

MODERNISATION OF KERALA

COURSE CODE: B21HS01GE
Generic Elective Course
For Undergraduate Programmes
Self Learning Material



SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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To increase access of potential learners of all categories to higher education, research and training, and ensure equity through delivery of high quality processes and outcomes fostering inclusive educational empowerment for social advancement.

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Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

Modernisation of Kerala

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(With Model Question Paper Sets)**



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MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed “blended format,” a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The University is committed to providing interdisciplinary learning opportunities that promote a deeper understanding of society and culture. The Generic Elective Course Modernization of Kerala is designed for undergraduate learners from all disciplines to explore the key social, political, economic, and cultural changes that shaped modern Kerala. This course offers valuable insights into the region’s transformation through reform movements, education, and development initiatives.

Rest assured, the university’s student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.

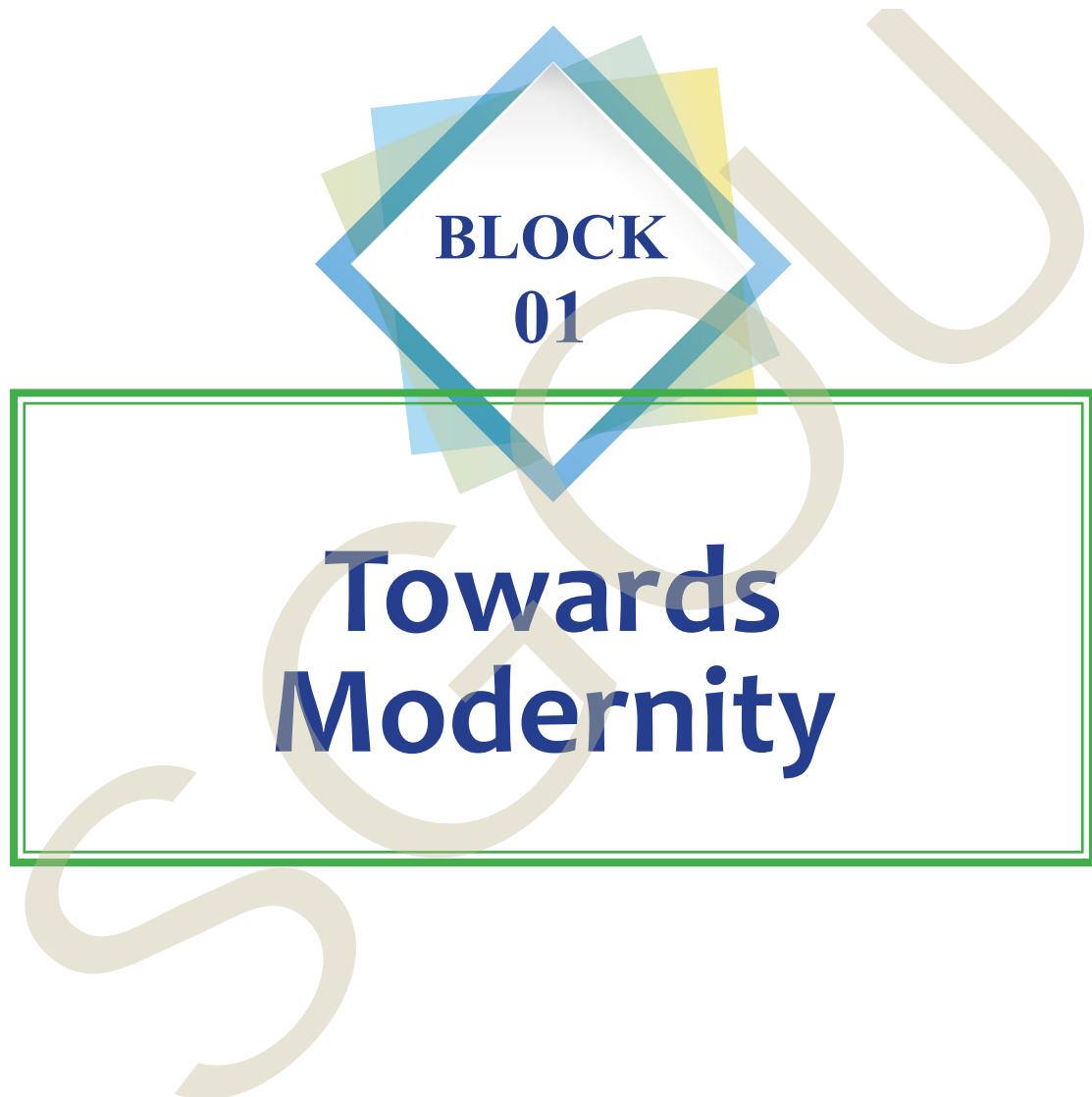


Warm regards.
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.

01-06-2025

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Unit 1

Prelude to Social Reform

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand how caste, economic oppression, and religious orthodoxy shaped Kerala's 19th-century social structure and necessitated reform movements
- ◆ examine the role of pollution, caste restrictions, and social exclusion in maintaining rigid hierarchies that denied fundamental rights to marginalised communities
- ◆ evaluate how early social reformers and intellectual movements challenged caste oppression and laid the foundation for Kerala's transition to modernity

P

Prerequisite

A foundational understanding of caste hierarchies, feudal economies, and religious orthodoxy is essential to grasp the significance of Kerala's 19th-century social reform movements. Kerala's rigid caste system, oppressive economic structures, and discriminatory legal frameworks denied civil rights to the majority while reinforcing Brahminical dominance. The tyranny of pollution, caste-based restrictions, and slavery ensured the continued marginalisation of lower castes. However, contradictions within these systems, coupled with intellectual awakening and colonial encounters, led to reformist challenges. Social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, and Aiyya Vaikunda Swami emerged to advocate for rationalism, social equality, and caste reform.



Keywords

Caste oppression, pollution laws, slavery, economic hierarchy, religious orthodoxy



Discussion

1.1.1 Prelude to Social Reform 19th-Century Kerala

In the early 19th century, Kerala, situated between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, was divided into the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the British-controlled Malabar District, and parts of South Canara. During this period, the first movements for social reform began to emerge in response to widespread inequality and oppressive traditions.

Two major forces made reform necessary: a rigid caste hierarchy, which was particularly severe in Kerala, and deeply entrenched religious superstitions that shaped every aspect of life. These systems not only structured society but also reinforced oppression, ensuring that lower-caste and marginalised communities remained trapped in subjugation.

To understand the roots of Kerala's reform movements, it is essential to examine the social conditions of the 19th century. The caste system, family structures, economic dependencies, and legal frameworks all worked together to deny fundamental rights and freedoms to the majority of the population. It was in this environment of systemic discrimination and religious orthodoxy that reform movements took shape, challenging long-standing traditions

and paving the way for Kerala's path to modernity.

1.1.2 Caste in Kerala: A System of Oppression and Social Control

Caste in Kerala was an all-encompassing system that dictated every aspect of life—residence, occupation, diet, and even physical proximity between individuals. It was not merely a social order but an entrenched mechanism of control, ensuring that the privileged elite maintained dominance while the lower castes remained in perpetual subjugation. Unlike the relative fluidity of earlier Dravidian society, caste had hardened into an oppressive hierarchy based on rigid notions of purity and pollution.

At the highest level, Brahmins (Namputhiris) wielded enormous power, controlling not just religious affairs but also land and political authority. Kings and rulers depended on their approval for legitimacy, further strengthening Brahmin dominance. Even within the Brahmin community, hierarchies persisted, with certain subgroups considered impure. This obsession with ritual status extended to all castes, reinforcing an elaborate system of untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability that dictated social interactions at every level.



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1.1.2.1 The Tyranny of Pollution: A Tool for Social Subjugation

The concept of pollution governed daily life, turning physical distance into a marker of social status. Mere sight, sound, or proximity to a lower-caste individual was deemed defiling. A Brahmin considered himself polluted if he saw a Pulaya or Nayadi from 100 feet away, necessitating ritual purification. Even among high castes, divisions were strictly maintained. Muttat and Elayat Brahmins viewed each other as polluting, while Nairs, though powerful in military and administrative roles, were considered impure by Brahmins. The absurdity of this hierarchy extended downward, as even oppressed castes practiced their own forms of exclusion, refusing food or interaction with those deemed inferior within their ranks.

For the lowest castes, these restrictions translated into extreme social isolation and daily humiliations. Pulayas and Nayadis had to announce their presence on roads by shouting "Oh, Oh" to prevent accidental pollution of upper castes. If they encountered a landlord, they had to step off the path, often wading through mud or dense vegetation. In some regions, untouchables were barred from marketplaces, further restricting their economic opportunities.

Caste dictated access to public spaces and even basic human dignity. Lower castes were prohibited from using village wells, walking on main roads, or entering temples. During religious processions, they had to maintain a significant distance to avoid "polluting" the deity. Even economic transactions were subject to caste-based discrimination—low-caste labourers were paid from a distance, ensuring that their touch did not "contaminate" the employer.

The enforcement of caste restrictions extended into education and medicine.

Schools barred lower castes from admission, depriving them of literacy and economic mobility. In professions that required social interaction, absurd caste rules applied—a low-caste physician treating a high-caste patient was still considered polluting, requiring the patient to undergo a ritual bath afterward. In some areas, palanquin bearers announced their presence by chanting "Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha," while Ezhavas, Parayas, and other lower castes responded with "Hom, Hom, Hom" to signal their compliance with caste regulations.

This oppressive system not only denied civil rights and economic opportunities to the majority but also ensured that social solidarity among the oppressed was nearly impossible. By dividing communities through endless layers of discrimination, caste functioned as a deliberate mechanism of control, making any challenge to the status quo difficult.

However, contradictions within the system exposed its fundamental weaknesses. Those deemed impure and denied temple entry would, in turn, exclude others from their own places of worship. Sub-castes within a single caste refused to intermarry or even share food, highlighting the arbitrariness of these divisions.

1.1.2.2 Family Structures and Marriage Practices

The oppressive nature of caste was mirrored in family structures and marriage practices. The Namputhiri Brahmins, for instance, maintained strict endogamy, with only the eldest son allowed to marry within the caste. Younger sons formed temporary alliances (*Sambandham*) with Nair women, absolving them of financial responsibility for their offspring. Meanwhile, Namputhiri women were often forced into lifelong celibacy due to rigid marriage restrictions.

The *Marumakkathayam* (matrilineal) system among Nairs created contradictions

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in power dynamics. While inheritance passed through the mother's lineage, actual authority rested with the eldest male, the *karanavan*. This led to economic instability, as family assets were frequently mismanaged. The practice of polyandry, common among Nairs, further complicated issues of inheritance and family structure.

Marriage customs across castes were expensive and rigidly enforced. *Talikettu Kalyanam*, a prepubescent marriage ritual for girls, was mandatory, and failure to conduct it led to social ostracisation. Hypergamy (marriage between upper-caste men and lower-caste women) was common, but the reverse was strictly prohibited, further reinforcing caste-based inequalities.

1.1.2.3 Economic Conditions

Kerala's economic system was structured to benefit the upper castes at the expense of the majority. The economy was centred around a priestly elite, particularly the Namputhiris, who secured their dominance through royal land grants justified by their spiritual authority, knowledge systems, and agrarian expertise. These grants elevated them to the status of landlords, allowing them to monopolise agricultural land and dictate economic relations through selective interpretations of religious texts. Consequently, the Namputhiri settlements and temple corporations controlled vast stretches of fertile land, cementing an exploitative feudal economy that prioritised their prosperity at the cost of the lower castes.

This system created an autocratic village economy where power remained concentrated in the hands of the high castes. The laws and economic policies were tailored to sustain this hegemony, with exclusive legislations and monopolistic practices preventing trade expansion, commercial growth, and agricultural development. The caste-based restrictions fragmented society, leading to widespread economic stagnation and national

weakness. Industrialisation was stifled as a result of caste-imposed limitations on labour mobility and resource access, preventing any significant economic progress.

Taxation policies were deeply discriminatory, exempting the high castes while burdening the lower castes with oppressive levies. These taxes were collected on arbitrary grounds, reinforcing economic disparities. The wealth generated from agrarian production was concentrated among the landlords and temple corporations, leaving the lower castes in perpetual poverty. The high castes not only monopolised land ownership but also restricted access to essential resources, ensuring that wealth remained within their own social circles.

The rigid caste barriers further stifled economic opportunities for the majority population. The lower castes, who formed the backbone of labour in agriculture and other industries, were denied the comforts of life and economic mobility. Any form of industrial development was deliberately restricted, as the prevailing social norms viewed economic progress for the lower castes as a challenge to the established hierarchy. The failure to harness the industrial potential of the region kept Kerala economically backward and heavily dependent on a feudal agrarian economy.

This deeply unequal economic system fostered widespread poverty, social injustice, and a lack of upward mobility for the marginalised communities. It ultimately set the stage for social unrest and the demand for reform, as the economic stagnation and exploitation became increasingly untenable in the face of growing awareness and resistance.

Slavery : The Darkest Chapter of Social Oppression

Slavery in Kerala was distinct from other forms of bonded labour, as it was deeply intertwined with caste. The Namputhiri



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landlords exercised absolute control over enslaved communities, treating them as property rather than people. The legal system even sanctioned their murder, with historical records stating that slaves could be "sold or killed" at the owner's will.

By the mid-19th century, British records indicate that over 11% of Travancore's population were enslaved. During famines, desperate families often sold their children into slavery, further entrenching this inhuman practice. The persistence of slavery, even as serfdom declined elsewhere in the world, highlights the brutal caste-based oppression in Kerala.

1.1.2.4 Law and Justice: Institutionalising Discrimination

The legal and judicial system in Kerala was deeply oppressive, reinforcing social hierarchies and denying fundamental rights to the majority of the population. Justice was neither free nor fair; instead, it was dictated by caste-based tribunals and feudal lords who upheld a rigid Brahminical order. Low-caste individuals had no civil liberties and were subject to arbitrary, often brutal, punishments, while high-caste offenders received lenient treatment or complete immunity.

The foundation of Kerala's judicial system rested on *Vyavaharamalika*, a text interpreted exclusively by the Namputhiri Brahmins, who not only controlled religious authority but also dictated legal rulings. This allowed them to manipulate laws in their favour while oppressing lower castes. High-caste individuals were never sentenced to capital punishment, while low-caste offenders were executed for minor crimes such as stealing a coconut. Judicial decisions were often based on archaic and inhumane practices such as fire, oil, and poison ordeals rather than any codified legal system.

The caste system extended its grip beyond the courts and into everyday life. Lower

castes were denied basic human rights as they could not hold umbrellas in public, even in heavy rain; they were barred from education and public services; and their movements were strictly controlled to ensure their perpetual subjugation. Kerala's rulers, under the influence of an elite Brahmin minority, enforced a rigid theocratic feudalism, where the well-being of the upper castes depended on the permanent suppression of the majority.

The absence of a formal legal structure and the dominance of caste-based judicial discrimination ensured that Kerala's society remained stagnant, denying justice to those who needed it most.

1.1.2.5 A New Ethical Consciousness: The Intellectual Challenge to Social Order

Against this backdrop of rigid caste oppression, economic stagnation, and legal discrimination, the need for a fundamental rethinking of social conditions became inevitable. The nineteenth century saw a shift in consciousness, driven not only by internal contradictions within the caste system but also by the influence of new worldviews introduced through colonial encounters. This period necessitated an ethical and philosophical response to the social realities of human existence, compelling thinkers, reformers, and sages to challenge deeply entrenched traditions.

Kerala's intellectual awakening was spearheaded by visionary reformers who recognised the urgent need to question religious orthodoxy and social injustices. Figures such as Aiyya Vaikunda Swami (1809-1851), Thaikkattu Aiyya Swamy (1814-1909), Chattampi Swamikal (1853-1924), and Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928) played a crucial role in shaping a new moral and philosophical outlook. Sensitive to the ethical demands of their time, they confronted the rigidities of caste, ridiculed superstitious

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beliefs, and rejected priestly dominance. Their reformist ideologies were influenced by both indigenous traditions and the transformative ideas brought by European interactions, leading them to reinterpret religion, advocate for social justice, and pave the way for Kerala's journey toward modernity.

These reformers did not merely critique the prevailing system; they actively proposed alternatives, emphasising universal brotherhood, rational thought, and social equality. Their relentless efforts laid the groundwork for the gradual dismantling of oppressive structures, shaping Kerala's unique trajectory of social reform and progress.

R Recap

- ◆ Kerala's 19th-century society was ruled by rigid caste-based control over life and mobility
- ◆ Caste pollution norms restricted proximity, access, and opportunities for lower castes
- ◆ Caste-based slavery denied legal rights and treated people as property
- ◆ Brahmins controlled religion, land, politics, and the judicial system
- ◆ Education and jobs were limited by caste, keeping lower castes disadvantaged
- ◆ Family and marriage systems reinforced caste and gender hierarchies
- ◆ Tax policies burdened lower castes while favouring upper-caste elites
- ◆ Brahmanical laws upheld caste-based punishments and legal discrimination
- ◆ Sree Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal fought caste and injustice
- ◆ Reform and colonial ideas challenged Kerala's caste-bound orthodoxy

O Objective Questions

1. Which were the two princely states that formed Kerala during the 19th century?
2. What was the main factor that determined social hierarchy in 19th-century Kerala?



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3. Which caste group controlled most of the land through royal grants?
4. What term describes the strict caste-based restrictions on proximity and interaction?
5. What term describes the temporary relationship between Brahmin men and Nair women?
6. What practice allowed landlords to buy, sell, or kill enslaved individuals in Kerala?
7. Which caste-based judicial text was used to uphold Brahmin authority in Kerala's legal system?
8. What form of marriage for prepubescent girls was mandatory in certain Kerala communities?

A

Answers

1. Travancore and Cochin
2. Caste system
3. Brahmins (Namputhiris)
4. Pollution laws
5. *Sambandham*
6. Slavery
7. *Vyavaharamalika*
8. *Talikettu Kalyanam*

A

Assignments

1. Analyse how caste-based restrictions on social mobility, education, and economic opportunities reinforced oppression in 19th-century Kerala.
2. Discuss the role of pollution laws and untouchability in maintaining caste hierarchies and controlling lower-caste communities.
3. Examine the impact of feudal land ownership and taxation policies on Kerala's economic stagnation and caste-based exploitation.

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4. Evaluate how early social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal challenged caste oppression and religious orthodoxy.
5. Compare and contrast the judicial and legal systems of 19th-century Kerala with those of colonial rule, focusing on caste-based discrimination.

R

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S

Suggested Reading

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Unit 2

Colonial Administration- Modernity

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse how colonial administration and legal codification transformed Kerala's governance, economy, and social hierarchies
- ◆ evaluate the impact of British land reforms and taxation policies on Kerala's agrarian economy and traditional joint family structures
- ◆ examine the role of colonial legal systems, including IPC and CrPC, in shaping Kerala's modern judiciary while serving British hegemonic interests

P

Prerequisite

A foundational understanding of colonial governance, feudal structures, and caste-based social order is necessary to grasp the impact of British administration in Kerala. The British restructured law, economy, and land relations, integrating Kerala into a modern bureaucratic system while reinforcing colonial control. The introduction of legal codification, taxation policies, and administrative reforms altered social structures, weakening caste-based adjudication but creating new economic inequalities. The abolition of slavery, land surveys, and revenue settlements played key roles in Kerala's transformation. This complex negotiation between colonial domination and modernity laid the foundation for later socio-political and reformist movements in Kerala.



Keywords

Colonial Administration, Land Reforms, Revenue, Legal Codification, Social Hierarchy, Agrarian Economy, Judiciary



Discussion

1.2.1 Colonial Administration and the Making of Modern Kerala

From the 18th century onwards, European societies increasingly embraced scientific rationality and empirical knowledge, shaping their approach to governance and administration. The British, as part of this intellectual shift, extended their hegemonic control by implementing official procedures that systematised and classified social and economic structures. In India, British administrators attempted to understand and reorganise society through their own methods of knowledge production, treating the diverse socio-economic world as a set of "facts" to be managed. The foundation of colonial power rested on the efficient collection and use of these facts, shaping the emergence of the modern state through data-driven administration.

The imposition of colonial rule triggered deep self-reflection within indigenous society, leading to social and cultural regeneration. This period of intellectual awakening, often termed the 'Kerala Renaissance,' played a crucial role in challenging caste hierarchies and religious orthodoxy, which had long defined pre-colonial Kerala's society. However, this transformation was not spontaneous, it was the result of gradual

reformist movements influenced by colonial governance.

Before British intervention, Kerala was politically fragmented, socially rigid, and economically stagnant. While the primary objective of colonial rule remained economic exploitation, it also set in motion both degenerative and regenerative social forces. As historians note, the colonial period was marked by a negotiation between non-European pre-capitalist structures and European colonial modernity, leading to accommodation and compromise rather than outright displacement. This interaction fundamentally altered Kerala's caste-based social order and introduced new economic, political, and administrative structures.

Despite serving hegemonic interests, British rule brought significant elements of modernity to Kerala. The introduction of a universal legal system, Western education, land reforms, and the abolition of slavery played a transformative role in reshaping society. While direct British rule was limited to Malabar, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin adopted British-inspired administrative systems and legal frameworks, integrating Kerala into the broader colonial order. The introduction of British Indian Civil and Criminal Procedure Codes reinforced the transition toward a modern legal and administrative structure, which continued



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to influence Kerala's governance beyond the colonial period.

1.2.2 British Administrative Policies and Their Impact on Land Relations in Malabar and Kerala

1.2.2.1 Early British Administration and Land Control

The Joint Commission Report of December 1792 marked the first systematic administrative intervention by the British in Malabar. Commissioners Jonathan Duncan and Charles Boddam devised a new governance framework, emphasising the regulation of trade and taxation. While trade in general was liberalised, pepper remained a monopoly, reflecting the economic motives of colonial rule. A crucial proclamation in 1792 prohibited the slave trade, indicating an early colonial attempt to restructure labour relations.

To consolidate British authority, the Joint Commissioners negotiated agreements with local rulers, defining their subordinate status within the Company's administration. By March 30, 1793, Malabar was reorganised into two administrative divisions, Northern and Southern, headquartered at Tellicherry and Cherpulassery, each under a Superintendent.

1.2.2.2 Malabar under the Madras Presidency and Revenue Reforms

In 1800, Malabar was officially incorporated into the Madras Presidency, bringing it under direct British administration. A Principal Collector, assisted by subordinate collectors, oversaw its governance. However, Malabar's economic progress lagged behind that of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, which pursued reform more autonomously.

British land revenue policies significantly impacted agrarian relations. Revenue settlements, as noted by Francis Buchanan in 1800, imposed an excessive land tax, discouraging cultivation. Tenants in Palghat paid one of the highest tax rates in India, leading to abandonment of farmlands in northern Malabar. In 1804, Thomas Warden described the tenant-landlord-government revenue sharing system, where cultivators retained only two-thirds of total produce, with landlords and the government claiming the rest. Low rice prices further burdened cultivators, forcing them to sell portions of their share to meet tax obligations.

A major shift came with the revenue assessment guidelines of July 21, 1805, which introduced standardised taxation. Under this system:

- ◆ Wetlands and garden lands were taxed after deducting costs for seed and cultivation. The remaining produce was split, with the government taking 60% and landlords 40%.
- ◆ Coconut and jackfruit plantations allocated one-third of the produce to cultivators, while the remainder was evenly divided between landlords and the government.
- ◆ Dry lands were taxed at half the *janmi*'s (landlord's) cultivated share.

This restructuring increased government and landlord earnings while reducing the cultivator's share, reinforcing agrarian inequalities.

1.2.2.3 Land Surveys, Private Property, and the Decline of Joint Families

A key administrative step was the British land survey, which categorised land into defined plots with fixed survey numbers, laying the foundation for a modern property rights system. Similar surveys occurred

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in Cochin (*Kettezhuthu*) and Travancore (*Kandezuthu*), introducing systematic land taxation.

The British economic model disrupted traditional land ownership. The subsistence economy transitioned into a commercialised agrarian economy, emphasising cash crops over food production. The concept of private property replaced communal landholding, undermining Kerala's joint family (*taravadu*) system, which had long been central to land management.

As market dependency grew, landowners sought credit, often mortgaging their properties to moneylenders. However, because *taravadu* properties were collectively owned, individuals struggled to secure loans, restricting economic mobility. The joint family structure, which upheld collective decision-making, became incompatible with British individualistic economic policies. Consequently, there was growing demand for legal reforms allowing the partitioning of family estates.

1.2.2.4 The Social Impact of Colonial Land Reforms

British land policies eroded traditional social hierarchies, yet also intensified economic disparities. With the decline of feudal production systems, slave labour was replaced by wage labour, altering the dynamics of social stratification. The introduction of cash taxation meant tenants had to sell produce rather than rely on barter systems, further entrenching monetary dependency.

The transformation of land tenure laws in Travancore and Cochin granted permanent tenancy rights, reducing landlord control. In Malabar, tenant agitations forced *janmis* to retain tenants, curbing their ability to arbitrarily evict them. These shifts fostered the growth of individualism, as collective ownership traditions crumbled. The legal

and economic changes of colonial rule restructured Kerala's society, aligning it with modern property and labour systems.

1.2.3 Transformation of Law and Order in Malabar and Kerala Under British Rule

1.2.3.1 Indigenous Legal Practices and Social Structure Before British Rule

Before British intervention, law and order in Kerala were deeply rooted in indigenous customs and traditional jurisprudence. The legal framework was based on texts like the "*Vyavahāramālā*," a Sanskrit treatise composed in the 16th-17th centuries, which served as the primary reference for legal practices in the courts of Travancore and Cochin. Justice was administered by local rulers, with caste playing a central role in legal discourse, reinforcing social hierarchies and caste hegemony.

Historical accounts by foreign travellers document the rigid and often brutal forms of justice prevalent in Kerala. Punishments included dipping hands in boiling oil, hanging, drowning with a covered head, placing offenders in a tiger's cage, property confiscation, amputation, and even execution by trampling with elephants. These punishments reflected the dominance of social stratification in legal enforcement, where caste identity often dictated the severity of punishment or access to justice.

1.2.3.2 Introduction of British Legal Administration and Structural Changes

With the expansion of British influence, particularly under Lord Cornwallis, the need for structured legal administration became evident. In 1793, the British government appointed Commissioners such as William Farmer, Major Dow, and



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later Paze to establish a judicial system in Malabar. They introduced a hierarchical court system divided into general districts, each overseen by Superintendents and Magistrates responsible for law enforcement, judicial administration, and revenue collection.

A significant development was the introduction of the Civil Code on June 12, 1793, which established provincial courts (*Adalat*) and defined separate jurisdictions for civil and revenue matters. The judges were assisted by Registrars, *Pundits*, and *Daroghas*, who ensured procedural compliance. Hindu and Muslim laws continued to apply in civil cases, with *Maulavis* and *Pundits* interpreting religious laws. However, British policies also led to the marginalisation of traditional caste-based adjudication systems, attempting to replace them with a uniform legal structure.

Despite these reforms, the judicial administration of 1793 faced challenges, including excessive bureaucracy, financial strain on the East India Company, and inefficiency in dispensing justice. The British realised that further centralisation was needed for an effective legal system.

1.2.3.3 Codification of Law: Introduction of IPC and CrPC

To streamline the legal system across India, the British introduced the *Indian Penal Code (IPC)* in 1861 and the *Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC)* in 1882. These laws replaced the fragmented indigenous legal codes with a unified, codified structure that applied uniformly across British territories, including Kerala.

The IPC provided a standardised set of criminal laws, outlining offences, penalties, and legal procedures. This removed the caste-based legal disparities that had existed earlier, at least in theory. The CrPC established a systematic framework for criminal proceedings, defining judicial processes, investigation protocols, and magistrate

powers. This law formalised police functions, replacing the arbitrary enforcement methods of the past.

The introduction of IPC and CrPC marked the transition from a caste-based, customary legal order to a modern, centralised judicial system. However, these changes also facilitated colonial control, as British authorities retained the power to interpret and enforce laws in ways that suited their economic and administrative interests.

1.2.3.4 Modernisation of Law Enforcement and Social Reorganisation

The modernisation of Kerala's law enforcement continued into the 19th century, particularly under British-appointed Diwans. In Cochin, Col. Munro, serving as British Resident and Diwan from 1812, reorganised the administration along modern lines. Judicial functions were stripped from local revenue officials (*Karyakars*), a police force (*Tannadars*) was introduced, and systematic land revenue collection was implemented. Munro's reforms also extended to social inclusivity, appointing Christian judges and integrating marginalised communities into public service.



Fig. 1.2.1 Col John Munro

In Travancore, rulers like Marthanda Varma and Dharma Raja had previously centralised administration and military strength, but British influence introduced further judicial and administrative changes.

Block-1

Maharaja Swathi Thirunal (1829-1847) implemented legal reforms, creating districts and appointing Dewan Peshkars to oversee law enforcement. In 1835, a formal police law was enacted, empowering Tahsildars to manage policing duties, marking the transition from a caste-based justice system to a bureaucratic one.

By the late 19th century, Cochin and Travancore had developed structured police and judicial institutions. The appointment of Sub-Inspectors in 1909 and the growth of police stations reflected an ongoing transition towards modern law enforcement. While these reforms introduced concepts of rule of law and bureaucratic governance, they also disrupted traditional power structures, weakening caste-based adjudication and integrating Kerala into a colonial administrative framework.

1.2.3.5 The British Administrative Role in the Abolition of Slavery in Kerala

The British colonial administration played a crucial role in the abolition of slavery in

Kerala, marking a significant step toward modernity and social justice. Before British intervention, slavery was deeply entrenched in Kerala's caste-based society, where lower-caste groups like the *Pulayas*, *Parayas*, and *Kuravas* were forced into bonded labour by landlords and temple authorities. The British stance on slavery evolved after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which ended slavery in the British Empire. In 1843, the British East India Company extended this policy to Malabar (part of the Madras Presidency), declaring slavery illegal. However, enforcement remained weak, as landlords continued exploitative practices. In the princely state of Travancore, under British pressure, Maharaja Uthram Thirunal issued a proclamation in 1855, formally abolishing slavery. Similarly, in Cochin, slavery was outlawed in 1855. Despite these legal measures, social attitudes were slow to change, and many former slaves continued to face economic hardship and discrimination.

R Recap

- ◆ British colonial rule replaced caste-based justice with a centralised bureaucratic legal system
- ◆ Land surveys and revenue reforms weakened joint families by introducing private property
- ◆ The 1792 Joint Commission Report began British control over Malabar's taxes and governance
- ◆ High land taxes caused agrarian distress and deepened rural economic hardship
- ◆ IPC and CrPC standardised laws, reducing caste-based legal inequality
- ◆ Travancore and Cochin saw modern courts, policing, and taxation under



Block-1

British policies

- ◆ Slavery ended by 1855, but caste-linked economic inequality persisted
- ◆ Barter economy declined as cash taxes and cash crops tied Kerala to colonial markets
- Brahminical law lost ground as British courts imposed a unified legal system
- ◆ The Kerala Renaissance opposed caste and injustice shaped by colonial governance

O

Objective Questions

1. Which colonial power established modern administrative and legal systems in Kerala?
2. Which report was the first major British effort to organise governance in Malabar?
3. Which economic system was disrupted by British land reforms and revenue policies?
4. Which legal codes unified criminal and civil laws in British India?
5. When did the British officially abolish slavery in Malabar?
6. Which two princely states in Kerala adopted British-inspired administrative systems?
7. What type of taxation system replaced the feudal barter economy under British rule?
8. To which British presidency was Malabar added in 1800?



Answers

1. British
2. Joint Commission Report (1792)
3. Feudal agrarian economy
4. IPC and CrPC
5. 1843
6. Travancore and Cochin
7. Cash-based taxation
8. Madras Presidency



Assignments

1. Explain the impact of British administrative and legal reforms on Kerala's traditional caste-based governance and judicial systems.
2. Discuss how British land revenue policies and taxation systems transformed Kerala's agrarian economy and social hierarchy.
3. Examine the role of colonial legal codification (IPC & CrPC) in shaping Kerala's modern judiciary while serving British administrative interests.
4. Evaluate the extent to which British land surveys and property laws contributed to the decline of Kerala's joint family system.
5. Compare and contrast the effects of British direct rule in Malabar with the administrative modernisation in Travancore and Cochin.



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Unit 3

Missionary intervention LMS-CMS-BEM- Channar Agitation

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse how Christian missionaries influenced social equality, education, and caste reform in Kerala, challenging traditional hierarchies
- ◆ evaluate the impact of missionary-led printing, linguistic contributions, and educational initiatives in shaping Kerala's modernity
- ◆ examine the role of missionaries in abolishing slavery, redefining gender roles, and supporting social movements like the Channar Agitation

P

Prerequisite

Understanding the caste system, religious orthodoxy, and feudal economy of 19th-century Kerala is essential to explore the influence of Christian missionaries. Missionary efforts were multifaceted, extending beyond religious conversion to education, healthcare, publishing, and social justice. They played a key role in abolishing slavery, uplifting marginalised communities, and challenging caste discrimination. Their contributions to linguistics, gender reforms, and public discourse significantly shaped Kerala's transition to modernity. However, their motives remain debated, as religious conversion often accompanied their reformist activities. The *Channar* agitation, educational advancements, and legal interventions illustrate their lasting impact on Kerala's socio-political transformation.





Keywords

Missionary Education, Caste Reform, Social Equality, Printing Press, Gender Roles, Slavery Abolition, Channar Agitation



Discussion

1.3.1 The Influence of Missionaries on Kerala's Modernity and Social Change

1.3.1.1 Conversion and Social Equality

Christian missionaries converted people from various castes to Christianity, promoting the fundamental Christian principle of equality. Unlike the rigid caste-based hierarchy, converts were supposed to be treated with relative equality, challenging the deep-rooted social divisions of Kerala. Missionaries actively worked to uplift marginalised communities and improve their living standards. Their contributions extended beyond religion, as they played a key role in social transformation through education, healthcare, and infrastructure development, fostering a more inclusive society.

1.3.1.2 Missionary Contribution to Social Reforms

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Kerala was entrenched in social evils and oppressive practices. Recognising education as the most effective tool for change, missionaries took the lead in establishing schools and institutions

that provided knowledge and skills to uplift society. Their efforts were widely supported by local rulers and kings, who saw missionary schools and colleges as instrumental in spreading Western education. Missionaries also introduced the homeopathic medical system to Kerala, further contributing to public welfare.

London Missionary Society (LMS)

The arrival of the London Missionary Society (LMS) marked a significant moment in Kerala's social renaissance. LMS missionaries focused on addressing the struggles of lower-caste communities, particularly in southern Kerala, where groups like the Nadars and Parayas faced severe discrimination. Their initiatives created awareness among the oppressed, empowering them to resist social injustices. The LMS actively campaigned against caste discrimination and worked to protect the rights of marginalised groups, challenging the dominance of the upper castes. William Tobias Ringel Taube, the first LMS missionary, began his work in South Travancore in 1806, followed by Rev. Charles Mead in 1817. LMS missionaries pioneered various educational institutions, including girls' schools, boarding schools, vernacular and Anglo-vernacular schools, and training colleges, ensuring widespread access to education.

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Church Missionary Society (CMS)

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) concentrated its efforts in central and northern Kerala, focusing on improving the condition of enslaved and oppressed communities. Education and conversion were the primary tools they used to liberate these groups from generations of suffering. In 1816, CMS missionaries established a college in Kottayam, turning the town into a major literary centre. Thomas Norton, the first CMS missionary, arrived in Alleppey and initiated educational activities. The CMS missionaries opened schools alongside churches, including seminaries, Syrian girls' schools, boarding schools, village schools, grammar schools, and training colleges. By 1836, they began admitting students regardless of caste and creed, breaking barriers to education and laying the foundation for modern higher education in Kerala.

Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (BEMS) and Linguistic Contributions

The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (BEMS) focused its work in North Malabar, where there had been little organised missionary activity before their arrival. Hermann Gundert, the first BEMS missionary in Malabar, arrived in 1839 and made significant contributions to Malayalam language and literature.



Fig. 1.3.1 Hermann Gundert

He authored *Malayala Bhasha Vyakaranam* (1859), the first Malayalam grammar book, and compiled the first Malayalam-English dictionary (1872). The BEMS missionaries also established Kerala's first girls' school in Tellicherry in 1839, later expanding to Calicut, Palakkad, and Manjeri. Their schools welcomed both Christian and non-Christian students, regardless of caste or creed, and pioneered compulsory education for children within their congregations.

1.3.2 Missionaries and Printing in Kerala

Missionaries recognised print technology as a powerful tool for education and social transformation. They established printing presses in Kochi and Vaipin as early as 1577, followed by one in Kodungallur. In 1821, Protestant missionary Benjamin Bailey set up the CMS Press in Kottayam, a landmark in Kerala's publishing history. The Government Press in Thiruvananthapuram was established in 1836, further strengthening the print culture.

With the establishment of these presses, the publication of books and journals flourished. Early publications included Malayalam grammar books, dictionaries, and significant literary works such as *Samkhepa Vedartham*, a Christian doctrinal text, and *Varthamana Pustakam*, a travelogue by Thoma Kathanar. Hermann Gundert, a Basel Mission missionary, contributed extensively by publishing works on grammar, theology, and history. He also launched Kerala's first newspapers, *Rajya Samacharam* and *Paschimodayam*, from Thalassery, shaping early journalism in the region.

Print technology and English education were deeply interconnected, reinforcing each other's growth. Printing democratised knowledge, making books accessible to all, thereby challenging caste-based restrictions on learning. This accessibility fostered public

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debates on social reforms, political changes, and educational advancements. Missionary efforts also contributed to linguistic reform by standardising Malayalam grammar and vocabulary through published dictionaries and language texts. By documenting and disseminating indigenous knowledge, missionaries inadvertently provided a platform for marginalised communities to assert themselves. While their role in fostering literacy and social change was undeniable, their motives remain contested, as critics argued that their primary goal was religious conversion, with education serving as a means to that end.

1.3.3 Missionary Influence on Education and Gender Roles in Kerala

Christian missionaries played a significant role in shaping education and gender roles in Kerala. They sought to restructure family values and norms, influencing both indigenous Christian communities and other religious groups. Missionary education had two primary objectives: providing vocational training to uplift followers economically and reinforcing gender roles to shape family structures. Women were placed at the centre of this transformation, as missionaries believed redefining their roles was essential to achieving their broader religious goals.

Missionary schools did not strictly separate religious and secular education but instead emphasised their interconnection. Sexuality and modesty became defining aspects of a woman's status within the family and society. These efforts encountered mixed reactions from various social and caste groups in Kerala. Some indigenous Christian communities, including Syrian Catholics, Latin Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, resisted missionary teachings by establishing their own schools to preserve traditional ways of life. Syrian Christians, in particular, faced criticism from Protestant missionaries for

adopting cultural practices akin to those of their Hindu counterparts. Missionaries saw these customs as deviations from the ideal Christian life and sought to reshape them according to Protestant values.

A key element of missionary influence was the promotion of the nuclear family as central to Christian living. The ideal Christian family, as envisioned by missionaries, required women to embody purity and obedience while men were expected to be industrious and truthful. These teachings reinforced patriarchal norms and framed family life within a rigid moral structure. While missionary interventions in education and gender roles contributed to broader social change, they also sparked debates on the nature of religious influence and the intersection of colonialism with indigenous traditions.

1.3.4 Missionary Influence on Slavery Abolition in Kerala

Christian missionaries, particularly those from LMS and CMS, played a crucial role in advocating for the abolition of slavery in Kerala. Their efforts extended beyond spreading the gospel to actively challenging oppressive social structures, including caste-based discrimination and bonded labour. Missionaries launched a vigorous campaign against slavery, recognising its deep connection to the rigid caste system. They opposed exploitative practices such as *oozhiyam* (forced labour) and openly confronted the privileges of higher castes while advocating for the rights of the oppressed slave castes.

The missionaries' persistent efforts culminated in the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1843, marking a significant milestone in Kerala's social reform movement. Their activism prompted General Cullen, the British Resident, to take a strong interest in ending slavery. Missionaries

Block-1

consistently petitioned the Governor of Madras to intervene on behalf of marginalised communities, demanding legislative action similar to that enacted in Bengal.

Beyond legal reforms, missionary activities fostered a broader discourse on human equality and freedom. Their schools and educational initiatives reinforced these ideas, empowering lower-caste communities with knowledge and awareness of their rights. By intertwining religious teachings with social justice, missionaries played a vital role in dismantling long-standing systems of oppression and laying the foundation for Kerala's progressive social transformation.

1.3.5 Channar Agitation (1813-1859)

The Channar Revolt was one of the earliest caste-based struggles in South India, marking the beginning of a series of social movements in Kerala's history. Taking place in three phases between 1813 and 1859, it was a fight for the fundamental civil right of lower-caste women to cover their upper bodies. The *Channars* (also known as *Shannars* or *Nadars*) were a significant community in South Travancore, primarily engaged in coconut climbing and toddy tapping. They were considered untouchables by the upper castes and often worked as slaves for upper-class landlords like the Nairs.



Fig. 1.3.2 Subaltern Women Engaged in the Making of Coir

The immediate spark for the revolt came when Poothathaankutty Channar and his wife, Ishakki Channathi, converted to Christianity and began dressing differently, with Ishakki modelling the attire of her former master's wife. Inspired by the teachings of Christian missionaries, many converted Channar women started wearing upper cloths, defying caste-based restrictions. This provoked violent opposition from upper-caste men, leading to widespread physical assaults, sexual violence, and public humiliation. In response, the Travancore government issued a proclamation in 1829 forbidding Channar women from wearing *melmundu*, the upper garment worn by higher-caste women.

Despite such oppression, Channar women continued their resistance. In 1813, inspired by Ayya Vaikunda Swami, the first organised agitation for rights for wearing dress took place. The struggle intensified in 1822 and persisted despite brutal crackdowns. Although Christian Channar women were granted permission to wear upper garments by Dewan Colonel John Munro, the ruling council later revoked the decision under pressure from upper-caste elites, fearing that it would blur caste distinctions. Dalit women, in particular, remained the most affected, as their forced exposure symbolised upper-caste control over their bodies.

Inspired by the Channar movement, Nadar and Ilava women also joined the struggle for clothing rights. In 1858, the agitation escalated into violent clashes in different parts of Travancore. As protests grew, attacks on Nadar women, churches, and schools intensified. On 26 July 1859, under the persuasion of Charles Trevelyan, the then Governor of Madras, the Travancore king was compelled to issue a proclamation granting lower-caste women the right to wear upper cloths of their choice. However, the decree still imposed restrictions, preventing them from wearing garments similar to those of Nair women.



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All Nadar women were eventually granted the right to cover their breasts, either by wearing jackets like Christian Nadars or tying a coarse cloth around their upper bodies like the *Mukkavattikal* (fisherwomen). Yet, they were still not allowed to adopt the upper-body attire of high-caste Hindu women. This partial concession did not satisfy Christian missionaries, who believed in full equality. Consequently, Nadar women continued to challenge the imposed dress

codes, developing upper-wear styles that closely resemble those of upper-caste women. This persistent defiance offended some high-caste Hindus, who viewed it as a provocation by the missionaries. The dress code remained discriminatory until 1915–1916, when further reforms, supported by social reformer Ayyankali, helped dismantle these restrictions, marking a crucial step toward social equality.

R Recap

- ◆ Missionaries challenged caste and supported marginalised communities in Kerala
- ◆ Western education from missions expanded literacy and reduced caste barriers
- ◆ LMS and CMS improved lower-caste education and social status
- ◆ Hermann Gundert enriched Malayalam grammar and early journalism
- ◆ Missions launched Malayalam presses, producing books, papers, and dictionaries
- ◆ The Channar agitation marked lower-caste protest for dress equality
- ◆ Missionaries opposed slavery, aiding its abolition in Kerala
- ◆ Vocational training gave converts jobs and economic security
- ◆ Mission teachings altered gender roles and promoted modesty
- ◆ Colonial missions brought reform but also cultural conflict

O Objective Questions

1. Which religious group were the forerunners of social reform in Kerala through education and advocacy?
2. Which missionary society worked primarily in southern Kerala among lower-caste communities?
3. Who was the first LMS missionary to arrive in South Travancore in 1806?

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4. Which Basel Mission missionary contributed significantly to Malayalam grammar and lexicography?
5. Where was Kerala's first girls' school, started by the BEMS, located?
6. Which major struggle in Travancore aimed to secure dress rights for lower-caste women?
7. Which missionary-established press in 1821 became a landmark in Kerala's publishing history?
8. In which year did Travancore grant lower-caste women the right to wear upper clothes?



Answers

1. Christian missionaries
2. London Missionary Society (LMS)
3. William Tobias Ringel Taube
4. Hermann Gundert
5. Tellicherry
6. Channar Agitation
7. CMS Press, Kottayam
8. 1859



Assignments

1. Analyse the role of Christian missionaries in Kerala's social transformation, focusing on their contributions to education, caste reform, and gender roles.
2. Discuss the impact of missionary printing presses and linguistic contributions in shaping Kerala's literary and intellectual landscape.
3. Evaluate the significance of the Channar Agitation (1813-1859) in the context of caste-based social struggles and women's rights in Kerala.



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4. Examine how missionaries influenced the abolition of slavery in Kerala, considering both their reformist efforts and the colonial legal framework.
5. Compare and contrast the approaches of LMS, CMS, and BEMS in their educational and social reform initiatives in different regions of Kerala

R

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Unit 4

Print and Early Newspapers

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the role of printing technology in shaping modern Kerala, focusing on its impact on literacy, journalism, and political awareness
- ◆ discuss the contributions of missionary and indigenous printing presses in the development of Malayalam literature and newspapers
- ◆ evaluate the impact of early Malayalam newspapers in fostering social reform, caste movements, and nationalist struggles

P

Prerequisite

A foundational understanding of colonial influence on Indian society and the role of the printing press in global history is essential to grasp the evolution of print culture in Kerala. The introduction of printing technology in Kerala was pioneered by Christian missionaries, with Benjamin Bailey and Herman Gundert playing significant roles in establishing Malayalam typography and early presses. Newspapers like *Rajyasamacharam* and *Paschimodayam* laid the groundwork for journalism, while publications like *Mathrubhumi* and *Swadeshabhimani* became integral to Kerala's social and nationalist movements. This unit explores the transformative power of print in shaping modern Kerala's political, social, and cultural identity.



K

Keywords

Printing press, Malayalam journalism, Missionary presses, Indigenous printing, Newspaper censorship, social reform, Nationalist movement

D

Discussion

1.4.1 The Arrival of Print Technology in Kerala

The emergence of the press played a crucial role in shaping modernity in Kerala by revolutionising the dissemination of information and expanding access to education. The origins of the printing press trace back to the 15th-century European Renaissance, a period of intellectual and cultural transformation. In 1436, Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable-type printing in Germany marked a turning point in history, enabling the mass production of books, including the Holy Bible. This breakthrough fuelled the spread of literacy and knowledge, making printed materials widely accessible.

European missionaries, recognising the power of print in spreading religious and educational ideas, sought to introduce printing technology in Kerala. The Spanish missionary John Gonsalvez was instrumental in this process. In 1577, he developed the first Malayalam printing types at Vypin Fort. His contributions laid the foundation for Malayalam typography, paving the way for printed literature in the region.

The expansion of printing continued with the efforts of another Spanish missionary, John De Bustamante, who introduced advanced printing techniques in Goa. By

1550, he had printed the first book in India, a philosophical thesis, marking a significant milestone in the evolution of print culture. Meanwhile, Francis Xavier, who arrived in India in 1542, played a pivotal role in promoting vernacular printing. Under his guidance, books were printed in Tamil, with Padri Markose Jorge publishing *Christiya Vanakam* and *Christiya Mahathvam* at the Cochin Press.

The introduction of printing technology in Kerala was not merely a technological advancement but a transformative force that contributed to the region's modernity. It enabled the documentation of history, the spread of new ideas, and the development of a literate society, ultimately shaping Kerala's intellectual and cultural landscape.

1.4.1.1 Establishment of the First Malayalam Printing Press

The introduction of the printing press in Kerala was closely linked to British colonial administration and missionary activities. In 1810, Colonel Munro became the British Resident of Travancore, paving the way for the establishment of printing technology in the region. The Christian missionary Benjamin Bailey sought assistance from the Travancore government to set up a press for publishing Malayalam works. With official support, the Christian Missionary

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Society Press was established in Kottayam, marking a significant milestone in Malayalam printing history. Bailey, often regarded as the 'Father of Malayalam Printing Technology,' played a crucial role in its development. He appointed skilled workers to create the 28 modern Malayalam letters, and by 1812, the Malayalam printing press began operations in Kottayam. Over the years, similar presses emerged in Mangalore, Varapuzha, Kodungalloor, Cochin, and Vaipinkotta.

Recognising the transformative potential of the press, the Travancore government established its own printing press in Trivandrum in 1839. By 1847, Hermann Gundert, a missionary and scholar, contributed to the refinement of Malayalam letters and introduced a hand press in Thalassery. The spread of printing presses across Travancore accelerated the publication of periodicals, fostering the growth of Malayalam literature and journalism.

1.4.1.2 Expansion of Missionary Printing Presses

The London Missionary Society (LMS) played a significant role in expanding printing technology in Kerala. Establishing numerous educational institutions in the Kanyakumari district, LMS recognised the need for a local press to produce educational materials. In 1820, under the leadership of missionary Charles Mead, the first LMS press was set up in Nagercoil. In 1830, another press was established in Neyyoor, which became a major publishing hub. By 1832, the Neyyoor press was producing educational materials and a monthly publication titled *Sanariya Prathikal*. In 1831, the *Desopakari* bulletin was launched, but operational challenges led to its transfer to the Nagercoil press. Over time, Neyyoor's printing press merged with the Nagercoil press, consolidating missionary printing efforts in the region.

Another major initiative was the CMS Printing Press, founded by Benjamin Bailey in Chalukunnu, Kottayam, in 1821. This press utilised English, Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit types. Its first major publication was the *Bible* in Malayalam. Bailey imported printing machines from England and later expanded operations with two additional machines from London in 1828. Maharaja Swathi Thirunal of Travancore supported this press, which published a vast number of religious tracts and books in Sanskrit and Malayalam. The press continued operations well into the 20th century, contributing to the expansion of Malayalam literature.

1.4.1.3 Rise of Indigenous Printing Presses

Until the mid-19th century, printing in Kerala was largely driven by Christian missionaries. However, the establishment of the *Kerala Vilasam* Press marked a shift toward indigenous efforts. During the reign of Uthram Thirunal Maharaja, *Kathakali* performer Easwara Pillai, with royal support, founded the first native-owned printing press in Travancore. This press played a key role in publishing Malayalam books, including the magazine *Vidhyavilasam*. It was also responsible for printing Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran's *Shakuntalam* in Malayalam.

Another significant venture was the Maliyammavu Kunju Variyathu Press, which published Sanskrit writings with Malayalam commentary. The early 20th century saw advancements in printing techniques, with the *Vidhya Vilasam* Press, established by Chathuranga Pattanam Kalahasti Yappa Mudaliyar in 1861, contributing to the publication of works by Ezhuthachan and Kunjan Nambiar. Despite being an outsider, Mudaliyar played a crucial role in promoting Malayalam literature through print.



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1.4.2 Evolution of Malayalam Journalism

The history of Malayalam journalism spans over 150 years, deeply influenced by missionary printing activities. The first Malayalam book, *Samkshepa Vedartham*, was printed in Rome by Fr. Clement Piyanis in 1772. The first Malayalam book printed in India was a translation of the *New Testament*, produced at Courier Press, Bombay, in 1811. The translation, done by Philipose Rampan, marked a key moment in Malayalam print history. In 1821, Benjamin Bailey began printing in Kottayam, using types provided by Fort St. George College in Madras. His dissatisfaction with the existing types led him to design a new set in 1829, which he used to print the *New Testament*.

In 1845, a lithographic press was set up in Illikkunnu, near Thalassery, by Rev. Hermann Gundert. Two years later, in 1847, Gundert made history by launching *Rajyasamacharam*, the first Malayalam newspaper. It consisted of eight cyclostyled sheets, lacking columns, crossheads, or an editor's name. The publication primarily focused on religious matters. *Rajyasamacharam* ceased publication in 1850 after producing 42 issues. Later in 1847, Gundert launched another periodical, *Paschimodayam*, which included articles on geography, history, natural science, and astrology. It was edited by F. Muller and had an annual subscription of one rupee. However, it ceased publication in 1851.

By 1848, the focus of Malayalam journalism shifted to Central Travancore. *Jnananikshepam*, an eight-page magazine printed at the CMS Press in Kottayam, emerged as an important publication. Apart from religious content, it covered scientific and informational topics. Another significant periodical, *Vidyasamgraham*, was published from Kottayam between 1864 and 1867.

1.4.3 Growth of Malayalam Newspapers

The 1860s marked the beginning of efforts to establish Malayalam newspapers, with the first newspaper published from Kerala ironically being in English, *Western Star*, founded by Charles Lawson in Cochin in 1860. Four years later, the first Malayalam edition, *Paschima Tharaka*, was launched. Edited initially by T.J. Paily and later by Kaloor Oommen Philipose, *Paschimatharaka* became a significant milestone in Malayalam print media. By 1870, *Keralapatrika* began publication from Cochin, further advancing Malayalam journalism. In 1867, two new papers emerged in Kottayam: *Santishtawadi* (Malayalam) and *Travancore Herald* (English). *Santishtawadi*, known for its critical stance against the rulers, was soon banned by the Travancore government, making it the first publication to face press censorship in Kerala. Another notable newspaper, *Satyanadakahalam*, was launched in 1876 as a fortnightly from Kunammavu under the Italian Carmelite Mission. Under Rev. Candidus, it expanded into a weekly publication, covering local news, government pronouncements, and court proceedings, and by 1880, it became one of the first illustrated weeklies in Kerala.

The foundations of modern Malayalam journalism were further strengthened in the late 19th century with the advent of printing technology. One of the earliest significant contributions came from Devji Bhimji, a Gujarati entrepreneur, who established the *Kerala Mitram* Press in Cochin in 1865. Despite facing severe opposition, including pre-publication censorship, Devji Bhimji persevered and, with the intervention of the British Resident, launched *Kerala Mitram* on January 1, 1881. Edited by Kandathil Varghese Mappillai, who later founded *Malayala Manorama*, *Kerala Mitram* set high editorial standards by covering literature, criticism, and public welfare.

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issues. Another landmark was the launch of *Kerala Patrika* from Kozhikode in 1884, founded by Chengalathu Kunhirama Menon, a freedom fighter. The publication became a leading voice in political and social discourse, covering international affairs, politics, and local issues while also providing space for literary critiques. Despite challenges such as the elitist preference for English newspapers and a lack of advertisement support, pioneers like Kunhirama Menon remained steadfast in their mission, laying the groundwork for the growth of Malayalam journalism.

1.4.3.1 *Malayala Manorama* and the Shift to Mainstream Journalism

The launch of *Malayala Manorama* in 1890 marked a turning point in the modernisation of Malayalam journalism. Established as a weekly from Kottayam by a joint-stock company, one of the first such ventures in Indian journalism, the newspaper was edited by Kandathil Varghese Mappillai. Initially focusing on literary content, *Malayala Manorama* quickly evolved into a publication of general interest. In 1928, it transitioned into a daily, a move that significantly expanded its reach and influence. The paper became deeply involved in mass movements, often shaping public opinion on socio-political issues.

By the early 20th century, Malayalam newspapers began to consolidate their positions despite increasing governmental repression. The launch of *Swadeshabhimani* in 1905, under the editorship of Ramakrishna Pillai, was a bold step in investigative journalism. Pillai's fearless critiques of palace politics and corruption led to his deportation and the confiscation of the press. Despite this, his contributions to journalism, including his pioneering work on newspaper ethics, left a lasting impact.

Malayala Manorama continued its growth in the 20th century, solidifying itself as a dominant player in the Kerala media landscape. It became an influential force in public discourse, setting new benchmarks for journalistic excellence. The newspaper's ability to adapt to political and social changes ensured its lasting legacy in Malayalam journalism.

1.4.3.2 *Mathrubhumi* and the Nationalist Spirit in Journalism

If *Malayala Manorama* represented the growth of mainstream journalism, *Mathrubhumi* embodied the integration of journalism with nationalist ideals. Launched in 1923 in Kozhikode, *Mathrubhumi* was founded by a group of dedicated nationalists, with K.P. Kesava Menon serves as its editor. The newspaper played a crucial role in the Indian independence movement, providing extensive coverage of key political events. Its moment of reckoning came during the Vaikom Satyagraha, where it boldly advocated for the rights of the oppressed.

During the peak of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, *Mathrubhumi* transitioned into a daily, becoming one of the most influential voices of the nationalist struggle. However, this prominence also led to severe government crackdowns, including financial penalties and temporary bans. Despite such challenges, the paper remained resilient, using tactics like blank editorial spaces as a form of silent protest.

In the decades that followed, *Mathrubhumi* continued to be at the forefront of political and social movements, emerging as one of Kerala's leading newspapers. Alongside *Malayala Manorama*, it played an instrumental role in shaping public opinion and setting the agenda for major political debates in the state.



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1.4.4 The Legacy and Future of Malayalam Press

The early 20th century saw the consolidation of Malayalam journalism with the emergence of influential newspapers such as *Kerala Kaumudi* (1911) and *Samadarshi* (1918). These publications, along with *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi*, played a pivotal role in Kerala's socio-political transformation. The period also witnessed the launch of *Al-Ameen* (1924), a newspaper that championed nationalist causes but faced repeated government repression.

The period leading up to independence saw further expansion and professionalisation of the press. The shift from a buyers' market to a sellers' market meant that newspapers were no longer mere vehicles of information but active players in Kerala's socio-political landscape. Publications such as *Malayalarajyam* (1929) introduced modern printing techniques, including the use of a rotary press, setting new standards in newspaper production.

1.4.4.1 The Press and Newspapers: Catalysts of Modernity in Kerala

The press and newspapers were instrumental in shaping modernity in Kerala, acting as catalysts for social, political, and cultural transformation. The introduction of print technology in the 19th century, pioneered by missionaries like Benjamin Bailey and Hermann Gundert, laid the foundation for

Malayalam journalism. Early publications such as *Rajyasamacharam* (1847) and *Paschimodayam* (1847) disseminated knowledge on religion, science, and history, fostering intellectual growth. By the 1860s, newspapers like *Paschima Tharaka* and *Keralapatrika* emerged, addressing local issues and challenging colonial and feudal authorities, thus promoting social reform and political awareness.

The press played a pivotal role in the nationalist movement, with newspapers like *Swadeshabhimani* (1905) and *Mathrubhumi* (1923) advocating for independence and social justice. *Swadeshabhimani*, under Ramakrishna Pillai, exposed corruption and faced severe repression, symbolising the press's struggle for freedom of expression. *Mathrubhumi* became a voice for the oppressed, supporting movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience Movement, despite government crackdowns.

Malayalam newspapers also promoted social equality and reform, addressing caste discrimination and advocating for the rights of marginalised communities. Publications like *Malayala Manorama* (1890) and *Kerala Kaumudi* (1911) not only informed but also mobilised public opinion, shaping Kerala's socio-political landscape. By the early 20th century, the press had become a powerful tool for education, reform, and nationalism, laying the groundwork for a modern, progressive society in Kerala.

R Recap

- ◆ The printing press transformed literacy, communication, and reform movements in Kerala

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- ◆ Missionaries like Bailey and Gundert shaped Malayalam printing and literature
- ◆ Kerala's first Malayalam press was set up in Kottayam in 1821 by CMS
- ◆ *Rajyasamacharam* and *Paschimodayam* (1847) pioneered Malayalam journalism
- ◆ Local presses like Kerala Vilasam expanded literature beyond missionary circles
- ◆ The press backed nationalism, with papers like *Swadeshabhimani* supporting independence
- ◆ Missionary presses published *Bible* translations, school books, and reformist writings
- ◆ Print challenged caste, promoting equality through articles and editorials
- ◆ Critical newspapers like *Swadeshabhimani* faced censorship and were shut down
- ◆ Malayalam journalism's growth shaped Kerala's modern political and social identity



Objective Questions

1. Who established the first Malayalam printing press in Kerala?
2. In which year did *Rajyasamacharam* begin?
3. Which missionary is credited with compiling the first Malayalam-English dictionary?
4. Which was the first-ever Malayalam newspaper in Kerala?
5. Which organisation established the first printing press in Kottayam?
6. Which Malayalam newspaper was banned for criticising the Travancore government?
7. Who founded the Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhumi* in 1923?
8. Which press was established by Gujarati entrepreneur Devji Bhimji in 1865?





Answers

1. Benjamin Bailey
2. 1847
3. Hermann Gundert
4. *Rajyasamacharam*
5. Church Missionary Society (CMS)
6. *Swadeshabhimani*
7. K.P. Kesava Menon
8. *Kerala Mitram* Press



Assignments

1. Analyse the role of Christian missionaries in introducing print technology in Kerala and its impact on social reform and literacy.
2. Discuss the contributions of early Malayalam newspapers like *Rajyasamacharam* and *Paschimodayam* in shaping public discourse and modernity in Kerala.
3. Examine how the printing press contributed to the nationalist movement in Kerala, with a focus on newspapers like *Swadeshabhimani* and *Mathrubhumi*.
4. Evaluate the influence of print technology on caste and gender dynamics in 19th and early 20th-century Kerala.
5. Trace the evolution of Malayalam journalism from missionary-controlled publications to indigenous newspapers and their role in Kerala's socio-political transformation.



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Unit 5

Western Education - Early Educational Efforts

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand how the transition from indigenous education to Western education influenced Kerala's socio-political and economic landscape
- ◆ analyse the role of Christian missionaries and colonial policies in shaping modern educational institutions and expanding access to marginalized communities
- ◆ examine the impact of Western education on caste and gender hierarchies, highlighting its role in fostering early social reforms in Kerala

P

Prerequisite

Prior to the arrival of Western education, Kerala's learning systems were deeply entrenched in caste-based hierarchies, with Brahmins holding exclusive access to knowledge. Education was primarily informal, conducted through Ezhuthupallis and temple-centered Salais, with little focus on inclusivity or scientific inquiry. The introduction of Western education through British policies and missionary efforts in the 19th century marked a transformative shift. Schools became more accessible, challenging traditional social barriers and introducing English as a medium of instruction. This period witnessed the establishment of significant institutions, expansion of literacy, and reforms in women's education, laying the foundation for Kerala's modernization.

K

Keywords

Western education, missionary schools, caste barriers, colonial policies, women's education, indigenous learning, educational modernization

D

Discussion

1.5.1 The Indigenous System of Education in Pre-Colonial Kerala

Before the arrival of the British, Kerala had an indigenous system of education, but it lacked formal institutions beyond the village schools known as *Ezhuthupallis* or *Patasalas*. These schools were typically run by a single teacher, called an *Ezuthachan* or *Asan*, who taught children of different age groups in the same class. However, this system lacked a structured or scientific approach and was insufficient for fostering intellectual, moral, or mental development.

Education in pre-colonial Kerala was deeply rooted in Brahmanic-Sanskritic traditions and remained largely inaccessible to the lower sections of society. The Namboothiri Brahmins, who held ritual authority and managed temples, had a monopoly over learning. Their education primarily focused on the study of Vedic literature, religious scriptures, and *Puranas*.

Temple-centered institutions, known as *Salais*, offered Vedic and material learning but were exclusively available to Namboothiri Brahmins. Additionally, *Vedapatasalas* and *Sabhamutts* functioned at the household level, further reinforcing Brahminical educational dominance. The curriculum in these institutions emphasised Sanskrit

proficiency along with a working knowledge of Malayalam, focusing primarily on reading rather than writing. Completion of this education ensured Brahmins a livelihood as *Vaidikas* (scholars of religious texts).

Among the *Patasalas*, Kanthalloor Shala, located near the Shiva Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, played a major role in preserving and promoting traditional knowledge system. It was an ancient centre of learning often called the "Nalanda of South India". It was believed to be established around 9th century CE. There subjects like vedas, astronomy, medicine and martial arts were taught under Gurukula System.

The role of literacy among Brahmins was primarily to preserve traditions, uphold the feudal structure, facilitate religious and philosophical discourse, and provide artistic entertainment for the ruling class. The local aristocracy, such as the *Naduvazhis* and other upper-caste temple communities (*Savarnas*), received a similar kind of education. However, traditional *Patasalas* operated through private initiatives without any financial support from the state.

1.5.2 The Introduction of Western Education in Kerala

The advent of British rule in Kerala marked a significant transformation in



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the region's educational landscape. The traditional system of learning, which was largely confined to privileged sections of society, was gradually replaced by a Western-style education introduced through missionary efforts. Christian missionaries, with the support of the colonial government, played a crucial role in establishing modern educational institutions, challenging the rigid caste-based order, and initiating social change.

A key moment in this transition came in 1813 when the British Parliament revised the Charter of the East India Company, allowing European missionaries to operate in India. This opened the way for widespread missionary activities, particularly in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. The Basel Evangelical Mission emerged as a leading force in spreading English education, establishing schools in Tellicherry (1817), Barnasseri near Kannur, Chalat, and Chowwa. These institutions primarily catered to marginalised communities, including the Cherumas, Pulayas, and Ezhavas, and also encouraged girls' education- an uncommon initiative at the time.

1.5.2.1 Western Education in Travancore and Cochin: Origins and Growth

John Munro, the British Resident of Travancore and Cochin from 1810, actively supported missionary-led educational efforts, viewing them as a means to promote progress and consolidate British influence. Protestant Christian missionaries expanded their activities alongside British rule, introducing new cultural and educational values that reshaped Kerala's society. While missionary education was closely tied to religious objectives, it also played a vital role in dismantling caste barriers and laying the foundation for a more inclusive educational system.

Western education in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin evolved through a series of initiatives by Christian missionaries, the local rulers, and the colonial administration. While the traditional education system existed in these regions through institutions like *ezhuthupallis* and Vedic schools, access was largely restricted to privileged castes and social groups. The introduction of Western education marked a significant shift in the socio-educational landscape of Travancore and Cochin.

1.5.2.2 Early Missionary Initiatives

The arrival of Protestant missionaries played a pivotal role in spreading Western education. The London Missionary Society (LMS) began working in Travancore in 1806, and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) followed in 1818. Missionaries believed that imparting education was crucial for their evangelical work and for developing a literate society. William T. Ringeltaube, a German Lutheran missionary, established the first English school for mass education in Mylaudy in 1809, offering free instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic to underprivileged children. This marked the beginning of a structured approach to Western education in the region.

The CMS College in Kottayam, founded in 1817 under the patronage of the East India Company Resident Colonel John Munro, was a landmark institution. The college was instrumental in promoting English education and producing a cadre of educated individuals who would later contribute significantly to the region's development.

Royal Patronage and Government Involvement

In 1817, the Regent Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai of Travancore issued a Royal Rescript recognising education as a state responsibility. This marked the first formal government

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commitment to education in Travancore. The Rescript pledged that the state would bear the entire cost of education, setting a precedent for future policies.

The English education system in Travancore gained momentum when Maharaja Uthram Thirunal issued a proclamation in 1844 stating that preference in government employment would be given to individuals educated in English schools. This led to a surge in demand for English education.

The University College in Thiruvananthapuram, established in 1866 under the patronage of Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma, further strengthened higher education. With John Ross as its first principal, the college became a leading institution for English education in Travancore.

1.5.2.3 Expansion and Policy Reforms

The second half of the 19th century witnessed a rapid expansion of education in Travancore. Under the administration of Dewan T. Rama Rao, significant reforms were introduced, including the establishment of the Vernacular Education Department. In 1871, the government mandated that every village should have its own school, ensuring wider accessibility to education.

The introduction of the grant-in-aid system in 1879 provided financial support to private schools, allowing vernacular education to flourish. By 1904, the Travancore government took up the responsibility of providing free primary education, abolishing school fees and offering salary grants to private schools catering to marginalised communities.

1.5.2.4 Cochin's Educational Development

In Cochin, Western education developed at a slower pace compared to Travancore. The first English school in the region was

established by CMS missionary Rev. J. Dawson in Mattancherry in 1818. However, the school struggled and eventually closed.

Cochin saw more structured efforts in education from the late 19th century. The appointment of Sealy as the first Director of Public Instruction and the framing of grant-in-aid rules in 1889 encouraged private institutions to establish schools. The educational policies of the Cochin government gained momentum in the early 20th century, leading to a wider educational network. The introduction of an education code in 1911 standardised curriculum, administration, and infrastructure.

Focus on Social Inclusion

The expansion of Western education was accompanied by efforts to include marginalised communities. In Travancore, missionary institutions initially focused on educating lower-caste and Christian children, while the state primarily catered to higher-caste students. However, the increasing demand for education among backward classes led to the establishment of schools specifically for them. Between 1894 and 1896, thirty schools were set up to serve *Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas, Marakkans, and Muslims*.

Cochin also took steps to promote inclusive education. Grants-in-aid provided financial assistance to private institutions that catered to underprivileged students. In 1892, educational diaries recorded fee exemptions for girls and special incentives such as free noon meals, books, and clothes. The High Caste Hindu Girls' School, initially exclusive, was opened to all communities in 1917, marking progress in gender and caste inclusivity.

Higher Education and University Establishment

The growth of higher education was a significant milestone in Travancore. The establishment of Travancore University



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(now the University of Kerala) on November 1, 1937, was a major step in fostering higher education. The university provided opportunities for advanced studies, aligning with the state's modernisation efforts.

In Cochin, higher education developed steadily. By 1947, the region had three government colleges and two private colleges. The government played a crucial role in regulating and supporting education through grants-in-aid and curriculum standardisation.

1.5.2.5 The Introduction and Growth of Western Education in Malabar

The spread of Western education in Malabar was significantly delayed compared to Travancore and Cochin. Several socio-political and religious factors contributed to this lag. The Mappila Muslim community, which viewed the British as oppressors, resisted English education due to fears of cultural erosion and religious conversion by missionaries. The Namboothiri Brahmins, who traditionally dominated education, also showed little interest in English learning. Additionally, the British administration in Malabar remained largely indifferent to the development of primary education.

Initially, the East India Company, as the direct rulers of Malabar, had no clear educational policy. Early efforts to introduce modern education were tied to administrative needs, leading to the establishment of vernacular schools aimed at training clerks and accountants. The first significant step towards institutionalised education came in 1826, when three *Tahsildari Schools* were established in Tellicherry, Calicut, and Palghat. By 1829, English was declared the official medium of communication, prompting further efforts to introduce English education.

In 1835, educational administration was

transferred to a new Committee of Native Education, which was later restructured multiple times. The British government took on a more active role in education during the latter half of the 19th century, although mass education remained neglected. The *Wood's Despatch* of 1854 recommended the establishment of universities, leading to the foundation of Madras University, which attracted students from Malabar seeking higher education. Following this, the *Calicut Provincial School* was opened in 1854, providing education up to the First Arts level. In 1855, a Government Anglo-Vernacular School was also established in Calicut.

Missionaries played a crucial role in promoting education in Malabar, particularly among marginalised communities. The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (BEMS) pioneered educational efforts by opening schools in Calicut, Chombala, and Tellicherry. Julie Gundert, wife of Hermann Gundert, founded a girls' boarding school in Tellicherry in 1839, marking an early step towards female education in the region. The curriculum in missionary schools included both religious and secular subjects, with a strong emphasis on English and Malayalam.

By the early 20th century, educational disparities between Malabar and the rest of Kerala began to narrow. The Madras government provided grants to support primary education, and after 1921, increased attention was given to the region's educational development. This shift was influenced by broader political changes, including the transfer of partial control of education to Indian administrators under the *Government of India Act of 1919*. Over time, these initiatives helped Malabar catch up with the educational progress seen in Travancore and Cochin.

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1.5.3 Caste and Community-Based Schools

In the early 20th century, various caste and religious groups in Kerala began organising themselves and saw education as a means of social mobility. Organisations such as the Nair Service Society, *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham*, and *Lajnathul Islam Sabha* established schools to uplift their communities. The Nair community, in particular, pushed for the creation of Nair Schools, which provided education for both boys and girls. Additionally, Anglo-vernacular schools, night schools, and evening schools were set up to accommodate those who worked during the day. However, despite the increasing number of schools, deep-seated caste divisions continued to shape the educational system.

Missionary schools in Travancore and Cochin encountered significant caste-related challenges. Upper-caste families resisted sending their children to schools where they would mingle with lower-caste students, reinforcing segregation in education. In southern Travancore, lower-caste converts faced backlash when they adopted upper-caste customs under missionary influence, leading to early anti-caste movements. Meanwhile, in northern Travancore, Protestant missionaries faced opposition from Syrian Christian priests, who objected to their influence. As a result, a ban was imposed in 1837, preventing Syrian Christian students from attending Protestant mission schools. Additionally, some upper-caste converts to Protestantism were criticised or even excommunicated for refusing to dine with lower-caste converts, highlighting the persistent barriers to caste integration in education.

1.5.4 Women's Education and Missionary Influence

The education provided to women in

missionary schools was shaped by the educational backgrounds of early missionary wives, who had studied in England. As a result, these schools largely followed a curriculum inspired by traditional English education, with some adaptations. In Victorian England, women were expected to play a secondary role in the household, managing domestic affairs while the husband or father served as the moral and financial authority. These ideals influenced early 20th-century nationalists and educationists in India, who promoted women's education with a similar focus on preparing women for their roles within the family. Missionary schools reinforced these expectations by teaching financial management, a skill Victorian wives used to track household expenses, to young Indian girls.

Beyond domestic training, missionaries aimed to educate local women to assist in outreach work. Boarding schools were designed to prepare Indian women to become suitable wives for young Indian missionaries, emphasising discipline, attendance, and proper conduct in line with Victorian ideals. Missionaries believed that a community's progress depended on improving the status of women, as they were responsible for passing down traditions and customs to the next generation. In central Kerala, schools run by missionary wives, such as Baker's boarding school, focused on domestic training. Girls were taught skills like embroidery, knitting, spinning, crocheting, lacework, and sewing, activities that were not only socially acceptable but also provided an additional source of income. Practical household skills, such as pounding rice and cleaning, were also part of their education. While the primary instruction was in the vernacular language, exceptionally talented students received special training in English.

However, missionary schools also introduced new role models that expanded



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the horizons of Indian women. European teachers, particularly single women from the second generation of missionaries, demonstrated alternative roles for women beyond traditional family structures. Some of these women, who held proto-feminist views, not only served as educators but also provided medical advice and promoted

Western medicine and hygiene among Indian women. Their presence encouraged an awareness of opportunities beyond caste-based occupations and conventional family roles, marking the beginning of a shift in the perception of women's capabilities and social contributions.



Recap

- ◆ Pre-colonial education in Kerala was Brahmin-run, excluding lower castes and lacking structure
- ◆ *Ezhuthupallis* and *Patasalas* offered basic literacy without broader intellectual development
- ◆ Missionaries introduced Western education promoting literacy, mobility, and gender access
- ◆ Missions like Basel and LMS educated marginalised groups and promoted English learning
- ◆ The 1813 Charter allowed missionary schools, challenging caste-based barriers
- ◆ Uthram Thirunal's 1844 order boosted demand for English education
- ◆ Travancore and Cochin supported government schools and inclusive policies
- ◆ Malabar lagged due to elite resistance and limited British funding
- ◆ Upper-caste opposition slowed lower-caste access to schools despite reforms
- ◆ Missionary schools trained women in new roles and questioned gender norms



Objective Questions

1. Which missionary society established the first school in Mylaudy in 1809?
2. Which year did the British Parliament revise the East India Company Charter for missionary activities?
3. Who founded CMS College in Kottayam in 1817?

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4. Which ruler issued the Royal Rescript of 1817 recognising education as a state responsibility?
5. When was Travancore University established?
6. Which community initially resisted English education in Malabar?
7. Which missionary established the first girls' boarding school in Tellicherry in 1839?
8. Which education policy in 1854 led to the establishment of universities in India?

A

Answers

1. London Missionary Society (LMS)
2. 1813
3. John Munro
4. Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai
5. 1937
6. Mappila Muslims
7. Julie Gundert
8. Wood's Despatch

A

Assignments

1. Analyse the impact of missionary education on Kerala's social structure by discussing how it influenced caste dynamics, women's education, and access to knowledge.
2. Evaluate the role of British colonial policies in transforming Kerala's education system by comparing pre-colonial indigenous learning methods with Western education introduced during British rule.



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3. Discuss the contributions of major missionary organisations such as the LMS, CMS, and BEMS in expanding education in Kerala, highlighting their key initiatives and challenges.
4. Examine the role of Travancore's royal proclamations in promoting education and how they contributed to the growth of public and private schools in the 19th century.
5. Critically assess the role of caste and gender in shaping educational access in colonial Kerala, focusing on the struggles of lower-caste and female students in gaining literacy.



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Unit 6

Malayalam Literature and New Social Consciousness

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse the transformation of Malayalam literature from classical and mythological traditions to modern narratives incorporating social realism and progressive themes
- ◆ discuss how literature in Kerala evolved as a tool for social critique, challenging caste oppression, gender norms, and economic inequalities
- ◆ examine the role of Western influences, translation, and the printing press in shaping the structure, themes, and accessibility of Malayalam literature

P

Prerequisite

A basic understanding of Indian literary traditions, the socio-political structure of pre-modern Kerala, and the impact of colonial rule on education and culture is essential to contextualize the evolution of Malayalam literature. Before modernity, Malayalam literature was primarily oral, deeply influenced by Sanskrit texts and religious discourses. With the advent of printing and Western education, literature transitioned from poetic and mythical narratives to novels, short stories, and socially engaged writings. The progressive writers of the 20th century played a crucial role in making literature a medium for change, highlighting caste struggles, women's rights, and economic disparities in Kerala.



Keywords

Malayalam Literature, Classical Traditions, Social Realism, Bhakti Poetry, Progressive Writers, Western Education



Discussion

1.6.1. Malayalam Literature Before the Advent of Modernity

Before the influence of modern literary forms, Malayalam literature was deeply rooted in the classical traditions of India. The great epics such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas* were rendered into Malayalam to reinforce cultural values and stabilise the ethos of *Malayalees*. The transient nature of human life and the moral teachings derived from these epics played a significant role in shaping the collective consciousness of the people.

Literary compositions such as *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Ramayana Kilipattu*, *Jnanappana*, and *Santana Gopalam* aimed to strengthen spiritual and moral values. These works were not restricted to the elite but were accessible to the masses through folk meters, which facilitated oral transmission and memorisation. Alongside spiritual discourse, literature also served as a medium for social critique. Satire and irony were employed to expose societal flaws such as the corruption of rulers and officials, the greed of courtesans, and the stagnation of the aristocracy.

The introduction of British rule brought significant changes to Malayalam literature. English became the official language and

the primary medium of higher education. Western literary forms and themes began to influence Malayalam writing, leading to the translation of English and Sanskrit works. Printing technology, newspapers, and grammar books facilitated a literary renaissance, integrating Indian traditions with Western aesthetics. The emergence of new poetic forms and prose narratives marked the beginning of modern Malayalam literature.

1.6.2 Poetry: From Classical Traditions to Romanticism and Social Realism

1.6.2.1 Traditional Poetry and the Bhakti Movement

Before the influence of Western literature, Malayalam poetry was dominated by two major schools: the Venmani and Kodungalloor schools. These poets adhered to traditional poetic forms, using pure Malayalam vocabulary and emphasising realism and naturalism. The complete translation of the *Mahabharata* into Malayalam verse was a testament to this era's literary dedication.

The Bhakti movement played a crucial role in shaping early poetry. Bhakti poems, cradle songs, and *attakathas* carried spiritual and moral messages, reinforcing religious devotion and ethical conduct. Poets like



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Ezhuthachan and Poonthanam created works that resonated with the common people, using accessible language and simple yet profound themes.

1.6.2.2 Romantic Revival and Poetic Innovation

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the influence of English Romantic poets on Malayalam poetry. Kumaran Asan's *Oru Veena Poovu* (1901) heralded the Romantic movement in Malayalam literature. This poem, addressing a fallen flower, explores themes of love, mortality, and the impermanence of worldly glory. Other notable romantic poems of this era include *Oru Vilapam*, *Viswarupam*, *Vilapam*, and *Asannamarana Chinta Satakam*.

During this period, themes from Sanskrit classics were also adapted into Malayalam poetry. Works such as *Chintavishtayaya Sita*, *Chandalabhikshuki*, *Karuna*, *Umakeralam*, and *Karnabhushanam* depicted mythological narratives infused with contemporary sensibilities.

1.6.2.3 The Rise of Social Realism in Poetry

By the 1930s, Romanticism in Malayalam poetry was accompanied by a strong wave of social realism. Poets began addressing issues of social injustice, economic disparity, and political struggles. This era saw the rise of a more humanistic and socially aware poetry that spoke of the struggles of common people.

Notable poems such as *Maninadam* explored the grief of a young poet, while *Manasvini* celebrated the beauty and stability of domestic life. Mysticism and symbolism also found a place in poetry, as seen in *Suryakanti* and *Perumthachan*, the latter portraying the tragic story of a father unintentionally causing his son's death.

Poetry became an instrument for social change, mirroring the aspirations of the

people for political freedom and justice.

1.6.3. Novels: A Reflection of Social Change

Malayalam literature underwent a significant transformation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the novel emerging as a crucial literary form. The novel was not merely a medium of storytelling; it became a vehicle for social critique and an instrument for shaping public consciousness. Unlike earlier poetic traditions that largely celebrated mythological and historical grandeur, the novel allowed writers to engage directly with contemporary realities. This shift reflected the broader social and political changes that were reshaping Kerala society at the time.

1.6.3.1 The Debate Over the First Malayalam Novel

One of the most debated aspects of Malayalam literary history is the identity of its first novel. Several works have been proposed for this title, each with its own group of proponents. Among these, Appu Nedungadi's *Kundalatha* (1887) is widely accepted as the first Malayalam novel. However, its claim is contested by Pulleli Kunju (1860) by Archdeacon Koshy, which was first serialised in *Jnana Nikshepam* magazine under the title *Jaathibhedam* before being published as a book in 1882. Critics argue that despite its early appearance, Pulleli Kunju lacks the structural and thematic depth of a true novel, making its classification controversial.

Translations of foreign works also played an important role in shaping early Malayalam fiction. *Paradesi Mokshayatra* (1847), the translation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* by Rev. Joseph Peat, and *Fulmoni Ennum Koruna Ennum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Katha* (1858), translated from Bengali by Hana Catherine Mullens, were among the first prose narratives in

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Malayalam. However, since they were not original compositions reflecting Malayali life, they are often excluded from discussions of the first Malayalam novel. Another significant work, Mrs. Collins' *Ghatakavadham* (1877), though set in Travancore with Malayali characters, is similarly dismissed by critics who consider translations as derivative works.

1.6.3.2 The Rise of Socially Conscious Novels

Despite these debates, the rise of the novel in Malayalam was rapid and remarkable. The enthusiasm of the reading public ensured that novels quickly became a dominant literary form. Works like *Indumathi Swayamvaram* (1890) by Padinjare Kovilakathu Ammavan Raja, *Meenakshi* (1890) by Cheruvalath Chathu Nair, and *Saraswativijayam* (1892) by Potheri Kunhambu reflected the growing diversity in themes and styles. O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889), widely regarded as the first fully developed Malayalam novel, set a new standard in narrative technique and social relevance.

Indulekha was a landmark work that blended romance with a critique of the prevailing caste and social hierarchies. It depicted the Nair community's struggle between tradition and modernity, with English education and individual freedom emerging as central themes. Madhavan, the protagonist, represents the educated Malayali elite, while the novel's exclusion of lower-caste characters underscores the limitations of its social vision. Scholars have pointed out that this absence was not incidental; rather, it reflected the elitist tendencies within the nationalist discourse of the time. By portraying only the upper-caste Nair experience, *Indulekha* subtly reinforced the idea that the emerging nation was primarily the domain of the upper castes.

Another influential work was C.V. Raman Pillai's *Marthanda Varma* (1891), the first in

his historical trilogy, followed by *Dharmaraja* (1913) and *Ramaraja Bahadur* (1918-20). These novels chronicled the political intrigues of the Travancore royal court and the conflicts among powerful Nair families. While these works enriched Malayalam literature, they largely ignored the struggles of lower-caste communities, reinforcing the dominance of the elite within historical narratives. The rivalry depicted in *Marthanda Varma* was confined to upper-caste factions, making it clear that the concerns of marginalised groups were not central to the historical imagination of early Malayalam novelists.

The early 20th century saw significant social reform movements in Kerala, and literature began to reflect these changes. Leaders like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali challenged caste oppression and demanded education and social rights for marginalised communities. These reformist ideas found their way into literature, with novels beginning to depict the lives of lower-caste communities and their struggles against social discrimination.

Social realism gained prominence with works like *Aphante Makal*, which highlighted the plight of Nambudiri women, and *Odayil Ninnu*, which presented a powerful critique of caste oppression through the character of Pappu, a rickshaw puller. *Randidangazhi* depicted the struggles of paddy cultivators in Kuttanad, while *Thottiyude Makan* chronicled the lives of generations of scavengers working under the Alappuzha municipal council. These novels marked a shift from the earlier romantic and historical themes to a more grounded engagement with social issues.

By the mid-20th century, Malayalam literature had fully embraced its role as a vehicle for social critique. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's *Balyakalasakhi* exemplified this new trend by portraying the love story of a lower-middle-class couple



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against the backdrop of social constraints. This novel, along with others, expanded the scope of Malayalam fiction to include the struggles of common people, making literature more inclusive and representative of the diverse realities of Kerala society.

1.6.4 Short Stories: From Morality Tales to Social Criticism

Initially, short stories in Malayalam were crafted to entertain readers with engaging, plot-driven narratives, often accompanied by a moral lesson. These stories followed a structured formula, an intricately woven plot, an element of suspense, and a satisfying resolution. Over time, the themes of short stories evolved to reflect the social, political, and economic transformations under colonial rule. The shift towards realism brought a more critical lens to the depiction of social issues.

Western literary influences, particularly Russian literature, played a significant role in reshaping the Malayalam short story. By the 1940s, the genre took on a distinctly indigenous character, serving as a powerful medium for expressing the realities of colonial oppression. Stories began to depict the struggles of the working class, the marginalised, and the destitute, exposing the exploitation and injustices they endured.

Short stories of this period achieved both artistic excellence and structural sophistication, emphasising a unity of impression that resonated with readers. Authors focused on the raw material of life rather than literary embellishments. The abuse of power by the wealthy and religious authorities was subjected to harsh critique. The transition to modern short stories marked a shift from purely didactic narratives to an engagement with social realism and political consciousness.

Translations also played a vital role in shaping Malayalam literature. The translation of *Shakuntalam* was followed by a wave of translations from Sanskrit and English, including the works of Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *The Merchant of Venice* found their way into Malayalam, enriching the dramatic and literary landscape.

1.6.5 Tradition to Social Awakening in Malayalam Literature

The evolution of Malayalam literature, especially the novel, reflects a shift in social consciousness. After *Indulekha*, the novel form gained new energy in the 1930s with the rise of progressive literature. Writers argued that literature should challenge societal orthodoxies rather than focus solely on aesthetics. This movement positioned the artist as a socially and politically engaged figure, opposing the notion of “art for art’s sake.”

In the 1940s, the Progressive Writers’ Movement profoundly influenced Malayalam literature. Writers like Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, P. Kesavadev, Ponkunnam Varkey, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, and Lalithambika Antharjanam broke from convention to highlight marginalised communities’ struggles. Their works democratised literary representation, expanding literature’s social consciousness.

European aesthetic theories, including Romanticism, Realism, and Marxism, further shaped Malayalam literature. These ideologies, combined with India’s cultural heritage, fuelled a vision of political unity amid diversity. The decline of aristocratic patronage and the rise of the middle class as new literary consumers also played a crucial role in this transformation. Literature became a medium for *Swadeshi* nationalism and a critique of socio-economic inequalities.

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Recap

- ◆ Early Malayalam literature centred on epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*
- ◆ Venmani and Kodungallur schools stressed realism, nature, and devotional themes
- ◆ Bhakti poetry made spiritual ideas accessible to common people
- ◆ English Romanticism inspired poets like Asan to explore love and mortality
- ◆ 1930s poetry tackled caste, politics, and economic struggles
- ◆ *Indulekha* (1889) marked the rise of the Malayalam novel
- ◆ Historical novels romanticised elites, ignoring caste-based struggles
- ◆ 1940s progressive writers critiqued inequality and caste oppression
- ◆ Short stories evolved into political critiques of religion and class
- ◆ Translations introduced global classics, shaping modern Malayalam writing

O

Objective Questions

1. What were the two main styles of early Malayalam poetry?
2. Which literary movement played a crucial role in shaping early Malayalam poetry?
3. Who is considered the author of the first fully developed Malayalam novel?
4. Which novel is widely regarded as the first historical novel in Malayalam?
5. Which literary movement in the 1940s focused on social realism and marginalised communities?
6. Who wrote *Oru Veena Poovu*, the poem that started Romanticism in Malayalam literature?
7. What was the primary influence on Malayalam poetry in the latter half of the 19th century?
8. Which writer's short stories focused on the struggles of the working class and marginalised communities?





Answers

1. Venmani and Kodungallur
2. *Bhakti* movement
3. O. Chandu Menon
4. *Marthandavarma*
5. Progressive Writers' Movement
6. Kumaran Asan
7. English Romanticism
8. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer



Assignments

1. Analyse the role of Malayalam literature in shaping Kerala's social and cultural consciousness before the advent of modernity.
2. Discuss the transition of Malayalam poetry from classical traditions to Romanticism and social realism with examples from key literary works.
3. Critically evaluate the impact of the novel as a literary form in Malayalam literature, highlighting its role in social reform and historical representation.
4. Examine the influence of the Progressive Writers' Movement on Malayalam literature in the 20th century. How did it challenge traditional literary themes?
5. Compare and contrast the contributions of early Malayalam novelists such as O. Chandu Menon and C.V. Raman Pillai in defining the narrative structure and themes of Malayalam fiction.

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BLOCK
02

Socio-Religious Reform Movements

Unit 1

Vaikunda Swamy and Samatva Samajam

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine principles of Samatva Samajam
- ◆ evaluate Vaikunda Swamikal's reform strategies
- ◆ explore spiritual aspects of his teachings
- ◆ discuss his impact on Nadar community

P

Prerequisite

In the 19th century, India underwent a period of significant social and religious transformation marked by the emergence of numerous reform movements across different regions of the country. These movements sought to address deep-rooted social practices such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, idolatry, and superstition, aiming to reshape Indian society in alignment with modern ideals of rationality, human dignity, and ethical reform. Often influenced by Western liberal thought as well as indigenous intellectual traditions, these reform initiatives attempted to reinterpret religious doctrines and social norms to suit a changing world. This unit offers a comprehensive and analytical exploration of these socio-religious reform movements, focusing on their ideological foundations, historical contexts, and long-term significance in Kerala context.

The British colonisation of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries laid bare the profound structural deficiencies and socio-cultural stagnation embedded within traditional Indian institutions. This critical exposure catalyzed a diverse array of reformist responses, spearheaded by visionary individuals and emergent



socio-religious movements, all of which sought to interrogate, reformulate, and rejuvenate entrenched practices in pursuit of a more rational, egalitarian, and ethically grounded societal order. These reform initiatives, commonly subsumed under the rubric of the Indian Renaissance, represented a complex and multilayered process of cultural negotiation and intellectual reawakening. Crucially, this renaissance unfolded within the hegemonic framework of British colonial rule, a context that simultaneously enabled reform through the introduction of modern ideas and technologies and constrained its emancipatory potential through the perpetuation of imperial control. The resultant reform discourse was thus marked by ambivalence, shaped as much by indigenous aspirations for renewal as by the imperatives and contradictions of colonial modernity.

What Structural and Ideological Conditions Necessitated Social Reform ?

A critical line of inquiry in understanding the nineteenth-century socio-religious awakening in India lies in identifying its driving forces: was it fundamentally shaped by the ideological currents of the West, or did it emerge as a reactive formation against colonial domination? While these vectors are interwoven, analytically disentangling them offers greater conceptual clarity. Equally significant is the endogenous restructuring of Indian society, particularly the rise of a colonial middle class. In this context, socio-religious reform movements can be interpreted as ideological manifestations of the evolving consciousness and aspirations of this emergent social formation.

Early historiography of Indian socio-religious reform overwhelmingly situated its genesis in Western influence. Proponents of this view identify a constellation of catalytic forces, English education and literature, Christian missionary activity, Orientalist scholarship, European science and philosophy, and the material culture of the West, as the principal stimuli for change. Later scholars have reiterated and refined this thesis; Charles Heimsath, for instance, contends that Western models shaped not only the ideological framework but also the organisational modalities of nineteenth-century reform movements.

While it is undeniable that Western intellectual and institutional intrusions sparked a great deal of change in nineteenth-century India, dismissing the reformist movement as a mere result of colonial “benevolence” ignores the structural conflicts of the process. A more nuanced analysis must highlight the ambivalent logic of empire, drawing on Sushobhan Sarkar’s *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays*, 1970 emphasise that “foreign conquest and domination was bound to be a hindrance rather than a help to a subject people’s regeneration”. This is because the same pedagogical and technological vectors that made critique possible also solidified new modalities of domination. Therefore, it is necessary to see the reform movements as negotiation spaces where local agents appropriated, hybridised, and challenged urban norms, creating a dialectic where emancipation and subordination were inseparable. Only by attending to this contrapuntal dynamic can we apprehend the true lineaments of India’s nineteenth-century socio-religious regeneration.

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Reform movements of the nineteenth century are best viewed as calculated reactions to the upsetting reality of colonial interference. Their greater significance lay in articulating a communal effort to confront and ultimately contest the socio - political order imposed by the empire, despite their pursuit of internal social amelioration. Therefore, socio-religious reform served as a crucial tool in the development of an emerging anti-colonial consciousness rather than as a stand-alone programme of moral renewal.

The reform movements in colonial India exhibited notable regional and socio-cultural variations. In Bengal and other northern regions, these movements were predominantly initiated and led by upper-caste elites, as exemplified by organisations such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Prarthana Samaj. These reformist initiatives primarily aimed to interrogate and reinterpret prevailing religious and social customs within the elite caste milieu, focusing on internal reform rather than structural transformation.

In contrast, the reform movements in the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent emerged from the subaltern strata, particularly those occupying the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. Consequently, the ideological underpinnings, objectives, and methods of these southern movements diverged significantly from their northern counterparts. Emphasising principles such as *Dharma* and *Satya* (righteousness and truth), these movements placed a pronounced emphasis on the pursuit of social equality and the assertion of equal rights, thereby challenging the entrenched hierarchies of caste and social exclusion.

In this context, the study seeks to critically examine the historical trajectory of socio-religious reform movements in Kerala.

A nuanced understanding of Travancore's rigid caste hierarchy, manifested in prohibitions on walking through the public streets, temple entry, education, and access to public spaces for marginalised groups such as the Nadars is indispensable for appreciating the radicalism of Vaikunda Swāmikal's reformist programme. Knowledge of the Travancore monarchy's political authority and its Brahmin-dominated advisory apparatus further illuminates the institutional resistance Swamikal encountered from both the state and entrenched upper-caste interests. Situating his work within the wider currents of colonial-era social and religious reform, epitomised by figures such as Sree Narayana Guru and Jyotirao Phule reveals how reformers sought simultaneously to reconfigure spirituality and advance social equity. Familiarity with the *Bhakti* traditions of Vaishnavism, alongside doctrinal concepts such as *dharma*, *mokṣa*, and *avatāra*, clarifies Swamikal's strategic deployment of devotional narratives to contest caste discrimination and to mobilise a mass following. Finally, an appreciation of the historical marginalisation and aspirational trajectory of the Nadar community explains their enthusiastic support for Swamikal and underscores the transformative role of the Samatva Samajam as a vehicle for dignity, self-respect, and social justice.





Keywords

Caste, Travancore, Nadars, Ezhavas, Ayya Vaikundar, Muthukutty, Teachings, Samatvva Samajam



Discussion

2.1.1 Caste and Society in 19th Century Travancore

In the nineteenth and mid of the twentieth centuries, Travancore functioned as a society rigidly structured by an elaborate caste hierarchy, deeply entrenched in orthodox Brahminical ideology. While the classical *varna* system of ancient India was originally conceived as a relatively flexible framework delineating occupational roles, by the colonial period in Travancore it had ossified into a highly stratified and *ritualized* social order. At the apex of this hierarchy were the Namboodiri Brahmins, who exercised spiritual hegemony through their exclusive control over temple priesthood, Vedic scholarship, and the interpretation of *dharmashastra*. Directly beneath them were the Nairs, a martial and landowning caste that constituted the administrative and military core of the Travancore state apparatus. In contrast, the lower castes including Ezhavas, Nadars, pulayas Kuravas, Parayas, etc., were systematically subjected to ritual pollution, social exclusion, and economic exploitation, thereby reinforcing a deeply unequal and dehumanising social structure.

The concept of ritual purity and pollution in Travancore was not merely symbolic but functioned as a pervasive regulatory principle governing nearly every dimension

of public life. Access to temples, roads, public wells, and the spatial organisation of markets, educational institutions, and even courtrooms was strictly mediated by caste-based norms. Individuals from lower castes were frequently prohibited from traversing public roads situated near temples or Brahmin residences. In more extreme instances, they were compelled to maintain a mandated physical distance from upper-caste individuals and, at times, required to signal their presence using a bell or stick to avert perceived ritual contamination. These exclusionary practices were not only upheld through entrenched customary norms but were also codified and reinforced by royal edicts, thereby conferring a sacral legitimacy to systemic social discrimination.

Among the most conspicuous expressions of caste-based subjugation was the injunction that prohibited lower-caste women from covering their upper bodies in public. This proscription was rigorously enforced upon Nadar and Ezhava women, who were forbidden to wear an upper cloth (*mel mundu* or blouse) in the presence of higher-caste men. The Channar Revolt, or Upper-Cloth Agitation, of the mid-nineteenth century spearheaded by Nadar women with the support of Protestant missionaries constituted a pivotal challenge to this gendered form of caste oppression. Although the Travancore

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state initially met the uprising with violent repression, sustained popular resistance, coupled with diplomatic pressure from British colonial authorities, ultimately compelled the regime to rescind the prohibition.

Religion and caste power were inextricably intertwined in nineteenth-century Travancore. The Namboodiri Brahmin priesthood not only monopolised ritual performance and temple administration but also defined the moral-legal order that governed inter-caste relations. As Robin Jeffrey notes in *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, statutory enactments frequently reproduced Brahminical interpretations of the *Manusmṛti* and related *Dharmaśāstra* texts, thereby institutionalising segregation and sustaining upper-caste supremacy. Temples, moreover, were formidable economic entities, major landholders, employers, and nodes of local authority, yet they remained inaccessible to the 'Avarna', those classified outside the fourfold *varna* schema and deemed ritually impure. This fusion of caste, religion, and state power systematically excluded subordinate castes from political representation, religious participation, and educational advancement. Formal schooling was a privilege largely restricted to upper castes, particularly Brahmins who presided over padashalas dedicated to Vedic learning; where lower-caste children were admitted, institutions were chronically underfunded, segregated, and rife with caste humiliation. In this context, the educational initiatives of Christian missionaries, especially the London Missionary Society and the Church Mission Society proved pivotal in establishing schools for marginalised communities, thereby provoking vigorous resistance from dominant castes and the Travancore royal court.

Within this socio - political milieu, the Nadar and Ezhava communities, despite their substantial participation in commerce, toddy tapping, and agriculture remained socially degraded and politically marginalised. Endeavours to elevate their status by adopting

upper-caste customs, wearing ornaments, or seeking temple entry provoked vigorous repression. Royal edicts (*kala pramaṇams*) repeatedly stipulated punitive sanctions for such "transgressions," ranging from fines and public flogging to banishment and, in extreme cases, capital punishment. Landless Pulayar agricultural labourers endured an even more stringent regime of exclusion, structured around codified practices of untouchability, unseeability, and unapproachability, a layered hierarchy unique to parts of Kerala and southern Travancore. Crucially, this oppressive order was not a vestige of antiquity but was continually reinscribed and modernised through colonial censuses, land surveys, and administrative classifications. Although claiming neutrality, British authorities entrenched caste boundaries by validating caste-specific titles, land rights, and legal identities, thereby fostering what Susan Bayly characterises as the "modernisation of caste," wherein colonial legal-rational structures became interwoven with traditional hierarchies, rendering caste exclusion ever more resilient.

The lower castes had no institutional platform for religious worship or social mobility. Temples denied them entry, and public spaces were closed off through custom and law. In this context of ritual denial, legal exclusion, and economic exploitation, movements such as *Samathuva Samajam* founded by Ayya Vaikundar in the 1830s emerged as radical challenges to the status quo. These movements did not merely demand social reform but rejected the very premises of Brahminical dominance, envisioning egalitarian religious practices, communal identity, and divine justice outside the boundaries of orthodox Hinduism. Thus, the social condition of Travancore in the 19th century was not only caste-ridden but institutionally sanctified by religion, law, and monarchy. It is in this backdrop that anti-caste movements and egalitarian spiritual initiatives took shape transforming South



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Indian society and laying the foundation for modern social justice struggles in the region.

2.1.2 Ayya Vaikundar: Life and Transformation

2.1.2.1 Early Life

Vaikunda Swamikal was born in 1808 CE into a poor Vaiṣṇavite Nadar family in the village of Sasthan Kovil Vilai, present-day Swamithoppu, located approximately eight kilometers southwest of Kanyakumari. He was named Muthukutty at birth, the son of Ponnumadan and Veyilal. From an early age, he exhibited marked spiritual sensibilities and exceptional devotional tendencies, which led residents to view him as a divine incarnation. His radiant appearance and serene demeanour contributed to a growing belief that he was of divine origin, destined to offer solace and deliverance to the oppressed and marginalised sections of society.

Initially named “Mudi Sudum Perumal,” a title suggesting royal authority, the name was opposed by upper-caste Hindus, who complained to the ruling authorities. As a result, the government issued an order directing that the child’s name be changed to one suitable to his caste, thereby renaming him as *Muthukutty*. This act of governmental interference, aligned with the upper castes’ rigid social norms, deeply wounded the young *Muthukutty* and instilled in him a profound sense of injustice and resistance.



Fig 2.1.1 Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal

2.1.2.2 Spiritual Inclinations and Intellectual Growth

As there were no formal schools available, Muthukutty engaged in self-study, learning sacred texts and literary works with the help of knowledgeable elders from his locality. He explored religious literature across traditions, gaining inspiration from texts like the *Tirukkural*, which instilled in him ideals of justice, equality, and righteous governance, and the *Harichandra Puranam*, which emphasised the power of truth. Like his parents, Muthukutty was devoted to Lord Vishnu, regularly performing rituals and devotional songs at home. He also practiced compassion and charity, dedicating a portion of his income to help the poor.

From an early age, he was disturbed by the exploitative behaviour of the dominant caste groups and government authorities. He openly criticised various forms of oppressive taxation, such as *talavari*, *velai padivu*, and other poll taxes, which were enforced upon the marginalised communities through coercion.

2.1.2.3 Spiritual Awakening and Assumption of Identity as Vaikundar

At the age of Twenty, Muthukutty fell seriously ill and experienced intense suffering. In search of relief, he was taken to the Murugan temple at Tiruchendur. It was there that he experienced a spiritual transformation and declared himself *Vaikundar*, claiming divine origin as the son of Vishnu. He proclaimed that he had come into this world to liberate the downtrodden *Shannars* (Nadars) and to establish *Dharma Yukam*, a just and equitable era.

Upon his return from Tiruchendur, he performed miraculous acts that amazed the people. The oppressed communities, desperate for a leader, welcomed him as a messianic figure. However, the upper-caste

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Hindus, unsettled by his growing influence, tried to prevent his entry into their territories. Vaikundar was attacked in various places by both caste Hindus and Muslims, yet he remained undeterred.

2.1.2.4 Years of Penance and Growing Opposition

In 1833, Vaikunda Swamikal began a period of intense spiritual discipline and meditation at Poovandararthoppu. During the first two years, he meditated in a six-foot-deep hollow pit called *Yoga Dapa*, consuming only liquids and fruits. Over the following two years, his focus shifted toward meditating for the eradication of the caste system. His penance drew opposition from upper-caste communities who tried to obstruct his spiritual practices, fearing his influence. Nevertheless, he completed the four years of penance, attracting a multitude of followers from marginalised communities across southern India who came to voice their grievances.

These followers revered him as a divine incarnation and referred to him as Vaikunda Swamikal. He listened to their complaints, healed ailments through divine methods such as giving sanctified soil and water, and advised them on maintaining physical and spiritual well-being. Through his divine healing powers, he cured both physical and mental afflictions, earning widespread fame across South India.

2.1.2.5 Teachings and Resistance

Vaikunda Swamikal's teachings emphasised key values such as compassion, truth, charity, and self-respect. He did not shy away from criticising the ruling elite. He condemned the Travancore ruler, Swathi Thirunal, for ignoring the plight of the lower castes, even referring to him disparagingly as *Ananthapuri Neechan*, and castigated the Brahmins as *Karineechanmar*. He advocated for the expulsion of the monarch, which

earned him the hostility of both the ruling class and caste elites.

A plot was hatched by some caste Hindus to poison Vaikunda Swamikal, but he reportedly survived the attempt through divine intervention. The conspirators then appealed to the king, who organized an inquiry at the Suchindram Temple mandapam. Accusations were leveled against Swamikal, and it was demanded that he be arrested and his activities suppressed. Responding to this, the Raja dispatched soldiers to Poovandararthoppu. Although his followers rallied in his defense, Vaikunda Swamikal advised them to maintain peace.

He was arrested and subjected to brutal torture, including being confined inside a lime kiln, a cage with wild animals, and even being placed amidst fire. However, he emerged unscathed from all these tortures. Eventually, the king offered to release him on the condition that he would restrict his activities to his own community. Vaikunda Swamikal refused, tore the royal decree, and rejected any form of compromise. He was eventually released in March 1839 after 110 days of imprisonment, and his return was celebrated with great fervor by his followers.

2.1.2.6 Post-Imprisonment Activities and the Vision of Dharma Yuga

Following his release, Vaikunda Swamikal continued his mission with renewed vigor. He initiated several of his followers into spiritual penance and instructed them in the ways of a new life rooted in equality and self-respect, anticipating the arrival of *Dharma Yuga*. His belief in a forthcoming era of justice and righteousness made him a prophetic figure of social transformation. Long before the formal emergence of socio-religious reform movements in India, Vaikunda Swamikal had already initiated a revolution among the oppressed



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communities, particularly the Nadars. He instilled confidence in them and challenged the deeply entrenched social inequalities. The Nadars faced intense discrimination, they were barred from accessing education, government employment, or using items like oil and milk, which were considered polluted if touched by them. They were prohibited from using footwear, carrying umbrellas, or building houses above a single story. Even basic rights such as access to public roads, wells, and justice in courts were denied to them. They were expected to worship from outside temple premises and were denied the study of both sacred and secular knowledge.

In this context, Vaikunda Swamikal's teachings were profoundly liberatory. He advocated for dignity in daily life urging his followers to wear turbans and allow their women to cover their upper bodies, acts that were considered revolutionary defiance against caste oppression. He called on his people to recognise their inherent worth and reclaim their social rights. Vaikunda Swamikal's movement had a deep and lasting impact on the Nadar community. His preaching awakened a sense of pride and unity among the Nadars, encouraging them to resist centuries of subjugation. He emphasised the importance of education in overcoming superstitions and backward customs, which also helped to stem the tide of conversion that was taking place among the oppressed communities during this period. Vaikunda Swamikal emerged as a guiding light for the marginalised, offering both spiritual solace and a roadmap for social change. By fusing divine authority with radical social reform, he laid the foundation for a more egalitarian society in South India, and his movement remains a significant milestone in the history of caste reform and religious awakening.

2.1.3 Establishment of Samatva Samajam

The *Samatva Samajam* was formally founded in 1836 as a direct response to the inequalities of Travancore society. It is historically recognised as one of the earliest organised anti-caste movements in India, preceding even the famous efforts of Narayana Guru, Jyotirao Phule, or Periyar. Vaikundar envisioned the Samajam as an inclusive collective where all human beings, regardless of caste or gender, could engage in spiritual and social upliftment.

Vaikundar preached that all people were the children of one divine entity and deserved equal treatment. He rejected the authority of the Vedas and Brahminical scripture, arguing that they had been manipulated to preserve caste privileges. In their place, he proposed a new religious framework based on love, equality, and divine justice. Importantly, he declared that God does not reside in temples built by the rich but in the hearts of the humble, a revolutionary message that challenged the legitimacy of temple-centric, caste-dominated religion.

2.1.3.1 Philosophy and Ideology Ideas of Samatva Samajam

The ideological core of Samatva Samajam can be summarised under several interrelated principles, all of which reflect a deeply humanistic and inclusive worldview.

1. Spiritual and Social Equality

Vaikundar's message that all castes are equal in the eyes of God directly undermined the hierarchical structure that governed religious and social life in Travancore. His denunciation of caste-based privileges was not only theological but also political, as he viewed caste as a tool of exploitation. His teachings aligned closely with the idea that spiritual realisation must be accompanied by social transformation.

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2. Rejection of Brahminical Rituals and Priestly Monopoly

Vaikundar criticised costly and elaborate rituals, animal sacrifices, and the role of Brahmin priests. He encouraged direct communion with the divine, eliminating intermediaries who had historically kept lower castes away from sacred practices. His *nizhal thangals* (shade halls), which functioned as worship and social centers, were spaces where no caste distinctions were allowed and all people could participate equally in prayer, song, and learning.

3. Dharma Yukam and the Vision of Just Society

A core part of Vaikundar's message was the prophecy of *Dharma Yukam*, or the Age of Righteousness, which would follow the destruction of *Kali Yukam*, the current age marked by injustice, inequality, and suffering. *Dharma Yukam* would be characterised by an absence of caste, gender discrimination, and economic inequality, and would be governed by truth, justice, and divine love. This utopian vision offered hope to the oppressed and served as a powerful critique of the existing order.

4. Gender Inclusion

In a society where women were doubly oppressed by caste and patriarchy, Vaikundar included women in his religious gatherings and recognised their equal spiritual worth. He condemned practices such as child marriage, polygamy, and the seclusion of widows, promoting instead the moral and spiritual autonomy of women.

2.1.3.2 Community Practices and Organisation

The organisational structure of the Samatva Samajam was decentralised yet cohesive. Vaikundar's teachings were disseminated through oral narratives, songs, and local gatherings, making them accessible to the

largely illiterate population. Worship took place in *Nizhal thangals*, which were often thatched structures erected by the community. These spaces served as alternatives to Hindu temples, which remained closed to the lower castes.

One of the most revolutionary practices of the Samajam was the Samabanthi, a communal meal in which all participants, irrespective of caste, sat together and ate. In a society where sharing food with lower castes was considered polluting, the Samabanthi was a direct act of civil disobedience. It created a sense of community identity and dismantled notions of ritual purity and pollution.

2.1.3.3 Conflict with the State and the Brahminical Order

Vaikundar's teachings did not go unnoticed by the Travancore monarchy and the Brahmin elite. His growing popularity among the oppressed castes and his direct challenge to ritual authority were viewed as threats to social order. In 1838, he was arrested by the Travancore state and imprisoned at Singarathope for several months. However, this act of suppression only enhanced his stature among his followers, who saw him as a martyr and divine reformer. Upon his release, he resumed his preaching with greater vigor. Despite persecution, Vaikundar never advocated violent rebellion. His resistance was deeply rooted in non-violence, moral persuasion, and the spiritual awakening of the masses. His critique was systemic, addressing not just the upper castes but also reforming the mindset of the oppressed by instilling self-worth and divine purpose.

The Samatva Samajam represents a watershed moment in Indian social reform history. It was the first mass movement led by a member of a lower caste that explicitly aimed to abolish caste, empower the marginalised, and redefine religious experience. It served as a precursor to



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many later movements, including those of Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala, Periyar's Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu, and Ambedkar's Dalit emancipation efforts across India. While upper-caste reformers often sought to 'reform' Hinduism without abolishing caste, Vaikundar and the Samathuva Samajam rejected the caste framework entirely. They built an alternative religious and moral universe, centered on dignity, equality, and shared community life. The *Ayyavazhi* tradition, which emerged from the Samathuva Samajam, continues to be followed by millions of people today, particularly in southern Tamil Nadu and parts of Kerala.

In recent years, the Government of Tamil Nadu has acknowledged Ayya Vaikundar as a pioneer of social reform. Statues have been erected in his memory, and his teachings have been integrated into the broader narrative of anti-caste resistance and human rights in

India. The Samatva Samajam was a radical, indigenous, and deeply spiritual response to the oppressive caste and religious structures of 19th-century Travancore. Its founder, Ayya Vaikundar, stands as a transformative figure who combined religious vision with social activism, inspiring a legacy of equality, resistance, and reform. The movement demonstrated that religion could be a tool for liberation rather than subjugation, and it provided a template for future generations to imagine a society free from the shackles of caste, ritualism, and injustice.

In the annals of Indian history, Samatva Samajam deserves to be remembered not only as a religious sect but as a revolutionary institution that laid the foundation for modern social justice movements in South India. Its enduring influence continues to inform contemporary struggles for dignity, equality, and human rights across the region.

R Recap

- ◆ Travancore society rooted in caste orthodoxy
- ◆ Lower castes faced ritual-based exclusions
- ◆ Temple denial symbolised religious caste dominance
- ◆ *Samatva Samajam* challenged Brahminical hierarchy
- ◆ Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal born into oppressed Nadar Vaishnavite family
- ◆ He renamed Muthukutty under caste pressure
- ◆ Ayya Vaikundar proclaimed divine mission after enlightenment
- ◆ He led caste reform through spiritual authority
- ◆ The *Samatva Samajam* rejected Brahmin rituals and temple authority
- ◆ The *Samatva Samajam* promoted *Dharma Yukam*, righteous, casteless society
- ◆ Communal meals defied caste-based segregation



Objective Questions

1. Who occupied the topmost position in the caste hierarchy of 19th-century Travancore?
2. Who is the author of the book 'The Decline of Nair Dominance'?
3. What revolt was led by Nadar women against the dress code imposed by upper castes?
4. What was the childhood name of Vaikunda Swamikal?
5. In which temple did Muthukutty attain spiritual transformation?
6. What was the name of the pit in which Vaikunda Swamikal meditated for the first two years?
7. In which year was the Samatva Samajam formally established?
8. What is the name of the communal meal organised by Samatva Samajam to promote caste equality?
9. Where was Vaikundar imprisoned by the Travancore state in 1838?
10. What is the term used by Vaikundar to describe the envisioned just and righteous society?



Answers

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Namboodiris | 6. 1836 |
| 2. Robin Jeffrey | 7. Samabanthi |
| 3. Muthukutty | 8. Singarathope |
| 4. Tiruchendur | 9. Dharma Yukam |
| 5. Yogadapa | |



A

Assignments

1. Discuss the historical significance of the Samatva Samajam as one of the earliest anti-caste movements in India. How did it differ from later reform movements led by Narayana Guru, Jyotirao Phule, and Periyar?
2. Explain the core philosophical ideas of the Samatva Samajam. How did Ayya Vaikundar's teachings challenge the existing caste and religious hierarchies in 19th-century Travancore?
3. Analyse the caste hierarchy of Travancore during the 19th century and discuss how it differed from the classical varna system of ancient India.
4. Examine the role of the Namboodiri Brahmins and Nairs in maintaining social and political control in Travancore. How did their dominance affect the lower caste communities?
5. Explain the circumstances that led to Muthukutty's spiritual awakening at Tiruchendur and the significance of his assumption of the identity "Vaikundar."

R

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Unit 2

Sree Narayana Guru and SNDP Yogam

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse the social condition of *avaranas* in the early 19th century
- ◆ explain the life and teachings of Sree Narayana Guru and his contribution to social reform in Kerala
- ◆ describe the founding, objectives, and activities of the SNDP Yogam
- ◆ discuss the impact of Sree Narayana Guru's philosophy on the upliftment of marginalised communities, especially the Ezhavas

P

Prerequisite

In nineteenth-century Kerala, entrenched caste hierarchies systematically marginalised *Avarna* communities such as the Ezhavas, Pulayas, and Parayas, subjecting them to the practices of untouchability, exclusion from educational institutions and public spaces, and widespread social ostracism. This deeply oppressive order was reinforced both by Brahminical religious orthodoxy and the administrative structures of Travancore, effectively obstructing the spiritual, social, and economic advancement of these communities. It was within this milieu that Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928), an Ezhava intellectual, spiritual reformer, and social visionary, emerged as a leading advocate for emancipation through self-respect, education, and ethical living. Rejecting the religious authority of Brahminism, Guru's most iconic act, the 1888 consecration of a Shiva temple at Aruvippuram, performed by himself rather than by a Brahmin priest constituted a radical assertion of spiritual egalitarianism and a direct challenge to caste-based religious exclusivity. To organise social upliftment, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP Yogam) was founded in 1903 by Guru's followers like Dr. Padmanabhan Palpu and Kumaranasan. The SNDP-Yogam became a key institution promoting education, economic self-reliance,

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and temple entry rights for the Ezhava and other marginalised communities. Guru's teaching—"One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man"—expressed his universalist vision and critique of caste divisions, while his educational initiatives empowered the oppressed through knowledge and dignity.

K

Keywords

Avarnas, education, Sree Narayana Guru, Temples, consecration, Aruvippuram, Knowledge, SNDP Yogam, Schools, Sivagiri, Works

D

Discussion

2.2.1 Kerala Society Before Sree Narayana Guru

The significance of Sree Narayana Guru's contributions can be fully appreciated only when contextualised within the socio-religious landscape of Kerala prior to and during his lifetime. Swami Vivekananda famously characterised the region's caste-ridden social order as a "lunatic asylum," underscoring the severity of its rigid and exclusionary practices. Kerala society was structured around the *Chaturvarṇyam*, or the four-fold varna system, comprising Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. However, due to the historical absence of the Vaishya class in Kerala, occupational roles associated with trade and agriculture were largely undertaken by communities excluded from the varna hierarchy, including Christians, Muslims, and Ezhavas. These groups, along with eighteen other *Avarna* or non-caste Hindu communities, were systematically denied a wide range of rights and privileges.

These included access to temples, the right to undertake *sanyasa* (renunciation), use of public roads, admission to government schools, participation in public offices and markets, access to public wells, rest houses (*satrams*), ponds, government employment, and even the freedom to name their children according to their own wishes. This pervasive exclusion underscores the radical nature of Sree Narayana Guru's reformist vision and social activism.

A range of customary practices—such as *kettu kalyanam*, *irupathiyettu choroonu*, *kathukuthu kalyanam*, *pulikudi*, *thirandukalyanam*, *ādiyanthiram* (observed on the 16th day after death), *thulāmāsakuli*, and *poorapāṭtu*—functioned as socio-cultural mechanisms that imposed significant financial burdens on marginalised communities, effectively maintaining them in a state of perpetual poverty and economic dependency. The systemic exclusion of children from polluting or untouchable castes from



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educational spaces was a direct consequence of caste-based segregation, wherein intermingling with upper-caste children was strictly prohibited. As noted by Kesavan Vaidyar, the denial of educational access served as a principal instrument through which untouchable communities were kept in a state of bondage for centuries. With the exception of a limited number of Ezhava families who preserved traditions of Ayurvedic practice and Sanskrit learning, the vast majority of untouchable castes were systematically deprived of intellectual and cultural capital, reinforcing their subjugation within the caste hierarchy.

During the early phases of educational reform in Kerala, members of marginalised communities were systematically denied access to formal education. Although modern, Western-style schools began to emerge across the region in the latter half of the 19th century, most of these institutions remained inaccessible to individuals from lower castes. Discriminatory admission practices ensured that children from communities such as the Ezhavas were routinely excluded from the educational system. This systemic exclusion was formally addressed in the historic Ezhava Memorial, organised under the leadership of Dr. Palpu and submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore on 3 September 1896. The petition, bearing the signatures of 13,176 individuals, explicitly documented the widespread denial of admission to Ezhava children in government schools, noting that they were often summarily turned away without justification. The Memorial serves as a powerful indictment of caste-based educational discrimination and reflects the growing consciousness and mobilization among oppressed communities demanding equitable access to state-sponsored institutions.

In South Travancore the conditions of those who were condemned as inferior castes, were extremely miserable; their bodies,

clothes and even food were spoiled. They had no freedom to use the public roads. Education was not within their reach. Schools were maintained by the government; using the taxes paid by these people also but they were not admitted to schools. When they applied for jobs, their application was rejected on the ground that they were not educated. They were not even allowed to enter temple premises. In India great men had been trying to eradicate the caste system and uplift the downtrodden since long ago.

The reform that Narayana Guru launched in Kerala was novel and more effective. The Guru understood the psyche of the people and realised that it is not their habit to traverse a new path, they will follow only the old path, and therefore the solution is to illuminate the old path. The highest ranking among the Avarnas was the Ezhavas or Thiyyas. He found it covenant to make use of this community as the medium to work for improving the life of Avarnas because he was born in that community and naturally the people of this caste gave a special affection and respect for him.

The rigid caste rules, untouchability observed for generations made them live like dumb driven cattle, serving their master's with no complaints. Moreover, the theory of *Karma* and rebirth affirmed that absolute submission to caste rules was the only means for betterment at least in the next birth. They were denied the right to enter or worship in temples. The prosperity of the upper castes was attributed to be due to the power of their gods. This induced a suppressed desire in the Avarnas to worship those deities or get at least a glimpse of those deities with the hope that it might improve their lot. But they were not allowed to worship these deities at home also. They had to worship only deities like *Chathan*, *Chamundi*, *Marutha* etc. They had to be propitiated with animal blood, roasted meat and liquor. This division of deities and rituals was an instrument to

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keep their morals always at a low level and thus perpetuate the caste hierarchy. The Guru had carried on his struggle not merely for the sake of a particular community but for the sake of all the communities of the world.

2.2.2 The Emergence of Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru was born on 26th August, 1856 in a middle-class Ezhava family. His mother was *Kuttiamma* and his father was *Maadan*. The couple had four children. Guru was the eldest among them and the only boy. His father was respectfully called 'Maadan Aasan' by the people. The title of *Aasan* was usually given to persons whose profession was teaching. The parents had named the little boy Narayanan who came to be generally known as *Nanu*. For the initiation of education, *Nanu* was taken to *Chempazhanthy Moothapillai*, the head of a renowned Nair family. He was an erudite and a professional astrologer too.

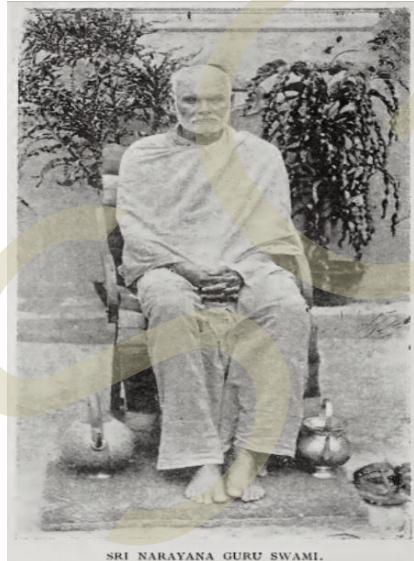


Fig 2.2.1. Sree Narayana Guru

At first *Nanu* was taught to read and write Malayalam fluently, the next step was to learn by heart *Siddha Rupam*, *Balaprabodanam*, *Amarakosam* etc. He could grasp very fast wherever he was taught. At an early age he

learnt Tamil also along with Malayalam. In those days Tamil language was also given lots of importance in Travancore state. *Nanu* was taught Tamil at a very young age.

At Travancore in Chalai Bazaar, there was a bookshop owned by a Tamil man. *Nanu* used to visit this shop and spend time during his mendicant days. He finished reading all the books in the shop within six months. He memorised all important Tamil and Sanskrit works like *Tholkappiam*, *Manimekhalai*, *Chilappathikaram*, *Kundakkesi*, *Thembhavani*, *Thirukural*, *Thevaaram*, *Thiruvaachakam*, *Ozhivil Odukkam*, *Siddharupam*, *Amarakosam*, etc. *Nanu* learned to recite and explain some Sanskrit verses. There was no scope for distant studies in the village and *Nanu* was too young to be sent out anywhere for higher studies. His studies were temporarily stopped. In 1877 *Nanu* was sent to the scholar Raman Pillai Asan at Puthuppally to study Sanskrit. In 1878 at the age of 21, *Nanu* reached Varanappally house for his higher studies. Arrangements were made for his boarding and lodging at the Varanappally house.

During those days pursuing higher studies was not easy. Varanappally family used to make all arrangements for lodging of Ezhava students for free. This family has every right to claim everlasting satisfaction for being blessed with the privilege to house *Nanu* and providing him with all the amenities for his studies.

His true nature evolves and starts to express itself while he was living there. It was the arsenal in which he developed the ideal and ambition of his future life and the steadfastness to implement it. *Nanu* mastered all epics, several dramas, grammar, poetics, and logic too. When he reached home after higher education *Nanu* and his father constructed a school for Ezhava Community in 1881. It was like a shed and situated to the east of their ancestral home. During this

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period, he was called Asan. He started his life as a teacher and nothing changed in his lifestyle. He spends free time reading devotional books and meditation or else he spends time in a nearby temple.

In Anchuthengu there was no school facility for lower caste children. So Nanu decided to go to their houses and teach them. He thought that they too have a right to get some light in their lives. Nanu decided to educate them. Gradually he came to be called Nanu Aasan by people. He received an invitation from a school in Anchuthengu and he accepted the offer.

Nanu Aasan stayed with P.K. Krishnan Vaidyan stayed at his Perunnely home for a short period and he was introduced to Shri. Kunjan Pillai Chattambi, who was a great scholar and a yogi. Kunjan Pillai Chattambi in turn introduced Nanu Aasan to Thykattu Ayyavu. He learned and practiced all yogic rituals from Thaikkattu Ayyavu and he always expressed his admiration to Ayyavu.

He spent many years in Southern Travancore as a yogi. People had begun to address him as Swami or Guru instead of Nanu Aasan. Day by day the respect and devotion of people towards the Guru was increasing. Soon people began to approach him seeking solutions to their problems. He was surrounded by people from morning till evening. He thirsted for solitude seated among the throng of devotees. Guru went a long-distance seeking solitude and at last he reached Maruthvamala, a hill situated to the east of Nagarcoil where there was a rock cave called Pillathatam on the top of the hill. He chose this cave for his ascetic practices. The Guru sat on it to meditate in this cave which would become the object of poetry and a centre for meditation.

Meditate in this cave which would become the object of poetry and a centre for meditation. The enlightenment attained by the Guru through his relentless efforts

for the self, simultaneously with his endeavour for the discovery of truth, was the gift of Maruthvamala. When caste and untouchability were carved into the society, it was calculated for a lead to save them from the aberrations to which the caste-infected society had been prone, that the Guru confronted the evil. Probably it was during that phase of his life that he could assure himself with complete confidence in the success of his crusade for the regeneration of man; that he could awaken the feelings for release and liberation lying dormant in man.

The Guru realised that the irrational customs and practices which ruled the roots in society could only pave for an unhealthy social life. After the sojourn in Maruthvamala, the Guru travelled every nook and corner of the Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari districts with a few members of the Nair community. Except the family of Dr. Palpu, no one in the Ezhava community had respect for him. They openly insulted and made allegations and attributions about him. But none of these imputations could shake in Guru's path to the goal. He transcended all thoughts about caste or religion, and so loved all human beings on equal footing. Swami had no opposition at all in the process of intermingling and interaction between Nadars, Muslims Christians, or any others.

More than the journeys the Guru had undertaken among people of diverse ways of life after severing all family connections and attachments, the wanderings in South India after Maruthvamala had conferred on him the benefit of rich experience.

He was able to reap new and useful knowledge from what he saw at Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Madura, Coimbatore, Salem, Kanchipuram, Pondicherry and Madras. In these places, he had trodden as a lone traveller and gained additional advantage thereby in learning more objectively about the suffering thousands. He gave them relief from their

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pains and cured them of illness through the administration of wonder medicines known as *Ottamuli*. The Guru had travelled by foot several times places like Bangalore, Mysore, Coorg and Mangalore in Karnataka in addition to the Kerala towns of Kannur, Thalasseri, Kozhikode, Palakkad, Thrissur, Ernakulam and Kottayam. In everywhere Guru witnessed humans were persecuted and exploited in the name of caste and creed.

His historic temple installation at Aruvippuram in 1888 was the first lesson in self-respect and self-confidence given to the relegated *Avarna* section of society. This act inaugurated the process of resurrection, education through temples. He led them from darkness to light through education. From temple to temple the deity was also changing.

2.2.3 Aruvippuram Movement

Temple reformation was one of the methods adopted by the Guru to empower the oppressed. He recognised the division of gods being practiced in the name of caste. He also realised the hold of temples on the people, their hidden desire to prosper and their frustration. The Guru decided to provide the people with a common place of worship, where all could come without the restriction of caste, creed or sex and offer prayers.

The Guru is a practical genius for transforming traditional institutions to serve as vehicles of change and modernisation was also reflected in his concept of the temple. Before the consecration of Aruvippuram Temple, in almost all places, Ezhavas had their own small shrines. Normally the deity of worship is *Bhadrakali*. In the offerings to that deity, there was animal sacrifice too. The worship of *Bhadrakali* is weakened because of the exhortation of the Guru. In several temples in south Travancore and central Travancore, the worship of Siva and *Subrahmanya* and the routine rituals by

priests from the Ezhava community are being conducted by the Guru's instructions. He proclaimed that, "*the installation of deities like Subrahmanya, Siva and Vishnu was done to bring common people back from animal sacrifice*".



Fig: 2.2.2. Aruvippuram Temple

The Guru said, "*All temples should have libraries. All religious texts should be collected and taught to all; People will visit a place if it is neat, clean and beautiful. Let the temple be there in one corner. Good thoughts will arise. Health will improve. Temples are necessary. They should be maintained properly. There should be industrial Training Centres attached to the temples to train children in various industries*".

The Guru desired that besides the sanctum sanctorum temples should have spacious ventilated rooms for the devotees to assemble for worship and to hold meetings. There should be gardens, bathing facilities, schools and space to impart industrial training to children and adults. The Guru's practical genius for transforming traditional institutions to serve as vehicles of change and modernization was also reflected in his concept of the temple. According to him, temples should not be built in an expensive manner which was the custom in ancient days. No money should be spent on an



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elaborate festival. Adjacent to the temple should be schools and reading rooms, small scale industrial training schools should also be attached to the temples, the offering at the temples should be used for the welfare of the people. This is the creative approach of a social revolutionary, who understood the people and their culture and who sought to transform traditional institutions into an organ of social change while maintaining its characteristic as a place of worship. The Guru's messages are "*that temples are not made for the Gods but for Man, for the all-round development and self-fulfilment of man*".

It is a historical fact that Sree Narayana Guru launched his educational programme through temples. The Guru decided to start his revolutionary activities with full self-confidence from Aruvippuram (1888) itself. When his imagination had materialised into action, the poisonous teeth of the caste demon and its attendant superstitions began shaking to their very roots and falling. As the response was seen favourable, the Guru with doubled confidence decided to work for carving out a new social order, ideal for and respectful of human values. The consecration at Aruvippuram was quickly followed by similar consecration of temples in other parts of Kerala. He opened the doors of the temples to all without any caste distinction. The Aruvippuram Temple became popular with in no time. Requests came from different areas for the installation of fresh temples and the Guru obliged. Sree Narayana guru consecrated several temples, attached to the temples, schools, libraries and industrial centres were also started.

2.2.4 Temple Installation as Educational Instrument

Sree Narayana Guru's educational ideologies are a combination of spiritual plane and materialistic plane. For instance, while in Aruvippuram or Sivagiri, the Guru

had arranged for the inculcation of the Vedic and tantric studies to children of all castes. At Sivagiri, the building of *Vaidikamadam* where the Guru himself had taken his abode for a long time was transformed into a spiritual school where philosophical and essential Vedic rituals were taught by the Guru.

Through his message, "*Let the people be illuminated through education and knowledge; that is the pill for their ills*", the Guru soon set out on a life mission of establishing schools wherever he had an anchoring. It is a historical fact that Sree Narayana Guru started his educational activities through temples. The Guru proclaimed, "*Knowledge is God, Learning is worship*". Sree Narayana Guru installed more than 60 temples all over Kerala and some in parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Along with the temples, schools were also started to be run with the income from the temples. Attached to some temples vocational and industrial training centres were also started and libraries were also annexed with the temples.

The Guru established schools at Aruvippuram Siva Temple, Vakkom Puthiyakavu Anandavalleeswaram Temple, Poothotta Sree Narayana Vallabha Temple, Kolathukara Temple, Kaikkarasubramaniya Temple, Kumarakom Sree Kumaramangalam Temple, Sree Narayana Mangalam Temple, Prakkulam Sree Kumaramangalam Temple, Talassery Sree Jaganatha Temple, Calicut Srikanteshwara Temple, Cherai Sree Gowrishwara Temple, Sivagiri Mutt, Pambadi Sivadarshana Temple, Palluruthy Sree Bhuvaneeshwari Temple, Kudroli Gokarnanatha Temple, Pottayil Devi Temple, Guhanandapuram Temple, Kannur Sree Sundareshwara Temple, Koorkancherry Sree Maheshwara Temple, Sree Somasekhara Temple, Kuramukku Sree Chidambaram Temple and Sree Bhadrachala Subrahmanya Temple.

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He insisted that those who learned Vedas should also practice agricultural operations and learn to use modern mechanical devices. The modern, innovative and vocational educational ideas of the Guru, prompted to stress the need for industrial training. It was in the same reply message conferred to a felicitation letter from Vignana Vardhini Sabha of Cherai in Aluva in 1910. The concretisation of the vocational and industrial technologies enunciated by the Guru materialised in handloom training centres established in Varkala, Kannur Sree Sundareshwara Temple, Koorkancherry Sree Maheshwara Temple, Sree Somasekhara Temple, Kuramukku Sree Chidambaram Temple and Sree Bhadrachala Subrahmanya Temple.

The Guru had a clear idea that Indian culture was deeply rooted in the Sanskrit language which was denied to the lower caste people. So, the Guru decided to establish a Sanskrit school for lower caste children. He established Sanskrit schools at Aruvippuram, Guhanandapuram Temple, Sree Maheswara Temple Thrissur, Sree Sundareswara Temple Kannur, and Peringottukara Sree Somasekhara Temple.

2.2.5 Formation of SNDP Yogam



Fig. 2.2.3. Foundation of the SNDP Yogam

The formation of the SNDP Yogam, was the result of a combined attempt by Sree Narayana Guru and the newly emerging middle class among the Ezhava community.

The origin of the SNDP Yogam may be traced back to Narayana Guru's consecration at Aruvippuram and his founding of an Ashram there in 1888. After the *Siva Prathista* came the auspicious new moon day in the Malayalam month *karkidakam*. On that day a meeting was held at Aruvippuram in commemoration, which became the precursor of *Vavutusangam* of later years. This was the first step towards unification of the people. At the Guru's instructions it was changed as the *ksetrayogam* from next *karkidakom* onwards. But its aim was not confined to temple affairs alone; within its preview was also the question of how to regenerate the backward sections of society.

In 1899 this Vavututo SangamSNDP as the Kshetra Yogam. It consisted of twenty-four members, with Kumaran Asan as the founding Secretary, streamlining of the temple, the *Mutt* and its properties, performance of daily rituals (*Puja*) and celebration of annual festivals were the administrative reasons behind the formation of this association. In other words, in the beginning, this association was not primarily a secular body or meant for social action; it was more of a religious organisation. It was this association that later transformed itself into the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam), in January 1903. Dr. Palpu and the educated middle class of the Ezhava community were not satisfied with the limited activities of the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam. It was not that they were against the daily pujas and the annual festivals of the temple, but they felt this was not adequate to fulfill their objectives. Hence, they took the initiative to expand its field of activities and to alter its name to encapsulate the newly included intentions.

Following the advice of the Guru, on 7th January 1903, Kumaran Asan sent a letter to a consultative meeting of Ezhava leaders in and around Thiruvananthapuram. A joint meeting of the special invitees and



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the members of the Aruvippuram temple was held at the Kamalalayam bungalow on the hill pit. It was decided to expand the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam and register it as a mass organisation under the Companies Act. A public meeting of the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam was held on 7th January, 1903. In this meeting decided to transform the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam into a mass organisation to resolve social, religious and educational issues for Ezhavas. The objective of the Yogam was the material and moral advancement of Ezhavas, Chovas and Thiyyas of Travancore, Cochin and British Malabar, in addition, to promote and encourage religious and secular education and to inculcate instructions and habits among the members of the community. The SNDP Yogam was organised around the Ashram and its proclaimed goal was to propagate the *Sanatana* philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru. The article of the Association and its bye-law show that the SNDP Yogam was largely commercial in character rather than an organisation meant to spread the philosophy of the Guru, or to take an imitative in the social and religious reform movements of Kerala.

It was unanimously decided to make Sree Narayana Guru the permanent president of the Yogam which was named after him. “*Our Dharma Paripalana Yogam was founded in the venerable name of Brahmasri Sree Narayana Guru swamy of Aruvippuram Mutt. The presidency of this is vested on the same great man. It is rare to find a great person or President more qualified for the post. If we do not make use of this opportunity and make it a success, it will be an irreparable loss and a cause for deep regret*”. These are words written by Kumarasan in the bye-laws of the SNDP Yogam. The first meeting elected Sree Narayana Guru as the life president of the SNDP Yogam and Chavarkottu Kochu Cherukkan Vaidyan as the Vice President. Kumaran Asan was selected as the General Secretary of the SNDP Yogam. The first

meeting also decided to shift the capital of the SNDP Yogam to Thiruvananthapuram.

The SNDP Yogam celebrated its first anniversary on 12 & 13 February 1904. The first annual meeting of the SNDP Yogam was attended by about 300 people from different parts of the state. The meeting initially focused on organisational activities as well as raising the standard of education in the community.



Fig: 2.2.4. Dr. Palpu

The need for a newspaper was essential for the functioning of the SNDP Yogam. So, the Yogam held a meeting and decided to publish a newspaper. During the deliberations on what name to give to the top the newspaper the Guru said, “*that the people now have knowledge (Vivekam) of need and that the newspaper that delivers it can be called Vivekodayam*”. The word ‘knowledge’ is one of Narayana Guru’s favourite words and it appears 26 times in his legendary work *Atmopadeshashashthakam*. At the very first meeting, the SNDP Yogam took a decision to publish a journal once in two months and called it *Vivekodayam*, with M. Govindan as editor.

The early objectives of *Vivekodayam* were to publish SNDP Yoga’s revenue and expenditure, publish meeting decisions and also publish Puranas, biographies of historical men, Guru’s teachings, advising on social good, opposing the bad promoting the ideas of unity, community love and

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morality. *Vivekodayam* was a publication that became a bi-monthly magazine for the second year in a row. P. Madhavan Vaidyar was the first manager of *Vivekodayam*. After a year of service by the first editor, the secretary of the Yogam, Kumaran Asan took over the editorships of *Vivekodayam*; in 1908 it was converted into a monthly. *Vivekodayam* was in the forefront of the state's literary activities under the leadership and guidance of Kumaran Asan. Most of the writings of Asan were first published in it, also the works of Sree Narayana Guru especially *Atmopadesa Satakam*. Members of the Yogam like C.V Kunjiraman, Moolur Padmanabha Panikkar and Murkoth Kumaran were the other literary figures who made contributions to the journal.

2.2.6 Early Activities of the Yogam

In the early stage of the SNDP Yogam its main activities revolved around the leading pioneers, such as Sree Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu and Kumaran Asan. The spiritual attributes of the Guru, the enthusiastic activities and generous financial support of Dr. Palpu, and the consistent tours, powerful writings and fiery speeches of Kumaran Asan together contributed substantially in laying a strong foundation for the development of the SNDP Yogam into a powerful organisation of the Ezhavas in Kerala. Though the influence of the three primarily helped the development of the SNDP Yogam, its appeal to the unlettered Ezhava masses remained limited. Though the SNDP Yogam attracted the attention of a large section of the Ezhava middle class spread across all over India, its membership was confined to the Travancore middle class.

Sree Narayana Guru and SNDP Yogam choose education as the instrument to uplift the Ezhava Community and to eliminate all social evils. The Guru wanted the ennoblement of the backward sections

that were denied their own potential due to deficiency of education. The Guru disclosed his educational thought and ideology through his poems and dialogues. The Guru gave messages to his disciples on various aspects of day-to-day life, most of those messages were concerned with education.

The SNDP Yogam's activities were aimed at spiritual and material development guaranteeing the individual's dignity and higher standard of living. The SNDP Yogam unleashed a comprehensive scheme of action to realise this. The internalisation of the dynamic values and skills to achieve a humanistic, secular and rational civil society was attempted through the following means. Disseminating the Guru's ideas among the masses, particularly among the vulnerable groups. Imparting confidence and generating capability in the deprived to assert their rights through peaceful means. Influencing the dominant force to shed away their prejudices and to change their attitude which was derogatory to the dignity and development of the marginalised groups. Initiating innovative movements and organisations so that people could shake off traditional caste and religious identities, Reforming socio-economic structures and processes such as family, marriage, occupation, education and technology.

The SNDP Yogam worked for the removal of untouchability and the annihilation of caste. Socially, the SNDP Yogam stood for the eradication of evils of superstitions and obnoxious customs and practices which were eating into the vitality of Kerala society. The Yogam equally aimed at the elimination of illiteracy among the masses. The Guru believed that only through education people could imbibe the right perspective about good life. He stated that a man must educate himself to be free. The Guru called upon the rich to start schools for the weaker sections. The Guru's concept of collective endeavours regarding education evoked



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keen interest in education on the part of the SNDP Yogam and other organisations associated with the Guru and several rich members of the Ezhava community, started schools for the deprived. The Guru stated that “*the Ezhava community could not be liberated from its miserable condition except through educational propaganda. Many people think that they are passing the exam to get a government job, if everyone is writing the exam to get a job, then if the new concert in Thiruvananthapuram is to be extended from Kanyakumari to Paravur, the space will not be enough. Even if you do not pass any exams, you should have at least a basic education. Do not depend on the government for this, where there are no government schools, schools should be built on their own*”.

2.2.7 The Sivagiri Pilgrimage

Just as the action plan provided by the Guru for members of the SNDP which consisted of “education through mass awareness”, was the manifesto of the Guru’s educational programme, so were the maxims and goals set by him to the Sivagiri pilgrimage. When Vallabhassery Govindanasan and T.K Kittan writer, two prominent devotees of Sree Narayana Guru, approached the great preceptor with a request to bless them with his permission to organise the first Sivagiri Pilgrimage as a unifying tactics of the scattered *Avarna* communities, the Guru along with his permission for the same, declared eight precise objectives which serve as a terse proclamation of his educational programme for the public: 1. Education, 2. Cleanliness, 3. Devotion, 4. Organisation, 5. Agriculture, 6. Trade and business, 7. Crafts and 8. Technical training.

It was also laid down by the Guru that on the confluence centre of the pilgrimage at Sivagiri, experts from all these eight sectors should be invited to conduct lectures on them and the pilgrims should attentively listen

to them, imbibe the ideas and on return to their places, try to put them into practice, thus ensuring progress and growth in person and in general.



Fig. 2.2.5. Sivagiri

2.2.8 Works of Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru wrote not less than sixty works and some of his works are untraceable. He was a polyglot who wrote poems, prose, and songs in Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil with equal deftness. According to Sahodaran Ayyappan Guru used to write poems, keep them in his memory, and then dictate, make someone copy down, and correct it if necessary. He wrote on various topics: devotion, moral science, social science, compassion, caste, religion, philosophy, spirituality and mysticism. His earlier writings were all poems, and he wrote ‘Gajendra Moksham Ammanapattu,’ ‘Vinayakastam,’ ‘Guhastakam,’ ‘Bhadrakalistakam,’ ‘Devisthakam,’ ‘Sri Krishna Darsanam,’ ‘Sree Vasudevastakam,’ and ‘Navamanjari’ at Varanapallil. ‘Balivadham Ammanapattu,’ which is untraceable, or ‘Gajendra Moksham’ boat song could be his first writing. ‘Siva Satakam,’ ‘Atmopadesa Satakam,’ ‘Swanubhava Giti,’ and ‘Darsanamala’ have 100 stanzas.

In Malayalam, Guru composed 34 poems, 5 prose, and two translations, a few of which have Sanskrit words (*Manipravalam*). ‘Arivu,’

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‘Swanubhava Giti,’ and ‘Daiva Dasakom’ do not have Sanskrit words. ‘Kundalinipattu’ in Malayalam is a mystic poem, but also a tantric poem in which Gurudevan asks the mind to attain bliss seeing the tantric dance of Lord Shiva; man is enlightened to Shiva by way of ‘tantra.’ Gurudevan equates dance of ‘parasakthi’ as a dance of a snake seeking its shelter. Kundalini shows Paramatman in the form of *Atman* and *Shakti* in the form of *Kundalini*. Here snake is an icon of mystical command telling the contentment and bliss of the soul bathing in a Sea of devotion of Shiva. He wrote 19 poems in Sanskrit and two in Tamil. Most of the philosophical and moral (awakening) works are difficult to understand for ordinary people. Gurudevan wrote single stanza to 100 stanza poems. Some of his works were published in ‘Vidyavilasini,’ ‘Vidyabhivardhini,’ ‘Sujananandini,’ ‘Vivekodayam,’ and ‘Mithavaadi.’

2.2.9 Socio-Religious Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru envisioned a society that transcended the barriers of caste, creed, and sectarian divisions, one grounded in universal human dignity and moral equality. His famous maxim, “One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man,” was not merely a slogan but a profound expression of his social philosophy and practical application of *Advaita Vedanta*. Unlike classical *Advaita*, which focused primarily on metaphysical unity, Guru’s interpretation extended to the social realm, advocating for egalitarianism in daily life and spiritual practice.

At the core of Guru’s thought was the rejection of caste-based identity as a valid determinant of social or spiritual worth. He questioned the legitimacy of caste distinctions, arguing that human beings, regardless of social labels, share a common origin and intrinsic essence. For Guru, caste was not a divine order but a human-made construct

that violated natural justice and spiritual unity. His interpretation combined philosophical reasoning, empirical observation, and ethical logic. The biological diversity among humans, differences in appearance, speech, customs, or habitat did not justify social stratification, as all humans possess the same fundamental consciousness (*chaitanya*), which is the manifestation of the ultimate reality, *Brahman*.

Sree Narayana Guru also challenged religious exclusivism. He maintained that no religion is inherently superior to another, as all spiritual paths, if rooted in love, compassion, and moral discipline, lead toward the same ultimate goal, liberation (*moksha*). According to him, religious conflict arises not from true spiritual principles but from misinterpretations and dogmatic claims of supremacy. He advocated for a universal religion of humanity, one that recognises the unity of all beings and upholds the values of peace, equality, and mutual respect.

Guru’s religious philosophy is deeply anchored in non-dualism (*Advaita*). He saw the world as a manifestation of the one undivided reality, *Brahman*, similar to how a spider both creates and exists within its web. He described God as *Ananda-Chaitanya*, blissful consciousness and equated the divine with the substratum of existence that remains unaffected even as the universe emerges and dissolves within it. For Guru, religious practice was a means to awaken the inner self to this universal consciousness.

Importantly, Sree Narayana Guru’s inclusive vision embraced all forms of worship. He acknowledged the diversity of spiritual traditions and saw value in every genuine attempt to approach the divine. His tolerance of varied ritual practices stemmed from his belief that the ultimate truth (*satya*) lies beyond ritual and doctrine and can be experienced through ethical living, meditation, self-inquiry, and service to humanity.



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In essence, Sree Narayana Guru's socio-religious philosophy called for a moral and spiritual awakening that dismantled caste hierarchies, embraced universal brotherhood, and promoted inner realisation over

external ritualism. His legacy continues to inspire movements for social justice, inter-faith harmony, and spiritual reform in Kerala and beyond.

R Recap

- ◆ *Avarnas* denied education, worship, and basic rights
- ◆ Caste customs kept lower castes impoverished, oppressed
- ◆ Guru's early education laid foundation for social reform
- ◆ Relentless learning shaped Guru's spiritual and reformist vision
- ◆ Teaching *Avarnas* showed Guru's commitment to equality
- ◆ Maruthvamala meditation empowered Guru's spiritual awakening
- ◆ Aruvippuram temple act inspired dignity among *Avarnas*
- ◆ Temples became centres for education and training
- ◆ Guru transformed temples into tools for social change
- ◆ Aruvippuram consecration challenged caste-based worship norms
- ◆ SNDP Yogam emerged from Guru's Aruvippuram initiative
- ◆ SNDP Yogam aimed for Ezhava moral and material upliftment
- ◆ Sree Narayana Guru became Yogam's life president
- ◆ *Vivekodayam* journal spread Guru's vision and ideals
- ◆ Guru wrote across languages with remarkable literary skill
- ◆ Many works are profound and hard to grasp
- ◆ His themes ranged from devotion to mysticism
- ◆ Guru envisioned equality beyond caste and religion
- ◆ Rejected caste as a man-made social construct
- ◆ Promoted universal religion rooted in compassion and unity



Objective Questions

1. In how many languages did Sree Narayana Guru compose literary works?
2. Name the mystic poem by Sree Narayana Guru that symbolically uses the snake to represent spiritual awakening.
3. In which year did Sree Narayana Guru and his father construct a school for the Ezhava community?
4. Where did Sree Narayana Guru perform his historic temple consecration in 1888?
5. Which event is considered the precursor to the formation of the SNDP Yogam?
6. Who was the founding Secretary of the Aruvippuram Temple Association?
7. When was the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam renamed as the *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana* (SNDP) Yogam?
8. What was the name of the newspaper published by the SNDP Yogam under the guidance of Sree Narayana Guru?
9. What type of *Vedanta* did Sree Narayana Guru practically apply in his social philosophy?
10. What term did Guru use to describe blissful consciousness or divine essence?



Answers

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Three (Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil) | 6. Kumaran Asan |
| 2. <i>Kundalinipattu</i> | 7. January 1903 |
| 3. 1881 | 8. <i>Vivekodayam</i> |
| 4. Aruvippuram | 9. <i>Advaita</i> |
| 5. <i>Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam</i> | 10. <i>Ananda-Chaitanya</i> |



A

Assignments

1. Discuss the evolution of the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam into the *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana* (SNP) Yogam. How did the objectives and scope of the organisation change during this transformation?
2. Analyse the role of the SNP Yogam's publication 'Vivekodayam' in promoting the social, educational, and literary goals of the Ezhava community in early 20th century Kerala. How did leaders like Kumaran Asan contribute to its success?
3. Discuss Sree Narayana Guru's educational ideologies and initiatives, focusing on how he combined spiritual and material education for the upliftment of all castes in Kerala.
4. Discuss the educational condition of *Avarnas* in Travancore in the early 19th century.

R

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Ayyankali and SJPS Yogam- Poikayil Appachan and PRDS

Unit 3

L Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse Ayyankali's role in challenging caste-based discrimination
- ◆ trace the contribution of SJPS to Dalit political representation and social transformation
- ◆ examine Poikayil Appachan's rejection of caste discrimination
- ◆ assess the socio-political contributions of the PRDS in uniting marginalised communities

P Prerequisite

Nineteenth-century Kerala was characterised by an exceptionally rigid and hierarchical caste order that subjected lower-caste and Untouchable communities to pervasive forms of oppression. Governed by stringent notions of ritual purity and pollution, the social hierarchy placed Namboodiri Brahmins at its apex while consigning untouchable groups. These communities endured severe social exclusion: they were prohibited from entering temples, schools, and public roads; denied the right to cover their upper bodies; and constrained even in their linguistic interactions with higher castes. Fundamental entitlements including education, landholding, and access to public services were systematically withheld, and many untouchables were compelled to perform bonded agricultural labour under threat of violence.

The deeply entrenched caste-based oppression in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kerala created the socio-political conditions that enabled the emergence

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of transformative subaltern reformers such as Ayyankali and Poikayil Appachan. Ayyankali directly confronted caste hierarchies by advocating for the rights of untouchable communities, particularly in the realms of education, access to public transportation, and political participation. His efforts laid the groundwork for institutional reforms aimed at dismantling caste-based exclusions. In parallel, Poikayil Appachan, through the founding of the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*, articulated a distinct religious and socio-political identity that fundamentally rejected the spiritual authority and caste orthodoxy of Brahminical Hinduism. Collectively, their interventions marked a critical shift toward the formation of an assertive Dalit consciousness, one that emphasised dignity, equal rights, and the structural reconfiguration of Kerala's hierarchical social order.

K

Keywords

Ayyankali, Pulaya, *Villuvandi Yatra*, *Sadujana Paripalana Sangham*, *Kallumala Agitation*, Caste Discrimination, Poikayil Appachan, *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*, Dalit Literature, Cultural Assertion, Spiritual Liberation

D

Discussion

2.3.1 Ayyankali

In nineteenth-century Kerala, religious and social life was profoundly shaped by entrenched superstitions and a rigid caste hierarchy. The upper castes observed elaborate ritual practices and upheld the authority of the Brahmin priesthood, while the religious expressions of the lower castes were often characterised by spirit worship, magical rites, and rituals deemed unorthodox or taboo by dominant groups. Religious knowledge and sacred spaces remained tightly controlled by the Brahmin elite, who systematically excluded subordinate castes

from formal education, public spaces and temple entry. Marginalised communities were relegated to forms of worship considered demeaning, often involving totemic practices and ritual performances marked as socially inferior. The caste system imposed severe forms of exclusion including untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability which restricted access to public spaces and reinforced the spatial and social segregation of lower castes. These rigid boundaries entrenched social stratification and severely impeded the possibility of upward mobility or integration within the broader socio-religious framework.



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The emerging middle class in Kerala, comprising individuals from both upper and lower castes, played a pivotal role in challenging the entrenched caste system. Among the upper castes, particularly those who assumed leadership within the national movement, caste divisions were increasingly viewed as antithetical to patriotic solidarity and obstructive to the advancement of democratic ideals. Conversely, members of the lower castes perceived the caste hierarchy as a fundamental impediment to their economic mobility. The most vigorous opposition to the caste system, however, emanated from organised movements among the lower castes, whose communities were systematically marginalised from access to public services and socio-economic opportunities. This structural exclusion propelled them to seek transformative changes to a system that relegated them to the periphery of social and political life.

The caste system, rigidly enforced in Kerala, became a major target of reform. Caste-based organisations emerged, promoting unity within communities and challenging internal divisions. Leaders like Narayana Guru and others worked to unify their respective castes. Both upper and lower caste middle classes opposed caste, though for different reasons, upper castes for nationalistic and democratic ideals, and lower castes for social and economic advancement. Among these, the lower caste movements were the most forceful, as they sought to break free from the systemic denial of rights and opportunities that had kept them on the fringes of society.

In this context Ayyankali rose as a powerful leader from the Pulaya community, which was then treated as the lowest group in society. The untouchables, primarily the Pulayas and other marginalised castes, lived in abject misery and humiliation, denied access to public roads, temples, education, and even basic human dignity.

Their homes were primitive huts, their diets sparse, their clothing inadequate, and their existence reduced to mere instruments of labour in the hands of landlords. The idea that the mere sight or touch of these people could defile public spaces reveals the inhumanity entrenched in caste society. Swami Vivekananda, on visiting Kerala, referred to it as a “lunatic asylum” due to its savage caste practices. This was the oppressive backdrop against which the life and mission of Ayyankali unfolded.

Ayyankali was born in Venganoor, a village near Trivandrum, into a Pulaya family—an oppressed community in the caste hierarchy of Travancore. Ayyankali was the son of Ayyan and Mala of the Perumkattuvila House. His community, the Pulayas, were deeply oppressed and forced to live on the margins of society, denied even the most basic human rights. They were subjected to brutal caste-based discrimination, treated as less than human, and were not allowed to wear proper clothing, own land, or access public spaces like roads and temples.

T.H.P Chentharassery mentioned in his work *Ayyankali: The First Dalit leader*, a childhood incident during an Onam celebration, where he was humiliated for his enthusiastic participation in a game with upper-caste boys, marked a turning point in his life. The insults and rejection he faced from his own family upon returning home only deepened his resolve. These experiences steeled him for a life of resistance. From a young age, Ayyankali was aware of the discrimination around him, and these early experiences helped shape his strong sense of justice and self-respect. Ayyankali refused to accept the submissive behaviour expected of the Pulaya community, who were treated as if they were born only to obey. Even as a child, he often questioned authority and chose to disobey. He freed himself without anyone's help and rose above the social restrictions of his caste. This gave him a

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clear understanding of human life, without being trapped by the condition of bondage. He remained calm and composed, yet deeply angered and ready to resist injustice. His childhood was marked by harsh treatment; it also sowed the beginnings of the resistance that would later guide his role as a public leader. Though denied formal education, he developed a powerful capacity for thought and expression, driven by the bitterness of social injustice. His mission emerged with clarity: to uplift and civilise his community so they could be rightful participants in modern society.

2.3.1.1 Villuvandi Yatra

The struggles and movements spearheaded by the social reformer Ayyankali against untouchability, caste-based discrimination, and social injustice in Kerala were both remarkable and impactful. As a pioneering advocate for the marginalised, Ayyankali employed bold and innovative methods in his fight for social equality methods that were unprecedented in Indian history.

Born into the Pulaya community, Ayyankali experienced the harsh realities of caste-based oppression from a young age. One of the most striking injustices he faced was the denial of freedom of movement, roads that were open even to animals were off-limits to members of oppressed castes, who were instead forced to travel through forest trails or alternative paths. This deeply entrenched injustice stirred a strong sense of resistance in Ayyankali. Recognising that such feudal structures were not unique to Kerala but widespread across India, he launched a powerful symbolic protest in 1893, known as the *Villuvandi Samaram* (Bullock Cart Protest). This marked Ayyankali's first major step into the social reform movement.

At that time, most people travelled on foot, while bullock carts were reserved for the privileged upper castes, particularly landlords. These carts symbolised social status and feudal authority. Ayyankali, challenging this deeply rooted hierarchy, chose to ride a bullock cart himself—a direct assertion of his right to dignity and mobility.



Fig. 2.3.1 Statue of Mahatama Ayyankali riding a cart, *villuvandi* on the Cherai beach

Source: onmanorama



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Ayyankali purchased a travel cart and rode it through a public road where untouchables were forbidden to travel. Wearing a white turban, and drawn by a pair of strong bullocks, his ride became a rebellion against caste restrictions. This powerful assertion of space transformed the Dalit body from being seen as a target of caste oppression into an empowered agent. In their biography, *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*, M. Nizar and Meena Kandasamy describe Ayyankali as a “Dalit leader of organic protest,” emphasising his natural yet politically astute form of resistance. When upper-caste mobs tried to attack him, he stood firm, risking his life to assert his right to freedom of movement. This event marked the beginning of an organised resistance as mentioned by Chenthalassery. The untouchables around Venganoor recognised him as their leader. Through this simple yet revolutionary act, he symbolised a break from servitude to assertion. In his book *Mahatma Ayyankali*, Mani explains how this protest deeply unsettled the upper castes and encouraged lower caste communities to challenge their oppression. He presents it as a significant moment in Kerala’s social history, giving it the importance and respect it deserves.

The *Villuvandi* Protest emerged as a landmark act of defiance, powerfully challenging caste restrictions and asserting the fundamental right of the oppressed to move freely. It also signalled the beginning of Ayyankali’s enduring journey toward social justice and reform.

2.3.1.2 Education of Dalits

Understanding that education was the bedrock of emancipation, Ayyankali turned his attention to schools. At the time, untouchables were not just excluded from educational institutions, they were condemned by religious texts like the *Manusmriti* to eternal servitude and ignorance. Even

listening to sacred hymns was forbidden to them. In response, Ayyankali initiated the establishment of schools specifically for Dalits. The first such school, set up in 1904 in Venganoor, was fired by upper-caste aggressors on its first day. This arson sparked further resistance. Many Dalits began embracing Christianity, not out of religious conviction but as an escape from the humiliations of Hindu caste orthodoxy. Even temple entry was impossible, proving the caste Hindu denial of any shared religious bond.

One of the most poignant episodes in this struggle was the 1910 attempt to admit a Dalit girl, Panchami, into a public school at Ooruttambalam. The school was burnt down by caste Hindus, triggering a chain of protests across southern Kerala. These incidents culminated in Ayyankali nominated to the Sreemoolam Assembly in 1911, a groundbreaking moment as it marked the first time a Pulaya sat in the legislative council of a princely state. Chenthalassery mentioned that an observer remarked that this event symbolised a transformative moment in Kerala’s history, heralding the impending collapse of ancient discriminatory structures.



Fig. 2.3.2 Ayyankali and Panchami

Source: Painting by P.S. Jalaja

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2.3.1.3 Ayyankali in the Assembly

Ayyankali's speeches in the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, the legislative council of Travancore as powerful and incisive critiques of upper-caste hypocrisy and the apathy of the state. These speeches highlight Ayyankali's intellectual acumen and rhetorical strength. These interventions mark one of the earliest expressions of Dalit political thought in South India. Ayyankali saw political representation, land ownership, and access to education as essential resources for achieving social and economic equality. His legislative efforts in the Sreemoolam Praja Sabha focused on securing these resources. Scholars like Sunny M. Kapikkadu, Dalit writer-activist and P. Sanal Mohan, historian, recognised these actions as the foundation of democratic political activism among Dalits in Kerala.

Ayyankali's approach was secular and grounded in justice, avoiding religious rhetoric. He emphasised the contradiction between Dalits' economic contributions and their social marginalisation, urging the state to recognise them as equal citizens deserving of rights and dignity. Ayyankali's speeches in the Sabha helped shape early Dalit political consciousness in Kerala. He translated community struggles into legislative demands, using the Sabha to challenge both state policies and elite dominance. Ayyankali consistently demanded meaningful access to education and employment for Dalits. He called for policy enforcement, representation in public services, and the end of token gestures.

Ayyankali's role institutionalised Dalit concerns within state structures, making them part of Kerala's formal political discourse. His leadership demonstrated how legislative platforms could serve as tools for marginalised empowerment. Ayyankali's presence in the Sabha redefined the possibilities for Dalit political action. He converted symbolic participation into

substantive change, laying a foundation for future generations to build upon.

2.3.1.4 Labour Strike

Yet, resistance to Dalit inclusion continued. Many public figures publicly opposed the mixing of upper- and lower-caste children in classrooms. The rationale offered was that Dalits, being historically uneducated, could not sit alongside intellectually superior upper-caste children. Ayyankali's response was bold and confrontational: if education was denied, then labour would be withdrawn. He declared "If our children are not admitted to schools, we will let weeds grow in all the paddy fields."

It was a bold and historic move, the first of its kind in Kerala. The strike aimed to demand not only admission for Dalit children into schools but also higher wages and shorter working hours for labourers. This action gained massive support from the oppressed communities, who resolved to boycott work on the lands of their upper-caste landlords.

The strike began in June 1913 and spread across key agricultural regions including Kandala, Pallichal, Mudavapara, Vizhinjam, and Kaniyapuram. For over a year, paddy fields were left uncultivated by untouchable labourers. This prolonged work stoppage was significant, as Chentharrassery notes, it predates both the Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the organised trade union movement in Kerala, which began only after 1920. Despite threats and brutalities, including police repression and sexual violence against women—the labourers remained united and steadfast.

As tensions escalated, the strike caused substantial economic disruptions and social unrest. The landlords, unable to break the unity of the labourers through coercion, were forced to engage in negotiations. Realising the gravity of the situation, the government intervened, and a compromise



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was brokered in May 1914. This marked the end of the strike, with the demands of the labourers largely being met, including improved conditions and some recognition of their rights.

The strike led by Ayyankali was a turning point in Kerala's social history. It demonstrated the power of organised resistance by the oppressed and laid the foundation for future struggles. It also elevated Ayyankali as an unmatched leader of the Dalits, inspiring large-scale mobilisation through his organisation, the *Sadujana Paripalana Sangham*, which played a key role in empowering the untouchables and asserting their rights in the socio-political landscape of Kerala. This period witnessed widespread uprisings, many led by charismatic figures like Vellikkara Chothy and Daivathan across southern Kerala.

These rebellions began to influence contemporary literature. Revolutionary poet Kumaran Asan, a contemporary of Ayyankali, incorporated themes of caste oppression and Dalit resistance into his works. Poems like "Duravastha" and "Chandala Bhikshuki" expressed a deep moral and spiritual outrage. Asan questioned the very foundation of caste, asking provocatively if it resided in blood, bone, or the womb. He warned the Brahminical order that social awakening among the oppressed was irreversible, and unless traditional systems reformed themselves, they would be swept away. His verses offered a form of shock therapy to a caste-ridden society.

2.3.1.5 Kallumala Agitation

Beyond his political activism, Ayyankali also challenged cultural degradation. He urged Dalit communities to adopt upper-caste styles of dress, embrace their own language, music, and dance traditions, and reject oppressive symbols like the *kallumala* (stone bead necklaces traditionally worn by Dalit women). The *Kallumala* agitation

of 1915 was a powerful act of resistance in which Dalit women broke their stone necklaces in public, asserting autonomy over their bodies and identities. Mani regards this as one of the most significant feminist moments in Kerala's history, highlighting the intersectional nature of Ayyankali's movement.

As described by T.H.P. Chentharassery, the revolt took place in Perinad, a village in the Kollam district, where a group of Pulaya women defied upper-caste restrictions by discarding their traditional stone bead necklaces (*Kallumala*), a symbol of their enforced low status. The upper-caste landlords considered this an open challenge to the caste order and reacted with severe repression. This event became a major flashpoint in Kerala's social history.

In response to the violence, Ayyankali, as documented by Chentharassery, mobilised a mass protest. He organised a public meeting where Dalit men and women declared that they would no longer accept caste-imposed customs that marked them as inferior. This declaration of self-respect and collective resistance led to violent clashes, but it also shook the foundations of caste-based oppression in Travancore. Ayyankali's involvement lent the movement a structured leadership and a larger ideological framework beyond a local rebellion.

The agitation soon spread to neighbouring regions and drew national attention. Chentharassery notes that it was one of the earliest instances in Kerala where Dalit women took the forefront in a public protest, demanding equal rights and dignity. The *Kallumala Samaram* became a symbol of the larger battle for social equality that Ayyankali had been fighting through his movements. It was no longer just a question of attire or jewellery, it was about agency, visibility, and freedom in public spaces.

The legacy of the Kallumala agitation

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marked a shift in the social dynamics of Kerala. It instilled a sense of pride and resistance in the oppressed communities, especially among women, who were traditionally excluded from active roles in public protests. Ayyankali's guidance during the agitation reinforced the importance of organised protest and self-respect as tools for social transformation. The movement thus became a foundational episode in the broader history of Kerala's social reform struggles.

Ayyankali also emphasised personal discipline, cleanliness, and dignity among his people. He encouraged them to abandon degrading practices and to demand respect in their homes and public life. He forbade liquor consumption, encouraged wearing decent clothes, and fostered a sense of self-worth. His speeches and campaigns ignited a psychological revolution among the downtrodden, teaching them to view themselves as equals, not inferiors.

In his later years, Ayyankali focused on consolidating the gains of the movement. Despite setbacks, including instances where the government reneged on school orders or refused to curb caste violence, he remained steadfast. Ayyankali passed away in 1941, but the fire he lit burned on. His efforts helped lay the foundation for a democratic Kerala where education, equality, and dignity would become constitutional rights. Chenthalarassery asserts that his work was not merely for Pulayas or Dalits but for humanity. In a land that once considered places defiled by his people's presence, he carved a space for them in courts, schools, legislatures, and, ultimately, in the conscience of a nation.

Ayyankali's personal philosophy dismissed fatalism and unquestioning rituals, instead embracing a rational and ethical perspective. His advocacy for reform was grounded in secular principles and constitutional rights rather than religious authority. T.H.P.

Chenthalarassery and N.K. Jose note that Ayyankali's work came to symbolise the early energy and drive behind Kerala's radical anti-caste movements.

K. S. Madhavan and Rajesh Komath explain that Ayyankali's work went beyond protests. He challenged society as a whole and aimed to rebuild it. His ideas focused on freeing oppressed people by promoting dignity, education, and fair economic opportunities in their daily lives. His vision remains important today, inspiring ongoing struggles for Dalit rights in Kerala. Saradamoni, historian and a pioneer in Dalit and gender studies noted that Ayyankali's efforts sparked a new political consciousness among Dalits in Kerala, one that viewed literacy and education not only as tools for individual advancement but as essential for claiming civic rights and moral equality. This growing awareness later laid the foundation for wider struggles over land ownership and access to public employment.

2.3.1.6 Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS)

To strengthen the social movement, Ayyankali co-founded the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) in 1907 along with his allies, including Thomas Vadhyar and Hari Vadhyar. This organisation united Dalits of all backgrounds and religions under a single banner, emphasising education, dignity, and social rights. Their relentless efforts pressured the Travancore government to issue an order in 1907 allowing untouchables into public schools. However, the implementation was thwarted by upper-caste officials, making it merely symbolic. In response, Ayyankali's followers began organising mass movements and strikes. They reminded society that the Dalits, through their back-breaking labour, were the producers of food and wealth, yet were treated as outcasts.

Under Ayyankali's leadership, the SJPS. became a central pillar of the Dalit movement



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in Kerala. It served as a centre for organising meetings, promoting cultural expression, offering legal support, and raising social awareness. The organisation's inclusive and democratic spirit, noting how it united Dalits from various religious backgrounds. More than just a reform group, the SJPS functioned as an alternative system of justice and self-governance for the marginalised community. SJPS aimed not only at ending caste discrimination but also at integrating Dalits into civic life by fostering a collective identity. The Sangham focused on the upliftment of the Pulaya community and others, serving as an early model of social democracy.

The name of the organisation itself 'Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham', meaning 'Association for the Welfare of the Poor' was radical in its time. It challenged the idea that Dalits were impure and instead honored their dignity and worth. Ayyankali chose to define Dalits by their values and hard work, not by the labels given by the upper castes. The Sangham's goal went beyond culture or religion; it aimed to bring political and social change.

From its beginning, the SJPS prioritised education, viewing it as a fundamental pathway to social emancipation. Following the government directive of May 1907, which permitted Dalits (then referred to as 'untouchables') to access public education, the SJPS played a critical role in urging the authorities to enforce this policy. However, upper-caste officials within the administration actively obstructed its implementation. Recognising the limitations of legal reforms in the absence of grassroots mobilisation, Ayyankali leveraged the organisational strength of the Sangham to spearhead school-entry agitations.

The S.J.P.S. was structured like a political party with branches, units, and clear

responsibilities. It grew rapidly, with more than a thousand units spread across Kerala. Its members were rigorously disciplined, and Ayyankali led by example, spending his own wealth on its operations. The organisation served as both a political platform and a civil society forum. It coordinated protests, gave legal assistance, published leaflets, and conducted community education programmes.

Ayyankali also used the SJPS as a judicial platform. Recognising that Dalits had no real access to colonial courts, he created a parallel legal system under the Sangham. T.H.P Chentharassery noted that realising the hostility of government courts toward Dalits, he established a parallel judicial system under the SJPS-a "Social Court." These courts, modeled after government legal structures, had clerks, messengers, and judges, Ayyankali himself being the supreme judge. They were known for impartiality, incorruptibility, and justice. Unlike the colonial courts that humiliated Dalits by refusing them entry or making them testify through intermediaries, these Social Courts respected their humanity and ensured dignity.

The SJPS also spearheaded the first organised agricultural labour strike in Kerala in 1913, demanding not just better wages but also school access for their children. The Sangham coordinated this massive effort, which lasted more than a year and forced the government into compromise. Historians like T.H.P. Chentharassery emphasises that the SJPS's strategic involvement in both social and labour rights makes it one of the earliest examples of a Dalit-led civil rights institution in India.

By 1911, Ayyankali's efforts through the SJPS led to his historic nomination to the Sreemoolam Praja Sabha, the legislative council of Travancore. Here he vocally represented the Dalits' right to land,

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education, and temple entry. His legislative speeches, backed by the organisational force of the SJPS, were landmark moments in the political awakening of the Dalit community.

The organisation also engaged in cultural resistance. It challenged symbols of Dalit subjugation, including the *kallumala* (stone necklace) worn by women. Through the S.J.P.S., Ayyankali encouraged Dalit women to cast off such signs and embrace dignity through dress and behaviour. The Sangham's cultural campaigns influenced poets like Kumaran Asan, who in works like *Duravastha* echoed the rebellion of the oppressed and foretold the decline of caste-based traditions.

Despite intense opposition including school burnings, police brutality, and ostracism

the SJPS maintained its moral and political compass. Ayyankali's charisma, combined with the Sangham's structure, ensured its resilience and impact. As Chentharassery observes, the S.J.P.S. represented not only a social renaissance but the earliest phase of democratic self-organisation by Dalits in Kerala.

The S.J.P.S. was more than an organisation; it was the institutional embodiment of Ayyankali's vision for Dalit liberation. It educated the oppressed, defended their rights, created parallel systems of justice, and laid the foundation for civic equality in a deeply unequal society. Through it, Ayyankali turned scattered anger into collective strength and planted the seeds of Kerala's later social transformation.

Historiography Placing Ayyankali

The historiography of Ayyankali's life and legacy has evolved significantly over the past century, moving from scattered literary references and commemorative writings to more rigorous scholarly and Dalit-led historical interventions. Initial mentions in publications like *Vivekodayam* and biographical sketches in *Kerala Kaumudi* laid the groundwork for documenting his contributions, though early efforts often lacked analytical depth. Over time, particularly from the 1970s onward, a growing body of literature from academic studies, biographies, and archival research to poems, songs, and plays has sought to reclaim and reinterpret Ayyankali's pivotal role in Kerala's socio-political transformation. These works not only highlight his resistance to caste-based oppression and his leadership in asserting Dalit rights but also explore how his memory has been preserved and reimagined through community narratives and cultural expressions. Together, they reveal a sustained attempt to reposition Ayyankali within both historical discourse and the collective consciousness of Kerala's marginalised communities.

Jayadevan, a Dalit activist, produced the "Ayyankali Souvenir" in 1979, which included comments by Ambedkar on Ayyankali's significance. Other key sources include *Ayyankali Smarakopaharam* by Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha and the 1989 "Panchajanyam" souvenir edited by Padma Sekhar. Notably, these efforts show the importance of Dalit-led initiatives in preserving Ayyankali's memory.

N.K. Jose, Dalit historian, authored six books on Ayyankali between 1982 and 2002, including *Pulaya Lahala*, *Ayyankali*, and *Ayyankali Oru Samagra Padanam*. K.K.S. Das, writer renowned for his significant contributions to Dalit literature, in his *Ayyankali Kerala Charithrathil* (2014) provided a more formal historical analysis. K.S. Madhavan and Rajesh Komath in their article "Dalits and Discourses of Anti-caste Movements in



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Kerala, India” discuss how Ayyankali’s movement played a crucial role in shaping a new perspective for Dalits to understand and connect with their history and culture. By presenting himself as a proud leader of the Pulaya community, he challenged the dominant Vedic-Sanskrit stories that had ignored or looked down on lower-caste voices. This new way of thinking was expressed through songs, poems, and shared memories, many of which have been recorded by scholars like K.K.S. Das and Paul Chirakkarodu, writer and social critic. In this way, Ayyankali not only changed political spaces but also gave Dalits a strong historical and cultural identity.

Other key works include Rev. Dr. J.W. Gladston’s *Protestant Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala*, which used Protestant missionary archives and Sree Mulam Sabha records. Although methodologically limited, these sources confirm Ayyankali’s relevance to Kerala’s reform landscape. C. Abhimanyu’s (who has extensively written about the life and works of Ayyankali) Malayalam biography *Ayyankali* attempted a thorough scholarly approach.

Among modern historians, T.H.P. Chentharassery’s widely referenced biography *Ayyankali: The First Dalit Leader* stands out for highlighting the forgotten histories of Kerala. Kunnuukuzhi S. Mani’s (Malayalam writer) *Pulayar through Centuries* and K. Saradamoni’s *Emergence of Slave Caste* also includes biographical references, though Saradamoni avoids deeper engagement with the Ayyankali movement.

K. S. Madhavan in his article ‘Formation of Dalit Identity in Kerala’ explains that under Ayyankali’s leadership (1863–1941), Dalits in Kerala began to resist caste-based oppression in a more organised and strategic way. Ayyankali pushed back against caste and feudal norms by demanding basic rights, such as walking freely on public roads, accessing education, entering public markets, and challenging dress codes imposed on Dalit women through the Kallumala agitation. These actions reshaped how Dalits were seen in public life and disrupted long-standing social hierarchies that had denied them dignity, education, and economic opportunity. P. Sanal Mohan observes that movements such as Ayyankali’s transformed the “body” into a powerful site of protest—using the socially marked body to challenge, resist, and disrupt caste-based spatial boundaries.

2.3.2 Poikayil Appachan and PRDS

In the early 20th century, Kerala became the stage for a profound spiritual and social awakening with the rise of the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS), a movement deeply embedded in the history, identity, and cultural consciousness of the Dalits. The caste hierarchy in Kerala was particularly rigid, subjecting Dalit communities like the Pulayas, Parayas, and Kuravas to severe untouchability and even conditions of slavery. Events such as the Channar revolt (1829), the Vaikunda Swami movement, the social reform efforts of Sree Narayana Guru, and the radical activism of Ayyankali created the

context from which PRDS emerged. Unlike movements that aimed to purify Hinduism or sought liberation through conversion to Christianity, PRDS responded directly to the identity crisis faced by Dalits in the aftermath of conversion. Christian institutions, far from dismantling caste barriers, often entrenched them further, failing to offer true social equality or spiritual liberation.

Poikayil Appachan also known as Poikayil Yohannan was a pioneering Dalit leader, poet, and religious reformer who played a foundational role in articulating an independent Dalit consciousness in Kerala. He established the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS), a faith-based organisation

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dedicated to the socio-political and spiritual emancipation of Dalits. Appachan's interventions transcended conventional reformist paradigms by linking spiritual liberation inseparably with social justice. In contrast to other movements that sought integration or reform within existing Hindu or Christian frameworks, he envisioned a radical religious innovation, one that explicitly recognised Dalit histories, experiences, and aspirations.

The poetic works of Appachan, deeply embedded in oral traditions, constitute some of the earliest Dalit literary expressions in Malayalam. These poems, frequently integrated into his public oratory, evoked the collective memory of slavery, structural marginalisation, and the systematic erasure of Dalit narratives from dominant historical discourses. Far from being purely artistic, Appachan's poetry functioned as a critical form of resistance and historiography, articulating a counter-narrative that restored voice and agency to the historically silenced Dalit community.

In her critical review of *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, Mini Sukumar, academic and women's rights activist, highlighted how Poikayil Appachan's poetic style masterfully intertwines simplicity with evocative imagery rooted in lived realities. His poetry not only articulated the historical sufferings of the Dalit community but also fostered a sense of pride and spiritual affirmation among its members. Sukumar argues that these formative literary contributions were instrumental in shaping a distinctive Dalit aesthetic and cultural consciousness.

Appachan's biography exemplifies the intricate intersections of caste, religion, and resistance. Born into bondage as a labourer in a Syrian Christian household, he later embraced Christianity and adopted the name Yohannan. However, his subsequent disillusionment with pervasive caste hierarchies

within Christian institutions led him to sever ties and establish the PRDS. This rupture was not merely a repudiation of dominant religious frameworks but an act of theological self-determination that reimagined the divine as inherently embedded in the lived experiences of Dalits.

Under Appachan's leadership, the PRDS challenged both Hindu traditions and Christian institutions by promoting a spiritual vision that upheld the dignity of Dalits. His teachings asserted that salvation transcended purely spiritual dimensions and necessitated emancipation from socio-political oppression. The term *Raksha* (redemption) in the organisation's name symbolised liberation from both material bondage and spiritual ignorance. Appachan's contributions can be seen as a precursor to these contemporary interventions, as he foregrounded the significance of Dalit voices in the rearticulation of Indian history. His critique of the marginalisation of Dalits in historical narratives prefigures wider historiographical debates about caste-based exclusions.

In the anthology edited by M. Dasan, V. Pratibha, Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, and C. S. Chandrika, Appachan is positioned deliberately as a foundational figure within Kerala's Dalit literary and intellectual traditions. His inclusion alongside prominent leaders such as Ayyankali and Pampadi John Joseph highlights his dual role, not only as a religious reformer but also as a political theorist instrumental in shaping a distinct Dalit identity.

Despite his pivotal role, Poikayil Appachan has frequently been marginalised or omitted from mainstream historiography of Kerala. His legacy persists through oral histories, ongoing religious practices within the PRDS, and renewed scholarly interest from Dalit academics and writers. His life and work challenge monolithic narratives of the Kerala renaissance and call for a critical



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re-examination of social reform through the intersecting lenses of caste and Dalit agency.

2.3.2.1 Poikayil Yohannan

Poikayil Appachan was born on 17 February 1879 into a Paraya family enslaved by a Syrian Christian household named Sankaramangalam, in Eraviperur, Pathanamthitta district. Although his parents named him Komaran, he was brought up as Yohannan and received basic literacy, as noted by Rajan Gurukkal. Despite being a slave, his access to education and the Bible helped him mentally transcend his oppressed status. He also became familiar with missionary writings. Possessing both intelligence and critical awareness, Yohannan was able to move beyond mere religious belief to understand deeper truths about social reality. As he matured, he recognised the shared conditions of the slave castes and aspired to unify them, rather than simply preaching the gospel. In 1900, he left the Sankaramangalam family in search of his roots and kindred communities, with the goal of organising them into a new collective.



Fig.2.3.4 Poikayil Appachan

Source: Ala

Believing that a liberal Christian sect would support him, he joined the Marthoma Church. However, he soon realised that an untouchable caste held no status there. Yohannan challenged the church's discriminatory practices, particularly its segregation of Pulaya and Paraya converts, including the establishment of separate places of worship

for them. His vocal opposition led to his excommunication. He then tried his luck with the Brethren Mission, a more reformed sect, but without success. Eventually, he became convinced that Christianity offered no real escape from caste-based oppression and discrimination. He deeply felt the absence of the core values of Christianity in the religious practices he encountered. He subsequently joined the Brethren Mission as a preacher but parted ways after four years. Thereafter, he committed himself to leading the newly converted Christian community autonomously.

Yohannan embarked on extensive travels to organise assemblies and raise socio-political consciousness. He openly challenged Christian institutions that practiced untouchability against Dalits who had converted in pursuit of liberation from feudal oppression. While his critiques provoked hostility among upper-caste Christians, they simultaneously ignited a sense of hope and empowerment within marginalised communities. His initial endeavours to consolidate his followers constituted an early phase of a broader freedom movement later termed *Adilahala* (uprising).

In 1908, Yohannan initiated a series of public addresses in Vakathanam, supported by his nephew, Kochukalayil Pathros. These gatherings incited violent reactions from upper-caste Christians, who, armed, attacked one such meeting. Yohannan's followers successfully intervened to protect him. Subsequently, legal actions were pursued against Yohannan and his associates, imposing considerable difficulties. Despite enduring multiple assaults—including a notable attack at Vellanadithottam enroute to Mundakkayam—Yohannan's resolve remained steadfast. His personal security detail, rigorously trained, ensured his safety. Although charged alongside eighteen others, all were ultimately acquitted without conditions.

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2.3.2.2 Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)

In 1909, Poikayil Yohannan established the Christian sect known as Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), or the ‘Church of God of Visible Salvation’. From then onwards, Yohannan came to be known as Appachan, a leader who stood for equality and values like Protestant humanism. As noted by R. Prakash in his article *Dalit Consciousness and its Perspective based on PRDS History in Kerala*, the PRDS represents one of Kerala’s earliest Dalit liberation movements, articulating a critique of Hinduism as a politically oppressive structure while simultaneously viewing Christianity as a religion fraught with identity conflicts. Prakash contends that the PRDS should be understood primarily as a Protestant movement that emerged in the aftermath of the mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity.

The PRDS experienced rapid expansion, with its central headquarters located at Eraviperoor and regional centres established at Amarakkunnu (near Thiruvalla) and Kottamam (near Neyyattinkara). According to historical accounts, the movement consolidated its presence through the acquisition of land and the establishment of worship spaces and educational institutions across multiple locations, including Eraviperoor, Amarakkunnu, Kulathur Moozhi, Perumpatty Muthalapra, Kottayam, Changannassery, Puthichakonam near Kavadayaar in Thiruvananthapuram, and Kottamam near Neyyattinkara. Yohannan notably organised a significant congregation at the Maramon sandbanks near Kozhencerry, which culminated in a landmark white-clad procession of thousands of followers to the Eraviperoor headquarters, highlighting the movement’s mobilisational capacity.

The growing influence of the PRDS elicited resentment and violent opposition from

upper-caste Christians. As documented, an attack by an upper-caste mob on a PRDS assembly in Vettiyad, near Thiruvalla, resulted in the death of a female member of the Sabha. This incident, termed the *Vettiyad Adilahala* (Vettiyad Uprising), symbolised the entrenched caste antagonisms within Christian communities. Scholars argue that such hostility from both upper-caste Hindus and Christians enhanced Yohannan’s stature as a pivotal figure championing the liberation of marginalised Dalits.

Poikayil Yohannan consistently emphasised that the oppressed castes, those subjected to systemic marginalisation, discrimination, and poverty were the true indigenous inhabitants of the land. He once welcomed Mahatma Gandhi at Kottamam near Neyyattinkara and said to him: “You engage in political work for India’s independence. I shall work for its spiritual freedom. The British will leave India at midnight.”

Through the formation of the PRDS, Yohannan succeeded in integrating nearly 14 sub-castes into a single religious and social collective. By rejecting superstitions and entrenched social hierarchies, his followers forged a unified community, exemplified by inter-caste marriages and solidarity across previous caste divisions.

Yohannan also collaborated with reformer Ayyankali in advocating for Dalit emancipation. As an elected member of the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha in 1921 and 1931, he articulated bold demands, including land redistribution to the landless, universal access to public education irrespective of caste, and affirmative action in public employment for marginalised communities.

With the approval of the Travancore government, Yohannan established the region’s first English-medium school for Dalits—an unprecedented initiative at the time. Later venerated as Kumara Guru Devan, Yohannan’s



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legacy extended beyond religious reform. As scholars such as Sreekumaragurudevan and T.H.P. Chenthalassery observe, the PRDS under his leadership evolved into a socio-religious revolution. While rooted

in a Protestant reformist ethos, it ultimately transcended both religious and caste boundaries, offering a radical model of spiritual and social transformation.

Songs of Poikayil Yohannan

Poikayil Yohannan composed many songs to communicate the spiritual, social, and cultural identity of Dalits and to critique the dominant religious narratives. These songs derived wisdom from the *Bible* but were written with irony and defiance, aiming to dismantle the illusion that the *Bible* and mainstream Christianity addressed the lived realities of Dalits. According to K. M. Lenin (Who wrote the book Poikayil Appachan, *Keelholaride Vimochakan*) Poikayil Yohannan, also known as Poikayil Appachan, remains one of the most powerful yet long-overlooked poet-voices of Kerala's social history. It was only recently that Appachan's songs once considered mere oral chants from itinerant gatherings, were acknowledged as poetry. These songs emerged from the soul of a people exiled from history and dignity, forced into the margins through slavery, caste violence, and social exclusion.

The songs, now anthologised under the title *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Paattukal*, are revealed not just as artistic expressions, but as vessels of historical pain, social protest, and philosophical inquiry. They expose the trauma of slavery, caste oppression, forced religious conversion, and erasure from official history. The songs serve as both testimony and resistance confronting Christian and Hindu institutions for their role in sustaining caste-based discrimination.

Numerous poems vividly portray the brutal realities of Dalit life scenes of slave markets, children dying from neglect, families torn apart by the slave trade, and the persistent humiliation faced in both social and religious domains. As Lenin observes, in one such poem. Appachan confronts the systematic omission of his community from historical narratives, asking why elaborate histories are preserved for other lineages while the story of his own people remains unwritten. Through these verses, he confronts the perceived divine order that systematically marginalises his people exposing its inherent injustice.

Appachan sings of a God who never appeared, prophets he never saw, and scriptures that held no promise for his people. These are not laments but fierce rejections of the *Bible*, of the church, of any doctrine that sanctioned caste hierarchies and social exclusions. His verses expose the lie of spiritual salvation through Christianity by highlighting how caste discrimination persisted within the church, rendering Pulaya Christians and Paraya Christians spiritually and socially inferior. In one of his most biting songs, he sarcastically lists the multitude of separate churches for each caste, mocking the failure of Christianity to transcend the very hierarchies it claimed to dissolve. Lines like “a church for the master, a church for the servant; a church for the Pulaya, a church for the Paraya” reveal the persistence of caste even after

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conversion. Appachan asserts that Christ's sacrifice did not erase caste hierarchies, and Dalits were still denied equal space in worship.

There is a recurring theme of intergenerational suffering. The poems remember fathers and mothers sold away, children starving or dying alone, and families shattered by the dehumanising system of caste slavery. The grief of a mother whose child dies in her absence while she works, and another who loses her children and husband to slave traders, forms the emotional core of these verses.

Philosophically, the songs challenge the very foundation of history, theology, and morality upheld by dominant castes and religions. The poet critiques not only social systems but the language of God and salvation itself, turning theology into a tool of radical inquiry and liberation. He questions the silence of God and the exclusion of Dalits from divine narratives, turning the songs into both lamentation and rebellion.

In Appachan's poetic vision, as highlighted by Lenin, Dalits are portrayed not merely as victims of oppression but as heirs to a vanished civilisation—one rooted in truth, *dharma*, and harmony, which was ultimately destroyed by the rise of Brahmanical dominance. His search for “the history of my people” is a symbolic excavation of a buried identity, rendered voiceless by hegemonic structures of religion, caste, and colonialism.

These songs are not only historical artefacts but continue to resonate with marginalised communities, Lenin noted. They retain cultural and spiritual relevance within the PRDS tradition, while also serving as a powerful example of Dalit literary assertion. Through Appachan's poetry, the document argues for a rethinking of modernity, renaissance, and identity in Kerala and beyond, urging that any real social transformation must begin by confronting the pain, dignity, and resistance encoded in these songs.

According to K. M. Lenin, these songs, etched into collective memory through centuries of oppression and resistance, serve both as artistic expressions and potent tools of political defiance. They represent the lived reality of Kerala's Dalit experience, blending spiritual depth with the tangible struggles of caste, labour, and religion. Appachan's poetry emerges as a powerful critique of both religious and literary conventions, forming a foundational voice in the pursuit of a democratic and caste-free culture.



R Recap

- ◆ Ayyankali led Kerala's first organised Dalit social reform movement
- ◆ *Villuvandi* protest asserted Dalit right to public road access
- ◆ Education denial led to Kerala's first agricultural labour strike
- ◆ In 1911, Ayyankali entered Sreemoolam Assembly, voicing Dalit rights
- ◆ *Kallumala* Agitation redefined Dalit women's identity and feminist resistance
- ◆ *Sadujana Paripalana Sangham* unified Dalits for education and justice
- ◆ Ayyankali's activism blended social justice with cultural assertion
- ◆ PRDS by Poikayil Appachan combined faith with Dalit emancipation
- ◆ Appachan rejected Hindu-Christian casteism, forming a separate spiritual path
- ◆ Appachan's songs documented slavery, loss, and religious disillusionment
- ◆ Dalit theology questioned divine silence, caste-based salvation doctrines
- ◆ PRDS established schools, congregations, and land for Dalits
- ◆ Ayyankali and Appachan inspired Kerala's Dalit liberation renaissance

O Objective Questions

1. In which year did Ayyankali lead the *Villuvandi Samaram*?
2. Which organisation was co-founded by Ayyankali in 1907?
3. Who wrote the biography “Ayyankali: The First Dalit Leader”?
4. What does the name “Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham” mean?
5. Which organisation did Poikayil Appachan found in 1909?
6. When was Ayyankali nominated to the Sreemoolam Assembly?
7. Which poet documented Dalit suffering in poems like “Duravastha”?

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8. In which year was the PRDS founded?
9. Which legislative body did Appachan become a member of in 1921 and 1931?
10. What is the title of the song anthology by Poikayil Appachan?



Answers

1. 1893
2. *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham*
3. T.H.P. Chentharassery
4. Association for the Welfare of the Poor
5. *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS)
6. 1911
7. Kumaran Asan
8. 1909
9. Sree Moolam Praja Sabha
10. *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Paattukal*



Assignments

1. Discuss the socio-political significance of Ayyankali's Villuvandi Yatra. How did this act of defiance redefine public space and Dalit resistance in colonial Kerala?
2. Evaluate the impact of the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) on Dalit empowerment.



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3. Examine the significance of the Kallumala agitation in Kerala's feminist and anti-caste history? How did it challenge caste-imposed cultural symbols and gender oppression?
4. Discuss the origins and ideological framework of the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) founded by Poikayil Yohannan.
5. Critically assess the use of poetry by Poikayil Appachan as a form of Dalit historiography and resistance.

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Unit 4

V.T. Bhattathiripad and Yoga Kshema Sabha

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the role of V. T. Bhattathiripad as a pioneering social reformer in Kerala, especially within the Namboothiri Brahmin community
- ◆ describe his efforts to challenge caste orthodoxy, Brahmanical patriarchy, and the rigid customs of his time
- ◆ analyse his contributions to women's empowerment, especially his campaigns for widow remarriage and female education
- ◆ evaluate his role in the formation of reformist organisations and his use of theatre and writing (e.g., plays like *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekkku*) to raise social awareness

P

Prerequisite

In the early 20th century, Kerala witnessed deep shifts within its socially rigid communities, especially among the orthodox Namboothiri Brahmins. One of the most reformers to rise from within this fold was V.T. Bhattathiripad. At a time when Namboothiri women lived in strict seclusion and younger men were bound by suffocating traditions, V.T. took a bold stand against these age-old restrictions. Through his writings, speeches, and fearless activism, he became a symbol of rebellion against social injustice.

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Around the same time, the Yoga Kshema Sabha, founded in 1908, emerged as a formal platform for change within the community. Initially modest in its aims, it gradually evolved into a forceful agent of reform. The Sabha began advocating for progressive causes like widow remarriage, education for women, and the dismantling of regressive practices such as the *ghosha* system, which kept women hidden from public life.

K

Keywords

Mana, Marakkuda, Ghosha, Purushavicharam, Smarthavicharam, Upanayanam, Antharjanam, Sudham, Misrabhojanam

D

Discussion

2.4.1 V.T. Bhattathiripad

Vellithuruthi Thazhathu Karutha Patteri Raman Bhattathiripad was born on 26 March, 1896 in Kaippilly Mana, located in Mezhathur on the banks of the Nila River. Like many Namboothiris of his time, he initially remained illiterate. However, as he grew older, he became increasingly critical of the rigid and orthodox customs practiced within his community. A man of keen intellect and deep empathy, Raman was particularly disturbed by the plight of Namboothiri women, many of whom were forced into early marriages with much older men. This injustice stirred in him a strong desire to bring about social reform.

As a result, many young women became widows at an early age and were condemned to live lives of hardship and isolation. A Namboothiri woman's existence was almost like that of a prisoner within the confines of the *Mana* (house), where she was treated

more like property than a person. When she stepped outside, she was hidden beneath a *marakkuda* (a palm-leaf umbrella) and wrapped in a *ghosha* (a shawl that covered her torso), symbolising the strict codes of modesty and control imposed on her. Patriarchal control was firmly rooted, allowing hardly any space for personal freedom or individuality—though, at times, rare exceptions did exist.

A Namboothiri woman accused of infidelity had to undergo a harsh and humiliating trial known as *smarthavicharam*, a ritual that reinforced caste-based exclusivity. As part of the punishment, she would be wrapped in a mat and rolled down from the roof of the house, a symbolic act of disgrace, before being permanently expelled from the *mana* (ancestral home). The men named in the case, if found guilty of immoral conduct, were also excommunicated from the community. One of the most well-known cases occurred in 1905, when Kuriyedathu Thathri was accused



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of infidelity. During the proceedings, she shocked society by revealing the names of several men, including those of high social standing, with whom she had been involved, and backed her claims with evidence.

The incident sent shockwaves through the Namboothiri patriarchal order. In a desperate attempt to defend themselves, the accused men appealed to the King of Cochin to allow a *Purushavicharam*, a cross-examination of the men, which had no prior precedent. Surprisingly, the king agreed. Some of the men even went so far as to hire barristers to argue their case, turning the *Smarthavicharam* into a highly unusual and complex legal process. Yet, all these efforts were ultimately futile. Every man named by Thathri was excommunicated. Later, V.T. Bhattathiripad interpreted the event as a powerful act of resistance by a woman against the oppressive patriarchy of the Namboothiri landlords, an early and significant protest within the community.

V.T. Bhattathiripad was aware of the deep-rooted injustices endured by *Antharjanams*, a term that literally means “those who live inside,” symbolising their forced seclusion. He understood their suffering as more than just a matter of gender injustice—it was deeply intertwined with the rigid caste hierarchy that governed the Namboothiri way of life. To him, the treatment of Namboothiri women was not far removed from the dehumanisation faced by the lower castes, as they were denied even the most basic freedom and respect. Determined to spark change from within, Bhattathiripad devoted himself to awakening social consciousness, especially among women. He chose theatre as his tool, a powerful platform through which he questioned entrenched orthodoxy and promoted progressive ideas, particularly around women’s rights and dignity.

2.4.1.1 Early Life

V.T. Bhattathiripad, widely known as VT, emerged as a pioneering social reformer who played a significant role in transforming the deeply conservative Namboothiri community. Born in Mezhathur into a financially struggling Namboothiri household, Bhattathiripad did not have access to modern education in his early years. His *Upanayanam*, a traditional initiation into Vedic learning was performed when he was just six years old. He began his education at home under a local *Othikkan* (Vedic teacher), and later moved to Patakara Mana near Perinthalmanna for advanced studies. Interestingly, though the Patakara Mana upheld orthodox customs, it also exposed Bhattathiripad to modern influences and changing lifestyles, he even learned to ride a bicycle there, a symbol of new beginnings.

After his time at Patakara, Bhattathiripad joined Mutukurissi Mana for further studies. However, due to various circumstances, he was unable to continue and returned home, spending a period in uncertainty. Around this time, his family was hit by severe financial hardship, compelling him to take up work as a temple priest in Mundamuka near Shoranur to support himself and his household.

2.4.1.2 *Adukkalayilnnum Arangathekkku*

V.T. Bhattathiripad’s groundbreaking play *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekkku* (*From the Kitchen to the Stage*) marked a significant shift in the landscape of Malayalam theatre. It boldly challenged the deeply rooted patriarchal norms of the Namboothiri community, sparking intense debate and introspection within its rigid social structure. In Kerala, theatre has long served as a powerful medium for shaping public opinion, fostering national consciousness, and driving social reform, and Bhattathiripad recognised its immense potential.

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The play was performed during the annual meetings of the *Yogakshema Sabha*, a reformist platform within the Namboothiri community. Through this work, Bhattathiripad not only exposed the oppressive conditions faced by women but also aligned his artistic efforts with the larger nationalist movement. His use of theatre as a tool for awakening both social and political awareness played a significant role in the broader movement for progressive change in Kerala.

The play served as a powerful voice for the emancipation of Namboothiri women, who had been confined for generations by rigid orthodoxy and blind superstitions. It challenged the deeply entrenched customs that kept women in domestic bondage and offered a bold call for their liberation. In the foreword to the play, renowned nationalist K. Kelappan emphasised its significance in exposing the regressive social practices within the Namboothiri community and underscored its role in pushing for reform.

The play's influence was profound, so much so that it inspired many Namboothiri women to step out of their kitchens and join the nationalist movement, breaking long-held taboos. When *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* was staged at Edakkunni on 24 December 1929, it became a pivotal moment not only for the reformist cause but also in cementing V.T. Bhattathiripad's position as a leading voice in Kerala's social transformation.

The staging of the play marked a turning point for the Namboothiri community. It boldly depicted a love story between a young Namboothiri woman and a boy from her own community, someone who, by tradition, was not allowed to marry an *antharjanam* due to his position as a junior member of his *illam* (household). With the intervention of the state enabling their union, the play challenged entrenched norms and opened space for reimagining conjugal

relationships. Through this narrative, V.T. Bhattathiripad not only questioned rigid customs but also gave legitimacy to the idea of love marriages. Its impact was profound, it stirred widespread opposition to practices like polygyny and the custom of elderly men marrying young girls, while also planting the seed of romantic choice within a conservative framework.

The oppressive realities within the Namboothiri community moved V.T. Bhattathiripad wrote a striking line in his play: "Let me be born a dog, a cat, or any other miserable creature, but never again as an Appan (the Youngster) in a Namboothiri household." This powerful expression captured the deep frustration with a system that stifled individuality and freedom, especially for women. His play was not just a theatrical performance, it was a call to action, aimed at breaking the chains that had confined Namboothiri women to the kitchen for generations and bringing them into public life.

With sharp satire, the drama exposed the cruelty and injustice endured by *Antharjanams* and became a bold tool for awakening social consciousness among them. Its impact was far-reaching, triggering a wave of awareness and self-reflection within the community. The successful staging of the play at Bhattathiripad's own home, despite fierce opposition from his conservative elder brother, became symbolic of the shifting tide: the weakening grip of orthodoxy and the rise of progressive thought.

The play did more than challenge tradition, it empowered. It infused new energy into the reform movement and helped change the mindset of even the most reluctant within the community. Bhattathiripad wasn't just a voice for change on stage; he lived it in real life by bringing his own wife out into public spaces, defying the practice of *ghosha*, and encouraging others to do the same. In doing



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so, he became a catalyst for a cultural shift that redefined the role of women within the Namboothiri community.

2.4.1.3 *Marakudayile Mahanarakam*

Similarly, M.R. Bhattathiripad's *Marakudakulile Mahanarakam* sparked intense debate. The play confronted orthodoxy head-on, calling for the reform of outdated marriage systems and family structures. These performances were more than entertainment; they were bold statements that spoke directly to the audience's lived realities. Creative and provocative, they aligned with the reformist vision of the younger generation. Women resonated with the message and became active participants in the wave of change. In this way, the plays accomplished what speeches and petitions alone could not, the theatre became a vehicle of transformation, lessening the burden of reformers by moving hearts and minds from the stage itself.

2.4.1.4 *Kannirum Kinavum*

V.T. Bhattathiripad's acclaimed autobiography is more than just a personal journey, it is a powerful chronicle of transformation, both individual and collective. Tracing his evolution from a boy steeped in the rigid traditions of priesthood to a fearless writer and reformer, the work offers a rare and honest glimpse into the inner world of a Namboothiri growing increasingly aware of the need for change.

Told in a distinctive style that stands out in Malayalam literature, the narrative unfolds through a series of interconnected essays. These vignettes vividly portray the suffocating realities of most Brahmin households in Kerala, trapped in outdated customs, social stagnation, and intellectual inertia. What makes the work truly compelling is how VT's

personal awakening is interwoven with the broader momentum of a reformist movement led by courageous and progressive youth, both men and women.

Although autobiographical in form, the book consistently shifts its gaze outward, using the author's life as a lens to reflect on the larger social crisis, with a particular focus on the need to liberate the Namboothiri community from its own oppressive structures.

V.T. Bhattathiripad emerged as a pioneering figure in Kerala's social reform movement, particularly within the Namboothiri community, which was then weighed down by deep-seated orthodoxy and rigid traditions. In his widely acclaimed autobiography *Kanneerum Kinavum*, he captures the transformative moment of his early education, writing, "I was absolutely thrilled as the veil of ignorance was torn to pieces and as I felt the smile of knowledge upon me." These words echo the spirit of Enlightenment, what Immanuel Kant famously described as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity."

The memoir is more than a personal recollection; it paints a vivid picture of a community at the crossroads of tradition and change. Through Bhattathiripad's childhood memories and reflections, the book offers a window into a time just before the sweeping wave of reform took hold, a period marked by blind adherence to religious ritualism and the suffocating grip of a decaying feudal order. *Kanneerum Kinavum* not only recounts the journey of one man's awakening but also sets the stage for the collective upheaval that would eventually liberate the Namboothiri community from the shackles of its own conservatism.

As the renowned Malayalam writer and poet G. Kumara Pillai once noted, *Kanneerum Kinavum* is more than a memoir, it is a

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powerful account of the formative experiences that awakened V.T. Bhattacharipad's deep yearning for freedom ultimately steered both his life and his community toward a radical shift. The book traces the inner and outer journey of a young, tradition-bound Namboothiri boy, an *Apphan* by birth, into a conscious, questioning individual who would go on to become a fearless writer and social reformer.

Bhattacharipad's literary voice, whether as a storyteller or playwright, was inseparably woven into the spirit of reform that defined early 20th-century Kerala. His work reflects the pulse of a society grappling with the forces of change during what would later be hailed as the Kerala Renaissance, a period marked by the community's profound and often painful engagement with modernity. His life and writing stand as testaments to that transformative era.

Kanneerum Kinavum offers readers a deeply personal yet socially significant lens into a community in transition, caught between the weight of its traditions and the pull of modernity. The memoir is rich with memories, especially of the women who shaped the author's early life, including his mother.

Bhattacharipad's attention to their oppression, along with his poignant portrayal of *Apphans*, young Namboothiri men who were denied marriage and property rights, reflects the core concerns of the reformist movement within the community. His play *Marakkutakkullile Maha Narakam* ("Hell Beneath the Palm-Leaf Umbrella") was a bold call for liberation, encouraging women to cast off the symbols of their seclusion. Its staging sent ripples through conservative circles, and for many Namboothiri women, especially the younger generation, it marked the beginning of a long-overdue awakening.

2.4.2 Yogakshema Sabha

V.T. became actively involved with the *Yogakshema Sabha*, a progressive organisation established in 1908 to promote reform within the rigid framework of the Namboothiri community. The group initially gathered at the Cherumukku Vaidikan's *mana* by the banks of the Periyar River. Conceived as a welfare-oriented collective, the Sabha aimed to challenge stagnation within the community by encouraging modern education and increasing literacy, particularly among Namboothiri youth.

One of its notable initiatives was the founding of a school at Edakkunni, near Thrissur, which offered English education to Namboothiri boys, a radical move at a time when such learning was frowned upon by the orthodox elite. The Sabha soon became a hub for like-minded young reformers who rallied against social and political structures that upheld oppression and resisted change. For V.T., this space offered both inspiration and a practical platform to push forward his reformist vision.

Publications like *Yogakshemam* and *Unni Namboothiri* served as vital platforms for promoting reformist thought among the Namboothiri Brahmins. *Yogakshemam*, a weekly that began circulation from Thrissur in 1909, focused on issues central to the community, especially the urgent need for English education and progressive changes in marriage customs. The journal was launched with the specific purpose of spreading reformist ideals and awakening the community to the need for transformation.

Closely aligned with the activities of the *Yogakshema Sabha*, the journal became a powerful vehicle for challenging orthodoxy. Similarly, *Unni Namboothiri*, which functioned as the Sabha's official voice, took strong positions against polygamy, the purdah system, and highlighted the community's backwardness in education. Alongside these



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efforts, the *Namboothiri Yuva Jana Sangham*, a youth organisation led by V.T. Bhattathiripad became instrumental in pushing for the social liberation of the community. These young reformers confronted entrenched traditions head-on, and over time, managed to achieve meaningful shifts in attitudes and practices.

One of the most significant milestones of the Yogakshema Sabha was its decision in 1928, during its annual gathering at Edakkunni, to prioritise education within the Namboothiri community. This led to the establishment of Namboothiri Vidyalayams across various regions of Kerala, an achievement that marked a turning point in the community's intellectual awakening. On the social reform front, another historic resolution came in 1930, also at Edakkunni, when the Sabha formally endorsed the abolition of the *ghosha* system (the purdah). The implementation of this resolution was systematic and impactful, offering V.T. Bhattathiripad a powerful opportunity to step forward and demonstrate his leadership in championing progressive change.

V.T. Bhattathiripad strongly advocated for the practice of inter-caste marriages during his discussions within the Yogakshema Sabha, believing it to be a necessary step toward social reform. To lead by example, he arranged the marriage of his own sister, who was then a student at a *Vidyalayam* to a young man from the Nair community. However, this bold move provoked backlash. The Vidyalayam Committee, citing a breach of the agreement between the school and the student's guardians regarding adherence to institutional rules and conduct, filed a legal case against him and ultimately won.

As the leading voice of the Namboothiri community, the Yogakshema Sabha succeeded in getting two of its prominent leaders elected to the inaugural Cochin Legislative Council in 1925. These representatives introduced the Namboothiri Bill, aiming to reform deeply

entrenched social and legal norms within their community. Despite fierce resistance from conservative quarters, the Bill managed to pass in the Cochin Council. In Travancore, it was approved with relatively little opposition. However, in Cochin, it failed three times before eventually being accepted, largely due to the growing recognition that blocking it was ultimately futile. The reform wave continued in Malabar, where the Madras Presidency Assembly enacted the Bill as the Namboothiri Law.

One of the most significant achievements of the Mahasabha was its challenge to the traditional inheritance system rooted in primogeniture, which gave exclusive rights to the eldest male heir. The new law dismantled this system, granting equal property rights to all family members, regardless of birth. This sequence of reforms, which reshaped the very foundation of property relations among the Namboothiris, owed much to the tireless efforts and visionary leadership of V.T. Bhattathiripad.

At the 1934 annual meeting of the Sabha held in Peramangalam, a bold resolution supporting widow remarriage was put forward. It faced immediate and fierce opposition from conservative members. However, the tide turned when a few legal professionals pointed out that the Government of India had already passed a similar bill, helping to push the resolution through. V.T. Bhattathiripad took the lead in bringing this reform to life by facilitating the marriage of a widow to Mullamangalath Rama Bhattathiripad, popularly known as MRB.

In addition to this landmark step, Bhattathiripad spearheaded other reformist activities such as *Sudham* (ritual purification) and *Misrabhojanam* (inter-dining across caste lines), challenging caste-based taboos. These efforts paved the way for broader change, and in the years that followed, Namboothiri

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women themselves began organising, eventually leading to the formation of the *Antharjana Samajam*, a collective that amplified their voices in the struggle for dignity and reform.

The Madras Namboothiri Act of 1933 (Act XXI) marked a turning point in the efforts to reform the rigid customs of the Namboothiri community. It outlawed *adhivedanam* (the practice of polygamy) and enforced monogamy, while also dismantling strict caste endogamy. The Act legalised *sajathivivaham* (marriage within the same caste) for all senior Namboothiri males and prohibited them from forming *sambandham* (non-marital) relationships.

Yet, the momentum for deeper change did not stop there. Under the determined leadership of V.T. Bhattathiripad, the reform movement continued to challenge long-standing traditions, especially in matters of marriage. One of its most groundbreaking milestones came in 1934, when the first widow remarriage within the Namboothiri community took place. Uma Antharjanam, Bhattathiripad's sister-in-law and the sister of reformer I.C.P. Namboothiri, married M.R. Bhattathiripad, a fellow activist and prominent figure in the movement. The wedding was publicly celebrated, with Parvathy Nenmenimangalam extending an open invitation to all *Antharjanams* in Kerala through *Mathrubhumi*.

Another significant breakthrough occurred in 1940 when the community witnessed its first inter-caste marriage involving an *Antharjanam*. V.T. Parvathy, Bhattathiripad's stepsister, married P.K. Raghava Panikkar, a Nair. This marriage defied long-standing restrictions that allowed Namboothiri men to marry outside the caste but barred

women from doing the same. The match was initially proposed by N.P. Damodaran, a close associate of Bhattathiripad. While Bhattathiripad's father held traditional views and did not fully support inter-caste marriage, he did not oppose the union and offered the couple his blessings.

These events symbolised not only a shift in marriage customs but a larger rupture in the orthodoxy of a deeply conservative social order, driven forward by the unrelenting spirit of reformers like V.T. Bhattathiripad.

2.4.3 *Rajanirangam*

In 1924, the 'Young Men Association' resolved to ignite a wave of reform within the Namboothiri community. Around this time, V.T. Bhattathiripad released *Rajanirangam*, a collection of four short stories that boldly portrayed the realities of Namboothiri life, especially the condition of women. At a time when even fictional depictions of Namboothiri women were taboo, this work broke boundaries. *Rajanirangam* struck a chord with the community, particularly its women, prompting many to reflect on their own lives with newfound awareness. V.T. rarely relied on fiery speeches; instead, he communicated his ideals through his writing and personal choices.

In 1931, he undertook the *Yachana Yatra*, a "Begging March" from Thrissur to the Chandragiri River that spanned seven days. This powerful act of protest aimed to raise funds to help underprivileged Namboothiri children access education. It was not merely a march, it was a cry for dignity and the right to learn, for children who lacked basic resources like school fees, textbooks, and even proper clothing.



R

Recap

1. Vellithuruthi Thazhathu Karutha Patteri Raman Bhattathiripad was born on 26 March 1896 in Mezhathur
2. V.T. Bhattathiripad was aware of the deep-rooted injustices endured by *Antharjanams*
3. V.T. Bhattathiripad's groundbreaking play *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* (*From the Kitchen to the Stage*) marked a significant shift in the landscape of Malayalam theatre
4. M.R. Bhattathiripad's *Marakudakulile Mahanarakam* sparked intense debate
5. In his widely acclaimed autobiography *Kanneerum Kinavum*, he captures the transformative moment of his early education
6. V.T. Bhattathiripad became actively involved with the *Yogakshema Sabha*, a progressive organisation established in 1908
7. The Madras Namboothiri Act of 1933 (Act XXI) marked a turning point in the efforts to reform the rigid customs of the Namboothiri community

O

Objective Questions

1. When and where was *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* first staged?
2. What does the term *Mana* refer to in the context of Namboothiri society?
3. In which year did the weekly *Yogakshemam* begin circulation from Thrissur?
4. Where was the reformist weekly *Yogakshemam* first published?
5. What was the primary purpose of the Namboothiri Bill introduced in the Cochin Legislative Council?
6. Which organisation played a key role in getting the Namboothiri Bill introduced in the Cochin Legislative Council?
7. In which year was the Madras Namboothiri Act (Act XXI) enacted?
8. Which practice was outlawed by the Madras Namboothiri Act of 1933?

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9. In the context of Bhattathiripad's work, what does the term "Appan" refer to?
10. What was the primary aim of the 'Young Men Association' formed in 1924?



Answers

1. 24 December 1929 at Edakkunni
2. The traditional house where Namboothiris lived
3. 1909
4. Thrissur
5. To reform social and legal practices within the Namboothiri community
6. Yogakshema Sabha
7. 1933
8. *Adhivedanam* (polygamy)
9. A young male in a Namboothiri household
10. To ignite reform within the Namboothiri community



Assignments

1. Critically examine the role of V.T. Bhattathiripad in the social reform movement among the Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala. How did his literary and activist efforts contribute to challenging orthodoxy and promoting progressive change?
2. Discuss the origins, objectives, and key activities of the Yoga Kshema Sabha. In what ways did this organisation act as a platform for reform within the conservative Namboothiri community?
3. Describe the impact of the drama *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* by V.T. Bhattathiripad in awakening social consciousness among Kerala's upper-caste communities. What made the play a powerful tool of reform?



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4. Evaluate the challenges faced by V.T. Bhattathiripad and other reformers of the Yoga Kshema Sabha in their attempt to modernise the Namboothiri community. How did they overcome resistance from within their own caste?
5. Compare the role of the Yoga Kshema Sabha with other contemporary reform movements in Kerala. What was unique about its approach, and how did it contribute to the larger renaissance movement in the region.

R

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Makthi Thangal, Vakkam Moulavi and Aikya Sangam

Unit 5

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ recognise the forerunners of the Kerala Muslim renaissance
- ◆ understand the efforts of Makthi Thangal to awaken the Muslim community in Kerala from social stagnation and backwardness
- ◆ explain his emphasis on modern education, especially the need for English and secular learning among Muslims
- ◆ analyse how Makthi Thangal combined Islamic teachings with rational thought and social responsibility

P

Prerequisite

The advent of European intervention ushered in a period of profound unrest and discontent, significantly affecting the socio-economic and religious fabric of the Muslim community. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kerala underwent far-reaching transformations in its social and intellectual spheres. Amid these shifts, various communities articulated distinct responses to the challenges and prospects introduced by colonial rule. Within this context, the Muslim community witnessed the emergence of a vibrant reformist movement, which sought to reconcile traditional Islamic tenets with the imperatives of modernity and socio-political change.

Leading this movement were influential figures like Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal and Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi. At a time when segments of the Muslim society were held back by superstition, lack of education, and rigid customs, these reformers took bold steps to question regressive practices, promote critical thinking, and advocate for progressive education, especially for women and other neglected groups within the community.





Keywords

*Kadora Kudoram, Paropakari, Tuhfath-ul Akhyar Va Hidayth-ul Ashrar,
Marumakkathayam*



Discussion

2.5.1 Makthi Thangal

Makthi Thangal, regarded as one of the first Islamic reformers in Kerala, was born in 1847 in Veliyancode. He came from a respected religious background, his father, Sayyid Ahmad Tangal, was a spiritual leader and follower of Veliyancode Ummar Qazi, while his mother, Shareefa Beevi, hailed from the distinguished Hamdani (Banu Hamdan) tribe of Yemen. This heritage placed Makthi Thangal within the cultural and intellectual currents of the Hadrami diaspora that had long been active along the Malabar Coast. Claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad, the Hadramis were central figures in various reform movements and were instrumental in reshaping the Indian Ocean region into a dynamic centre of intellectual and cultural activity.

Makthi Thangal's childhood days were profoundly shaped by the rich intellectual legacy of the Hadrami tradition. His father served as his first teacher, instilling in him both religious knowledge and a deep respect for learning. After completing his basic education at Chavakkad Higher Elementary School, Makthi pursued advanced religious studies at Veliyancode, Marancheri, and Ponnani, centres known for their classical Islamic scholarship. A gifted linguist, he became proficient in English, Malayalam, Arabic, Hindustani, Persian, Urdu, Tamil, and

the Arabic-Malayalam script. Despite being trained in a traditional system, Makthi gained significant insight into modern governance during his tenure as an excise officer under British rule, a role he held until the age of 35. This unique blend of traditional learning and colonial administrative experience would later inform his reformist outlook.

Makthi Thangal keenly understood the power of print as a tool for social transformation and began using it effectively to reach a wider audience. Although he formally stepped into the world of publishing after resigning from British government service in 1892, his involvement with print began earlier. His first publication, *Kadora Kudoram* (The Hardest Fortress), appeared in 1884 and was a sharp critique of Christian missionary activity. By 1888, he had started contributing to *Satyaprakasham* (True Light), a weekly edited by Kakka Sahib of Cochin, where he also served as sub-editor for nine months. In his writings for this journal, Makthi expressed deep concern over the condition of the Muslim community and called for reform from within. Later, he wrote for *Paropakari* (The Benevolent), a Malayalam periodical published from Calicut and Cochin between 1898 and 1901, further strengthening his commitment to reformist journalism.

Makthi Thangal broke new ground as the first Muslim reformer in Kerala to use

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Malayalam as a medium for articulating reformist thought. Recognising the linguistic gap within the Muslim community, many of whom were not fluent in either English or standard Malayalam, he emphasised the importance of Arabic-Malayalam publications to ensure his message reached the grassroots. His commitment to this vision took shape through the launch of the fortnightly *Tuhfat-ul Akhyar Va Hidayth-ul Ashrar* (A Precious Gift and Guidance for the Virtuous). His pioneering work received strong backing from a rising class of Muslim intellectuals and publishers, such as Cheneth Valappil Sayyid Abdul Rahman Hydrose (also known as Adima Musliyaar), Arakkal Kunjahammad Haji of Kochi, and Aniyapurath Ammu Sahib of Thalassery, all of whom played a vital role in sustaining a vibrant Muslim print culture in Kerala. His journal contributions spanned a wide range of topics, including current affairs - both local and international, Quranic interpretation, history, personal development, and community dialogue through question and answer sections.

A firm believer in the transformative power of education, Makti saw modern learning as essential to the progress of Kerala's Muslim community. He placed particular importance on fluency in both English and Malayalam, arguing that promoting Malayalam through his writings would encourage its adoption and help usher the community into modernity. This emphasis on language was not merely practical but deeply philosophical, Makti saw language as a key component of identity. He believed that acquiring knowledge and engaging with religious texts in one's own language would not only modernise Muslims but also reconnect them with the core teachings of Islam. His efforts laid the groundwork for a modern Muslim identity in Kerala and advocated for the community's meaningful participation in the region's evolving public life.

Makthi Thangal once remarked that since the *Quran* is in Arabic, translating it into Malayalam could be an effective way for believers to truly grasp its meaning. Driven by this conviction, he undertook the mission of rendering the *Quran* accessible to Malayalam-speaking Muslims, believing that such translations would lead to a clearer understanding of Islam and help eliminate un-Islamic and syncretic practices. He strongly advocated for translating all madrasa textbooks into Malayalam as well, noting that students could save valuable years of study if they were taught foundational Islamic texts, such as the *Pathu Kithab* (a set of ten fiqh works), in their native language. For Makti, language was not just a medium of instruction but a tool for religious clarity and social reform.

Makthi Thangal openly challenged the authority of the traditional *Ulema*, urging the community to question their rigid interpretations. He was deeply concerned about the declining social status of Muslims amidst changing political and societal conditions, and he believed that blind adherence to outdated religious authority was part of the problem. He strongly criticised the *Ulema* for opposing modern, secular education and the study of contemporary languages. In his view, these were not threats to Islam but essential components of its spirit, tools that could empower the community and align it with the true, progressive essence of the faith.

2.5.1.1 Makthi as a Reformist

Makti's reformist agenda was the reinterpretation of Islamic principles based on scriptures to return to true Islam. He drew a strict boundary between 'haram and halal', 'scriptural Islam and popular Islam'. His reformist and rationalist ideas were marked by the emphasis on the rationality of Islamic belief and thought. The Islam



Block-1

practiced by the Muslims, especially the Mappilas in the pre-reform era was also syncretic in nature. Several rituals like *Uruz* festival, *Nerccas*, reciting *Malas*, *Maulids* and *Ratibs* were practiced by the Mappilas along with some Hindu social customs like *Marumakkathayam* (matrilineal system of inheritance) and beliefs in astrology.

In his writings, Makti emphasised on the eradication of what he felt to be accretions to Islam and argued for adherence to the authority of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*; in addition, he severely criticized *shirk* (practicing idolatry or polytheism), *bida-at* (innovations or heretical doctrine), superstitious beliefs as un-Islamic customs. He fought against practices such as *Muharram*, *Kodikuttu*, *Chandanakkudom*, *Nercha*, *Maulid* and *Malappattu* in which Muslims ceremoniously mediated dead Sufi saints, martyrs and prophets in their everyday life. Makti attacked Sufism as un-Islamic.

While his writings concerning Sufism were mostly directed against the Sufi cults, he also attacked the silence of orthodox ulema and their toleration of these practices. Indeed, he points out that many of the ulema propagated Sufism and sold the *karamat* (miracles) of Sufi saints to mundane life. This may not have only been a fanciful statement.

Most of his speeches emphasised the Quranic teachings against idolatry and advocated that Muslims should stick to the principle of oneness of Allah, which meant that Muslims were not meant to seek help from anyone except Allah. He also campaigned against the practice of certain Muslim praying directly and seeking fortune and help from *shaykhs* (masters) and *awliyas* (saints).

Makti realised that his reformist discourse never achieved the community needs until the incorporation of women into the reformist project. Makti wrote a monograph *Naari Naraabhichaari* (Women always follow Men) to define the roles and social behavior

of women. This monograph attempted to define proper Muslim feminine etiquette and as a part of spiritual reform movements for the women. Advocating both religious and secular education for women, Makti aimed to train women to be pious and provided an ideal picture of how devoted Muslim women should be to their families and husbands and how she should act when faced with the challenges of modernity. In his monograph *Naari Naraabhichaari*, he argued that education was in fact more essential for women than men. The primary objective of Makti in women's education was to prepare them emotionally and biologically to satisfactorily perform their roles as mother and homemaker.

Scholars have considered the matrilineal system of inheritance and matrilocal residence as a distinguishing feature of Mappila society. In his part, Makti condemned the matrilineal practices of Mappilas as un-Islamic and demanded that property should be inherited through the patrilineal line. Criticising this system as a strong remnant of Hindu culture, he wrote a small note in his tract *Parcaleetha Porkalam* (Battlefield for Deciding the Comforter) and articles in *Salah-ul Iqvan* titled 'Muslimkalum Marumakathayavum' (Muslims and Matriliney) with a strident critique of the practice. With his emphasis on correct Muslim behaviour based on Islamic principles, Makti distinguished Muslims from non-Muslims and non-believers which articulated a sense of Muslim exclusiveness and Muslim self-awareness.

2.5.2 Vakkam Maulavi (1873-1932)

Abdul Khader, born in 1873 into a respected trading family in the village of Vakkam in Chirayinkil Taluk (present-day Thiruvananthapuram district), was nurtured in an environment that valued learning. His parents were deeply invested in his education and arranged for him to study under renowned

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scholars from across India. Among his tutors was a travelling Arab scholar who played a key role in shaping the young boy's linguistic and intellectual growth. Under their guidance, Abdul Khader developed mastery in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Tamil, Sanskrit, and English, along with a deep curiosity that drove him to absorb knowledge far beyond conventional boundaries.

Abdul Khader launched the influential newspaper *Swadeshabhimani* on 19 January 1905, appointing Ramakrishna Pillai as its editor. Together, they boldly committed themselves to exposing injustice and fearlessly speaking the truth to the public. Alongside his journalistic pursuits, Abdul Khader also took steps toward uplifting his community by establishing the *Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham* in 1906. However, *Swadeshabhimani* faced the wrath of the colonial authorities due to its unflinching criticism of British rule. On 26 September 1910, the British government banned the newspaper, seized its press, and exiled Ramakrishna Pillai from Travancore. Despite this major setback, Abdul Khader remained undeterred in his mission as a reformer and cultural visionary.

Abdul Khader authored numerous works on Islamic philosophy and translated several significant texts from Persian and Arabic into Malayalam, which earned him widespread recognition and the name Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi. A committed humanist and a strong advocate of democratic ideals, he offered deep reflections on society, religion, and culture. His reformist vision sought to steer the Muslim community in Kerala towards progress by separating authentic religious principles from blind customs and superstitions. Widely regarded as Kerala's first socio-religious reformer, he devoted himself to the upliftment of the Muslim community, particularly through the spread of modern education. He passionately campaigned to awaken his people to the value

of learning and worked tirelessly to advance educational opportunities for women.

Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi launched several Arabi-Malayalam periodicals with the aim of raising educational standards and social consciousness among Kerala's Muslim community. Notably, *Al-Islam* (1918) and *Deepika* (1931) were instrumental in helping people better understand the core teachings of Islam. In 1931, he also established the *Islamia* Publishing House to systematically publish books aligned with his reformist ideals.

His publications, however, did not sit well with the conservative elements in the community. By openly questioning practices like *nercca* (devotional offerings), *uroos* festivals, and saint death anniversaries held at dargahs, Moulavi challenged long-held traditions. This provoked strong backlash from orthodox scholars, *ulema* issued fatwas urging the public to avoid his works, and many *mullahs* labelled him a *kafir* or *Wahabi* to discredit him. Despite this opposition, his journals ignited a powerful wave of reform within the Muslim community. Sadly, due to a lack of committed successors, these progressive publications could not be sustained for long.

The inclusion of Arabic instruction in all public schools with Muslim students in Travancore was largely due to the relentless efforts of Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi. He ensured that Muslim girls received free education and that boys benefited from fee waivers and scholarships. Taking a hands-on approach, he authored Arabic textbooks and even developed a teacher training manual for primary school instructors. The government eventually adopted his recommendations to formalise qualifications for Arabic teachers.

In recognition of his contributions, Moulavi was appointed chairman of the Muslim Board by the Travancore government. His leadership was instrumental in unifying



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Muslims across Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar through the *Muslim Aikya Sangham*, founded in 1922. This organisation was dedicated to the integrated development of the Muslim community through education and social reform.

Moulavi's strategy for social change centered on building strong regional institutions. He played a key role in founding the *All Travancore Muslim Mahajana Sabha* and the *Chirayinkil Taluk Muslim Samagam*, further solidifying his position as a foremost leader in community upliftment. He passed away on 23 August 1932, leaving behind a legacy of reform and empowerment.

2.5.2.1 Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham (Organisation for Muslim Unity)

The early reform efforts among Kerala's Muslims had sparked an emerging cultural awareness, but by the 1920s, this growing consciousness evolved into a more organised and purposeful movement. This transformation was symbolised by the establishment of the *Muslim Aikya Sangham* in 1922, which later came to be known as the *Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham*, likely around 1925. It marked the first concerted attempt to unite Muslims across the region to collectively pursue their social, religious, and educational aspirations.

The formation of the *Aikya Sangham* was deeply influenced by the reformers like Vakkom Moulavi, Hamadani Tangal, and K. M. Moulavi, as well as by the efforts of local initiatives such as the *Nishpaksha Sangham* in Kodungallur, the *Islam Dharma Palana Sangam*, the *Travancore Muslim Mahajana Sabha*, and the *Chirayankieth Taluk Muslim Samajam*. Established in 1922 at Kodungallur in the princely state of Cochin, the *Aikya Sangham* emerged under the leadership of prominent Muslim personalities including Manappattu P. Kunhu Muhammad Haji, Kottappurathu Seethi Muhammad Sahib,

K. M. Seethi Sahib, K. M. Moulavi, and E. K. Moulavi.

The Muslim *Aikya Sangham* held its inaugural Annual Conference on May 27–28, 1923, at Eriyad. This gathering proved to be a milestone in the *Sangham*'s evolution, as it marked the beginning of a more organised and strategic phase. Leaders used the occasion to lay out concrete plans and a clear roadmap for broadening the organisation's influence across Kerala. Presiding over the conference was the distinguished reformer Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi from Travancore, whose presence underscored the importance and reformist spirit of the event.

The Muslim *Aikya Sangham* was founded with the primary goal of fostering collective progress within the Muslim community, with a particular emphasis on social reform and the spread of modern education. Alongside this, the organisation actively sought to eliminate superstitions and practices considered un-Islamic that were prevalent among the masses. Inspired by its vision, numerous primary and secondary schools were established. One of the *Sangham*'s long-standing aspirations was to set up a college in Kerala modelled after the M.A.O. College in Aligarh. Although the organisation remained active for only about twelve years, its impact was profound, playing a crucial role in shaping a distinct community consciousness among Kerala's Muslims.

The *Aikya Sangham* movement also voiced strong criticism against the entrenched social inequalities in Kerala and how these injustices affected the Muslim community. Seeking to promote the Islamic ideals of equality and fraternity, its leaders frequently addressed the importance of respectful and compassionate conduct towards fellow human beings. They urged Muslims to treat followers of other religions with dignity and to refrain from causing them harm. Additionally, the movement opposed practices like matrilineal inheritance and

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other customs that had been assimilated from surrounding communities, viewing them as contrary to Islamic principles.

The *Aikya Sangham* played a crucial role in safeguarding the socio-religious, educational, and emerging political interests of Kerala's Muslim community. In just over a decade, it succeeded in fostering a deep sense of awareness and reform-mindedness among both intellectuals and the wider public.

Notably, as its mission evolved, the organisation began incorporating political demands into its broader reform policy, specifically advocating for Muslim representation in legislative and civic bodies. Through a combination of public conferences, speeches, inter-community dialogues, and widely circulated writings in both Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam, the *Aikya Sangham* helped usher in a new phase of civic consciousness and active

participation in Kerala's Muslim public life.

To spread its reformist vision more effectively within the community, the *Aikya Sangham* brought out two notable journals: *Muslim Aikyam* in Malayalam and *Al-Irshad* in Arabi-Malayalam. These publications became key instruments in shaping public opinion and mobilising support. Under its influence and leadership, several primary and secondary schools were established across Kerala. Significantly, its leaders were instrumental in founding *Farook College*, which later emerged as the first Muslim-run institution of higher learning in the state.

Following its 12th annual conference held at Cannanore in 1934, the *Aikya Sangham* decided to wind up its activities. It formally merged with the *Kerala Muslim Majlis* and handed over its assets and resources to *Farook College*, ensuring that its legacy would continue through educational advancement.

R Recap

- ◆ Makthi Thangal, regarded as one of the first Islamic reformers in Kerala, was born in 1847
- ◆ He formally stepped into the world of publishing after resigning from British government service in 1892
- ◆ His first publication, *Kadora Kudoram* (The Hardest Fortress), appeared in 1884
- ◆ He launched the fortnightly *Tuhfat-ul Akhyar Va Hidayth-ul Ashrar* (A Precious Gift and Guidance for the Virtuous)
- ◆ Makti wrote a monograph *Naari Naraabhichaari* (Women always follow Men) to define the roles and social behaviour of women
- ◆ Abdul Khader launched the influential newspaper *Swadeshabhimani* on 19 January 1905
- ◆ Abdul Khader also took steps toward uplifting his community by establishing the *Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham* in 1906
- ◆ In 1931 Abdul Khadar also established the Islamia Publishing House



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- ◆ Established in 1922 at Kodungallur in the princely state of Cochin, the Aikya Sangham emerged under the leadership of prominent Muslim personalities
- ◆ The formation of the Aikya Sangham was deeply influenced by the reformers like Vakkom Moulavi, Hamadani Tangal, and K. M. Moulavi
- ◆ The Muslim Aikya Sangham was founded with the primary goal of fostering collective progress within the Muslim community



Objective Questions

1. What was the title of Makthi Thangal's first publication?
2. In which year did Makthi Thangal's *Kadora Kudoram* first appear in print?
3. Who was the editor of the weekly *Satyaprakasham* to which Makthi Thangal contributed?
4. *Paropakari*, a Malayalam journal that Makthi Thangal contributed to, was published from which cities?
5. What was the central theme of Makthi Thangal's writings in *Satyaprakasham*?
6. On which date was the newspaper *Swadeshabhimani* launched?
7. Who was appointed as the editor of *Swadeshabhimani* by Abdul Khader?
8. What was the name of the organisation founded by Abdul Khader in 1906?
9. Where was the first Annual Conference of the *Muslim Aikya Sangham* held?
10. Who presided over the first Session of the Annual Conference of the *Muslim Aikya Sangham*?

A

Answers

1. *Kadora Kudoram*
2. 1884
3. Kakka Sahib
4. Kochi and Kozhikode
5. Reform within the Muslim community
6. 19 January 1905
7. K. Ramakrishna Pillai
8. *Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham*
9. Eriyad
10. Vakkam Abdul Qadir Moulavi

A

Assignments

1. Critically assess the role of Makthi Thangal in laying the intellectual foundations of Kerala's Muslim reform movement. How did his ideas influence later reformers like Vakkam Moulavi?
2. Analyse the social and educational vision of Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi. How did his publishing efforts and institutional strategies contribute to modernising Kerala's Muslim community?
3. Trace the origin and evolution of the Muslim Aikya Sangham. In what ways did this organisation act as a platform for collective action and reform?
4. Compare and contrast the approaches of Makthi Thangal and Vakkam Moulavi in their efforts to reform the Muslim community.
5. Examine the challenges and resistance faced by Vakkam Moulavi in implementing reform, particularly from traditional religious scholars and institutions. What does this reveal about the nature of socio-religious reform?



R

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Unit 6

Chattambi Swamikal, Mannathu Padmanabhan and the NSS

L

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine the radical role of Chattambi Swamikal in Kerala's social reform movement
- ◆ reflect on Swamikal's critique of Brahmanism and caste through historical, philosophical, and rational methods
- ◆ differentiate between universalist reformers and caste-based reformers
- ◆ evaluate the impact of the Nair Service Society (NSS) on education and community consolidation

P

Prerequisite

The nineteenth century in Kerala was marked by a profound social awakening that contested the entrenched structures of caste hierarchy, Brahmanical hegemony, and the systemic marginalisation of subordinated communities. This unit undertakes a critical exploration of the complex trajectories of social reform in modern Kerala through an analytical engagement with the lives and intellectual contributions of two pivotal figures, Chattambi Swamikal and Mannathu Padmanabhan. Emerging during the transitional period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both reformers engaged with the deeply stratified social order, yet articulated markedly divergent ideological and strategic responses.



Block-1

Chattambi Swamikal, a radical spiritual philosopher and polymath, subverted Brahmanical orthodoxy by offering alternative hermeneutics of religious scriptures, vernacular traditions, and historical narratives. His epistemological interventions advocated for caste egalitarianism, cultural pluralism, and an inclusive ethical order, thereby providing a critical intellectual foundation for the social reform and awakening in modern Kerala, subsequent anti-caste mobilisations. In contrast, Mannathu Padmanabhan, the architect of the Nair Service Society, adopted a reformist paradigm rooted in caste consolidation. His efforts were oriented towards the moral regeneration, educational uplift, and political mobilisation of the Nair community, seeking to fortify its position within the emerging colonial-modern polity.

By juxtaposing these figures, the unit interrogates the dialectical tensions that characterised Kerala's encounter with modernity—between radical egalitarianism and caste-based conservatism, between universalist aspirations of social justice and the particularistic impulses of identity assertion. In doing so, it illuminates the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of reformist discourse in colonial Kerala.

K

Keywords

Kerala Renaissance, Brahmanical dominance, Caste hierarchy, *Pracheena Malayalam*, *Avarna*, Syncretic traditions, Temple entry movement, Social reform, Rational inquiry, *Advaita Vedanta*, Pluralism, *Vimochana Samaram*

D

Discussion

Swami Vivekananda, during his visit to Kerala in the late 19th century, famously remarked that the region was a “lunatic asylum” of castes. His comment captured the deep entrenchment of caste divisions in Travancore society, where not only untouchability but even unapproachability and ‘unseeability’ were institutionalised. It was within this highly stratified social landscape that Chattambi Swamikal was born and came of age. In the mid-nineteenth

century, the princely state of Travancore, was characterised by a rigid caste hierarchy, social conservatism, and limited access to education and public space. The Brahminical order dominated intellectual, spiritual, and ritual life, while social mobility remained restricted for even the upper non-Brahmin castes, including the Nairs. The influence of colonial administration had begun to alter aspects of governance and law, but traditional structures remained largely intact.

Block-1

Education was accessible primarily to upper-caste males, with Sanskrit learning especially confined to Namboodiri Brahmins.

2.6.1 Chattambi Swamikal and the Modernisation of Kerala Society

Chattambi Swamikal was born in 1853 as Kunjan Pillai into a Nair family of modest means in Kannamoola, near Thiruvananthapuram. His father, Vasudeva Sharma, passed away early in his life, and the household was largely supported by his mother, Nangamma Pillai, and her extended matrilineal kin. The family belonged to a socially prominent caste, yet their economic situation did not afford Kunjan the benefits of formal education. He grew up in a society where access to learning was mediated by both caste and class, and where intellectual spaces were largely exclusionary.

Despite these limitations, Kunjan developed a keen interest in learning. He listened attentively to conversations, religious recitations, and local discourses. He gradually acquired the basics of Sanskrit and Tamil through informal contact with scholars and religious practitioners. His curiosity and debating skills earned him the nickname “Chattambi,” a term denoting student monitorship or leadership among peers, though he was not formally enrolled in any institution.

The intellectual environment of nineteenth-century Kerala was diverse, though stratified. While Vedic and Smarta traditions were dominant, parallel streams of thought from Buddhism, Jainism, Tantric sects, and devotional movements existed, often in marginalised or folk contexts. Chattambi Swamikal began to explore these alternative sources of knowledge. Over time, he travelled extensively, engaged with various philosophical systems, and studied religious texts across traditions, including

Christianity and Islam; without confining himself to orthodoxy.

Chattambi Swamikal’s formative years thus reflected the tensions of a society at the intersection of tradition and change. He came of age during a period marked by social rigidity but also by growing contestation of inherited structures. His intellectual development and reformist orientation were responses to the specific cultural and institutional exclusions of nineteenth-century Kerala.

2.6.1.2 The Intellectual Rebellion against Brahmanism

At the heart of Chattambi Swamikal’s interventions was a pointed critique of Brahmanical authority. His writings, especially in works like *Pracheena Malayalam*, sought to dismantle the historical and theological justifications for Namboodiri supremacy in Kerala. Swamikal refuted the myth of Parasurama gifting Kerala to Brahmins, challenging the legitimacy of Namboodiri land ownership and their exclusive access to religious rituals. He presented a counter-narrative based on rational analysis and indigenous oral traditions, arguing that the land and its social structure had evolved through local, organic processes rather than divine or mythological mandates.

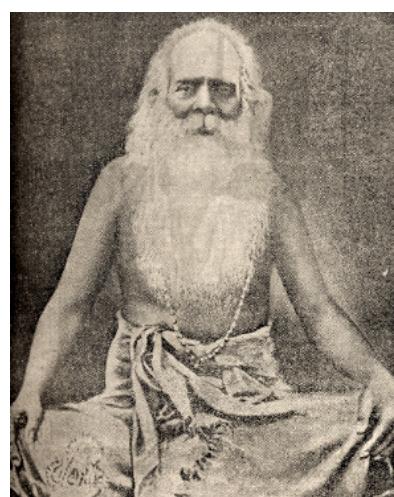


Fig. 2.6.1 Chattambi Swamikal



Block-1

Swamikal also dissected the caste system from a historical-materialist perspective, recognising how social stratification served the interests of a parasitic class of Brahmins who dominated not just religion but knowledge systems. He described how the productive classes; *Pulayars*, *Parayars*, and other so-called *avaranas*, were alienated from their labour and degraded into hereditary servitude. His analysis of caste was deeply grounded in economic and social terms, rejecting the theological justification of inequality. This marked a significant intellectual break from earlier religious reformers, positioning Swamikal as a social theorist as well as a spiritual reformer.

2.6.1.3 Reclaiming Knowledge for the Marginalised

Chattambi Swamikal's critique extended to the epistemological domain. The Vedas, which were considered divine and unchallengeable by orthodoxy, were placed under rational scrutiny. He argued that the Vedas were human compositions, written by sages and not divinely revealed truths. According to Swamikal, the Smritis and Sutras that excluded women and Shudras from Vedic learning were mere social conventions rather than sacred injunctions. By contesting the mantra "*Na Stree Shudrau Vedam Adhyiyatam*," (Let not women and Shudras study the Vedas.). He asserted the right of all human beings to pursue knowledge and spiritual growth. In *Pracheena Malayalam*, he provides counterevidence from the Vedas and Upanishads to argue that Shudras and women were not excluded in the earliest religious teachings.

This was revolutionary in a society where education and learning had long been monopolised by upper-caste males. Chattambi Swamikal envisioned a knowledge system rooted in equality and free inquiry. His philosophical works reflect influences

from diverse traditions; Advaita Vedanta, Siddha philosophy, and Tamil Saiva thought; demonstrating his belief in intercultural synthesis and pluralism. He insisted that spiritual truth was not the sole property of any caste or creed, and that morality and wisdom were universal values.

2.6.1.4 A Historical Conception of Kerala's Society

Another defining feature of Chattambi Swamikal's thought was his historicisation of Kerala society. In opposition to the ahistorical narratives of Brahmanical texts, he examined Kerala's past using rational and critical methods. His writings contain early elements of historical sociology, identifying patterns of land ownership, labour relations, and power structures. He described how the Namboodiri-dominated Brahmanical system emerged by appropriating the lands and surplus of producers, converting organic communities into rigid caste categories for exploitation. His critique of caste as a social construct and his insistence on moral equality were foundational ideas later echoed by reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and even modern Kerala Marxist historians.

This approach laid the intellectual groundwork for later historians and social reformers. His historicism was not a mere academic pursuit; it served a political purpose: to reclaim dignity and agency for the oppressed. By asserting that caste was not divinely ordained but historically constructed, Swamikal legitimised the struggle for its abolition. He offered the subaltern a new identity not grounded in pollution or ritual inferiority but in historical contribution and moral worth. He delegitimised the religious basis of social stratification and created a framework for resistance. This empowered the oppressed with a new consciousness based on dignity, labour, and ethics, rather than ritual status.

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2.6.1.5 Reimagining Kerala as a Pluralistic and Rational Society

Chattambi Swamikal's vision of Kerala was pluralistic and anti-hierarchical. He believed that spiritual wisdom was not limited to Sanskrit or Brahmanical culture but also resided in tribal, Tamil, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. His interest in Tamil Siddha literature, his openness to Buddhist teachings, and his reverence for tribal customs demonstrate his commitment to a syncretic intellectual tradition.

He also refuted the idea that Kerala was a Brahmanical gift. Instead, he identified the region's cultural and linguistic formation as an outcome of diverse human interactions. His concept of Kerala as "Malayala Bhoomi" was rooted in the lived experiences and contributions of all its communities' not just the priestly castes. He presented a historiography that centred the marginalised and reinterpreted myths as ideological tools of domination.

2.6.1.6 Social Change and the Social Reform

Chattambi Swamikal had a notable influence on the early spiritual and intellectual development of Sree Narayana Guru. In the 1880s, Guru met Swamikal, who introduced him to Ayyavu Swamikal, a respected teacher of meditation. This meeting marked a key moment in Guru's spiritual formation. While the two reformers followed different paths—Guru emphasised organised religious reform, and Swamikal adopted a more philosophical and textual approach—they both opposed caste hierarchies and promoted spiritual equality.

Swamikal questioned the exclusive authority of Brahmins over religious knowledge. He wrote in Malayalam and Tamil, aiming to make sacred texts accessible to non-Brahmin communities. His writings

rejected caste-based restrictions on learning and ritual. Guru's act of consecrating a Shiva idol at Aruvippuram in 1888, along with the declaration that it was an "Ezhava Shiva," echoed this critique of ritual exclusion and caste privilege.

Their shared ideals are considered to have shaped the broader context of the Kerala Renaissance. The reform movements that followed—such as temple entry campaigns, the push for universal education, and land reform—emerged in an intellectual atmosphere informed by their teachings. Both figures are often seen as central to Kerala's transition toward a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

While Chattambi Swamikal's radical critique of Brahmanical hegemony and caste oppression laid the philosophical and ethical foundations for Kerala's modern social reform movements, the early twentieth century saw the emergence of reform initiatives rooted more in caste consolidation and community upliftment. As Kerala society began to modernise further under colonial influence, communities that had historically held intermediate or dominant positions, such as the Nairs, began to experience a crisis of identity and status. In response, leaders like Mannathu Padmanabha Pillai sought to reorganise and revitalise these communities through structured associations like the Nair Service Society (NSS). Unlike the universalist and anti-caste vision of Chattambi Swamikal, the NSS represented a form of caste-based modernisation, aiming to protect and advance the interests of a particular community within the framework of modern education, politics, and social reform.

2.6.2 Mannathu Padmanabha and the Nair Service Society

The early twentieth century represented a pivotal phase in Kerala's social history,



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characterised by far-reaching movements aimed at caste reform, educational advancement, and political mobilisation. Within this dynamic socio-political context, Mannathu Padmanabha (1878–1970) emerged as a seminal figure in the domain of community reform and collective self-assertion. Renowned for his instrumental role in the foundation of the Nair Service Society (NSS) in 1914, Padmanabhan's contributions reflected a strategic engagement with the challenges of colonial modernity. His reformist agenda sought to revitalise the Nair community through institutional consolidation, moral regeneration, and the pursuit of educational and political empowerment, positioning him as a central architect of Kerala's evolving socio-cultural landscape.

2.6.2.1 Early Life and Intellectual Formation

Mannathu Padmanabhan was born on 2 January 1878 in Perunna, near Changanassery, in the princely state of Travancore. Trained initially as a teacher, he began his career in education in 1893 and later entered the legal profession in 1905. However, his true influence emerged in the field of social reform and community organisation. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of increasing anxiety within the Nair community, as they faced declining feudal privileges, internal disunity, and competition from upwardly mobile lower castes; most notably the Ezhavas, who were mobilising under leaders such as Sree Narayana Guru.

2.6.2.2 Formation of the Nair Service Society (NSS)

The NSS was founded in response to a perceived decline in the Nair community's fortunes in early 20th-century Travancore. Mannathu Padmanabhan, a lawyer influenced by Western liberal, saw the Nairs as suffering from "extravaganza" and "anachronistic

customs" that threatened their customs. To address this, he and a group of young Nair leaders organized at the local level starting with a Nair Karayogam at Perunna, Changanassery in 1912 and by 31 October 1914 formally founded the *Nair Samudaya Brithya Jana Sangha* "for the service of the Nair community. This body, renamed the Nair Service Society (NSS) on 11 July was structured much like Gopal Krishna Gokhale's Servants of India Society, with K. Kelappan as President and Mannathu Padmanabhan as Secretary.

From its inception the NSS sought both to reform Nair society internally and to rally the caste as a political force. Padmanabhan viewed the Nairs as culturally dominant in Kerala's Hindu hierarchy and he aimed to use a unified Nair organization to safeguard their position while reforming their customs. In Padmanabhan's words, Nairs "deserve proper and timely treatment" to prevent collapse of the community. Thus, the NSS was intended not just as a charitable or educational society but as a modern "community organisation" to defend Nair interests and install reform.

2.6.2.3 NSS and Social Reform

Education was the most visible and arguably the most successful domain of NSS activity. Starting with the Karukachal English School in 1915, the NSS went on to establish a wide range of educational institutions, from primary schools to colleges and professional training centres. These institutions played a crucial role in increasing literacy and modernising the outlook of the Nair middle class, which gradually reoriented itself toward bureaucratic, professional, and commercial occupations.

Yet, the NSS's social reform agenda was selective. While it opposed certain traditional practices within the community, such as excessive litigation, lavish dowries, and wasteful ceremonies, it was less forthcoming in challenging systemic casteism. The

Block-1

NSS did not challenge the broader caste hierarchy in which the Nairs held a relatively privileged position. In this respect, its reformism was conservative, it aimed at internal purification and cohesion rather than radical transformation.

Padmanabhan did take part in significant reformist struggles such as the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) and the Guruvayur Satyagraha (1931–32), both of which aimed to secure temple entry rights for marginalised castes. In a notable gesture, he opened his family temple to all castes. However, critics have pointed out that these gestures, though progressive, did not fundamentally alter the NSS's commitment to Nair consolidation and advancement, often at the cost of broader social unity.

2.6.2.4 The Vimochana Samaram (Liberation Struggle) of 1958–59

In 1958–59, Kerala witnessed the *Vimochana Samaram* or “Liberation Struggle”, a large anti-Communist movement that forced the fall of the first elected Communist government. The NSS under Mannathu Padmanabhan was a key leader of this agitation. Its involvement reflected both ideological opposition to the Communist reforms and Nair community interests. Initially, Mannam had even praised the Communists' Education Bill, but he turned against the government when “*the Agrarian Relations Bill would dispossess the Nair community of their land*”.

The NSS's immediate complaints were the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill (land reform) and the government's reservation policy. These measures threatened traditional Nair landholdings and caste privileges, so Padmanabhan mobilised the community to resist them. NSS leaders explicitly stated that Nair anger over the land reform bill and the reservation policy drove their participation. But they also framed

the struggle in broader terms: defending religious and educational institutions. In public, the NSS and Church denounced the government's Kerala Education Act (which regulated private schools) as anti-Hindu, even though Padmanabhan had privately approved of it. This suggests that the NSS's liberation campaign combined genuine mass grievances (unemployment, schooling, poverty among Nairs and others) with a tactical alliance: it “clubbed the grievances of both the church and [the] community” when the opportunity arose. In Padmanabhan's own words, “*the NSS found common cause with (the Catholic Church)*”

By early 1959 a grand coalition had formed: all the main non-Communist parties (Congress, Praja Socialist Party, Muslim League, Revolutionary Socialist Party) aligned with community groups (the NSS and the Catholic Church) under Padmanabhan's leadership. The NSS rallied Nairs through its network of local *karayogams*, while the Church mobilized Christians. The alliance's motto was literally “*Vimochana*” (liberation) from Communist rule. Opposition leaders framed their struggle as upholding democracy and religion against a “dictatorship” of one party. As one commentator notes, the Congress high command even supported the NSS-led agitation: Nehru's government “extended support to the KPCC to agitate with other opposition parties and community organisations” in what became an extra-constitutional movement.

The protests took two phases. The first (April–June 1959) was largely mass agitation, culminating in marches and strikes. NSS cadres marched under Mannam's banner – he emerged as “the towering figure of the Liberation Struggle” The second phase (June–July 1959) turned to what supporters called “*Direct Action*”, involving general strikes, civil disobedience and clashes. By late July the violence and political pressure led the Governor (with central government assent)



Block-1

to dismiss the EMS ministry. On 30–31 July 1959, Kerala's first elected Communist cabinet was removed and President's Rule imposed.

2.6.2.5 Mannathu Padmanabhan's Political Thought and Activities

Mannathu Padmanabhan combined nationalist politics with community leadership in a unique blend of ideas. Intellectually he was influenced by Western liberalism and utilitarianism; one biographer calls him “a product of western liberal thoughts” who sought rational social reforms. He believed in modern education and humanism, yet also in strong caste solidarity. In practice, Padmanabhan joined the Indian National Congress in the 1940s and played a notable role in Travancore's politics. In 1947–49 he led anti-royalist protests Dewan Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, advocating Travancore's merger with Indias. For these freedom activities he was nominated to the Travancore Legislative Assembly in 1949. This shows how he was part of the mainstream independence movement: as a Congress worker he helped “conquer the unexplored areas” of struggle and earned status as a mass leader.

Simultaneously, Padmanabhan used his grassroots base to implement reforms. He campaigned for women's rights and against regressive customs: for example, he successfully advocated raising the minimum marriage age (the Travancore Nair *Marumakkathayam Act* of 1935) and ending child marriage rituals. He also took concrete steps in temple administration. In the late 1940s he was appointed the first President of the Travancore Devaswom Board (which managed Hindu temples). From this post he introduced reforms in temple management (e.g. improving accountability), though this angered some and led to his removal. During this period he even helped found the *Hindu*

Maha Mandalam, Kerala's first pan-Hindu consolidation movement, aimed at uniting upper and lower castes under reformist leadership .

Unlike contemporaries such as Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, whose philosophies centred on the eradication of caste hierarchy and the advancement of marginalised communities, Padmanabhan's efforts often reinforced a collective Nair identity. His involvement in campaigns like the Vaikom Satyagraha signified a willingness to collaborate across caste lines, but these instances did not amount to a full repudiation of caste privilege. For example, while Ayyankali mobilised Dalits for labour and educational rights, and Sree Narayana Guru's teachings emphasised spiritual and social equality beyond caste, Padmanabhan's reforms aimed primarily at preserving the socio-economic position of the Nair community in the face of colonial and postcolonial shifts.

Politically, Padmanabhan aligned with nationalist forces, joining the Indian National Congress and actively opposing the autocratic rule of Diwan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. His role in the 1959 Vimochana Samaram (Liberation Struggle) was particularly telling: while framed as a defence of democracy, it was also a mobilisation against the Communist government's land reforms and reservation policies, which were perceived as threats to upper-caste landholdings and influence. The movement's coalition, bringing together the NSS, Catholic Church, and anti-Communist political parties, demonstrated his ability to forge broad alliances while advancing sectarian interests.

Padmanabhan's views on democracy were contradictory. He advocated for participatory governance and criticised authoritarianism yet often resisted redistributive policies that threatened traditional hierarchies. His leadership of the Travancore Devaswom

Block-1

Board and support for reform within temple institutions highlight his commitment to rationalising tradition, but also his discomfort with relinquishing caste-based control over Hindu religious life.

Posthumously, interpretations of Padmanabhan's legacy have been complex. Some view him as a moderniser who expanded access to education and rational thought within his community. Others point to the NSS's continued opposition to caste-based affirmative action and its alignment with conservative political forces as evidence of the enduring influence of his caste-centric vision. Unlike Guru or Ayyankali, who are remembered as icons of egalitarianism, Padmanabhan is often seen as a figure who straddled reform and conservatism.

In sum, Mannathu Padmanabhan's contributions to Kerala's public life were significant but circumscribed. His reforms improved educational and social infrastructure within the Nair community, yet his politics reflected the limits of upper-caste-led reform movements in fully confronting caste inequality. His legacy invites both admiration for his organisational brilliance and critical reflection on the boundaries of community-based reform in a society structured by caste.

2.6.2.6 The NSS in Post-Padmanabhan Kerala

Following the death of Mannathu Padmanabhan in 1970, the Nair Service Society (NSS) has continued to be a prominent force in Kerala's socio-political landscape. While it officially positions itself as a secular, non-partisan organisation devoted to community service, its actions and interventions often reflect deeper political alignments and caste-based advocacy.

Publicly, NSS leaders have consistently reaffirmed the organisation's commitment to democratic and secular principles. For

instance, General Secretary G. Sukumaran Nair declared in 2015 that the NSS maintains "equidistance from all political parties," underscoring its claim of neutrality. Yet, in practice, the Society has historically leaned towards the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), engaging with political actors who are perceived to be amenable to its agenda. Despite affirming its secular ethos, the NSS has been reluctant to associate with overtly Hindu nationalist platforms, explicitly rejecting calls to join a "broad Hindu alliance" in 2015. Such decisions signal a strategic balancing act; asserting pluralism while selectively advancing community interests.

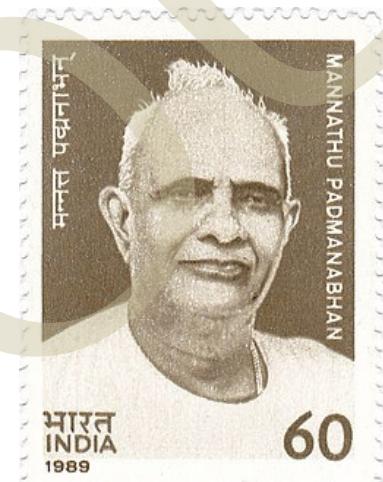


Fig.2.6.2 Stamp commemorating Mannathu Padmanabhan (1989)

One of the most polarising dimensions of the NSS's contemporary role lies in its approach to caste-based reservations. The leadership has persistently criticised caste quotas, branding them divisive and susceptible to misuse. At a 2024 conference, NSS representatives demanded the abolition of both caste-based reservations and caste censuses, framing them as mechanisms of "vote bank politics" and obstacles to national cohesion. Their argument rests on the perception that the benefits of reservation disproportionately favour the elite within "backward" communities, thereby excluding economically disadvantaged groups among



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the so-called forward castes. Consequently, the NSS has promoted the idea of economic criteria for affirmative action; a stance that mirrors Padmanabhan's historical concern with safeguarding the interests of the Nair community.

This position, however, places the NSS in conflict with several other groups. The SNDP Yogam, representing the Ezhava community, opposes any dilution of the current reservation framework. Meanwhile, left-leaning parties in Kerala continue to champion caste-based policies as essential tools for redressing historical injustice. The NSS's opposition to these measures, then, is not merely a matter of ideological divergence but speaks to enduring tensions in Kerala's caste politics.

In modern Kerala, the NSS functions as a significant pressure group. It administers a wide network of educational institutions, staying true to its founding emphasis on uplift through learning. Its annual gatherings frequently serve as platforms for political commentary, with leaders often targeting the Communist government over issues such as educational reform and communal harmony.

Despite these criticisms, the NSS repeatedly articulates its commitment to secularism, framing its interventions as part of a larger civic duty rather than sectarian mobilisation.

Nevertheless, the organisation remains a contested entity. To its supporters, the NSS embodies a proud legacy of self-improvement, community service, and cultural preservation. To its critics, it is an inherently conservative force, resistant to the egalitarian thrust of modern social policy. Its dual identity, as a social reform initiative and a caste-based consolidatory mechanism, continues to shape its role in public life.

The NSS today is both a legacy institution and an active participant in Kerala's political and social debates. It walks a fine line: advancing a rhetoric of inclusivity while defending forward-caste privileges; engaging in politics without overtly declaring political intent. This ambiguity is not accidental, it is intrinsic to the organisation's historical mission and present-day relevance. The NSS, in this respect, is less an anomaly than a reflection of the enduring complexities of caste and modernity in Kerala.



Recap

- ◆ Chattambi Swamikal challenged caste using rational thought
- ◆ Kerala's caste structure faced radical intellectual resistance
- ◆ Swamikal reimagined knowledge as universal and inclusive
- ◆ He refuted Brahmanical myths of divine land grant
- ◆ Mannathu Padmanabhan reformed Nair society conservatively
- ◆ NSS promoted education but upheld caste privilege
- ◆ Kerala Renaissance blended universalism and caste mobilisation

- ◆ Swamikal historicised caste to empower the oppressed
- ◆ Nair Service Society led caste-based modernisation
- ◆ *Vimochana Samaram* overthrew Kerala's first communist cabinet
- ◆ Padmanabhan's reforms avoided full caste abolition
- ◆ NSS backed education but resisted caste quotas
- ◆ Kerala's modernity involved layered reform traditions
- ◆ Guru, Ayyankali and Swamikal opposed caste orthodoxy



Objective Questions

1. What was Chattambi Swamikal's birth name?
2. *Pracheena Malayalam* primarily critiques what dominant social force?
3. Which philosophical system most influenced Chattambi Swamikal?
4. What did *Pracheena Malayalam* critique?
5. What myth did Swamikal reject in Kerala's history?
6. Who founded the Nair Service Society?
7. In which year was the NSS formally founded?
8. Which caste was primarily mobilised by the NSS?
9. What was a limitation of the NSS reform agenda?
10. Which temple entry movement did Padmanabhan support?
11. What legislation did the NSS oppose in 1959?
12. What community was represented by the SNDP Yogam?
13. Who guided Sree Narayana Guru in early spiritual life?
14. What was the motto of the *Vimochana Samaram*?
15. What was Swamikal's stance on Vedic access?



A

Answers

1. Kunjan Pillai
2. Brahmanical supremacy
3. *Advaita Vedanta*
4. Brahmanical supremacy
5. Parasurama's divine gifting of Kerala
6. Mannathu Padmanabha
7. 1914
8. Nair community
9. It did not challenge caste hierarchy fundamentally
10. Vaikom Satyagraha
11. Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill
12. Ezhava community
13. Ayyavu Swamikal
14. Liberation from Communist rule
15. Open to all, not Brahmin-exclusive

A

Assignments

1. Compare the caste critique of Chattambi Swamikal with the caste mobilisation of Mannathu Padmanabhan. How did their reform approaches differ in method and scope?
2. Analyse the role of the NSS in Kerala's educational and social reform movements. To what extent did it promote or hinder inclusive social change?
3. Discuss the impact of Chattambi Swamikal's historical and rational approach to social reform in the context of Kerala Renaissance.

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4. Evaluate the *Vimochana Samaram* as both a political and caste-based movement. How did Padmanabhan's leadership reflect the contradictions of reform and privilege?
5. Compare the reform ideologies of Chattambi Swamikal, Sree Narayana Guru, and Ayyankali. How did their caste locations influence their visions of equality?

R

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S

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Unit 7

Women Question in the Social Reform Movements in Kerala

L

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, learners will be able to:

- ◆ understand the socio-cultural condition of women in pre-modern and colonial Kerala
- ◆ analyse how various social reform movements addressed women's issues
- ◆ evaluate the role of individuals and organisations in advocating women's rights
- ◆ reflect on the intersectionality of caste, gender, and religion in reform discourses
- ◆ acknowledge the role of women in addressing their own rights

P

Prerequisite

The condition and status of women in pre-modern Kerala society was deeply influenced by caste hierarchies, religious customs, and patriarchal norms. While certain communities like the Nairs followed matrilineal practices, it did not necessarily show gender equality. Brahmanical patriarchy imposed rigid restrictions on the women. It was within this context that the "woman question" emerged as a grave concern during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which paralleled the major currents of social reform and colonial modernity. The spread of English education, missionary activity, print culture, and the modern ideologies such as liberalism, nationalism, and socialism invited new debates on gender roles and women's position in society.

Social reform movements in Kerala challenged caste-based discrimination and addressed the subjugation of women. These movements advocated for widow remarriage, female education, the abolition of oppressive customs, and greater



participation of women in public life. However, their approaches differed based on caste, religious affiliations, and political contexts. While many reform efforts were led by men, women too began to assert their voices by writing in journals, organising within community associations, and speaking in public forums. Their interventions redefined the meaning of reform from within and questioned the patriarchal underpinnings of even progressive movements. In this unit, let us explore how the “woman question” was framed and addressed in Kerala’s social reform movements, how caste and class influenced these responses, and how women themselves became agents of transformation.

K

Keywords

Woman Question, Social Reform, Gender Equality, Caste, Patriarchy, Women’s Education, Widow Remarriage, Colonial Modernity, Matriliney

D

Discussion

2.7.1 Social Position of Women in the Pre-Modern Kerala

The roles of women in the society were shaped by patriarchal norms that prioritise male dominance and family honour. Across all castes, women in Kerala have long experienced various forms of oppression, exclusion, and denial of basic rights. The rigid caste system, reinforced by Brahminical norms, pushed women particularly those from lower castes, into marginalised and subordinate roles in society. Even today, issues like dowry-related violence and the discrimination based on gender and caste persist.

In Medieval Kerala, women's lives were controlled through many oppressive customs. Pulappedi and Mannapedi were

the practices where lower caste men could abduct or ritually pollute upper-caste women on certain rights. Victims would lose their caste status and be thrown out of society.

In Brahmin society, women known as *Antharjanams* were strictly secluded. They carried cadjan umbrellas outdoors to remain hidden and preserve ritual seclusion, especially from lower-caste men. Meanwhile, lower-caste women had more mobility compared to the upper caste women, mainly due to their involvement in labour and service roles, but remained socially and economically oppressed. They were denied ownership of property and access to public resources. In Syrian Christian communities, patrilineal kinship reinforced male authority and restricted women's access to property.

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Tribal women suffered due to the superstitious beliefs and social norms that worsened their condition. Lower-caste women were barred from wearing upper clothes and jewellery, symbols used by privileged castes. Those who failed to uphold such norms had to undergo harsh punishments imposed only on lower-caste women.

2.7.2. Colonial Modernity and Emergence of the ‘Woman Question’

While we consider the trajectory of women’s question emerged within the larger context of 19th-century socio-religious reform movements in colonial India, we can identify multiple dimensions and approaches of reform that responded to perceived moral and social decline. Reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Mahila Samaj, and educational movements were influenced by both indigenous traditions and colonial ideologies like Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism. Women became central to the discourse of reform often framed as symbols of tradition, morality, and national identity. While reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated women’s education and opposed practices like *sati*, their actions were criticised on the grounds that it reflected their elite caste identities and Western liberal values.

Scholars such as Lata Mani, Ashis Nandy, Geraldine Forbes, and Romila Thapar have written on how debates around *sati*, consent, property rights, and women’s education revealed tensions between tradition and modernity. Reforms related to the upliftment of women faced resistance from orthodox groups like the Dharma Sabha and took different shapes across regions. For example, the Aligarh movement focused on Muslim women’s education and the Satya Shodhak Samaj put efforts for lower-caste and women’s empowerment.

The social reform movements in Kerala during the late 19th and early 20th centuries began to focus on addressing the issues around caste, religion, and modernity. Yet, the voices of women were often overshadowed by the concerns of dominant male reformers. The role of women and their conduct were considered as the markers of community progress by the reformers. However, in most of the cases, women themselves were rarely included in such conversations.

2.7.2.1 Women’s Question and Socio-Religious Reforms

Colonial rule brought many changes in administration and the economy, but it also changed how people perceived society and social order. Missionaries and the spread of English education encouraged people to question customs like widow remarriage, women’s education, and caste practices. However, these reforms were often viewed through the colonial lens of ‘tradition versus modernity’ or ‘barbaric versus civilised.’

In Kerala, reformers used these colonial critiques of Indian society to try to bring changes in their own societies, especially within their own caste groups. However, even though they pushed for changes, they mostly kept the traditional patriarchal system in place. Instead of liberating women, they tried just to change the roles of women within a male-controlled society. So, the changes in women’s roles were influenced both by colonial rules and by the existing caste and gender hierarchy.

2.7.2.2 The Concept of Ideal Woman

When reformers tried to restructure family and kinship systems, they often ended up reinforcing gender hierarchies by keeping traditional ideas about women’s roles. Their efforts were criticised as it didn’t try to break the traditional notions of female virtue about



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what made a ‘good woman’, but to control women’s conduct to align with emerging ideas about being proper and respectable at home. The home, marriage, and family became the main places where new ideas about women’s roles were created, but these were also the places where women faced the most control. Women were encouraged to learn to read and write, but not necessarily to become independent or make their own choices.

During this time, women were encouraged to be literate but not necessarily educated for their independence. They were expected to uphold cultural purity and moral strength while remaining within their homes. Thus, even as reform movements considered women as symbols of progress, they were often criticised for constraining their actual freedom and agency.

2.7.3 Women’s Rights Movement in Modern Kerala

The 19th and early 20th centuries were a critical juncture in Kerala history, with many social reform movements trying to restructure caste, kinship, and education. However, within these movements, the question of women’s position was often sidelined. In Kerala’s patriarchal society, women faced severe suppression and exploitation across social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. Even when women’s conditions improved, in terms of access to education or freedom from exploitative customs, the frameworks of change were laid out by male reformers. Women’s freedom was often limited to being better at their household duties. So, these reforms were criticised on the grounds that instead of breaking down the patriarchy (male dominance), just that it reorganised it in a new way. The changes in practices around marriage, domestic life, and education redefined women’s roles, but largely within a patriarchal framework.

Among the Namboothiris, marriage practices were strict. Only the oldest son could marry within the caste, while younger men had unofficial relationships (called *sambandham*) with Nair women. This led to lifelong celibacy and social isolation of the Namboothiri women. When reforms happened through the passing of Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, it aimed not at improving women’s lives but at providing marital privileges for younger men.

To improve the social conditions of the Namboothiri Brahmins, the Yogakshema Sabha was formed in 1908 under leaders like Desamangalam Valiya Sankaran Namboothiri and Kurur Unni Namboothiri. The Sabha aimed to abolish polygamy, child marriage, and the practice of *Sambandham*, while promoting widow remarriage and education among Namboothiri youth through its youth wing, the *Namboothiri Yuvajana Sangham*. Namboothiri women, called *Antharjanam*, faced many restrictions as they had to cover themselves with a shawl called *Ghosha* and hide their faces behind an umbrella known as *Marakkuda*. They were denied education and confined by strict caste rules. These women were subjected to harsh punishments like *Smarthavicharam*, which is a trial for infidelity where women were expelled from their homes in humiliating ways. The famous 1905 *Smarthavicharam* of Kuriyedath Thathri shocked the community as it revealed the names of several men involved. It led to a rare trial of men and exposed the patriarchal nature of Namboothiri society.

Namboothiri reformers challenged old practices like *sambandham*. However, the criticism of his actions was that many of their reforms aimed more at protecting men’s status and power than empowering women. For example, the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 sought to regulate sexual relations and legitimise marriage within caste boundaries but paid little attention to women’s autonomy or their right to consent.

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Among the reformers, V.T. Bhattathirippad, a member of the youth wing, challenged traditional customs through education and activism. He criticised practices like *Sambandham* and *Ghosha* and wrote the influential play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*. He also supported inter-caste marriages by marrying his sister to a Nair youth. The Sabha opened schools and by 1930 succeeded in abolishing the *Ghosha* practice. Political efforts led to the introduction of the Namboothiri Bill, which, after facing opposition, brought important reforms including equal property rights for family members instead of inheritance by the eldest son alone.

In 1934, despite resistance, the Sabha passed a resolution supporting widow remarriage. He also arranged the marriage of a widow to Mulla Mangalath Raman Bhattathirippad. He also promoted social activities like intercaste dining to break caste barriers. The progressive Namboothiri youth produced literary works condemning social evils, such as the drama *Marakkudakkullile Maha Narakam*, which encouraged women to reject the *Marakkuda* umbrella. The movement culminated in 1945 when E.M.S. Namboodiripad, presiding over the Yogakshema Sabha, declared that their goal was to “make the Namboothiri a human being.”

Alongside these reforms, Namboothiri women organised themselves through groups like the *Antharjana Samajam*, led by Parvathy Nenmenimangalam, Arya Pallam, and Lalithambika Antharjanam. These movements challenged male dominance and caste restrictions. All these movements further paved the way for the social reforms of women in Kerala.

In traditional Namboothiri families, known as *illams*, women’s roles were ritualistic and

confined. The introduction of reform did not question their exclusion from public life. It merely replaced religious duties with secular chores and be ‘modern’ housewives. So, the home remained their main space, but with new rules shaped by colonial ideas. Even though Namboothiri homes changed in how they looked and behaved, the control over women stayed the same. Rituals became less visible, but women were still closely controlled, now through strict moral rules and education. So, the reforms did not end patriarchy but changed how it worked.

Under colonial rule, the colonial administrators and missionaries, influenced by Victorian values, promoted monogamous nuclear families. This was to control women and prevent Namboothiri men from having relationships with Nair women. For communities like the Thiyyas, marriage and sexuality were less strict compared to higher castes. However, colonial rulers and missionaries saw these customs as immoral. They promoted Victorian ideas of faithful marriage and male-headed families as the right way to live. An ideal woman was portrayed as obedient and devoted to home life. It was to teach women to accept and follow strict patriarchal family roles.

In the case of lower caste women in Kerala, the caste system made things worse. Apart from facing other caste atrocities, they were not even allowed to wear certain clothes or ornaments that were seen as symbols of respect and status. However, women did not stay silent. Protests like the *Achippudava*, *Melmundu*, *Mookoothi*, and *Kallumala* movements showed how lower caste women bravely challenged these long-standing rules. While upper caste women were confined within strict social boundaries, lower caste women actively resisted through protests demanding social equality and the right to dress with dignity.



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2.7.3.1 Role of Women in Addressing Women's Rights

As we discussed, in 19th-century Kerala, the ‘women’s question’ is often discussed through the lens of upper-caste male reformers and occasionally a few elite women. Reformers like Ayyankali, Chattambi Swamikal, Vaikunda Swami, and Velayudha Panikar supported the women’s movements and brought attention to women’s rights and caste injustices in pre-modern Kerala. However, there were also powerful acts of resistance from marginalised communities, especially Dalits, whose stories rarely found a place in official records. These movements also demanded social equality and dignity for women. One of the earliest instances of protest came from Nangeli, a Dalit woman from Cherthala, who resisted the oppressive *Mulakkaram* (breast tax). According to oral tradition and the collective memory, Nangeli opposed the *Mulakkaram* or breast tax, a tax reportedly imposed on lower caste women who wanted to cover their breasts. In protest, she cut off her breasts and presented them to Travancore officials and died soon after. The following day, the Travancore ruler reportedly revoked the tax. Her locality came to be known as *Mulachiparambu* ‘land of the breasted woman’ as a reminder of her sacrifice. Yet, despite this, Dalit women were still prohibited from wearing upper-body garments in front of upper castes. Early records such as the Tarisapalli Copper Plates (from the 9th century CE) and accounts by European travellers do mention gender-based taxes like *talakkaram* (head tax for men) and *mulakkaram* (for women). While oral traditions and local memory mention Nangeli’s act of resistance, historians have debated the existence and exact nature of the so-called ‘breast tax.’ Some suggest it may have been a general poll tax on women of lower castes rather than one specifically related to attire.

The Channar movement or *Maaru Marakkal Samaram*, this agitation took place among Nadar (Channar) women in South Travancore. Nadar and Ezhava women fought for their right to wear upper-body clothing, confronting both caste-based restrictions and violent repression. Although the British initially supported the cause by allowing Christian women to wear upper garments, they retracted the order under pressure from the Travancore court, fearing it would disrupt the caste order. Aiyya Vaikunda Swami, a social reformer in 19th-century Kerala who worked for the upliftment of oppressed communities, played a crucial role in bringing together women and holding meetings with them to spread awareness and fight against caste-based discrimination.

As historian Rajan Gurukkal explains, the struggle went through two or three stages before any major change happened. During this time, in 1813, the Travancore government issued an order that officially banned slavery. However, the Channar Revolt, which focused on the right of lower-caste Nadar women to cover their upper bodies, occurred in different phases and faced strong resistance. With the support of Christian missionaries, these women challenged rigid caste rules. Although the protests turned violent, it eventually led to official recognition of their right to wear jackets (*kuppayams*), though with some restrictions. This is known as the *Melmundu Agitation* (1813–1859) or *Maaru Marakkal Samaram*. Women’s struggles, such as the *Achippudava Agitation* (1858) and the *Kallumala Samaram*, were further expressions of resistance against caste and gender-based discriminations. *Achippudava* Agitation of 1858 arose after an Ezhava woman was humiliated for wearing the *achippudava*, white cotton cloth with a gold border that only upper-caste women were allowed to wear. In protest, agricultural workers refused to harvest paddy as a form of resistance. This non-cooperation affected

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the land-owning classes and attracted public attention. Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikar, a social reformer from the Ezhava community, strongly supported the protest. The agitation grew as a collective fight against caste-based clothing rules and for basic respect and equality.

Other protests such as the *Mookuthi* (nose-stud) and *Kallumala* (stone necklace) agitations also saw lower-caste women asserting their dignity and right to dress with respect. In Pandalam, a lower-caste woman wore a nose stud, which was usually only allowed for upper-caste women. Because of this, some upper-caste men attacked her and took the nose stud away. It is known that Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker reacted by distributing gold nose studs to lower caste women and made sure they could wear them safely. The agitation became a symbol of women's right to adorn themselves and assert dignity.

Similarly, in 1915, the *Kallumala* Agitation, Stone Necklace Protest or Perinad Revolt happened, led by Ayyankali. Pulaya women were forced to wear heavy stone necklaces as a sign of their lower status and were not allowed to wear gold or silver jewellery or upper garments. Ayyankali encouraged them to stop wearing these stone necklaces and start wearing better clothes. This caused conflicts with the upper-caste Nairs, but later, in a public event in Perinad, Kollam, Pulaya women bravely took off their stone necklaces in front of Ayyankali and another reformer Changanacherry Parameswaran Pillai. It was a powerful assertion of dignity, not merely about dress but also rejection of caste markers.

About education, for many lower caste families, especially under missionary influence, it provided social mobility. While missionary schools like Baker's provided access to education, they often emphasised ideals like domesticity, hygiene, and

obedience aligned with colonial gender norms. Personal narratives of women like Chandrika Balakrishnan and E.K. Janaki reveals how they faced patriarchal resistance to their education. Often, women had to give up their aspirations to keep peace in their families. This shows that education didn't automatically change women's roles.

With the emergence of nuclear families, the burden on women increased. They were no longer only caregivers but were also expected to be educated partners to their husbands. However, despite this, they had to remain quiet and obedient. Testimonies from families across caste lines show that modern family ideals, whether among elite Nairs or Dalits, continued to prioritise male authority, with women expected to support from the background.

The progress made during Kerala's reform era was full of contradictions. Changes in caste rules, marriage laws, and educational changes often reproduced older patriarchal structures under the guise of modernity. The issue of women's rights remained secondary. Instead, women were often used as symbols of social progress rather than being given real freedom or power. Their roles changed, but mostly in ways decided by others, not by the women themselves.

Even though women were often ignored or pushed aside in the main stories about reform, women were not entirely silent or passive. Their writing like letters, memoirs, and early magazines show that women resisted, negotiated, and sometimes quietly challenged the rules. Works like *Her-Self*, edited by J. Devika, collect these voices and prove that women were not just passive observers during the reform movements. Women's involvement in public life was limited but began to grow gradually in the early 20th century. It paved the way for future feminist movements.



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2.7.4 Reforms Within and Outside the Household

While the 19th and early 20th centuries saw visible challenges to caste and gender hierarchies through movements like the *Achippudava*, *Melmundu*, and *Kallumala* agitations, some important changes were taking place within the domestic and legal spheres. Beginning with the Madras *Marumakkathayam* Act of 1933, the joint-family system of the *tharavadu* was broken down, allowing for the partition and sale of property. This process reached its legal conclusion in 1976, with the *Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act, 1975*, which abolished matriliney. These reforms ended the *tharavadu* system and replaced matrilineal inheritance with patrilineal norms. This shift, often justified in the name of progress and modernisation, weakened women's traditional claims to property and status, changing the very foundation of domestic life. As G. Arunima argues, the abolition of matriliney, especially among the Nair community, marked a crucial redefinition of gender roles, family structures, and property rights.

The history of women's reform in Kerala, therefore, must be seen not only in terms of public movements but also through the transformation of kinship, caste, and law, where the impact on women was both liberating and limiting. Matriliney gave women access

to property and status within the family. Although matriliney was not fully egalitarian, often controlled by male elders or *karanavars*, it still provided women with symbolic and material claims within the household that were diminished by patrilineal reforms. Arunima argues that its disintegration under colonial modernity and legal intervention was presented as a step toward 'progress', often defined in patrilineal and Western terms. These changes reshaped women's positions by eroding their earlier claims to power within the household and reframing the family around male lineage.

While we have examined how social reformers and women's protests challenged visible injustices in Kerala, it's equally important to understand how the very idea of what it meant to be a 'woman' was being redefined during this period. J. Devika argues that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new gender identities were constructed not just by reformers or protest movements, but by modern institutions seeking to produce 'governable' and 'disciplined' subjects, women and men moulded for both public and domestic roles in a modernising society. As she points out that while these changes opened public spaces to *Malayalee* women, it was a form of ambiguous liberation, one where womanhood became tied to regulated and respectable behaviour, not full autonomy.

R Recap

- ◆ Patriarchy and caste deeply oppressed women across the society in pre-modern Kerala.
- ◆ Brahmin women were secluded
- ◆ Lower-caste women had more freedom mainly due to their involvement in labour and service roles, but no rights.

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- ◆ Lower-caste women faced harsh punishments for breaking caste-based dress codes.
- ◆ 19th-century reforms questioned old customs but often preserved caste and gender hierarchies.
- ◆ Women's voices were mostly missing in reform debates as reforms focused on male priorities.
- ◆ Education for women aimed to make them better wives, not independent individuals.
- ◆ Homes remained spaces of control under patriarchy.
- ◆ Major protests like the *Melmundu*, *Achippudava*, and *Kallumala* agitations challenged caste dress restrictions.
- ◆ Reformers like Ayyankali, Vaikunda Swami, and Velayudha Panikar supported women's rights struggles.
- ◆ Dalit women like Nangeli resisted oppressive taxes and caste humiliations, though their stories were often erased.
- ◆ Missionary schools provided education but reinforced submissive gender roles.
- ◆ Legal reforms, especially the abolition of matriliney replaced women's property rights with patriarchal norms.
- ◆ Abolition of matriliney weakened women's traditional family power under the guise of modernisation.
- ◆ Gender identities were reshaped by modern institutions to create disciplined, controlled women.
- ◆ Early 20th-century women's writings and activism laid the foundation for later feminist movements in Kerala.



Objective Questions

1. The breast tax protest is associated with which woman?
2. What was the aim of the *Melmundu Samaram*?
3. Which reform act began breaking down matrilineal inheritance in Kerala?
4. When was matriliney legally abolished in Kerala?



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5. Which tax was imposed on lower-caste women to prevent them from covering their breasts?
6. Who was the social reformer that supported women in the *Melmundu Samaram*?
7. What was the reason behind *Kallumala Samaram*?
8. Who distributed gold nose studs to lower-caste women during Mookuthi agitation?
9. Who authored the play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*?
10. What practice involved public trials and expulsion of Namboothiri women for suspected infidelity?
11. Which organisation was founded in 1908 to initiate Namboothiri social reform?
12. Which group was led by women like Parvathy Nenmenimangalam and Arya Pallam?
13. Who edited the work *Her-self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women 1898-1938*?
14. Who wrote the work *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar 1850-1940*?

A

Answers

1. Nangeli
2. To demand the right to wear upper-body clothing for lower caste women
3. Madras *Marumakkathayam* Act of 1933
4. 1976
5. *Mulakkaram* (breast tax)
6. Vaikunda Swami
7. Denial of wearing stone necklaces by Pulaya women
8. Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikar
9. V.T. Bhattathiripad

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10. *Smarthavicharam*
11. *Yogakshema Sabha*
12. *Antharjana Samajam*
13. J. Devika
14. G. Arunima

A

Assignments

1. Discuss how the social reform movements in Kerala addressed the women question.
2. Discuss how patriarchy and caste intersected to oppress women in pre-modern Kerala society.
3. Analyse the effects of the *Madras Marumakkathayam Act* of 1933 and the abolition of matriliney on women's property rights and family status.
4. Evaluate the role of male reformers in women's rights movements in Kerala. Examine the gaps and silences in the male-centric reform narratives.
5. Discuss the role of women in Kerala's social reform movements during the 19th and early 20th centuries. How did their participation challenge traditional norms, and what limitations did they face within these movements?

R

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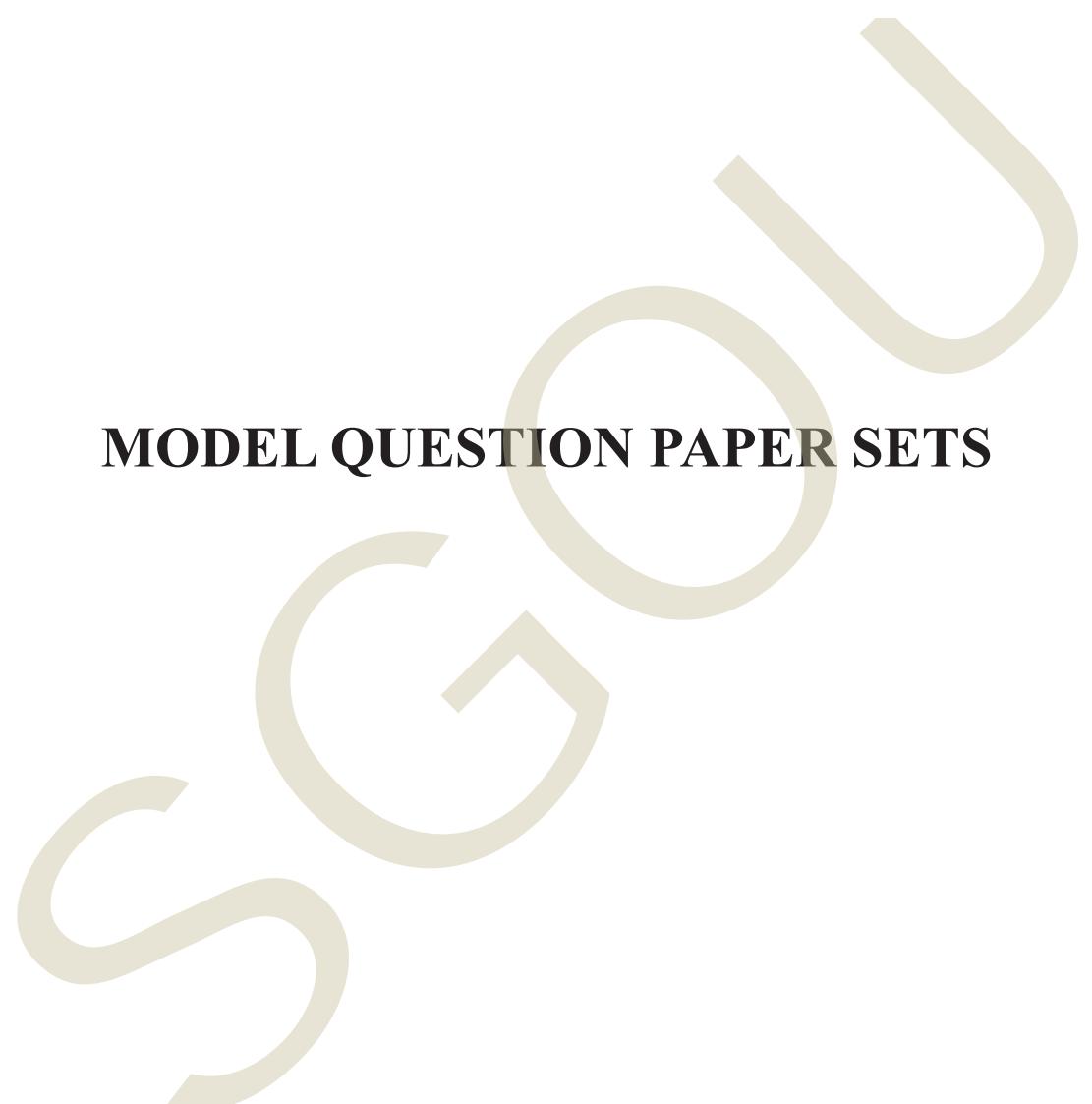
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MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE:

Reg. No. :

Name:

SIXTH SEMESTER B.A. HISTORY EXAMINATION

GENERIC ELECTIVE COURSE

B21HS01GE-Modernization of Kerala

(CBCS - UG)

2022-23 - Admission Onwards

MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SET A

Time: 3 Hour

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any ten questions of the following. Each question carries one mark.

(10 × 1 = 10 Marks)

1. Name the three Protestant missionary organisations active in 19th-century Kerala.
2. What revolt led by Nadar women challenged caste-based dress codes?
3. Who authored *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku*?
4. What slogan did Sree Narayana Guru popularise to challenge caste divisions?
5. What was the name of the first Malayalam newspaper printed in Kerala?
6. Who led the *Villuvandi Samaram* demanding Dalit access to public roads?
7. What organisation was founded by Vaikundar to promote caste equality?
8. What was the name of the first school established by Benjamin Bailey?
9. What reform organisation did Mannathu Padmanabhan establish?
10. What form of communal worship was practised in *Nizhal Thangals*?
11. Name one of the customary practices that burdened lower caste women.
12. Who was the founder of PRDS, advocating for Dalit religious autonomy?
13. Which Travancore proclamation allowed Christian missionary activity?
14. Which hill did Sree Narayana Guru use for meditation and ascetic retreat?
15. What movement led to a temporary withdrawal of the Education Bill of 1957?

SECTION B

Answer any ten questions of the following. Each question carries two marks.

(10×2 =20 Marks)

16. How did British legal codification (IPC/CrPC) alter the caste-based legal order in Kerala?
17. What was the socio-political significance of the Channar Revolt in colonial Travancore?
18. Briefly explain the reform agenda of the SNDP *Yogam*.
19. In what ways did print culture contribute to the growth of reform movements in Kerala?
20. How did Christian missionary activities influence education among marginalised communities?
21. Describe the role of Ayyankali in fighting for Dalit access to public schools.
22. What was Chattambi Swamikal's approach to religious texts and caste critique?
23. What were the educational and spiritual contributions of Poikayil Yohannan?
24. How did the *Vimochana Samaram* reflect tensions within caste reform politics?
25. Explain the intersection of gender and caste in Kerala's reform discourse.
26. What was the function of *Samabanthi* in the *Samatva Samajam* movement?
27. Describe how Malayalam literature evolved as a medium for social critique in the 19th century.
28. What were the contributions of figures like Arya Pallam and A.V. Kuttimalu Amma?
29. What were the limitations of male-led social reform with regard to women's emancipation?
30. How did western education affect caste relations in colonial Kerala?

SECTION C

Write a short note on any five questions of the following.

Each question carries four marks.

(5×4 = 20 Marks)

31. Rajyasamacharam
32. Ezhava Memorial (1896)
33. *Nizhal Thangals*
34. V.T. Bhattathiripad's theatre activism

35. *Sambandham*
36. Upper Cloth Revolt
37. *Vimochana Samaram*
38. Poikayil Yohannan
39. Role of Missionaries in Women's Education
40. Sree Narayana Guru

SECTION D

Answer any two questions of the following. Each question carries ten marks.

(2×10 =20 Marks)

41. Analyse how colonial administrative reforms led to both the weakening and reinforcement of Kerala's caste system.
42. Discuss the contributions of Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal in transforming caste society through spiritual and social resistance.
43. Compare the reform methods of Sree Narayana Guru and Vaikunda Swamikal in their challenge to caste and ritual hierarchy.
44. Examine how land, education, and law became tools of oppression and eventual reform in 19th-century Kerala.



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(CBCS - UG)

2022-23 - Admission Onwards

MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SET B

Time: 3 Hour

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any ten questions of the following. Each question carries one mark.

(10 × 1 = 10 Marks)

1. What was the name of the early English school founded in Kottayam?
2. Which 19th-century reformer critiqued caste through reinterpretation of Hindu texts?
3. Who initiated the *Kallumala Samaram* against caste-based dress codes for women?
4. What social reform movement was initiated by Poikayil Yohannan?
5. Name the Tamil literary work that strongly influenced Sree Narayana Guru.
6. Name the first Western-style Malayalam textbook published in Kerala.
7. Which colonial report formalised land revenue in Malabar?
8. What was the theme of V.T. Bhattacharipad's drama 'Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku'?
9. What was the slogan used by Sree Narayana Guru that called for social unity?
10. What social restriction was symbolised by denial of upper garments to lower caste women?
11. Who founded the Nair Service Society (NSS)?
12. What annual pilgrimage site was associated with SNDP reform activity?
13. Which protest used a cart (*villuvandi*) to challenge caste road restrictions?

14. What was the major educational movement launched by Mannathu Padmanabhan?
15. What form of print media was used to spread Vaikundar's teachings?

SECTION B

*Answer any **ten** questions of the following. Each question carries **two** marks.*

(10×2 =20 Marks)

16. How did land revenue reforms introduced by the British impact caste-based ownership?
17. Discuss the role of CMS and Basel Missions in spreading English education in Kerala.
18. What was the ideological basis of the Samatva Samajam's critique of Brahminical power?
19. How did PRDS differ from upper-caste-led reform movements in its spiritual approach?
20. Explain the goals behind the establishment of the NSS.
21. What were the limitations of male-led social reform with regard to women's emancipation?
22. How did Sree Narayana Guru challenge traditional temple authority and ritual hierarchy?
23. What criticism did Chattambi Swamikal raise against Brahminical dominance?
24. How did women's experiences vary across Namboothiri, Nair, and Dalit communities?
25. What role did missionary print media play in reform discourse?
26. Describe the role of Ayyankali in fighting for Dalit access to public schools.
27. In what way did the SNDP Yogam empower the Ezhava community economically?
28. What were the contributions of Poikayil Yohannan in constructing a Dalit religious identity?
29. How did the British codification of law both disrupt and reinforce caste?
30. What were the social outcomes of the Channar Revolt?

SECTION C

*Write a short note on any **five** questions of the following.
Each question carries **four** marks.*

(5×4 = 20 Marks)

31. LMS
32. *Samabanthi*
33. PRDS Movement
34. Aruvippuram Shiva Temple Consecration
35. *Kallumala Agitation*
36. V.T. Bhattathiripad's Reform Literature
37. Ayya Vaikundar's Dharma Yukam
38. SNDP Yogam and Sivagiri Pilgrimage
39. *Vimochana Samaram*
40. Missionary Education and Women's Literacy

SECTION D

*Answer any **two** questions of the following. Each question carries **ten** marks.*

(2×10 =20 Marks)

41. Assess the role of caste, education, and religious reform in the rise of Kerala's modern society.
42. Examine the evolution of anti-caste movements in Kerala with special reference to Vaikundar, Ayyankali, and Poikayil Yohannan.
43. Discuss how caste and gender intersected in pre-modern Kerala to define the lives of Namboothiri, Nair, and Dalit women.
44. Analyse the impact of missionary intervention and early printing on Kerala's socio-religious reform movements.

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യയാൽ സ്വത്രന്തരാകണം
വിശ്വപ്രതരഥയി മാറണം
ഗഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
സുരൂപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കൂദിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു തെങ്ങങ്ങളെ
സുരൂവീമിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവെജയയന്തി പാറണം

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ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ
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