

Sanaullah Makti Thangal,
Nabi Nāñayam
(Prophet's Coin) (excerpt)

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Translator's Preface

Sanaullah Makti Thangal (1847–1912) was a religious scholar, intellectual, polemicist, and printer-publisher from the Mappila community of the South Indian state of Kerala. While conventional readings eulogize Thangal's interventions as having initiated a religiously inspired reform within the community, recent scholarship adopts a more skeptical approach, often reading Thangal as a product of colonial modernity. Thangal's *Makti Manakleśam*, *Kadora-kudāram*, *Nārinarābhichāri*, and *Muslingalum Vidyābhyaśayum* have received some renewed scholarly attention in the last decade. My interest in *Nabi Nāṇayam*, an important yet overlooked part of his oeuvre, emerges from how it complicates the “tradition versus reform” framework often employed in the study of Thangal's work. Thangal's efforts to publish his work, along with the various discursive moves employed in *Nabi Nāṇayam*, reveal how a section of Mappila scholars engaged with material and discursive shifts attendant to colonial modernity. The novelty of Thangal's endeavor suggests less a rupture from the tradition of history writing in Arabi-Malayalam at the time, as represented by the works of scholars such as Shujai Moidu Musliyar, than an attempt to broaden the horizon of Mappila textual engagement into the emergent Malayalam print public.

Nabi Nāṇayam can be translated as “Prophet's coin.” As Thangal explains in the preface to the text, *Nabi Naanayam* was the name of the daily collection that helped him finance the publication of his work. Thangal's decision to honor the collection by titling the prophetic biography with the same name indicates the creative way in which he sought to overcome the financial struggles associated with his endeavors. In *Nabi Nāṇayam*, Thangal mobilizes the life of the Prophet as a heuristic site for the putative Muslim readers and as a medium to engage critically with missionary and orientalist polemics. Taking an innovative approach toward prophetic biography, the text draws from traditional sources of the *sīrah* tradition, such as Ibn Hisham and Ibn Athir, in addition to modern orientalist biographies of the Prophet, such as the works of John Davenport, Edward Gibbon, Godfrey Higgins, and William Muir. *Nabi Nāṇayam* also initiates a conversation with the Malayalam biographies of

the Prophet, produced within the missionary milieu, such as Hermann Gundert's *Muhammadu Caritram* (The history of Muhammad). While *Muhammadu Caritram* portrays the emergence of the Prophet Muhammad and the rise of Arabs as God's punishment for Christians who had strayed from their religion, Thangal makes use of the discursive authority of Western scholarship sympathetic to the Prophet, such as Davenport's *An Apology for Mohammed and the Koran*, Gibbon's *Life of Mahomet*, and Higgins's *An Apology for the Life and Character of the Celebrated Prophet of Arabia, Called Mohamed, or The Illustrious*, to provide an alternate picture of the prophetic life in Malayalam. In making a case for the valor and dignity of Arabs, Thangal draws from the authority of Christian apologetical literature such as *Kashf al-āthār fi qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā' Banī Isrā'īl*, a Persian translation of Alexander Keith's *Evidence of Prophecy*. The range of languages and genres *Nabi Nāñayam* draws from is suggestive of Thangal's resourcefulness in bringing together a diverse archive for what is likely the first extant biography of the Prophet by a Muslim in Malayalam.

The text begins with a geographical description of Arabia, along with a concise social and religious history of pre-Islamic Arabs. The descriptive language employed here resonates with works such as *Life of Mahomet* as well as missionary publications in Malayalam such as *Pashchimodayam*. It then turns to the genealogy of the Prophet and responds to some of the criticisms raised by the missionaries through a detailed engagement with the Gospels. Drawing from the Islamic *munazarah* (debate) tradition of North India, which often employed exegesis of Puranas (Hindu scriptures) in making a case for Islam, the text also interprets passages from the Puranas like Bhavishya Purana as predicting the emergence of a Prophet in *Kali Yuga* (Age of darkness). Finally, the work turns to the Prophet's life, narrating key events from birth to age 40, referencing traditional and modern sources.

The choice of the script, as well as the various linguistic registers employed by *Nabi Nāñayam*, reflect broader shifts in the language ideology occasioned by the advent of print modernity in colonial India. While the majority of works in the Mappila textual tradition at the time were composed in Arabi-Malayalam, including

many of Thangal's own works, *Nabi Nāñayam* is self-consciously written in “simple” Malayalam prose using modern Malayalam script. Thangal notes that the language employed in the work is aimed at making the text accessible to “Malayali Muslims” who do not regularly interact with “standard” Malayalam, which was assuming its modern shape in the 19th century. The use of a mix of Sanskritic and missionary vocabulary along with the self-consciously accessible language renders the text an interesting heteroglossic site that foreshadows the importance modern Malayalam would come to assume in Mappila Muslim life.

The preface to *Nabi Nāñayam*, which is translated below, sheds light on textual production, methodology, and linguistic choices, as well as the intended readership of the text. Even though parts of the preface, such as the long and elaborate sentence structure of the supplicatory preface (the complexity of which I have sought to retain), might seem to contradict Thangal's own claim about the accessibility of the text, they draw our attention to the layered nature of a work that blends rhetorical registers shaped within the Sanskritic-missionary milieu with the Islamic textual conventions. While Thangal was able to complete only the first part of the biography, covering pre-Islamic Arabia to the beginning of the Prophet's mission, *Nabi Nāñayam* offers valuable insights into a transitional moment in the history of Mappila textual culture.

Preface to *Nabi Nāṇayam* (Prophet's coin) by Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Thangal

Most Exalted Lord! As the continuous assistance in the efforts to elevate scripture and establish the Truth, undertaken without assistance from anyone, and upon the faith that there is no service beyond service to You and no refuge beyond Your refuge, happened to bring contentment to those weak in faith, oh Lord! I sing your praise with a joyful heart.

Dear Lord! Upon seeing the dearth of works revealing the honor You bestowed on the most beloved of the beloved, Prophet Muhammad, in the language of Kerala, wherein dwell many a follower and countless adversaries, and owing to the unbearable sadness on witnessing how the Muslims of Kerala, due to the lack of the spread of education, were wanting not only in the effort to establish the truth crucial to the revival of scripture but also in self-respecting thought, leaving them drained of strength and assailed and overcome by opponents, O Foundation of All Existence! Taking you as the sole Anchor, I embarked as the champion of truth-seeking debate and achieved success. Even though I have longed for and persevered in producing a book titled *History of Prophet Muhammad*, public frustration has brought the initiative to a farcical demise.

Oh Lord, who aids the Truth! Because of the love You have for Your beloved, the Muhammadiyya Press was revived with the help of the enthusiasm of the public of Alappuzha, and through the support of daily collection from the petty traders of Kochi by the name of *Nabi Nāṇayam* (Prophet's coin) I begin this virtuous work on the history of Prophet Muhammad. Dear Lord, bestow your blessings on *Nabi Nāṇayam* to not be interrupted till its completion! Ameen.

Readers, since the reason for this work of history lies in the daily collection called *Nabi Naanayam*, and considering that title to be auspicious, the work will also be called *Nabi Nāṇayam*. Do not assume that this is an ordinary work of history. This work contains testimonies from European historians and responses to the criticisms from the followers of other faiths. The right to establish the truthfulness of the Prophet, my grandfather, has been completely

fulfilled. Since this publication relies on a daily collection called *Nabi Naanayam*, which is in its infant stage and weakened as a child suffering from illness due to the lack of affection from the affluent who are supposed to support *Nabi Nāñayam*. Since the tract is being published weekly, it is impossible to publish the history as a book in one go or combine one or two forms weekly. One copy in eight parts, printed in half-sheet forms, will be delivered fortnightly to regular patrons, and they shall store it safely and later compile it into a book. I believe that sufficient contributions will arrive by the end of the week.

Since only a few interact with Malayalam language in Malayalam Islam, only terms that they understand will be used, though. It will not be without ornamentations appropriate for the time. It is hoped that the readers will not entirely overlook the difficult parts that may exceed 60 in number.

Those requesting a copy of the historical work, regardless of who they are or where they are from, are kindly informed that they must join the *Nabi Nāñayam* fund. The payment should be made directly to the Muhammadiyya Press and must be done in advance, as has been the practice with *Nabi Nāñayam*. It is hereby confirmed that this rule does not apply to followers of other faiths.