

## **Education, Modernity and Reform: The Malabar Case (1850-1950)**

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*This paper primarily examines the social reform movements in Kerala, with a concentration on Malabar. It examines how reformers viewed modern education as a means of achieving the social mobility channels and novel cultural practices introduced by the missionaries and the British institutional framework. This study prioritised subjects such as western education, the notion of cleanliness, bodily practices, civil rights, and others, rather than encompassing the entirety of reform movements' operations.*

**Keywords:** stratification, hierarchy, matriliney, modernity, mobility, culture.

Kerala culture has been significantly shaped by the socio-religious reform movements that emerged and developed in the 19th century. During the colonial era, when caste society was rebuilt, reform efforts in Kerala gained momentum. The colonised societies formed a new social order by confronting or struggling with the foreign society. In the case of Chinese and Central Asian societies, which were to some extent detached from the colonisation process, they grew and developed by bringing to fruition the contradictions that grew within them. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how, in the 19th and 20th centuries, social and religious reform movements helped to reorient and reconstruct the social order that existed in Malabar by bringing in

the logic of western modernity. The space's unique historical experience had a role in its selection. Malabar experienced both colonial and indigenous state systems. The years 1850 to 1950 are included since this was a pivotal time in the evolution of the current social and economic order. In the initial phase, the Kerala's stratified social structure presented an obstacle for the colonial economy and cultural mission, which was carried out at two levels. Initially, in order to optimize revenue from the field, the indigenous hierarchical system was maintained. At a later stage, colonial states created new narratives concerning educational institutions such as seminaries, hospitals, clubs, reading rooms, coffee shops, hostels, and schools. They also engaged in negotiations with marginalised groups by offering new forms of education, communication, clothing, food, leisure, and lifestyle practices.

Marshal Berman argues that cultural capitalism and modernity's expression can transcend national, racial, and ethnic divides. Following Weber's logic, the new class dynamic was created by the kinds of skills and abilities obtained by formal education, which create options different from those resulting from actual property ownership.<sup>1</sup> His main point is how the invasion of economic value has affected people's personal lives. Not only does the process influence the relationship between the administration and the subjects, but it also impacts the economy and the consumer. Social reform initiatives by Kerala's Muslims and Ezhavas, missionary endeavours, scientific advancements, club creation, and variations in taste are all clear manifestations of cultural capitalism. For example, Mambally Bapu, a small shopkeeper, opened a bakery in Thalassery, a colonial town, in 1880. This bakery served as more than just a sweet shop; it also signalled a shift in caste norms around eating habits and patterns. Another point of reference is that *Kalari*, which was viewed as a system of warrior training before to colonisation, was situated inside the vast framework of circus, which emerged as a part of colonial body awareness and entertainment. Just as Thacholi Othenan and Aromal of Vadakkan Pattukal received haloes, so did Kalari masters Keeleri Kunhikannan and Kannan Bombay of Thalassery.

A democratic method of knowledge dissemination was established by the printing press, which arrived with colonial modernity. According to Anderson, print capitalism was a unifying force in the colony and had the ability to transcend the limitations of face-to-face communication. Modernity brought about by colonialism essentially changed the caste system's historical relationship to occupancy. Caste and class consciousness based on land were superseded by the living conditions brought about by education within the newly established class system. There were obvious changes in language, architecture, culinary habits, and attire, among other areas. Family ties and marriage customs changed as well. The matrilineal society and polyandry prevalent in Kerala were viewed as immoral by Europeans. During this time, there were several discussions on divorce, education for women, and customs. For instance, the Malabar Marriage Committee, which was constituted in 1891, had discussions on a range of topics related to Malabar society, such as the customs surrounding marriage today, the legislation regarding inheritance, property relations, women's standing, and the demands of *anantharavans* in matrilineal *taravads* of Malabar, and western education. According to Robin Jeffrey, the rise of public education, particularly in schools, and the expansion of government employment prospects in the second half of the 19th century were the causes of disagreements and partition lawsuits in the last three decades of the century.<sup>2</sup> Junior members made attempted to file complaints with lesser courts to get them resolved. Additionally, repeated requests for compensation were made to the colonial state. Dissenting voices from the Mappila community also opposed the Marumakkatayam system. As an example, E.K. Moulavi, the head of the *Aikya Sangam*, declared explicitly that 'the system is forbidden in Islam, and it is an accretion from Hinduism. It shatters Islam's sense of brotherhood and solidarity'.<sup>3</sup>

Educated young made strong claims regarding customary rights and current marriage customs, which sparked contentious discussions. As a member of the Marumakkathayam Committee, O Chandu Menon argued that majority of the people in Malabar including the aristocracy were not in favour of any change in the existing form of inheritance and marriage practices. The provision regarding the registration of

marriages and the removal of hitherto observed rules of consanguinity and affinity are disgusting to the public in general. At the same time he admitted the enthusiasm of educated youths who took a strong stand in favour of marriage reforms.<sup>4</sup> An English-educated from north Malabar C. Sankaran Nair interpreted the same situation favourably for women. He emphasised that the current family structure gives the *karanavar* absolute control, as he appropriates all property revenue and distributes it to his own spouse and kids.<sup>5</sup> The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 was passed as a direct result of these deliberations and public battles, which was a huge relief to the Marumakkatayam adherents of Malabar. Their males were given the chance to start their own families, and the girls were given the chance to join their husband's family. Additionally, new organisations, like the Registration of Marriages, were founded. The Matriliny Bill, introduced in 1931 and passed into law in 1933, declared that matrilineal *taravads* was "no longer the focus" of Nair life and that 'the social stream was flowing along more natural channels'<sup>6</sup>. The Madras Marumakkatayam Act of 1933 established marriage as a legal institution, provided for an unrestricted right to divorce, upheld monogamy, and, most importantly, gave each individual the ability to claim a portion of the *taravad* estate through the partition of taravads. Individual independence in the Nambudiri community was guaranteed by the Madras Nambudiri Act of 1933.

The colonial era, when the traditional caste-based society was revived, gave rise to a reform movement in Kerala. Reform could only be achieved by incorporating both eastern and western concepts during a period of transition when the views of missionaries and the British government were disseminated and western education expanded. Socio religious movements of Kerala were seriously supported by material growth attained by the lower sections of the society in the advent of colonialism and vice-versa. Malabar developed new cultural connotations with the introduction of English schooling. Traditional language-based skills were no longer adequate to meet the new demands of colonialism and its knowledge systems. Following Weber's logic, it was the new class situation which was determined by the kinds of skills and abilities obtained by education credentials

that create life chances outside of the life chances of direct property ownership made the English as the language of power. Naregal's study shows the ways that colonial rule in South Asia restructured social hierarchies by altering the nature of relation between 'high' and 'low' languages.<sup>8</sup> Many social groups in Malabar, particularly those in the lower strata, saw gaining modern knowledge as a means of gaining access to the colonial system, which provided opportunities for upward social mobility.

Only within a pan-Indian framework can the overall nature of Kerala's socio-religious reform movements be evaluated. In light of the research conducted by western scholars, individuals such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee have evaluated the inconsistencies present in early Indian civilization. The creation of knowledge and its efficient dissemination, as proposed by reformers such as Swami Vivekananda, is the answer to this problem. In the context of colonial modernity and the introduction of colonial capitalism to Kerala, the reformers there recognised the value of western education. Thus, a specific component of education is included in their reform project. Sree Narayana Guru was one of the pioneers of Kerala's social reform movement and the first to acknowledge the importance of a western education in rising from the lower socio economic strata to the summit of the social ladder. Apart from being an instrument for getting a job, he considered modern education as a weapon that could help someone escape the confines of traditionalism. In order to enable the Ezhava boys and girls to attend public schools, he employed Euresian missionaries to teach them English while serving as the Yogam secretary.<sup>9</sup>

In 1910, he delivered a speech in Cherai to the *Vijnana Vardhana Sabha*, highlighting the importance of women's education and technical abilities for launching enterprises. The Guru's dictum was, "Organise so that you may be strong and educate so that you may be free." Sree Narayana Guru observed that English holds a special position among educated people and promoted English education because it has a liberating effect on Hindu traditions. He believed that if education were provided in English, the less fortunate

members of society would be treated equally with the wealthy. As an example, he said, “Sanskrit education is becoming less and less important.” Right now, English is the language that is most commonly spoken. Therefore, we should focus entirely on it.<sup>10</sup> There are three problems afflicting modern civilization, as Sree Narayana Guru realised. The oppressive caste system and other cruel customs enslaved a large number of people, primarily due to ignorance, superstitions, and cultural regression. The second social evil was the economic backwardness of the populace. Thirdly, because of the division in the population, traditional and obscurantist factions that wanted to keep the feudal backwardness and the caste system in place were unable to be defeated.<sup>11</sup> Guru suggested that education, organisation, and industrial growth be the three key components of any solution to these issues and the advancement of society.<sup>12</sup>

The views of Chalilakath Kuhahammad Haji, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Vagbhatananda, and Sivayogi about English instruction are same. The initiative of Chalilakathu Kunhahamad Haji to modernise *Othupallis* by equipping classrooms with desks, seats, blackboards, maps, atlases, and libraries serves as an example of this movement. He valued Malayalam, mathematics, logic, and geography highly and recommended that students read news items to obtain an awareness of the world’s daily occurrences.<sup>13</sup> After studying in English, intellectuals from the Mappila community attempted to transform traditional educational institutions by introducing novel teaching methods. Intellectuals with a western education, such as Khan Bahadur K. Muhammed of Chawghat, supported his attempt.

Another social reformer, Makti Tangal, acknowledged the threat that modern day Islamic civilisation faced. The British and their structural changes, the introduction of Christian missionaries and their broad propaganda and efforts to win over converts, and the remarkable advances made by non-Muslim societies in the field of colonial administration were among these. Tangal took these societal truths and used them to outline his plan of action. He wrote a number of pamphlets contesting Christian theological beliefs and arranged public discussions and street gatherings in opposition to Christian evangelising.

In an effort to dispel missionary misinformation and inform Muslims about the true nature of their faith, he toured throughout Kerala. His first novel, *Kathora Kutharam*, was published in 1884, and it caused quite a stir in Kerala. He questioned the three principles, which is one of the main tenets of Roman Catholicism. He is critical of Christian missionaries and their teachings, but he readily backs the colonial government when it comes to issues of work and education. His dictum was, “There can be no pride without knowledge, and there can be no modesty without pride.”<sup>14</sup> He promoted English education, female education, and the renovation of the Arabi-Malayalam script as means of acquiring new forms of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The prevalent resistance at the time to learning Malayalam and English was something he regretted. The Mappilas referred to English as “naraka bhasha,” the language of hell. It would be beneficial to study such a language, Makti Tangal said in response to a question about whether it was irreligious to do so, as it would be helpful after one reached hell.<sup>16</sup> He emphasised the importance of teaching English, Malayalam, Arabic, and Arithmetic to Muslim kids in order to prepare them for the harsh realities of the contemporary world. According to him, learning Arabic can help one obtain religious instruction. However, one should focus on courses like grammar, philology, commerce, agriculture, geography, and space technology, among others, in order to obtain a secular education. “Almost all transactions were in English in their judicial proceedings and colonial practices,” he stated. Therefore, the Muslim community ought to let go of its inhibitions and preconceptions regarding that language. English language proficiency is a prerequisite for the highest jobs in the British administrative service. A person’s strength and faith now depend on his or her position within the colonial administrative structure.<sup>17</sup> He had a very progressive view on women’s education. He chastised the lavishness of Muslim marriages and urged the parents to use this enormous sum of money for the girls’ education. He asserted, paraphrasing Nabi’s teachings, that it is the duty of parents to provide their daughters with both secular and religious education. Her brother ought to take this if they weren’t able to finish it. The husband should be the third person to educate her if it is not possible.<sup>18</sup> Tangal maintained that girls do not require their own educational

facilities. Without straying from their religious beliefs, anyone can pursue education in public schools.<sup>19</sup> Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi, another reformer in the community, made extra efforts to spread his reformist views in Malabar when the structural changes brought about by colonial modernity became a reality. He knew that the Mappilas opposed English education and that education in general was out of date there. His primary objective was to modernise Arabic training so that Muslim parents would feel at ease sending their children to such cutting-edge institutions.

Moulavi disseminated his ideas and views throughout the Muslim populace through the medium of print culture. His *Swadeshabimani* was a daring modern Malayalam newspaper of the day that sharply criticised the Travancore government. Maulavi started releasing a monthly publication called the *Muslim* in 1906. The value of education in improving Mappila society was repeatedly emphasised in the pages of the *Muslim*. He promoted rejecting the erroneous notions of Islamic ideals. “If a community becomes educationally barren, then gradually the heart of the community will be emaciated by the decaying of their mental powers and their intellect will be narrowed by restricting the light of knowledge,” Moulavi stated, citing the necessity of English education. No community will be able to live independently without access to contemporary education.<sup>20</sup> *Al Islam*, a new journal that he began in 1918, was a prominent forum for discussing the role of women in Islam. It emphasised the significance of raising the social standing of Muslim women in its monthly editions. The argument for teaching women to read and write was made. Women should be allowed to pursue both modern education and religion, according to Moulavi, in order to elevate their standing.<sup>21</sup> The formation of *Muslim Aikya Sangam* facilitated the cohesion of Muslim reform groups across Kerala. At the Eriyattu village in Kodungallur, the *Sangam* was founded in 1922 by a group of Muslim academics led by Vaikom Maulavi, E Moidu Maulavi, Manapatt Kunhahmed Haji, Kottapurath Seethi Muhammad Sahib, Kochu Moideen Haji, and KM Moulavi.<sup>22</sup> Many young Mappila people received assistance from the *Sangam* to pursue higher education.



Several studies have examined the social reform initiatives among Kerala's lower castes. According to Sanal Mohan, modern education was used by the lower castes of Kerala to gain access to the interactive space that colonial modernity had established. Ayyankali the leader of oppressed castes, has tried to incorporate the struggle for social justice with educational aspects. He realized that, breaking of caste norms, redefining the body and getting education in formal school systems were the legitimate means to acquire the forms of cultural and social capital. Ayyankali attempted to integrate eastern and western customs by using his own body as a symbol. His usage of turbans, overcoats, and other accessories has a deeper meaning since it sends a message to those from lower castes about breaking free from caste-based societal norms and joining the public space. It was also an attempt to achieve the symbolic capital that Bourdieu had mentioned.

At the start of the 1900s, high caste groups, particularly the Nambuthiris, considered educating themselves in English in order to transform themselves. The Yogakhema Saba was established in 1908 in response to the growing need for activism, with a particular emphasis on the contemporary education needed to acquire the skills required to defend the community and the rights that the new forces were threatening. There were three main goals for the movement. (a) To push for the marriage of all junior Nambutiri males in the community; (b) to require English language instruction; and (c) to end the custom of Purdha among women.<sup>23</sup> In Edakkuni, a single Nambutiri school was founded in 1909 under the direction of Yoga Kshema Saba. In order to support the students' English studies, the school offered free boarding, accommodation, and other amenities. Furthermore, Nambutiris constructed two further schools: one at Taliparamba and the other at Kulakodayil in Travancore.<sup>24</sup> In 1917, the Kottakkal Upasabha, the local unit of Yoka Kshema Sabha, prepared a memorandum recommending that Nambutiri continue their education in English and western knowledge at educational institutions designed in line with the principles of the Gurukula system. It also suggested the establishment of agricultural cooperative banks and other trades like banking and finance.<sup>25</sup> The reformers also made the value of

women's education a central tenet. As per the 1927 Nambutiri Stree Vidyabhyasa Commission Report (NFECR), the women belonging to the community were expected to obtain education that would prepare them for the rigours of contemporary household life. VT Bhattatiripad argued that reforming Antarjanams wouldn't be complete unless they ended all forms of discrimination, improved the community's internal and external spheres, and achieved education, success in examinations, employment, and assets similar to those of other communities.<sup>26</sup> He suggested that Antarjanams should adopt modern dress, acquire modern knowledge and familiarity with modern ways of life in order to establish a new sort of relation with their modern educated husbands.<sup>27</sup> Theatre has been widely used by the Yoga Kshema Saba for propagating the themes of education, social participation, marriage reforms etc. V.T's *Adukkalayilninum Arangathekku*, M.R.B's *Marakkudayile Mahanarakam* and Premji's *Ritumadi* contributes much towards this direction. They even conducted *yajana yathra* to mobilizing fund for the education of poor Nambutiri students. Nambutiri Yuvajana Sangam, a new organization of educated youth came to the forefront in 1930's and involved in burning social problems of the community. Women education was popularized and even a woman was elected as its president.<sup>28</sup> At the 34th annual conference of the YKS, EMS Nambutiripad gave the keynote address. He urged attendees to reflect on the contributions made by the early reformers in the areas of women's liberation and education. "If the community didn't receive an English education, society would laugh at them," he stated. They were willing to give up that much *brahmanyam* in order to advance their English education'.<sup>29</sup> By arranging interfaith marriages, certain youth organisations, such as Nambudiri Yuvajana Sangam, attempted to dissolve caste distinctions. One unconventional union was that of Uma Antarajanam, a widow and Mullamangalath Raman Bhattatiripad (MRB). Elites and educated young people from many parts of Kerala attended the marriage function. VT. Battatiripad delivered the felicitation speech. The couples received a Mangala Patram from Bhattatiripad. A public gathering was also scheduled. Parvathi Nemmini Mangalam noted the revolutionary changes that occurred in Nambudiri life because of education and reformer actions in an article titled

“Purappedula MRByude Velikku” that was published in Mathrubumi Daily on September 4, 1934, only days before the wedding. Nambudiris achieved a scale of social progress that is beyond even progressive people among other caste groups in the Hindu community,” she remarked<sup>30</sup>. The marriage of Raghavan Panikkar, a Nair youth, and Parvathi Antarajanam, a sister of V.T. Bhatatitipad, was celebrated as a secular occasion in May 1940 by eschewing all religious customs and rites. The marriage ceremony took place in K. Kelappan’s presence.

Bodily cleanliness and sanitation were another subject of significant discussion against the backdrop of colonial modernity and social reform movements in Kerala. Cleaning oneself and one’s surroundings was acknowledged as a requirement for social acceptance. Discourses on health, hygiene and medicine in which body figured in as the locus was actively spread through the newspapers and advertisements. The idea of cleanliness, order, punctuality, and household devotions which constitute such remarkable characteristics of a well-kept English middle-class home. Sree Narayana Guru once stated: ‘More temples are not necessary. In front of the temple, we need a nice garden. Ponds have been replaced with water taps. It is customary to wear tidy, clean clothing when entering temples or social events’. The protagonist of Joseph Muliyls book, Sukumari, talks on the value of cleanliness and how it altered the whole atmosphere of domestic life. For instance, Sukumari had a complete paradigm shift when she visited the home of Karuna, a fictional English-educated woman. Sukumari was taken aback by the cleanliness of the home and has since tried to implement it in her own life. According to Sanal Mohan Pratyaksha Raksha Dharma Sabha, led by Poikayil Yohannan, created a theory of body practices to get around the restrictions that the mediaeval society placed on the bodies of women. Along with spiritual cleanliness the movement laid equal emphasis on the cleanliness of the body.

## Conclusion

Modern education, social justice, humanism, health, and hygiene were prioritised by the social reform movement that arose against the backdrop of colonial modernity. This helped to place the marginalised segment of society in the new interactive space created by the British. They came to see that education is a key factor in gaining the cultural and symbolic capital that, in pre-modern society, was reserved for the higher castes. Many of the reformers continued the new body routines and perception of cleanliness that colonial modernity brought about. Lower castes made significant efforts to restore family unity and the bonds associated with it. The reforms sought access to public areas like marketplaces and roadways, which were crucial for preserving civil rights. They were motivated by the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The joint family, caste system, and customary rules that governed Kerala society were all seriously threatened by the reform movement. A few examples of reform movement reflections include the restructuring of the family unit, the emergence of new literary genres, increased levels of social mobility, etc. Amidst the backdrop of social reform movements and colonial modernity, there were serious conversations about education, attire, diet, bodily practices, and social mobility, among other topics.

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