student, he wrote articles in Arabic and Malayalam magazines about Arabic literature and media (Vadakara, 2011).

He was elected president of IUML Kerala State committee after the death of his father, PMSA Pookkoya Thangal on September 1, 1975. It was at the age of thirty-nine. In an interview with Jhony Lukoos, a journalist, he recalls that he was reluctant to receive the position. But, pressure from the top leaders of the party made him to accept the nomination (Lukoos, 2007). He continued as the president of the party until his death on August 1, 2009. He transcended the binary between religion and politics, as he was Qadi (Supreme religious authority) of 404 Mahals. As a Qadi, he is responsible for issuing Fatwas (opinion on religious issues) and supervising Muslim life under his jurisdiction. He practiced Islamic healing - a system of curing diseases through prayer, Quranic texts, and traditional medicines. The practice of Islamic healing was very normal in the Sayyid families of Malabar (Lang, 2014). In short, the religious authority of his family, his spiritual practices and political power placed him in a position that enabled him to be an influential leader, *Panakkatte kireedam vekkatha Sulthan* (The king form, *Panakkad*, who does not wear a crown). This was a popular introduction about him by the Muslim community, and it shaped community's social interactions, inter-community relationships and the Muslim political identity for three and half decades.

### Everyday Practices of Conflict Resolution

An analysis of memoirs about Shihab Thangal reveals that the popular view about him is that he was a man of mediation and conflict resolution. The traditional authority of the Sayyids in the Muslim community is the prime reason for people's dependence on them for mediation. The Sayyid families in different localities play this role in Kerala. Panakkad Syed's family has more acceptance in the region than the other Syed families. The reputation of Panakkad Syed's family is based on the political and religious role they played in the area. PMSA Pookkoya Thangal (father of Shihab Thangal) was the state president of Indian Union Muslim League. He was arrested in 1948 as part of the government's move

against the Muslim League during Hyderabad action (a military plan to annex Hyderabad to Indian Union) (Vadakara, 2015). He also was a person extensively engaged in mediation and solving problems. One famous story about him illustrates his role in problem-solving practices in the community. One day, when he came out of his house during the early morning, he found some people sitting in the courtyard of his house and waiting. He realized that they were waiting for him since the midnight for an urgent matter and they could not wake him up as he was sleeping in a very inner part of the house. He felt very sorry about the incident, and decided to shift his bedroom to a room adjacent to the entrance of the house. He believed that it would be convenient for his visitors to wake him up if they needed to meet him during the nightly hours (Konar, 2008).

Shihab Thangal continued the legacy of his family in mediation and solving conflicts. He reserved every Tuesday for a meeting with the public. Traditionally, the Sayyids at Panakkad family meet with people on Tuesdays. It was a custom practiced by his father too. On Tuesdays, his brothers also interacted with the public at their respective houses. All of them are either leaders of Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama: an organization of Ulema/Muslim clerics (Members of the organization supports Muslim League in practice although there is no official collaboration between them) or they bear high position in the Muslim League. As the Sayyid houses are located in the same neighborhood in Panakkad, Tuesdays are usually very crowded there. People from different parts of Kerala come to the village to make an appointment with the Sayyids. The purpose of the visit varies from person to person and it includes healing, solving interpersonal quarrels, family problems, and inter-community conflicts. He usually sits in the front side of the house on his chair in front of a roundtable, and the people surround him from the three sides while presenting their issues to him. He listens to everybody and responds to the problems.

The study analyzed memoirs and popular stories about him. During the study, the spread of many stories and narratives about his mediation role in the community was revealed. It is beyond the scope of the study to document all those stories. Here is one such a story. It was widely circulated on social media in the form of a Facebook video by Basheer Faizy Deshamangalam. He is one of the leaders of the student wing of Samastha, the Ulema organization. Shajahan Madampat (2017) has quoted the same story in his article entitled “Malappuram isn’t Mini Kashmir.”

One day a quarrel was reported to the Panakkad family. A coconut tree owned by a neighboring Hindu family troubled a Masjid committee because it grew over the Masjid and the coconuts falling down from the tree regularly broke the thatched tiles of the Masjid. The situation became worse as the house owner declined the request of the masjid committee to cut the tree. The tension escalated to a conflict between the Muslim and Hindu communities. Finally, they decided to approach Shihab Thangal to mediate and solve the problem. He listened to both parties. The Muslim representative said that they (i.e., the Muslims) are tired of changing the tiles and there is no other way other than cutting the coconut tree. Hindu family members countered that the situation has gone out of their hand and the other community members are not satisfied with cutting the tree. Shihab Thangal ordered the Masjid committee to demolish the current structure and rebuild the Masjid with a concrete roof. He then handed over his donation for the rebuilding project. Everybody was happy with an unexpected solution proposed by him. The representative of the Hindu family also made a donation for the masjid reconstruction. The twist in the story begins as they returned home. The old mother at the Hindu home was shocked when she knew about the solution. She thought it is not fair to ask Muslims to rebuild their Masjid for the sake of a coconut tree. She requested an urgent meeting with Shihab Thangal as soon as possible to inform

him that they are ready to cut the tree. They rushed to his home; it was the early nightly hours. Still, the house was crowded. She entered the courtyard crying, apologizing and saying that she is ready to cut the tree. Shihab Thangal consoled her, and convinced her to continue with his earlier solution to the conflict (Deshamangalam, 2016).

There are similar popular stories about his engagement with solving problems and mediating everyday conflicts. The popularity of his practices of mediation and solving conflicts was officially endorsed when a Kerala High court assigned him a case for mediation. The family court of Malappuram was handling the case initially. A divorced woman named Chemban Imthihasunnisa filed a lawsuit against her ex-husband Kodasseri Abdul Hameed seeking money for the cost of care support services for herself and their children. The family court's verdict was in favor of Imthihasunnisa. Abdul Hameed appealed to the High Court of Kerala. While the case was processing in the court, the parties agreed for a settlement. Then the High Court judges - Kurian Joseph and Harun-ul-Rasheed - ordered that the case be sent to Shihab Thangal for mediation as the parties agreed that they will abide by his decision (Kodasseri Abdul Hameed Vs. Chemban Imthihasunnisa, 2007). They reached an agreement mediated by Shihab Thangal at his residence, and the court later produced its final judgement (Kodasseri Abdul Hameed vs. Chemban Imthihasunnisa, 2009).

He also mediated conflicts among Muslim organizations representing various sects in the Muslim community. Competition and contestation among religious organizations are a very important aspect of Kerala Islam (Santhosh, 2013; Kooria, 2013). The organizational split in the Muslim community of the region was a big problem for IUML as it reduces the collective power of the community while standing for the community rights and engaging with the government. Hence, engagements with conflicting religious organizations were part of everyday politics of the Muslim League. Considering the situation, Shihab Thangal developed a common platform for Muslim organizations to deal with cases that affect Muslims generally. The most crucial instance of such a movement was during *Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum Case Verdict* of the Supreme Court of India in 1985. Muslim organizations considered the verdict as a move against the Islamic Sharia. Leaders of Muslim organizations have recognized his ability to bring rival Muslim organizations to a common platform (Hassan, 2009).

### The Politics of Conflict Resolution

This section examines how Shihab Thangal extended his practices of mediation to the political arena. As he was the state president of Indian Union Muslim League, he had an influential role in shaping the political spectrum of his time. The political controversy over Babari Masjid is an integral part of post-colonial political discourses in India. The claim of Hindu nationalists over the Babari Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh was very instrumental in their emergence as a powerful political force in the country. The demolition of Babri Masjid by Hindu nationalists on December 6, 1992 reflected the entire country in the form of outbreaks of communal violence (India Today, 2011, December 5). The politics over Babri Masjid continued after its demolition also as Hindu nationalists propose a Hindu temple at the site. The incident and the political discourses around it changed the political fabric of India. It opened doors for the Bharatiya Janata Party to seize power and caused the decline of secularism and the rise of communalism (sectarianism). The outbreak of communal violence followed by the destruction of the Masjid was very massive and countrywide (Brass, 2003; Engineer, 2004).

Following the demolition of Babri Masjid and the eruption of communal violence across the country, Shihab Thangal issued a statement requesting the Muslim community to keep quiet and calm and not to indulge in any forms of retaliation against the Hindu community. He asked party members to stand around the Hindu temple, protecting it from any acts of violence. His statement was published in the leading daily newspapers. *Malayala Manorama* reports it as follows: “Muslim League president Shihab Thangal appeals to all sections of the people to maintain peace and obey law and order even at the stage of extreme provocation from the opponents until Muslim leaders across the country make a decision on the case” (Samadhanam Palikkuka, 1992). IUML provided vehicles, drove through the villages and announced Shihab Thangal’s statement in a loudspeaker while asking people to live in communal harmony (Madampat, 2010). His articles in *Chandrika Daily* proposes his idea about the Babri Masjid controversy. His article is entitled “Let thousand years old ideologies not get into conflicts.” In the article, he debunks Hindu nationalists’ claim over Babari Masjid citing historical and legal sources. He states IUML’s position over the issues, its desire for peace among communities and the willingness of the party to obey court order whatever it is. According to him, the preservation of religious institutions and their protection is the basis of Indian secularism proposed by the constitution. He refers to the August 15, 1947 private bill introduced by Muslim League in the parliament that advocates for maintaining the status quo regarding the ownership of religious institutions as a reference point (Shihab, 1990).

His statement and interference in the post-Babari scenario gathered appreciation from diverse sections of the communities. He was named *a man of peace*, and the secular credentials of his party strengthened in the public sphere (Sreedaran, 2011; Nair, 2011). His party leaders and supporters designated him with the title, *Samadanathinte Vellaripravu*, meaning *the dove of peace*. The title was trendy and widely used to introduce him in party pamphlets, articles, and speeches. Another incident, which invited much public appreciation, was his visit to Angadippuram Tali Temple. It is a famous Hindu temple in the Malabar. One morning, the temple authorities realized that somebody had burnt the giant door at the entrance of the temple. The situation was enough to fuel communal tension as the typical suspects are Muslims. It was a Friday. Finishing the Friday Prayer, he visited the temple and met Hindu priests. The picture, which shows him coming out of the temple after the visit and the Hindu priests accompanying him, was the frontline story of the next day newspapers. The image was enough to control the situation from erupting into a communal clash. There are similar incidents where he played a reconciling role, and the narrations about those are very popular in writings and speeches about him. The representational stories described in the above lines are enough to understand how he was perceived as a mediator and a man of reconciliation, and how he placed conflict resolution at the center of his politics.

### Shihab Thangal and the Art of not Making a Conflict

As the introductory section explained, usually, conflict resolution studies the conflict zones, traces the causes or the constitution of the situation, and suggests the solution. An analysis of Shihab Thangal’s life and his mediation practices enlarges the domain of conflict resolution research to study the art of not making conflicts and its methods. The case of Shihab Thangal illustrates such a situation. His social and political policies were mostly to prevent conflicts, which is different from solving conflicts. International Relations scholarship has explained the scenario using the term diplomacy. The illegitimacy of violence or coercion and the risk of war have compelled modern states to choose diplomacy as a method to pursue



self-interests. Presently, the primary duty of a diplomat is to prevent conflicts or war between countries. Diplomatic practices have reduced wars and high-density conflicts between nations. On the other hand, inter-community clashes have become common within the countries, especially in multi-ethnic or multi-religious countries. Hence, maintaining and preserving mutual trust and respect between communities is essential to prevent an outbreak of conflict and clash between them.

In this context, Johnston's (2014) discussion of internal diplomacy invites more deliberations. According to him, "divisive character of religious influences is widely appreciated and understood, their obverse contributions to resolving conflict are all but unknown (Johnston, 2014, p. 1434). He argues that while international organizations have limited capability to intervene in internal conflicts of member states, religious figures and spiritual leaders have a significant role to play regarding mediation and conflict resolution. Some spiritual leaders played a significant role in controlling conflicts either through public diplomacy or as actors behind the scene. He illustrates with the instances of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Bishop Desmond Tutu (Johnston, 2014).

Shihab Thangal comes under Johnston's category of internal diplomats, and his practices of conflict resolution can be characterized as internal diplomacy. Scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution have outlined different methods to ease tension and solve problems. Mediation, negotiation, coordination, consensus building, circles, and nonviolent communication are some methods among them. Shihab Thangal utilized multiple methods of mediation according to the contexts and situations. The most common method he practiced is circles. The circle is a problem-solving method in which concerned people sit in a circle and share their problems with a person who may be either a leader of the community or an elder. Kay Pranis (2005) has documented the effectiveness of circles in conflict resolution. Shihab Thangal has a special arrangement at his residence to listen to the problems of the people. There is a round table at the sit-out of his house. Sit-outs are a very common part of Kerala houses. It is an open space in the front side of a home. He sits in a char facing the round table, and the people stand around him and the table sharing their problems and seeking solutions. The structural arrangements form a circle of people while he listens to the people. The memoirs and popular narratives about him have mentioned about this round table as it is a place where thousands of problems have been solved. He used this method to deal with personal issues, interpersonal quarrels, family problems, and other regular social issues. His models of conflict resolution in political cases are politics of self-restraint, compromise, and forgiveness. He advised against retaliation and revenge. Hence solving conflict and maintaining a harmonious relationship with other communities were central to his idea of doing community politics in a multi-religious society.

### **Shihab Thangal and the Making of the Muslim Polity**

The section examines how Shihab Thangal's leadership and his political decisions centered around conflict resolution, self-restraint and reconciliation constituted the Muslim polity of Kerala. The introductory section has explained the difference in the political culture of Kerala comparing to some other parts of the country, as Kerala enjoys good relationship between and among major religious communities. A historical account of IUML reveals that it was a party that was isolated by other parties because of historical reasons, especially its relationship with its parental party, All India Muslim League. The later was considered in Indian public discourses as the cause of India-Pakistan partition. The political

discourses in India downgraded establishing a political party exclusively for a community. IUML had to struggle to get accepted at the political spectrum of Kerala. Hence, it was the primary duty of IUML to establish that its movement for Muslim rights is not to deny the rights of others. So maintaining a good relationship with other communities became an essential part of IUML politics. Shihab Thangal's period was very crucial in the party's political development.

Shihab Thangal and IUML projected communal harmony as the central element of their politics in the post-Babari scenario. He projected conflict resolution as the principal element of his politics. His actions and statements, especially in the post-Babari Masjid Scenario, and his intervention to prevent tensions between religious communities in different places produced political discourses and public opinions that increased the acceptance of Muslim League. As a result, Muslim League internalized peace and communal harmony as the center of its politics. For instance, the 70th-anniversary celebration of IUML at Malappuram by the youth wing of the party, the Muslim Youth League was conducted by flying doves to the sky. The state president of Muslim Youth League, Sayyid Munawwarali Shihab Thangal (Son of Shihab Thangal) was seen in the pictures of the celebration accompanying Hindu priest Melshandhi Subramanian and Father Jose Sebastian (Nasar, 2018).

At the same time, the Shihab Thangal's post-Babari policy also necessitated a split in the party as the national president Ibrahim Sulaiman Sait left the party. He formed Indian National League blaming inefficiency of Muslim League in addressing Muslim issues. The post-Babari scenario also witnessed the rise of new parties Like Popular Front of India and People Democratic Party advocating the need for more assertive Muslim politics and questioning IUML's stand on Babari Masjid demolition (KC, 2015). IUML countered the politics of new Muslim political parties arguing that these parties engage in politics of hatred, trying to break the relationship between communities and destruct peace and tranquility. The Babari demolition and its aftermath are very crucial in Kerala Muslim politics. It is because the political discourses of the time were about the ontology of Muslim politics in a situation that turns more hostile toward Muslims day by day (Chiriyankandath, 1996). In short, the constitution of Muslim polity in Kerala was very much associated with the discourses on conflict resolution, inter-community peace, and communal harmony.

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