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# **Colonial Pedagogy in Kerala: A Study of Textbook Narratives as Instruments of Cultural and Political Subjugation**

**Dr. Mujeeb Rahiman K G**

## **Abstract**

The paper examines how British colonial-era textbooks in Kerala served as ideological tools to legitimize foreign rule and reshape indigenous identity. Through content analysis of prescribed school readers, it demonstrates how these materials systematically promoted Western cultural supremacy, distorted historical narratives of local resistance, and inculcated loyalty to the colonial government. The study argues that education was a primary mechanism for enforcing cultural assimilation and mental subordination, leaving a lasting legacy on the region's socio-cultural and educational landscape.

**Keywords:** Colonial Education, Textbooks, Cultural Imperialism, Historical Narratives, Resistance Movements, Ideological State Apparatus

## **Introduction**

Colonialism is a system of rules which assumes the right of one people to impose their 'will' upon another. It inevitably leads to a situation of dominance and dependency and it systematically subordinates those governed by it to the imported culture in social, economic and political life. According to Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, "colonialism is the practice by which a powerful country

controls another country or other countries.”<sup>1</sup> In her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* novelist Elleke Bohemer interpreted colonialism as: “The consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands often by force.”<sup>2</sup> (Bohemer 2) Professor John McLeod claimed: “colonialism is only form of practice which results from the ideology of imperialism, and specifically concerns the settlement of one group of people in a new location.”<sup>3</sup> ( McLeod 7)

Colonialism is not merely political and economic conquest; but cultural conquest. Education, as one of the determining factors of culture, played significant role in the politics of both the colonizer and the colonized. Cultural conquest seemed less coercive and assumed more receptivity among the colonized. Education facilitated this process with less expenditure and minimum resistance from the side of the natives. It was purely intentional and one of the most successful weapons by which the British subjugated the people of India. Replacing the existing native education with British system of education had the effect of destroying the cultural identity of being Indian. The British, in the opinion of Gauri Viswanathan, was producing an image of ideal Englishman through education.<sup>4</sup> (Viswanathan 86 )

The process of colonization implies one nation or territory taking control of another nation or territory either through the use of force or by acquisition. As a product of colonization, the colonizing nation implements its own form of schooling within their colonies. It is defined as an attempt to assist the consolidation of foreign rule. The idea of assimilation is important to colonial education. Assimilation involves the colonized being forced to conform to the cultures and traditions of the colonizers. Gauri Viswanathan points out that “cultural assimilation is the most effective form of political action because cultural domination works by consent and often precedes conquest by force.”<sup>5</sup> (Viswanathan 89) After a few years of political conquest, the British in Kerala consolidated their position by introducing public education system. Shift from indigenous system of education to that to the one introduced by the British was fast and at the same time, tumultuous.

Colonizing governments realize that they gain strength not necessarily through physical control, but through mental control. This mental control is implemented through a central intellectual location, the school system, or what Louis Althusser called ‘an ideological state apparatus’. Colonial education strips the colonized people away from their indigenous learning structures and draws them toward the structures of the colonizers.

The textbooks and educational materials during the colonial period often contained elements that reinforced and promoted colonial agenda. Textbooks might have perpetuated cultural biases and racial stereotypes, portraying European cultures as superior and indigenous or local cultures as inferior or primitive. The historical narratives presented in textbooks might have selectively highlighted or glorified colonial achievements while downplaying the exploitative or negative aspects of colonial rule. This skewed perspective often served the interests of the colonizers. Textbooks typically included works of literature from the colonizing countries or those aligned with colonial ideologies. Local or indigenous literary works were often overlooked, denying students exposure to their own cultural literary heritage. Textbooks may have portrayed colonial rule as a boon for Kerala society, ignoring the detrimental effects of colonialism on local economies, social structures, and cultural practices.

Colonial-era textbooks in Kerala, much like those in other British-ruled regions of India, served as a powerful tool for inculcating Western culture, values, and perspectives. These textbooks were instrumental in aligning the educational curriculum with British imperial interests, often undermining local cultural identities and promoting a Eurocentric worldview. Colonial textbooks in Kerala served as tools to spread Western culture by promoting English as the medium of education, sidelining local languages and traditions. They presented British history, literature, and moral values as superior, subtly encouraging students to adopt Western ideals over indigenous beliefs. Additionally, these textbooks portrayed Indian society as “backward,” reinforcing the colonial narrative that British rule was a civilizing force necessary for progress. *Malayalam Randam Padapusthakam*<sup>6</sup>, a textbook for second grade in the schools was published in 1922 by the

Travancore State Government. The text book contains different lessons on features of animals to acquaint the children like the cow, crow, dog, elephant, goat, hen, bull, horse, jackal, sheep, and tiger are among those in the textbook. The children became more knowledgeable about the animals that live nearby. Besides these the text book also includes the life experience and stories based on western culture such as *Balanaya Washington* <sup>7</sup>(*The Childhood of Washington*) (*Malayalam Randam Padapusthakam. 54*) and *Budhiyulla Balan*<sup>8</sup> (*The Intelligent Child*), (*Malayalam Randam Padapusthakam. 65*) to instil the western morals in the students. Another textbook namely *Second Reader* (*Randam Padapusthakam*), which was taught in schools in Travancore for second standard in 1926 also contains the stories related to western cultures. Even though these were published by Travancore government the textbooks transmit the western practices and cultures.

Colonial textbooks in Kerala largely ignored or misrepresented local resistance movements, instead promoting a narrative that glorified British rule and minimized indigenous struggles for freedom. Colonial textbooks consistently portrayed rebellions against British rule as uncivilized, chaotic, and detrimental to progress, casting these uprisings in a strongly negative light. This framing aimed to delegitimize resistance to British authority by painting it as primitive, violent, and irrational, contrasting it with the supposed order and stability brought by colonial governance.

In these textbooks, rebellions were often described as “mutinies” or “disturbances,” with rebels depicted as aggressive, bloodthirsty, or misguided. For instance, the 1857 Indian Rebellion (often referred to as the “Sepoy Mutiny” in colonial narratives) was depicted as an example of native barbarism and religious fanaticism rather than a legitimate expression of widespread resentment against British policies. By emphasizing violent incidents and exaggerating the chaotic nature of the uprisings, colonial textbooks portrayed these movements as dangerous to society’s peace and progress, something that the British had to suppress for the “greater good.”

This negative framing served to justify harsh reprisals and reinforced the idea that colonial rule was necessary to bring civilization, law, and order to the region. It fostered the belief that any resistance to British authority was not only futile but harmful to society, indirectly encouraging the native population to accept British rule as a stabilizing force. Resistance leaders like Pazhassi Raja and Velu Thampi Dalawa, who actively opposed British authority, were either omitted from the curriculum or portrayed in a negative light, discouraging nationalist sentiments among students. This erasure of local heroes in education fuelled resentment among Kerala's reformers and nationalists, who eventually pushed for revised educational content that celebrated Kerala's own freedom fighters and cultural heritage, especially in the lead-up to and following independence. The text book for fifth grade namely *The History of Malabar Part II*<sup>9</sup> which was taught in schools in Malabar in 1922 justified the colonial rule and distorted the historical events in Kerala. The third part of the text book *EngleeshukarudeBharanam (British Rule)* justifies the revenue taxation of British in Kerala and criticised Pazhassi Raja. There are two chapters on Pazhassi Raja and these chapters depicted that Pazhassi Raja created anarchy and chaos in Kottayam.<sup>10</sup> (*The History of Malabar Part II. 117-125*) The text also told that Pazhassi Raja showed cruel attitude towards the people and so that the people never supported him at any time. The text book justified the suppression of the revolt.

The text also mentioned about the Kurichia Revolt of 1812, and it is referred in a derogatory way as GothraKalapam. It explained how the new taxation system that the British had instituted among the tribes had been misunderstood by them. Additionally, it implies that the indigenous people were favoured by British policies.<sup>11</sup> (*The History of Malabar Part II. 131-135*) In essence, the book presents colonial policies as beneficial to the indigenous population while distorting anti-British agitations and movements. The textbooks depicted this kind of historical interpretations on Kerala and its leaders.

The text book of 1922 portrayed that the government and its citizens were facing increasing challenges as a result of the uncivilized Mappilas' actions.<sup>12</sup> (Ramaswami Iyer. 90-100). The Moplah

revolutions of 1835 to 1852 are presented in this chapter in a very negative light. (Ramaswami Iyer.137)<sup>13</sup>

Colonial textbooks often portrayed European colonizers as suffering victims during rebellions in colonial countries, emphasizing the hardships they endured rather than addressing the causes of the uprisings. In India, including Kerala, these narratives described events like the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny and local revolts as acts of “savage” aggression against benevolent British rulers, casting Indian resistance in a negative light. This portrayal aimed to evoke sympathy for the colonizers while justifying harsh retaliatory measures, painting colonial rule as a “civilizing” force under constant threat from a supposedly unruly population. The text book Fourth Reader<sup>14</sup> for the primary classes in 1908 was the best example for this. The first chapter A Narrow Escape told about the story related to three Europeans who are trying to flee from France to escape persecution for their religion.<sup>15</sup> (Fourth Reader.1-7). Another chapter The Siege of Lucknow Part I and Part II is explaining the 1857 revolt and termed the Indians as rebels. The chapter explained the miseries of Englishmen in the revolt and never mentioned the real reason of the great revolt. They misinterpreted the revolt of 1857 in the colonial perspective.<sup>16</sup> (Fourth Reader.73-77)

This colonial history textbook is crucial for understanding colonialism’s perspective and how foreign powers saw their rule as legitimate, especially in the context of colonial history textbooks used in classrooms at that time. The legacy of colonial elements in textbooks during the colonial period has left a significant impact on the education system. The continued use of such materials even after independence has required a deliberate effort to decolonize the curriculum, reframe historical narratives, include diverse perspectives, and emphasize indigenous culture and history. This process aims to provide a more accurate, inclusive, and culturally sensitive representation of Kerala’s history, distinct from the biased and Eurocentric views perpetuated during the colonial era.

One prominent feature of colonial textbooks was their tendency to present colonial rulers in a positive light, often justifying their governance and framing it as beneficial for the colonized population.

This narrative aimed to instill a sense of loyalty and submission among the local populace, encouraging them to view the colonial government as a protector and benefactor. By portraying the colonial rule as a source of stability, progress, and moral guidance, these textbooks often suggested that the local people should cooperate with and support the government's efforts.

For example, such textbooks might emphasize the introduction of modern infrastructure, like railways, sanitation systems, or schools, as evidence of the government's benevolence. In reality, these advancements primarily served the economic interests of the colonial rulers, but in the textbooks, they were presented as gifts to uplift the "backward" colonies. This framing implied that cooperation with the government was a duty of the colonized, as it would supposedly lead to their improvement and advancement.

The text book *Civics* of class VIII in 1940 justifies the deeds of the government and the people should cooperate with government. The Chapter named as *Government and Their Works* says that the goal of the government is not to deceive the populace. Making our people as pleasant as possible is the responsibility of the government. They serve the public interest as public servants. It is our duty to assist them.<sup>17</sup> (Narayanan 41). Another chapter in this book called as *India's Rulementions* that the British Government did a fantastic job creating a unified nation and the unification of India occurred through the British rule.<sup>18</sup> (Narayanan.57)

Colonial textbooks often portrayed indigenous leaders who resisted British rule in a negative light to justify British conquest and control. By depicting such leaders as aggressive, tyrannical, or disruptive, the textbooks aimed to tarnish their reputation and minimize local support for them. This negative portrayal helped the British frame their rule as a "civilizing mission," contrasting the supposedly "backward" and "violent" native rulers with the "just" and "orderly" British administration.

In the case of Tipu Sultan, colonial texts often highlighted his conflicts with neighboring kingdoms and his staunch opposition to British expansion, casting him as a ruthless ruler. For instance, they might depict him as a religious fanatic or a dictator who oppressed his own

people, ignoring his efforts to resist British dominance or his policies that fostered regional development and trade. This portrayal reinforced the idea that figures like Tipu Sultan were enemies of peace and progress, subtly encouraging local populations to view the British as protectors who were rescuing them from these “dangerous” leaders. By shaping public perception against leaders like Tipu, the British textbooks worked to dismantle any lingering loyalties among the populace, creating an environment where colonial rule seemed preferable and cooperation with British authority seemed rational and beneficial.

The 1922 textbook contains a chapter titled “Tipu Sulthan,” which portrays Tipu Sulthan in a very unfavorable light. The villagers hated Tipu and admired the British, as this chapter clearly notes. How Kerala profited from the British victory over Tipu is also explained in this chapter. This chapter claims that the British treated the princely countries with sincerity and courtesy, and that the Keralites loved and adored the British.<sup>19</sup> ( Ramaswami Iyer.90-100).

Colonial textbooks often highlighted the supposed virtues of British rule by depicting the British as honest, fair, and polite in their treatment of local princely kingdoms. This portrayal sought to cultivate an image of the British as respectful, morally upright, and concerned with the welfare of the native states. The narrative suggested that, in contrast to the “divisive” or “self-serving” rulers, the British dealt with native kingdoms fairly and honorably, thereby justifying colonial intervention as a stabilizing and just force. For example, textbooks might describe how the British maintained alliances, honored treaties, and upheld the rights of local rulers, creating an impression of mutual respect. This narrative was often used to explain British policies like the Doctrine of Lapse, which annexed states without a direct heir, as a lawful and fair practice rather than as a strategy for expanding British control. Such portrayals downplayed the political manipulation and economic exploitation underlying British policies and instead emphasized their supposedly “civilized” and “benevolent” approach.

By promoting the idea that natives felt a deep affection and trust for the British because of their fair and polite treatment, colonial textbooks aimed to foster loyalty and cooperation among readers. This created a social expectation that supporting British rule was both

desirable and honorable, reinforcing the legitimacy of colonial authority and discouraging resistance among the population. Another chapter named as Malayalam and Bombay Government under the Company 1793-1800 says that the natives (Malayalees) had a greater affection for the British because of their honest and polite treatment of the princely kingdoms.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Colonial-era textbooks in Kerala exemplified the British Empire's deliberate use of education as a means of cultural domination and ideological control. By presenting British rule as a stabilizing force and portraying indigenous leaders in a negative light, these textbooks effectively fostered a pro-colonial mindset, creating an environment of mental submission and passive acceptance among the colonized. The impact of these educational materials extended far beyond the classroom, embedding colonial biases within the cultural and historical consciousness of the society. Recognizing this legacy is essential in postcolonial Kerala's efforts to reframe historical narratives, promote cultural inclusivity, and restore indigenous perspectives that had been marginalized. Through decolonizing its educational content, Kerala can work toward an understanding of its past that celebrates its heritage and resists the remnants of colonial bias.

## **Endnotes:**

1. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>
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16. Ibid., pp. 73-77.
17. N.P. Narayanan Nair, Civics of Standard VIII, V. Sundaralayer & Sons, Thiruvananthapuram, 1940, p. 41.
18. *Ibid.* p. 57.
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