

Kerala Renaissance: Problems and Perspectives

COURSE CODE: B21HS03DE

**Undergraduate Programme in History
Discipline Specific Elective Course
Self Learning Material**



**SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

Vision

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.

Mission

To be benchmarked as a model for conservation and dissemination of knowledge and skill on blended and virtual mode in education, training and research for normal, continuing, and adult learners.

Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

**Kerala Renaissance:
Problems and Perspectives**
Course Code: B21HS03DE
Semester - V

**Discipline Specific Elective Course
Undergraduate Programme in History
Self Learning Material
(With Model Question Paper Sets)**



**SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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



KERALA RENAISSANCE: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Course Code: B21HS03DE

Semester- V

Discipline Specific Elective Course
Undergraduate Programme in History

Academic Committee

Dr. K.S. Madhavan
Dr. U.V. Shakkeela
Aneesh S.
Dr. Manoj T. R.
Dr. Vysakh. A. S.
Dr. K. Savitha
Dr. Soumya S.
Jisha D. Nair
Dr. V. Jyothirmani

Development of the Content

Zubin Antony Mehar Reynold
Dr. Preethi Chandran P.B.
Dr. Arun A.S.

Vishnu S.S.
Hareesh U.P.
Ajay Joy Mathew

Review and Edit

Dr. Biju R.I., Dr. Sebastian Joseph,
Abdul Muneer A., Dr. C. Francis

Linguistics

Sujith Mohan

Scrutiny

Zubin Antony Mehar Reynold
Dr. Preethi Chandran P.B.
Thahani Rezak.
Dr. Reeja R.
Dr. Arun A.S.

Design Control

Azeem Babu T.A.

Cover Design

Jobin J.

Co-ordination

Director, MDDC :

Dr. I.G. Shibi

Asst. Director, MDDC :

Dr. Sajeevkumar G.

Coordinator, Development:

Dr. Anfal M.

Coordinator, Distribution:

Dr. Sanitha K.K.



Scan this QR Code for reading the SLM
on a digital device.

Edition
August 2025

Copyright
© Sreenarayanaguru Open University

ISBN 978-81-988379-1-2



All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission in writing from Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Printed and published on behalf of Sreenarayanaguru Open University by Registrar, SGOU, Kollam.

www.sgou.ac.in



Visit and Subscribe our Social Media Platforms

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 aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The Undergraduate Programme in History is carefully designed to incorporate recent trends in historical knowledge. Concepts, methodologies, and interpretations are presented as a coherent narrative tailored to fit the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) format. This programme aims to inspire students to pursue further reading in the discipline. Its primary objective is to cultivate competent history learners who are well-versed in the principles of historical understanding.

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.

01-08-2025

Contents

Block 01	Conceptualising Renaissance	1
Unit 1	Departure from Medieval "Darkness"	2
Unit 2	Enlightenment and Scientific Rationality	9
Unit 3	Humanism and Equality	24
Unit 4	Renaissance as Revival	34
Unit 5	Renaissance and Modernity	45
Block 02	From Tradition to Modernity	57
Unit 1	Social Evils	58
Unit 2	Gender Issues	66
Unit 3	Colonial Challenges	75
Unit 4	Missionary Intervention	84
Unit 5	Colonial Modernity	92
Block 03	Leaders and Movements	102
Unit 1	Upper Caste/Community Movements	103
Unit 2	Lower Caste Movements	117
Unit 3	Christian Missionaries and Social Reform	134
Unit 4	Movements among the Muslims	150
Unit 5	Women's Progress	168
Block 04	Movements against Caste and Untouchability	186
Unit 1	Radical Reform	187
Unit 2	Spiritual Path	196
Unit 3	Temple Entry Movement	203
Unit 4	Later Movements	211
Unit 5	Caste in Post-Colonial Society	224
Block 05	Rethinking Kerala Renaissance	236
Unit 1	The Difference of Kerala Renaissance	237
Unit 2	From Social Reform to Social Struggle	247
Unit 3	Patriarchal Agenda and Imagining of "New" Women	256
Unit 4	Emancipation Agenda and Community Politics	266
Unit 5	Formation of Hindu Identity	276
Block 06	Renaissance literature	286
Unit 1	Reform and Literature	287
Unit 2	Newspapers and Journals	295
Unit 3	Story, Drama and Novel	302
Unit 4	Autobiographies	309
Unit 5	Critical Studies	316
Model Question Paper Sets		322



BLOCK

Conceptualising Renaissance



UNIT

Departure from Medieval "Darkness"

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ identify the concept of the “Dark Ages” using recent historiographical perspectives and interpretations
- ◆ explain how the Black Death transformed medieval Europe’s demography, economy, and urban settlement patterns
- ◆ point out the Renaissance as a period of intellectual, scientific, and cultural transformation in Europe
- ◆ discuss the decline of feudalism and rise of centralised states in early modern Europe

Prerequisites

This unit critically engages with the emergence of modern societies and the historical processes that endowed them with their distinctive characteristics. In doing so, it addresses several foundational questions that hold central significance in the study of historical transformation. When did modern societies emerge? What were the underlying causes of their development? And through what mechanisms and processes did this transformation unfold. By interrogating these core issues, the unit aims to illuminate the complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and cultural forces that contributed to the formation and evolution of modern social structures.

Keywords

High Middle Ages, Modernity, Humanism, Rationality, Scholasticism, Enlightenment

Discussion

1.1.1 Revisiting the ‘Dark Ages’

The term “The Dark Ages” traditionally refers to the period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the onset of the Renaissance, approximately the 5th to the 14th centuries. This label has often implied a time of cultural stagnation and minimal scientific progress. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges this characterisation, with many medieval historians rejecting the term as a misrepresentation of the period’s complexity and its significant intellectual, cultural, and technological developments.

The idea of the “Dark Ages” as a time of ignorance in early Western history is still commonly used today. According to Joseph McCabe, this idea first came from Cardinal Baronius around the year 900 C.E. It was later supported by the writer Petrarch and then taken up by well-known historians like Gibbon in the 1700s, and Hallam and Buckle in the 1800s. In the twentieth century, writers like Bertrand Russell, Will Durant, A.L. Kroeber, and even the *Cambridge Medieval History* continued to use the word “dark” to describe a time marked by hardship and decline. This period was known for poverty, illiteracy, a shrinking population, constant wars, and a clear lack of cultural development. Joseph McCabe mentions that Inge, in his book *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, described the Dark Ages as several centuries of pure barbarism the longest and saddest backward step in human history.

The medieval world functioned as a closed society, predominantly governed by the structures of feudalism and the authority of the Catholic Church. The Church, along with its clergy, held a central position in social life,

exerting influence over individuals from birth to death. The later Middle Ages witnessed a series of transformative developments that laid the groundwork for subsequent reform movements. Scholars argue that a decline in population contributed to reduced agricultural output and manufacturing, thereby accelerating the disintegration and transformation of the feudal socio-economic order.

1.1.1.1 Birth of a New Era

The concept of early modernity serves as a critical framework for understanding the historical developments of Early Modern Europe. The term “early modern” began to gain prominence in historiographical discourse during the 1970s. Historians generally use it to denote the period between the end of the Middle Ages and the onset of the nineteenth century. The usage of this term was notably advanced by scholars such as Peter Burke through his works *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 1972 and *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe* in 1978 and Natalie Zemon Davis, particularly in her book *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* in 1975. The adoption of the term aimed to address the challenges of historical periodisation, offering a lens through which to examine the processes of continuity and change linking the medieval era to the emergence of the modern West. This period, especially between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, witnessed significant cultural and intellectual transformations, most notably the Renaissance, which brought a revival of European art and literature inspired by classical antiquity. However, the use of the term “Renaissance” has been critiqued by some scholars for its elitist undertones and its focus on literary and artistic developments an interpretation not uniformly embraced



across regions such as England, Germany, and France.

1.1.2 Transformations in Late Medieval Europe

During this period, the religious and intellectual cohesion that had characterised Western culture began to fragment, giving way to a diversity of ideas and worldviews. In the realm of politics, new modes of governance and modern political attitudes emerged, accompanied by the rise and decline of various empires. Europe underwent profound structural transformations, including the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the shift from artisanal production to mechanised industry, and the replacement of animate energy sources with inanimate fossil fuels. These centuries also marked a move away from religious uniformity towards secularism, and from the so-called “Dark Ages” to an era defined by scientific inquiry and rational thought. Political organisation evolved from decentralised feudal structures to centralised nation-states and empires. Furthermore, the period witnessed the gradual erosion of elite-dominated political systems, and the rise of ideas centered on natural rights, liberty, equality, mass political participation, and the emergence of a distinct public sphere.

The period of economic expansion that characterised the High Middle Ages in Europe came to a halt at the onset of the fourteenth century. Between 1310 and the 1340s, both population growth and agricultural productivity stagnated, giving way to a period marked by widespread scarcity. This phase of decline was further exacerbated by the outbreak of the Black Death a devastating pandemic that originated in Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean in 1347. It rapidly spread across Europe, reaching Italy, Spain, and France, followed by Switzerland, Austria, and Germany in 1349, and ultimately Scandinavia and Poland by 1350. The pandemic resulted in an estimated population

loss of approximately forty percent. The severe demographic and agricultural crisis precipitated by the plague contributed to a relative rise in the prominence of towns and cities, as rural areas experienced sharp declines in labour and productivity.

The mass migration from rural areas during this period contributed to the growth of major urban centres such as Antwerp, Florence, Venice, Barcelona, London, Lyons, and others. This urban expansion was accompanied by the rise of influential trading organisations, including the Hanseatic League and the Merchant Adventurers, which played a key role in the development of commercial networks. By the fifteenth century, Europe was geographically differentiated into various regions, each shaped by its natural features. Economic expansion was supported by a range of policy reforms and relief measures, while the absence of arid deserts allowed for extensive agricultural development. The continent’s rich deposits of iron and coal - two critical resources for industrialisation - further fuelled economic and industrial growth. Europe’s central geographical position, surrounded by seas, facilitated maritime connectivity with other parts of the world. As trade expanded, European states invested heavily in naval power, enabling them to explore and reach distant territories. In these regions, European powers were able to establish both economic dominance and political control, laying the foundation for future imperial expansion.

1.1.2.1 The Emergence of Early Modernity

During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Europe underwent a series of foundational transformations that marked the onset of early modernity. Linguistically, the term “early modern” also reflects the period during which notions of modernity began to be integrated into English usage. For instance, the ‘Arithmetical Military

Treatise' (1579) was among the earliest texts to include an extended discussion on "modern military" practices. Intellectually, the period witnessed a renewed interest in the classical works of ancient Greek and Roman scholars, reflecting a broader revival of classical knowledge.

A significant epistemological shift also occurred, as empirical observation and experimentation began to emerge albeit in a nascent form as legitimate methods of acquiring knowledge. A key milestone in this scientific transformation was the helio-centric model of the universe proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), which placed the sun at the centre of the solar system. Technological advancements, particularly the invention of the movable-type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s, played a crucial role in disseminating these new ideas across Europe.

In the religious domain, the authority of the Catholic Church came under increasing scrutiny, with critiques of its theology and institutional practices eventually giving rise to the Protestant Reformation and the formation of new Christian denominations. Concurrently, European exploration expanded significantly, exemplified by the voyages of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), which led to contact with non-European cultures and contributed to a global reconfiguration of knowledge and power.

Collectively, these developments - ranging from scientific inquiry and religious reform to technological innovation and global exploration - formed the intellectual and cultural movement known as the Renaissance, characterised by the rise of liberal humanism and a profound transformation in European thought.

Recap

- ◆ The label "Dark Ages" is increasingly challenged by modern historians.
- ◆ Feudalism and Church shaped early medieval social structure deeply.
- ◆ Decline of feudalism accelerated by demographic and economic crises.
- ◆ Historians coined "early modern" to bridge medieval-modern transitions.
- ◆ Renaissance revived classical knowledge and humanist thought in Europe.
- ◆ Black Death caused massive population and productivity declines.
- ◆ Urban migration fuelled economic and commercial city growth.
- ◆ The printing press spread new ideas and scientific innovations rapidly.
- ◆ Reformation fractured Church unity, reshaping the European religious landscape.

Objective Questions

1. Who invented the movable-type printing press during the fifteenth century?
2. What label did Petrarch popularise for the medieval period?
3. Name the powerful northern European trade league active during this time.
4. From which region did the Black Death initially begin to spread?
5. Who proposed the heliocentric model that challenged Church cosmology?
6. What was the name of the devastating 14th-century pandemic?
7. What political system eventually replaced decentralised feudal governance?
8. What philosophical movement emphasised human potential during the Renaissance?
9. Which religious institution was challenged during the Protestant Reformation?

Answers

1. Johannes Gutenberg
2. Dark Ages
3. Hanseatic League
4. Constantinople
5. Nicolaus Copernicus
6. Black Death
7. Nation-state

8. Humanism
9. Catholicism

Assignments

1. Critically evaluate the historiographical evolution of the term “Dark Ages.”
2. Explain the socio-economic consequences of the Black Death on medieval European society.
3. Discuss the role of cities and trade organisations in the transformation of medieval Europe.
4. Analyse the intellectual and technological contributions of the Renaissance to the development of Early Modern Europe.

Reference

1. Hilton, Rodney, editor. *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*. Verso Editions, 1982.
2. Hobsbawm, E. J. *Industry and Empire*. Penguin, 1989.
3. Palmer, R. R. *A History of the Modern World*. Macmillan, 1976.

Suggested Reading

1. Dobb, Maurice. *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.
2. Huberman, L. *Man's Worldly Goods*. Read Books, 2008.
3. Magdoff, Harry. *Imperialism*. Monthly Review Press, 1978.



4. Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Historical Capitalism*. Verso, 1984.
5. T. K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein. *World-Systems Analysis: Theory and Methodology*. Sage, 1982.

SGOU



UNIT

Enlightenment and Scientific Rationality

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ understand the intellectual and philosophical foundations of the Scientific Revolution and its major contributors
- ◆ evaluate how technological innovation and artisanal knowledge shaped early modern scientific development and institutions
- ◆ compare key historiographical interpretations of the Scientific Revolution from Marxist and intellectualist perspectives

Prerequisites

This unit aims to enable the learner to comprehend the emergence of the Enlightenment, explore the ideological foundations underpinning the movement, and understand how the Enlightenment contributed to the rise of rationalism and the development of modern science.

This unit will also seek to explore the transformation of Europe from a predominantly religious worldview to one grounded in scientific inquiry. The sixteenth century marked a significant period of scientific advancement, during which prevailing religious and classical conceptions of the cosmos - including notions of heaven and the universe - were rigorously questioned. Scientific progress during this era was driven by empirical methods, with experimentation forming the cornerstone of inquiry. Despite facing severe opposition - including persecution and, in some cases, execution - many scientists remained steadfast in their pursuit of rational explanations for the natural world.

Keywords

Enlightenment, Rationalism, Scientific revolution, Technology, Science, Francis Bacon, Robert Hook, Newton

Discussion

1.2.1 The Foundations of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment stands as one of the most significant intellectual movements in human history. Alongside the Renaissance and the Reformation, it is widely regarded as having laid the foundational groundwork for modernity. Indeed, the Enlightenment is often credited with contributing more profoundly to the shaping of the modern world than any earlier intellectual development. It is typically identified as the period during which modern modes of thought began to take form. Originating in Western Europe, Enlightenment ideas gradually spread across the continent and later extended to North and South America. By the nineteenth century, through European imperial expansion, the influence of Enlightenment thought reached global dimensions, leaving an enduring impact on societies worldwide.

In 1784, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant described the Enlightenment as the process of individuals freeing themselves from self-imposed immaturity - that is, the inability to think independently. He believed that earlier periods were limited by people's dependence on others for guidance. Kant captured the essence of the Enlightenment with the phrase "Sapere aude!" - ("Dare to know!") Have the courage to use your own understanding." The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was led by intellectuals who promoted independent thinking. Influenced by the Scientific Revolution, they valued reason and supported the use of the scientific method to study all areas of human

life, society, and nature in a systematic way.

During the Enlightenment, people believed that all institutions and ideas should be examined using reason and scientific thinking. They thought that, by breaking free from old and useless traditions - especially religious ones - they could understand the world more clearly. Just as Isaac Newton had discovered the natural laws of the physical world, Enlightenment thinkers believed they could use reason to uncover the laws that shaped human society. This gave them hope that they could build a better world than the one they had inherited. Ideas like reason, natural law, hope, and progress were widely discussed during this time. However, the Enlightenment thinkers, or philosophes, were not overly idealistic. Many of them understood that ignorance and suffering could not be eliminated quickly, and that real progress would take time and come with challenges.

Many philosophers viewed themselves as the successors of the ancient pagan philosophers and the Italian humanists of the Renaissance, who had revived classical learning. They believed that the Middle Ages were a time of intellectual decline, during which the Catholic Church's strict control allowed faith to overshadow and weaken human reason. However, the philosophers were more directly influenced by the revolutionary thinkers of the seventeenth century. This raises an important question: What were the key intellectual developments that led to the emergence of the Enlightenment as a major intellectual movement?

Peter Gay, a prominent historian of the Enlightenment, described the movement as the “rise of modern paganism,” emphasising the anti-Church sentiments particularly evident within the French Enlightenment. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly challenged this characterisation, arguing that it does not accurately reflect the broader scope of Enlightenment thought across different regions. In countries such as Italy, Germany, Austria, Scotland, England, and the United States, Enlightenment thinkers generally did not adopt an anti-Christian stance. Even within France, explicitly anti-Christian or anti-religious positions were relatively limited.

While the Enlightenment did involve a critical attitude toward superstition and the rigid institutional structures of organised religion - particularly in its condemnation of clerical wealth, power, and corruption - it did not uniformly reject religion itself. Instead, Enlightenment thinkers expressed a wide range of perspectives on religion. A key feature of the period was the growing emphasis on distinguishing between the religious and the civil spheres, contributing to the process of secularisation in political thought. This evolving view promoted the idea that institutional religion should not interfere in state affairs. Furthermore, there was an increasing valuation of material progress and worldly engagement, which were seen as more practical and meaningful pursuits than traditional religious or spiritual objectives.

The Enlightenment did not arise suddenly or without background; it was strongly influenced by earlier developments in modern science during the sixteenth century and modern philosophy in the seventeenth century. The main ideas of modern science - such as observation, experimentation, analysis, and logical thinking - were taken up by Enlightenment thinkers as tools to challenge traditional beliefs and religious

authority. Important figures like René Descartes (rationalist philosophy), Isaac Newton (modern science), John Locke (liberal philosophy), and Pierre Bayle (scepticism) played key roles in this change. They helped introduce scientific ways of thinking into discussions about society and human nature. In fact, some historians consider Locke and Bayle to be part of the early Enlightenment because of their important influence on its development.

The Enlightenment drew much of its intellectual inspiration from two English thinkers - Isaac Newton and John Locke - who were highly respected by the *philosophes*. Newton was often praised as one of the greatest minds in history. One poet even wrote, “Nature and Nature’s Laws lay hid in Night; God said, ‘Let Newton be,’ and all was Light,” showing the admiration people had for him. Enlightenment thinkers were deeply impressed by Newton’s idea of the universe as a well-ordered machine. They believed that by using Newton’s method of logical reasoning, they could discover natural laws that governed human society - including politics, economics, justice, religion, and the arts. To them, the world and everything in it worked like a large, orderly machine.

1.2.2 The Scientific Revolution

The Scientific Revolution represents one of the most pivotal and transformative periods in European history. Spanning the era between the Renaissance and the contributions of Isaac Newton, this intellectual revolution brought about a profound shift in conceptions of nature and society. Traditional modes of thought - rooted in classical Greek and Roman philosophies - were gradually displaced by a new paradigm of ‘modern thinking,’ which emphasised the systematic investigation of natural phenomena through hypothesis, experimentation, and rational analysis. This methodological shift laid the foundation for what came to be known as the Scientific Revolution.



The recovery of lost Greek scientific texts, largely through Islamic scholarship, played a crucial role in this intellectual resurgence. By the late fifteenth century, scholars such as Robert Grosseteste, John Buridan, and Nicole Oresme were already formulating ideas that anticipated key developments in mathematics and physics. Importantly, the Scientific Revolution unfolded alongside the rise of capitalism, the spread of Puritanism, and the emergence of the modern state and democratic governance, underscoring its deep entanglement with broader socio-economic and political transformations.

The seventeenth century marked a significant transformation in humanity's understanding of the universe. During this period, a new intellectual climate emerged in which the geocentric, Earth-centered model was increasingly rejected in favour of the heliocentric view, recognising the Earth as merely one of several planets orbiting the sun. This paradigm shift led to the demystification of the cosmos, prompting critical reassessments of long-held moral and religious beliefs, and played a central role in resolving the broader intellectual crisis facing Europe at the time.

Scientific inquiry and learning expanded rapidly throughout the century, giving rise to what was then referred to as “natural philosophy.” This emerging field was characterised by major advancements in disciplines such as mathematics, astronomy, and physics, and came to be seen as a symbol of intellectual progress and human reason.

1.2.2.1 Stages of Scientific Revolution

According to J.D. Bernal, the Scientific Revolution can be delineated into three distinct phases:

1. The Copernican Phase, during which the traditional geocentric

model of the universe was supplanted by the heliocentric concept proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus.

2. The Intermediate Phase, in which thinkers such as Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo Galilei provided empirical and theoretical foundations that supported and expanded upon the heliocentric model.
3. The Newtonian and Cartesian Phase, characterised by the contributions of Isaac Newton and René Descartes, during which scientific societies were established, and science became increasingly institutionalised within European society, marking its integration into the intellectual and cultural fabric of the period.

Although the Scientific Revolution is generally considered to have begun in the late sixteenth century, the defining characteristics of modern science - namely, the emphasis on systematic observation and empirical verification - fully emerged only in the seventeenth century. Historically, this period followed the Renaissance and unfolded alongside significant geopolitical and economic transformations in Europe.

Amidst ongoing religious conflicts and political upheavals such as the Restoration, the era also witnessed major navigational breakthroughs. These developments included the subjugation of Italian territories by France and Spain and the subsequent rise of Spain as a dominant global power. The discovery of the Americas and the establishment of maritime trade routes to the East led to a substantial influx of wealth into Europe, contributing to inflation, economic crises, and the onset of European colonisation.

The exploration of the New World and successful early voyages generated increased demand for advancements in shipbuilding and navigational technologies. As a result, the production of compasses, maps, and other navigational instruments intensified. This growing need also stimulated interest in the precise observation of celestial bodies, aimed at creating more accurate astronomical tables. In response, several European nations - including Portugal, France, England, Spain, and the Netherlands - established navigational schools to support and institutionalise this emerging scientific and exploratory enterprise.

The Ptolemaic theory of the heavens, grounded in Aristotelian cosmology and centered around an Earth-centric universe, was fundamentally challenged by the revolutionary ideas of Nicolaus Copernicus. Through rigorous mathematical observation and calculation, Copernicus rejected the geocentric model and proposed a heliocentric system in which the Earth and other planets revolve around the sun. His groundbreaking work, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, was published posthumously due to fear of condemnation by the Church, which later denounced his theories as heretical.

The invention of the telescope, a byproduct of spectacle manufacturing in Holland around 1600, marked a significant advancement in observational astronomy. Galileo Galilei, a professor of physics and military engineering, constructed his own telescope and used it to empirically refute the medieval conception of the cosmos. His observations provided substantial support for the heliocentric model, leading to his infamous trial by the Inquisition. Giordano Bruno, another advocate of heliocentrism, was executed for heresy, highlighting the severe resistance faced by early proponents of scientific change.

Tycho Brahe, a Danish astronomer, established one of the first scientific observatories of the modern era, where he meticulously recorded the positions of stars and planets. His data were later refined by Johannes Kepler, who developed laws of planetary motion that further solidified the heliocentric theory. The success of Galileo and Kepler's models was due in large part to advances in mathematics, particularly the development of algebra and trigonometry by François Viète, which significantly enhanced computational precision.

In the mid-fifteenth century, the theologian Nicholas of Cusa proposed a radical idea: that the universe is infinite, homogeneous in substance, and governed by uniform laws. Simon Stevin advanced mathematical thought by introducing the decimal system in 1568 and laying the groundwork for modern hydraulics. John Napier contributed further with his invention of logarithms in 1614, streamlining complex calculations.

Leonardo da Vinci, a polymath of exceptional genius, made substantial contributions across scientific and artistic domains. During his time in Venice, he engaged deeply with mathematics, produced highly accurate cartographic maps, and pioneered concepts in mechanical engineering. He envisioned technologies such as steam propulsion, cannons, and paddle-driven ships. Da Vinci is also credited with early studies in plant morphology, fluid dynamics, and the development of the camera obscura, placing him at the forefront of numerous scientific disciplines.

William Gilbert, in his seminal work *De Magnete*, compiled all known information on magnetism and proposed that the Earth itself functions as a giant magnet. He theorised that magnetic forces were responsible for maintaining planetary positions, thus laying the foundation for the sciences of electricity and magnetism.



1.2.3 Advancement in Technology

Technological advancements during this period significantly contributed to progress in mining, metallurgy, and chemistry. The introduction of water wheels, including both the undershot and overshot types, revolutionised mining operations by enhancing efficiency in activities such as river damming and metal processing. These technologies were also adopted in industries such as paper production, reflecting their broader industrial applicability.

The expansion of mining activities stimulated the growth of chemical knowledge, advancements in metal smelting, and developments in medical practices. Simultaneously, the intersection of art and science became increasingly pronounced. Renaissance artists recognised the importance of scientific knowledge, particularly in geometry and mathematics, to achieve technical precision and realism in their work. Leon Battista Alberti asserted that a painter must possess a comprehensive understanding of geometry, arguing that mathematical principles were essential for improving knowledge of the natural world. Leonardo da Vinci emphasised experimentation and empirical observation as the only reliable path to truth in artistic and scientific endeavours. Similarly, Piero della Francesca, renowned for his intellectual approach to painting, demonstrated a deep commitment to geometry, carefully planning his compositions based on mathematical principles. This integration of artistic and scientific inquiry marked a defining feature of the Renaissance intellectual landscape.

An important yet often overlooked dimension of early modern intellectual inquiry was the role of magic and its intersections with emerging scientific thought. During the Renaissance, magical traditions such as alchemy and atomism

attracted serious scholarly attention. Alchemy was perceived as a means of uncovering the hidden laws of nature, while atomistic theory proposed that all matter was composed of indivisible particles whose combinations and transformations could be manipulated - a notion that prefigured later developments in chemistry and physics.

Within the realm of medicine, Theophrastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus, emerged as a key figure in challenging the classical Galenic framework. As a pioneer of the iatrochemical school, he rejected the ancient Greek belief that disease resulted from imbalances among the four bodily humours, proposing instead that illness had chemical causes and required chemical remedies. Paracelsus's approach laid the foundation for the integration of chemistry into medical practice.

Georgius Agricola, a physician and mineralogist, contributed significantly to the study of geology, while Jan Baptist van Helmont conducted foundational experiments in plant physiology, emphasising the importance of empirical methods. Andreas Vesalius revolutionised the study of human anatomy with the publication of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, based on detailed human dissections, thereby challenging centuries of reliance on animal-based anatomical texts. William Harvey, through his investigation into the circulation of blood, introduced a mechanistic view of human physiology. Although his findings were initially met with resistance, they ultimately laid the groundwork for modern rational physiology.

Francis Bacon played a crucial role in articulating a new vision for scientific inquiry. Rejecting Aristotelian teleology, Bacon emphasised empirical observation and experimentation as the cornerstones of knowledge production. His advocacy for systematic, collective research efforts contributed to the eventual establishment of

institutions such as the Royal Society. He also cautioned against metaphysical speculation, arguing that scientific knowledge should remain grounded in observable phenomena.

René Descartes, another foundational thinker, provided a philosophical framework for modern science by challenging medieval scholasticism. Through methodological doubt and deductive reasoning, Descartes developed a dualistic ontology that sharply separated mind and body. This allowed for a mechanistic interpretation of the physical world, free from theological constraints, and helped to delineate the boundaries between science and religion. His emphasis on quantifiable and measurable phenomena reoriented scientific inquiry toward precision and objectivity.

Collectively, these intellectual developments fostered the emergence of a scientific worldview grounded in reason, empirical evidence, and methodological rigour. The convergence of experimental practice and theoretical reflection culminated in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, marking a decisive break from pre-modern thought. This period witnessed not only the formalisation of scientific methods but also the expansion of applied sciences and technology. Innovations such as the mechanical clock, microscope, telescope, barometer, and air pump exemplified the technological momentum that paralleled and reinforced scientific advancement. The rationalisation of knowledge and the institutionalisation of science during this era laid the foundation for the rise of modern science and its enduring influence on Western intellectual history.

1.2.4 Institutionalisation of Modern Science

Francis Bacon and René Descartes played a pivotal role in elevating the status of experimental science, particularly among

non-specialist audiences. Their respective philosophical frameworks not only legitimized empirical inquiry but also helped embed scientific discourse within the broader cultural consciousness of early modern Europe. Bacon's emphasis on inductive reasoning and collective experimentation, coupled with Descartes' rationalist and mechanistic worldview, contributed to the formation of a new intellectual climate in which science was no longer confined to academic or ecclesiastical institutions but became a matter of public interest and participation.

This democratisation of scientific knowledge found fertile ground among the emerging middle classes, including professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and other individuals of means - often referred to as the "virtuosi". These intellectually curious individuals actively engaged with the new "natural philosophy," not only as consumers of knowledge but also as contributors to its advancement. Parallel to this class was a technically skilled group of artisans and craftsmen - surveyors, metallurgists, military engineers, clockmakers, instrument makers, and industrial chemists - who played a crucial role in the scientific movement. Their expertise in precision work and applied knowledge made them indispensable to the development of experimental science.

Unlike the anonymous labourers of earlier times, many of these craftsmen were literate, self-educated, and prolific. They authored treatises, contributed to technical literature, and published their findings in emerging scientific journals such as "*Philosophical Transactions*" of the Royal Society, thus participating directly in the institutionalisation of scientific communication. Their work represents a convergence of practical skill and theoretical insight, bridging the divide between manual labour and intellectual inquiry.



The seventeenth century also witnessed important contributions from figures such as Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke, who exemplify the empirical ethos of the period. Boyle's investigations into vacuums and gas laws not only advanced the field of chemistry but also laid the conceptual groundwork for later technological innovations, including the steam engine of the eighteenth century. His experimental rigour and commitment to mechanical philosophy established a model for future scientific practice.

Robert Hooke, another polymath of the era, conducted groundbreaking research in elasticity, formulating what came to be known as Hooke's Law. His invention of the balance wheel significantly improved the accuracy of timekeeping instruments such as watches and chronometers, thereby facilitating more precise navigation and mechanical regulation. Hooke's engagement with broader cosmological questions also contributed to the articulation of foundational principles such as the inverse square law and the concept of universal gravitation - ideas that would be further developed by Isaac Newton.

In sum, the scientific advancements of the seventeenth century were not the product of isolated genius but rather the outcome of a complex interplay between philosophical innovation, practical craftsmanship, and institutional support. The integration of theoretical and applied knowledge, coupled with the increasing accessibility of scientific discourse, laid the foundation for the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of modern science as a dominant intellectual force in Western thought.

By the mid-seventeenth century, science in Europe underwent a crucial transformation, becoming increasingly institutionalized through the formation of learned societies and formal academies. In England, this shift was epitomised by the establishment of the

Royal Society of London, which evolved from informal gatherings of scholars initially held at Gresham College. As a pioneering centre of scientific activity, Gresham College hosted lectures in both English and Latin, promoting the study of subjects such as geometry and astronomy. During the turbulence of the English Civil War, many of these scholarly meetings were relocated to Oxford, eventually culminating in the formal founding of the Royal Society in 1660 under the patronage of the monarchy. Its charter emphasised the promotion of "natural knowledge," aligning scientific exploration with national interests, particularly in trade, navigation, and technological innovation.

The institutionalisation of science in England coincided with similar developments across Europe. In France, under the guidance of Jean-Baptiste Colbert and the patronage of Louis XIV, the *Académie des Sciences* was established in Paris in 1666. Both the Royal Society and the French Royal Academy embodied the intellectual spirit of the Scientific Revolution: they functioned not only as forums for empirical research and theoretical discussion but also as engines of practical innovation. Their research agendas often prioritised applied sciences, with particular focus on hydraulics, gunnery, mechanical devices, and navigation - fields essential to commerce, industry, agriculture, and imperial expansion.

Navigation emerged as a central area of scientific advancement in both England and the Dutch Republic. Figures such as John Dee and Gerardus Mercator contributed significantly to this field through the creation of accurate and mathematically informed maps, aligning with the broader cartographic revolution that characterised the early modern period.

The Royal Society was composed of a diverse array of individuals - scientists, instrument makers, mathematicians, and

educated amateurs - who were united by a shared commitment to empirical investigation and the practical utility of knowledge. The Society facilitated the development of scientific instruments, encouraged correspondence with scholars abroad, and amassed collections of natural and artificial curiosities from across the globe, reflecting the global and colonial dimensions of scientific inquiry during this era.

Despite the growing attention to practical applications, the seventeenth century remained profoundly engaged with celestial phenomena. Astronomy and planetary science continued to dominate the intellectual landscape, culminating in the revolutionary work of Isaac Newton. With the publication of his *Philosophic Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), Newton formulated the law of universal gravitation and established the foundational principles of classical mechanics. His synthesis of observational astronomy, mathematics, and physics marked the culmination of the Scientific Revolution and definitively displaced the Aristotelian worldview.

Newton's development of calculus, designed to address complex problems in mechanics and fluid dynamics, exemplified the new mathematical sophistication of scientific inquiry. His *Principia* not only demonstrated that the motions of celestial bodies conformed to natural laws but also set enduring standards for scientific method and theory construction. Newtonian science became the paradigm of rational inquiry, influencing generations of scientists and firmly establishing the mechanistic and mathematical worldview that would define modern science.

1.2.5 Historiographical Interpretations

The origins of modern science have been interpreted through multiple historiographical

lenses, each offering distinct explanations for the emergence and trajectory of the Scientific Revolution. One influential perspective is advanced by Marxist scholars, who argue that the rise of modern science was intrinsically linked to the material conditions and economic imperatives of early capitalism. From this view, scientific progress was not an isolated intellectual phenomenon but rather a functional response to the growing needs of trade, navigation, and colonial expansion. R. Hooykaas, for instance, emphasises the critical role played by Portuguese navigators in initiating a process of discovery that ultimately culminated in the unveiling of the New World. The geographical explorations of Asia, Africa, and the Americas generated renewed interest in understanding the natural world, thereby fostering a climate of inquiry that extended beyond scientific institutions and into the broader fabric of society. In this context, the Scientific Revolution is seen as facilitating the rise of new social classes and establishing a direct relationship between scientific advancement, technological innovation, and socio-economic transformation.

In contrast to this socio-materialist interpretation, other historians - such as Alexandre Koyré and Arthur Koestler - have posited an intellectualist and individual-centric account of the Scientific Revolution. Koyré contends that the emergence of modern science cannot be fully explained by external social or economic factors; rather, it was the product of exceptional intellectual insight on the part of individual thinkers. He underscores the discontinuous and non-linear nature of scientific progress, arguing that the revolution in thought was driven by radical shifts in metaphysical and mathematical frameworks rather than by practical needs. Similarly, Arthur Koestler, in his seminal work *The Sleepwalkers*, presents the Scientific Revolution as a narrative shaped by the extraordinary contributions of isolated



geniuses, such as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. According to Koestler, these figures were guided more by personal vision and philosophical speculation than by societal demands or utilitarian objectives.

Herbert Butterfield offers yet another interpretative stance, characterising the Scientific Revolution as a transformative but ultimately enigmatic episode in human history. He famously described it as “an epic adventure” and emphasised its “dynamic quality,” suggesting that its significance lies not merely in the accumulation of discoveries, but in the fundamental shift it represented in human thought. While acknowledging the role of individual creativity, Butterfield also highlighted the importance of technological innovation, arguing that the tools and instruments developed during this period - such as the telescope, microscope, and mechanical clock - were instrumental in shaping new modes of perception and analysis.

Taken together, these varying interpretations underscore the complexity of the Scientific Revolution. Whether viewed as a byproduct of capitalist expansion, the consequence of individual genius, or a convergence of technological and intellectual breakthroughs, the rise of modern science was undeniably a multifaceted phenomenon. It reflected not only a transformation in the content of knowledge but also a reconfiguration of the very methods, purposes, and social functions of scientific inquiry.

Marxist scholars generally interpret the Scientific Revolution within the broader context of contemporary social and economic transformations, particularly those associated with the rise of capitalism. Friedrich Engels, a foundational figure in Marxist thought, asserted that science emerges in response to the practical and technical needs of society. He famously argued that when a society

encounters specific material challenges, these challenges act as catalysts for scientific advancement, often doing more to propel knowledge forward than formal academic institutions. In this view, science is not an abstract or autonomous pursuit but a historically conditioned response to socio-economic demands.

Building on this framework, Edgar Zilsel advanced a sociological theory of the origins of modern science. He emphasised that scientific knowledge must be understood as a social phenomenon, shaped by the interaction between intellectual traditions and material conditions. Zilsel traced the roots of modern science in Europe to the cumulative influence of ancient mathematicians and astronomers, as well as the critical contributions of medieval Arabic physicians and scholars. However, he contended that the decisive emergence of modern science was linked to the needs and structures of early capitalist society. According to Zilsel, it was the convergence of artisanal knowledge, empirical practices, and the rationalising tendencies of capitalist production that created the conditions for the rise of systematic scientific inquiry.

Thus, from a Marxist perspective, the Scientific Revolution is not merely a narrative of intellectual breakthroughs by isolated geniuses, but a historical process deeply embedded in and shaped by evolving social relations, economic imperatives, and class structures.

A distinct body of scholarship has argued that the emergence of experimental science in the seventeenth century was closely linked to the ethical and cultural values promoted by Protestantism, particularly Calvinism and Puritanism. Max Weber, Robert K. Merton, S.F. Mason, and Christopher Hill are among the leading figures who have advanced this thesis, often referred to as the “Protestant ethic” argument. According to Max Weber, Calvinist doctrines - especially

the emphasis on hard work, discipline, and the rational organisation of life - created a conducive environment for the development of experimental science. Weber suggested that the Calvinist worldview, rooted in asceticism and a rational orientation toward worldly affairs, fostered attitudes that were particularly favourable to empirical inquiry and systematic investigation.

Building upon Weber's thesis, Robert K. Merton proposed that Puritanism played a crucial role in shaping the rise of modern science in seventeenth-century England. In his analysis, Merton emphasised the importance of religious ethos - rather than theology *per se* - in understanding the compatibility and eventual integration of scientific inquiry within a Protestant cultural framework. He argued that Puritan values such as diligence, practical engagement with the world, and a rejection of scholastic authority provided fertile ground for scientific innovation. Merton also noted that many early scientists were Puritans or were closely aligned with Puritan ideals, highlighting the social and institutional support for science within Protestant communities.

S.F. Mason, in his work *The Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation*, attributed the growth of scientific movements to a combination of religious, economic, and technical factors. He argued that the new technical challenges arising from industrial production, navigation, and warfare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided an economic stimulus for scientific inquiry. Mason also emphasised the strong association between science and mercantile enterprise, noting that merchants often supported scientific endeavours through funding, patronage, and the translation of key scientific texts. He identified the first significant point of convergence between Protestantism and modern science in the Protestant critique of medieval cosmology and scholasticism. According to Mason, both early Protestant

thought, and modern science shared a spirit of anti-authoritarianism, individualism, and a commitment to challenging established traditions.

In contrast, other scholars have challenged the Protestant-centered narrative by pointing to the significant scientific achievements that originated within Catholic contexts, particularly in Italy. They argue that institutions in Catholic countries also played a foundational role in the development of modern science, thereby complicating any singular confessional explanation. Nonetheless, the view that Protestant ethics contributed to the cultural legitimisation and institutional development of science in early modern Europe remains a significant and widely discussed historiographical position.

In the seventeenth century, rationalist thinkers increasingly embraced *physico-theology*, an intellectual framework that sought to understand God through the study of the natural world, rather than solely through scriptural revelation. This marked a significant epistemological shift in the relationship between religion and science. As historian Roy Porter observed, during this period "God became more remote and Nature less sacrosanct," signalling a transition from a theologically dominated worldview to one grounded in empirical observation and rational analysis. Physico-theology represented an attempt to reconcile faith with the emerging scientific worldview, positioning nature as a rational, intelligible system governed by laws that could be discovered through reason and experimentation.

While scholarly debates persist regarding the precise relationship between the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, it is widely acknowledged that broader socio-economic transformations - particularly the growth of urban centres and the expansion of mercantile economies - created fertile



conditions for scientific development. The rise of urban society facilitated the dissemination of knowledge, fostered intellectual exchange, and enabled individuals to engage more actively in rational inquiry. In this context, the emergence of modern science can be viewed as a by-product of these changing structural conditions, wherein individual agency and critical thought assumed an increasingly central role in cultural and intellectual life.

The Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century thus represents a profound reorientation of knowledge systems. It marked the triumph of rational inquiry over traditional authority, leading to foundational changes in the conceptual frameworks and methodologies of various scientific disciplines. From this point onward, science began to occupy a permanent and authoritative place within European intellectual and cultural life, shaping not only academic thought but also public discourse, institutional development, and the broader trajectory of modernity.

A prominent historian of the eighteenth century has aptly described it as an era marked by both continuity and transformation. Profoundly shaped by the intellectual legacy of the Scientific Revolution - particularly the

epistemological contributions of John Locke and Isaac Newton - the philosophes of the Enlightenment envisioned the possibility of constructing a new social order grounded in reason and the discovery of natural laws governing human behavior and institutions. In a manner reminiscent of the Christian humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the philosophes upheld the belief that education held the potential to cultivate morally and intellectually improved individuals, thereby contributing to the advancement of society.

Rejecting traditional religion, which they perceived as an impediment to intellectual progress and human freedom, the philosophes sought to displace religious authority with what they termed the “sciences of man” - a set of emerging disciplines in economics, political theory, jurisprudence, and pedagogy. Through these secular domains of inquiry, they laid the intellectual foundations for a modern worldview characterised by rationalism, empiricism, and secular humanism. This paradigmatic shift not only challenged existing social and theological orthodoxies but also contributed to the articulation of Enlightenment ideals that would shape the trajectory of Western modernity.

Recap

- ◆ Enlightenment encouraged reason, liberty, and independent intellectual inquiry.
- ◆ Kant defined Enlightenment as thinking without external authority.
- ◆ Newton’s scientific method inspired Enlightenment views on society.
- ◆ The Scientific Revolution challenged geocentric views of the cosmos.
- ◆ Copernicus introduced heliocentrism; Galileo supported it with telescopic observations.

- ◆ Enlightenment thinkers aimed to separate religion from civil governance.
- ◆ Paracelsus reformed medicine using chemistry, not humoral theory.
- ◆ The Royal Society institutionalized science through collective experimentation.
- ◆ Marxists connect science's rise to early capitalist structures.

Objective Questions

1. Which philosopher defined Enlightenment as freedom from self-imposed intellectual immaturity?
2. Which Latin phrase did Kant use to summarise Enlightenment ideals?
3. Who proposed the heliocentric model challenging the Ptolemaic geocentric view?
4. Which French historian called Enlightenment the “rise of modern paganism”?
5. Name the major scientific institution founded in England in 1660.
6. Which Enlightenment thinker contributed to liberal political philosophy and empirical psychology?
7. What concept did Newton's universe as a machine metaphor represent?
8. Which Enlightenment thinker pioneered the method of rational doubt?
9. What school of medicine was initiated by Paracelsus?
10. Which Dutch mathematician introduced logarithms to simplify complex calculations?

Answers

1. Immanuel Kant
2. Sapere aude
3. Nicolaus Copernicus
4. Peter Gay
5. Royal Society
6. John Locke
7. Mechanical Universe
8. René Descartes
9. Iatrochemistry
10. John Napier

Assignments

1. Analyse the role of Enlightenment ideals in shaping secular modern thought.
2. Discuss how the Scientific Revolution laid the groundwork for Enlightenment philosophy.
3. Evaluate the contribution of craft, technology, and artisans in institutionalising modern science.
4. Compare Marxist and intellectualist interpretations of the Scientific Revolution's historical significance.

Reference

1. Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 50th Anniversary ed., University of Chicago Press, 2012.
2. Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Copernican Revolution*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
3. Popper, Karl. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Routledge, 2002.

Suggested Reading

1. Anderson, M. S. *Europe in the Eighteenth Century, 1713–1783*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
2. Anderson, M. S. *Europe in the Eighteenth Century*. London, 1987.
3. Beaudoin, S. M., editor. *The Industrial Revolution*. New York, 2003.
4. Huberman, L. *Man's Worldly Goods*. Read Books, 2008.



UNIT

Humanism and Equality

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain the emergence, principles, and intellectual foundations of Renaissance Humanism in Europe
- ◆ familiarise themselves with the role of Italian humanists in shaping art, literature, and education
- ◆ explain the relationship between humanism, secularism, and changing cultural values in Early Modern Europe
- ◆ assess the enduring impact of humanist ideals on concepts of individuality and equality

Prerequisites

This unit seeks to explore the emergence and evolution of Humanism as a defining intellectual and cultural movement of Early Modern Europe. It will examine the development of Humanist thought, particularly as reflected in the domains of art, literature, and music. The unit also aims to contextualise Humanism as a transformative force that significantly influenced European society and culture, with its foundational principles continuing to shape European thought well into the late nineteenth century.

Special attention will be given to Humanism's role in fostering individualism and promoting the expression of the self, thereby initiating a profound shift in cultural sensibilities and intellectual priorities. By emphasising critical inquiry, classical learning, and the dignity of human experience, Humanism cultivated a learned elite that redefined the cultural and social fabric of Europe. Ultimately, this unit aspires to provide a comprehensive understanding of the enduring impact of Humanism on freedom and equality in Western world.

Keywords

Humanitas, Petrarch, Studia Humanitatis, Secularism, Vernacular Literature, Greco-Roman Classics, Civic Humanism

Discussion

1.3.1 Humanism and Equality in Early Modern Europe

The Italian Renaissance was marked by two key intellectual and cultural developments: a revitalised engagement with classical Latin and Greek texts, and a flourishing of the visual arts. These pursuits were not exclusive to men, nor were they confined to Italy alone; rather, they were emblematic of a broader cultural movement across Europe known as Humanism. At its core, Humanism was characterised by the systematic recovery, study, and reinterpretation of ancient Greco-Roman texts, through which scholars sought to revive classical ideals and apply them to contemporary life.

Humanists not only endeavoured to restore the intellectual legacy of antiquity but also actively integrated classical ideas into evolving discourses in literature, philosophy, music, and the visual arts. Their interests spanned a wide array of disciplines, demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of Renaissance scholarship. Italian humanists, however, held a distinctive position within the wider European humanist tradition, owing to their geographical proximity to the remnants of classical civilisation and the political, economic, and cultural centrality of Renaissance Italy.

This unit will further examine these dynamics, focusing on how humanist ideals shaped intellectual life and artistic production, and how Italian humanism differed in its aims

and influence from parallel movements in other parts of Europe.

1.3.1.1 Humanism

The term *humanism* originates from the Latin word *humanitas*, a concept employed by Cicero and other classical authors to denote the values associated with liberal education, including rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Within the context of the Italian Renaissance, humanism emerged alongside two key cultural phenomena: a revival of interest in classical Latin and Greek texts, and the flourishing of visual arts - both of which significantly shaped the intellectual and aesthetic contours of the period.

Historians such as Jacob Burckhardt and Georg Voigt interpreted Renaissance humanism as deeply intertwined with the political and social fabric of Italian city-states, viewing it as a cultural force that reflected and responded to contemporary civic life. In contrast, scholars like Paul Oskar Kristeller conceptualised humanism primarily as an academic and intellectual tradition, largely divorced from its broader societal context. According to this perspective, humanism functioned as a scholarly enterprise centred on the study of classical texts, sustained by a community of educators and students engaged in the traditional studia *humanitatis*.

The term *umanista* - initially used in Renaissance Italy to describe teachers and students of classical literature and the liberal arts - gradually evolved to define



a distinct intellectual movement. Over time, humanism expanded beyond its academic roots to become a major agent of cultural transformation across Western Europe, shaping developments in education, philosophy, art, and the formation of a secular and anthropocentric worldview.

A defining feature of Renaissance Humanism was the emergence of a new mode of historical consciousness - one marked by an acute awareness of temporal rupture and the desire to revive what was perceived as a lost classical civilisation. This intellectual orientation was most notably initiated by Francesco Petrarch, often regarded as the progenitor of Renaissance Humanism. Petrarch articulated a profound discontent with the cultural legacy of the medieval period, which he deemed an era of intellectual and moral decline, or “barbarism.” In contrast, he idealised the classical past, particularly ancient Rome, and sought its revival through a renewed engagement with Latin literary and philosophical traditions.

This historiographical reorientation - framed by a belief in the capacity of human agency to restore lost cultural values - was shared by subsequent humanist figures such as Coluccio Salutati, Poggio Bracciolini, Lorenzo Valla, and Marsilio Ficino. These intellectuals were united by a conviction in the transformative power of classical learning and a recognition of their own era as one of cultural renewal and progress. They viewed themselves not merely as scholars but as agents of a civilisational renaissance. Petrarch played a seminal role in this movement, positioning himself as a mediator between antiquity and modernity, and seeking to recover the “inner spirit” of Roman civilisation through philological rigor and moral introspection. His efforts helped lay the ideological foundation for the broader cultural revival that came to define the Renaissance.

1.3.2 Rise of Historical Consciousness

Petrarch’s vision for the cultural and moral regeneration of Christian society was fundamentally anchored in the synthesis of eloquence and philosophy - a union that carried significant implications for educational theory and practice in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. During this period, education was primarily delivered through three institutional forms aside from the universities and the monastic schools that catered exclusively to members of religious orders. These included private fee-paying schools, where instruction was tailored to the subjects for which parents were willing to pay; community or communal schools, funded and managed by municipal authorities; and independent schools founded by individual educators or civic patrons.

The communal schools, which emerged as early as the thirteenth century in many towns of northern Italy, represented an early form of public education, wherein schoolmasters were employed under formal contracts that specified their curricular obligations. However, despite the intellectual ferment associated with the rise of Humanism in the fourteenth century, the curriculum of these schools remained largely unchanged. Rooted in the scholastic traditions of the Middle Ages, this curriculum provoked strong criticism from Petrarch and subsequent humanist thinkers. They condemned it for its intellectual rigidity and its failure to cultivate moral and civic virtues relevant to the life of urban citizens.

Leonardo Bruni later acknowledged Petrarch’s pivotal role in laying the intellectual foundation for a new educational programme that would revive classical ideals. Central to this humanist reform was the emphasis on the studia humanities - a curriculum grounded in the direct study of classical Latin and Greek texts, without

the mediation of scholastic or medieval commentaries. Humanists championed the idea that moral and intellectual formation could only be achieved through engagement with the linguistic and rhetorical richness of antiquity, thereby reorienting education toward civic virtue, critical inquiry, and cultural refinement.

The revival of interest in classical literature was neither restricted to the Italian Renaissance nor uniquely Italian in origin. As Nicholas Mann has noted, classical influences were already discernible in twelfth-century French culture, where both Latin and vernacular literatures bore the imprint of ancient texts. By the close of that century, major narrative works such as *Roman de Thèbes*, *Eneas* and *Roman de Troie* - along with numerous shorter compositions—were being composed with overt classical foundations, reflecting a widespread literary engagement with antiquity.

1.3.3 Spread of Humanism Beyond Italy

In England, the intellectual endeavours of John of Salisbury, a distinguished scholar of the twelfth century, reflect an early humanist impulse. However, the socio-economic structure of the time - dominated by a feudal and agrarian system - limited the broader dissemination of such classical ideals. Despite this constraint, the themes that John of Salisbury had advanced later gained traction among Italian humanists, particularly in the more urban and politically fragmented Italian city-states, where conditions were far more conducive to the emergence of a humanist culture.

Italy's burgeoning urban centres, such as Florence, Padua, Vicenza, and Verona, became hubs for the cultivation and transmission of humanist thought. These cities were populated by a growing class of educated laypersons, including lawyers,

civil servants, and merchants, whose demand for rhetorical and literary proficiency gave momentum to the humanist movement. Italian humanists, drawing from classical sources, sought to elevate standards of eloquence and rhetorical skill, both as tools of personal cultivation and as instruments of civic engagement. Rhetoric was particularly valued for its utility in public oration and the composition of official and diplomatic correspondence.

Humanists occupied prominent positions within the socio - political framework of their time, serving as educators, secretaries, chancellors to princely courts and city-states, and emissaries in diplomatic missions. As a largely secular and lay elite, they exerted considerable influence over cultural and political developments. The intellectual model they championed was grounded in a return to classical texts as vehicles for moral instruction, aesthetic refinement, and civic responsibility.

The spread of humanism beyond Italy was significant, with France emerging as a parallel centre of humanist activity, often shaped by Italian precedents. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is emblematic of the transition from medieval to Renaissance literature. His magnum opus, *The Divine Comedy*, combines religious vision with incisive social critique, and while deeply rooted in medieval theology, it reveals a comprehensive engagement with the human condition. Dante, a polymath proficient in Latin, French, and German, consciously chose to write in the vernacular Italian, thereby broadening the cultural accessibility and impact of his work - a move that would influence the trajectory of humanist literature.

Though Petrarch deeply admired Dante, he diverged from him in significant ways, particularly through his fervent commitment to classical Latin authors. Petrarch's classicism laid the foundation for the systematic study



of antiquity that would become the hallmark of Renaissance humanism.

Humanist scholars disseminated their ideas through a diverse range of educational and cultural channels. Some established independent schools that offered instruction in the newly emerging humanist curriculum, encompassing both elementary and advanced levels of study. Others secured positions within existing universities, although these institutions remained largely dominated by traditional disciplines such as law, medicine, and theology. Within such academic settings, humanist studies often remained peripheral and subordinate to the established scholastic framework.

A significant proportion of humanist educators exerted their influence through grammar schools, where they introduced classical texts, linguistic precision, and moral philosophy to a broader student body. These institutions played a pivotal role in institutionalising the humanist pedagogical model, especially in the education of future civic leaders and professionals.

However, the impact of humanism extended well beyond formal educational structures. Humanist values and ideals permeated cultural life through literature, visual art, and theatrical performance. Through these mediums, humanist thinkers engaged broader audiences and shaped the intellectual climate of the period. The literary and artistic productions of the Renaissance were often imbued with classical themes and human-centered perspectives, reflecting the movement's emphasis on eloquence, ethical reflection, and the dignity of the individual. Thus, humanism functioned not only as a curricular innovation but also as a comprehensive cultural project that reshaped the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral foundations of early modern Europe.

1.3.4 Humanism and Secularism

One of the significant outcomes of the Renaissance was the emergence of a secular worldview, often referred to as the secular opening. This shift marked a gradual decline in the hegemonic influence of religion - particularly the Catholic Church - over various aspects of human life. The rise of humanism during this period played a crucial role in fostering secular thought, challenging the theological dominance of medieval scholasticism and the spiritual monopoly of Christian orthodoxy. While Renaissance humanists did not entirely reject Christianity - nor did most identify as atheists - they critically examined religious doctrines and reoriented intellectual life toward human agency, reason, and the material world.

Petrarch, often regarded as the father of humanism, criticised Italian scholasticism for being overly fixated on religious dogma and material concerns, which he saw as diverging from the true teachings of the Church. Similarly, Coluccio Salutati promoted an engaged and active civic life grounded in secular ethics, even as he maintained personal respect for monastic ideals. Humanists like Francesco Barbaro, a Venetian of the first generation, contributed to this secular discourse by redefining traditional Christian values. In his treatises, Barbaro defended marriage and the pursuit of wealth, directly opposing the earlier Christian valorisation of poverty. Poggio Bracciolini went further by advocating for usury, a practice long condemned by ecclesiastical authorities.

Matteo Palmieri also emphasised the virtues of active civic engagement over contemplative withdrawal, reinforcing the notion that worldly involvement in politics, marriage, and economic activity was both natural and desirable. Although these ideas did not constitute a wholesale rejection of Christianity, they represented a significant

cultural departure from medieval spiritual ideals. The humanists' glorification of secular life reflected broader social transformations in Renaissance Italy, where urban elites increasingly celebrated wealth, power, and public life. Classical studies, central to humanist education, contributed to a renewed appreciation of human potential and dignity, even as scholars remained conscious of the limitations and fragility of human nature.

For Renaissance humanists, education was a vital instrument for advancing a new conception of the human being - one grounded in dignity, rationality, and civic responsibility. Central to their educational philosophy was the belief that rhetoric, derived from classical antiquity, served as essential training for participation in public and political life. Consequently, humanists introduced significant reforms to the traditional scholastic curriculum, emphasising the *studia humanitatis* - a programme that prioritised grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. These reforms were not limited to Italy; they gradually influenced educational institutions across Europe, including private academies, municipal schools, and provincial centres of learning.

Poggio Bracciolini's rediscovery of classical educational treatises in the early 15th century - such as his 1416 finding of Quintilian's work - reinvigorated interest in ancient pedagogical models and inspired numerous humanist writings on educational theory. In addition to curricular reforms, humanists also introduced changes in handwriting, adopting the more legible humanist script, which laid the foundation for modern typography. Physical education was another important component of the humanist programme, based on the classical ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano* - a sound mind in a sound body.

However, a notable limitation of humanist educational initiatives was their general

exclusion of women. Despite advocating the intellectual and moral development of the individual, most Italian humanists did not extend these ideals to girls, thereby reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. While some exceptions existed - such as the occasional education of elite women - humanist pedagogy largely remained a male-dominated enterprise. This contradiction between the professed commitment to individual freedom and the gendered restriction of educational access underscores the complexities and limitations of Renaissance humanism.

1.3.5 Artistic Expressions of Humanist Ideals

The Renaissance marked a profound transformation in the artistic representation of the human figure, reflecting the era's broader reimagining of humanity. This new vision of man - rooted in classical ideals of proportion, harmony, and realism - was vividly articulated through the visual arts. The emergence of archaeology during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries played a crucial role in this development. Excavations in ancient Roman sites unearthed numerous classical works of art, which deeply influenced Renaissance artists and led to the revival of Greco-Roman aesthetics. These rediscovered artefacts contributed to the formulation of the ideal human form, characterised by perfectly proportioned bodies that came to dominate Renaissance painting and sculpture, inspiring generations of artists across Europe.

A pivotal shift in artistic sensibility can be traced back to the early fourteenth century with Giotto di Bondone, whose lifelike frescoes broke away from the stylised and rigid forms of medieval art. His approach introduced a new naturalism in the portrayal of the human figure, setting the stage for subsequent Renaissance masters. Donatello's nude bronze statue of *David*, created in 1416, was revolutionary in its classical inspiration



and representation of the free-standing, anatomically accurate male form. Michelangelo further advanced this tradition with his own monumental *David* (1503), a work celebrated for its powerful embodiment of human beauty and psychological intensity.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, painted in the early sixteenth century, epitomised the Renaissance ideal of individualism and feminine grace. The enigmatic expression and subtle modelling of light and shadow reflected a deep engagement with human psychology and naturalistic technique. Alongside the celebration of secular and individualistic values, Renaissance art was marked by a strong commitment to realism. Artists sought to represent the world as it appeared to the eye, using innovations such as linear perspective, chiaroscuro, and anatomical precision. These techniques enabled painters and sculptors to depict space, depth, and emotion with unprecedented accuracy.

The human body in Renaissance art was no longer simply a vessel for spiritual expression; it became an emblem of autonomy, dignity, and physical beauty. Portraiture flourished, capturing individualised and recognisable faces, while sculptures and paintings conveyed a sense of personality and inner life. Donatello's bronze 'St. George' (1415), based on an earlier marble statue, exemplifies this new humanist focus - depicting the saint not only as a religious figure but also as a confident, youthful warrior.

Women, too, began to be portrayed with greater individuality, as seen in numerous portraits that moved beyond symbolic roles to explore female identity. Even religious art was imbued with humanist sensibilities. Raphael's *Madonna and Child*, for example, combined devotional themes with tender human emotion and idealised beauty, aiming to evoke both spiritual reverence and aesthetic admiration. The grand frescoes, mosaics, and sculptures that adorned churches, ceilings, and cupolas - such as those found in the Sistine Chapel - were not only religious expressions but also masterpieces of artistic innovation and humanist vision.

Italian humanism can be characterised by its emphasis on individualism and the inherent dignity of the human being, with a focus on the realisation of individual potential. It promoted a secular outlook that encouraged intellectual engagement beyond the confines of religious doctrine. Central to the humanist project was the revival of classical Latin and Greek texts, alongside the encouragement of vernacular literature, which broadened access to learning and cultural expression. Additionally, humanists advanced the study of history as a means to understand human experience over time and fostered a new philosophical orientation grounded in critical inquiry and ethical reflection, marking a departure from the scholasticism of the Middle Ages.

Recap

- ◆ Humanism revived classical learning, influencing art, literature, and cultural values across Europe.
- ◆ Petrarch's vision initiated a cultural shift toward classical ideals and moral renewal.

- ◆ Italian city-states nurtured humanist scholarship through vibrant civic and educational institutions.
- ◆ Secularism emerged, challenging medieval religious dominance while valuing worldly life and civic duty.
- ◆ Humanist education promoted rhetoric, classical texts, and civic responsibility over scholastic rigidity.
- ◆ Renaissance art embodied realism, individuality, and classical ideals of proportion and harmony.
- ◆ Humanism broadened learning through vernacular literature and historical consciousness of cultural progress.

Objective Questions

1. Who is considered the father of Renaissance Humanism?
2. From which Latin word did the term humanism originate?
3. Which city-state produced prominent humanists like Salutati and Bruni?
4. What did Poggio Bracciolini discover in 1416?
5. Who sculpted the bronze statue of David in 1416?
6. Name the Renaissance artist who painted the *Mona Lisa*.
7. What educational programme did humanists emphasise over scholasticism?
8. Which ancient civilization's ideals strongly influenced Renaissance humanism?
9. Who authored *The Divine Comedy*?
10. What principle translates as "a sound mind in a sound body"?

Answers

1. Petrarch
2. Humanitas
3. Florence
4. Quintilian's works
5. Donatello
6. Leonardo da Vinci
7. Studia humanitatis
8. Greco-Roman
9. Dante Alighieri
10. Mens sana in corpore sano

Assignments

1. Analyse the contribution of Petrarch to the revival of classical ideals in Italy.
2. Discuss how Renaissance art reflected humanist values in both religious and secular contexts.
3. Evaluate the relationship between humanist education and the development of civic responsibility in Europe.

Reference

1. Cipolla, Carlo M., *Before the Industrial Revolution, European Society and Economy, 1000- 1700*, 3rd edition New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1994.

2. Nicholas, D. *The Transformation of Europe. 1300-1600*, London: Oxford University Press, 1999.
3. Vries. Jan de, *Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600-1750*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
4. Wiesner-Hanks, Merry, *Early Modern Europe. 1450-1789*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press. 2013.

Suggested Reading

1. Hobsbawm, E. J. *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848*. Penguin, 1989.
2. Palmer, R. R. *A History of the Modern World*. Macmillan, London, 1976.



UNIT

Renaissance as Revival

Learning Outcomes

After the completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ analyse the socio-political and economic transformations from medieval to early modern Europe
- ◆ evaluate the cultural, intellectual, and artistic impact of the Renaissance on European society
- ◆ explain the role of commerce, patronage, and institutions in shaping early modern Europe
- ◆ assess how technological, navigational, and economic changes influenced European global connectivity

Prerequisites

This unit aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Early Modern Europe by examining the historical development of key European nations from the Middle Ages through the early modern period. It begins with an exploration of the political and social conditions of these nations during the medieval era, setting the context for the transformations that followed. By analysing the collective experiences of various European regions, the unit seeks to present an integrated perspective on the emergence of early modernity. A central objective is to familiarise students with the defining characteristics of this period, including its socio-political structures, cultural shifts, and intellectual developments. Special emphasis is placed on the Renaissance, which is examined in depth to assess its profound impact on European society. Through this discussion, this unit intends to illuminate the broader changes in thought, art, education, and social norms that marked the transition from medieval to modern Europe.

Keywords

Renaissance, Humanism, Patronage, City-states, Commercial Revolution, Double-entry bookkeeping, Atlantic economy

Discussion

1.4.1 Rebirth of Tradition

The term Renaissance, derived from the French word meaning “rebirth,” was retrospectively coined in the nineteenth century to characterise a transformative period in Western European history, generally spanning from CE 1400 to 1650. The temporal boundaries of this era, however, vary across regions and disciplines, with distinct trajectories in artistic, architectural, literary, scientific, and musical developments. From a historiographical perspective, the Renaissance cannot be viewed as a neatly bounded epoch; rather, it represents a complex continuum in which cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic innovations both emerged from and coexisted with medieval legacies. Far from a radical rupture, the Renaissance constituted a phase of intensified humanistic inquiry and secular engagement that laid critical foundations for the subsequent Enlightenment. Thus, the Renaissance is best understood not as an isolated moment of cultural flowering, but as a dynamic process within the *longue durée* of European intellectual history.

1.4.2 Medieval to Early Modern Transition

In the Middle Ages, European society was organised into three principal estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the peasantry, with serf-cultivators and artisans forming the lower strata. This hierarchical structure, marked by legally sanctioned inequality, was legitimised through a religious–normative order that reinforced the social and political

dominance of the upper estates. Within the nobility itself, internal differentiation existed - ranging from monarchs possessing vast estates and fortified castles to minor nobles whose holdings were comparatively modest.

While the medieval period accorded little structural significance to traders, merchants, and manufacturers, the early modern era witnessed their numerical growth and increasing economic influence. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, certain merchants and bankers had amassed wealth surpassing that of the landed aristocracy, facilitating their gradual integration into the social elite. This shift indicated a slow but consequential transformation in the distribution of economic power, undermining the exclusive dominance of hereditary nobility. Concurrently, the decline of serfdom eroded the uniformity of the peasantry, generating new forms of rural stratification.

Early modern Western society also exhibited pronounced gendered divisions of labour, reflecting its fundamentally patriarchal order. Men monopolized access to political authority and commercial enterprise, while women - regardless of class - were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Among the elite, women oversaw extensive households with numerous servants and, in certain circumstances, assumed the management of estates during the protracted absence of their male counterparts due to war or commerce. These intersecting transformations - in estate hierarchy, economic composition, and gender relations - signalled the gradual



reconfiguration of the socio-political order from its medieval foundations toward a more complex, though still hierarchical, early modern social formation.

1.4.2.1 Urban Foundations of Renaissance Italy

The Renaissance emerged primarily as a phenomenon of the urban milieu, finding fertile ground in regions characterised by dense networks of cities and towns. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Italian city-states, whose distinctive political autonomy, commercial vitality, and cultural dynamism made Italy the principal centre for the diffusion of Renaissance culture across Europe. Northern and Central Italy possessed an unusually high concentration of towns whose urban life was more dynamic, sophisticated, and economically vibrant than that of any other region on the continent. Although the Renaissance was shaped by the contributions of hundreds of artists, scholars, and intellectuals, its most vigorous expressions flourished in the urban contexts of Florence, Milan, Rome, and Venice. Florence distinguished itself as a cradle of exceptional artistic talent, while the wealth and political power of Rome and Milan enabled sustained patronage.

The flourishing of Renaissance culture was underpinned by an intricate web of social and economic factors. The patronage of popes, princes, cardinals, and wealthy merchant families sustained an environment in which art, architecture, and scholarship could thrive. By the fifteenth century, Italy's urban centres had generated a prosperous and self-assured mercantile aristocracy whose conspicuous consumption and civic pride found expression in the construction of grand churches, public edifices, and the endowment of universities as new centres of humanist learning. This urban society was grounded in the principles of individual property rights and private contractual relations, reflecting a legal culture

shaped by the revival of Roman law.

Lawyers and notaries, as literate intermediaries between commerce, governance, and culture, formed a crucial professional stratum within this social order. Their mastery of Latin and familiarity with Roman legal traditions not only facilitated the regulation of economic and industrial activity but also fostered an engagement with the language, literature, institutions, and customs of classical antiquity. In theoretical terms, the Renaissance urban environment may be understood as an arena where Weberian notions of legal-rational authority intersected with a proto-bourgeois ethos of self-fashioning, and where the economic surplus generated by mercantile capitalism enabled the cultural efflorescence that marked the transition from medieval to early modern Europe.

1.4.2.2 Social Hierarchy and Political Structure

The social hierarchy of Renaissance urban centres was organised into three principal strata, each defined by distinct economic resources, political influence, and cultural capital. At the apex stood the *nobili*, *principali*, and *grandi*—often referred to as the “first citizens.” This elite group comprised the wealthiest men in the city, who monopolised political authority by reserving the principal offices and administrative posts for themselves. As a ruling oligarchy, they embodied both economic and symbolic power: widely travelled, highly educated, and proprietors of grand residences situated in the urban core, they projected an image of civic prestige and cultural refinement.

Beneath this ruling elite was the *mezzani*, a socially heterogeneous middle stratum composed of individuals of moderate means, including shopkeepers, bankers, wine merchants, apothecaries, artists, lawyers, civil servants, and teachers. While the *mezzani*

possessed sufficient economic resources to maintain a respectable social standing, their participation in governance was structurally constrained, reflecting the oligarchic nature of Renaissance political systems.

At the base of the social pyramid were manual labourers and domestic servants, who formed the largest segment of the population yet remained entirely excluded from political representation. In theoretical terms, this tripartite structure illustrates both a Weberian hierarchy of status groups and a Marxian division between those controlling the means of production and those dependent on wage labour or servitude. Historically, it reflects the persistence of medieval corporatist forms of governance in which political rights were concentrated in the hands of a property-owning urban patriciate, even as the early modern period witnessed gradual shifts in the composition and economic bases of these social orders.

Despite the transformative impulses of the Renaissance, religion retained a central position in the cultural imagination of early modern Italy, with much of the artistic production continuing to affirm Christianity as the dominant spiritual framework. Patronage and opportunities - economic, intellectual, and political - remained concentrated within an aristocratic elite, reflecting the enduring hierarchical structure of society. The physical remnants of antiquity, particularly the ruins of Roman temples, villas, and public buildings, played a formative role in shaping the Renaissance's Italian origins. Rome, long the symbolic and geographical heart of Christendom, also became a focal point of classical revival. Although these ancient structures had suffered centuries of neglect and destruction, the fifteenth-century papacy initiated systematic excavation and preservation efforts, recognising their cultural and ideological value.

1.4.2.3 Classical Revival

Italian humanists and artists looked nostalgically yet critically toward the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, seeking to integrate their ideals into contemporary artistic and intellectual life. The architect Filippo Brunelleschi, regarded as one of the foremost innovators of the Renaissance, exemplified this engagement through repeated journeys to Rome, where he meticulously studied and measured ancient ruins as a basis for his own designs. The revival of classical culture in Italy was further facilitated by the transmission of ancient knowledge from the Byzantine Empire, conveyed through a network of scholars, theologians, and merchants from maritime hubs such as Venice and Genoa.

This circulation of ideas and texts - through both direct channels, such as commercial exchanges with Byzantium, and indirect ones, including diplomatic envoys and itinerant scholars - enabled the synthesis of Roman and Greek cultural traditions. From a theoretical perspective, this process may be understood as a form of cultural hybridisation, wherein the Renaissance functioned as a liminal space that negotiated between medieval Christian frameworks and the revived humanist ideals of antiquity. The resulting intellectual synthesis not only redefined artistic and architectural expression but also contributed to the broader transformation of European thought during the early modern period.

Renaissance Italy, while marked by intense political rivalries and recurrent warfare, was equally distinguished by a profound commitment to the advancement of the arts. The courts of princes, merchant oligarchs, and despotic rulers engaged in a competitive pursuit of artistic talent, vying for the services of leading architects, sculptors, painters, and scholars. Many cultivated a princely style of rule, employing patronage not only as a display of personal magnificence but

also as a means of consolidating political legitimacy and enhancing civic prestige. Patronage served dual purposes: it projected the authority and refinement of the ruler or patron, while simultaneously benefiting the broader community through the creation of public works.

1.4.2.4 Economic Foundations and Merchant Influence

The city-states institutionalised this aesthetic and political agenda. Municipal governments commissioned city halls, renovated streets and public squares, constructed lodges, and built monumental public buildings to inspire civic pride. Siena, for instance, strategically employed art to communicate political ideals, commissioning fresco cycles and architectural projects that embodied republican virtues. The competitive display of wealth among urban elites resulted in the proliferation of chapels, hospitals, guild headquarters, churches, and public sculptures. Interiors were adorned with elaborate frescoes, portraits, gem collections, and libraries containing classical manuscripts and celebrated literary works.

Initially, many patrons regarded painters and sculptors as mere craftsmen - practitioners of mechanical skills - yet figures such as Cosimo de' Medici elevated them to the status of intellectuals and creative geniuses. This shift in perception, accompanied by increasing recruitment of artists from the urban middle classes for major commissions, gradually redefined the social position of the artist. As patronage became more competitive, the cost of artistic production rose, reinforcing the elite character of Renaissance culture. It was, fundamentally, a cultural system sustained by wealthy men, affluent cities, and powerful popes.

1.4.2.5 Economic Foundations

The economic underpinnings of this cultural efflorescence lay in the robust commercial networks and thriving trade of the Italian city-states. By the thirteenth century, Italy had become the most prosperous region in Europe, its wealth concentrated in urban centres such as Florence, Venice, Milan, and Rome. From a theoretical point of view, this nexus of economic capital, political ambition, and symbolic display illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, wherein investment in the arts functioned as both a marker of social distinction and a mechanism of political power. The Renaissance thus emerged not merely as an artistic movement, but as a socio-economic formation in which commerce, politics, and culture were mutually reinforcing.

In Renaissance Italy, the merchant-banker elite and the skilled artisan class structured their political and social life around the rhythms of economic activity, particularly the expansion of trade and commerce. The prosperity generated by these sectors facilitated the rise of new families whose wealth derived from mercantile and banking enterprises rather than from hereditary landholding. As these new wealthy sought to translate their economic capital into political influence, tensions emerged with the entrenched old rich, whose authority rested on long-standing aristocratic privilege.

1.4.2.6 Political Shifts

This contestation over political participation produced a fissure within the urban elite, creating fertile ground for broader social unrest. Popular revolts, often involving small shopkeepers, skilled artisans, and other segments of the *popolo minuto*, challenged the exclusivity of oligarchic governance.

In certain cases, these upheavals enabled the emergence of temporary dictatorships, supported by victorious factions of the *popolani*, who sought more inclusive political arrangements, albeit often within the framework of strongman rule.

The long-term outcome of these conflicts was a reconfiguration of the political map. In cities such as Florence and Venice, the consolidation of territorial control transformed them from autonomous urban communes into expansive regional states. These developments can be read through a Weberian lens as a shift from patrimonial oligarchies toward more centralised, bureaucratic forms of authority, or, alternatively, through a Marxian framework as an expression of class struggle between established elites and an emergent bourgeoisie, mediated by the mobilisation of lower-status urban groups.

By the fifteenth century, much of the Italian peninsula had come under the hereditary domination of powerful princely families, whose aristocratic courts monopolised the mechanisms of cultural patronage. Therefore, the flourishing of Renaissance art, scholarship, and intellectual life became increasingly concentrated within the courts of Italian rulers and the Papal curia. From the late fifteenth century onward, Renaissance popes pursued deliberate ideological programmes aimed at reinforcing their dual identity: as supreme spiritual authorities of Christendom and as temporal sovereigns of the central Italian states.

This concentration of power coincided with periods of political instability in certain city-states, where warfare, demographic decline, and the contraction of trade undermined urban prosperity. In such contexts, the promise of stability offered by princely rule - however autocratic - proved attractive to many contemporary thinkers. Renaissance historians and philosophers, drawing on both classical precedents and

pragmatic concerns, often endorsed forms of benign tyranny as a necessary means of restoring civic order and safeguarding the conditions for cultural production.

This shift reflects a Machiavellian recognition of the *raison d'état* - the idea that political authority must be preserved, even at the expense of republican freedoms, to ensure the survival and prosperity of the state. It also illustrates a broader Weberian transition from civic humanism to a model of charismatic - patrimonial authority, in which the ruler's personal prestige and capacity for patronage became central to both political legitimacy and cultural vitality in Renaissance Italy.

1.4.2.7 The Commercial Revolution

The commercial revolution of the late Middle Ages exerted a transformative influence on European society, fundamentally reshaping its economic, social, and institutional structures. Its impact was evident in the proliferation of trade fairs, the physical expansion of urban centres, the accelerated output of printed books, and the concurrent growth of both urbanisation and population. However, this transformation was not merely an expansion of trade volume; it represented a qualitative reconfiguration of the economic system.

The period witnessed significant financial and institutional innovations, including the refinement of holding companies, the widespread adoption of cashless transactions through bills of exchange, the introduction of marine insurance contracts, and the perfection of double-entry bookkeeping and advanced accounting techniques. Long-distance commerce expanded, underpinned by the emergence of international banking networks and complex commercial and industrial partnerships. The development of mechanisms for multiple-party payments across distant locations facilitated more rapid



execution of orders, integrating regional markets into a broader transcontinental economic sphere.

These developments can be understood through the lens of institutional economics as the creation of new transactional infrastructures that reduced uncertainty, lowered transaction costs, and enabled capital accumulation on an unprecedented scale. They also align with Braudel's "longue durée" framework, in which the commercial revolution is seen as a structural shift that laid the economic foundations for the Renaissance and, eventually, the rise of early modern capitalism. By enabling merchants to consolidate resources through joint ventures and cooperative companies, these innovations redefined profit-making as both a private enrichment strategy and a systemic driver of European economic integration.

Institutions have consistently functioned as foundational drivers of social transformation, providing the structural frameworks within which economic, political, and cultural change occurs. The economic revitalisation of medieval Europe created the conditions for the establishment of enduring centres of learning, most notably the founding of the University of Bologna in the eleventh century - the first of its kind in Europe. Over the following centuries, universities proliferated across the continent, becoming key sites for the transmission of knowledge and the training of professional elites.

As Toby Huff has argued, the medieval European university was an institution uniquely configured to promote systematic, technical, and scientific education, representing a decisive turning point in the intellectual history of Europe. By the late Middle Ages and into the Early Modern period, the attainment of a university degree had become an essential marker of elite professional status. Graduates entered

specialised roles such as the *cura animarum* (care of souls) in the clergy, legal practice, administrative governance, medical care, and scholarly teaching.

The curricular structure of Early Modern universities centred on the arts, theology, law, and medicine, disciplines that not only reflected the intellectual priorities of the age but also responded to the practical demands of an increasingly complex society. In parallel, the growth of a legally trained and literate administrative class facilitated the formal expansion of legal institutions and the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. This institutional evolution illustrates a Weberian process of rationalisation, in which the codification of knowledge and the professionalisation of expertise became essential to the functioning of modernising polities. The university, as both a cultural and bureaucratic institution, thus played a pivotal role in shaping the epistemic foundations of Europe's transition from the medieval to the early modern world.

1.4.2.8 Maritime Expansion

By the fifteenth century, the European economy was gradually emerging from the constraints of the medieval period. The lingering demographic, economic, and social repercussions of the Black Death - which had devastated continental Europe in the mid-fourteenth century - continued to shape patterns of labour, production, and urban life. In response to these structural shifts, urban centres forged new commercial associations and penetrated previously inaccessible markets, signalling a reorientation of economic activity toward expansion and integration.

The final decade of the fifteenth century marked a watershed in global connectivity. Portuguese navigators successfully rounded the Cape of Good Hope, opening direct maritime access to Asian markets, while the voyages to the Americas initiated by

Christopher Columbus heralded an entirely new sphere of transoceanic exchange. Prior to these exploratory breakthroughs, European shipping had largely remained within coastal waters, navigating under the constant sight of land. The technological and navigational innovations of the period - including the proliferation of multi-masted vessels, more efficient sail configurations, and advancements in cartography - significantly reduced navigational risks and improved the efficiency of long-distance maritime travel.

These developments shifted the strategic geography of European commerce. The rise in the number of ocean-going vessels and

the growth in trade volume facilitated the increasing use of Atlantic seaboard routes, which gradually eroded the long-standing dominance of Mediterranean maritime trade. These transformations can be interpreted through world-systems analysis as a transition in the spatial organisation of the European core, in which the Atlantic economy began to supplant the Mediterranean as the primary axis of commercial and geopolitical power. They also reflect a Braudelian *longue durée* process, whereby technological change, geographic reorientation, and expanding networks of exchange laid the structural foundations for the early modern global economy.

Recap

- ◆ Early modern Europe emerged from medieval socio-political and cultural foundations.
- ◆ Renaissance marked cultural rebirth grounded in classical antiquity and humanism.
- ◆ Italian city-states thrived as urban centres of Renaissance innovation.
- ◆ Patronage by elites fostered advancements in art, architecture, and learning.
- ◆ Renaissance social structure reflected wealth, occupation, and political exclusivity.
- ◆ Classical revival shaped architecture, art, and intellectual exchange with Byzantium.
- ◆ Courts and municipal governments competed to commission monumental public works.
- ◆ Merchant-bankers and artisans gained influence, challenging hereditary aristocratic power.
- ◆ Commercial revolution introduced new financial systems and expanded global trade.
- ◆ Maritime innovations shifted trade dominance from Mediterranean to Atlantic powers.

Objective Questions

1. What does the term “Renaissance” mean in French?
2. Name the Italian city-state known for exceptional artistic talent.
3. Which legal tradition shaped Renaissance urban legal culture?
4. Who was the Medici patron elevating artists to intellectual status?
5. Which economic class gained power alongside merchant-bankers in Renaissance Italy?
6. Name the architectural innovator who studied Roman ruins.
7. What bookkeeping method was perfected during the commercial revolution?
8. Which Portuguese route opened direct maritime access to Asia?
9. Who initiated voyages leading to European contact with the Americas?
10. Which economy replaced the Mediterranean as Europe’s commercial centre?

Answers

1. Rebirth
2. Florence
3. Roman law
4. Cosimo de’ Medici
5. Skilled artisans
6. Filippo Brunelleschi
7. Double-entry bookkeeping

8. Cape of Good Hope
9. Christopher Columbus
10. Atlantic economy

Assignments

1. Analyse how Italian city-states' political and economic structures nurtured Renaissance culture.
2. Discuss the impact of commercial revolution innovations on European trade and economic growth.
3. Evaluate the role of patronage in shaping Renaissance art, architecture, and intellectual life.

Reference

1. Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981.
2. Hale, J. R., *Renaissance Europe: The Individual and Society, 1480-1520*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971.
3. Johnson, Paul, *The Renaissance*, London, 2020.
4. Kekewich, Lucille (ed.), *The Renaissance in Europe: A Cultural Enquiry (The Impact of Humanism)*, Oxford, 2000.
5. Kramer, Loyd and Sarah Maza (eds.), *A Companion to western Historical Thought*, Oxford, 2002.
6. Munck, Thomas, *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History*, London, 2000.

Suggested Reading

1. Hobsbawm, E. J. *Industry and Empire*. Penguin, 1989.
2. Palmer, R. R. *A History of the Modern World*. Macmillan, London, 1976.
3. Stavrianos, A. J. *The World Since 1500*. New York, 1981.

SGOU



UNIT

Renaissance and Modernity

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain how Renaissance, Enlightenment, and French Revolution collectively shaped European modernity
- ◆ discuss the cultural, political, and economic transformations from medieval to industrial modernity
- ◆ explain the role of humanism, rationalism, and democratic ideals in modern thought
- ◆ assess the global diffusion and contradictions of modernity from a critical historical perspective

Prerequisites

The historical processes that laid the foundations of modernity unfolded across a broad temporal and geographical spectrum. Nevertheless, certain decisive turning points significantly shaped both the degree and the intensity of this transformation. Among these, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of industrial capitalism stand out as pivotal ruptures. The social changes and cultural interactions of the modern era were largely configured within a framework structured by these historical discontinuities - what Raymond Williams famously termed the “structure of feeling.”

Keywords

Humanism, Rationalism, Enlightenment, French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, Separation of powers, Modernity



Discussion

1.5.1 Renaissance and Modernity

From a critical perspective on modernity, Max Weber, as interpreted by Lowy observed that the pervasive and powerful influence of capitalist modernity enabled new forms of domination. He metaphorically described this condition as an “iron cage,” wherein individuals found their lives increasingly regulated, rationalised, and constrained by the imperatives of bureaucracy. These important writers’ debates and different ways of thinking would not have been possible without the major changes that shaped history. We can also see these turning points as times of crisis for the West. In each of these crises, the Western world entered a new stage of history. These moments are closely connected to the problems of today’s modern world. To truly understand the West, modernity, and its global impact, we must look closely at these developments.

At every crisis point, Western modernism was reshaped, gaining more influence and setting the stage for the next big change. For example, the Renaissance ended the so-called Dark Ages and, through a long and difficult process, gave rise to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, in turn, shaped the spirit of the French Revolution. While these changes prepared the West culturally and socially, the Industrial Revolution in England brought major political and economic changes. This revolution built on earlier progress, taking the social transformation that began with the Renaissance to a much higher level, and closely linking modernity with capitalism.

The first major change that started modernity in Europe was the Renaissance. However, it took more than three centuries for the full effects of this change to be seen in the context of modernism. The Renaissance

began in Italy in the 14th century, when people renewed their interest in the culture of ancient Greece and Rome, making great progress in art, science, and philosophy. It can be said that the Renaissance started in Italy in the 14th century, became more defined in the 15th century, and was widely accepted across Europe in the 16th century.

The Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement that played a key role in shaping modernity and its philosophical foundations. Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt identified the Renaissance as the starting point of European modern thought. At the heart of the changes sparked by the Renaissance was the “discovery of the individual,” meaning a renewed focus on the human being. This shift paved the way for anthropocentric thinking, which would influence the spirit of the following centuries. During this period, people began to explore the purpose of human existence and to better understand human potential. Renaissance thought emphasised the value of the individual, their personality, and their abilities. People sought to realise their potential through the power of reason, creativity, and imagination.

In almost every language, the word Renaissance refers to a period in European history and, as its origin suggests, to both a spiritual and physical renewal. This renewal was so powerful that it inspired new ideas in many areas and encouraged people to explore a wider range of knowledge about the world - especially in art, architecture, science, philosophy, literature, and music. These fields, shaped by the Renaissance, later became the foundation of modern thought. In art, the movement was defined by a renewed interest in the styles of ancient Greece and Rome. Famous Italian figures such as Giotto, Petrarch, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Donatello became central to this

transformation. Art in this period broke away from the styles of the Middle Ages, moving towards new ideas about perspective, human anatomy, light, shadow, colour, naturalism, mythology, and classical themes. This shift brought radical changes that transformed the whole of Europe and its sense of beauty.

Perspective was one of the most important artistic innovations of the Renaissance. By placing the human eye at the centre, perspective made objects appear more realistic and gave artworks a strong sense of depth, creating a three-dimensional effect. This had a major influence on painting and sculpture. As Gombrich explains, Renaissance artists valued perspective so highly that they planned the perspective and layout of their works before even starting to paint or sculpt. This approach celebrated the human gaze and signalled the growing belief that humans could master and understand nature. It also planted the early seeds of the Enlightenment idea of a “subject-centred universe of reason,” as later described by Immanuel Kant.

Some authors, such as Marshal McLuhan in 1964 and Ong in 1967, argue that this focus on vision paved the way for scientific tools like the telescope and microscope, and influenced the rise of visual culture in the 19th century. Michel Foucault took this idea further, suggesting that Renaissance perspective also laid the groundwork for modern systems of social control and surveillance. In his view, this way of seeing made it possible to observe and regulate behaviours that might otherwise disrupt social order.

During the Renaissance, significant progress was made in the study of human anatomy. Artists began to explore the structure of the human body in detail, gaining a deeper understanding of its movements, muscles, and organs. This knowledge allowed them to create paintings and sculptures

with greater realism. Notable examples include Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, Michelangelo’s David, and Titian’s Venus of Urbino (all of which present the human form with remarkable accuracy and beauty from different perspectives).

This focus on accurately representing the human body reflected a shift toward a more human-centred and secular view of life, which would influence later periods. A key reason for the increased importance of anatomical studies was the Renaissance artists’ desire to base their work on precise, realistic information about the body.

During the Renaissance, many artists began taking anatomy lessons and studying the human body closely to understand its structure more accurately. One of the most important figures in this field was the Italian anatomist, Andreas Vesalius. Through his detailed examinations, Vesalius discovered that some of the medical information recorded by Galenus, a physician from Pergamon in the 3rd century whose work had long shaped Medieval and Renaissance medicine, was incorrect. In 1543, Vesalius published *The Structure of the Human Body*, a groundbreaking anatomy book that provided a detailed description of human anatomy and became the most influential work of its time. His research greatly improved understanding of the body’s structure and contributed to the advancement of surgical techniques.

The Renaissance also saw numerous other publications and discoveries in anatomy and medicine that shaped the foundations of modern science. These included Giovanni Battista Morgagni’s “Autopsy Method,” which laid the basis for modern post-mortem procedures; Hieronymus Fabricius’ discovery of venous valves; and Francesco Redi’s work with the microscope, which not only contributed to the development of the modern microscope but also included the first anatomical studies of insects.



Nature, which had previously been mediated through divine iconography in medieval art, emerged as an autonomous subject of representation, aligned with the humanist project of situating man at the centre of intellectual and artistic inquiry. This epistemic reorientation is epitomised in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, which synthesises classical proportional theory with Renaissance ideals of geometric harmony, embodying the belief that the human body mirrors the mathematical perfection of the cosmos. Da Vinci's approach reflects a broader philosophical turn from the medieval God-centered cosmology to what Heidegger identifies as the "subiectum"- the positioning of the human as the foundational point of reference for knowledge and representation.

both the organising principle and the site of critical contestation in Western thought.

While the Renaissance transformed the visual arts, it also brought significant changes to literature and language. Italian literature flourished, with figures such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Dante and Machiavelli becoming central to the history of world literature. As Peter Burke notes, although some of these authors - like Dante - are often linked to the Middle Ages, they can also be understood as part of the early Renaissance. Their works drew on the heritage of ancient Greek and Roman literature, used everyday language, and placed human character and experience at the centre of storytelling. This human-centred focus encouraged new literary forms, such as the sonnet in poetry and the five-act structure in drama and comedy.

One of the most important linguistic developments of the period was the increasing use of local, or vernacular, languages instead of Latin, which allowed modern European languages to take shape. In France, writers like François Rabelais and Michel de Montaigne explored questions about human nature and the meaning of life. In England, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and John Milton created works that remain among the greatest in world literature. In Spain, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* became one of the most influential novels ever written, blending humour, social commentary, and reflections on the nature of reality.

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany in 1440 marked a decisive turning point in the intellectual history of the Renaissance. By enabling the rapid and consistent reproduction of texts, printing drastically reduced the cost of books and expanded their availability beyond the traditional circles of clergy and the learned elite. This technological innovation democratized access to knowledge, fostering a broader reading public and facilitating the



diffusion of humanist scholarship, scientific inquiry, and literary production. The printing press functioned as a transformative medium that reshaped the conditions of cultural transmission and intellectual exchange, accelerating what Elizabeth Eisenstein in the book, *The Printing Press as an agent of Change* identifies as the “print revolution.” The wider circulation of texts destabilised existing structures of authority by allowing competing ideas to emerge and gain traction, thereby laying the groundwork for religious reformations, scientific advancements, and new forms of public discourse. In this sense, Gutenberg’s invention can be seen not merely as a mechanical breakthrough but as a catalyst for epistemic change, fundamentally altering the relationship between knowledge, communication, and social power in early modern Europe.

During this period, profound changes occurred in Western Europe that weakened the political and spiritual authority of the Catholic Church, the central institution of the Middle Ages. These shifts formed part of the broader cultural rupture described above and paved the way for the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity. The Renaissance helped to initiate reform movements that challenged the Church’s monopoly over religious truth and moral authority. In this new environment, individuals were increasingly encouraged to follow their conscience, question established dogma and think freely without fear of ecclesiastical control. Popular dissatisfaction was fuelled by the Church’s vast wealth, the corruption of its officials, and the moral failings of the clergy, especially in certain regions of Europe. This erosion of trust not only weakened the Church’s hold over society but also strengthened the humanist and anthropocentric worldview, in which the human being - not God - became the primary reference point for understanding the universe. This represented a shift in the episteme of the period: authority moved

away from a divinely sanctioned hierarchy toward a secular, human-centred order that would shape the intellectual foundations of modern Western thought.

Modernity, at its core, is founded on a worldview grounded in reason and rationality, applying these principles across the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. Central to this framework is the idea that a coherent, systematic rationality shapes all aspects of modern life, leaving little room for gaps or ambiguities. Rationality may be understood as the capacity to draw logical and consistent conclusions with reason, and to make decisions based on evidence, information, and data. Such a structured form of rationality cannot exist without a commitment to reason itself, nor without a deliberate orientation toward its persistent and purposeful application. Throughout history, this close relationship between human beings and their active use of reason has been a defining force in shaping the trajectory of modern thought.

Modernity places a central focus on reason and rationality. With the work of René Descartes, rationalism gained prominence, marking a shift in which the sciences began to guide philosophy, reversing the pattern of earlier periods when philosophy had directed the sciences. This positive emphasis on reason continued for the next two centuries, reaching its height in the 18th century - the so-called Age of Enlightenment. What distinguished this period from earlier centuries was its conviction that reason should be the main tool for understanding and improving the world. This belief shaped intellectual, political, and cultural life, and found its most developed expression in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose work profoundly influenced later thought and became a cornerstone of modern intellectual history.

In his 1784 essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Immanuel



Kant famously called on individuals to have the courage to use their own reason and to adopt a critical stance toward dogma and authoritarianism. This statement became one of the defining expressions of the Enlightenment's intellectual spirit. The concept of reason first outlined by Descartes was, in Kant's philosophy, transformed into a strong affirmation of individual rationality as the basis for human autonomy. Within the Enlightenment framework, confidence in reason and science, a mechanistic view of the universe, a belief in historical progress, and an underlying optimism about human potential were all reinforced. These ideas provided the intellectual foundations upon which much of Western thought in subsequent centuries was built. By the late 18th century, such views had reached their peak in Kant's work, and the Enlightenment as a movement profoundly shaped the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres of modernity.

1.5.2 The French Revolution and Democratic Modernity

Modernity brought major reforms to political life and democratic principles in European society. One of its most important outcomes was the introduction of the first significant steps toward embedding the core values of modernity - equality, freedom, and justice - into the structure of society. These changes reflected a shift from traditional, hierarchical systems of power to more inclusive and rights-based political orders. This transformation can be understood as part of the broader Enlightenment project, in which reason and human autonomy became guiding principles for social organisation, law, and governance.

The French Revolution marked a new stage in the human-centred thinking that had begun with the Renaissance after the long medieval period in Europe. Politically, it is often seen—especially in Marx's view

- as a victory of the bourgeoisie. However, the Revolution was also the starting point for many of the major social and political problems that would later appear in modern society, as well as for the debates and analyses aimed at understanding them.

Several key thinkers shaped the spirit of the French Revolution and influenced many of the debates that followed. Among the most prominent were Descartes, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. Another significant figure was Julien Offray de La Mettrie, who combined Enlightenment ideas with the factual and materialist outlook of the period, capturing the intellectual spirit of the age. Even before the dawn of a new era, these authors identified the issues that would emerge in modern society and reflected on them, offering analyses and evaluations that would guide future discussions.

Rene Descartes supported the growth of critical thinking with his famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," and through his reflections on the ideas of earlier thinkers, especially about creation. His rationalist philosophy argued that people can reach truth and knowledge using reason. This view aligned closely with many of the ideas emphasised during the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers also believed that reason and rationality should be used to challenge unjust governments. In this sense, Descartes played an important role in shaping the intellectual foundations of the French Revolution and inspiring those who sought to resist despotic monarchies.

In 1748, Montesquieu published "*On the Spirit of the Law*", a work that became the foundation for the principle of "separation of powers" in government. In it, he warned of the dangers of giving all powers to a single person, calling such a system "despotism." Instead, he argued that power should be divided among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. This principle is now seen as one of the core foundations of modern

democratic states, helping to protect governments from tyranny and arbitrary rule. Montesquieu believed that this division of powers would help create and maintain a democratic order. For him, true “democracy,” as a system of virtue, depended on a balanced separation of powers rather than the absolute control of one ruler. Another key idea Montesquieu stressed in this work was the principle of the rule of law. He argued that laws should be applied equally and fairly to everyone. For him, the rule of law was essential to limit the government’s arbitrary power and to protect the rights of individuals.

Another important part of Montesquieu’s *On the Spirit of the Laws* is his study of different forms of government. He describes three main types: monarchy, aristocracy, and republic. A monarchy, according to Montesquieu, is an “unlimited government,” but in practice, the monarch’s powers are often limited and regulated by law. An aristocracy is a “class government,” where power is held by a small group of elite or noble families—usually the wealthiest and most influential in society. A republic, in contrast, is a “people’s government,” where citizens have a role in governing, often through elected representatives. Montesquieu believed that republics better protect human freedom and encourage participation, and he listed many advantages of this system. However, he also warned that republics could become dangerous if they turned into a form of majority despotism.

Voltaire was another key figure who shaped the intellectual foundations of modern political thought. He strongly defended ideas that are central to modern democracies, such as protecting individual freedoms, freedom of expression, and human rights. His ideas, which deeply influenced both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, focused on several main points: equality and freedom, tolerance, opposition to religious dogma, the importance of science and reason, and criticism of despotism.

One of Rousseau’s most important works is *The Social Contract*, which opens with the famous line, “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”. This work goes beyond the concerns of its own time and stands as one of the strongest critiques of despotic governments on an individual level. In it, Rousseau explores human nature and how societies are formed when people come together. He argues that while people are born free and equal, they lose their freedom as society develops. To overcome this unjust and unequal system, he proposes a “social contract” between individuals. This contract is an agreement to organise society and protect the common good, which in turn guarantees freedom for everyone. Rousseau also introduces the idea of the “general will”, which represents the collective interests of all people above individual desires. By accepting the general will through the social contract, Rousseau believes individuals can regain their freedom and create a fairer, more just society.

It can be said that the French Revolution, built on the intellectual foundations laid by these thinkers, played a key role in shaping modernity - especially in areas such as democratic values, human rights, secularism, nationalism, and social change. The Revolution helped spread principles such as equality, freedom, justice, and popular sovereignty, which became the basis of modern democratic systems. At its core, the Revolution was driven by the people’s demand for equality among social classes. During this period, the privileges of the nobility were abolished, feudal structures were dismantled, and important steps were taken toward creating a society in which all citizens were equal before the law.

During the Revolution, the 17-article *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, announced on August 26, 1789, stressed the principles of equality, freedom, and justice. This important text, written as



a response to authoritarian and oppressive systems, underlined people's right to decide their own future and to live freely. In this sense, the Declaration became a source of inspiration for the basic freedoms and human rights that modern democracies protect today. Here's your paragraph restructured in simple and clear language. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* also adopted the principle that justice should be accessible to everyone and that the rule of law must be upheld. In the years that followed, European democracies grew and developed on this foundation of justice.

Another major impact of the Revolution was the idea that people should have a say in how the country is run. When the monarchy was replaced by a republic, society gained the power to influence political decisions. Public participation and political awareness grew stronger during the French Revolution, as people began to take part through street protests, rallies, and written publications. The French National Assembly, created during the Revolution, was made up of representatives elected by the people and worked to end the monarchy and feudal system. Its goal was to reflect the will of the people. The Revolution also introduced the principle of separating legislative, executive, and judicial powers, creating a system of checks and balances. This allowed the legislative body, representing the people, to influence the government. Elections were held so citizens could choose their representatives, encouraging active public involvement in decision-making.

The French Revolution strongly promoted the ideas of equality and justice. People came together to demand freedom, fairness, and equal rights, fighting against slavery, class privileges, and other forms of inequality. These values became the foundation of modern society. The Revolution also helped develop civic awareness, encouraging individuals to take an active role in political

decisions and government affairs. It stressed both the rights and responsibilities of citizens, strengthening the idea of citizenship that supports modern democracy.

The Revolution also expanded the public sphere, giving people more chances to join political debates and decisions. It created a space where social issues could be discussed openly and ideas could be shared freely, which increased democratic participation and political awareness. Overall, the French Revolution was a key example of social change, helping to end the feudal system and promote the ideals of equality, justice, civic awareness, and active public involvement - values that remain central to modern society.

1.5.3 Industrial Revolution and Global Modernity

While modernity in Europe was already growing through earlier changes, a major turning point came in England at the end of the 18th century - the Industrial Revolution. This transformation became a central force in shaping what we now call "modernity," driving rapid changes in economy, society, and politics. It created a level of social, cultural, and political change far greater than in any previous era, redefining how people lived, worked, and interacted.

Starting in the 14th century, the Renaissance challenged the authority of the Church, which had dominated for over a thousand years, and placed human beings at the centre of thought and creativity, especially in art. It created a new worldview that focused on humans and their ability to understand and control nature. This human-focused perspective gradually spread over the centuries and became one of the main foundations of modern aesthetic philosophy. Without the breakthrough of the Renaissance, modernity might not have been possible.

The Enlightenment was the second major turning point in Europe, taking the changes begun in the Renaissance to a new level. It promoted rational thinking about people, the world, and the universe, giving rise to ideals such as reason, equality, freedom, individualism, and science. Humanity, which had expanded its vision in the Renaissance, now began to think in more structured, ideological ways - sometimes to the point of being limited by them. Since the world and universe were now considered fully understandable, science and rationality were expected to form the basis of a new civilization.

The Enlightenment encouraged people to free themselves from all forms of metaphysical and political dependence, allowing them to study and understand nature and society more deeply. The human-centred ideas of the Renaissance moved into science, guiding many discoveries. This approach eventually led to positivism in the 19th century - a belief that only scientific knowledge was valid. However, critics argue that this overly human-focused view later became one cause of the crisis of modernism. For the ideas of the Renaissance and Enlightenment to shape Western political and economic life, more radical political changes were needed. These changes, which occurred in the late 1700s - about 250 years after the Renaissance - brought the social and intellectual revolutions of the earlier periods into the political arena, leading to major transformations.

The French Revolution, along with the intellectual contributions of the writers and thinkers who shaped its ideological framework, addressed the long-standing political requirements for the consolidation of modernity. This marked the final decisive step in a

historical process in which the human subject was to be positioned as the master of nature. The Enlightenment's emphasis on science, technological advancement, and rational thought found tangible material expression in England through the Industrial Revolution. Comparable in transformative power to the French Revolution in the political domain, the Industrial Revolution redefined the economic and social fabric of modernity. Over the course of two and a half centuries, it radically expanded productive capacities, and through the emergence of industrial capitalism, it extended these transformations on a global scale. In doing so, it shifted modernity from a European phenomenon to a planetary one.

1.5.4 Contradictions and Critiques of Modernity

However, this global diffusion also revealed the paradoxical dimension of modernity: its capacity to achieve its declared ideals - progress, rationalization, and mastery over nature - while simultaneously generating conditions that alienate and subordinate human beings and place the natural environment under existential threat. This contradiction forms the basis of postmodern critiques, particularly the perspective articulated by Lyotard which challenges the grand narratives and utopian aspirations underpinning modernist thought. While such anti-modernist perspectives accurately identify modernity's self-destructive tendencies, they often fail to engage with the deeper ontological and structural problem of modernity itself - that is, the inherent tensions within its foundational logic and its teleological drive toward totalising transformation.



Recap

- ◆ Renaissance initiated human-centred thinking and challenged medieval Church authority.
- ◆ Perspective in art reflected growing mastery of nature and human reason.
- ◆ Anatomical studies advanced medical science and realistic human representation.
- ◆ Vernacular literature expanded cultural participation beyond Latin-speaking elites.
- ◆ Printing press revolutionised knowledge circulation and challenged established authority.
- ◆ Enlightenment promoted rationalism, science, equality, and individual liberty.
- ◆ French Revolution embedded democratic ideals into modern political structures.
- ◆ Montesquieu's separation of powers became foundation of modern democracies.
- ◆ Industrial Revolution transformed economy, society, and global modernity.
- ◆ Modernity's progress coexisted with contradictions and ecological risks.

Objective Questions

1. Who called modern bureaucracy an “iron cage”?
2. Which Swiss historian identified the Renaissance as the start of European modern thought?
3. Who painted the *Vitruvian Man*?
4. Who published *The Structure of the Human Body* in 1543?

5. Who invented the printing press?
6. What was the famous Enlightenment motto of Kant?
7. Who authored *On the Spirit of the Laws*?
8. Which Enlightenment thinker wrote *The Social Contract*?
9. What 1789 declaration proclaimed equality, freedom, and justice?
10. Which 20th-century thinker criticised modernity's "grand narratives"?

Answers

1. Max Weber
2. Jacob Burckhardt
3. Leonardo da Vinci
4. Andreas Vesalius
5. Johannes Gutenberg
6. Dare to know
7. Montesquieu
8. Rousseau
9. Declaration of the Rights of Man
10. Lyotard

Assignments

1. Discuss how Renaissance humanism influenced Enlightenment rationalism and democratic political thought.
2. Analyse the social, political, and economic impacts of the French Revolution on modernity.

3. Evaluate the contradictions between modernity's ideals and its environmental and social consequences.

Reference

1. Cosman, Madeleine Pelter, and Linda Gale Jones. *Handbook to Life in the Medieval World*. Infobase Publishing, 2008.
2. Ellwood, Robert S. *Encyclopaedia of World Religions*. Facts on File, 2007.

Suggested Reading

1. Brinton, Crane. *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Vintage Publications, 1965.
2. Carnes, Mark C., and John A. Garraty. *The American Nation: A History of the United States*. Pearson Longman, New York, 2006.
3. Foner, Eric. *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*. Oxford University Press, 1981.
4. Rude, George. *The Crowd in the French Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 1967.



BLOCK

From Tradition to Modernity



UNIT

Social Evils

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ identify the caste structures that sustained inequality in pre-reform Kerala
- ◆ describe the role of temples and religion in enforcing social hierarchies
- ◆ discuss the forms of economic and labour exploitation faced by marginalised groups
- ◆ trace how social customs and language reinforced caste and gender oppression
- ◆ evaluate the historical context in which the Kerala Renaissance emerged

Prerequisites

Kerala is widely celebrated today for its achievements in social development, literacy, and communal harmony. However, prior to the social reform movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the land bore the burden of deep-rooted social evils that marred its society. These evils were not incidental or marginal; they formed the very scaffolding of Kerala's social order. To understand the significance of the Kerala Renaissance, one must first examine the nature, depth, and consequences of the entrenched iniquities that prevailed in the pre-reform period.

Keywords

Caste hierarchy, Untouchability, Uzhiyam, Mulakkaram, Temple power, Sirkar slaves, Upper Cloth Revolt

Discussion

The study of pre-modern Kerala society has been shaped by a range of historical sources, each offering distinct insights into its social structure, power relations, and everyday life. Early texts often blended myth and memory, reflecting the values and ideologies of dominant groups. The *Mooshakavamsa Kavya*, written in the 11th century, is among the earliest attempts at recording local political history. Although composed in the stylised form of courtly poetry, it tells us about kingship, temple building, land control, and the role of Brahmins in legitimising rule. It reflects a society where power rested on lineage, ritual authority, and the control of land and trade routes.

From the 16th century, *Tuhfat-ul-Mujahiddin* marked a turning point. Written by Sheikh Zainuddin, a Muslim scholar from Ponnani, the text documents not only Portuguese aggression but also local caste practices, economic life, and inter-religious tensions. Unlike earlier writings, it focuses on lived realities. It is also notable for its strong ethical voice, protesting injustice and calling for resistance. The *Keralolpathi*, compiled in the 17th century or later, presents a very different image. It claims that Kerala was created by the mythical sage Parasurama, who then brought Brahmins to settle the land. The text explains the origins of caste divisions, temples, and rulers. Though not historically accurate in a modern sense, it reveals how upper-caste groups, particularly the Namboothiris, justified their dominance in social and religious life.

Folk ballads such as the *Vadakkan Pattukal* and *Thekkan Pattukal* give us another angle. Transmitted orally before being written down, these stories revolve around duels, family honour, and warrior codes. They reflect the world of intermediate castes, especially the

martial Nairs, and show how values such as loyalty, bravery, and vengeance shaped social behaviour. In addition to these, temple records, copperplate grants, and foreign travel accounts add detail. They speak of caste-based occupations, land revenue systems, local disputes, and religious institutions. Portuguese and Dutch observers, for instance, were often surprised by the complexity of caste and the influence of temples in daily life.

Together, these sources help us see a society rooted in hierarchy but also in negotiation. Historiography, here, is not just about what happened; it is about how communities remembered, justified, or questioned the world they lived in.

2.1.1 The Rise of Caste Hierarchies

In the Sangam age, society in early Kerala was notably less rigid. Social divisions existed, but they were shaped more by occupation and clan than by hereditary status. Work, regardless of its nature, was not seen as degrading. There were no strict notions of untouchability or ritual pollution. People moved with relative ease between roles, and the boundaries between groups remained porous. In stark contrast, medieval Kerala witnessed the entrenchment of caste hierarchies. This changed dramatically with the arrival and settlement of Brahmins, especially the Namboothiris. Originally met with resistance by the indigenous Dravidian communities, the Brahmins eventually overcame opposition through strategic assimilation and religious authority. They established settlements in fertile regions, constructed temples, and gradually converted spiritual hegemony into social and economic dominance.



Temples became the lynchpins of power, not merely places of worship. They emerged as instruments of land accumulation and custodians of a new Brahmanical order. Around these temples, a stratified society began to take shape. The caste system, largely absent before, was now meticulously constructed and enforced. The social pyramid was thus erected; with the Brahmins at the summit, followed by the Kshatriyas, Nairs, and an array of occupational and service castes including carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, Chaliyans, Thiyyas, Pulayas, and Parayas. This division, though ostensibly based on profession, soon ossified into a hereditary caste order.

2.1.2 Untouchability

Perhaps the most dehumanising element of the social hierarchy was untouchability. The Namboothiris and other caste Hindus devised intricate notions of ‘pollution’ and ritual purity to justify the exclusion of lower castes from public life. This was not a matter of mere religious orthodoxy; it permeated every aspect of existence. Untouchables were prohibited from entering temples, schools, or public roads adjacent to religious institutions. Notices were posted near temples warning ‘polluting’ castes not to approach. Even the shadow of an untouchable falling upon a higher caste was considered contaminating.

Spatial segregation was absolute. In many parts of Travancore and Cochin, lower castes could not use the public road near temples. Signs were erected warning them to keep away, as their very presence was considered polluting. In markets, if they had goods to sell, they had to lie on the roadside, at a distance, and shout out their wares. Even public utilities like water sources and wells were segregated. A Pulaya drawing water from a higher caste well was unthinkable.

In courts, a member of a polluting caste had to stand under a tree outside the premises

while a clerk took down their testimony. In conversations, lower castes had to refer to themselves in humiliating terms such as *adiyan* (slave). They were barred from wearing upper garments, using umbrellas, or donning gold jewellery. If a Pulaya tenant had to inform his Namboothiri landlord of the birth of his child, he was forced to say that his wife had delivered a ‘monkey’. Even cooked rice eaten by a lower caste had to be referred to as gruel in conversations with Brahmins, creating a level of internalised degradation that stripped language itself of honesty and dignity.

The tyranny of ‘pollution’ was enforced not only through exclusion but also through language, spatial restrictions, and behavioural codes. The very act of being born into a polluting caste condemned one to a life of humiliation and disenfranchisement.

2.1.3 Economic Exploitation

Economic structures in pre-reform Kerala were inextricably tied to caste. The Janmi system, in which vast tracts of land were owned by upper caste landlords, relegated the lower castes to agrarian servitude. The Pulayas, Parayas, Ezhavas, and other such communities were bound to the land as tenants, labourers, or, worse, as agrestic slaves.

Forced labour was common. The *uzhiyam* system compelled individuals from lower castes to work without any form of remuneration. Travancore had its own category of “sirkar slaves”; individuals who were legally owned by the state and rented out to private landholders. Slaves faced harsh punishments for defiance or attempts at escape. Their lives were marked by both physical toil and psychological subjugation.

Taxation, too, was weaponised. The lower castes bore the brunt of hundreds of different levies; on houses, hair, oil, fishing nets, hunting tools, and even on the breasts of

women (known as the infamous *mulakkaram* or breast tax). Taxes were collected during festivals, harvests, royal events, and for no reason other than caste entitlement. The crushing tax burden kept entire communities impoverished and dependent.

2.1.4 Education and Knowledge as Privilege

Education, which ought to be the cornerstone of human advancement, was monopolised by the upper castes. Brahmins alone had access to traditional learning. The Avarnas those outside the caste system were forbidden from entering schools or learning Sanskrit. Knowledge was sanctified and locked away behind the doors of temples and scriptural institutions. For the Ezhavas, Pulayas, and other backward communities, literacy was a distant dream, blocked by religious and legal injunctions.

The denial of education served to reinforce social hierarchies. Without access to knowledge or the means of economic mobility, the lower castes remained trapped in cycles of poverty and ritual ‘pollution’. Women, especially from these communities, faced double oppression; excluded by both caste and gender.

2.1.5 Superstition and Ritualism

The religious sphere was no less oppressive. Spirituality in Kerala, particularly under the control of the Nambuthiris, devolved into a web of superstitions, ritualism, and priestcraft. The masses were taught that their misfortunes were the result of *karma* and caste. To question the priesthood was to invite spiritual damnation. Even minor rituals required the presence of Brahmin intermediaries, who charged exorbitant fees and exercised total control over religious life.

Festivals, religious events, and daily worship were rigidly segregated by caste. In some places, lower castes were allowed to participate only from afar. Temples were not houses of God for all; they were bastions of exclusivity and domination. The notion of a shared, universal divine was absent. Instead, divine grace was filtered through the caste system, and salvation itself was caste-dependent.

Cultural spaces were also tightly regulated. Folk performances like *Theyyam*, *thottam pattu*, and *kettukazhcha*, which originated from the beliefs of the subaltern, were absorbed and subordinated under caste Hindu patronage and stripped of their emancipatory potential. The everyday lives of the oppressed were governed by omens, taboos, and religious interdictions that served to perpetuate obedience.

2.1.6 Gendered Oppression and Sexual Exploitation

Women were perhaps the most invisible victims of this social order. Upper-caste women lived under strict codes of chastity and seclusion, while lower-caste women were denied even the right to modesty. The prohibition against wearing upper garments was not merely a cultural custom; it was enforced through physical violence and social exclusion. The infamous Upper Cloth Revolt, spearheaded by Channar women, was one of the earliest indications of resistance.

Sexual exploitation was institutionalised through practices like *sambandham*, a loose form of marital alliance between Nambuthiri men and Nair women, where the former retained all privileges and the latter had no claim to property or inheritance. For lower-caste women, there was no legal recourse against abuse. Their bodies were treated as both economically productive and ritually polluting; used, discarded, and regulated without consent.



2.1.7 A Closed and Rigid Social Order

At its core, pre-reform Kerala society was defined by exclusion, oppression, and denial. Caste was not merely a social category; it was an all-encompassing reality that determined one's food, occupation, place of residence, access to knowledge, and right to

dignity. The state, religion, economy, and culture all worked in tandem to uphold this order. Mobility whether social, economic, or spiritual was systematically denied to the majority of the population.

Resistance, when it emerged, was swiftly crushed. Any deviation from established customs was branded as heresy or rebellion.

Manusmriti

The *Manusmriti* was not a law code in the modern sense, but its influence in pre-modern Kerala was significant. Though never uniformly enforced, it shaped how society understood caste, gender, and authority. Among the Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala, the text was treated as an ideal guide for maintaining social order, especially in matters of ritual purity and caste-based roles.

Caste rules from the *Manusmriti* supported a rigid hierarchy, with severe restrictions on lower-caste communities. Access to education, temples, and even public roads was limited. In Kerala, this framework allowed Brahmins and dominant castes to control land, knowledge, and political power. Its teachings placed women in subordinate positions throughout their lives. A woman, according to Manu, must always be under the protection of a man first her father, then her husband, and then her son. This belief helped justify practices like *smarthavicharam*, where upper-caste women accused of violating sexual norms were publicly tried and often excommunicated. Such customs reinforced patriarchal control.

Critics such as Dr B.R. Ambedkar denounced the *Manusmriti* as a symbol of inequality and exclusion. While not enforced by courts, its values shaped centuries of social practice. In Kerala, this meant legitimising caste dominance and limiting the freedoms of both women and marginalised communities.

Lower castes were left with little space for self-expression. Even language and speech were monitored and controlled. The social evils that plagued Kerala prior to the reform movement were neither accidental nor transient. They were deeply embedded in the very architecture of society. Untouchability, caste-based exclusion, forced labour, educational deprivation, ritual exploitation, and gendered oppression collectively rendered vast swathes of the population invisible and voiceless.

It is within this grim context that the Kerala Renaissance acquires its historical significance. The reformers who emerged in

the 19th century, armed with modern education, colonial interventions, missionary support, and indigenous wisdom, were not simply reacting to injustice. They were confronting centuries of systemic inhumanity. That the renaissance took root in such a rigid and reactionary society is itself a testimony to the courage, foresight, and resilience of those who dreamed of a better world. This understanding is essential for students of history, not only to appreciate the strides Kerala has taken but also to recognise how deeply society must be transformed when its very foundations rest upon inequality and injustice.

Recap

- ◆ Brahmin settlements institutionalised caste and temple-based power.
- ◆ Untouchability regulated mobility, speech, and public presence.
- ◆ Pollution taboos justified exclusion and everyday humiliations.
- ◆ Pulayas and Parayas endured forced labour and slavery.
- ◆ Education was monopolised by Brahmins, denied to others.
- ◆ Superstition and ritualism maintained Brahminical spiritual dominance.
- ◆ Taxation was arbitrary, punitive, and caste-discriminatory.
- ◆ Gender codes restricted women, especially lower-caste women.
- ◆ Language enforced subjugation through humiliating self-reference.
- ◆ Resistance was suppressed; mobility was deliberately denied.

Objective Questions

1. Which community institutionalised Brahmanical dominance through temple construction and land control?
2. Which tax was imposed on lower-caste women's bodies in Travancore?
3. Which term was used by lower castes to refer to themselves humbly?
4. Which ritual performance was appropriated and regulated by caste Hindu patronage?
5. What system forced lower castes to labour without pay in Travancore?
6. Which caste was considered the highest in Kerala's social hierarchy?
7. Who were denied access to wells used by higher castes?
8. What was the name given to state-owned slaves in Travancore?
9. Which revolt was sparked by the denial of upper garments to women?

Answers

1. Nambuthiris
2. *Mulakkaram*
3. Adiyar
4. Theyyam
5. *Uzhiyam*
6. Brahmins
7. Pulayas
8. Sirkar slaves
9. Upper Cloth Revolt

Assignments

1. Examine the role of untouchability in shaping spatial and social boundaries in Kerala.
2. Describe the various forms of forced labour and economic exploitation under the Janmi system.
3. How did the denial of education reinforce social hierarchies among avarnas in pre-reform Kerala?
4. Analyse the gendered nature of caste oppression using examples from lower-caste women's experiences.
5. Evaluate the role of superstition and ritualism in maintaining Brahminical control over society.

Reference

1. Balakrishnan, P.K. *Jativyavasthayum Keralacharithravum*. D.C. Books, 2004.
2. Narayanan, M.G.S. *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*. Kerala Historical Society, 1972.
3. Rao, M.S.A., *Social Change in Malabar*, The Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1957.
4. Sivathamby, K., *Studies in Ancient Tamil Society*, New Century Book House, Madras, 1998.
5. Thurston, Edgar. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vols. 1–7. Franklin Classics, 2018.

Suggested Reading

1. Ganesh, K.N. *Keralathinte Innalekal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1995.
2. Iyer, L.K.A. *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*. Higgin Botham, 1909.
3. Menon, K.P. Padmanabha. *History of Kerala*. 4 vols. Asian Educational Services, Delhi



UNIT

Gender Issues

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ identify key gender-based restrictions in Kerala's pre-reform caste society
- ◆ examine how religious and caste institutions reinforced patriarchy
- ◆ trace the impact of the denial of education on women's roles
- ◆ explore early signs of female resistance and social reform

Prerequisites

The social structure of Kerala, as it emerged during the medieval and early modern periods, was deeply rooted in caste-based patriarchy. Women across communities suffered varying degrees of subjugation, framed by a rigid socio-religious order. The condition of women in pre-reform Kerala cannot be described in generalities alone. It was a layered reality, marked by caste, class, religion, and geography, but underpinned by the same logic of patriarchal dominance. Polygamy, illiteracy, widowhood, domestic confinement, and Brahmanical patriarchy were not isolated phenomena; they were strands of a larger system that saw women as vessels of ritual honour and social stability rather than as individuals with agency.

Keywords

Polygamy, Widowhood, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Sambandham, Marakkuda, Illiteracy, Smarthavicharam, Antharjanam

Discussion

2.2.1 Polygamy

Polygamy was a common practice among Kerala's elite castes, particularly among Namboothiri Brahmins and Muslim landlords. For the Namboothiris, the eldest son was permitted to marry within the Brahmin caste, often to a much younger girl, sometimes a child, while the younger sons entered into *sambandham* relationships with women from the Nair caste. These relationships, though recognised socially, carried no legal standing for the women or their children.

A striking consequence of this system was that many Namboothiri women remained unmarried. These women, *Antharjanams*, or "those who remain indoors," were confined within their homes, their existence marked by perpetual isolation. Marriage for them was a privilege rationed out in the interests of caste purity. The unwed were condemned to a life of chastity, silence, and ceremonial purity, robbed of the emotional and social security that marital life might have offered.

In Muslim households, especially among affluent *mappilas*, polygamy was sanctioned under Islamic law but often practised with little concern for the consent or dignity of women. A man could divorce his wife with relative ease through *talaq*, while the woman was left with no parallel right of renunciation. The burden of abandonment, both social and economic, fell squarely upon the woman's shoulders.

2.2.2 Widowhood

For widows, especially among the upper castes, life was little more than a slow social death. While Kerala did not widely practice *sati*, the self-immolation of widows, women were subjected to severe restrictions and ritualistic shaming. Among Namboothiri

women, widowhood meant total seclusion, the removal of jewellery, cropped hair, and a life stripped of all colour and festivity. They were forbidden to remarry. The stigma surrounding widows was such that their presence was considered inauspicious, especially during festivals and ceremonies.

The Nairs, though matrilineal, imposed their own silent codes. Polyandry was permitted but rarely translated into autonomy for women. Widows might remarry under *marumakkathayam* traditions, but such practices were on the decline by the nineteenth century. Among the Ezhavas and other *avarna* groups, widow remarriage was more common, yet such unions were socially frowned upon and often resulted in ostracisation from the wider community.

In Christian families, widows faced pressure to remain within the confines of their husband's lineage and social norms. Remarriage was allowed but rarely encouraged. For Muslim women, the *iddah* period following the husband's death marked their temporary isolation, but reintegration into married life was possible depending on class and familial standing.

2.2.3 Illiteracy and Intellectual Exclusion

The denial of education to women in pre-reform Kerala was systematic and calculated. Education, particularly religious and classical, was the exclusive domain of Brahmin men. *Avarna* communities and women were considered unworthy of learning. Language, the very medium of consciousness and expression, was withheld from the majority of Kerala's women. Among the few who did receive any form of literacy were the *devadasis*, women trained



in temple arts, music, and Sanskrit, yet ultimately reduced to ritualised performers and, frequently, objects of elite male desire. Their learning, paradoxically, did not translate into status or autonomy but rather reinforced their functional role within temple economies and patriarchal frameworks.

In Nair households, young girls were sent to *kalaris* or *ezhuthupallis*, but this education seldom went beyond the elementary. The focus remained on preparing the girl for domestic responsibilities. After puberty rites such as the *thali kettu kalyanam*, formal learning ceased. Syrian Christian girls were somewhat better positioned, and missionary schools later brought some reform, yet early resistance to girls' education persisted across denominations. The suppression of female education was not merely neglect; it was a deliberate mechanism of control. An educated woman was perceived as a threat to the social fabric, a challenge to male guardianship, and an aberration in a society that valued silence over speech in women.

2.2.4 Domesticity as Destiny

Domesticity was the only permissible arena for most women. The kitchen, courtyard, and storehouse formed the limits of their world. The ideal woman was one who laboured silently, served her husband and elders, bore children without complaint, and died with her reputation intact. In Brahmanical ideology, the wife was the guardian of household purity. Her worth was tethered to her husband's piety and her own invisibility.

The *marakkuda*, or palm-leaf umbrella used by Namboothiri women to cover their faces in public, symbolised this imposed invisibility. It was not merely a practice of modesty; it was a ritualistic effacement of identity. The *antharjanam* was not allowed to be seen, to travel freely, or even to stand

near the windows of her home. Her presence was considered so ritually potent that exposure could cause pollution.

Among working-class women, particularly the Pulayas and Parayas, domesticity blended into agrarian labour. Women tilled fields, carried loads, and performed back-breaking tasks for upper-caste landlords. Yet, even in this economic indispensability, they were denied social legitimacy. Their labour was seen as an extension of their servitude, not a claim to rights.

2.2.5 Brahmanical Patriarchy

Brahmanical patriarchy was not limited to Brahmins. It filtered through caste society, shaping customs, inheritance laws, and gender norms. The central principle was clear: women, like land and ritual, had to be controlled, protected, and kept within bounds. Honour was a male concern, but its currency was female conduct.

Smarthavicharam, a cruel practice among Namboothiris for trying women accused of adultery, exposed the surveillance and brutality women endured. Accused women were subjected to interrogations, seclusion, and public disgrace. V.T. Bhattathiripad's autobiographical account, *Kanneerum Kinavum*, paints a harrowing picture of these trials, in which women were emotionally broken and socially erased. The concept of *stridhanam* (women's wealth), where a woman's property rights were mediated through her male kin, further reflects this control. Women were either under their father, husband, or son. At no point were they seen as independent legal subjects.

Religious texts were invoked to sanctify these roles. While early Vedic hymns mention educated women like Gargi and Maitreyi, these voices were systematically silenced in Kerala's later religious traditions. Rituals centred on male asceticism, and female

Caste and Community Based Experiences of Women in Pre-Renaissance Kerala

Namboothiri Women

Cloistered within ill-lit homes, Namboothiri women, *Antharjanams*, lived lives of strict seclusion. Many were denied marriage entirely, especially younger daughters. Education was withheld, mobility forbidden, and their presence shrouded beneath the *marakkuda*. Purdah-like restrictions dictated their every movement, making visibility itself a taboo.

Nair Women

Despite a matrilineal system that allowed them property rights, divorce, and a measure of sexual agency, Nair women remained tethered to the authority of the *karanavar*, the male elder of the *tharavad*. True autonomy was elusive, and their freedoms often operated within patriarchal constraints.

Ezhava and Dalit Women

These women endured some of the harshest realities of caste and gender oppression. They faced unending cycles of agrarian and domestic labour, sexual exploitation by upper-caste landlords, and routine ritual exclusion. Social safety nets were non-existent; their suffering remained invisible to the structures of power.

Christian Women

Beneficiaries of missionary influence, Christian women had relatively better access to literacy, healthcare, and limited social mobility. Yet, patriarchal norms persisted within ecclesiastical hierarchies and familial expectations, especially in matters of inheritance, marriage, and public presence.

Muslim Women

Governed by *Shariat* laws, Muslim women were subject to patriarchal interpretations of religion. Many lived in domestic seclusion, excluded from education and public life. Marital decisions, including divorce through *talaq*, were unilaterally decided by men, leaving women vulnerable and dependent.

spiritual agency was relegated to secondary roles or marginalised entirely.

2.2.6 The Early Tremors of Resistance

The 19th century ushered in tremors of change. The Upper Cloth Revolt (*Channar Lahala*), in which Channar women of Travancore fought for the right to cover their bodies, laid bare the absurdity of caste and gender codes. The Upper Cloth Revolt

(*Channar Lahala*) was more than a protest against a dress code; it was a powerful indictment of the deeply embedded caste and gender hierarchies in pre-modern Kerala. To understand the significance of the revolt, it must be located within the broader context of Kerala's social fabric in the 19th century, a society stratified by a rigid caste system, gendered spaces, and feudal privileges.

In Travancore, caste was not merely a social division but a principle that regulated

every aspect of public and private life, from spatial arrangements to bodily autonomy. The upper castes, especially the Namboothiri Brahmins and Nairs, enjoyed not only ritual status but also immense control over land, law, and custom. Lower castes such as the Ezhavas and Channars (now called Nadars), who formed the labouring majority, were denied access to public amenities, temple entry, education, and even the right to wear clothes covering the upper half of their bodies. In this oppressive hierarchy, the status of women was especially precarious.

Among the Channar women, the proscription against covering their breasts symbolised their subjugation. In contrast, Namboothiri women, though cloistered and subjected to marital restrictions, were allowed full-body covering and gold ornaments, depending on family status. Nair women, following matriliney, had greater social freedom, property rights through the mother's line, and the custom of *Sambandham* with Namboothiri men, but even they remained under the authority of the *karanavar*, the male head of the taravad. Ezhava and Dalit women, by contrast, experienced labour exploitation, sexual violence, and caste-based humiliation with little or no access to redress.

The Upper Cloth Revolt arose within this inequitable order. The right to cover the upper body was not a matter of fashion, but a demand for dignity and equality. Beginning in the early 19th century, Channar women in southern Travancore, especially around the present-day Kanyakumari district, began to defy the ban and wear the upper cloth. The resistance, often encouraged by Christian missionaries who provided education and support to the marginalised, was met with brutal suppression. Houses were burnt, women were stripped in public, and physical assaults were common.

The Travancore state, influenced by both conservative Hindu elites and colonial

administrators wary of unrest, initially sided with the upper castes. It was only after sustained pressure from the oppressed communities, missionaries, and sections of the British administration that a royal proclamation in 1859 allowed Channar women the right to wear a jacket or upper cloth, albeit not in the manner of upper-caste women. This partial concession, though modest by modern standards, marked a breakthrough in the assertion of human dignity and gendered resistance in Kerala.

What made the revolt exceptional was the way it directly challenged both caste patriarchy and the feudal order. The symbolism of the body, especially the female body, was at the heart of caste regulation. The revolt tore through the ideological foundation that legitimised this control. It also demonstrated how women from marginalised communities could lead movements for social change long before the advent of modern feminism in India.

This protest must also be read alongside other socio-religious movements in Kerala that questioned Brahminical dominance and caste inequalities. The emergence of reformist thinkers, the introduction of missionary education, and growing awareness among the oppressed slowly reshaped the contours of Kerala society. The revolt anticipated later movements by reformers like Ayyankali and Narayana Guru, who mobilised Dalits and backward castes against caste violence and for educational rights.

When viewed through the lens of subaltern resistance and gender critique, the *Channar Lahala* is of central importance in understanding Kerala's transition from a feudal society to one that gradually embraced equality and social reform. The revolt not only exposed the irrationality and cruelty of caste-based sartorial codes but also heralded a new political consciousness among oppressed women, making it one of the

earliest gendered struggles against caste in modern Indian history.

The social reform movement in Kerala did not arise in a vacuum. It emerged in response to these injustices, fuelled by Western education, missionary interventions, and the first stirrings of political consciousness.

The transformation that followed was not merely one of laws and institutions; it was a rupture in Kerala's moral imagination. It began with the simple but revolutionary belief that a woman, too, was a person.

Recap

- ◆ Namboothiri women faced enforced seclusion and denied marriage.
- ◆ Polygamy among elites marginalised women's conjugal rights.
- ◆ Widowhood led to isolation, stigma, and ritual shaming.
- ◆ Illiteracy was enforced to preserve patriarchal control.
- ◆ Education was restricted across caste and gender lines.
- ◆ Domesticity confined women to silence and servitude.
- ◆ Lower-caste women suffered labour exploitation and social exclusion.
- ◆ Brahmanical patriarchy shaped religious and social gender norms.
- ◆ *Smarthavicharam* publicly punished women for alleged moral transgressions.
- ◆ Missionary education began challenging caste-gender restrictions.
- ◆ Reformers questioned caste hierarchies and gender injustice.
- ◆ Women's resistance movements, like the Upper Cloth Revolt, emerged.

Objective Questions

1. Which upper caste community practised *Smarthavicharam* against women accused of adultery?
2. What was the term for secluded Namboothiri women in traditional Kerala society?
3. Which community practised matriliney and the *Marumakkathayam* inheritance system?
4. Name the protest by Channar women for the right to wear blouses.
5. What was the umbrella used by Namboothiri women to veil their faces?
6. Who wrote *Kanneerum Kinavum*, describing Namboothiri women's sufferings?
7. What system of temporary Islamic divorce marginalised Muslim women?
8. Which caste's women were often victims of *sambandham* without property rights?
9. What term described the forced labour system imposed on lower-caste communities?

Answers

1. Namboothiris
2. Antharjanam
3. Nairs
4. Upper Cloth Revolt
5. *Marakkuda*

6. V.T. Bhattathiripad
7. *Talaq*
8. *Nairs*
9. Uzhiyam

Assignments

1. Describe the role of Brahmanical patriarchy in shaping gender norms in traditional Kerala society.
2. Discuss the condition of widows among Namboothiri and Nair communities before the reform movements.
3. Explain how educational exclusion reinforced gender inequality in the pre-modern caste society of Kerala.
4. Evaluate the impact of *sambandham* on Nair women's autonomy and property rights.
5. Compare the status of women in Muslim and Christian communities during early colonial Kerala.

Reference

1. Aaya, Toshie, "Women in the Nambudiri Caste Movement" in T. Mizushima and H. Yanagisawa (eds.), *History and Society in South India*, Tokyo, 1996.
2. Arunima G., *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar 1850–1940*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2003.
3. Chen, Martha Allen (ed.), *Widows in India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998.
4. Devika J., *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007.



5. Devika J. (ed.), *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women 1898–1938*, Stree, Kolkata, 2005.
6. Saradamoni K., *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*, Alta Mira Press, New Delhi, 1999.

Suggested Reading

1. Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2000.
2. In Search of India's Renaissance, Vol. II, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, 1992.



UNIT

Colonial Challenges

Learning Outcomes

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

1. explain the impact of colonial administrative and legal reforms on Kerala's traditional governance
2. assess how the abolition of slavery altered Kerala's caste-based social order
3. analyse the transformation of family and inheritance laws during colonial intervention
4. evaluate the role of missionary and state-led initiatives in shaping modern education in Kerala

Prerequisites

By the early 1800s, the English East India Company controlled Malabar (following the 1792 Treaty of Srirangapatnam) and had treaties making Travancore and Cochin princely states subordinate allies. Under this new order, sweeping administrative and legal reforms were introduced across Kerala. The British applied modern bureaucratic methods, land surveys, codified laws, and revenue systems, which overlaid the old caste-based feudal order. Simultaneously, social reform movements and missionary efforts began challenging oppressive customs. Together, these forces—colonial policy, indigenous reformers, and mission activism transformed Kerala's rigid pre-colonial society into a more modern one.

Keywords

Colonial reforms, Abolition of slavery, Matrilineal inheritance, Missionary education, legal modernisation, Travancore, Caste oppression

Discussion

2.3.1 Administrative and Legal Reforms

The British organised Kerala's governance on standardised lines, with differences between Malabar and the princely states. In 1793, the first British Joint Commission reorganised Malabar into districts and liberalised general trade while monopolising pepper. By 1800, Malabar was formally annexed to the Madras Presidency. The Company introduced systematic revenue settlements (from 1805) that fixed heavy taxes e.g. two-thirds of the crop to state and landlord combined, which often exceeded local yields. This cash-based taxation replaced the older barter economy, compelling peasants to sell produce to pay taxes. The British also conducted land surveys: each plot was surveyed, numbered, and registered as private property. Traditional communal or matrilineal landholding gave way to individual titles. In effect, the *tharavadu* (joint family estates) system was undermined by converting once-communal holdings into subdivisible plots.

Alongside land reforms, the colonial regime imposed a uniform legal-administrative system. British law codes, notably the Indian Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code, were introduced in Kerala, replacing the older caste-based justice practices. Travancore and Cochin, though formally independent, adopted British-inspired administrations under their Residents. For example, Sir John Munro (Resident of Travancore, 1811–1814) overhauled the state's judiciary and revenue administration. He stripped revenue collectors of judicial functions, created

a modern police force, and enforced systematic land revenue collection. Munro even appointed Christian judges in Travancore's courts to break Brahmanical monopolies on justice and to integrate marginalised castes into government service. Similarly, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal (1829–47), under British influence, subdivided Travancore into new districts and made the Dewan responsible for law enforcement. In 1835, he enacted the first formal police law, empowering Tahsildars with duties previously handled by caste councils. By the late 19th century, both Travancore and Cochin had structured police forces (with Sub-Inspectors from 1909) and district courts much like those elsewhere in British India. These reforms effectively centralised authority and replaced arbitrary caste adjudication with the colonial concept of the rule of law.

Under colonial rule, therefore, Kerala was woven into a modern bureaucratic framework. Officials collected and organised data, codified customs, and enforced impartial legal codes. Traditional elites—Brahmin landlords and feudal chiefs—saw their privileges curtailed. In Malabar, the Ryotwari tenurial system was strengthened: tenants gained security as land could not be easily confiscated while *jenmis* (landlords) became collectors for the state. In Travancore and Cochin, the state introduced Western-style courts and police, and imposed princely regulations on marriage, inheritance, and taxation. For example, Travancore's Diwans enacted courts and enforced a uniform legal code; Cochin's ruler, with British advice, established writ-providing courts by the late

1800s. The result was a dramatic change: where earlier a crime might be judged by caste elders, now it went to a government magistrate; where labour and rent were once arbitrary, they became subject to written contracts and receipts. Even though these changes served colonial interests, they also inadvertently laid the foundations of modern governance in Kerala.

2.3.1.1 Abolition of Slavery

Another landmark reform was the ending of Kerala's caste-linked slavery. In pre-colonial Kerala, a significant number of lower-caste people were kept as hereditary slaves by landlords and temples. These bonded labourers had no rights; they could be bought and sold, even killed with impunity by their owners. The British and their missionaries worked to dismantle this system. Early British proclamations hinted at change as the 1792

Colonial Manuals and Surveys in Kerala

From the early 19th century, the British undertook extensive surveys and documentation in Kerala as part of their administrative and fiscal expansion. These records were not just bureaucratic exercises; they were instruments through which the colonial state asserted authority, restructured traditional systems, and justified its presence.

A key example is the 'Malabar Manual', prepared by William Logan and published in 1887. Drawing on earlier records and field reports, Logan documented land tenure systems, caste structures, agricultural practices, and local customs in Malabar. His work was not objective scholarship; it reflected the colonial state's desire to categorise and regulate Indian society to ensure stable revenue and orderly governance. Similarly, detailed revenue settlement reports were undertaken across Malabar from 1805 onwards, following its annexation after the Third Anglo-Mysore War. These reports fixed land rights, rent obligations, and created a permanent landowning class aligned with British interests. Population censuses, beginning in 1871, further codified caste and community identities, often freezing them into rigid administrative categories.

While these manuals introduced modern tools of governance, such as standardised taxation, uniform laws, and legal procedures, they also imposed a colonial understanding of society. In doing so, they played a central role in Kerala's transition from feudal systems to colonial modernity.

Joint Commission forbade the slave trade in Malabar, but real abolition came later. After the Imperial Slavery Abolition Act (1833), the East India Company extended the ban to Malabar in 1843. This formally made slavery illegal in the Madras Presidency, though many landlords evaded it and continued coercive labour practices. Pressure continued, and in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, slavery was outlawed by royal decree in 1855 at British insistence.

Crucially, Christian missionaries campaigned vociferously against slavery. London Missionary Society (LMS) and Church Missionary Society (CMS) workers in Kerala linked bondage to the oppressive caste system and denounced it as un-Christian. They actively sought converts among enslaved castes (Pulayas, Parayas, etc.) and educated them in literacy and scripture, fostering ideas of equality. Missionaries petitioned colonial officials,



demanding intervention, and publicised abuses. Their efforts culminated in Kerala's 1843 abolition edict, referred to here as the "Slavery Abolition Act" in alignment with Madras legislation. As one source notes, missionary activism "culminated in the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1843, marking a significant milestone in Kerala's social reform movement."

These legal changes did not instantly erase exploitation. Many freed people had lost land and social support, falling into poverty. Officially free, they often continued as low-wage workers under new names. Nonetheless, abolishing slavery was a turning point. It legally denied landlords the right to own humans and challenged the very ideology of untouchability. By 1855, formal slavery ended throughout Kerala, a change driven by colonial law and reinforced by missionary-led public pressure. In combination with other reforms, this helped break older hierarchies and paved the way for later egalitarian movements, even though, as noted, true social equality took much longer to achieve.

2.3.2 Reforms in Family and Inheritance

Kerala's family laws also underwent major reform under colonial and reformist influences. Traditionally, many Kerala communities (notably the Nairs) practised *Marumakkathayam*. Property and succession were held by the *tharavadu*, with the senior maternal uncle (*Karanavan*) managing it. In the early 20th century, movements for change grew from within these communities. Upper-caste Nairs and other groups, influenced by Western ideas of individual rights and reformers like the Nair Service Society (NSS), agitated against the concentration of power in these matriarchal structures.

Travancore's government enacted the first changes. A Nair Regulation in 1912 began to limit the *Karanavan*'s authority,

but it was the Travancore Nair Act of 1925 that brought sweeping change. This Act allowed Nair families to divide property on a per-head basis, effectively enabling the partition of *tharavads*. It also stripped nephews (sister's sons) of future claims on an uncle's estate. In practice, this meant that a man's own children and widow were secured in inheritance. The 1925 law also banned polygamy within the community, aligning marriage with monogamous norms. Similar laws were passed for other matrilineal castes: the Ezhava Act (1925) in Travancore and others mirrored these reforms. By mid-century, large sections of Hindu society in Travancore had effectively shifted to a bilateral patrilineal inheritance, though in customary practice they often still referred to it as *Marumakkathayam*.

Cochin introduced comparable legislation. The Cochin Nair Regulation (1919–20) curtailed the *Karanavan*'s powers, allowed easy partition of joint property, and for the first time legally bound men to maintain their wives and children. It explicitly recognised a wife's right to support and similarly restricted polygamy and hypergamous arrangements. Later, the Cochin Nair Act (1937) completed the transformation: it "brought about the complete disruption of *Marumakkathayam* as an institution." Under this 1938 law, any member of a *tharavadu* could demand partition, and each nuclear family gained its own property share; now wives and children inherited directly from their husbands and fathers. The old joint-family structure was legally dismantled.

In British Malabar (under Madras), analogous reforms came via colonial legislation. The Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 allowed Nair *tharavad* to be partitioned and sanctioned inheritance from father to son. This Act applied to all Hindus of Malabar. A companion law, the Mappila Marumakkathayam Act (1933), gave Muslim matrilineal families the right

to partition; after India's adoption of the Muslim Personal Law (*Shariat*) in 1949, Malabar Muslims formally switched to the patrilineal inheritance common elsewhere. The Madras Namboothiri Act (1933) was also passed at this time: it gave male and female Namboothiri family members equal shares in an ancestral *illam* and allowed junior members to marry within the caste, ending the strict eldest-brother succession. This latter reform, though legislated by British India, had been a long-standing demand of Kerala social reformers. In sum, by the late colonial period, even Malabar's matrilineal communities were aligned with patrilineal inheritance norms.

Throughout Kerala, these inheritance reforms went hand-in-hand with changes to marriage norms. The new laws outlawed polygamy and hypergamy (marrying "up" to higher castes) that were common in old systems. For instance, the Cochin Act of 1920 and its Malabar equivalent explicitly forbade high-caste Nair women from contracting hypergamous unions, and made it a legal duty of husbands to support their wives and children. These provisions reflected indigenous reform movements (the NSS and Nair community leaders) pressuring for modern family norms. Ultimately, the colonial-era family laws dismantled the matrilineal *tharavadu* system and ushered in a nuclear-patrilineal model. By giving individuals (husbands, wives, and children) direct inheritance rights, these reforms both reflected and stimulated Kerala's social modernisation.

2.3.3 Modern Education

Education was perhaps the most visible arena of colonial-era change. In pre-colonial Kerala, formal schooling was limited and caste-restricted: Brahmin boys studied Sanskrit in temple-based *salai* schools, Nair youth learned basic Malayalam and martial arts at village *ezhuthupallis*, while

lower-caste children were largely excluded. Missionaries and colonial authorities challenged this. The London Missionary Society (LMS) opened the first mass English school in Kerala (Mylaudy, Travancore, 1809) for underprivileged children. The Church Missionary Society founded Kottayam College in 1817 with Resident John Munro's patronage. These institutions laid the groundwork for Western education in Kerala.

The princely states soon followed suit with royal patronage. In 1817, Regent Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai of Travancore decreed that education was now a government responsibility. She even resolved that the state would bear all educational expenses, a radical shift from previous times. Later, Uthram Thirunal (Travancore Maharaja) officially preferred English-educated candidates for government service (1844), further raising demand for schooling. In 1866, Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal established Travancore's University College in Trivandrum, cementing higher education. The real expansion came under the long Dewanship of T. Rama Rao in the 1870s–1890s. Rama Rao created a Vernacular Education Department and, in 1871, mandated that each village have a school. He also introduced grant-in-aid (1879) to encourage private vernacular schools, and by 1904, abolished fees for primary schools, adding salary grants for schools serving marginalised communities. Over time, Travancore built an extensive school network and achieved high literacy.

Cochin's growth was slower but steady. Its first English school in Mattancherry (1818) failed, but Cochin established a Department of Education and grant rules (1889) to support private schools. By 1911, a uniform education code standardised schools' curriculum and administration. The Cochin government also took measures to include girls and lower castes: by 1892, it recorded fee exemptions and even free midday meals for poor students,



and in 1917, it opened a formerly exclusive girls' high school to all communities.

Western education arrived more slowly in Malabar, but eventually had a significant impact. After all, the British had annexed Malabar directly but provided it with little initial investment. Early on, the East India Company opened only *tahsildar* schools (1826) in regional centres to train clerks. In 1829, English was declared the official language of the Malabar administration. Missionary efforts filled the gap: the Basel Evangelical Mission (1839) opened many vernacular schools in North Malabar. Notably, Hermann Gundert of the Basel Mission compiled Malayalam grammars and dictionaries and helped establish a girls' boarding school at Thalassery in 1839. By mid-century, the Wood's Despatch of 1854 had led to the foundation of Madras University (1857), which Malabar students could attend. An Anglo-vernacular government school was opened in Calicut in 1855. Still, it was only after 1921, when Indianisation of education and local agitation increased, that Malabar's schooling system expanded with government grants. Gradually, Muslims and lower castes in Malabar also gained access through madrasa reforms and mission schools.

The net effect of these educational changes was profound. Within a century, Kerala went from minimal literacy to having one of the highest literacy rates in Asia. Christian missionaries, with their printing presses and network of schools, played a vital role (for instance, converting parts of southern Kerala saw schools serving new Christian communities). Western schooling provided vocational skills and modern ideas. Lower-caste communities used education as an escape from traditional oppression (for example, Ayyankali's agitation for Pulaya schooling in Travancore drew on such advances). Schools also became melting pots: over time, castes and creeds intermingled in classrooms. By the 20th century, Kerala had built colleges, universities, and even professional schools (in law and medicine), often with government and community support. The literacy and enlightened citizenry thus produced became the backbone of Kerala's social reform movements and nationalist politics. In short, colonial-era education, combining missionary zeal and state policy, laid the intellectual groundwork for modern Kerala.

Recap

- ◆ The British restructured Kerala's legal and administrative system.
- ◆ Slavery was legally abolished across all Kerala regions.
- ◆ The *Marumakkathayam* system was dismantled through legal reforms.
- ◆ Missionaries pioneered vernacular and English education efforts.
- ◆ Education laws ensured wider access to marginalised communities.
- ◆ Travancore and Cochin enacted early family law reforms.

- ◆ Colonial land revenue policies disrupted agrarian life.
- ◆ Caste-based privileges eroded under British legal codes.
- ◆ Modern courts replaced caste councils in legal disputes.
- ◆ Christian missions actively supported oppressed caste emancipation.

Objective Questions

1. Which British Resident initiated administrative reforms in Travancore during the early 19th century?
2. In which year was slavery formally abolished in the princely Travancore state?
3. Which Kerala community followed the Marumakkathayam system of inheritance traditionally?
4. What 1925 Travancore legislation disrupted the matrilineal joint family system?
5. Which missionary society opened the first English school in Travancore?
6. What term refers to the administrative division under a Tahsildar in colonial Kerala?
7. Name the missionary who compiled early Malayalam dictionaries and grammars.
8. Which 1933 act dismantled Marumakkathayam in British Malabar?
9. Who founded Travancore's University College in 1866?
10. Which colonial tool replaced caste-based customary courts in Malabar?
11. Which caste group was most affected by Kerala's system of agrarian slavery?
12. What educational policy first mandated state responsibility for village schools in Travancore?

Answers

1. John Munro
2. 1855
3. Nairs
4. Nair Regulation
5. LMS
6. Taluk
7. Gundert
8. Madras Act
9. Ayilyam Thirunal
10. IPC
11. Pulayas
12. 1871 Edict

Assignments

1. Examine how British land revenue reforms altered traditional agrarian structures in colonial Kerala.
2. Analyse the role of Christian missionaries in dismantling Kerala's caste-based slavery and oppression.
3. Discuss the legal transformation of family and inheritance systems in Travancore under British influence.
4. Evaluate how modern education policies improved literacy and challenged caste barriers in Kerala.
5. Compare administrative reforms in Malabar with those introduced in Travancore and Cochin princely states.

Reference

1. Cohn, B. S. (1996). *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*. Oxford University Press.
2. Heimsath, C. H. (1965). *Indian nationalism and Hindu social reform*. Oxford University Press.
3. Jones, K. W. (1994). *Socio-religious reform movements in British India*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Kareem, C. K. (1978). *Kerala under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan*. Kerala History Association.
5. Puthenkalam, J. (1977). *Marriage and family in Kerala*. University of Calgary.
6. Sen, A. P. (Ed.). (2003). *Social and religious reform: The Hindus of British India*. Oxford University Press.

Suggested Reading

1. Ibrahim Kunju, A. P. (1975). Mysore–Kerala relations in the eighteenth century. Kerala Historical Society.
2. Poonnen, T. I. (1978). Dutch hegemony in Malabar and its collapse, 1663–1795. Publications Division, University of Kerala.
3. Schneider, D. M., & Gough, K. (Eds.). (1961). Matrilineal kinship. University of California Press.
4. Venugopalan, T. R. (Ed.). (2002). State and society in pre-modern South India. Cosmo Books.



UNIT

Missionary Intervention

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ identify the historical context behind the arrival of Christian missionaries in Kerala
- ◆ evaluate the educational contributions of LMS, CMS, and BEMS in Kerala's transformation
- ◆ examine the role of missionary-led print culture in promoting literacy and social awareness
- ◆ analyse how missionary intervention influenced caste, gender, and cultural dynamics in Kerala society

Prerequisites

The arrival of Christian missionaries in Kerala during the early 19th century marked a turning point in the region's educational landscape. Backed by the 1813 Charter Act, which allowed missionary activity in British India, groups such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Basel Evangelical Mission began to establish schools across Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. Their primary intention was evangelisation. They believed that the ability to read the Bible in the vernacular would pave the way for conversion. Education was thus a subtle but effective tool for religious instruction and moral reform. At the same time, missionaries were responding to the colonial state's need for an educated local workforce. English-medium instruction and modern subjects served administrative purposes while reinforcing Western ideals. The spread of literacy, especially among lower castes and women, was both radical and strategic, challenging existing hierarchies under the guise of Christian philanthropy and service.



Keywords

LMS, CMS, BEMS, Missionary education, Malayalam printing, Social reform, Caste upliftment

Discussion

2.4.1 LMS, CMS and BEM

In the early nineteenth century, Kerala began to experience significant social and cultural changes. One of the key reasons for this transformation was the arrival of European Protestant missionaries. Three missionary organisations became especially important during this period: the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (BEMS). These groups played a crucial role in shaping education, religion, and public life in Kerala.

Their arrival was made possible by a change in British policy. In 1813, the British Parliament renewed the charter of the East India Company and, for the first time, allowed Protestant missionaries to work in India. Although parts of Kerala, like Travancore and Cochin, were princely states and not directly under British rule, their close ties with the Company created a favourable environment for missionary activity.

The London Missionary Society was the first to arrive. It was founded in Britain in 1795 as a non-denominational Protestant body. The society aimed to spread Christianity through education and printing, not just by preaching. In 1806, William Tobias Ringel Taube, a German missionary working with the LMS, reached South Travancore. Just three years later, in 1809, the LMS opened the first English-medium school at Mylaudy, marking a pioneering effort in the region. The school introduced modern subjects such as mathematics and geography alongside

Christian religious teachings. The LMS also supported the translation of the Bible into Malayalam and Tamil, making religious texts available in local languages.

Soon after, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) began its work in central Travancore. This society was closely connected to the Church of England and was more formally Anglican. In 1816, the CMS founded a college at Kottayam, which became an important centre for higher education and theological training. By 1818, missionaries like Thomas Norton were working in Alleppey, establishing schools, printing presses, and churches. The CMS played a key role in developing Malayalam prose, printing textbooks and religious materials, and helping to build a literate Christian community.

The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society entered Kerala a little later. Founded in Switzerland and Germany in 1815, it sent its missionaries to Malabar, the northern region of Kerala. In 1839, Hermann Gundert, a well-known Basel missionary, settled in Thalassery. Gundert was not only a missionary but also a distinguished scholar of the Malayalam language. He wrote a grammar book, compiled a dictionary, and edited some of the earliest Malayalam newspapers such as *Rajyasamacharam* and *Paschimodayam*. The Basel Mission also focused on industrial and technical education, establishing workshops, printing presses, and vocational schools, especially for people from lower castes and marginalised communities.



By the mid-nineteenth century, all three missions had established themselves in different parts of Kerala. The LMS was active in the south, the CMS in the centre, and the BEMS in the north. Their impact extended far beyond religion. They introduced new forms of education, promoted the Malayalam language, encouraged printing and publishing, and supported social reforms. While their work was rooted in Christian belief, it contributed to the broader transformation of Kerala's society and laid the foundation for many of the state's later developments in literacy, education, and social awareness.

2.4.1.1 Missionary Contributions to Education

Missionaries made education the central pillar of their work. Unlike Kerala's traditional *ezhuthupalli* schools (which served mainly upper castes), the new mission schools taught reading, writing, and arithmetic *vernacularly* to children of every caste. The CMS and LMS founded networks of vernacular and English-medium schools in the 1820s–40s. For example, Dr. Charles Mead of the LMS (in Travancore from 1817–73) established several *industrial* schools for boys and actively promoted female education. In Travancore's Kottayam, CMS missionaries founded a grammar school in 1821, and their wives opened girls' schools in adjacent villages to advance women's literacy. Basel missionaries likewise established village schools in Malabar; by the 1850s they were running primary schools at Calicut (Kallayi, 1848) and Tellicherry (1856). In each region, mission schools catered especially to marginalised communities such as Pulayas, Nadars, and Ezhavas in Travancore, as well as Christian labourers and lower castes in Malabar, who had hitherto been barred from formal learning.

These missionary efforts were often complemented by enlightened princely policies. In Travancore, for instance, the

Regent Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai enacted a famous 1817 Rescript declaring primary education a state responsibility. Under this decree, free village schools were to be funded from the treasury, effectively adopting the model pioneered by missionary instructors. A similar pattern occurred in Cochin, where the CMS opened the first school at Mattancherry (1818), and later in Malabar, where local patrons endowed mission schools (the Basel-backed Brennen School at Tellicherry was founded in 1862). By the late nineteenth century, a dense network of government and mission schools existed across Kerala, blurring former caste barriers. Indeed, one study notes that LMS, CMS, and BEMS “provided education to all castes” in Kerala, thereby conferring “a new status and resource to the lower and neglected castes” for the first time. In sum, the Protestant missions were instrumental in building Kerala's first system of mass education, introducing vernacular literacy, vocational training, and even some higher schools and colleges (e.g. CMS College, Kottayam in 1817) to communities long excluded from learning.

2.4.2 Print Culture and the Spread of Literacy

Closely tied to education was the introduction of print technology. Missionaries viewed the press as a powerful tool for teaching and conversion. In 1821, Benjamin Bailey (CMS) obtained a permit to establish the first Malayalam printing press at Kottayam. Working with the Travancore government, Bailey and his Indian assistants designed metal type for the Malayalam script, and by 1829 had printed the first complete Bible in Malayalam. The CMS press (Chalukunnu, Kottayam) thereafter produced primers, catechisms, and tractates in Malayalam, Tamil, and even Sanskrit. At the same time, the LMS inaugurated its own press: in 1820, Charles Mead set up an LMS press at Nagercoil (later moved to Neyyoor) to print Tamil–Malayalam primers

and monthly bulletins. Over the 1830s, the missionary presses issued schoolbooks, grammars, and religious literature that greatly expanded literacy. For instance, the Basel missionary Hermann Gundert, a scholar of Malayalam, authored Kerala's first grammar (1859) and English–Malayalam dictionary (1872), works published by mission presses that standardised the language.

By the 1840s, these printing efforts gave birth to the first Malayālam press media. Gundert launched *Rajyasamacharam* (the “State Gazette”) in Thalassery in 1847, initially an eight-sheet religious magazine. He quickly followed this with *Paschimodayam*, a monthly publication covering geography, science, and general topics. These periodicals brought news and ideas to Malayalis for the first time. Other mission presses produced seminal works; for example, *Samkshepa Vedartham* (a Malayalam catechism) and *Varthamana Pusthakam* were printed at Bailey's press.

Later in the century, the CMS press issued magazines such as *Jnananikshepam* (from 1864) and *Vidyasamgraham* (1865–67), which combined religious instruction with articles on science and society.

The combined result was a transformation of Kerala's print culture. Protestant presses democratised knowledge, making books accessible to all. Texts and newspapers began circulating beyond *savarna* centres, allowing for wider engagement with literacy. Missionary educational policy further promoted reading, as mission schools taught writing and often required students to read textbooks and tracts. With more reading material available, public literacy in Travancore and Cochin rose dramatically during the 1800s. Indeed, by the early twentieth century, these regions had among the highest literacy rates in India, a legacy largely traceable to the groundwork laid by LMS, CMS, and BEMS schools and presses.

Hermann Gundert (1814–1893)

Hermann Gundert was a German missionary, scholar, and linguist who made enduring contributions to the Malayalam language and education in 19th-century Kerala. He was born on 4 February 1814 in Stuttgart, Germany. In 1836, he arrived in India under the Basel Evangelical Mission and began his work in Thalassery (Tellicherry), North Malabar, in 1839.

Gundert's impact was most strongly felt in the fields of vernacular education, lexicography, and printing. He founded several Malayalam-medium schools in and around Thalassery and believed that education in the mother tongue was essential for meaningful learning. In 1847, he launched *Rajyasamacharam*, widely regarded as the first printed newspaper in Malayalam. This was followed by *Paschimodayam*, which included articles on geography, science, and social issues, which was unusual for its time.

In 1872, Gundert compiled the first comprehensive **Malayalam–English dictionary**, which contained over 50,000 entries and set a new standard for language scholarship. He also authored a Malayalam grammar in 1859 and translated parts of the Bible into Malayalam. His contributions were not merely linguistic; they reflected a deep engagement with Kerala's culture and society. Gundert died in Calw, Germany, on 25 April 1893, but his legacy continues in Kerala's educational and literary history.



2.4.3 Social Change and Cultural Transformation

Beyond schooling, the missionaries' presence heralded deep social shifts. Conversion to Christianity was itself a challenge to the Hindu caste order. Missionaries proclaimed the Christian ideal that "converts were supposed to be treated with relative equality," in stark contrast to Kerala's strict caste hierarchy. They actively campaigned against untouchability and caste prejudice; LMS agents in the south publicly decried restrictions on Nadars and Parayas, empowering converts to assert their rights. As a result, lower-caste Hindus who joined mission congregations found new social standing and occupational opportunities. One study observes that missionaries "provided education to all castes" and so conferred "new status and resource" on Kerala's neglected communities for the first time. This influx of literate Christians created a new social stratum and helped stimulate early reform movements. For example, the Channar (Nadar) agitation over women's attire (1820s–50s) was influenced by Christian ideas of dignity; Christian Nadar women were eventually granted the right to cover their upper bodies earlier than in Hindu society, setting a precedent for later reforms.

Women's lives were particularly affected by mission education. In the 1820s and '30s, the very notion of formal schooling for girls was revolutionary in Kerala. Basel missionary records proudly noted that Christian women enjoyed "greater freedom" than Hindus. The LMS, CMS, and BEMS "made continuous efforts to popularise women's education and

empowerment." Indeed, the Basel Mission established Kerala's first girls' boarding school at Tellicherry in 1839, soon followed by others (in Calicut, Palakkad, etc.). These schools taught reading, sewing, and Bible study to girls of various castes, helping produce Kerala's surprisingly high female literacy in the next century. Missionary teaching also challenged patriarchal norms. One contemporaneous summary notes that mission schools "trained women in new roles and questioned gender norms." Although missionaries themselves often upheld conservative family values, their legacy included a generation of educated Hindu women who would later press for widow remarriage, the abolition of child marriage, and broader gender reforms.

Overall, the Protestant missions acted as catalysts for Kerala's social renaissance. Christian congregations themselves modelled new social norms (monogamy, Bible-reading, monastic codes of work and temperance) that challenged traditional structures like matrilineal inheritance and polyandry. In short, while missionary programmes aimed at conversion, their unintended effect was to provide Kerala's population with tools of literacy, critical thinking, and organisation. These, in turn, underpinned Kerala's famous social reforms (slavery abolition, temple entry, caste associations) later in the century. In the end, the LMS, CMS, and BEMS helped reshape Kerala's social order by opening schools to every caste and publishing Malayalam literature, and thus played a leading role in the region's modernisation.

Recap

- ◆ LMS began educational reforms in South Travancore.
- ◆ CMS established the first formal college in Kerala.
- ◆ BEMS promoted Malayalam literature and printing in Malabar.
- ◆ Missionaries introduced Kerala's earliest mass education systems.
- ◆ Print media spread scientific and religious knowledge widely.
- ◆ Female literacy received an early push through mission schools.
- ◆ Malayalam Bible printing enhanced vernacular literacy among all castes.
- ◆ Missionaries challenged caste hierarchy through inclusive schooling.
- ◆ Basel missionaries standardised Malayalam with dictionaries and grammars.
- ◆ Mission presses democratised access to books and newspapers.

Objective Questions

1. Which missionary group established the first English school in Travancore?
2. In which year was the CMS College at Kottayam established?
3. Who was the German missionary associated with the Basel Mission's grammar work?
4. Which region did the Basel Evangelical Mission primarily operate in?
5. What was the name of the first Malayalam newspaper by Basel Mission?
6. Where did Benjamin Bailey establish Kerala's first Malayalam printing press?
7. Who led the LMS educational efforts at Mylaudy in the early 1800s?
8. What community greatly benefited from missionary educational outreach in Travancore?

9. Which mission started the first girls' boarding school in North Kerala?
10. Which script did missionaries create metal types for Malayalam printing?
11. What Basel Mission publication helped popularise science in Malayalam?
12. Which language was used by missionaries to promote early Bible reading?

Answers

1. LMS
2. 1817
3. Gundert
4. Malabar
5. Rajyasamacharam
6. Kottayam
7. Charles Mead
8. Nadars
9. BEMS
10. Malayalam
11. Paschimodayam
12. Malayalam

Assignments

1. Discuss the educational strategies adopted by the London Missionary Society in colonial Travancore.
2. Examine the contributions of the Church Missionary Society to print and literacy in central Kerala.
3. Analyse how the Basel Evangelical Mission's press work shaped language and literature in Malabar.
4. Assess the role of missionaries in uplifting marginalised communities through access to education.
5. Explore how missionary efforts in female education impacted gender norms in 19th-century Kerala.

Reference

1. Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics, Women and Well-Being – How Kerala Became a Model*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
2. P.M. Jussay, *The Jews in Kerala*, Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2005.
3. Kawashima, Koji, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858–1936*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988.
4. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Early Christianity*, Theological Publications in India for Church History Association of India, Bangalore, 1984.

Suggested Reading

1. Cherian P.J. (ed.), *Perspectives in Kerala History*, Kerala State Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999.
2. Kerala Through the Ages, Department of Public Relations, Thiruvananthapuram, 1980.
3. Elamkulam Pillai Kunjan, *Marumakkathayam Keralathil*, National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1968.





UNIT

Colonial Modernity

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain how colonial land reforms in Kerala fostered capitalist agrarian relations
- ◆ discuss the impact of Western education and print on Kerala's social classes
- ◆ evaluate the role of colonial rule in reshaping caste and gender norms
- ◆ assess how colonial institutions were used both to impose control and enable reform

Prerequisites

Between the late 18th and early 20th centuries, Kerala experienced sweeping changes under British rule, a period often referred to as its renaissance. This transformation, described as colonial modernity, involved the restructuring of Kerala's economy, society, and governance along Western lines. The British, aided by princely states and missionaries, introduced capitalist land reforms, English education, legal codification, and the idea of a civilising mission. These measures disrupted traditional hierarchies and customs, particularly those related to caste and ritual. While the reforms primarily served colonial interests, they also created opportunities for new social classes, especially an educated middle class, to challenge entrenched inequalities. Caste-based organisations and reformers used print, law, and public debate to push for social justice. Thus, colonial modernity in Kerala was both a tool of imperial control and a catalyst for indigenous reform, shaping the region's path towards modern social consciousness.

Keywords

Colonial modernity, land tenure, Plantations, Caste reform, Education, Women's rights, Print culture

Discussion

The late 18th to early 20th century saw Kerala's traditional society rapidly transformed by colonial rule, a period often dubbed its *Renaissance*. Historians note that this onset of modernity was characterised by "a critical interrogation of the past and a visualization of a possible future". Local thinkers debated new ideas and challenged age-old customs; for example, sacred Hindu rituals were reordered or even rejected in the service of social reform. A central concern of Kerala's renaissance was the rigid caste system: many new caste-based organisations campaigned against untouchability and other social evils. In this context, the colonial era's "intervention of missionaries and British colonialism" reshaped Kerala's economy, social classes, and political ideas. The British rulers and their ally-princely states introduced Western-style capitalism, new class formations, and a belief in a Western "civilising mission", all of which profoundly altered Kerala's traditions.

2.5.1 Capitalist Tendencies

Colonial modernity in Kerala was marked by explicit capitalist reforms in land tenure, agriculture, and trade. The British and their local collaborators rewrote land laws to maximise revenue. In Malabar, the colonial government recognised *Janmī* landlords as absolute owners, allowing them to lease land at will. Traditional safeguards were overturned: the *Janmam* (original tenurial right) became proprietary, while *kanam* and *verumpattom* tenancies were rendered

precarious or turned into rentier contracts. This meant landlords could demand higher rents or evict tenants easily, and even bring cases in British courts to enforce their claims. One consequence was harsh; the state "appropriated a large share of the peasant surplus", leaving peasants impoverished. In one 1805 settlement, for example, cultivators could keep only one-third of their produce for subsistence, while the remainder (60%) went to the state and 40% to the landlord. Such extreme assessments (often far above market value) led to arrears, property seizures, and even maltreatment of peasants. In short, colonial agrarian policy violated customary *janmam* norms and intensified burdens on tenants.

At the same time, the colonial state actively promoted commercial agriculture and plantations. By the late 19th century, Kerala saw the opening of large plantations, especially in tea and coffee. British and foreign companies, such as the Kannan Devan Hill Produce Co. in the southern high ranges, invested in hill stations and rubber or tea estates. Land was often leased on very favourable terms, encouraging the rapid expansion of cash crops. As one colonial observer noted, Europeans often acted "as entrepreneurs prepared to transform the landscape" into plantations and markets. This commercialisation had mixed results: it created new jobs and spurred infrastructure (roads, rail, tramways), but also converted forests into monocrop estates, displacing shifting cultivators and small farmers.



Kerala's position in world trade also grew under colonial rule. The British East India Company, having fought off rival powers, won monopolies and duty-free rights over Kerala's spices by the late 18th century. By this time, the Company "had acquired enough power to be 'courted, respected and feared by all the Rajas'", allowing it exclusive trade in pepper, sandalwood, and other goods. Such arrangements expanded trade but transferred wealth to Britain. In Malabar, after annexation, the Company forcibly appropriated resources: it took a salt monopoly and made tobacco, timber, and spices state reserves. These monopolies "resulted in great hardship for the people". Local producers, such as the Mappila cultivators of Malabar, found their incomes

squeezed as the Company manipulated prices for profit. Indeed, one Punjabi settler found that after the English secured the pepper trade at Attingal, they steadily drove down the price paid to cultivators while the Company amassed great fortunes.

In summary, colonial rule over Kerala rapidly implanted capitalist economic relations. Traditional land tenure was recast to serve revenue ends, plantations and cash crops were promoted, and trade was reorganised to serve British markets. These capitalist tendencies generated growth in some sectors (tea, spices, coconuts) and transportation, but often at the cost of the rural peasantry and older norms.

The White Man's Burden was a 19th-century imperialist concept suggesting that it was the duty of European powers, particularly Britain, to "civilise" non-European peoples. Popularised by Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem of the same name, it reflected the widespread belief that colonised societies were backward and needed Western guidance, education, and religion. This notion cloaked imperial expansion in moral righteousness, portraying conquest as a selfless act for the benefit of the colonised. In reality, it justified exploitation and domination, enabling empires to mask economic and political motives behind a veil of benevolence. The idea reinforced racial hierarchies, portraying Europeans as superior and others as incapable of self-governance. While embraced by many at the time, the concept drew criticism for its arrogance and hypocrisy. Today, it stands as a stark reminder of how colonialism was rationalised through moral posturing and racial superiority rather than genuine concern for human welfare.

2.5.2 Rise of New Social Classes

A hallmark of colonial modernity in Kerala was the emergence of a Western-educated intelligentsia. Missionary and state schools teaching in English, as well as Malayalam, spread rapidly under British patronage. For example, the Basel Mission opened primary schools in Malabar (later becoming Victoria College, Palakkad, founded in 1866). In princely Travancore and Cochin, rulers and missionaries set up formal schools and colleges from the early 19th century onwards. The Rani of Travancore declared education

a state responsibility, decreeing that modern schooling was essential for government jobs. By the mid-19th century, Kerala had an extensive network of government and missionary schools, producing a small but growing class of bilingual clerks, teachers, and professionals.

This new middle class played a vital role in Kerala's transformation. They had access to printed books and newspapers (CMS Press in Kottayam, Basel Mission presses in Malabar) and engaged in public debates. Printing technology, writes one historian, made books "accessible to all

without class/caste distinctions,” removing “the sacred halo surrounding the written text” and fostering critical reading. Malayalam newspapers like *Rajya Samacharam* (1836) spread news and modern ideas. Westernised education exposed them to liberal ideals liberty, equality, fraternity, rationalism, and women’s rights for the first time. Having absorbed these values, the educated classes began to question social injustice and lobby for change. Petitions such as the Malayali Memorial of 1891 (signed by over 10,000 individuals from various castes) demanded a fair share of government jobs for native Keralites. The Malayali Memorial is often cited as a symbol of the new educated class asserting itself. In these ways, colonial education and print culture created an urban bourgeoisie school teachers, lawyers, journalists, and managers who were rooted in local tradition but oriented towards modern ideas and global affairs.

2.5.2.1 Transformation of Caste Structures

Colonial rule complicated Kerala’s rigid caste hierarchy. On one hand, the British practiced non-interference in Hindu religion, so they did not forcibly break down caste. The British “were more interested in consolidating their power than initiating reforms” in caste structures. Indeed, they set up a legal and judicial system largely parallel to the old caste councils. Over time, however, colonial laws did erode caste privileges. The British courts gradually assumed authority over crimes and civil disputes previously handled by caste *panchayats*. Legislation like the Caste Disabilities Removal Act (1850) and the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act (1856) struck a blow at caste customs (e.g. loss of inheritance upon conversion, bans on widow remarriage). In practice, many high-caste councils lost much of their power as cases moved to colonial courts. Similarly, British encouragement of uniform legal codes meant even personal matters (marriage, divorce,

inheritance) were no longer solely determined by caste jurists. These changes “shook the integrity of the caste system” in Kerala.

More broadly, colonial modernisation loosened caste boundaries in urban settings. Growing jobs in the colonial administration, plantations, and professions meant people of different castes began working side by side in towns and plantations, a new social mixing unprecedented in rural Kerala. As one study notes, industrial growth and urbanisation made it “inevitable for people of different castes, classes, and religions to live in close congregations.” This exposure undermined Brahmin hegemony: lower castes could now voice aspirations inspired by Western liberal values like individual rights. Indeed, many reformers and new organisations sprang up from the lower orders. For example, Sri Narayana Guru (1856–1928), a leader of the Ezhava community, campaigned against caste restrictions and untouchability. He founded temples where Ezhava (low-caste) priests could serve, challenged the Brahmin monopoly of worship, and urged education for the depressed classes. Similarly, Ayyankali (1866–1944), from the Pulaya caste, led movements for access to roads, schools, and rights for landless cultivators. These leaders appealed to modern sensibilities such as unity and rationalism and used new platforms (printed journals, assemblies) to mobilise the oppressed.

Nevertheless, many scholars caution that colonial rule did not eliminate caste thinking entirely. As Binoy (2019) argues, colonial modernity in Kerala “failed to make a radical transformation in the perception of the caste-based society”; caste prejudices often persisted in private life even as public spaces slowly opened. In sum, while colonialism granted Indians theoretical equality before the law, the transformation of caste was uneven: legal reforms and education empowered some lower castes, but deep social attitudes changed only gradually.



2.5.2.2 Role of Women

The colonial era also expanded women's roles, especially through education and reform. Missionaries and reform societies set up girls' schools, a radical change from the traditional seclusion of high-caste women. For instance, in the 1820s, CMS missionaries opened several girls' schools in Kottayam and elsewhere. Church and state now promoted female literacy alongside male literacy. Exposure to Western ideas brought early calls for women's rights: colonial-educated elites discussed widow remarriage, polygamy, and property rights for women, influenced by concepts of "women's liberation" and humanitarianism.

At the same time, several notable women's struggles occurred under colonial auspices. The Channar (Upper Cloth) Revolt was led by lower-caste Nadar women in Travancore demanding the right to cover their upper bodies. Colonial pressure played a role: Governor Munro initially granted converted Christian Nadar women the right in 1813, and in 1859 the Travancore ruler finally permitted all Nadar women to wear a cloth, though still less than the style of higher castes. Later, Dalit leader Ayyankali supported the continuation of this demand and won full rights in 1916. These events showed how contact with colonial norms (e.g. Christian converts covering themselves) emboldened suppressed women to challenge caste dress codes. In another example, Ayyankali's 1915 *Kallumala Samaram* saw Pulaya women in southern Travancore publicly discard their traditional stone-bead garments (once a mark of enslavement) as part of a wider anti-caste protest. This act was a pivotal moment; it symbolised lower-caste women's claim to dignity and set a precedent for public protest by people otherwise excluded.

Overall, British rule created space for women's empowerment by expanding education and introducing new legal ideas.

Yet patriarchal traditions remained strong. Most women, especially in rural areas, continued to have limited roles outside the home. Colonial modernity gave elite and reform-minded women tools to question patriarchy, a striking change from earlier eras, but Kerala's full advancement of women would be an ongoing struggle well into the 20th century.

2.5.3 Colonial Ideology and Motives

Colonial modernity in Kerala was underpinned by an ideology often described as the “civilising mission” of the British Empire. The rulers and missionaries saw themselves as bearers of a superior Western culture and sought to reshape Kerala along those lines. Education served as a means of subjugation and an instrument for the dissemination of colonial ideology. In practice, this meant introducing Western-style education, law, and administration as tools of the empire.

In education, the colonial government and Christian missions jointly dismantled Kerala's indigenous system. Traditional village *patasala* were local one-teacher schools teaching the basics in Malayalam or Tamil. British authorities and missionaries attacked these as backward and set up new formal schools. In Travancore and Cochin, the rulers, influenced by missionaries, even passed proclamations giving the state responsibility for schooling, distinguishing formal schools from the informal home-based system. By the early 19th century, Western subjects like English, arithmetic, geography, and history were taught in many schools. Missionary schools also taught the Bible, while state schools under the Rajas reflected the colonial curriculum. English, in particular, was promoted as the "superior" language of science and modern knowledge. In effect, a whole new worldview was introduced: the British believed English education would



inculcate “Orientalist” ideas of a civilised West and help legitimise their rule.

Similarly, colonial legal reforms embodied civilising pretensions. The British introduced uniform laws and courts across Kerala. They transferred judicial power from hereditary caste councils to civil courts, undermining traditional norms. For example, cases of assault or marriage disputes, once caste matters, now went to British judges. The British professed to follow local customs in civil cases, but in landmark cases, courts often set precedent contrary to older caste rules. Aside from caste laws, British missionaries and reformers lobbied for social legislation: high-caste Keralites saw British support for measures like the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) and Caste Disabilities Act as interference, but these laws reflected colonial motives of “moral uplift” and the colonial state’s new secular ethos. In sum, British legal reforms dismantled some traditional institutions under the banner of “enlightenment”, even as they primarily served to entrench state authority.

Administratively, the colonial government restructured Kerala’s governance to fit modern bureaucratic norms. In the subsidiary states of Travancore and Cochin, separate branches of the judiciary and revenue administration were created along British lines. This required a new hierarchy of English-educated officials. The same was true in British Malabar. In effect, the old multilayered power of kings, chieftains, and caste elders was replaced by a centralized, professional bureaucracy answerable to the British crown or the British-resident. This redrawing of authority was ideologically justified as bringing “good governance” and progress, but it also ensured colonial control. Officials like William Logan (sent to Malabar in 1882) compiled vast surveys and reports on land and society (the “survey modality” of knowledge), reflecting a belief that colonial rational planning would yield

prosperity. Logan even proposed modernising the agrarian system with laws for tenant rights, a plan later dismissed by his superiors as undermining colonial revenue policy.

In the guise of a civilising mission, the colonial regime also encouraged social reforms through missionary work and print culture. Missionaries not only opened schools but also promoted ideas about health, hygiene, and monogamy. The printing press, introduced by both European and local actors, carried tracts challenging practices like untouchability and animal sacrifice. In some cases, British rulers backed these reforms if they aligned with economic interests (for example, teaching reading to all castes created a larger pool of low-level clerks). But even when pursued as genuine social change, reforms often carried colonial underpinnings: they posited a binary “civilised” West versus “backward” East that justified continued British dominance.

To critics, these efforts did not always have purely benevolent motives. All over the world, transforming indigenous cultures had been an agenda central to colonial domination. In Kerala, this meant that every institution replaced, from village schools to caste councils to hereditary chiefs, served in practice to stabilise the colonial regime. Even as Kerala benefited from new literacy, law, and communication, these instruments were often calibrated to extract revenue and manpower for imperial needs. For instance, while the British touted land revenue settlements as modernisation, in reality, they were designed to maximise state income and secure a loyal landed class.

2.5.4 Colonial Kerala in the Renaissance

Taken together, colonial capitalist policies, social change, and ideological reforms set the stage for Kerala’s broader renaissance. The colonial state created the



conditions, educational institutions, print culture, and Western legal norms that local reformers could exploit to challenge tradition. Figures like Narayana Guru and Ayyankali explicitly blended traditional and modern in their visions: they retained belief in a reformulated Hindu ethos while adopting rationalist critique and egalitarian ideals. For example, Narayana Guru preached one human community beyond caste, opened temples for lower castes, and even wrote a social critique in Malayalam verse, a synthesis of tradition and modernity. Ayyankali mobilised peasants for literacy and road access, envisioning economic self-improvement alongside social uplift. These reformers operated under colonial rule but often in spite of it; some used colonial courts or print presses to claim their rights, showing how colonial instruments could empower challenges to colonial authority.

At the same time, the colonial era provoked new consciousness among the high castes. Upper-caste Keralites formed their own associations (e.g. the Nair Service Society

in 1916) to negotiate with the colonial state on education and jobs. Inter-caste reform movements also had to contend with colonial categories of “backward classes” and census designations, which reified once fluid castes. Thus, colonialism often froze social identities even as it changed their terms.

By the early 20th century, Kerala had a robust public sphere: newspapers, associations, and courts where social issues were hashed out in colonial language (English and modern Malayalam). Debates on widow remarriage, temple entry, and land rights all took place in this new arena. Although British administrators intended these as progressive, they found themselves pressured by a newly conscious society. The Kerala of 1950 looked very different from that of 1870. Literacy was widespread, caste barriers were formally attacked, and plantation capitalism had woven Kerala into global trade. Yet many colonial shadows remained: landlordism, communal schools, and a bureaucratic state echoed that ambivalence of colonial modernity: it brought modernisation, but on the coloniser’s terms.

Recap

- ◆ British land reforms turned *janmam* into private property, aiding landlords.
- ◆ Peasant tenancies became precarious under colonial courts and revenue laws.
- ◆ Commercial agriculture displaced forests and small farmers for plantations.
- ◆ Trade monopolies in spices enriched Britain and hurt local producers.
- ◆ English education created a new bilingual middle class in Kerala.
- ◆ Print culture enabled debates on caste, equality, and social rights.
- ◆ The Malayali Memorial exemplified middle-class assertion in colonial governance.
- ◆ Colonial laws undermined caste panchayats and hereditary dispute resolution systems.

- ◆ Urbanisation and new professions encouraged caste mixing and lower-caste mobility.
- ◆ Women accessed schooling, challenged dress codes, and fought social restrictions.
- ◆ Legal reforms allowed limited but real shifts in caste boundaries.
- ◆ Colonial tools enabled reformers like Guru and Ayyankali to mobilise.

Objective Questions

1. Which colonial company monopolised Kerala's spice trade by the late 18th century?
2. What term described the British justification of imperialism as a mission to modernise natives?
3. Which class emerged in Kerala due to English education and government jobs?
4. Name the revolt where Pulaya women discarded stone beads as a form of protest.
5. Who was the leader of the Ezhava community who opened temples for all castes?
6. Which act allowed Hindu widows to legally remarry under colonial rule?
7. Which press published *Rajyasamacharam*, one of Kerala's earliest newspapers?
8. Which major cash crop was cultivated in colonial-era plantations in Kerala's high ranges?
9. Which colonial officer conducted extensive surveys in Malabar in the 1880s?
10. What term described the original tenurial right converted into private property by the British?
11. Which community led the Upper Cloth Revolt in Travancore?
12. Which memorial petition was signed by thousands seeking government jobs for Malayalis?

Answers

1. British East India Company
2. Civilising mission
3. Western-educated middle class
4. Kallumala Samaram
5. Narayana Guru
6. Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act
7. Basel Mission Press
8. Tea
9. William Logan
10. Janmam
11. Nadar women
12. Malayali Memorial

Assignments

1. Examine the impact of British land reforms on agrarian relations and peasant livelihoods in Kerala.
2. Analyse how colonial education and print culture contributed to Kerala's social reform movements.
3. Discuss how colonial legal changes transformed caste authority and dispute resolution in Kerala.
4. Evaluate the roles of Ayyankali and Narayana Guru in contesting caste and advocating reform.
5. Critically assess the contradictory nature of colonial modernity in Kerala's socio-economic transformation.

Reference

1. Gurukkal, Rajan, and Raghava Varier. *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present*. Orient Blackswan, 2018.
2. Gurukkal, Rajan, and Raghava Varier. *Kerala Charithram*. Vols. I–II, Vallathol Vidyapeetham, 1991.
3. Haridas, V. V. *Zamorins and the Political Culture of Medieval Kerala*. Orient Blackswan, 2015.
4. Narayanan, M. G. S. *Perumals of Kerala*. Current Books, 2013.
5. Panikkar, K. M. *History of Kerala: 1498–1801*. Annamalai University, 1960.
6. Sainuddeen, Shaikh. *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin*. Other Books, 2006.

Suggested Reading

1. Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
2. Ganesh, K. N. *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*. Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2004.
3. Gupta, Charu. *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. Permanent Black, 2001.
4. Gurukkal, Rajan. *Social Formations of Early South India*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
5. Gurukkal, Rajan. *Kerala Temple and the Agrarian System*. Vallathol Vidyapeetham, Sukapuram.



BLOCK

Leaders and Movements



UNIT

Upper Caste/Community Movements

Learning Outcomes

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

- explain how Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal challenged royal power and caste oppression
- examine Chattampi Swamikal's contributions in rejecting caste myths, promoting gender equality and opposing priestly dominance
- evaluate V.T. Bhattathiripad's role in reforming the Nambutiri community
- analyse key upper caste reform movements in 19th and early 20th century Kerala

Prerequisites

The socio-religious reform movements in nineteenth-century Kerala emerged as a critical response to deep-rooted caste hierarchies and oppressive customs, with visionary leaders like Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal, Chattampi Swamikal and V.T. Bhattathiripad challenging entrenched rituals, priestly dominance and social injustices. Drawing inspiration from native traditions and selectively engaging with modern ideas, these reformers rejected caste-based discrimination, fought for the dignity of the marginalised and initiated collective resistance through education, spiritual reinterpretation and community organisation, laying a foundation for the Kerala Renaissance and advancing ideals of equality, rationality and human dignity. This unit discusses how these reformers reshaped Kerala's social order through critical thought and activism.

Keywords

Vaikunda Swamikal, Ayyavazhi Movement, Chattampi Swamikal, Samatva Samajam, V.T. Bhattathiripad, Yogakshema Sabha, Smarthavicharam, Caste Equality, Widow Remarriage

Discussion

The socio-material realities of the nineteenth century made it imperative to critically reevaluate the moral foundations of human life. This task was often taken up by thinkers and intellectuals who responded thoughtfully to the upheavals of their era. In Kerala, this role was notably fulfilled by Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal (1809–1851), Thaikkattu Aiyya Swamy (1814–1909), Chattampi Swamikal (1853–1924) and Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928). These leaders were attuned to the ethical crises around them and responded by reassessing religious doctrines and cultural norms, especially as they encountered new perspectives introduced through European religious influences. Their teachings challenged irrational rituals, dismissed the authority of priestly classes and denounced extravagant spiritual practices. They openly opposed caste-based hierarchies and worked to inspire collective resistance against such oppressive customs.

What united these spiritual reformers was their deep grounding in native traditions coupled with a critical stance towards foreign ideologies. Although they were not directly influenced by Europeans, they managed to internalise and reinterpret aspects of modern thought without losing their cultural identity. Their reformist efforts bore a resemblance to the liberal ideals championed by Protestant missionaries and echoed broader trends in Indian socio-religious reform in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite their outward orthodoxy, they

played a central role in shaping what came to be known as the Kerala Renaissance, a movement that advanced principles of rational inquiry, egalitarianism, human dignity and democratic values. Among them, Vaikunda Swamikal was the earliest torchbearer of this transformation.

3.1.1 Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal (1809-1851)



Fig.3.1.1 Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal
Source: IAS Gyan

Ayyavazhi Vaikundar is known as the first leader of the social reform movement in Kerala. He bravely stood up against royal power to fight the injustices faced by his community. He was born into a caste that was considered *varna-bahya*, or outside the traditional four-caste system, *Chaturvarna*, mentioned in the *Manusmriti*. Reliable information about Vaikunda Swami comes from the writings of his principal follower, Thaikkattu Aiyya Swami, as well as from missionaries such as Rev. Fr Samuel Mateer

and Rev. Fr Mead and documents maintained by the London Missionary Society.

Vaikunda Swami was born in March 1809 into a financially disadvantaged Channar family in Samithoppu, near present-day Kanyakumari, in the southern region of Travancore. He was born to Ponnu Nadar, a palm tree worker in Swamithope and his wife was Veyilammal. Initially, he was named Mudichudum Perummal, which means “crowned king”. It was a time when people of the lower castes were not even allowed to name their own children as they wished. Forced by resistance from dominant castes, the parents modified the name to Muthukutty. As Chentharassery noted, even though he studied Tamil and followed the path of devotion, he had to endure many painful struggles, making it natural for him to speak out against untouchability, discrimination, unfair customs and superstitions.

Vaikunda Swami received instruction in epic and classical texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, certain Puranas and Tamil literary works such as *Tirukkural* and *Tiruvachakam* under a local teacher. He appears to have gained some understanding of the *Bible* through Rev. Fr Mead, while Rev. Samuel Mateer also maintained contact with him. His education included exposure to Islamic teachings. Despite this wide-ranging learning, he followed the customary profession of his community, working as a toddy tapper. However, his awareness of social injustices and deep moral sensibility made it difficult for him to live within the confines of caste-based expectations. Eventually, he renounced worldly life, wandered as an ascetic and began to be revered as Vaikunda Swami.

Vaikunda Swami was deeply influenced by Christian ideas, which shaped his worldview. These ideas led him to question many social and religious customs in the kingdom of Tiruvitamkur. Ayyavazhi Vaikundar was

the first revolutionary ascetic in Travancore to openly resist royal authority. He openly criticised Maharaja Swathi Thirunal and referred to the white colonial rulers as “ven neechan” (lowborn whites), which led to his arrest on the Maharaja’s orders. After his arrest, Vaikundar was jailed in Singaratoppu, but large crowds of followers kept gathering, prompting the authorities to continuously move him to different locations. Even though he was treated harshly, as described in Thaliak Lakshmanan’s *Brahmashri Vaikundaswamikal*, his followers did not give up. During talks for his release, he strongly refused a condition that asked him to speak only for his own community, making it clear that his goal was to free all oppressed people.

Vaikundar devised thoughtful plans to uplift all marginalised people through knowledge and self-respect. He established five pathis near Christian churches to promote dignity, education and discourage forced conversions, leading missionaries to view him as a threat. Meanwhile, the rulers encouraged caste discrimination, imposed heavy taxes on the poor, allowed corruption and neglected governance, causing widespread suffering and public anger. Unlike other saints who often stayed away from public life, he constantly spoke to people about why idol worship, costly rituals and false ideas about God were unnecessary. He strongly criticised the caste system, especially the treatment of lower castes by the upper castes and fought for the dignity and freedom of those at the bottom of society. Vaikundar united the oppressed lower castes, whose only strength was their hard work and led a protest against the king. He also vehemently opposed the white rulers who supported exploitation and injustice.

He gave special attention to the struggles of the so-called untouchables. One major event he led was a protest in 1813, where Channar women marched wearing upper garments, challenging the rule that banned



them from covering their chests. This was not just about clothing; it was a stand for dignity that lasted for decades until the issue was officially resolved in 1859. He also led the Channar community in entering temples and rejecting unjust taxes imposed on them. He supported inter-caste dining, known as *samapanti bhojanam*, to break caste barriers and spread the idea of *samatva samajam*, a society based on equality. In 1836, he formed a group called 'Samatva Samajam' to support the Avarnas and raise concerns about problems in government functioning. This group is likely the first social reform organisation in Kerala and Vaikunda Swami is seen as one of the first leaders to push for significant social change.

Vaikunda Swamikal was the first reformer to promote the message: "One caste, one religion, one god, one language, one world, for humanity." In 1851, before he passed away, he installed a mirror in the temple of his village, Samithoppu, as a symbol of divinity. He told people to remove their upper garments and turbans, look into the mirror and pay respect to their own reflection, an act meant to boost their self-worth. He fought against alcoholism, exploitative rituals, slavery and forced labour, aiming to restore dignity through peaceful reform.

Vaikundar introduced a new way of worship in Ayyavazhi. As Chentharassery mentioned, devotees lit a lamp placed on a lotus flower, which symbolised purity and detachment, as the lotus remains untouched by water. The lamp represented cleansing and was kept in front of a mirror. While praying before this, wearing a headgear or turban was compulsory. Before worship, individuals had to bathe and apply a wide line of holy ash on their foreheads. Those carrying items in temples or during rituals also had to wear this ash mark. Clean clothes were required for prayers in feather tents and a vegetarian diet was to be followed during prayer time. The worship style demonstrated

that no one is above or below anyone else. Vaikundar supported group prayers, a tradition still followed at Maruthwamala and Vaikunda Ashram. Teachings from *Akilathirattu* and *Arul Nool* are explained during these gatherings. The Tamil book *Akhilathirattu (Prapancha Sangraham)* was written following the instructions of Vaikundar.

3.1.1.1 Ambalappathi

Ambalappathi was a model village established by Vaikundar to demonstrate how people should live in a good and equal society. According to *Akilathirattu*, about seven hundred families lived there, consisting mainly of individuals treated as outcasts or marginalised. The adults worked and shared their earnings with each other. While going out for work, they also spread the teachings of the Swamis. Ambalappathi became an important place for disseminating Vaikundar's ideas.

3.1.1.2 Thuvayalpanthi

Vaikundar founded Thuvayalpanthi as a permanent centre to practise his teachings. The residents were required to follow certain rules: bathe three times a day, wear wet clothes, cook and eat three meals daily and prepare food together. These were strict rules established by Ayya. This place had several smaller branches, with nearly seven hundred people residing there to spread his message. Thuvayalpanthi was located six kilometres northwest of Kanyakumari. Vakaipathi and Muttapathi were two other branch settlements linked to it, with Swamithoppu being the most significant.

Vaikundapathi was another centre, set up at the base of the Maruthwamala hills. All the pathis were not only intended to follow the Swami's ideas but also acted as active centres for his movement. The people who lived and worked in these places were called Pandaarams. These settlements were based

on equality, with no caste discrimination, allowing men and women to live as equals, which is why they were considered exemplars of an equal society.

3.1.1.3 Nizhal Thangals

The name Nizhal Thangal signifies that all living beings exist under the shadow of the all-powerful and all-present God. These places were primarily for worship. Vaikundar established many thangals in locations such as Kottarakkara, Venjaramoodu, Nedumangad, Nemom, Parassala, Vilavancode, Kalkulam, Nagercoil, Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli. These thangals assisted orphans and the poor by providing shelter, food, spiritual teachings and medical care. Vaikundar initiated these places to unite people and spread the message of equality.

The various pathis illustrated how to live in unity and equality. At a time when many individuals gained wealth by exploiting the poor, Vaikundar presented an alternative way. In Thuvayalpanthi, people lived together, shared their resources and utilised their assets for the benefit of all. He believed that high taxes were a form of exploitation and openly spoke against them.

Akilathirattu also mentions protests led by Vaikundar against property owners who collected unfair taxes, including separate taxes for land and palm trees. By doing good work for the welfare of people, Vaikundar fulfilled his divine purpose. On June 9, 1851, at the age of 42, he passed away peacefully at Ambalappathi, six kilometres west of Kanyakumari. His followers referred to him as “Aiyya” (meaning father) and he is remembered as one of the earliest social and religious reformers of 19th-century India. After his death, his followers named their path *aiyya vali*, meaning the path of Aiyya, which still exists as a unique community today.

3.1.2 Chattampi Swamikal

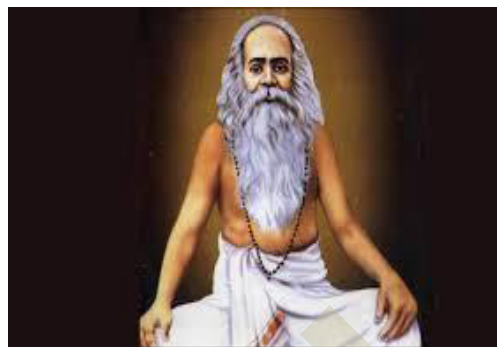


Fig.3.1.2 Chattampi Swamikal

Source: Kerala Kaumudi

Chattampi Swami was born on 25 August 1853 in Kollur, in southern Travancore. His original name was Ayyappan and he was called Kunjan at home. He studied under Pettayil Raman Pillai Asan, a respected scholar. Since Kunjan was the class monitor, he earned the nickname "Chattampi", meaning someone who maintains order or rules. In the early 1870s, Raman Pillai started an organisation called Jnanaprajagaram, which helped Chattampi meet many scholars. He learned Tamil from Swaminatha Desikar, philosophy from Professor Manonmaniyam Sundaram Pillai and yoga from Thaikkatu Aiyya Swami. At a philosophy conference in the Travancore palace, Chattampi met Subba Jatapatikal, who arrived in Thiruvananthapuram from Tamil Nadu as a royal guest to participate in the Navaratri festival and became his student. Under him, he studied logic (*Tarka*), grammar (*Vyakarana*), interpretation (*Mimamsa*) and *Vedanta*. During this time, he also learned Siddha medicine, martial arts and music.

Chattampi studied Christianity under a priest in a Tamil Nadu monastery, learning about its beliefs and spiritual practices. He also studied the *Quran* and Sufi mysticism from an Islamic scholar. He travelled widely across India, met many sages and learned about different religions. People began calling him Swami after he realised and taught that all religions share the same core values and that conflicts arise from misinterpretations.

He believed that such misunderstandings turn religion into a tool for control. He later deepened his knowledge of Siddha views on God and returned to Mavelikkara as a wise and accomplished sage.

Chattampi Swami had a profound understanding of Kerala's social and religious conditions. He strongly criticised blind beliefs and meaningless rituals. He suggested proper and meaningful ways of worship for the people. He opposed the control of knowledge by a small group and the dominance of priests over religious texts. He wanted ordinary people to have access to spiritual knowledge. He spoke out against unfair social systems and practices like the caste system. He also cared deeply about women's rights and worked to elevate their status in society. He pointed out that the scriptures actually granted equal status to women, but men had distorted their meaning to keep women oppressed.

Chattampi Swami wrote extensively in Malayalam on religion, language and culture, aiming to make *Siddha* and *Advaita* ideas accessible. Works such as *Vedadhikara Nirupanam*, *Pracheena Malayalam* and *Nijananda Vilasam* reflect his deep interest in Kerala's heritage and his stance against social oppression. In *Pracheena Malayalam*, Chattampi Swamikal firmly rejected the historical claims of texts like *Keralolpathi* and *Kerala Mahathmyam*, which depict Parasurama gifting Kerala to Brahmins to absolve himself of killing Kshatriyas. He denounced this origin myth as fabricated by Brahmins to maintain social dominance. Swamikal argued that early Kerala society enjoyed social equality and that caste divisions were later imposed by Brahmins for their own gain. He dismissed the Parasurama legend, rejected the *Chaturvarnya* system based on birth and insisted that caste should be determined by one's deeds (*karma*), not by birth. He openly declared that untouchability and caste discrimination could not end

without discarding misleading sacred texts. He also challenged the classification of Nairs as Sudras, calling it an insult invented by Brahmins to keep them subservient and asserted that no community should claim superiority over another.

In *Vedadhikara Nirupanam*, Swamikal launched a strong critique of Brahminical religious authority and superstition, arguing that the Vedas never barred Sudras from studying them. He insisted that all Hindus, regardless of caste, have the right to learn the Vedas, thereby disputing the Brahmins' exclusive claim to Vedic knowledge. He courageously declared that both men and women are equally entitled to understand the Vedas, directly challenging Brahminical control over religious texts and their supposed infallibility. In his writings, he opposed the Brahmins' sacrificial rituals and challenged their claims of superiority while also criticising colonial domination.

In *Adi Bhasha*, Chattampi Swamikal argued that Tamil was humanity's earliest language, asserting that it evolved independently and did not originate from Sanskrit. He claimed that the ancient, natural form of Tamil, which he called Moola Dravida, was the root of other languages. According to Sreedhara Menon, in *Jivitha Karunya Nirupanam*, Chattampi Swamikal expressed his firm belief in non-violence, strongly condemning animal sacrifices practised in temples under the Devaswom Department during Setu Lakshmi Bai's regency. His writings display his profound compassion for all living beings. One of his more controversial works, *Krishthumatha Chedanam* (1890), countered what he perceived as malicious propaganda by Christian missionaries who attacked Hindu beliefs instead of explaining their own faith. He found the Biblical portrayal of God irrational, doubted the divinity and even the existence of Jesus and criticised the violent methods used to spread Christianity. Yet, in *Christhumathasaram*, he also highlighted

the simplicity and purity of Christ's original teachings.

Chattampi Swamikal built his ideas of self-respect, equality and civic rights on Advaita philosophy, as explained in works like *Advaithachintapaddhati* and *Sarvamatasamarasyam*. These texts stressed the unity of all religions and non-violence as universal principles. He strongly advocated gender equality, condemning discriminatory traditions and insisting that women deserved equal education and respect. He also denounced harmful social customs, such as *Talikettukalyanam*, that burdened families, inspiring reforms in the Nair community.

Although he formed no formal order, his rational, humanistic teachings on self-respect, equality and freedom influenced later reformers. He lived simply as an Avadhuta, choosing to stay among people rather than withdrawing from society and used his sharp intellect to challenge Brahmin supremacy and missionary propaganda. By blending philosophy with practical social ethics, he revitalised Hindu society and inspired collective self-awareness among Kerala's non-Brahmin groups. Chattampi Swami died in 1921. After his death, a Sivalinga was placed at his burial site in Panmana, Quilon district, which is now a Siva temple.

Nair Samajam

The first formal society for the Nair community was established in 1903, called the Travancore Nair Samajam. Soon after, in 1905, the Kerala Nair Samajam was formed. Around the same time, a group of young people created an organisation based on the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) model. However, this group faded away by 1921, when political activities in Kerala were increasing.

There was growing pressure on the government to change the matrilineal inheritance system. In 1912, Mannath

Padmanabha Pillai started the first Nair Karayogam (a local village-level association) in Changanassery. This idea later grew into larger taluk-level associations and ultimately led to the formation of the Nair Samudaya Jana Sangham in 1914. In 1915, the organisation adopted its current name, Nair Service Society (NSS).

3.1.3 V.T. Bhattathiripad and Yogakshemasabha

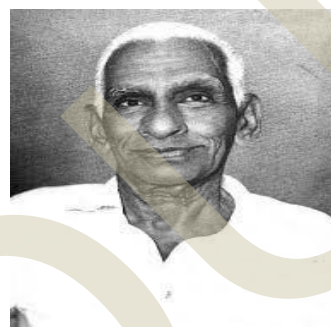


Fig.3.1.3 V.T. Bhattathiripad
Source: India Art Review

At that time, Kerala society was burdened with severe social evils, especially those oppressing women within the conservative Nambutiri Brahmin community. Despite their privileged status, many Nambutiris faced internal restrictions; learning English, cutting the traditional tuft, or advocating change were taboo and elders refused to support youth education. Girls faced stigma at birth and restrictive marriage customs, whereby only the eldest sons married within the caste, forcing others into sambandham alliances with Nair women. This denied Nambutiri women proper marriage prospects and often left them widowed at a young age. Women lived secluded lives, veiled under strict dress codes and ghosha, confined to kitchens, denied education and stripped of freedoms; widow remarriage was banned while old widowers freely remarried young girls. The *smarthavicharam* system enforced caste purity by publicly trying, isolating and excommunicating accused women. Amid this rigid orthodoxy and resistance

to modern ideas, V.T. Bhattathiripad emerged as a reformer determined to challenge these oppressive traditions.

Vellithuruthi Thazhathu Karutha Patteri Raman Bhattathiripad was born on 26 March 1896 in Kaippilly Mana at Mezhathur. Like many other Nambutiris of that time, Raman did not receive formal education and remained illiterate. As he grew up, he became critical of the rigid traditions followed by his caste. V.T. Bhattathiripad began his Vedic education at six, studying first at home and then at Patakkara Mana, where he was exposed to modern ideas. After leaving Mutukurissi Mana without completing his studies, he returned home and, due to financial hardship, worked as a temple priest in Mundamuka near Shornur. His time at Mundamuka was pivotal: he realised his lack of literacy when he was unable to help a young girl with her homework, which inspired him to learn Malayalam and English with her help. He later connected this illiteracy to the limited traditional education of the Nambuthiri community.

During this time, V.T. Bhattathiripad became associated with the Yogakshema Sabha, which aimed to reform the Nambutiri community. He recalled attending the 8th Yogakshema Sabha meeting in Vellinezhi in 1916, where he admired the discussions, organisation and community spirit. He was motivated by Kurur Nambutiripad's call for English education and praised the fundraising for schools, such as the one at Thaliparambu. Inspired by modern education, V.T. left his priestly role to earn money for schooling. In 1918, he went to Thiruvananthapuram for the *Murajapam* ritual, using the ceremonies to gather funds. There, he learned English with help from other Nambutiris, gained insights into Travancore politics and formed a key friendship with K.N. Kuttan Nambutiripad, later editor of the Unni Nambutiri journal, with whom he worked closely.

V.T. had a sharp mind and strongly felt the need for social reforms in his community. He was especially moved by the difficult lives of Nambutiri women, who were often married off young to much older men. As a result, many became widows early in life and had to endure a lonely and miserable existence. Nambutiri women were kept confined within their homes, treated almost like property. If they went outside, they had to be covered with a palm-leaf umbrella called *marakkuta* and a shawl called *ghosha*. Patriarchy was dominant in their society, though there were rare exceptions.

If a Nambutiri woman was suspected of infidelity, she would be subjected to a caste-based trial called *smarthavicharam*. During this trial, the woman would be wrapped in a mat and thrown down from the roof of the house. She would be permanently expelled from her home and the men involved with her would also be excommunicated. In 1905, a woman named Kuriyedathu Thathri was accused in such a trial. During the proceedings, she revealed the names of several men she had been with, including many well-respected individuals and even provided proof. This caused a huge uproar among the Nambudiri leaders, who asked the king of Cochin to allow a special inquiry against the men, called *purushavicharam*, even though it had never been done before. Some of the accused men even hired lawyers to defend themselves. The entire trial became very unusual and complex. Still, it ended with all the accused men being excommunicated. Later, V.T. Bhattathiripad saw this event as a bold act of protest by a woman from the community against the male domination of the Nambutiri system.

V.T. Bhattathiripad strongly opposed the mistreatment of antharjanams (Nambutiri women), which he saw as a form of caste discrimination. He worked to raise awareness among Nambutiri women and used theatre as a powerful tool for social reform and

women's rights. His play *Atukkalayilninnum Arangathekku* marked a major change in Malayalam theatre and sparked strong criticism against the male-dominated Nambutiri system.

Many Nambutiris gathered at the house of Cherumukku Vaidikan on the banks of the Periyar River during the Sivarathri festival in 1908. There, they decided to form the Namputhiri Yogakshema Mahasabha, a welfare organisation for the Nambutiri community. The main aim of this organisation was to promote modern education and increase literacy among Nambutiris. To spread progressive ideas and create awareness about social reforms, the sabha started a monthly magazine called *Yogakshemam*. Kurur Unni Nambutirippad led the discussions on reform. This became the first organised effort to bring changes within the community.

In the 1928 annual meeting at Edakkunni, the sabha agreed to promote education, which led to the opening of Namputhiri Vidyalayams in various parts of the state. This was considered one of the sabha's greatest achievements. Another major reform was the removal of *ghosha* (veil or purdah), which was accepted during the 1930 annual meeting, also at Edakkunni. This decision showcased V.T. Bhattathiripad's leadership. His play inspired many Nambutiri women, especially young girls, to think differently. M.R. Bhattathiripad's work *Marakkutakkullile Mahaa Narakam* (Hell Inside the Palm Leaf Umbrella) motivated women to stop using the umbrella that had been used to hide them from view.

V.T. Bhattathiripad also supported inter-caste marriages and spoke about it in the Yogakshema Mahasabha. To support his views, he gave his sister, who was a student at a Vidyalayam, in marriage to a Nair youth. However, the Vidyalayam Committee filed a case against him, claiming he had broken

the agreement signed by the girl's parents, which required adherence to the school's rules. The Committee won the case in court.

The sabha, which represented the Nambutiri community, succeeded in getting two of its leaders elected to the first Legislative Council of Cochin State in 1925. These leaders introduced the Nambutiri Bill in the Council. Although orthodox members opposed it strongly, the Bill was still passed. In the Travancore Legislature, the Bill was passed without much trouble. However, it failed three times in Cochin before finally being accepted, as people realised that blocking it was futile. Later, it became Nambutiri Law in Malabar when it was passed by the Madras Presidency Assembly. The Mahasabha helped change the property laws of the Nambutiri community, which had previously followed primogeniture, where only the eldest male inherited family property. After the law was passed, every family member had the right to an equal share. These step-by-step changes in property rights occurred mainly because of V.T. Bhattathiripad's efforts.

The Nambutiri reform movement's focus on widows shows how male priorities shaped its agenda. Although widows faced severe hardships, their plight was largely ignored until 1927. It was only after V.T. Bhattathiripad's Unni Nambutiri movement gained momentum that widow remarriage became a key reform. Like Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotiba Phule, V.T. championed widow remarriage, which was especially significant since it was strictly forbidden for Brahmin women, highlighting his commitment to gender equality. A milestone came on 13 September 1934, when the community's first widow remarriage, between Uma Antarjanam and M.R. Bhattathiripad, took place at V.T.'s home, Rasikasadanam, in Tritala.

In 1934, during the sabha's annual meeting in Peramangalam, a resolution to allow



widow marriage was introduced. There was strong opposition to it, but it was passed after some lawyers reminded people that the Government of India had already passed a similar law. V.T. Bhattathiripad took the lead in making this happen by arranging the marriage of a widow to Mullamangalath Raman Bhattathiripad (1908–2001), also known as MRB. Bhattathiripad also promoted other reforms like *sudhham* (ritual purity) and *misra bhojanam* (inter-dining). A few years later, Nambutiri women formed an organisation called Antharjana Samajam.

From the early 1900s, individual Nambutiris and the Yogakshema Sabha began showing interest in India's national movement, though they did not play a leading role at first since the movement in Kerala was still growing and led mainly by intellectuals. Gandhi's arrival and his constructive programmes inspired many Nambutiris, including V.T. Bhattathiripad, to get actively involved. V.T. attended the Congress meeting at Ottapalam in 1920 as a volunteer and represented Kerala at the 1921 Ahmedabad session. Under his influence, Brahmin women like Arya Pallam also joined the nationalist cause.

Social reform soon became linked with nationalism. The younger Nambutiris demanded legal reforms, which resulted in the Travancore Malayala Brahmin Regulation (1930) and the Madras Nambutiri Act (1933). These laws allowed younger family members to marry within their caste and secure inheritance rights, helping to end polygamy and exploitative ties with Nair women. The reforms also addressed individual property rights and opposed old men marrying young girls, promoting freedom in marriage choices.

A fierce critic of superstitions, V.T. Bhattathiripad used his writings and activism to push for progress within the Nambutiri community. Though he spent his final years quietly in his village, his earlier efforts had radically modernised the community. Seen as a redeemer, V.T. helped free the Nambutiris from oppressive customs and guided them toward a modern, secular and more equitable society, sparking a new civil awareness among them.

Recap

- ◆ Reformers rethought Kerala's caste based society, blending native traditions with modern ideals.
- ◆ Vaikunda Swami led the oppressed, resisted royals and promoted equality.
- ◆ Fought untouchability and created *pathis*, model villages for reform.
- ◆ Chattampi Swamikal challenged Brahmin myths and caste-based birth hierarchy.
- ◆ Advocated women's equality and rejected oppressive rituals and customs.

- ◆ His works exposed myths and promoted *Advaita* and linguistic roots.
- ◆ The Nair community formed societies and tackled inheritance and modern education.
- ◆ V.T. Bhattathiripad reformed oppressive Nambutiri customs and championed women.
- ◆ Used theatre and writings to fight caste and gender discrimination.
- ◆ Widow remarriage milestone; Yogakshema Sabha propelled social change.

Objective Questions

1. Which European missionaries documented information about Vaikunda Swamikal?
2. What was the important message promoted by Vaikunda Swamikal?
3. What is the name of the Tamil book written following Vaikunda Swamy's instructions?
4. Which work of Chattampi Swamikal strongly rejected the *Keralolpathi* legend?
5. Which organisation did V.T. Bhattathiripad actively support in the reform of the Nambutiri community?
6. Name the play written by V.T. Bhattathiripad.
7. Who was the earliest torchbearer of the Kerala Renaissance?
8. Who led the widow remarriage movement in the Nambutiri community?
9. Who argued that Tamil was humanity's earliest language?
10. What was the Yogakshema Sabha's official magazine?

Answers

1. Rev. Fr Samuel Mateer and Rev. Fr Mead
2. One caste, one religion, one god, one language, one world, for humanity
3. *Akhalathirattu* (Prapancha Sangraham)
4. Pracheena Malayalam
5. Yogakshema Sabha
6. *Atukkalayilninum Arangathekku*
7. Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal
8. V.T. Bhattathiripad
9. Chattampi Swamikal
10. Yogakshemam

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of Aiyya Vaikunda Swamikal in the Kerala Renaissance. How did his teachings and actions challenge the caste system and royal authority in Travancore?
2. Analyse the contributions of Chattampi Swamikal towards dismantling Brahminical dominance in Kerala society. How did his writings challenge religious and social hierarchies?
3. Analyse V.T. Bhattathiripad's role in reforming the Nambutiri community. How did his theatre and writings contribute to women's emancipation and modernisation within the community?
4. Compare and contrast the reform approaches of Vaikunda Swamy and Chattampi Swamikal. In what ways were they similar in ideology but different in methods and impact?
5. Examine the role of the Yogakshema Sabha in transforming the conservative practices of the Nambutiri community. What were its major achievements and challenges?

Reference

1. Cherian, P.J., editor. *Perspectives on Kerala History*. *Kerala State Gazetteer*, vol. II, part II, Thiruvananthapuram, 2024.
2. Gurukkal, Rajan and Raghava Varier. *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present*. Orient Blackswan, 2018.
3. Houtart, Francois and Genevieve Lemercinier. "Socio-Religious Movements in Kerala: A Reaction to the Capitalist Mode of Production: Part One." *Social Scientist*, vol. 6, no. 11, 1978. www.jstor.org/stable/3516609.
4. Kurup, K.K.N. "The Intellectual Movements and Anti-Caste Struggles in Kerala." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 55, 1994. www.jstor.org/stable/44143425.
5. Menon, A. Sreedhara. *Kerala History and Its Makers*. Madras, 1990.
6. Menon, K.P.K. *Chattampi Swamikal: The Great Scholar Saint of Kerala: 1653–1924*. Perumbavoor, 1967.
7. Sivadasan, S. (ed.), *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. Modern Book Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, 2021.

Suggested Reading

1. Awaya, Toshie. "Women in the Nambudiri Caste Movement." *History and Society in South India*, edited by T. Mizushima and H. Yanagisawa, Tokyo, 1996.
2. Chen, Martha Allen, editor. *Widows in India*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998.
3. Devika, J. *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala*. Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007.
4. Ganesh, K.N. *Keralathinte Innalekal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995.

5. Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
6. Lopez, Lawrence. *A Social History of Modern Kerala*. Thiruvananthapuram, 1998.
7. Menon, A. Sreedhara. *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*. Madras, 1996.
8. Nair, A. Balakrishnan. *Paramabhattacharya Sree Vidhyadhiraja Chattampi Swamikal*. Thiruvananthapuram, 2001.
9. Pilla, P. Govinda. *Kerala Navodhanam: Oru Marxist Veekshanam*. Thiruvananthapuram, 2003.

SGOU



UNIT

Lower Caste Movements

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain how Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Pandit Karuppan fought caste discrimination through social, educational and spiritual reforms
- ◆ describe the formation and impact of SNDP Yogam, Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam and community sabhas in empowering oppressed castes
- ◆ examine significant events like Aruvippuram consecration, Villuvandi Yatra, labour strikes and Kallumala agitation and their role in social change
- ◆ critically assess how these leaders' work influenced Kerala's transformation towards equality, dignity and democratic rights for the untouchables

Prerequisites

In nineteenth and early twentieth-century Kerala, deep-rooted caste hierarchies, untouchability, social exclusion and rigid religious customs forced marginalised communities to live under severe social, economic and spiritual oppression. Denied access to education, temples, public roads and dignified livelihoods, these communities suffered constant humiliation and exploitation under both the dominant castes and colonial rule. This unequal order provoked leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Pandit Karuppan to lead powerful reform movements that aimed to challenge oppressive practices, uplift the lower castes through education, organise collective action for rights and build self-respect and equality. Their movements arose as bold responses to an unjust social system, blending spiritual reform, social protest and modern democratic ideals to secure basic human dignity for the oppressed. This unit

discusses the key figures, organisations and actions that shaped Kerala's historic lower caste movements and laid the foundation for a more equal society.

Keywords

Sree Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam, Aruvippuram Consecration, Advaita Philosophy, Sivagiri Pilgrimage, Ayyankali, Villuvandi Yatra, Dalit Education Movement, Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS), Kallumala Agitation, Pandit Karuppan, Jatikkummi, Pulaya Maha Sabha

Discussion

3.2.1 Sree Narayana Guru and SNDP Yogam

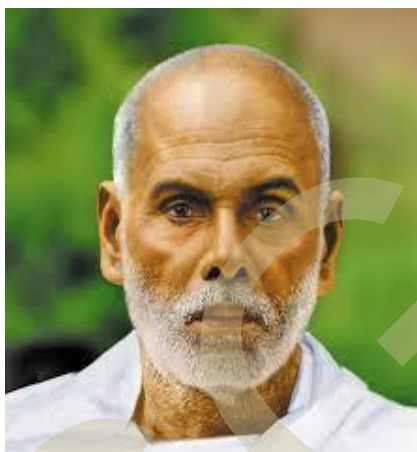


Fig.3.2.1 Sree Narayana Guru
Source: DC Books

Narayana Guru was born in 1856 to an Ezhava farmer in Chempazhanthi, Thiruvananthapuram. He was called Nanu during his childhood. As a child, he worked as a cowherd for a wealthy family. His life changed when Kummanpallil Raman Pillai Asan, a Sanskrit school headmaster from Kayamkulam, helped him start his education. He first sent Nanu to learn under Moottha Pillai Asan, a village teacher, who introduced him to learning. Later, Raman Pillai Asan personally taught him Malayalam and Sanskrit for six years while Nanu stayed at

his home. He became interested in Vedanta and began teaching nearby children basic Malayalam and Sanskrit. This led people to start calling him "Nanu Asan".

In 1882, Narayana Guru met Chattampi Swami and stayed with him for several months, learning *Siddha*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta*. They travelled together and during this time, Narayana Guru began questioning social evils like the caste system and supported his guru's reform efforts. Chattampi Swami introduced him to Aiyya Swami, who accepted him as a disciple and taught him for a few months. Though Narayana Guru briefly lived a householder's life, he wished to become a *sanyasi*. Narayana Guru came to Aruvippuram, where he meditated and practised Yoga for months. Local people started coming to him for advice and he guided them to reject superstitions, meaningless rituals, costly ceremonies and caste discrimination. More people began following him and he often repeated the message of Vaikunda Swami: "One caste, One religion, One God." Around this time, he became known as Narayana Guru.

Narayana Guru, a firm believer in Sree Sankara's *Advaita* philosophy, described *Brahma* as the ultimate reality and saw the individual soul as one with it. He reinterpreted

Advaita with a focus on humanism and social reform, using its core ideas for social upliftment. Although devoted to Sankara's teachings, he strongly opposed the caste system and dedicated his life to fighting it. To empower marginalised communities, he established temples for the Ezhavas and allowed access to Pulayas and other castes seen as lower, promoting equality and social progress.

3.2.1.1 Aruvippuram

Narayana Guru was a passionate young man who could not tolerate upper-caste domination. In 1888, he took a stone from the river and installed it as Lord Siva at Aruvippuram, boldly challenging the Nambudiri caste's exclusive right to perform idol consecration rituals. At that time, lower castes like the Ezhavas were not allowed to worship major Hindu gods like Lord Shiva. Instead, they had to worship local deities like Matan, Maruta, Chattan and offer items like liquor, meat, or animal blood. Narayana Guru began his reform work during a time when these communities were even banned from entering temples. This act shocked the upper castes and when questioned, Guru calmly replied that he had only installed an Ezhava Siva. This daring move marked him as a radical against caste and became a turning point in Kerala's socio-religious reform movement.

According to M.K. Sanu, Guru's act of consecrating a Sivalinga at Aruvippuram was a bold challenge to the Brahmin-dominated caste system. At that time, only Brahmins were believed to have the right to install idols in temples. By installing a Siva idol on Sivaratri in 1888, Guru gave the Ezhavas, who were seen as untouchable and outside the caste system, the right to connect with God. This act was not just about building a temple; it questioned the entire caste-based religious system. In front of the idol, Guru inscribed a verse which said, "This is a model place

of brotherhood where all people, regardless of caste or religion, may live like siblings." T. Baskaran notes that this verse expresses important human values such as equality, freedom and brotherhood.

Narayana Guru continued his spiritual reforms by establishing more than fifty temples for the Ezhava community, mainly for worshipping Lord Siva and related deities. He also introduced new forms of worship by consecrating symbols like a mirror at Kalavamkode and a lamp along with values like truth and peace at Karamukku. In 1912, he consecrated the goddess Sarada at Sivagiri without performing any ritual worship. Narayana Guru founded many temples across Kerala and beyond to promote social welfare, unity and spiritual upliftment for oppressed communities. He challenged idol worship by consecrating lamps, inscriptions and even mirrors instead of idols, teaching people to find God within themselves. He used temples as symbols of caste division and instruments of social change, replacing harmful practices like animal sacrifice and evil spirit worship with more enlightened forms. He encouraged the Ezhavas and other marginalised groups to act as priests and take charge of their own spiritual lives. Through this vision, he blended Eastern spiritual values with modern education and social reform.

In 1904, Guru moved to Sivagiri to focus on his spiritual life while becoming more active in social reform. In 1912, a temple for Sarada Devi was built there. He also started a Sanskrit school and an orphanage at Varkala, where children from any caste could receive an education. Guru told pilgrims visiting Sivagiri to see the journey as a way to promote education and self-awareness through devotion to God. He encouraged them to learn, grow and become strong by working together. He believed that true independence came from agriculture, trade, handicrafts and technical skills. He also urged



them to spread the message of cleanliness across the country. In 1913, he founded the Advaita Ashramam at Aluva to promote the study of different religions and the idea of universal brotherhood, expressed as “Om Sahodaryam Sarvatra”. When Rabindranath Tagore visited Guru at Sivagiri in November 1922, he said he had never met a sage with greater spiritual wisdom than Narayana Guru.

Narayana Guru supported the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 and, during a meeting with Gandhi at Varkala, stressed the need for equal educational and economic opportunities for everyone. He championed women’s empowerment, opposed extravagant marriages and urged the wealthy to set up industries to employ the poor, believing industrial development was key to community progress. He promoted co-operatives, modern farming and local manufacturing and even trained people in coir production, organising Kerala’s first industrial exhibition at Alwaye. In 1924, he hosted a historic interfaith conference at the Advaita Ashram in Alwaye to foster understanding among religions, declaring that all faiths share the same ultimate goal and should avoid conflict. He also introduced multi-religious education in the school he founded.

3.2.1.3 SNDP Yogam

Dr. Padmanabhan Palpu, the first Ezhava bacteriologist trained in London and a strong political figure, was fighting for civic rights for the Ezhavas and other oppressed castes who were educated but still denied public access and government jobs. After the Malayalee Memorial Petition of 1891, which demanded jobs for educated Malayalis, Dr. Palpu tried to organise the Ezhavas through a group called the ‘Ezhava Sabha’, but it did not gain momentum. During a short rickshaw ride in 1893, he spoke to Swami Vivekananda in Bangalore about caste discrimination. Vivekananda advised him to find a spiritual leader who could guide people through both

religious and economic reforms. This made Dr. Palpu realise the importance of gaining Narayana Guru’s support. After submitting the Ezhava Memorial Petition in 1896, signed by more than 13,000 Ezhavas to the king of Tiruvithamkur, Dr. Palpu grew closer to Narayana Guru.

Even while spending time with people who gathered as Vavoottu Yogam (a formal social gathering) at Aruvippuram, Narayana Guru often remained quiet and deeply reflected on his own thoughts and goals. This inner reflection led him to write *Atmopadesa Satakam* in 1897, a well-known Malayalam philosophical poem composed of a hundred verses. In 1898, he transformed the Vavoottu Yogam into a more organised group called the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam. A special meeting of this group was held in 1903, led by Dr. Palpu, where it was decided that the Yogam would work for both the spiritual and material development of the Ezhava community. That same year, the group was officially registered under the Indian Companies Act of 1882 as the Aruvippuram Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, with Narayana Guru as its President.

The organisation became a strong force in Kerala’s social reform movement. It focused on many areas, such as ensuring freedom to worship, changing old customs, promoting modern family values, encouraging education, fighting for basic rights such as walking freely on public roads and helping Avarnas obtain government jobs and seats in the legislative assembly. It also worked to improve farming and industry, supported women’s rights and promoted scientific thinking instead of superstition. In its early years, the SNDP played an important role in advancing progressive changes in Kerala.

From 1916 onwards, Guru’s relationship with the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) faced tensions due to disagreements about the organisation’s

priorities. Guru strongly felt that there was a serious mismatch between his idea of *dharma paripalanam* (upholding ethics and righteousness) and the activities being carried out by the SNDP. He believed that the goal should not be the upliftment of just one caste through a caste-based organisation, but the liberation of all lower castes through a movement that stood against caste divisions. At one point, he even publicly declared that he could not associate himself with any caste-based group. Still, despite these differences, he attended the SNDP's annual meeting at Palluruthy in 1927.

In 1928, Guru started another organisation called the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham at the Kurukkancheri Siva Temple in Thrissur. It was a monastic group that aimed to treat all people equally, without judging them based on social status. This organisation later became the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham Trust. Eleven of Guru's disciples, including Bodhananda Swamikal and Swami Ernest Kirk, signed with him to form the Sangham, which followed the principles described in his work *Ashram*. Both the SNDP and the Sangham were designed using modern and democratic ideas. Unlike traditional monastic systems where leaders are chosen by a single head, Guru's legal will stated that future leaders should be elected so that everyone could participate in decision-making. The SNDP was also officially registered under the Company Act as a non-banking financial institution and followed an organised, democratic way of working.

The Dharma Sangham began publishing journals like *Vivekodayam* and *Dharmam* to spread its principles and values. Guru passed away on 20 September 1928, but his philosophy remains highly relevant to today's society. He introduced modern methods of organisation, supported democratic ideals and embraced science and technology, which made him a significant leader in Kerala's

reform movement. His secular and inclusive outlook was widely welcomed and people from all communities respected him as a leader who stood for justice and equality for everyone.

Sree Narayana Guru, though not Western-educated, never sought to Westernise the Ezhavas or other marginalised communities, so describing his movement as Westernisation is misleading. Some label it modernisation, but more accurately, it was a rehumanising effort that restored dignity to a once-dehumanised group. He did not preach revolution or class struggle, nor did he limit his teachings to his own Ezhava community; he openly rejected sectarian labels. As a deep thinker and seeker of spiritual truth, Guru was above all a visionary reformer and practical *Karmayogi* dedicated to uplifting humanity.

3.2.2 Ayyankali and Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam



Fig.3.2.2 Statue of Mahatma Ayyankali riding a cart, villuvandi on the Cherai beach

Source : onmanorama

In 19th-century Kerala, caste-based discrimination was deeply rooted in society and Ayyankali emerged as a strong leader from the Pulaya community, which was considered the lowest in the social hierarchy. Ayyankali was born in 1863 in Venganoor, near Thiruvananthapuram, into the Pulaya caste and from an early age, he experienced

the harshness of caste-based oppression. In *Ayyankali: The First Dalit Leader*, T.H.P. Chentharassery recounts a childhood incident during an Onam celebration when Ayyankali was insulted for eagerly taking part in a game with upper-caste boys. This moment deeply affected him and became a turning point in his life. When he returned home, he faced scorn and disapproval even from his own family, which only strengthened his determination. These early hardships prepared him for a life of resistance. Ayyankali grew up fully aware of the caste-based injustices around him and these painful experiences helped build his strong sense of dignity and fairness. As Kunnukuzhi S. Mani notes, though his childhood was filled with cruelty, it was also during this time that the foundations of his later leadership were laid. Despite being denied formal education, he developed a sharp mind and a powerful voice, shaped by his anger at social injustice. His purpose became clear: to raise and empower his community so they could take their rightful place in a modern and equal society.

3.2.2.1 Villuvandi Yatra

Ayyankali's bold defiance aimed to claim public spaces for the oppressed, believing this would help them resist all forms of injustice. He formed a group of young rebels called 'Ayyankalippada' and, with their support, walked the forbidden roads of Venganoor, sparking clashes with caste Hindus. His determined leadership inspired the Pulaya community to persist, eventually winning the right to use public roads across much of Travancore by 1900, though some private roads remained restricted. Notably, in 1898–99, he boldly travelled on public roads in a decorated bullock cart from Venganoor to Aralummoodu, despite fierce opposition. Ayyankali believed freedom had to be claimed through struggle, not granted by oppressors and his defiance of caste restrictions made him a revered leader among the Pulayas.

Ayyankali was born into the Pulaya community and, from an early age, faced the severe hardships of caste-based discrimination. One of the most painful injustices he endured was the restriction on using public roads, while even animals could move freely; people from oppressed castes like his were forced to take forest paths or other difficult routes. This unfairness deeply affected him and sparked a strong desire to resist such oppression. Realising that this kind of feudal control existed not just in Kerala but throughout India, he organised a bold and symbolic protest in 1893, known as the *Villuvandi Samaram* (Bullock Cart Protest). This event marked the beginning of his active involvement in the struggle for social reform.

3.2.2.2 Education of Dalits

Realising that education was key to freedom, Ayyankali focused on starting schools. At that time, Dalits were not only barred from schools but were also kept in ignorance by religious texts like the *Manusmriti*, which claimed they were meant to serve forever. They were even banned from hearing sacred songs. To challenge this, Ayyankali started schools for Dalits. The first, opened in 1904 at Venganoor, was burned down on its first day by upper-caste people. This attack led to stronger resistance. Many Dalits began converting to Christianity, not because of belief, but to escape the humiliations of the Hindu caste system. They were also denied entry into temples, which showed how caste Hindus rejected any shared religious identity.

A powerful moment in this struggle happened in 1910 when a Dalit girl named Panchami tried to join a public school in Orruttambalam. The school was set on fire by caste Hindus, leading to protests throughout southern Kerala. These events led to Ayyankali being nominated to the Sreemoolam Assembly in 1911. It was the

first time a Pulaya had a seat in a princely state's legislative council. Chentharassery noted that one observer saw this as a turning point in Kerala's history, marking the decline of long-standing caste-based discrimination.

Even then, people continued to oppose the inclusion of Dalits. Many public figures openly spoke against allowing upper and lower-caste children to study together. They argued that Dalits, who had been kept away from education for centuries, were not fit to study with upper-caste children, who were seen as intellectually superior. Ayyankali strongly opposed this idea. He declared that if Dalit children were not allowed into schools, then Dalit workers would stop working in the fields. He warned, "If our children are not admitted to schools, we will let weeds grow in all the paddy fields." This was a bold and historic decision, the first protest of its kind in Kerala. It demanded school admission for Dalit children, better wages and shorter working hours for labourers. Many oppressed people supported the protest and decided to stop working on upper-caste landlords' lands.

The strike started in June 1913 and quickly spread to major farming areas like Kandala, Pallichal, Mudavapara, Vizhinjam and Kaniapuram. For more than a year, Dalit workers left paddy fields uncultivated. As Chentharassery points out, this protest occurred even before the Russian Revolution in 1917 and Kerala's trade union movement, which began after 1920. Despite police violence, threats and attacks on women, the workers remained united. As the strike continued, it created significant economic and social problems. The landlords could not break the workers' unity and were forced to negotiate. The government intervened and by May 1914, a compromise was reached. Most of the workers' demands were accepted, including better conditions and some recognition of their rights.

This strike, led by Ayyankali, became a milestone in Kerala's social history. It demonstrated the strength of united action by the oppressed and made Ayyankali a respected leader among Dalits. His group, the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham, helped unite and empower the untouchables, giving them a voice in Kerala's social and political life. During this time, many other protests also took place in southern Kerala, led by figures like Vellikkara Chothy and Daivathan. These protests began to influence literature as well. Kumaran Asan, a well-known poet and Ayyankali's contemporary, wrote about caste cruelty and Dalit resistance. In poems like *Duravastha* and *Chandala Bhikshuki*, he expressed strong anger and sadness. Asan questioned whether caste was something found in blood, bones, or the womb. He warned the upper-caste system that if it refused to change, the growing awareness among the oppressed would dismantle it. His poems served as a wake-up call to a society trapped in caste.

3.2.2.3 Ayyankali in Assembly and Labour Strike

In 1907, the Travancore government began appointing representatives from lower castes to the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly, marking a significant step toward including marginalised communities in governance. That year, N. Kumaran Asan represented the SNDP Yogam and under Dewan P. Rajagopalachari, more underrepresented castes gained a voice. By 1908, the Pariah community was permitted to send a representative and in 1910, P.K. Govinda Pillai, a Nair, was nominated to advocate for the Pulayas, passionately defending their rights.

In 1912, despite being illiterate, Ayyankali was appointed to the Assembly, a historic milestone for Dalit empowerment in Kerala. He served as a nominated member for 28 years, tirelessly championing the Pulaya



community's welfare. Recognising the financial burden on Pulaya children, who had to pay school fees like upper-caste children, he demanded full fee concessions in 1919. His efforts succeeded, greatly benefiting Pulaya students. He renewed his plea in 1922 and also proposed free meals for Pulaya students, understanding that poverty and hunger hindered education.

Ayyankali also addressed landlessness, pointing out that most Pulayas were tenant labourers at the mercy of landlords who often evicted them. He urged the government to allocate available land, resulting in 500 acres being granted in Vilappil Pakuthy, Neyyattinkara. He continued to submit lists of potential sites for distribution, pushing the government to expedite land registration for his community.

Beyond land and education, he demanded *puramboke* land in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam for building satrams (lodging houses) for the Pulayas, a separate burial ground and the appointment of an official to safeguard the rights of oppressed classes. He also pushed for better job opportunities for the Pulayas in government services. Due to Ayyankali's persistent efforts and leadership, branches of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham spread across Travancore, strengthening the fight for Dalit rights and social upliftment.

3.2.2.4 Kallumala Agitation

Apart from his political work, Ayyankali also fought against cultural discrimination. He encouraged Dalits to dress like upper castes, celebrate their own language, music and dance and reject symbols of oppression like the kallumala, stone bead necklaces worn by Dalit women. In 1915, during the Kallumala Agitation, Dalit women broke these necklaces in public to show they had control over their own identity and bodies. Scholar Mani sees this as an important feminist event in Kerala, demonstrating how Ayyankali's movement

also supported women's rights. According to T.H.P. Chentharassery, the protest occurred in Perinad village in Kollam district, where Pulaya women threw off their kallumala to challenge caste rules. This angered the upper-caste landlords, who responded harshly. The protest became a turning point in Kerala's social reform history. When violence ensued, Ayyankali organised a public meeting where Dalit men and women declared they would no longer follow caste-based customs that marked them as lower. Though the protest led to conflict, it also weakened the hold of caste oppression in Travancore. Ayyankali provided the movement with leadership and a clear purpose. The agitation soon spread to other locations and garnered attention across India. Chentharassery notes that this was one of the first times Dalit women led a public protest in Kerala, demanding respect and equality. The Kallumala Agitation came to symbolise the broader fight for dignity, identity and freedom that Ayyankali championed. It was about much more than jewellery; it was about the right to be seen and heard in society.

The Kallumala Agitation left a lasting impact on Kerala's social structure. It inspired pride and a spirit of resistance among the oppressed, especially women, who had long been excluded from public protests. With Ayyankali's leadership, the agitation demonstrated how organised struggle and self-respect could lead to real social change. This movement became a key moment in Kerala's broader history of social reform.

In his later years, Ayyankali worked to consolidate the achievements of his movement. Even when the government reneged on its promises, such as cancelling school orders or ignoring caste violence, he remained committed. He died in 1941, but the movement he built continued to inspire change. His work helped create the foundation for a democratic Kerala, where education, equality and dignity became fundamental rights. Chentharassery points

out that Ayyankali's efforts were not just for Pulayas or Dalits, but for the betterment of all humanity. In a society where Dalits were once seen as polluting, he ensured they found a place in schools, courts, legislatures and in the moral heart of the nation.

Ayyankali believed in reason and ethics, rejecting blind faith and meaningless rituals. His fight for change was based on secular values and legal rights, not religious rules. According to Chentharassery and N.K. Jose, he represented the strong early force behind Kerala's anti-caste movement. Scholars K. S. Madhavan and Rajesh Komath note that Ayyankali's vision was broader than protest; he sought to reshape society itself. He believed true freedom meant providing people with dignity, education and equal access to jobs and resources. His vision remains relevant today and continues to guide struggles for Dalit rights in Kerala. Historian Saradmoni, a leader in Dalit and gender studies, observed that Ayyankali created a new sense of political awareness among Dalits. For them, education and literacy became more than just personal goals—they became ways to claim equal rights and respect. This awareness later helped ignite larger movements for land ownership and government jobs.

3.2.2.5 Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS)

To empower Dalits and advance the social reform movement, Ayyankali co-founded the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) in 1907, along with reformers like Thomas and Hari Vadhyar. This organisation united Dalits across caste and religious lines under the ideals of education, dignity and social justice. It pressured the Travancore government to allow Dalits into public schools, but due to upper-caste resistance, this remained mostly symbolic. In response, Ayyankali and his followers organised mass protests and strikes, asserting their role as the true backbone of

the economy. The SJPS acted as a political and cultural force, conducting meetings, promoting art and legal support and offering a platform for Dalit self-expression. It also established a parallel judicial system called the "Social Court," led by Ayyankali, to ensure justice for Dalits who were routinely denied fair treatment in colonial courts. By 1913, the SJPS led Kerala's first agricultural labour strike and in 1911, Ayyankali was appointed to the Sreemoolam Praja Sabha, where he voiced demands for land, education and temple access.

Structured like a political party, the SJPS quickly expanded across Kerala, spreading awareness and organising resistance through local units. It fostered Dalit identity and self-respect, especially among women, by rejecting caste-imposed markers like the *kallumala* (stone necklace). The organisation also influenced Kerala's cultural sphere, inspiring writers like Kumaran Asan. Despite severe backlash, including violence, social boycott and arson, the SJPS remained committed to justice, sustained by Ayyankali's leadership and vision. As T.H.P. Chentharassery notes, the Sangham became a symbol of Dalit self-governance and Kerala's early democratic awakening. It was more than a reform group; it was the institutional heart of Ayyankali's dream of equality, educating the oppressed, defending their rights and building the foundation for a just and inclusive society.

Ayyankali was Kerala's first social reformer to demand agricultural land for the untouchables. Remarkably, he also led Kerala's first labour strike, which took place four years before Russia's historic October Revolution. As one of the most progressive and influential leaders of his time, Ayyankali urged the people of Kerala to break free from the grip of caste-based oppression. He used his position in the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly to intensify his fight for social equality and justice, working



alongside leaders from other communities to push for reforms. His efforts significantly boosted the self-confidence and dignity of Kerala's marginalised, especially the Pulaya community.

3.2.3 Pandit Karuppan (1885-1938) and the Emancipation of the Untouchables

Kandathiparambil Papu Karuppan, known as Sankaran in childhood, was born on 24 May 1885 in Cheranelloor near Ernakulam to a lower-middle-class family from the Dheevera fishing community. A Tamil sage, impressed by the boy's potential, named him Karuppan, meaning "wise" in Tamil. He first learned Malayalam and then studied Sanskrit poetry under Mangalappillil Krishnan Asan and later Annamanada Rama Pothuval. He continued his higher education at the Kotunkolur Gurukulam under renowned scholars.

By the time he joined Kotunkolur, Karuppan was already writing poetry. At age twelve, he amazed his teachers with a Sanskrit poem called *Lankamardanam*. In 1904, at nineteen, he wrote *Jathikummi* in Malayalam, criticising caste discrimination and untouchability. Long before labour and socialist movements began in Kerala, K.P. Karuppan spoke out for the rights of the oppressed, including freedom, equality and land ownership. In his poem *Jatikkummi*, he strongly criticised caste discrimination, untouchability and beliefs from the *Manusmriti*, calling them ignorant and unfair. Inspired by Adi Shankaracharya's *Manisha Panchakam*, he expressed the idea of equality in simple and emotional language that common people could understand.

Karuppan's poems boldly questioned caste differences and became an early and powerful voice in Kerala's fight against caste, even before Kumaran Asan's *Duravastha*.

Although critics dismissed such works as not political enough, *Jatikkummi* was an important step in using literature for social change. Later, caste-oppressed voices, like the folk songs sung by Kalabhavan Mani, became popular. *Jatikkummi* also inspired a group of Pulaya youth to visit Karuppan and express their pain. Touched by their words, Karuppan advised them to stay united and offered to guide them, giving them strength and hope.

When the king of Cochin visited the Gurukulam, he learned about Karuppan's talent and brought him to the royal palace, arranging for his further Sanskrit studies under Rama Pisharody, the royal family's chief teacher. After his studies, Karuppan became a Sanskrit scholar and was appointed a teacher at the Caste Girls' High School in Ernakulam in 1912. He went on to publish many poems and plays. He also wrote *Aacharabhushanam* to raise awareness against superstitions among oppressed communities. In 1913, the king of Cochin honoured him with the title *Kavithilakam*, meaning "star poet."

After completing his studies at Kodungallur Kovilakam, he began his career as a Sanskrit teacher at St. Theresa's Convent School in Ernakulam. He then worked briefly as a clerk in the fisheries department but soon left that job to teach at the Savarna Balika Patasala. At that time, it was remarkable for an Avarna teacher to be instructing Savarna students. According to P. Sankaran Nambiar, his humility, simplicity, good conduct and personal cleanliness made him acceptable for this unusual post.

Later, he was transferred to the Government Girls' School in Thrissur, where he lived with his wife and disciple, Thapaswini. Beyond teaching, he held various important roles, serving as Director of the Board of the Central Co-operative Bank, Chairman of the Oriental Studies and as an examiner for Madras

University. He was also appointed Secretary to both the Elementary Education Committee and the Bhasha Parishkarana Committee. In 1931, he became the first Superintendent of Vernacular Education in Cochin State and in 1932, he joined Maharaja's College as a Lecturer, a position he held until his death. Professor Kerala Varma Thampuran praised his commitment and zeal for teaching.

Deeply committed to social reform, he also worked tirelessly for the progress of his own Araya community. He founded the Kalyanadayini Sabha in Anapuzha, Kodungallur, to unite the Arayas and later in 1911, he established the Vaala Samudaya Parishkarini Sabha in Thevara, which was later renamed Sudharma Suryodaya Sabha. These organisations focused on eliminating harmful customs, promoting social unity and securing community rights. Karuppan believed in empowering his people by encouraging self-worth and pride and he worked hard to remove their sense of inferiority.

Through his writings, Karuppan consistently voiced the struggles of the oppressed. He conceived the idea of the 'Kayal Sammelanam', a meeting on the Cochin backwaters to launch the Cochin Pulaya Sabha, since Pulayas were barred from holding gatherings in cities and public spaces. With his knowledge, vision and leadership, Karuppan played a crucial role in transforming the social and cultural conditions of the Pulaya community.

In addition to these efforts, Karuppan also took an interest in the struggles of the marginalised in Travancore. He submitted a poetic petition to the Maharaja listing the rights and benefits they deserved. His concern extended especially to the Pulaya community in Cochin, with whom he worked closely, particularly in collaboration with the leader Krishnadiyan. A major event in this regard was the Pulaya Maha Sabha convention held

in May 1913, at St. Albert's High School, Ernakulam, where Karuppan presented a powerful poetic petition highlighting their hardships. This petition was later handed to the Maharaja by T.K. Krishna Menon.

Karuppan continued his advocacy at a public meeting during the agricultural exhibition in Ernakulam in October 1913. He criticised the exclusion of Pulayars from the exhibition, even though many of the items on display were their creations. Diwan Joseph Borre responded positively by granting them access. However, the organisers opposed their presence, claiming the exhibits were polluted by their touch. Karuppan defended the Pulayars' rights with reasoned arguments and ensured their rightful entry. His actions helped secure their freedom to enter public spaces like Ernakulam town and its markets, marking a significant step in their social empowerment.

In 1925, Pandit Karuppan was appointed to the Cochin Legislative Council to represent communities that had long been denied political rights, acknowledging his relentless advocacy through his writings and activism. In the Council, he championed the rights of the Pulayas and other marginalised groups, highlighting their exclusion from public spaces and pressing for improvements in their education, health and living standards. His persistent work led to the creation of the Department for the Protection of the Depressed Classes, with Rao Sahib C. Mathai, then Director of Public Instruction, serving as ex-officio protector and Karuppan as the full-time assistant protector. He convinced the government to introduce scholarships, fee waivers and other incentives to support the education of children from these communities. He was also pivotal in establishing fisheries schools under the newly organised fisheries department.

After completing his three-year term, Karuppan was nominated for another term



but chose to step aside, requesting that the position be given to another leader from the depressed classes. The government then appointed P.C. Chanchan, a Pulaya leader and Karuppan resigned to make room for him. He introduced many welfare schemes like setting up colonies, separate schools, scholarships and special concessions. This department was later renamed the Harijan Welfare Department and still exists under the Kerala government. He also started fisheries schools in Cochin and set up fish-curing yards to support the fishing community. During his term, he held key roles such as Secretary of the Elementary Education Committee and the Bhashaparishkarana Committee and Superintendent of Vernacular Education in Cochin. In 1932, he became a Sanskrit lecturer at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam. He chose to retire in 1934 to focus more on social reform work.

Pandit Karuppan's greatest legacy was his tireless work for the upliftment of the marginalised and downtrodden. His literary works were dedicated to improving the

lives of the poor, driven by his vision of an egalitarian society. More than just a writer, he was an active social reformer who supported the progressive actions of the ruling Rajas, believing their cooperation could help advance the welfare of lower castes. With their support, he established colonies across Cochin State to house the landless poor, encouraging them to adopt clean habits, maintain their surroundings and develop a sense of civic pride. He also drafted a 'Document of Rights' for the Pulaya community, which he presented to the visiting Governor.

When Karuppan passed away on 24 March 1938, at the age of 53, his writings inspired not only his own community but all oppressed and untouchable groups. He used his energy, eloquence and poetic gifts to awaken the upper classes to the injustices of casteism. In the princely state of Cochin, where social oppression was entrenched, Pandit Karuppan boldly challenged orthodox beliefs, exposing caste-based discrimination as both a social evil and political injustice.

Recap

- ◆ Narayana Guru spread *Advaita* ideals for social upliftment.
- ◆ He challenged caste by consecrating Shiva at Aruvippuram.
- ◆ Guru built temples, mirrors and lamps symbolising equality and truth.
- ◆ The SNDP Yogam was founded for Ezhava upliftment and modern education.
- ◆ Guru stressed unity, clean living, co-operatives and modern industry.
- ◆ Ayyankali led protests, demanding roads, schools and dignity for the underprivileged.
- ◆ The Villuvandi Yatra boldly claimed roads against caste restrictions.

- ◆ He started schools and led strikes for education access.
- ◆ A historic labour strike forced landlords to accept Dalit demands.
- ◆ The Kallumala Agitation broke caste symbols and empowered Dalit women.
- ◆ Ayyankali served for decades in the Assembly for Dalit rights.
- ◆ The Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham united Dalits for education and rights.
- ◆ Pandit Karuppan's poems attacked untouchability and caste oppression.
- ◆ Karuppan formed Araya Sabhas and uplifted fishing communities.

Objective Questions

1. Who founded the SNDP Yogam?
2. In which year did Narayana Guru consecrate the Siva idol at Aruvippuram?
3. Where did Narayana Guru find the Advaita Ashramam?
4. Which poem did Narayana Guru write in 1897?
5. Who led the Villuvandi Yatra?
6. Which organisation did Ayyankali establish in 1907?
7. Who wrote *Jathikummi*?
8. Which agitation involved Dalit women breaking their kallumala beads?
9. Which poet wrote *Duravastha* and *Chandala Bhikshuki*?
10. What title was given to Pandit Karuppan by the Cochin king?
11. Who organised the Kayal Sammelanam to launch the Cochin Pulaya Sabha?
12. Which Sabha did Karuppan form for the upliftment of the Araya community?

Answers

1. Sree Narayana Guru
2. 1888
3. Aluva
4. *Atmopadesa Satakam*
5. Ayyankali
6. Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS)
7. Pandit Karuppan
8. Kallumala Agitation
9. Kumaran Asan
10. Kavithilakam
11. Pandit Karuppan
12. Vaala Samudaya Parishkarini Sabha

Assignments

1. Describe the role of Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala's caste reform movements. How did his actions and teachings challenge the caste system and promote social equality?
2. Explain the historical significance of the Aruvippuram consecration by Narayana Guru. Why is this event seen as a turning point in Kerala's social reform history?
3. Analyse Ayyankali's contributions to Dalit empowerment in Kerala. Discuss his strategies for fighting caste discrimination and securing educational rights for Dalits.
4. Discuss the impact of the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) and its importance in Ayyankali's movement for social justice.

5. Evaluate the contributions of Pandit Karuppan to the emancipation of the untouchables. How did his literary and political efforts advance the rights of marginalised communities?

Reference

1. Appan, K.P. *Charithrathe Agadhamakkiya Guru*. DC Books, Kottayam, 2000.
2. Balakrishnan, P.K. *Jativyavasthithiyum Keralacharithravum*. DC Books, Kottayam, 2008.
3. Bhaskaran, T. *Sri Narayanaguruvum Manavikatayum*. Sivagiri Sree Narayana Press, Varkala, 2010.
4. Cherian, P.J., editor. *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*. Kerala Gazetteers Department, 1999.
5. Chentharasseri, T.H.P. *Ayyankali*. Prabhat Book House, 2009.
6. Chentharasseri, T.H.P. *Ayyankali, the First Dalit Leader*. Mythri Books, 2005.
7. Das, K.K.S. *Ayyankali Kerala Charithrathil*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2014.
8. Divya, S. "Historiographical Writings on Mahatma Ayyankali — A Critical Review." *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities (IJIRAH)*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2019.
9. Gurukkal, Rajan and Raghava Varier. *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present*. Orient BlackSwan, 2020.
10. Jose, N.K. *Mahanaya Ayyankali: Jeevithavum Darsanavum*. Hobby Publication, 1998.
11. Kannukuzhi, Mani. *Mahatma Ayyankali*. D.C. Books, 2008.
12. Madhavan, K.S. "Formation of Dalit Identity in Kerala." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 69, 2008.

13. Madhavan, K.S. and Rajesh Komath. "Dalits and Discourses of Anti-caste Movements in Kerala." *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, vol. 4, no. 2, Oct. 2023.
14. Mohan, Sanal P. *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
15. Panikkassery, Velayudhan. *From Ayyankali to V.T.* (in Malayalam), Current Books, 2003.
16. Saradamoni, K. "Education, Employment and Land-Ownership: Role of Caste and Economic Factors." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 16, no. 36, 1981.
17. Sivadasan, S. (ed.), *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*, Modern Book Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, 2021.

Suggested Reading

1. Abhimanyu, C. *Ayyankali*. Samskarika Prasidheekarana Vakuppu, 1990.
2. Bhaskaran, T. *Brahmarshi Sree Narayana Guru*. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2009.
3. Bhaskaran, T. *Maharshi Sree Narayana Guru*. Cultural Publications Department, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003.
4. Bhaskaran, T. *Sree Narayana Darsanam*. Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode, 1984.
5. Bhaskaran, T. *Sri Narayana Guru Vaikhari*. SNDP Yogam, Kunnathunadu Union, Perumbavoor, 2015.
6. Kandasamy, Meena and M. Nisar. *Ayyankali: The Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*. Other Books, 2007.
7. Mane, Suresh. *Indian Socio-Cultural Protest Movements*. Translated by unknown, Bahujan Vartha Publications, 2008.
8. Mohan, Sanal. "Searching for Old Histories: Social Movements and the Project of Writing History in Twentieth-Century Kerala." *History in the Vernacular*, edited by Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, Permanent Black, 2008.

9. Renukumar, M. R. *Ayyankali: Jeevithavum Idapedalukalum*. DC Books, 2017.
10. Sanoo, M.K. *Narayana Guru Swami*. Vivekodayam Publication, Irinjalakkuda, 1976.
11. Swamy, V. V. and E. V. Anil, editors. *Songs of Poyikayil Appachan*. Translated by Ajaysekhar, IPRDSS, 2008.
12. Varier, Raghava and Rajan Gurukkal. *Cultural History of Kerala*. Vol. 1, Department of Cultural Publications, 1999.

Suggested Reading

1. Awaya, Toshie. "Women in the Nambudiri Caste Movement." *History and Society in South India*, edited by T. Mizushima and H. Yanagisawa, Tokyo, 1996.
2. Chen, Martha Allen, editor. *Widows in India*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998.
3. Devika, J. *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala*. Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007.
4. Ganesh, K.N. *Keralathinte Innalekal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995.
5. Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
6. Lopez, Lawrence. *A Social History of Modern Kerala*. Thiruvananthapuram, 1998.
7. Menon, A. Sreedhara. *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*. Madras, 1996.
8. Nair, A. Balakrishnan. *Paramabhattacharya Sree Vidhyadhiraja Chattampi Swamikal*. Thiruvananthapuram, 2001.
9. Pilla, P. Govinda. *Kerala Navodhanam: Oru Marxist Veekshanam*. Thiruvananthapuram, 2003.



UNIT

Christian Missionaries and Social Reform

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain how Christian missionaries contributed to social reform and education in colonial Kerala
- ◆ analyse the Channar Revolt as a protest against caste-based dress codes and its impact on women's rights and civil equality
- ◆ evaluate Poikayil Yohannan's role in founding PRDS and shaping a unique Dalit identity and literature against caste oppression
- ◆ discuss the significance of the Nasrani Jati Aikya Sangham as an early attempt at church unity and social upliftment among Syrian Christians in Kerala.

Prerequisites

The arrival of Western ideas of rationality, equality and liberal education under British rule clashed with deeply entrenched caste hierarchies and social injustices that defined Indian society. The missionaries, often supported by colonial administrators, became crucial agents of this change, introducing modern education and advocating for human dignity among marginalised communities like the Dalits and lower castes. Yet, while the colonial state and missionaries promised progress and equality, they often reinforced their own agendas, classifying communities through the census, promoting Christianity as superior and sometimes failing to uproot caste prejudices within their own institutions. This contradictory push for reform under the combined influence of missionary zeal and colonial governance highlighted both the potential and the limits of modernity in dismantling caste oppression and patriarchal restrictions, especially for marginalised groups who turned to new movements and

leaders to assert dignity, rights and social justice. In this unit, analyse the significance of struggles like the Channar Revolt and Poikayil Yohannan in reclaiming dignity and identity for the oppressed.

Keywords

Colonial Modernity, Missionary Education, Channar Revolt, Upper Cloth Rebellion, Poikayil Yohannan, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, Protestant Missions, Travancore Social Reform, Nasrani Jathiyakya Sangham

Discussion

Colonial modernity in India set in motion a wave of social movements that redefined community identities, driven by goals of equality, upward mobility and both material and spiritual emancipation. The colonial census, with its fixation on classification and numbers, played a crucial role in shaping caste identities, especially for Dalit communities, who had previously been undocumented in official records. By listing caste names, the census helped forge a sense of unified caste groups, which encouraged Dalit activism and mass mobilisation.

Yet, the democratic ideals introduced during colonial rule largely served the interests of the privileged classes, who claimed to speak for the whole nation while denying genuine equality to lower castes and women. Reformers often failed to challenge ancient scriptures that upheld caste hierarchies, while English-educated landlords and professionals formed caste associations to strengthen their own caste ties instead of dismantling them. Although earlier *Bhakti* movements gave Dalits some spiritual solace, reform efforts during British rule rarely tackled the deep roots of Hindu orthodoxy, leaving entrenched inequalities intact by the time India gained independence.

In Kerala, colonial rule, combined with missionary activity, also influenced Dalit lives. Missionaries aimed to ease the harsh social restrictions faced by Dalits and to educate them. Though missionaries did offer education and spread some awareness, they ultimately failed to deliver real equality and sometimes exploited the very people they claimed to uplift. Many Dalits who converted, hoping for dignity and justice, found themselves marginalised within church structures as well.

Since the 19th century, bold thinkers like Jotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar laid a strong intellectual and ideological foundation for challenging the Brahminical caste order. Ambedkar, in particular, is credited as the pioneer of Dalit discourse, providing a compelling framework to analyse caste oppression and imagine a more just society. Yet dominant powers feudal elites, the bourgeoisie and Brahminical authority joined forces to contain and weaken Dalit resistance, using so-called development policies that, in reality, deepened the hardships of Dalit communities by denying them basic needs like land, water and shelter. Amid this stifling reality, radical Dalit voices turned to new forms of resistance, aligning with broader



revolutionary movements to reclaim identity and dignity. In this context, the writings and struggles of leaders like Poikayil Yohannan in early 20th-century colonial Kerala remain vital examples of Dalit assertion and the effort to reclaim their own history.

This social revolution empowered the oppressed classes to seek justice and equality. Movements demanding women's right to cover the upper part of their bodies marked the rise of grassroots resistance. These changes often met with resistance from privileged castes, leading to non-violent but emotionally charged conflicts. These were not just religious clashes but ideological battles over social structures and lifestyles. As Samuel Mateer notes, caste Hindus were alarmed by the progress of Christian converts, who adopted Western styles and challenged caste supremacy. Over time, this ideological conflict settled into a fragile compromise, but its legacy marked a turning point in Travancore's social transformation.

3.3.1 Channar Revolt

Women faced two kinds of oppression: one because of their caste and the other because they were women. Lower caste people were only allowed to wear a single piece of cloth called a *mundu*, which had to be tied around the waist. C. Kesavan, a social reformer from Kerala, wrote in his autobiography *Jeevitha Samaram* that if someone wore the *mundu* below the knees, it was considered a punishable offence and they were forced to wear it above the knees. Until the 19th century, women in southern Kerala were not allowed to cover their upper bodies in front of Brahmins. According to J. Devika, Nair girls were taught to keep their chests bare as a sign of respect to Brahmin men, who were seen as gods. A non-Brahmin woman was not allowed to cover her chest in front of a Brahmin man.

The way Hindu women dressed in Travancore was largely shaped by the caste system. Women from upper castes had certain privileges, while women from lower castes faced strict rules. According to V. Nagam Aiya, Brahmin women, especially the Nambudiris, were allowed to cover their breasts and followed strict rules of *purdah*. They did not appear in public without covering themselves with a *marakkuda*, a kind of umbrella made from cadjan leaves. Nair women, though they had a higher status because of their connection with Brahmins, still had to uncover their upper bodies when in front of royal figures or men of high rank.

Women from lower castes like Ezhavas, Nadars and other lower castes were not allowed to cover their breasts at all. B. Sobhanan explained that these women were forced to expose themselves while working in fields, at home, or carrying goods. Besides this, they had to pay taxes like *mulaivila/mulakaram* (breast tax) and *menipon* (jewellery tax), highlighting how inhumanely they were treated. They were seen as property and had no civil rights. Because of these harsh conditions, many of them converted to Christianity in the 19th century, seeking dignity and freedom.

When Christian missionaries came to Travancore, they changed the region in many ways. They brought ideas of rational thinking, social justice and human dignity. These values gave the lower castes hope for a better life. This led the oppressed people to become more aware of their civil rights and they started turning to conversion as a form of protest.

Nadars and Ezhavas began organising protests against caste discrimination. The London Missionary Society (LMS) focused on helping the Nadars in Travancore, which brought about important social changes.

R.N. Yesudas noted that the Travancore government allowed Christian missions to work freely, leading to many Channars converting to Christianity. But as Christian converts began to grow in confidence through education, religious support and economic progress, upper-caste Hindus felt uncomfortable. The Channars began to demand equal treatment, which the upper castes resisted, not wanting to see their former inferiors rise in status.

To assist the new converts, Col. John Munro, the Resident in Travancore, issued an order in 1812. It allowed Christian women to cover their breasts, just like Christian women in other countries. He also instructed local officials not to stop them from doing this and warned that those who did would be punished. However, the caste Hindus objected to this and claimed that it was ruining caste boundaries. Due to this, Munro modified his order, allowing only Christian women to wear *kupayam*, a type of jacket similar to what Mappila women wore.

Later, Dewan Shangara Narayanan, who succeeded Munro as Dewan, issued a Proclamation in 1815. According to C.M. Agur, this granted Christian Nadars and Ezhavas the right to own property and permitted their women to cover their upper bodies according to their religious texts, but not in the style of upper-caste Hindus. Even though these orders were in place, local officials did not enforce them properly and continued the old traditions. Mrs. Mault and Mrs. Mead, two missionary women, disapproved of seeing Christian women with uncovered breasts. They introduced a loose jacket with short sleeves for these women. This satisfied the European sense of modesty but did not meet the expectations of the Nadar Christian women, especially those from Tirunelvely, where they had more freedom.

R.N. Yesudas noted that some Nadar women, without waiting for permission from the missionaries, began wearing extra clothes or scarves over their shoulders, similar to Nair women. This angered the caste Hindus, who viewed it as an attack on their exclusive rights. The clash over dress, driven by religious and social assertion, grew into what became known as the Channar Revolt or Upper Cloth Rebellion.

The Channar Revolt, also called the *Melmundu Kalapam*, *Melsila Kalapam*, or Upper Cloth Rebellion, was a strong social movement that began because lower caste women were not allowed to cover their breasts. Christian missionaries and some modern-minded and educated Hindus supported the cause of these women. However, the Travancore Royal House did not accept their demand to wear upper cloth. Opposition from upper castes and the state led to violent incidents, where young men tore off the blouses of Channar women in public places like markets. This kind of violence resulted in local revolts by the oppressed people.

The Channars led this rebellion because they wanted the same clothing rights as upper caste Hindu women. Many Channars had been working in Tinnevely, where women were permitted to dress decently above the waist. When they returned to Travancore, they were told to uncover their breasts again, but they refused. The caste Hindus saw this as a threat to their traditions and reacted with anger and hostility. The Travancore government avoided interference. As a result, both Christian and Hindu Channars, along with other oppressed castes, began to openly resist upper caste dominance.

The Channar Revolt was a powerful resistance against caste-based oppression, particularly the discriminatory dress codes imposed on lower caste women and was led

by reformers like Vaikunda Swamikal and Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker. Vaikunda Swamikal (1809–1851) challenged caste discrimination, encouraged avarnas to reject unpaid labour, adopt symbols of dignity like turbans and shoulder cloths and urged them to remain Hindu and fight for their rights. Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker (1825–1874) directly confronted Brahmin dominance by addressing the dress restrictions on Ezhava women, boldly distributing upper cloths in public and defending women's dignity even against social backlash. Their combined efforts transformed the revolt into not just an issue of attire, but a broader fight for equality, dignity and justice for the oppressed castes.

3.3.1.1 The First Phase

The first phase of the Channar Revolt began in May 1822 in Kalkulam district and Iraniyal taluk when Christian Channar women publicly wore upper cloths, angering upper-caste Hindus who harassed them in markets and streets, forcibly removing their garments and causing communal clashes. A complaint also accused Christian Nadars of evading toddy taxes and breaking caste rules. Facing violence and a lack of local court support, the affected Nadar Christians turned to missionary Charles Mead, who filed a case in Padmanabhapuram court. In 1823, the court ruled in favour of the Christian women, legally allowing them to wear upper garments.

Encouraged by this verdict, the women continued to wear upper cloths, but this further enraged the upper castes, who retaliated with new complaints about unpaid taxes. Charles Mead reported ongoing attacks to the British Resident, Colonel Newell, who then ordered an official inquiry. Mead, mindful of caste tensions, advised the women to wear simple jackets instead of decorative garments to avoid provoking the upper castes.

However, the Nadar converts, now more educated and economically stronger, rejected caste oppression and persisted in wearing upper cloths, escalating upper-caste hostility, especially as the Christians continued to inform missionaries of ongoing attacks.

The Travancore government noticed that Nadars in Nanchinad were now refusing to perform customary caste duties like *Uzhiyam* (forced labour). The authorities saw this as a sign of rebellion, which led caste Hindus to become openly aggressive toward missionaries and to try to stop both Christianity and the wearing of upper cloths by Christian women. The rising tensions and inability to resolve the dispute led to the next outbreak of the revolt in 1828, marking the second stage of the Channar Rebellion.

3.3.1.2 The Second Stage

The second phase of the Channar Revolt began in mid-1828 and lasted until 1830, gaining strength in places like Attoor, Vilavancode, Nanchil Nadu and other regions in Neyyoor. Caste Hindus opposed the movement violently, threatening, attacking, publicly humiliating individuals and even burning churches. In Attoor, where the town was managed by Neyyoor Mission, Christian women started wearing upper cloths (*thol seelai*) after the 1823 court ruling, angering upper castes. Assaults on Nadar women in markets became common, lasting four weeks until Captain Daly deployed troops to restore order.

In Vilavancode, where Nairs dominated, there was fierce resistance to Christian reforms. Nadar women were beaten and stripped for covering their upper bodies. In Nanchil Nadu, covering the upper body led to physical attacks and harassment of Nadar women for months. Missionaries Mead and Mault reported these abuses to Colonel Morrison, leading Dewan Venkita Rao to investigate. He opened a temporary court at

Padmanabhapuram and advised Christian women to wear cloth across the chest but not on the shoulders, asking all communities to adhere to traditional practices.

A Royal Proclamation on 3 February 1829 banned Channar women from dressing like Nair women, restricting them to jackets (*Kuppayam*) as per tradition. The government blamed missionaries for encouraging the practice and wanted to stop conversions. Despite this, many Christian women and Hindu Nadars continued wearing upper garments, influenced by Tinnevely customs and a growing sense of dignity. Missionaries denied inciting rebellion, arguing that Nadars were already evolving socially and demanding dignity. R.N. Yesudas noted that Nadars had worn upper cloths even before converting, especially those travelling to Tinnevely. Missionaries demanded full freedom for converts; some, like John Cox, petitioned the Madras Government about slavery and mistreatment, even suggesting Travancore should be annexed to stop persecution.

The abolition of slavery in 1855 further angered upper-caste landlords, who felt their status threatened by lower-caste women dressing like upper castes. This visible defiance deepened tensions and intensified conflicts between caste Hindus and the Nadars, who refused to return to old customs.

3.3.1.3 The Third Stage

By October 1858, the anger of the caste Hindus towards the Christian Nadars had grown very strong. There were many fights and disturbances in markets, fairs and on the streets. Christian women who wore upper clothes were attacked by Nairs, who pulled off their jackets in public. Even though the 1829 Proclamation had allowed them to wear these clothes, the upper castes still did not accept this for lower-caste women.

In October 1858, caste-based violence erupted again in Travancore when Nadar

Christian women were attacked in Arumanur and Poovar for wearing upper garments. Officials who assaulted women received minimal punishment, encouraging repeated offences and spreading fear among Nadars and Christians. By December, violence worsened in Neyyoor, with mass assaults by Nairs and Vellalas. In Kottar, over 200 upper-caste men raided poor Nadar homes, tearing off women's clothing and beating them. The Nadars, led by Chinna Nadar, retaliated by looting upper-caste shops and damaging property.

The broader context of the 1857–58 Indian Mutiny emboldened caste Hindus to attack Nadars, especially after Queen Victoria's Proclamation in November 1858 urged missionaries not to interfere with Indian customs. Many missionaries withdrew, causing confusion; Nadars saw the Queen's words as a promise of freedom, while caste Hindus interpreted them as a licence to restore old caste dominance. Dewan T. Madhava Rao responded with a proclamation on 27 December 1858 reinforcing the old rule that Channar women could not cover their upper bodies like Nair women and warning Nadars against defying this. The Nadars and missionaries viewed this as biased, worsening the unrest instead of resolving it.

The revolt spread through South Travancore, with fresh riots in Neyyoor, Parassala, Trivandrum, Santapuram and Kottar, where violence against Nadar women escalated. Nadars, both Christian and Hindu, united and retaliated by attacking upper-caste women and villages. They raised funds and rallied support from Nadars in Tinnevely, who prepared to enter Travancore. Alarmed by the scale of the uprising, the British Resident intervened to prevent further violence across the border.

The conflict, lasting five months, drew the attention of the Madras Government. In July 1859, Governor Charles Trevelyan



persuaded the Travancore king to issue a new proclamation allowing Channar women, both Christian and Hindu, to wear jackets, coarse cloth (*kuttiseela*), or cover themselves in any manner they chose, though not exactly like high-caste women. This proclamation marked a victory for the Nadars, who began wearing jackets like the Nairs, inspiring other communities like the Ezhavas to adopt the practice too. New clashes followed when Ezhava women in places like Paravur, Mayyanad and Chavara were attacked for wearing upper clothes. Although Ezhavas lacked direct missionary support, they petitioned the Madras Government to pressure the Travancore king to extend the right to all backward castes.

Finally, in 1865, Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal issued a second proclamation granting Ezhavas and other backward castes the same right to cover their upper bodies using jackets, *kuttiseela*, or any cloth style they wished. An additional order instructed Nair women to remain covered when appearing before high officials or while serving in temples or the royal palace. This marked a turning point, expanding the rights first won by the Channar women to all lower castes, symbolising a significant step in the fight against caste-based dress restrictions in Travancore.

This protest became one of the first civil rights movements initiated by a marginalised group in Travancore. It was the first strong action taken against strict caste rules on clothing. This was a significant step forward for lower-caste women. It was not just about clothes, but a powerful moment that brought respect, dignity and equality for Channar women and other oppressed groups in Kerala.

3.3.2 Poikayil Yohannan and PRDS

In the early 20th century, Kerala witnessed a strong spiritual and social awakening

through the rise of the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), which became deeply connected to the history, identity and culture of the Dalits. The caste system in Kerala was extremely rigid and Dalit groups like the Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas faced harsh untouchability and even slavery. Events like the Channar Revolt (1829), the Vaikunda Swami movement, Sree Narayana Guru's reform work and Ayyankali's activism helped set the stage for the birth of PRDS. Unlike movements that tried to reform Hinduism or offered conversion to Christianity as a solution, PRDS directly addressed the identity crisis that Dalits experienced after converting. Christian institutions often failed to eliminate caste divisions and did not provide true social or spiritual equality.

Poikayil Appachan, also known as Poikayil Yohannan, was an important Dalit leader, poet and religious reformer who helped create a unique Dalit identity in Kerala. He founded the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), a religious group focused on the social, political and spiritual freedom of Dalits. Unlike other reform movements that worked within Hindu or Christian traditions, Appachan created a new faith that fully acknowledged Dalit history, struggles and hopes.

Appachan's poems, rooted in oral traditions, are among the first examples of Dalit literature in Malayalam. These poems, often included in his speeches, recall the pain of slavery, exclusion and the loss of Dalit stories in mainstream history. His poetry was not just creative expression; it served as a powerful means of resisting oppression and recounting the true history of the Dalit people, restoring their voice and dignity.

In her review of *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, Mini Sukumar, an academic and women's rights activist, points out that Poikayil Appachan's poetry blends simple language with powerful

images drawn from real-life experiences. His poems express the past suffering of Dalits while also inspiring pride and spiritual strength within the community. Sukumar believes that his early writings helped shape a unique Dalit perspective on art and culture.

Appachan's life story highlights the deep links between caste, religion and resistance. He was born into slavery as a worker in a Syrian Christian family and later became a Christian himself, taking the name Yohannan. However, when he realised that caste discrimination still existed within the church, he broke away and started the PRDS. This separation was not merely a rejection of mainstream religion—it was a bold spiritual move that envisioned God as present in the everyday lives of Dalits.

Under Appachan's leadership, the PRDS questioned both Hindu customs and Christian systems by promoting a spiritual path that respected Dalit dignity. He taught that true salvation was not just spiritual but also required freedom from social and political oppression. The word *Raksha* in the group's name stood for freedom from both physical suffering and lack of spiritual knowledge.

Scholars like Gopal Guru have stressed the importance of restoring Dalit control over how their knowledge is created and shared. Appachan's work can be seen as an early step in this direction, as he focused on the value of Dalit voices in reshaping Indian history. His criticism of how Dalits were excluded from history connects with larger discussions about caste-based exclusion in historical writing.

Appachan is clearly presented as an important figure in Kerala's Dalit literary and intellectual history. He is grouped with major leaders like Ayyankali and Pampadi John Joseph, indicating that he was both a religious reformer and a political thinker who helped shape Dalit identity. Despite

his significant role, Poikayil Appachan is often overlooked or excluded from Kerala's mainstream history. Nevertheless, his influence endures through oral stories, PRDS religious practices and growing academic interest from Dalit scholars and writers. His life challenges the conventional narratives of Kerala's renaissance and advocates for a deeper examination of reform from caste and Dalit perspectives.

Poikayil Appachan was born on 17 February 1879 into a Paraya family who were enslaved by a Syrian Christian family called Sankaramangalam in Eraviperur, Pathanamthitta. Though his parents named him Komaran, he was raised as Yohannan and received a basic education, as mentioned by Rajan Gurukkal. Even as a slave, learning to read and access the Bible helped him rise above his oppressed condition in thought. He also read missionary texts. With his intelligence and awareness, Yohannan looked beyond religion to understand the deeper realities of social life. As he grew older, he realised the common suffering of slave castes and aimed to unite them, rather than simply preach.

In 1900, he left the Sankaramangalam family to search for his origins and find similar people, hoping to organise them into a united group.

Believing that a liberal Christian group would support him, Yohannan joined the Marthoma Church. However, he soon realised that people from untouchable castes were still treated as inferior. He opposed the church's caste-based practices, particularly the separation of Pulaya and Paraya converts and their designated places of worship. Due to his strong criticism, he was expelled from the church. He then attempted to join the Brethren Mission, a more modern group, but that also did not work out. Over time, he became convinced that Christianity did

not free people from caste discrimination. He felt strongly that true Christian values were absent from the practices he observed. Later, he worked as a preacher with the Brethren Mission for four years but ultimately left. After that, he decided to lead the new Christian converts independently.

Yohannan travelled widely to organise meetings and raise awareness about social and political issues. He vehemently criticised Christian institutions that treated Dalit converts as untouchables, even though they had joined to escape feudal oppression. His criticisms angered upper-caste Christians but inspired hope and strength among the oppressed. His early efforts to unite his supporters marked the beginning of a larger movement later known as *Adilahaḷa* (uprising).

In 1908, Yohannan began delivering public speeches in Vakathanam with the help of his nephew Kochukalayil Pathros. These meetings provoked violent attacks from upper-caste Christians, who came armed and assaulted one of the gatherings. Yohannan's supporters managed to protect him during the attack. Subsequently, legal cases were filed against him and his team, causing them significant trouble. Despite facing several attacks, including a major one at Vellanadithottam on the way to Mundakkayam, he remained resolute. His well-trained personal security team effectively guarded him. He and eighteen others were charged, but all were eventually acquitted without conditions.

To support his radical ideas, Poikayil Yohannan employed the language, rhythms and everyday idioms of Dalit life in his poetry, making his poems some of the earliest written records reflecting the lived experiences of Dalits in India. Many of his songs were styled like hymns, which made them widely popular and accessible. His poetry was deeply connected to his social mission: rejecting both

the Bible and the Vedas, which he argued upheld slavery and combatting the divisions and rivalries among lower-caste groups. He powerfully reminded Dalits that they were heirs to a rich ancient culture, yet were systematically erased from conventional history. His song *Kaanunnilloraksharavum* poignantly expresses this loss, lamenting that nowhere was the story of his people recorded, leaving them invisible and forgotten.

Yohannan fiercely exposed the hypocrisy within the Christian church, condemning how casteism persisted even there, fragmenting congregations along caste lines. His verses illustrate how separate churches for different Dalit sub-castes only preserved inequality instead of abolishing it. Yohannan's poems and songs reveal how Dalits, rejected by both Hinduism and Christianity, remained socially abandoned, with no one to teach them true knowledge or dignity. He emphasised that the absence of a recorded history contributed to Dalit enslavement and dispossession. His haunting songs evoke the brutal legacy of slavery, families torn apart, people treated as livestock and entire generations growing up orphaned and rootless. In these verses, the grief of forced labour and loss of family identity becomes a powerful historical testimony.

For Yohannan, reclaiming this forgotten past was crucial to his people's liberation. Through his poems, he urged Dalits to search for their own buried histories and resist the erasure imposed by dominant castes and religions. His movement extended beyond words; his boldest act was to publicly burn a thousand Bibles at Muthalapara as a protest against caste-based exclusion within Christianity, directly challenging Savarna Christians and rejecting empty religious promises of salvation after death.

Kumara Guru was nominated twice, in 1921 and again in 1931, to the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly as a Dalit representative.

In this role, Poikayil Yohannan (known as Kumara Guru) powerfully asserted that Kerala's so-called slave castes were actually its earliest inhabitants, who had been uprooted and oppressed by dominant castes over time. He condemned the authorities for failing to return even a fraction of the land rightfully belonging to Dalits, whose relentless labour had enriched Kerala's soil. Yohannan argued that land should not be allocated to any other communities until all landless Dalits received their fair share first. He continued his struggle for land rights, financial support, education and jobs for Dalits, using his position as both a lawmaker and spiritual guide to inspire unity and shape a distinct Dalit identity. Through his sermons, writings and songs, he illuminated the forgotten history of his people and envisioned a renewed social self, a vision that scholars compare to the defiant spirit of England's medieval Lollard poets and modern Black intellectuals like Cornel West and Toni Morrison.

3.3.2.1 Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)

In 1909, Poikayil Yohannan founded a Christian group called the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), meaning the 'Church of God of Visible Salvation'. From that time, he was known as Appachan, a leader who supported equality and adhered to ideas close to Protestant humanism. According to R. Prakash in *Dalit Consciousness and its Perspective on the Basis of PRDS History in Kerala*, PRDS was one of the first Dalit liberation movements in Kerala. It criticised Hinduism for being politically oppressive and also highlighted the identity issues within Christianity. Prakash believes that PRDS should primarily be seen as a Protestant movement that emerged after many Dalits converted to Christianity.

The PRDS grew quickly, with its main office in Eraviperoor and branch centres

in Amarakkunnu (near Thiruvalla) and Kottamam (near Neyyattinkara). Historical records indicate that the movement strengthened its presence by buying land and establishing places of worship and schools in many areas, such as Eraviperoor, Amarakkunnu, Kulathur Moozhi, Perumpatty Muthalapa, Kottayam, Changanassery, Puthichakonam near Kavadayaar in Thiruvananthapuram and Kottamam near Neyyattinkara. Yohannan led a major gathering at the Maramon sandbanks near Kozhencherry, which concluded with a large white-clad procession of thousands marching to the Eraviperoor headquarters, demonstrating the movement's strong ability to organise people.

The rising popularity of the PRDS led to anger and violent reactions from upper-caste Christians. One recorded incident involved an attack by an upper-caste mob on a PRDS gathering in Vettiyaad near Thiruvalla, where a woman from the Sabha was killed. This event, known as the Vettiyaad Adilahala (Vettiyaad Uprising), revealed the deep-rooted caste tensions among Christians. Scholars believe that this kind of hostility from both upper-caste Hindus and Christians further highlighted Yohannan's role as a key leader fighting for Dalit liberation.

Poikayil Yohannan often stated that the oppressed castes, who faced discrimination and lived in poverty, were the true original people of the land. When he met Mahatma Gandhi at Kottamam near Neyyattinkara, he told him: "You are working for India's political freedom. I will work for its spiritual freedom. The British will leave India at midnight."

Yohannan formed the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) to bring together about 14 different sub-castes into one united religious and social group. His followers rejected superstitions and caste barriers, creating a strong, unified community that



encouraged inter-caste marriages and mutual support. He also worked with reformer Ayyankali to fight for Dalit rights. As a member of the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha in 1921 and 1931, he strongly demanded land for the landless, equal education for all castes and job reservations for oppressed communities.

With the permission of the Travancore government, Yohannan started the region's first English-medium school for Dalits—something never done before. He was later honoured as Kumara Guru Devan and his influence extended beyond just religious changes. According to scholars like Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan and T.H.P. Chentharassery, the PRDS became a social and religious movement under his guidance. Although it began with Protestant reform ideas, it eventually broke away from religious and caste limits, presenting a bold new path for spiritual and social change.

3.3.3 Nasrani Jathi Aikya Sangham

The Greek word *Oikoumene*, meaning *church unity*, inspired a global ecumenical movement among Protestant churches by the late 19th century, eventually forming the *World Council of Churches*. Orthodox churches partly joined, while the Catholic Church preferred “reunion” under its fold, though it later engaged in limited ecumenical efforts.

Long before this global trend, a unique church unity effort took shape in Kerala: the *Nasrani Jathiyaiikya Sangham* (Syrian National Society). Led by Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius II (Malankara Metropolitan), Catholic priest Nidhirikkal

Mani Kathanar and Akkara Kurian Writer, this *Sangham* aimed to unite the divided Syrian Christian factions (*Puthenkoottukar* and *Pazhayakoottukar*) for social, economic and educational upliftment.

This early unity movement arose as Anglican missionaries spread Protestant ideas through CMS schools, causing divisions among Syrian Christians. Facing social discrimination and lack of access to government jobs, both factions felt the need to unite. A joint welcome for the Madras Governor in 1882 symbolised this unity effort and inspired the Sangham's formation.

The *Sangham* planned village committees, schools, workshops, a bank and an English high school open to all castes, which was revolutionary for its time. The ‘Woodland Estate’ in Kottayam was bought for this purpose. However, differences arose when Dr. Charles Lavigne, the new Catholic Vicar, rejected shared control and demanded that the property be under Catholic authority. Pulikkottil Thirumeni refused and Mani Kathanar supported him. The Catholic side withdrew and the Orthodox faction independently built the MD Seminary High School and later Baselius College.

Although the *Nasrani Jathiyaiikya Sangham* collapsed, its vision for church unity, education and social empowerment lived on through projects like *Nasrani Deepika* (the community's first paper) and indirectly inspired *Malayala Manorama*. This early Kerala initiative remains an overlooked but remarkable forerunner of later ecumenical movements and a testament to Pulikkottil Thirumeni's progressive leadership, decades ahead of its time.

Recap

- ◆ Colonial modernity reshaped caste; the census forged Dalit group identities.
- ◆ Poikayil Yohannan reclaimed Dalit history through writings and resistance.
- ◆ Protestant missions modernised Travancore, supported by British officials.
- ◆ Women's right to cover triggered grassroots resistance and ideological clashes.
- ◆ Missionary education helped uplift women and sparked conflicts challenging privileged caste supremacy.
- ◆ The Channar Revolt demanded dress freedom, exposing caste oppression and inspiring grassroots resistance.
- ◆ Travancore decrees granted upper-cloth rights, but local caste bias weakened implementation.
- ◆ Vaikunda Swamikal and Panicker led the revolt, transforming the dress code struggle into a fight for equality.
- ◆ Prolonged clashes forced royal proclamations granting dress rights to oppressed castes statewide.
- ◆ Poikayil Yohannan's PRDS movement revived Dalit identity, rejecting both Hindu and Christian hierarchies.
- ◆ Yohannan's writings and protests preserved Dalit history, demanding dignity, land, education and equality.

Objective Questions

1. Who issued the 1812 order allowing Christian women to cover their breasts?
2. Which two leaders are closely associated with the Channar Revolt?
3. What is the name of the movement founded by Poikayil Yohannan?

4. Which tax did lower caste women have to pay for their breasts?
5. What was Kumara Guru Devan's real name?
6. Where did Poikayil Yohannan burn a thousand Bibles?
7. Which early unity organisation aimed to unite divided Syrian Christian factions?
8. Which English school was linked to the Nasrani Jathiyaikya Sangham?
9. Who was Poikayil Yohannan compared to in the Western context?
10. Which style did Poikayil Yohannan use in his poetry?

Answers

1. Col. John Munro
2. Vaikunda Swamikal and Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker
3. Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)
4. *Mulakaram/mulaivila*
5. Poikayil Yohannan
6. Muthalapara
7. Nasrani Jathiyaikya Sangham
8. MD Seminary High School
9. Cornel West and Toni Morrison
10. Everyday Dalit idioms and hymns

Assignments

1. Discuss how colonial modernity and the colonial census influenced the formation of Dalit community identities and activism in India.
2. Analyse the social, cultural and political significance of the Channar Revolt (Upper Cloth Rebellion) in Travancore's history.
3. Explain the contributions of Poikayil Yohannan and the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in shaping a distinct Dalit identity and resisting caste oppression in Kerala.
4. Describe the significance of the Nasrani Jathiyakya Sangham in the history of church unity and community upliftment in Kerala.
5. Explain the socio-cultural restrictions on women's dress in Travancore that led to the Channar Revolt. How did caste and gender intersect in this context?

Reference

1. Agur, C.M. *Church History of Travancore*. Madras, 1903.
2. Agur, C.M. *Church History of Travancore*. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1990.
3. Aiya, V. Nagam. *The Travancore State Manual*. Vol. I, Trivandrum, 1906.
4. Aiya, V. Nagam. *Travancore State Manual*. Vol. II, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989 (reprint).
5. Bose, Satheese Chandra and Shiju Sam Varughese. *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*. Popular Prakashan, Hyderabad, 2015.
6. Chentharassery, T.H.P. *Poyikayil Appachan*. Mythri Books, 2017.
7. Chentharassery, T.H.P. *Poikayil Sreekumaragurudevan*. Navothanam Publications, Kottayam.

8. Gurukkal, Rajan. "Historicising Culture." *Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress*, Kalady, 1998.
9. Lenin, K.M. *Poyikayil Appachan, Keezhalarude Vimochakan*. National Book Stall, 2018.
10. Mateer, Samuel. *Native Life in Travancore*. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1991.
11. Nisar, M. Abdul. "The Colonial Modernity and the Emergence of Caste Organizations in Kerala." *Indian Streams Research Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, Mar. 2013.
12. Prakash, R. "Dalit Consciousness and Its Perspective on the Basis of PRDS History in Kerala." 17 July 2003, www.dalitindia.com.
13. Sasi, Aranya K. *Historicising Transitions in Dressing Patterns of Women in Travancore – 1800–1949*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Kariavattom, Thiruvananthapuram, Mar. 2018.
14. Sibi Tharakan. *Nasrani Jathyaikya Sangham*. <https://archive.org/details/nazrani-jathaikya-sangam>.
15. Sivadasan, S., editor. *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. Modern Book Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, 2021.
16. Sobhanan, B. *Rama Varma of Travancore: His Role in the Consolidation of British Power in South India*. Sandhya Publications, Calicut University, Calicut, 1978.
17. Sivadasan, S. (ed.), *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. Modern Book Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, 2021.
18. Yesudas, R.N. *Peoples Revolt in Travancore*. Kerala Historical Society, Thiruvananthapuram, 1978.

Suggested Reading

1. Chirappad, Rajesh. *Poyikayil Appachan*. Chintha Publishers, 2018.
2. Devika, J. "The Aesthetic Woman: Re-Forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early Twentieth-Century Keralam." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2005. www.jstor.org/stable/3876627.
3. Jeffiy, Robin. *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847–1908*. Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1976.
4. Kawashima, Koji. *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858–1936*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
5. Menon, A. Sreedhara. *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*. Viswanathan Printers and Publishers, Madras, 1996.
6. Rejikumar, K.T. *Poikayil Sree Kumara Guru: Charithraruparekha*. Kottayam, 2005.
7. Santhosh, O.K. *Poyikayil Sreekumara Guru*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2011.
8. Sreekumaragurudevan. *Samuhika Mathaprashtanam*. PRDS Publications, 2003.
9. Valsa, M.A. "Dalit Women Empowerment Struggles in Pre-Independent Kerala." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 79, 2018–19. www.jstor.org/stable/26906295.



UNIT

Movements among the Muslims

Learning Outcomes

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

- explain the contributions of Makthi Thangal as an early Islamic reformer
- analyse the reformist efforts of Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi for the upliftment of the Muslim community in Kerala
- analyse major Islamic reform movements in Kerala, including the Mujahid and Islahi movements and their efforts to purify Islam, promote modern education and uplift women
- examine the role of organisations like the Muslim Aikya Sangham and Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama in preserving religious unity, promoting education and balancing tradition with modernity

Prerequisites

The history of Islam in Kerala stands apart from North India's conquest-driven narrative, emerging instead through peaceful Arab trade, intermarriage and deep cultural integration that blended Hindu and Islamic customs into a unique regional identity. The reform movements in Kerala's Muslim community arose mainly because many visionary leaders recognised that local Islamic practices had gradually absorbed un-Islamic customs, superstitions and social practices that contradicted the true spirit of the Quran and Hadith. Reformers like Makthi Thangal and Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi believed that ignorance, outdated customs, resistance to modern education, especially for women and the influence of orthodox clerics were keeping

the community backward while other sections of society progressed under colonial modernisation. They felt a strong need to purify Islam from local accretions, promote rational thinking, encourage modern and religious education and create a unified Muslim identity rooted in core Islamic teachings yet equipped to meet the challenges of the modern world. This unit discusses the peaceful arrival and unique cultural integration of Islam in Kerala and how various reform movements and leaders worked to purify Islamic practices and promote modern education. It also examines the significant role these movements played in shaping Kerala's Muslim identity through social, educational and religious revival.

Keywords

Mujahid Movement, Islahi Reform, Vakkom Moulavi, Makthi Thangal, Muslim Aikya Sangham, Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, Tawheed and Ijtihad, Swadesabhimani Newspaper.

Discussion

The history of Islam in Kerala is vastly different from that of North India. While northern Islam came via conquest, in Kerala, it arrived peacefully through Arab trade contacts. The Arabs married local women, forming settled communities. Islam thus spread through integration and mutual respect, non-violence. Sheikh Zainuddin, in *Tuhfat al-Mujahiddin*, provided a detailed picture of the growth of Islam in Kerala. He noted that Muslims in Kerala were respected by Hindu rulers and were not persecuted for their beliefs. Cultural integration was deep; mosques were built using traditional Kerala temple architecture, as noted by V. Nagam Aiya. This architecture continued for centuries, showing that early Kerala Muslims embraced local artistic traditions without conflict.

In Kerala, Muslims inherited both Hindu and Muslim customs, leading to a unique cultural synthesis. Though conflicts arose between Islamic values and local traditions, over time, a hybrid culture emerged that was

neither fully Arabian nor Hindu. Matriliney, or *Marumakkathayam*, a local Hindu custom, was also practiced by wealthy Mappila families like the Keyis and the Arakkal royal family.

At the same time, Islamic revivalist movements like the Mujahid movement sought to purify Islam of local influences. The Mujahids opposed superstitions, the dowry system and blindly following past scholars (*taqlid*), while promoting modern education, especially for women and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). They played a crucial role in setting up institutions like Farook College, promoting both religious and secular education.

Muslims in Kerala were also significant in resisting Portuguese dominance in maritime trade. According to M.T. Narayanan, the Kunjali Marakkars, Muslim admirals of Calicut, played a key role in naval battles against the Portuguese, with support from the Zamorin. Their tragic defeat in 1600 marked the end of a strong resistance.



K.K.N. Kurup reviews how the Ali Rajas of Cannanore, also called *Regents of the Sea*, held significant power and influence, supported by their Islamic and mercantile connections. His research, along with Genevieve Bouchon, reveals how the local Muslim rulers collaborated with multiple communities, including Persians, Chinese and Arabs. M.N. Karassery, in his study of Arabic-Malayalam, explains how this hybrid language, Malayalam written in Arabic script, evolved to spread religious and literary knowledge among Mappilas. The Mappila songs, including *Muhyuddin Mala*, date back to 1607 and are a key part of Kerala Muslim literature.

On the cultural side, Stephen F. Dale, historian and academic, documents *nercca*, Kerala Muslims' saint-martyr festivals, which blend Islamic elements with folk Hindu traditions. These include *jaram* (tomb) worship, celebrated like temple *utsavams*, showing the deep interweaving of local traditions and Islamic faith. Kerala Muslims are shown to be deeply rooted in local history, culture and plural traditions, while also sharing a broader Islamic faith with the global *ummah*. Their story is one of both assimilation and reform, with local practices shaping their Islam and reform movements reshaping their future.

A.P. Ibrahim Kunju traces Islam's arrival to legends about Cheraman Perumal, the last Chera king, who is believed to have met Prophet Muhammad and sent Malik ibn Dinar to Kerala. While Portuguese records support a *conversion* narrative, historical evidence is sparse and suggests Islam took root between the 8th and 12th centuries, supported by Arab trade links. Archaeological finds like the Pantalayini Kollam tombs and the Tarisappalli copper plate confirm early Arab Muslim merchant presence.

According to tradition, Sufi missionaries, including Malik ibn Dinar, played a key role

in spreading Islam by establishing early mosques across Kerala. The Makhdum family of Ponnani became major Islamic scholars, with the Qadiriyya order gaining wide popularity through devotional texts. Other orders like Ba'Alavi and Rifa'i also influenced local Islam, though stricter Sunni clerics later excommunicated some groups like the Naqshbandis. Saint-shrines such as Beema Palli and Kanjiramittam attracted multi-caste devotees, showing Islam's grassroots integration.

Support from native rulers like the Zamorin helped Muslims prosper economically and socially, with Muslim traders boosting regional trade and aiding military campaigns. The Arakkal royal family rose as a Muslim power centre by the 15th century. Islam's appeal among lower castes, who sought escape from rigid Hindu hierarchies, led to conversions that improved their social and economic standing, often encouraged by rulers to strengthen their navies and workforce.

In the nineteenth century, Islamic society, much like various non-caste communities, witnessed the rise of significant reform efforts and revitalisation movements. This period saw influential figures within the Muslim community challenging practices they viewed as distortions of true Islamic principles, practices that had gradually been introduced by religious scholars serving their own interests. These early movements were dual in nature: they sought to cleanse Islam of later additions that conflicted with its core doctrines while simultaneously promoting the upliftment of the community through modern education, with particular emphasis on educating women. By rejecting customs deemed un-Islamic, these reform efforts played an important role in shaping a stronger sense of community identity. It is important to note that these reformers, whether from the initial wave or later generations, remained committed to the foundational Islamic texts,

the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Thangal, Chalilakath Kunhamad Haji, Sheikh Muhammad Hamadani Thangal, E.K. Moulavi and Vakkom Abdul Khadar Moulavi stand out as key leaders who drove Kerala's Islamic socio-religious reform forward.

3.4.1 Makthi Thangal



Fig. 3.4.1 Makthi Thangal
Source: Samayam Malayalam

Makthi Thangal, born in 1847 in Veliyancode, was one of the earliest Islamic reformers in Kerala. His father, Sayyid Ahmad Thangal, was a religious leader and his mother, Shareefa Beevi, belonged to the noble Hamdani tribe of Yemen. His ancestors were from the Saqqaf tribe, who claimed descent from Al-'Abbas, the Prophet Muhammad's uncle. His maternal grandfather was a Mughal who served the British government as a scribe. His paternal grandfather, Muhammad Maqdoom Saqqaf Thangal, was a renowned religious scholar and Sufi devotee.

Makthi was deeply influenced by the intellectual heritage of the Hadrami Arabs, who played a significant role in spreading Islamic culture and establishing religious institutions across the Indian Ocean region. His early education was under his father and he later studied Islamic subjects at institutions in Chavakkad, Veliyancode, Marancheri and Ponnani. He was multilingual, fluent in Malayalam, English, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Tamil, Hindustani and Arabic-Malayalam. He briefly worked as an excise officer under British rule before resigning at the age of 35.

Makthi was a pioneer in using print media for Islamic reform. He recognised its potential to counter Christian missionary attacks on Islam and to strengthen Muslim identity. His first publication was *Kadora Kudoram* (1884), a tract against Christianity. He worked as sub-editor for the journal *Satyaprakasham*, edited by Kakka Sahib in 1888 and later contributed to *Paropakari* and *Salah-ul Iqvan*, edited by Saidali Kutty Master. He also planned a magazine called *Nithya Jeevan* but faced financial constraints.

Makthi was the first Muslim reformer to write in Malayalam, making his work accessible to Kerala's Muslim population. He believed Muslims needed publications in Arabic-Malayalam due to their unfamiliarity with both standard Malayalam and English. One of his key initiatives was the fortnightly *Tuhfath-ul Akhyar Va Hidayth-ul Ashrar*. He received support from reform-minded figures like Sayyid Abdul Rahman Hydrose (*Adima Musliyaar*), Arakkal Kunjahammad Haji and Aniyapurath Ammu Sahib. His publications addressed *Quran* interpretation, news, history, self-development and community queries. His main goal was to reconcile Islamic principles with modern life. He used the press not only to defend Islam against external critiques but also to inspire internal reform and modern Muslim identity.

Islamic modernists, in response to colonialism and Western modernity, believed Islam could embrace modern values like rationality, science and progress. Thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal argued that Islam must be reinterpreted in light of changing political and intellectual conditions. Robert Bellah described modernism as a deliberate engagement with modern ideas while maintaining religious tradition. Within this framework, Makthi Thangal is viewed as a modernist who tackled modernity through

education and language. Like other South Asian Muslim modernists, he stressed that true Islam and modern education were not contradictory. He emphasised both Malayalam and English as essential for societal progress and argued that learning in one's mother tongue brought Muslims closer to Islam.

Makti encouraged the translation of the *Quran* and other Islamic texts into Malayalam to improve understanding among common Muslims, many of whom couldn't read Arabic. He believed education in Malayalam would make Islamic teachings accessible, allowing Muslims to abandon un-Islamic and superstitious practices. He strongly criticised the traditional educational system, (*Dars*), where rote memorisation of legal texts (*fiqh*) was central, instead of learning the *Quran* and *Hadith*. He called the system outdated and the translations unintelligible, mocking them as laughable even to tribal communities. He supported modern secular education and called for reforms that included integration with regular schooling systems, funding support from the government and compulsory education for Mappilas.

Makti's views clashed with the orthodox ulema, whom he accused of resisting modern education and spreading anti-British sentiment. He blamed them for inciting violent outbreaks among Mappilas and suggested founding theological schools to teach true Islam. In his article "*Muslim Janavum Vidyabhyasavum*," he argued that education was necessary to liberate Muslims from political and social ignorance.

Makti also collaborated ideologically with other reformers such as Sheikh Muhammad Maheen Hamdani Tangal, Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi, Chalilakath Kunhammed Haji and C. Saidalikutty Master. All these leaders promoted modern education, social upliftment and the rejection of outdated religious practices. He quoted Prophet

Muhammad's saying that Muslims should seek knowledge even if they had to travel to China, using it to legitimise his educational reforms. He frequently wrote in journals like *Salah-ul Iqvan*, calling education a divine duty supported by the *Quran* and *Hadith*. He also delivered speeches across Kerala promoting secular and religious education.

Makti Thangal envisioned a modern Malayali Muslim identity rooted in direct access to Islamic scripture, bypassing intermediaries and syncretic traditions. His movement marked a turning point in Kerala Muslim history by challenging popular Islam and introducing a reformist, scripturalist vision of true Islam, laying the foundation for broader Muslim modernity in the region. He was a major Islamic reformer in colonial Kerala who sought to purify and modernise the practice of Islam among Mappila Muslims. Drawing from scriptural Islam, Makti rejected what he saw as un-Islamic customs and local accretions like syncretic rituals, Sufi practices, matrilineal inheritance (*Marumakkathayam*) and saint veneration. He firmly distinguished between *halal* and *haram* and between scriptural and popular Islam.

Hisham Sharabi distinguished *Islamic reformism*, which focuses on reviving core Islamic traditions, from *Islamic modernism*, which also draws on Western thought. Makti, though earlier discussed as a modernist, is presented here as a reformist (*islah*), aiming to restore a pure version of Islam. He condemned Sufism as un-Islamic and accused both Sufi saints and orthodox ulema of encouraging superstition. He promoted the oneness of God (*tawhid*) and opposed mediation through saints.

Makti also advocated for women's reform, stressing their education for religious and domestic roles. However, like other reformers such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, he promoted a *pativrata*

ideal, where women were expected to be submissive, pious wives. His booklet *Naari Naraabhichaari* advised women to focus on homemaking and child-rearing while obeying their husbands, asserting men's superiority due to their physical strength. He strongly opposed matriliney (*Marumakkathayam*), a system inherited from Hindu society, calling it un-Islamic and unnatural. Makti believed it denied men both property rights and respect within the family. His writings like *Muslimkalum Marumakkathayavum* and *Parcaleetha Porkalam* reflect his campaign to replace matrilineal inheritance with a patrilineal, scripturally approved model.

Makti's project aimed at defining a homogeneous Muslim identity (*ummah*) in Kerala. He emphasised strict adherence to the *Quran* and *Hadith*, rejected syncretism and worked to create clear boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. His reformist vision combined a return to religious purity with community consolidation. He emerged as a significant Muslim polemist in 19th-century colonial Kerala, actively responding to Christian missionary critiques of Islam. As Arunima notes, polemical exchanges between Christians and Muslims over theology were a major feature of public life in this period. Makti was the first prominent Muslim intellectual in Kerala to defend Islam while simultaneously launching counter-attacks on Christianity. His writings in Malayalam formed part of a Muslim "counter-public," aiming to resist missionary influence and prevent conversions to Christianity.

Makthi Thangal published around 30 out of 50 works through his own *Muhamadeeya Press*, despite financial hardship. His polemics focused on refuting Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus and the corruption of scripture (*tahrif*). Notable works include *Kadora Kudoram*, *Makthi Tangalakosham*, *Kadora Vajram* and *Suvishesha Nasham*. He portrayed monotheism as the Islamic truth and argued

that Christian scriptures had been distorted. His central argument was that Islam offered a rational and uncorrupted faith.

Makti adopted new methods in religious debate, using print media to reach a wide Malayali audience, including non-Muslims. Like the missionaries, he emphasised language skills, writing in Malayalam and drawing on Western theological and historical sources, including the Old and New Testaments. His fluency in English, Urdu and Persian allowed him to engage critically with both Western and Indian scholarship. His goal was to prove Islamic superiority and to discredit Christian truth claims using the same rational tools favoured in the West. He presented Islam as not only spiritually authentic but also intellectually superior to Christianity, using Western rational standards to validate Islamic beliefs. In works like *Makti Samvada Vijayam Mukthi Vilambaram*, he declared that Islam had triumphed in debate over Christianity and Western thought itself. His polemics were thus a central part of Islamic modernism, defending the faith against external critique by appealing to both tradition and reason.

Makti Thangal died on 18 September 1912. Throughout his life, he laboured to renew Islamic thought in Kerala, always championing education, vernacular writing and the idea of a unified Malayali Muslim identity within the broader Islamic world. As Kerala's pioneer of Islamic print culture and a fearless reformer, Makti Thangal remains an enduring symbol of intellectual awakening among Malabar's Mappilas.

3.4.2 Vakkom Abdul Khader Maulavi (1873-1932)

Vakkom Abdul Khadar Moulavi is widely celebrated as the pioneering force behind the modern awakening of Kerala's Muslim community. Born on 28 December 1873



in Vakkom village, Chirayinkil taluk, then part of Travancore, he was the fifth child of Aisha Beevi and Muhammed Kunju. His family, known as Poonthran, traced its roots to a wealthy lineage that had settled in Travancore from Madurai. His father brought in renowned scholars from far-off regions to tutor him in various subjects and maintained a rich library at home, which allowed the young Moulavi to engage deeply with eminent thinkers of his time. Endowed with sharp intellect and innate curiosity, he soon became fluent in Arabic and gained deep insights into the *Quran*, Islamic law, Prophetic traditions, logic and history. He also acquired proficiency in multiple languages, including Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit, Tamil, English and his native Malayalam.



Fig. 3.4.2 Vakkom Abdul Khader Maulavi
Source : Open Magazine

Witnessing the backwardness and ignorance that burdened his community distressed him deeply. Abdul Khadar observed how conservative clerics, who should have championed learning, instead discouraged education, especially for girls, contradicting Islam's emphasis on knowledge for all believers. They had infused Islam with rituals and practices alien to its core teachings, such as saint worship and tomb offerings, which further entrenched superstition. Moulavi, armed with his education and vision, resolved to confront this stagnation. He rallied young reformers and progressive scholars to push for change within Kerala's Muslim society.

In shaping his reformist mission, he drew significant inspiration from prominent revivalist thinkers like Egypt's Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin Al-Afghani. Rashid Rida's journal *Al-Manar* in particular profoundly shaped Moulavi's approach, providing intellectual ammunition for his campaign to return to Islam's textual sources. He was also influenced by the ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Shah Waliullah of Delhi, though his intellectual sympathies leaned more toward the Arab reformists than the North Indian modernists. Observing the vibrant print culture flourishing around him, Moulavi recognised the power of the press as a vehicle for reform. To counter conservative resistance, he distributed *Al-Manar* and similar writings locally, hoping to instil a spirit of critical inquiry and renewal.

As a social reformer, Moulavi was ahead of his time in harnessing journalism to awaken both Muslims and the wider society. His boldest step was founding *Swadesabhimani*, a newspaper that quickly grew into a rallying point for progressive thought and public accountability. The inaugural issue appeared on 19 January 1905 from Anjengo under the editorship of C. P. Govinda Pillai, with a clear mission to expose public grievances and advance the common good without fear or favour. Two days before its first anniversary, Ramakrishna Pillai took over as editor, transforming *Swadesabhimani* into a formidable voice of radical critique. Pillai's fearless journalism, which directly challenged corruption and social injustice, marked the birth of an uncompromising press culture in Travancore. Moulavi's unwavering support for his editor, even when Pillai was exiled, cemented his legacy as a principled champion of reform and free expression.

Working together, they used their newspaper as a platform to challenge the Dewan's administration and princely governance in Travancore. They demanded voting rights for all adults

and equal enforcement of laws. Through bold articles like *Royal Servants and the Travancore Government* and *Why Not Deport Sankaran Thampi?*, they openly criticised the monarchy's power structure. Their outspoken stance provoked the royal authorities, who, on 26 September 1910, seized the press and banished Ramakrishna Pillai from Travancore. Despite the forced closure, the press had already stirred public consciousness about democratic ideals and personal freedoms. Movements like the *Pouravakasa Samaram* (Citizens' Rights Struggle) and the later Abstention Movement were deeply influenced by this early press activism.

For Vakkom Moulavi, his writings and editorial work were primarily aimed at revitalising Islamic practice to meet the demands of modernity. He championed the reformist views of progressive Islamic thinkers and encouraged modern education among Kerala's Muslims. In his opening editorial of *Swadesabhimani*, he made it clear that his mission was to uplift not only the Muslim community but also any group seeking collective betterment. He launched multiple journals where he clarified core Islamic teachings and debunked misguided beliefs using well-respected sources.

In January 1906, he founded *The Muslim*, a Malayalam publication, urging the community to pursue self-improvement. He highlighted the significant educational backwardness of Muslims in Travancore through census figures and historical context. He stressed the urgency of both religious and secular learning, especially for women and produced numerous essays to encourage this shift. Moulavi also challenged the entrenched influence of traditional scholars (*Ulema*) who, in his view, monopolised religious authority for their own ends. To make authentic Islamic knowledge more accessible, he published explanatory works

like *Islam Matha Siddhantha Sangraham* in 1915, which summarised Islamic thought for lay readers.

Recognising that many Kerala Muslims were unfamiliar with the Malayalam script but fluent in Arabic-Malayalam, Moulavi began *Al-Islam* in 1918 in the Arabic-Malayalam script. He even imported specialised printing equipment to reach this wider audience. His efforts unsettled conservative scholars, sparking fierce opposition and even physical confrontations between reformists and traditionalists. *Al-Islam* became a crucial tool for raising awareness among women and openly promoted female education, as seen in the 1918 article *Nammude Sthreekal*.

To further address cultural uplift and bridge understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, Moulavi launched *Deepika* in 1931. This journal published Malayalam translations of the *Quran* and notable works like Lothrop Stoddard's *The New World of Islam*. He used *Deepika* to argue that Muslims should embrace modern science and technology, such as airplanes, vaccines and machinery, while staying rooted in genuine Islamic principles. He often contrasted this with communities like the Nairs, Ezhavas and Syrian Christians, who he felt prospered through progressive attitudes and enterprise. Though *Deepika* ran into financial difficulties and Moulavi's health declined, he managed to publish a dozen issues, leaving a legacy of bold reform and intellectual awakening among Kerala's Muslims.

Vakkom Moulavi dedicated his life to redefining how Muslims understood the purpose of human existence, the role of faith and the corrupting force of misguided religious thinking. Through his writings and journalism, he became a driving force behind a broad social and religious reform agenda. Despite facing constant financial struggles, he tirelessly worked to uplift Muslim education and inspire local religious scholars to embrace



progressive ideas. This was a crucial task at a time when conservative clerics discouraged ordinary Muslims from attending modern schools, restricting learning to traditional religious texts alone. One of his core concerns was how society should be organised. He believed that despite human differences, people must coexist through community life; hence, structured social organisation was vital to express and manage these relationships.

Moulavi's era coincided with that of Sree Narayana Guru, with whom he interacted frequently. Recognising his skills, various groups nominated him to the SNDP, appreciating his forward-thinking vision and leadership. In 1918, he established the 'Islamika Dharma Paripalana Yogam' at Nilakkamukku, inspired by the SNDP's model. This organisation worked to bridge divisions among Kerala's Muslims, aiming for a unified community spirit. Unlike the SNDP's caste-focused approach, Moulavi's Yogam envisioned a universal Muslim brotherhood. It spread its reformist vision by publishing booklets and hosting discussions. For example, Moulavi's pamphlet *Zau-us-Sabah* directly addressed criticisms from orthodox circles by defending pioneers of Islamic revival like Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab. This reformist wave saw similar associations emerge, such as the Pallippuram Hadiyyul Islam Sangham and the Chirayinkeezh Taluk Samajam. The Chirayinkeezh group notably surveyed Muslim households to assess their educational and financial status and hosted large annual gatherings to raise awareness. Thanks to such initiatives, more Muslim children began enrolling in secular schools.

Moulavi's influence even reached the government. His efforts led Travancore's administration to introduce Arabic in schools and appoint qualified teachers, a process for which they relied on Moulavi's expertise. He oversaw teacher selection and authored Arabic textbooks for beginners, greatly expanding

access to Arabic learning and attracting more Muslim students to state schools. Prominent figures like Sulaiman Sahib of Alleppey and P. Habib Muhammed, Moulavi's nephew, eventually earned university degrees, symbolising this educational progress. He believed Muslims needed more than religious piety; they required modern knowledge and scientific thinking to regain the strength they once held. In Moulavi's view, Muslims were drifting as an unorganised mass, lacking the moral discipline and unity that once made them strong. By reviving Islamic values alongside modern education, he aimed to rebuild a sense of purpose and collective identity.

At a time when Travancore's other communities were transforming under colonial and princely modernisation policies, Moulavi realised that Muslims could not afford to stand still. Combining his status as a respected religious scholar with his social credibility, he advocated that education and community organisation were essential for progress. His numerous journals consistently spread this vision of integrated social and religious reform. Through these wide-ranging efforts, Vakkom Moulavi laid the foundation for Kerala's Muslims to modernise, reform their customs and claim a stronger place in society without abandoning their religious roots.

3.4.3 Muslim Aikya Sangham

In the early 20th century, Kerala's Muslim community experienced strong reform and revival movements. People became more aware of the need for religious unity, social development and better education. Two important organisations that helped lead this change were the Muslim Aikya Sangham, started in 1922 and the Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, which came later as a leading group of religious scholars. Though both had different beginnings and methods,

they played a key role in shaping the modern Muslim identity in Kerala.

The Muslim Aikya Sangham, meaning “Muslim Unity Association,” was started during a time when there was growing concern about the backwardness of Kerala Muslims, especially in education, economy and political participation. According to Dr. Abdul Aziz, this organisation was influenced by reformist movements in other parts of India and the Muslim world, such as those led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in North India and Muhammad Abduh in Egypt. In Kerala, the reform spirit was best represented by Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi, who later became the president of the Sangham’s first anniversary meeting.

The main aim of the Sangham was to bring about religious unity among Kerala Muslims, who were divided by sects, customs and regional practices. It also worked to improve both religious and modern education, combat superstitions and outdated customs and raise the status of women in society. The Sangham brought together forward-thinking scholars, reformers and social activists who believed the Muslim community should actively respond to the challenges of modern life.

In 1923, the Sangham celebrated its first anniversary at Eriyadu with Vakkom Moulavi as president. By then, he was already a well-known reformist through his journal *Swadeshabhimani* and other writings. His leadership gave the Sangham more respect and recognition, especially because he supported *ijtihad* (independent thinking) and the removal of practices that he believed were against true Islamic teachings, such as shrine worship and superstitions. To share its message widely, the Sangham published two journals: *Muslim Aikyam* in Malayalam and *Al-Irshad* in Arabi-Malayalam. These journals helped spread reformist ideas, promote education and explain Islamic beliefs in a modern and clear way.

The Sangham also arranged public meetings and discussions, helped open schools and libraries and encouraged unity among different Muslim sects like Sunnis, Shias and Mujahids. However, these efforts were not always welcomed. Many traditionalists strongly opposed these reforms, fearing they would weaken their control and the community’s long-held practices. Over time, especially by the mid-1930s, the Sangham began to lose strength. New organised groups like the Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama and Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen gained more followers by offering clearer ideologies and stronger leadership.

Even though the Aikya Sangham did not last long, its ideas did not disappear. It encouraged open discussion, self-reflection and new ways of thinking within the Muslim community. As Abdul Aziz mentions, the Sangham played an important role in starting a culture of questioning, learning and reform among Kerala Muslims, which later movements continued to develop.

3.4.4 Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama

The Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, formed in 1924, is one of the most respected Islamic scholarly organisations in Kerala. At the second annual conference of the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham held in Aluva in 1924, the Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama was established as a council of scholars to support the activities of the Aikya Sangham. Abdul Jabbar, the Principal of Vellur Baqiyyathus Salihat Arabic College, presided over both the annual conference and the Ulama Conference. Scholars from all sections of the Muslim community were its members. The declared aim of the organisation was to emphasise the fundamental and practical aspects of Islam and to ensure the educational and social progress of the Muslims of Kerala.

In 1926, a group that opposed the policies and positions of the Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama came forward to establish a separate body, which became known as the Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama. It is well-known for following traditional Sunni-Shafi'i beliefs and for its strong role in shaping the religious and social life of Kerala's Muslims. The group was formed as a response to both colonial rule and the rise of Islamic reform movements. It became a major force in religious education, mosque leadership, issuing *fatwas* and protecting traditional Islamic teachings among Sunni Muslims in the state. The *Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama* includes various associations of Muslim scholars in Kerala, India. The most notable among them is *Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama* (commonly called *Samastha*), a Sunni-Shafi'i scholarly body established in 1926. Another key organisation is the *Dakshina Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama*, founded in 1955 to serve the southern parts of Kerala.

The Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama was officially started in 1926, during a time when Kerala's Muslim community faced both internal divisions and external pressures. Reformist groups like the Muslim Aikya Sangham and later the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen were introducing new, modern ways of interpreting Islam. These reformist views challenged traditional Islamic practices and the authority of well-known religious scholars (*Ulema*). In response, leading Sunni scholars came together to protect the teachings of the Shafi'i school of thought, which most Kerala Muslims followed. As Muhammed Kunhi P.P. explains, Samastha was formed to safeguard both religious traditions and to build a strong religious identity among Muslims based on long-standing beliefs.

The organisation brought together respected scholars from all over Kerala, such as E.K. Aboobacker Musliyar, Kottumala Abubacker Musliyar and Pangil Ahmed

Kutty Musliyar. These scholars guided the community in understanding Islamic law, solving religious problems and running religious institutions. Samastha focused on madrasas (Islamic schools) and Arabic colleges, which became central to religious education in Kerala. Abdul Aziz notes that the group built a solid educational system that included classical Islamic teachings along with moral values, ensuring young Muslims received proper religious training.

Samastha also created a central authority for issuing *fatwas* (religious rulings) on important social and religious matters. This helped keep community practices in line with the Shafi'i tradition. The organisation also worked closely with local mosques and their committees, spreading its influence into many parts of everyday life, including marriage, death and inheritance. It also monitored public religious speeches, ensured the Friday sermons were correct and stopped what it perceived as un-Islamic practices introduced by reformist groups.

By the 1950s, Samastha had become the main religious body for Sunni Muslims in northern Kerala. However, in 1955, a split occurred, resulting in the formation of a new group called the Dakshina Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, mostly composed of scholars from southern Kerala. Although this southern group was smaller, it shared the same goal of protecting Sunni religious traditions. The original Samastha continued to grow, holding annual meetings, exams for scholars and training programmes for teachers, thus becoming the backbone of Sunni religious life in Kerala.

Despite reformist groups like the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen often criticising Samastha for being too old-fashioned and slow to change, Samastha remained robust. It had deep roots in the community, a wide network of scholars and a consistent message. K.K. Abdul Kareem states that Samastha was

successful in creating a religious community that balanced faith and social responsibility while resisting both modern reinterpretation and the political use of religion.

3.4.5 Islahi Movement

In Kerala, the *Islahi Movement* emerged in the early 20th century through the efforts of a few visionary reformers who sought to rid the Muslim community of foreign cultural influences and help it adapt to modern times. Prominent figures like Syed Sanaullah Makti Thangal, Chalilakathu Kunhahammed Haji, Hamadani Thangal and Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi led this movement, which focused on returning to the fundamental teachings of the *Qur'an*, reforming religious practices and promoting modern education to uplift especially the Mappila Muslims.

Makti Thangal stood out for championing women's education, arguing from Islamic principles that women are vital to the strength of families and society. His essay *Nari Narabhichari* and other writings, collected in *Makti Thangalude Sampoorana Krithikal*, highlight his push for public religious discussions and his defence of Islam against missionary criticism. Chalilakathu Kunhahammed Haji, known as the "Sir Sayyid of Kerala," advocated for modernised religious education and defied conservative attitudes by sending his daughters to school. He transformed Tanmiyattul Madrasa into Dar-ul-uloom Arabic College, adding modern subjects like science and geography, which revolutionised traditional madrasa education in Kerala.

Hamadani Thangal, a Sufi reformer, worked to uplift education by establishing the Muslim Conference, inspired by the All India Muslim Educational Conference. He emphasised a balanced curriculum that blended religious and modern subjects and encouraged talented students to pursue

studies at Al-Azhar University in Egypt (Sayed Mohiyuddin Shah). Vakkom Moulavi, widely regarded as the "father of the Muslim renaissance in Kerala," also played a vital role in promoting women's education through his English periodical *The Muslim* (1906). This journal published progressive voices like B. Kalyani Amma, who challenged the notion of Muslim women's seclusion and supported their right to learn. Despite facing criticism, *The Muslim* fearlessly questioned rigid religious views and argued that educating women was fully compatible with Islamic teachings.

The reformist drive of the movement was strongly influenced by Islamic revivalist currents, particularly Egyptian *Islahi* thought, yet it adapted these ideas to Kerala's diverse social context. The *Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham*, founded at Eriyad in 1922, helped organise and advance many of these reforms, playing a key role in connecting Kerala Muslims with the region's wider Renaissance movements. Still, critics like K.M. Seethi argued that although the movement portrayed itself as anti-colonial, in practice it often cooperated with colonial powers, seeking official acceptance rather than articulating an alternative political vision.

Gender issues featured prominently in the reform agenda. Although the reformers promoted women's education, their aim usually remained conservative, aiming to mould women into better wives and mothers. Scholars such as Amina Wadud, an American scholar and Gayatri Spivak, a feminist and critic, have criticised this limited notion of women's liberation, pointing out that the reforms did not dismantle entrenched patriarchal readings of Islam or fully address gender justice. As a result, women's agency was frequently marginalised and their roles were kept within the domestic sphere, despite educational advancements.

3.4.6 Mujahid Movement

The Mujahid movement is the continuation of the Islahi Movement in Kerala. E.K. Ahmad Kutty outlines the origins, objectives and impact of the Mujahid Movement in Kerala, which has played a central role in the religious and social revival of the Muslim community over the past seven decades. Although formally established in 1950, the movement began in 1922 and is represented by four core organisations: Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen, Ithihadu Shubbanil Mujahideen and Mujahid Students Movement. These bodies work together with the shared aim of restoring Islam to its original purity as taught in the *Quran* and *Sunnah* while opposing later innovations and superstitions.

The movement strongly promotes *Tawheed* (oneness of God) and combats *Shirk* (polytheism) and *Bid'ah* (religious innovations), such as saint worship, tomb rituals, *Mouloud*, *Ratib* and *Chandanakkudam*.

It also rejects *taqlid* (blind following of early jurists) and upholds *ijtihad* (independent reasoning based on scripture). The Mujahid Movement works for social reform by fighting practices like the dowry system and by encouraging modern education with a focus on women's education, Arabic language learning and the development of Islamic literature.

The movement is inspired by leading revivalist thinkers like Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, yet it maintains an independent and critical stance, rejecting any interpretation that conflicts with the *Quran* and *Hadith*, regardless of the scholar's prominence. At its core, the Mujahid Movement aims to revive true Islam in Kerala, raise community awareness and remove un-Islamic practices through peaceful and intellectual efforts. Its mission is summed up in the motto: "*Back to the Quran and Sunnah.*"

Recap

- ◆ Islam spread peacefully in Kerala through Arab traders and cultural integration deepened.
- ◆ The Mujahid movement fought against superstitions, dowry and taqlid; it strongly promoted modern education.
- ◆ Arabic-Malayalam literature and Mappila songs shaped Muslim identity and preserved cultural continuity.
- ◆ The Cheraman Perumal legend links the origins of Kerala Islam directly to Prophet Muhammad.
- ◆ Malik ibn Dinar, the Makhdum family and Sufi orders spread Islam institutionally and regionally.
- ◆ Native rulers like the Zamorin supported Muslims, boosting their economy, navy and social position.

- ◆ Reformers rejected un-Islamic practices, stressed the *Quran* and *Hadith* and modern education uplifted the community.
- ◆ Makti Thangal pioneered vernacular print, countered missionaries and pushed for a modern Muslim identity.
- ◆ Makti Thangal condemned syncretism, Sufism and matriliney, demanding Quranic purity and community unity persistently.
- ◆ Vakkom Moulavi's journalism, schools and the *Swadeshabhimani* paper advanced modern reform fearlessly.
- ◆ The Muslim Aikya Sangham and Jamiyyathul Ulama unified Kerala Muslims and deeply strengthened religious scholarship.
- ◆ The Mujahid and Islahi movements revived Tawheed and education while consistently rejecting superstition.

Objective Questions

1. Which Arab missionary is traditionally credited with establishing early mosques in Kerala?
2. Which text by Sheikh Zainuddin gives a detailed account of Islam's growth in Kerala?
3. Name one of the journals started by Makti Thangal.
4. Which famous newspaper did Vakkom Abdul Khadar Moulavi launch?
5. Which organisation is known for following the Sunni-Shafi'i tradition in Kerala?
6. Who was called the "Sir Syed of Kerala"?
7. Which movement promoted women's education through the magazine *The Muslim*?
8. Who founded the 'Muhamadeeya Press'?
9. Which journal did Vakkom Moulavi start in 1918 for Arabic-Malayalam readers?

Answers

1. Malik ibn Dinar
2. *Tuhfat al-Mujahiddin*
3. *Tuhfath-ul Akhyar Va Hidayth-ul Ashrar*
4. Swadesabhimani
5. Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama (Samastha)
6. Chalilakathu Kunhahammed Haji
7. The Islahi Movement under Vakkom Moulavi
8. Makti Thangal
9. *Al-Islam*

Assignments

1. Explain the unique features of the spread of Islam in Kerala and how it differed from its spread in North India.
2. Discuss the contributions of Makti Thangal towards Islamic reform and education among Kerala Muslims.
3. Describe the role of Vakkom Abdul Khadar Moulavi in the modern awakening of Kerala's Muslim community.
4. What were the aims and activities of the Muslim Aikya Sangham and the Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama?
5. Analyse the goals and impact of the Mujahid Movement on Kerala's Muslim society.

Reference

1. Abdul Kareem, K.K. *Kerala Muslim Kalacharithram (Cultural History of Kerala Muslims)*. Other Books, Kozhikode, 2009.
2. Abraham, Jose. *Islamic Reform and Colonial Discourse on Modernity in India: Socio-Political and Religious Thought of Vakkom Moulavi*. Palgrave Macmillan, Delhi, 2014.
3. Ahmad, Aziz. *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857–1964*. Oxford University Press, London, 1967.
4. Arunima, G. “Imagining Communities Differently: Print, Language and the Public Sphere in Colonial Kerala.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2006.
5. Ashraf, Muhammed Niyas. “Modernity and Reform in Colonial Kerala: Revisiting the Contributions of Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Tangal.” *Social Orbit*, vol. 3, no. 1, Dec. 2017.
6. Ashraf, Muhammed Niyas. *Islamic Modernity and Reform in Colonial Kerala: Reading Makti Tangal*. Unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Delhi, 2015.
7. Aziz, Abdul. *Reform and Revival Among Muslims of Kerala*. University of Calicut, 1994.
8. Benaseer, V.I. *Social Reform Movement and the Question of Gender: A Study of the Islahi Movement of Malabar, 1871–1948*. Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Science Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2023.
9. Dale, F. Stephen and M. Gangadhara Menon. “Nerccas: Saint-Martyr Worship among the Muslims of Kerala.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 41, 1978, pp. 523–538.
10. Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella. “Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India.” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2/3, 2008, Cambridge University Press. *SOAS Research Repository*, <https://soas-repository.worktribe.com/output/416095>.
11. Spivak, Gayatri. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies and Dialogues*. Routledge, 1990.

12. Vakkom Moulavi Foundation Trust. *Collected Works of Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi*. Trivandrum, 2007.
13. Wadud, Amina. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam (Islam in the Twenty-First Century)*. Oneworld Publications, 2006.
14. Muhammed Kunhi, P.P. "Samastha and the Formation of Muslim Public in Kerala." *Journal of Kerala Studies*, 1982.
15. Sivadasan, S. (ed.), *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. Modern Book Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, 2021.

Suggested Reading

1. Abdul, Samad, M., *Islam in Kerala: Groups and Movements in the 20th Century*, Laurel Publications, Kollam, 1998.
2. Ali, Mohammed. *The Development of Education among the Mappilas of Malabar, 1800–1965*. Nunes Publication, New Delhi, 1990.
3. Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Malabar*. Orient BlackSwan, Delhi, 2003.
4. Bayly, Susan. *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.
5. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993.
6. Gellner, Ernest. *Muslim Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.
7. Hasan, Rifaat. "Islamic Modernist and Reformist Discourse in South Asia." *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, edited by Shireen T. Hunter, Routledge, Delhi, 2014, pp. 159–186.
8. Kareem, C.K. *Kerala Muslim History, Statistics and Directory*. Vol. III, Kochi, 1991.
9. Kareem, K.K. Muhammad Abdul. *Makti Tangalude Jeevacharithram (Biography of Makti Tangal)*. Yuvatha Book House, Calicut, 1997.

10. Kareem, K.K. Muhammad Abdul. *Makti Tungalude Sampoorana Krithikal (The Collected Works of Makti Tungal)*. Vachanam Books, Calicut, 2012.
11. Lakshmi, L.R.S. *The Malabar Muslims: A Different Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2012.
12. Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella. *Islamic Reform in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2013.
13. Panikkar, K.N. *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836–1921*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989.



UNIT

Women's Progress

Learning Outcomes

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

- explain the impact of marriage and inheritance reforms on matrilineal communities in Kerala
- analyse how novels like *Indulekha* and plays like *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* used literature and theatre as tools to question tradition and promote women's emancipation and social change
- trace the growth of women's political awareness through nationalist and communist movements
- evaluate the role of education reforms in improving women's literacy in Kerala

Prerequisites

In Kerala, the gradual but profound awakening among women arose from the deep-rooted need to break free from oppressive customs, rigid family structures and entrenched caste and gender hierarchies that kept them confined to domesticity. As shifts in land ownership, colonial laws and social reform movements disrupted old systems like matriliney and *Sambandham*, women across castes began to challenge practices that denied them property rights, education and autonomy. Reformers, community leaders and early writers exposed the injustices faced by Nambutiri women forced into child marriages and seclusion, Ezhava women restricted by caste barriers and countless others burdened by outdated marriage laws. Missionaries and progressive royal policies opened schools that encouraged girls' education despite social resistance, while nationalist and communist movements later amplified calls

for equal rights and participation in public life. Novels like *Indulekha* exposed contradictions in matriliney and women's rights, while plays such as V.T. Bhattathiripad's *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* boldly challenged oppressive practices and inspired women to step from seclusion into public life, showing how the written and performed word became vital instruments for awakening social consciousness and fuelling Kerala's broader reform movements. This growing awareness and activism highlighted that genuine social progress depended on freeing women from the constraints of tradition, enabling them to study, work, speak out and claim their rightful place in Kerala's evolving society.

Keywords

Matriliny, Sambandham, Malabar Marriage Act, *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku*, *Indulekha*, Women's India Association, Nair Regulation

Discussion

The political awareness of women in modern Kerala grew slowly from the late 1800s to the 1940s. It was shaped by changes in the economy, British rule, social reform, nationalism and class struggles. New land rules, changes in property rights, marriage laws and family systems due to colonial rule played a key role. Kerala's reform movements included lower castes and peasants who fought feudalism and joined the freedom struggle, which helped women become more politically active.

Among the Nairs, moving from matrilineal to patrilineal inheritance created debates, new laws and petitions. This led to the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 and later laws that allowed property division by 1933. Novels like *Indulekha* illustrated the clash between old customs and new ideas about husbands' roles and women's rights. The Nambutiris, the highest caste in Kerala, also saw change. They demanded better education, marriage within their caste and reforms against polygamy and old men marrying young girls. Young reformers wrote plays and articles exposing the problems

faced by Nambutiri women. Events like the first meetings of Nambutiri women and the Yogakshema Sabha debates showed women getting involved. Small acts like giving up the *Marukuda* umbrella, wearing blouses and saris and asking for property rights demonstrated how reform was spreading.

At the same time, the Ezhava community, led by Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan, fought against caste barriers and old customs. They sought education, simple marriages, patrilineal inheritance and monogamy. The SNDP Yogam became an important organisation that connected spiritual reform with better living conditions. Kumaran Asan's poems addressed women's suffering and caste issues, strengthening the idea of women's rights. K. Aiyappan furthered this with his secular and rational ideas. He aimed to break caste and religious barriers through inter-caste meals, inter-caste marriages, equal property rights for women and civil marriage laws. In the Kochi Assembly, he advocated for women's equal rights in property and marriage.



The Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924–25 combined social reform with the freedom struggle. It mobilised many women into action. Gandhiji's visit inspired women to spin khadi and support the national movement. Numerous meetings across Kerala saw women speaking, donating and breaking old customs to join protests. Women like Sarada Ammal and Parvathi Amma spoke out against caste rules and for equal rights. Women became increasingly visible in protests, meetings and law-making, demonstrating their growing political strength.

3.5.2 Educational Reforms

The high literacy rates for women in Kerala today have their roots in a complex history of missionary activity, community reform, local royal policies and colonial administrative strategies that shaped women's education from the early nineteenth century onwards. Missionary societies like the London Missionary Society (LMS), Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Basel Evangelical Mission (BEMS) were instrumental in introducing modern schooling for girls in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Their early efforts were often driven by religious aims, converting local populations and creating a Christian moral order, but they also laid the foundations for widespread schooling by establishing seminaries, day schools and boarding schools for girls.

The first significant effort came after the 1813 revision of the East India Company Charter, which allowed missionary work in India. Missionaries believed education was key to spreading Christianity and building a civilised society. Pioneers like Charles Mead and his wife Johanna started schools for girls, including those from enslaved castes, teaching basic literacy alongside domestic and vocational skills such as spinning, sewing and embroidery. Royal support, like the Royal Rescript of 1817 by Regent Rani

Gouri Parvathi Bai in Travancore, formalised education under state responsibility, an early sign of government interest in education as an administrative function.

Early missionary schools had a curriculum shaped by the ideals of Victorian domesticity. They trained girls primarily to be good wives and mothers, in line with the missionaries' view that women were keepers of tradition and morality. Alongside literacy, domestic work like needlework, hygiene and household management were major parts of the syllabus. Yet these schools did more than reproduce Victorian ideals; they created spaces where girls from various castes mingled, subtly challenging traditional caste restrictions.

However, early attempts faced many barriers. Resistance came from conservative communities fearful of conversion or the erosion of religious customs. Caste prejudices made mixed schooling contentious and girls from lower castes were often kept away from formal schools longer than boys. Early marriage, high dowries, a lack of secondary schools, co-education anxieties and fees added further obstacles. Missionaries tried to overcome these challenges by providing free lodging, food and even dowry support.

By the late nineteenth century, new developments strengthened the growth of women's education. The economic boom from commercial agriculture gave princely states like Travancore surplus budgets, which were partly invested in schools and health. Local rulers, like Sir Madhava Rao in Travancore, saw education as the bedrock of social reform. Parallel to missionary schools, government schools emerged, sometimes in competition to limit missionary dominance. The Raja's Girls School in Thiruvananthapuram, later Maharaja's College for Girls, symbolised this state commitment.

Curricula began expanding too. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, girls were taught vernacular languages, English, history,

geography, science and basic mathematics, alongside moral and religious lessons. By the early twentieth century, efforts were made to tailor curricula to girls' perceived roles, introducing domestic science courses, though these often failed to gain traction due to a lack of certification and employment prospects. Physical education and sports also gained importance, partly in response to colonial critiques of Indian hygiene practices and epidemics.

Community and caste organisations played a major role. Groups like the Nair Service Society (NSS), Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS), SNDP Yogam and various Muslim associations opened their own schools to uplift their communities. This broadened women's access but also bound it tightly to caste and community identity. Dalit leaders like Ayyankali publicised education statistics to push for more schools for marginalised communities like the Pulayas. Community-funded schools, often motivated by the goal of upward mobility, made education a collective aspiration.

By the early twentieth century, Kerala's rulers and educated elites actively supported women's schooling. Reports, policy reforms and inspections focused on improving girls' enrolment. Grant-in-aid codes standardised private schools and teachers had to pass government exams. Female Inspectresses of Schools were appointed and there was more emphasis on female teachers and separate hostels for girls. However, prejudice remained. While Ezhava boys gained access to schools, girls from the same communities were more frequently excluded. Co-education, though it opened doors, also pushed women into new male-dominated spaces, creating discomfort but also opportunities for social mobility.

Other factors boosting literacy included changes in land relations, a modern secretarial administration, growing trade

and plantations and the demand for clerical jobs. Indigenous schools were assimilated into the modern system through grants and updated curricula. A vibrant print culture, including books, newspapers, journals and women's magazines, promoted literacy and shaped debates on women's roles. Novels like *Indulekha* reflected this social change, highlighting how education empowered women to challenge rigid caste and gender norms.

By the mid-twentieth century, women's education in Kerala was no longer solely a missionary or elite project. It had become part of wider nationalist, community and social reform agendas. Yet, despite expanded access, deep-rooted caste divisions and gender expectations persisted. Education opened doors but did not always translate to autonomy. Colonial ideals, missionary legacies, local caste politics and state policies combined to sustain a system where education prepared women for both modern citizenship and traditional domesticity.

Kerala's broader social environment has long fostered strong incentives for educating girls. However, within households, such external encouragement often clashes with day-to-day family dynamics. Historical matrilineal traditions in parts of Kerala meant that, even before formal education systems were standardised in the 1860s, girls in Malabar commonly attended local schools, a trend not matched elsewhere in the Madras Presidency. By contrast, girls in conservative Nambutiri households in the 1930s and 1940s often stayed home for lessons. Still, this early access did not usually extend beyond basic schooling, even among matrilineal groups. Puberty typically determined whether further study was encouraged for girls. For poorer families, sending girls to school had to be weighed against practical concerns, as girls often juggled chores, childcare and schooling while boys were mostly tasked with outdoor errands. Despite the idea of



“free” education, costs added up, especially when schools for higher grades were far from home, forcing tough choices about which children should continue.

3.5.3 Marriage Reforms

A large section of Kerala’s people once followed *Marumakkathayam*, a matrilineal system where marriage was through *Sambandham*. In this system, a man’s children belonged to his wife’s family, so his property never went to his wife or children. When the British came, new money, jobs and ideas weakened the old *taravad* (joint family). Elders lost control, marriages became unstable and educated Nairs started questioning old marriage and property rules. In 1879, the Malabar Marriage Association was formed to make Nair marriages legal and fix property rights, but the government did nothing. In 1890, Sir C. Sankaran Nair tried again with a new bill in the Madras Council to legalise *Sambandham* and protect women and children. Many landlords and conservatives blocked it, so the law was weak. It stated that registered *Sambandham* would count as legal marriage, but few Nairs registered, only 57 between 1897 and 1904. The law did not cover Nambutiri-Nair *Sambandham* and did not allow property division. In Travancore, people also wanted change. P. Thanu Pillai tried in 1897 but failed. After more effort, Travancore passed the Nair Regulation in 1912. This law was stronger, made *Sambandham* fully legal, covered Nambutiri-Nair marriages, banned polyandry and gave wives and children rights to a man’s property.

In Kochi, the Nairs got the Cochin Regulation of 1920, which banned polygamy for men who married Nair women. The Travancore Nair Regulation of 1925 allowed people to split *taravad* property and gave wives rights to maintenance and divorce. Madras passed the *Marumakkathayam* Act in 1933, which allowed property to pass from

father to son and permitted partition. Cochin passed a similar law in 1938. After these laws, thousands of Nairs filed cases to split large *taravads* into smaller families. This ended matriliney among the Nairs, reducing their control over land but giving them more freedom and choice.

The Ezhavas had no single inheritance law. Some used *Marumakkathayam*, some mixed systems and some patriliney. Inspired by Narayana Guru, Ezhavas changed their marriage customs too. After seeing the Nairs’ changes, they demanded similar laws and the Ezhava Regulation of 1925 was passed in Travancore. The Thiyyas in Malabar came under the Madras *Marumakkathayam* Act of 1933, which made Ilava and Thiyya marriages legal, limited divorce and required husbands to support wives and children.

The Nair reforms also pushed the Nambutiris to change. Traditionally, only the eldest son could marry within the caste; other sons had relationships with Nair women, but their children had no property rights. Reformers argued that this was unfair to women. Many Nambutiri women remained unmarried or became widows at a young age because they had to marry older men. Groups like the Yogakshema Sabha and Unni Nambutiri spread reform ideas. V.T. Bhattathiripad’s play *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* mocked old customs. This led to new laws, the Travancore Malayala Brahmin Regulation (1930) and the Madras Nambutiri Act (1933). These laws allowed younger sons to marry within the caste and share family property equally. This ended polygamy and the unfair *Sambandham* ties with Nair women. Nambutiri women gained more respect and rights.

Kerala Christians were early opponents of child marriage, polygamy and untouchability. By the late 1800s, they did not advocate much for new inheritance laws because most followed the Indian Succession Act.

However, leaders like R.V. Kulantha Swamy Pillai wanted Hindu converts to have full property rights. In 1911, the government formed a committee that suggested limited rights for women. Many Syrian Christians opposed granting daughters property rights, so nothing changed initially. However, steady pressure led to the Christian Succession Act of 1916, which allowed Christians to make wills, gave widows a share equal to children and permitted inter-group marriages among Christians. Still, it did not grant women equal rights with men. Kochi passed a similar law in 1921.

In Malabar, Muslims also gradually shifted from matriliney to patriliney. After demands for change, the Moplah Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 allowed Muslims to divide *taravad* property and switch to Shariat Law for inheritance. The Shariat Act of 1937, which extended to Madras in 1947, ended matriliney for Malabar's Muslims as well. Thus, from Nairs to Ezhavas, Nambutiris, Christians and Muslims, the people of Kerala slowly abandoned matriliney through new laws, introducing individual property rights and a patriarchal family system.

Social structures and patriarchal mindsets significantly impact how women access education and the levels they achieve. Nineteenth-century reform initiatives did advocate for girls' education, but this progress was carefully balanced to avoid threatening the male-dominated family system. Over time, the justification for women's higher education was framed in ways that strengthened their appeal as marriage partners and later highlighted their potential to contribute to household income. Despite the rise in women's earning potential, traditional gender roles remained deeply embedded; women were still expected to handle cooking (Sen 1990), child-rearing and other domestic work.

3.5.4 Indulekha

Indulekha, by Chandhu Menon, explores both the promise and constraints of its heroine's outlook, shaped by the social environment in which she lives. The protagonist, Indulekha, is a young woman raised in a matrilineal community. Although she is bound by the strict moral codes of her society, she shows remarkable resolve in protecting her freedom to choose her future husband. Her boldness and self-reliance set her apart within her traditional household. As Chandu Menon himself makes clear, his aim was to craft a novel in the style of English fiction, for which an average Malayali woman of the time would not suffice as a heroine. Indulekha, therefore, is not a reflection of what women were but rather an image of what Menon believed they could become with the benefits of an English education.

Education provides Indulekha with the confidence to stand up to her grandfather, Panchu Menon, who objects to her relationship with Madhavan. She firmly believes she can overcome any obstacles to be with the man she loves. However, when Madhavan is deceived by false rumours about her, he leaves for North India, feeling betrayed. In his absence, Soori Nambutiri appears at the family home and tries to claim Indulekha as his bride, but she flatly refuses him. This act of defiance is significant because it challenges the customary privilege of Nambutiri Brahmins, who often took women from Nair families without resistance. Thwarted, Soori turns his attention to Indulekha's mother, but in the end, a young servant girl, Kallianikutty, is handed over to him to soothe his wounded pride. Eventually, Madhavan realises his error and returns, leading to his reunion with Indulekha.

In this way, Indulekha becomes Menon's vision of the enlightened Nair woman shaped by English education. Through her, Menon urges his community to offer girls the same



educational opportunities as boys. This is not to imply that the novel glorifies the English language itself as a force for social reform; rather, it emphasises the transfer of new knowledge, ideas and critical thinking that emerged from Europe's Industrial Revolution. The book calls for the adoption of these modern values to help uplift women's social standing. The story is rooted in the reality that Kerala's society was beginning to embrace such progressive ideas. *Indulekha*, therefore, symbolises a period of transition, an era where feudal traditions began to give way to early bourgeois modernity. Her distinctiveness as a character stems from this larger historical shift. Her insistence on personal freedom and the right to decide her own future echoes the broader ideals of individual liberty and self-determination that the Industrial Revolution made possible. She is a product of a time when society was poised on the brink of modern capitalist change. This explains how Menon, despite his personal loyalties as a British official and his conventional views about matriliney and caste, uses his novel to critique the society of his time. His creative realism overcomes his subjective leanings, resulting in the portrayal of an idealised but believable woman, *Indulekha*.

Yet, this remarkable heroine is not without contradictions. Her courage and independence are shaped and limited by her uncritical acceptance of the very social framework she partially opposes. Her rebellion is restricted to asserting her freedom to select her spouse, a struggle in which she prevails. While this victory demonstrates her strong will, it also highlights how her awareness is confined within traditional bounds. *Indulekha* remains firmly rooted in the values and codes of conduct prescribed for women of her class. Her quest for autonomy does not challenge the moral fabric of the matrilineal system; instead, she works within its constraints. She embodies both the promise and the shortcomings of the 'new woman'. The strength of Chandhu Menon's narrative

lies in how it captures this duality, turning *Indulekha* into a vivid symbol of a society moving towards new ideals while still tethered to old norms.

3.5.5 Adukkalayilninnum Arangathekku



Fig. 3.5.1 *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathek*

Source: DC Books

Theatre wields a strong influence over its audience and has significantly contributed to fostering national consciousness and driving social change in Kerala. V.T. Bhattathiripad's Malayalam play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* was staged during the Yogakshema Sabha's annual conferences, where he made full use of theatre as a tool for social reform and to advance nationalist ideals. Written in 1929, the play advocated for the emancipation of Nambutiri women who had long been confined by superstition and rigid orthodoxy. In his foreword, renowned nationalist K. Kelappan emphasised the play's importance in exposing the oppressive conditions within the Nambutiri community and pushing for reform. The impact was profound; the drama inspired many Nambutiri women to step beyond the confines of their kitchens and join the nationalist movement. Its performance at the Sabha's 22nd annual meeting at Edakkunni in December 1929 proved pivotal, strengthening

the reform movement and establishing V.T. Bhattathiripad as a leading figure.

The story unfolds with Madhavan leaving for Madras to pursue his studies, while in his absence, Tethi's marriage is arranged with an elderly Nambutiri. Although Tethi's father respected Madhavan, he feared committing the sin of *Parivadanam* by marrying his daughter outside their rigid customs. After finishing his studies, Madhavan, with help from friends, managed to stop the wedding through a court injunction and eventually, Tethi married him instead. At a Nambutiri Yuvajana Sangham event held to honour the newlyweds, Madhavan publicly removed Tethi's *ghosha* (veil), freeing her from seclusion. This act inspired several Antarjanams (Nambutiri women) to write about reform; among the first was Mrs. Parvathi Manazhi, who urged women to become literate and adopt modern dress.

The oppressive conditions within the Nambutiri community drove V.T. Bhattathiripad to declare in his play that he would rather be born as any miserable creature than as a young boy in a Nambutiri household. His play *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* mocked the injustices faced by Nambutiri women and aimed to bring them out of domestic confinement into public life. This work sparked an unprecedented awakening within the community. Critic Kuttikrishna Marar noted that the drama's first staging at the 22nd annual meeting would likely bring about in one year the kind of change that would otherwise have taken a decade. After its debut at Edakkunni, the play was performed in nine other locations, becoming a powerful tool for spreading reformist ideas in a way that even the illiterate could grasp.

Staging the drama at V.T.'s own home, despite resistance from his conservative elder brother, symbolised the defeat of traditionalists and the triumph of radical

reform. *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* revitalised reform efforts and changed attitudes among Antarjanams. V.T. led by example, bringing his wife into public spaces and urging other women to reject the restrictive *ghosha*. Arya Pallam later acknowledged that V.T.'s unwavering support gave them the moral strength to step into public life and challenge oppressive customs.

Created in the early 1900s, this drama served not merely as entertainment but as a bold critique of age-old customs. It painted a picture of how women, particularly Nambutiri women known as Antarjanams, were confined within dark interiors, denied education and forced into child marriages and oppressive widowhoods. Through powerful scenes and lines, the play called for women to rise from secluded kitchens into open arenas where they could study, speak out and build their own identities an idea that defied tradition at every turn.

3.5.6 Nationalist and Communist Movements

In the early 1930s, Kerala experienced a surge of gatherings and conferences among different communities focusing on social cohesion, women's education and civil rights. In May 1931, the Kochi Depressed Classes Conference at Chengannur stressed the importance of unity, while an Araya women's meeting at Alappuzha, chaired by K.C. Narayani Amma, addressed their lack of educational progress and civic responsibilities. This gathering acknowledged the government's support and decided to establish an all-Kerala Mahila Sangham. Likewise, at a Christian Women's Conference in April 1930 at Chengannur, Anna Chandy, India's first woman lawyer, encouraged Christian women to join the freedom movement and work towards financial independence. The Catholic Sahitya Samithi's second annual session in May 1930 also focused on the role of women and the Malayalam language.



For the Pulaya community, women's involvement became more visible through the activities of the Sadhujana Paripalana Sabha led by Ayyankali. A meeting in Thiruvananthapuram in March 1930 notably featured well-dressed Pulaya women and girls performing songs. When Pulayas resisted eviction at Pallichal in September 1930, they received support and advice from the Humanitarian Society and the Salvation Army. Ayyankali's relentless efforts secured educational access for Pulayas by 1914, paving the way for women like Dakshayani to rise as educated pioneers, eventually becoming the first woman graduate and a member of the Kochi Legislative Council and the Constituent Assembly. Pulaya women also defied social restrictions by abandoning old customs like the Kettu mala and adopting new clothing styles despite opposition, while Ayyankali's leadership contributed significantly to the Temple Entry Proclamation.

Educated women increasingly took part in public life. Anna Chandy, who became the first woman advocate in 1930, also edited *Sreemathi*, a women's magazine and chaired important meetings. At the All-Kerala Nair Conference at Chavara in 1931, Ammu Swaminathan led a women's gathering that called for improvements in women's education, job opportunities, welfare institutions and temple access. Women's active role extended to the literary field as well: Ammukutti Amma spoke on rural development, Bhagirathi Amma highlighted women's contributions to Malayalam literature and literary clubs at schools organised discussions on women's social and political engagement.

Women teachers also mobilised to demand better working conditions and resisted census work obligations forced upon them. In Thiruvananthapuram, women graduates advocated for more employment, improved

leave entitlements and the appointment of women teachers in girls' schools. The SNDP Students Conference underlined the need for girls to participate in student organisations and public meetings promoting Hindi featured speeches by women like Lakshmikutty Amma. Altogether, this era saw a notable rise in organised women's activities, signalling increased awareness of the value of education, social reform and civic participation.

3.5.6.1 Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movement

During the Non-Cooperation Movement and throughout the 1920s, the Women's India Association (WIA) played an active role in advancing women's rights and social reform. In 1921, when the Kochi Legislative Council was formed, the WIA appealed to the Kochi Magistrate to ensure that voting and council membership would not exclude women, aiming to secure their role in guiding public affairs. The WIA celebrated milestones such as Anna Chandy becoming Tiruvitamkur's first woman advocate and Mrs. P. Mosses joining the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly. A landmark Bill to abolish the Devadasi system was introduced by a woman member of the Kochi State Legislative Council and its passage was widely praised.

The WIA's activities extended to promoting Swadeshi ideals through exhibitions and in October 1930, Karthyayani Amma served as its secretary. Besides political engagement, the WIA focused on social welfare; it operated orphanages, offered midwife training and ran industrial training centres to uplift economically disadvantaged women. Local branches were formed in places like Talassery (September 1930) with active members such as Mrs. Krishna Menon, Demayanthi Amma, Ambika Lakshmanan and C.K. Bharatiammal; branches also emerged in Kozhikode and Trichur.

In April 1934, the Women Teachers Association gathered at Ernakulam, recognising that women entering the teaching profession was a new and significant development that brought fresh challenges. The Association demanded paid maternity leave and strongly opposed the view that married women should not hold government jobs, arguing instead that women's employment elevated their social standing. They also called for women teachers to be posted closer to their homes.

At the Aluva Union Christian College Conference in April 1934, Kalyanikutty Amma spoke passionately about modern women rejecting outdated ideals that wronged devoted wives, instead honouring reformers like Ram Mohan Roy and Jawaharlal Nehru. She argued that true equality depended on both men and women valuing motherhood's burdens and contributions. She also criticised the economic system for undervaluing housework, stressing that women's domestic drudgery was tied to male property ownership.

In January 1935, the Tiruvitamkur Women's Conference, chaired by Dr. Muthulekshmi Reddy in Thiruvananthapuram, highlighted the importance of women's education, encouraged women to serve as public and social workers and called for the formation of social service groups within schools and colleges to further strengthen women's roles in society. The Civil Disobedience Movement marked a turning point by encouraging large numbers of women to enter the political arena. T.C. Kochukutty Amma from the Kochi Educational Service inspired women to follow Gandhi's constructive work. Many women from prominent families stepped forward as satyagraha volunteers.

At the 27th session of the SNDP at Kozhikode on 31 May 1930, nationalists and others clashed over what path to take. During this session, C.L. Rukmini Amma put forward a resolution advocating *Swadeshi*

and *Khadi*. Just days later, on 5 June 1930, a massive women's gathering in Kozhikode, led by Narayanikutty Amma, Kameshwari Amma and Krishna Bai, promoted the use of indigenous goods and khadi. Women volunteers moved door-to-door urging households to adopt Swadeshi products. In July, students of Chalapuram Girls' School and members of the Women's Swadeshi League marched through Calicut, singing patriotic songs. On 10 August 1930, shops and businesses remained shut for All India Prisoners Day, thanks to the combined efforts of the Mahila Sangh and the Swadeshi League. An exhibition showcasing Swadeshi arts and industries ran from 24 August to 2 September in Kozhikode, inaugurated by the poet Vallathol. The Women's India Association helped organise this event.

When reports emerged of police brutality against women satyagrahis in Bombay, women in Kozhikode decided to protest. On 16 November 1930, the authorities imposed restrictions on Mrs. Madhavan Nair, A.V. Kuttimalu Amma, T. Narayani Amma, P.G. Narayani Amma, E. Narayanikutty, Mrs. Sundara Iyer and Gracy Aaron to prevent their action. Nonetheless, around thirty women, clad in immaculate white khadi as if headed to worship, began a procession with national and black flags. When the Inspector General attempted to seize the flag from Jayalekshmi, a teenage girl, she resisted, declaring she would not let go. A crowd gathered; six women, Karthyayani Amma, Narayanikutty Amma, Gracy Aaron, Kunhikavu Amma, Thalapurath Ammukutty Amma and Jayalekshmi, were detained. Jayalekshmi was later freed, but the others were jailed until 18 November, marking the first known arrest of women activists in Malabar. Charged under Section 145, they refused to defend themselves in court and were jailed until the session ended. Karthyayani Amma declined to post a security bond, so she alone remained imprisoned when the court adjourned. The Magistrate



remarked that this was the first time women in Malabar had stepped into political protest and expressed hope they would desist in future.

On 17 November 1930, students struck classes in solidarity. Every girl at Chalapuram Girls' School stayed away. Led by Jayalekshmi, the students marched through town and circled the jail where the women were held. In December, the KPCC was declared unlawful. On 13 January 1931, under the leadership of Gracy Aaron as the third 'Dictator' (satyagraha leader), women like Devaki Amma, Mrs Prabhu with her baby, Mrs Ganesh Pai and Vedavathi gathered at Kozhikode beach and burned foreign cloth. On 17 January, a crowd, including a hundred women, greeted Karthyayani Amma on her release from prison. On 2 February 1931, Easwari Ammal, the fifth 'Dictator,' was detained at Kozhikode beach for defying the salt law, becoming the first woman in Kerala to be arrested for this act. Her 14-year-old son was also taken into custody.

Picketing of imported cloth shops by Kozhikode women continued. Kunjilekshmi Amma, a Kochi Educational Service teacher and Sanjiva Pai, a teacher under the Malabar District Board, both left their jobs to join the movement and were arrested on 1 February 1931 while picketing. On 25 February, students from the Bal Bharat Sangham and Balika Sangham, guided by Jayalekshmi Sundara Iyer and P.G. Swarna Kumari, held a 'takli' (spinning wheel) march in Kozhikode. Karthyayani Amma and Matilda Kallen worked tirelessly in door-to-door campaigns under the Desa Sevika Sangham. In March, a women's gathering at Vadakara established the Women's Spinning Association and a committee to promote khadi work.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, freedom fighter and social reformer, visited Kannur on 19 March 1931, encouraging women to picket shops selling foreign goods. The

following day, Mrs Narayanan and Mrs Madhava Pai led Kaushalya and M.K. Vani in protest picketing. At Alappuzha, a women's conference chaired by Mariamma Anthraper stressed the need to reject foreign cloth, support khadi and spread temperance awareness. She highlighted that, as natural symbols of sacrifice, women could easily embrace khadi and persuade men to do the same. The Tiruvitamkur District Foreign Cloth Boycott Council began formally enlisting women volunteers. On 22 April 1931, picketing by women officially began, with Mariamma Anthraper, Lekshmi Pillai and Smt Kamalamma among the leading participants. These women were welcomed with garlands and cheers by the public. Picketing spread to Trisoor on 25 April under A.V. Kuttimalu Amma and Mrs Pavamani from Kozhikode, supported by women such as P. Amritamma, P. Vishalakshi Amma, T. Lakshmikutty, M. Karthyayani Amma, M. Lekshmikutty Amma, P.A. Narayanikutty, P.A. Kochammini, K. Kamalam, T. Subhadra, Mrs T.C. Achutha Menon and Mrs Ikkanda Warriar. Similar efforts took place in Alappuzha, Ambalapuzha and Thiruvananthapuram. Public meetings were organised almost daily in different towns.

The 5th Provincial Political Conference (3-5 May 1931) also held a separate session for women. Chaired by Padmavati Asher, it was attended by Mrs Pavamani, Mrs K. Madhava Menon, Sita Bai, Karthyayani Amma, Kunjikavu Amma, Mrs Krishnaswamy Iyer, Mrs Iyer and K. Madhavikutty. Dakshayani Kettil Amma gave the welcome speech. The resolutions called for opening public places to all, equal employment rights for women, enforcing the Sarada Act, compulsory primary education for women, Hindi learning, founding the Kerala Mahila Desa Sevika Sangham and starting night schools and craft centres for women. The All Kerala Women's League came into existence at Kozhikode on 13 June 1931, with Mrs

Pavamani as President, Kunjikavu Amma as Vice President, Kuttimala Amma as Treasurer and P.M. Kamalavathy and Kunhilekshmi Amma as Secretaries.

On 2 August 1931, the KPCC passed a resolution supporting temple entry. At a meeting on 5 September, P.M. Kamalavathy, M. Karthyayani Amma and Kelappan were appointed to spread this message through outreach in untouchable communities. That same day at Guruvayoor, Karthyayani Amma addressed a huge gathering. A committee for temple entry was set up in Alappuzha, which hosted a massive public meeting on 21 September 1931, addressed by Dr C.L. Rukmini Amma and Karthyayani Amma. Rukmini Amma then toured Kerala as part of this campaign. On All India Temple Entry Day, 1 November 1931, Kelappan, C.I. Rukmini Amma, Karthyayani Amma and others led a march from the satyagraha camps. On 21 November, Ekadasi Day, Kelappan and several women staged a satyagraha at Guruvayoor. The Malabar Youth League's 13th conference at Taliparamba on 27–28 December 1931 also endorsed temple entry, with Parvathy Nenmini Mangalam present.

The Mahila Sevika Sangh in Calicut continued with Swadeshi work and held another Swadeshi exhibition from 1 to 10 November 1931. Meanwhile, women's picketing of foreign cloth shops continued. On 27 January 1932 in Talassery, Kamalabhai Prabhu, Mrs Govindan Nair and Sambhavi Amma were arrested during a picketing drive. Refusing to pledge loyalty to the government, Mrs Prabhu was given six months of rigorous imprisonment and a fine. When she refused to pay, the Magistrate demanded her jewellery, including her tali (mangalsutra). She reluctantly removed it herself, asking her companions to do the same. She was then sent alone to Vellore jail without a female escort. This incident sparked protests nationwide and was raised in the Legislative Council, Central Legislative

Assembly and even the House of Commons. The government issued a statement criticising the Magistrate's harsh action and he himself expressed regret and ordered her *tali* returned.

On 4 February 1932, Kozhikode observed Gandhi Day with a procession that ended in the arrests of Kunhikavu Amma, Mrs Pavamani and Padmavathy. The first two received two-and-a-half years of rigorous imprisonment; Padmavathy got two years. On 10 February, Miss Matilda Kallen, the second 'Dictator' of the Kerala Yuvak Sangh and Devaki Amma led volunteers in Quilandy and were arrested and beaten, receiving two years in prison each.

At Palakkad, on 9 February, P. Devakiamma led a procession with P. Janakiamma and Padmini, who were all arrested. Devakiamma was imprisoned. On 18 February, K. Madhaviamma and Sambhavi Amma were arrested in Talassery for picketing and sentenced to six months. On 17 February, police violently broke up a women's procession in Palakkad.

On 22 February in Kozhikode, a march led by Kuttimalu Amma and two noblewomen, Ammukutty Nethyaramma and Suguna Pai, was halted by police. All three were arrested. The Magistrate tried to separate Kuttimalu Amma from her two-month-old baby, but the jail superintendent allowed her to keep the child with her. They each received two years in prison.

On 30 April 1932, women protesting in Kannur were beaten and detained. After the 6th Kerala Provincial Conference in Kozhikode, about 100 people, including 12 women like Mrs Aaron, were arrested during a procession on 15 May. Women picketed again on 19 May in Kozhikode, leading to further arrests there on 30 June and at Chirakkal on 9 July. Kunjirutha, a 60-year-old woman who willingly courted arrest daily, was jailed for a year and kept in poor conditions at Peralasseri. After



falling ill, she was moved to the Kannur jail hospital on 8 September 1932 following public outcry. Between January and July 1932 alone, 22 women and over 400 men were convicted. Acknowledging women's active role, the KPCC elected Kunhikavu Amma as its President on 9 September 1934. She later opened the Harijan Balika Sadan at Ottappalam on 30 September 1934, a home for underprivileged Harijan girls, later named Kasturba Sadan.

3.5.5.2 Communist/Working Class Movements

The working-class movement in Kerala gathered real strength during 1934–35, when workers began to organise locally and at an all-Kerala level. Yet, even before this, large numbers of workers in Kozhikode, Kannur and Trisoor had supported the Civil Disobedience Movement, with women workers in the weaving mills at Kozhikode noted for their participation. As early as the 1920s, Alappuzha's workers raised demands for maternity benefits, predating the formal support of the Tiruvitamkur State Congress.

In May 1935, the All Kerala Trade Union Congress held its first conference at Kozhikode, coinciding with the Congress Socialist Party's state-level meeting. Meanwhile, peasants and teachers also began organising in Malabar, with significant involvement of women, especially in the teachers' movement. However, it was the working-class mobilisation in Tiruvitamkur that expanded women's public role, building on earlier social reform and political struggles.

A landmark moment came with the October 1938 general strike by Alappuzha's coir workers, mainly Ezhavas influenced by their own social reform movements and the SNDP. These workers had earlier contributed funds to the Salt Satyagraha and joined the Vaikom Satyagraha under leaders like T.K. Madhavan. They were also active in the

'Altenom Movement' for reservation in public bodies. The 1938 strike showed a clear shift as workers moved from caste-based bodies to the Congress Socialist Party, which encouraged independent class organisations. Their demands included not only better wages, shorter hours and an end to contract labour, but also maternity benefits and responsible governance.

During crackdowns, women and children formed a vital network for delivering messages and strike materials. This experience led the Communist-led Tiruvitamkur Coir Factory Workers Union (TCFWU) to systematically build women's participation. They created structures like ward committees to politically engage women inside and outside factories. K. Meenakshi, a coir worker, became a full-time organiser. Study camps were held at Alappuzha and Kottayam, training women such as Meenakshi, Devayani, Lakshmikutty, Gomati Dev, Dakshayani, Bhavaniamma, P. Yashoda and Arya Pallam. Women began to see themselves as "soldiers for communism," ready for struggle.

By 1941, women's factory committees addressed issues such as unfair dismissals, wage cuts, unequal pay and maternity benefits. The TCFWU's efforts secured maternity payments in 288 cases during 1944–45, in contrast to Kochi, which, despite having a Maternity Benefit Act, made no real payments. Equal pay was also taken up in 1943, with the union agreeing to a modest wage rise if a uniform rate could be set. These factory committees also began handling social issues like domestic violence, desertion, or husbands blocking their wives' political work roles once managed by caste groups.

Prominent organisers of these women's committees included V.J. Aleyamma, Ammini, Mariamma, Janaki, Marykutty, Madhavi, V.S. Sharada and Mary. From 1943 to 1945, three conferences for women

workers ran alongside the TCFWU's annual meetings. K. Meenakshi's full-time activism brought her into contact with older SNDP leaders like Kalikutty Assatry, who supported and guided her work. Cultural activities under the Thozhilali Samskarika Kendra (Workers' Cultural Centre) drew in entire families, with girls like Medini, Anasuya and Meenakshi performing in plays and songs. K. Meenakshi's roles, acting as union general secretary when leaders were underground, attending tripartite talks with the Labour Commissioner and leading strikes and pickets expanded the ideas of what women could do in labour and politics.

In 1943, the Ambalapuzha Taluk Mahila Sangham was formed, with Meenakshi as General Secretary and Kalikutty Assatry as President, marking a shift from social reform to a working-class women's movement. That year saw the first taluk-level women's demonstration. Although they faced mocking remarks from some men and attacks from hirelings of coir capitalists, women like Joansa resisted bravely. The organisation grew until it was banned in 1946 during the Punnappa Vayalar uprising. Women stood firm during brutal raids, torture and repression, with many activists going underground. Women leaders like Meenakshi extended their work to organising agricultural and spice workers, further integrating women into Kerala's working-class and Communist movements.

In 1949, two women activists, P.K. Mary and P. Aleyamma, alongside two male colleagues, entered the Legislative Assembly building to protest against the Dewan's draft constitution, which was based on an American model. They shouted slogans and were subsequently arrested, but Akkamma Cherian, a woman member of the Assembly, intervened to prevent police harassment of the women.

Significant structural changes in Kerala's coir industry during the late 1940s, especially

its decentralisation, weakened not just the economic foundation but also the political momentum of women's collective activity in that sector. Despite this, some women sustained their activism by aligning with the Communist Party, which helped them broaden their work and contributed to building an all-Kerala women's organisation.

Women's growing political awareness in Kerala had unique features. Unlike the social reform movement in Bengal, which mainly affected the upper castes, Kerala's reform activities cut across wider sections of society. The existence of matriliney added another dimension; reform movements within upper-caste communities like the Nambutiris and Nairs challenged caste-based restrictions on women, boosting their self-awareness. Yet, economic changes gradually altered family structures and deepened divisions within these communities, evident in the conflict between matrilineal and patrilineal property rights. This struggle gave rise to early debates about women's rights and encouraged upper-caste women to step out of their domestic boundaries and participate actively in the civil disobedience movement of the 1930s. Their political involvement was often rooted in prior community-based organising focused on education, Gandhiji's constructive programmes like khadi promotion and the fight against untouchability.

Within the Ezhava community's anti-savarna struggle, a similar tension over property rights existed, with women often denied their fair share. Nevertheless, this movement laid the groundwork for progressive measures like civil marriage laws and workers' rights, injecting an egalitarian spirit into social reform. When such struggles connected with broader working-class and Communist movements in Travancore, they paved the way for women's deeper engagement both within the household and in political life. By being linked to organised movements for wider social transformation,



these efforts helped dismantle traditional social values that had silenced and sidelined women for generations.

However, economic marginalisation, such as the decline of women's role in the coir industry, posed fresh hurdles to this progress.

The experience showed that genuine emancipation depended not only on social and political awakening but also on structural economic changes that would secure women's material independence and strengthen their position in society.

Recap

- ◆ Women's political consciousness in Kerala grew under colonial, nationalist and reform pressures.
- ◆ Matriliney shifted to patriliney, sparking legal battles over property rights
- ◆ Novels like *Indulekha* questioned feudal customs, empowering modern educated women
- ◆ Nambutiri women's reforms challenged polygamy, orthodox practices and demanded better status.
- ◆ Ezhavas under Sree Narayana Guru fought caste, promoted education and advocated for simple marriages.
- ◆ The Vaikom Satyagraha mobilised women and Gandhiji's visit boosted khadi and freedom struggle participation.
- ◆ Missionaries established girls' schools, merging Christian conversion aims with social upliftment efforts.
- ◆ Community organisations like NSS, SNDP and SJPS expanded women's education and shaped identity politics.
- ◆ Marriage Acts legalised *Sambandham*, ended polyandry and protected wives and children's inheritance rights.
- ◆ Plays like *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekk* exposed oppression, fuelling Nambutiri women's awakening.
- ◆ Christian and Muslim communities gradually reformed marriage and inheritance, ending matriliney's dominance regionally.
- ◆ Nationalist and Communist movements integrated working-class women into strikes and unions, demanding maternity rights.

- ◆ The Women's India Association fought for devadasi abolition, voting rights and women's employment protections.
- ◆ Temple entry, swadeshi picketing and civil disobedience campaigns saw unprecedented women's activism.

Objective Questions

1. Which Act marked the legalisation of Sambandham among the Nairs in Travancore?
2. Who led the Ezhava community's fight for social reform and education?
3. Which play by V.T. Bhattathiripad criticised oppressive Nambutiri customs?
4. Name the heroine in the novel *Indulekha* who symbolises the impact of English education on Nair women.
5. Who was a key female organiser in the Communist-led Tiruvitamkur Coir Factory Workers Union?
6. Which Act allowed Muslims in Malabar to shift from matriliney to Shariat inheritance?
7. Which women's organisation promoted Swadeshi and social welfare?
8. Who wrote the novel *Indulekha*?

Answers

1. The Travancore Nair Regulation of 1912
2. Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan
3. *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku*

4. *Indulekha*
5. K. Meenakshi
6. Shariat Act 1937
7. Women's India Association
8. Chandhu Menon

Assignments

1. Explain the impact of the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal systems among the Nairs and its significance for women's rights in Kerala.
2. Discuss the role of missionary education in shaping women's literacy and social status in Kerala during the 19th and early 20th centuries.
3. How did literature like *Indulekha* and plays like *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* contribute to women's social awareness and reform movements?
4. Describe the role of community organisations in promoting women's education and social upliftment.
5. Assess the importance of the National movements and Communist movements in increasing women's political participation in Kerala.

Reference

1. Arunima, G. "Matriliny and Its Discontents." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2/3, Summer–Monsoon 1995, pp. 73–85. www.jstor.org/stable/23003943.
2. Bhattathiripad, V.T., *Adukkalayilninu Arangathek*, DC Books, 2022.
3. Cherian, P.J., editor. *Perspectives on Kerala History. Kerala State Gazetteer*, vol. II, part II, Thiruvananthapuram, 2024.

4. Devi, Indira M.G. *Kerala and the Quit India Movement*. Mullasseril Publishers, 2005.
5. Gurukkal, Rajan and Raghava Varier. *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present*. Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2018.
6. Menon, O. Chandhu. *Indulekha*. H & C Books, 2016.
7. Panikkar, K.N. "Literature as History of Social Change." *Social Scientist*, vol. 40, 2012, pp. 47–56. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41633799.
8. Rajan, P.K. "Comparative View: Three Heroines: Indulekha, Sita and Gauri: A Study in Feminine Consciousness." *Indian Literature*, vol. 30, no. 3 (119), 1987, pp. 107–116. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23337931.
9. Sivadasan, S., editor. *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. Modern Book Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, 2021.

Suggested Reading

1. Achyuthan, K.R. "The Social Spectrum of Kerala." *Journal of Kerala Studies*, vol. X, parts 1–4, 1983.
2. Isaac, T.M. Thomas. *Emergence of the Trade Union Movement in Alappuzha (1922–38)*. CDS, Thiruvananthapuram, 1983.
3. Menon, P.K.K., editor. *The History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala: 1885–1938*. Vol. 2, Department of Cultural Publications, Kerala, 2001.
4. Nair, P.K. Parameswaran. *History of Malayalam Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, Madras, 1967.
5. Namboodiripad, E.M.S. *Kerala Society and Politics*. National Book Centre, Delhi, 1984.
6. Raimon, S., et al., editors. *The History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala: 1938–1948*. Vol. 3, State Archives Department, Nalanda, Trivandrum, 2006.
7. Rao, M.S.A. *Tradition, Rationality and Change*. Bombay, 1972.
8. Velayudhan, Meera. "Women Workers and Class Struggles in Alappuzha, 1938–50." *Shakti*, vol. I, no. 2, 1984.



BLOCK

Movements against Caste and Untouchability



UNIT

Radical Reform

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ discuss how early colonial encounters and education challenged Kerala's caste order.
- ◆ assess the ideological and organisational strategies of Ayyappan, Krishnan and Vagbhatananda.
- ◆ analyse the link between philosophy, journalism and activism in caste reform.
- ◆ evaluate the role of reformist organisations in advancing equality and fraternity.

Prerequisites

The advent of European colonial powers initially the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and subsequently the British added further layers of socio-political and economic complexity to Kerala. By the late eighteenth century, substantial portions of the region came under British authority, either through direct rule in Malabar or indirectly via the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. The colonial administration introduced new systems of revenue collection that consolidated the position of landlords while simultaneously exacerbating the economic vulnerability of peasants. Paradoxically, colonial intervention also created fissures within the traditional order. Missionary activity facilitated the establishment of schools where, at least in principle, children from diverse social backgrounds could receive education. Likewise, the introduction of the printing press initially by missionaries and later appropriated by

indigenous reformers opened discursive spaces for emerging voices of critique and reform. The spread of Western education, moreover, produced a new generation of Indians capable of critically evaluating their own society considering liberal ideals circulating in the broader global context.

Contemporary reports by travellers and colonial officials documented the harsh realities faced by lower castes, thereby bringing greater visibility to the severity of caste-based restrictions. Although the colonial administration frequently upheld the privileges of landlords and Brahmins, the very mechanisms of modern governance such as administrative surveys, codified laws and bureaucratic procedures unintentionally eroded elements of traditional authority. This paradox was particularly evident in the functioning of colonial courts, which at times reinforced caste norms while simultaneously providing new avenues for legal redress. Such contradictions were not overlooked by those who sought to challenge and transform the existing social order.

Keywords

Mishra Bhojanam, Sahodara Sangham, Mithavadi , Atmavidya Sangham, Abhinava Kerala

Discussion

A striking feature of Kerala's early reform movements is that they largely emerged from within Hindu society rather than being imposed through external intervention. Reform-minded individuals began interrogating the ideological foundations of untouchability, questioning whether such practices were genuinely sanctioned by sacred texts or whether they represented distortions devised to preserve entrenched hierarchies of privilege. This critical engagement reflected both ethical consciousness and structural necessity. On the one hand, reformers articulated a moral revulsion against the systematic dehumanisation of neighbours, labourers and community members a stance resonant with notions of moral universalism and the critique of "othering" advanced in social theory. On the other hand, reform

was also propelled by the recognition that a society fragmented into multiple antagonistic castes was ill-equipped to negotiate the demands of modernity, colonial governance and global competition.

The strategies of reform drew on diverse intellectual resources. For some, the project assumed a religious character, as they sought to reinterpret spiritual texts to affirm the principle of human equality before the divine a process akin to what theorists describe as religious reformation from within. Others adopted a more secular and rationalist approach, rejecting caste on the grounds that it was irrational, unscientific and unjust, thereby aligning with Enlightenment-derived discourses of reason, rights and social justice. In this sense, Kerala's reform movement can be understood as both a moral critique and a

pragmatic response, embodying what Antonio Gramsci might term a counter-hegemonic project that challenged dominant cultural logics while envisioning a more egalitarian social order. The caste reform movements in Kerala had far-reaching implications for the cultural practices and evolving identities of Dalit communities. Many of these initiatives sought to secure upward mobility by adopting elements of Brahmanical norms, thereby attempting to negotiate status within the rigidly stratified social order of Kerala. Practices such as vegetarianism and an emphasis on ritual purity became prominent markers of this process of social reconstitution. In retrospect, these movements have often been described under the rubric of a regional 'renaissance,' highlighting their transformative role in reshaping collective consciousness. At the same time, the mobilisation of lower-caste groups through such reformist efforts integrated them into a reconfigured Hindu fold, offering modes of religious and social belonging that were previously inaccessible within the entrenched hierarchies of traditional caste society. In the early twentieth century, Kerala remained a profoundly stratified society, where rigid caste hierarchies were sustained both by long-standing custom and by the regulatory mechanisms of colonial law. Reformist interventions began to unsettle this order, most notably through the work of Sree Narayana Guru, whose celebrated dictum, "one caste, one religion, one God," articulated a vision of spiritual egalitarianism within a Vedantic framework. Yet, a younger generation of radicals advanced this critique in more secular and uncompromising terms. Sahodaran Ayyappan, for example, rejected religious authority altogether with his declaration: "No caste, no religion, no God". Such positions encapsulated the intellectual and ethical ferment of what has come to be described as Kerala's Renaissance—an era that combined elements of Vedantic universalism with rationalist critique and

demands for social justice. Within this transformative milieu, three figures stand out: Sahodaran Ayyappan in central Kerala, C. Krishnan (often referred to as Mithavadi Krishnan) in Malabar and Vagbhatananda in the northern regions. Each, in distinct ways, mobilised new discourses and practices to contest untouchability, superstition and entrenched inequalities, thereby contributing to the broader reconfiguration of Kerala's social and cultural landscape.

3.1.1 Sahodaran Ayyappan and the Sahodara Sangham

Sahodaran Ayyappan (1889–1968) was born in a Cherai Ezhava household on Vypeen Island. Deeply influenced by Narayana Guru's ethics, he added the title "Sahodaran" (meaning "brother") to his name as a manifesto of universal kinship. In May 1917 Ayyappan staged a watershed protest: the Mishra-Bhojanam (mixed dining) at Cherai, where Pulaya, Paraya and higher-caste Hindus ate together on the same banana leaf. This direct challenge to untouchability provoked outrage among Brahmins and Nairs, who scorned him as "Pulaya Ayyappan". He simply embraced the label, proud to stand with the oppressed. For Kerala's marginalised, this inter-caste feast was nothing short of revolutionary.

The Cherai feast catalysed the founding of the Sahodara Sangham (Brotherhood Association) in 1917. Its aim was revolutionary: to destroy caste distinctions and promote equality through solidarity. The Sangham organised packed public meetings and communal festivals where people from all backgrounds dined and socialised together. It even promoted inter-caste marriage as a political act of liberation. In the same year, Ayyappan launched a journal, Sahodaran, to spread these ideas. Printed at Mattancherry, its logo was a pipal leaf symbolising enlightenment and Ayyappan became its editor and eponym. His articles attacked



ritualism, superstition and the hypocrisy of high-caste “reformers”. He insisted that religion must never contradict human equality, turning the ethical core of Vedanta against Brahmin hegemony.

Ayyappan imbued the movement with a broad progressive ideology. Sahodaran fiercely advocated rationalism and socialism. It celebrated labour rights and intermarriage, urged temple entry for Dalits and even ran articles on Marxism and global revolutions. Notably, the annual issue of 1929 carried an illustrated biography of Lenin, a signal of Sangham’s radical horizons. In poetry and prose, Ayyappan linked Kerala’s struggle to world history: he sang about the October Revolution and the French Republic’s ideals in Malayalam. He also popularised Buddhist ethics by commissioning early Malayalam translations of the Dhammapada.

Unlike many contemporaneous reformers who restricted themselves to rhetorical or symbolic interventions, Sahodaran Ayyappan actively translated egalitarian ideals into both praxis and institutional politics. His role as a legislator in the Travancore Legislative Assembly during the 1930s was marked by consistent advocacy for progressive measures such as temple entry for marginalised communities and the advancement of labour rights, thereby challenging entrenched socio-religious hierarchies. More enduring, however, was his capacity to embed these principles within collective life through the activities of the Sahodara Sangham, whose communal meals, study circles and public gatherings constituted a performative enactment of social equality. By reinterpreting Sree Narayana Guru as the “Kerala Buddha” and privileging ethics over doctrinal religiosity, Ayyappan articulated a discursive framework that combined spiritual humanism with rationalist critique. This synthesis facilitated a transition towards a secular-modern ethos in Kerala, situating its modernisation within a trajectory distinct

from both colonial liberalism and orthodox religiosity.

3.1.2 C. Krishnan (Mithavadi Krishnan) and the Mithavadi

In northern Kerala’s Malabar region, Changaramkumarath C. Krishnan (1867-1938) emerged as a parallel champion of equality. Well-educated and from a relatively privileged Thiyya family, Krishnan renounced personal gain for social reform. A devoted disciple of Narayana Guru and colleague of Ayyappan, he was nicknamed Mithavadi after the weekly *Mithavadi* (The Reformer) he edited from 1913 until his death. Under Krishnan, the paper became the “Bible of the socially depressed”. Through its fiery editorials, the *Mithavadi* relentlessly attacked caste injustice. It called for temple entry of “backward” Hindus, equal schooling for Ezhavas, Thiyyas and Dalits and fair wages for peasants. It also stood up to landlords: when oppressive tenancy laws hurt farmers, Krishnan reminded rulers that the true owners of the land were the people, not kings or feudal elites.

Krishnan’s ideology blended rationalism, humanism and democratic socialism. He admired Guru’s universalism but insisted on mass politics. Like Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar believed that caste liberation must precede political independence. In practice he courted controversy: he was initially an admirer of Gandhi, inviting him to Calicut in 1918, but confronted him with Kerala’s reality. In a private meeting, Krishnan told Gandhi that untouchability and savarna domination must be eradicated as the priority in the freedom movement. He warned Gandhi that political freedom would be “hollow and meaningless” without social equality.

Krishnan also worked through community organisations. He was a leading figure in the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP)

Yogam in Malabar. He organised SNDP conventions, chaired its Sivagiri jubilee in 1916 and even served as Dharmakartha (manager) of Guru's ashram institutions. His influence reached beyond Kerala: he helped introduce Neo-Buddhism to Malabar by organising a public Buddhist meeting in Kozhikode in 1925, planting pipal saplings descended from the Bodhi tree. In 1929 he co-launched the rationalist magazine *Yuktivadi* with Ayyappan and others, aiming to spread scientific temper and equality to the masses. He also wrote books, such as *Buddha Tatva Pradeepam* in 1929, critiquing ritualism and inequality from a Buddhist-humanist perspective.

Throughout, Krishnan refused personal advancement. At one point he could have joined the British administration, but instead spent his wealth on reform. He even remained critical of Congress's upper-caste leadership, famously opposing Gandhi's Quit India campaign in 1930 as insufficient for caste justice. Still, by the 1920s and 1930s his repeated pleas did help push Kerala toward reform: the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) and Guruvayur temple-entry (1931) campaigns saw his support. He mentored younger activists and the Mithavadi was effectively a training ground for future writers and politicians. His contribution was to democratise Kerala's public sphere, tying caste reform to broader struggles of land, labour and dignity.

3.1.3 Vagbhatananda and the Atmavidya Sangham

In northern Malabar, Vayaleri Kunhikkannan Gurukkal (1885-1939), better known as Vagbhatananda, offered a more explicitly philosophical path to reform. A brilliant Sanskrit scholar, he fused Vedantic Advaita with a trenchant social critique. In 1917 he founded the Atmavidya Sangham (Society for Self-Knowledge) at Karakkad near Vadakara. Unlike the more

spiritually oriented Sree Narayana Trust, Vagbhatananda's Sangham was largely secular and intellectual. It drew upon Advaita ideas that the same divine Self resides in all people to attack caste. He insisted religion must lead to compassion, not hierarchy. In his tract *Atmavidya* (written as the Sangham's manifesto) and in public lectures he taught that if all men are "children of God," caste barriers had no meaning.

Vagbhatananda poured these ideas into action. He ran free schools open to all castes, such as the Tatvaprasika Sanskrit School he founded in Kozhikode in 1906, which made special concessions for poor students. The Sangham organised communal meals and encouraged inter-caste marriage, just as Ayyappan's did. Importantly, the *Atmavidya* journal *Abhinava Kerala* (started in 1921) and later *Atmavidyakahalam* spread his messages in Malayalam. His oratory, influenced by Brahmananda Siva Yogi's Raja Yoga teachings, turned him into a popular teacher across Malabar. By appealing to reason and inner spirituality, he made reform a conscious choice rather than a concession to politics.

Vagbhatananda campaigned vigorously against superstition and social evils. Under the banner of the Sangham he led public agitations against idol worship and ritual poisonings. He openly criticised intoxicating alcohol and drug abuse, urging prohibition in Kerala. He forbade animal sacrifice in temples, even physically entering temple courtyards to protest it. He condemned dowry, child marriage and other caste-linked customs in his poems and essays. He encouraged intercaste dining and inter-caste marriages and vehemently opposed untouchability. In the early 1930s, Vagbhatananda also lent strong support to the Guruvayur Satyagraha, where volunteers demanded the right for all Hindus to enter the temple. He argued that denying entry to any Hindu was a violation of the very principles of the faith.



In less than a generation Vagbhatananda's movement laid important social groundwork. It raised political consciousness among North Malabar's lower castes and gave Kerala's freedom struggle an egalitarian edge. In 1925 he inspired the founding of the Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative, a peasants' co-operative that became a model for community self-help. His intellectual synthesis also influenced Kerala's later leaders. E. M. S. Namboodiripad acknowledged Vagbhatananda's role in shaping Kerala's egalitarian ethos. After his death the formal Sangham faded, but its ideas endured in North Malabar. Vagbhatananda showed that Advaita spirituality and social justice were not opposed but complementary. His version of Vedanta applied to everyday life helped Kerala's reformers see religious tradition as a source of universal equality rather than caste division.

3.1.4 Broader Impact on Kerala Society

The intellectual and political interventions of Sahodaran Ayyappan, K. A. Krishnan and Vagbhatananda must be situated within the broader framework of Kerala's

socio-cultural Renaissance, a transformative movement spanning the early decades of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1940, these reformers played a pivotal role in destabilising entrenched structures of caste orthodoxy and ritual hierarchy. Through the institutionalisation of practices such as inter-dining, joint festivals and the organisation of inclusive public gatherings, they affected what may be read as a counter-hegemonic reconstitution of social relations, anticipating and supplementing state-led reforms. Their interventions in print culture through journals, tracts and poetry extended these critiques into the public sphere, enabling the circulation of new discourses on caste, religion, rationalism and science. In this sense, their work exemplifies what scholars have identified as the creation of a "vernacular modernity," wherein global ideas of secularism and humanism were translated into local idioms of practice. Collectively, these reformers provided the ideological and cultural groundwork for the watershed struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, including the Vaikom Satyagraha, the Guruvayur and Travancore temple-entry movements and the landmark 1936 Temple Entry Proclamation.

Recap

- ◆ Colonial rule strengthened landlords but weakened caste privileges.
- ◆ Missionary schools opened cracks in rigid social hierarchies.
- ◆ Western education inspired comparison with liberal global ideals.
- ◆ Ezhavas strongly resented denial of learning and temples.
- ◆ Reform spirit in India influenced Kerala's local leaders.
- ◆ Ayyappan promoted brotherhood through communal dining experiments.

- ◆ Sahodaran journal spread rationalist, socialist and egalitarian ideas.
- ◆ Mithavadi Krishnan used journalism to empower marginalised peasants.
- ◆ Vagbhatananda's Atmavidya Sangham upheld Advaita against caste barriers.
- ◆ Reformers transformed philosophy into practical social action.

Objective Questions

1. Who organised the famous inter-dining feast at Cherai in 1917?
2. Which weekly newspaper became C. Krishnan's main instrument of reformist agitation?
3. What year did Krishnan assume editorship of *Mithavadi* in Malabar region?
4. Which reformer was mockingly called "Pulaya Ayyappan" by caste conservatives?
5. Which organisation was founded by Vagbhatananda to promote *Advaita* philosophy?
6. In which year did Vagbhatananda start publishing the journal *Abhinava Kerala*?
7. What philosophy underpinned the Atmavidya Sangham's call for human equality?
8. Which reformer openly promoted socialism, rationalism and even atheism?
9. What famous temple struggle did Vagbhatananda directly support in early 1930s?
10. Which caste community strongly resented denial of Sanskrit learning and temple entry?

Answers

1. Sahodaran Ayyappan
2. Mithavadi
3. 1913
4. Sahodaran Ayyappan
5. Atmavidya Sangham
6. 1921
7. Advaita
8. Sahodaran Ayyappan
9. Guruvayur Satyagraha
10. Ezhavas

Assignments

1. Discuss how colonial education and missionary activities weakened caste barriers in Kerala.
2. Analyse Sahodaran Ayyappan's inter-dining experiment as a radical challenge to untouchability.
3. Evaluate C. Krishnan's role as both journalist and activist in social reform.
4. Examine how Vagbhatananda used Advaita philosophy to fight caste discrimination.

Reference

1. Devika, J. *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala*. Orient Longman, 2007.
2. Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*. Oxford University Press, 1993.
3. Jones, Kenneth W. *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
4. Heimsath, Charles H. *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*. Oxford University Press, 1965.

Suggested Reading

1. Devika, J., editor. *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women 1898–1938*. Stree, 2005.
2. Ganesh, K. N. *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*. Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2004.
3. Ganesh, K. N. *Keralathinte Innalekal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1995.
4. Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
5. Cherian, P. J., editor. *Perspectives in Kerala History*. Kerala State Gazetteers Department, 1999. Devika, J., editor. *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women 1898–1938*. Stree, 2005.
6. Ganesh, K. N. *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*. Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2004.
7. Ganesh, K. N. *Keralathinte Innalekal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1995.
8. Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
9. Cherian, P. J., editor. *Perspectives in Kerala History*. Kerala State Gazetteers Department, 1999.



UNIT

Spiritual Path

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain how spiritual reformers in Kerala challenged caste and untouchability.
- ◆ compare the approaches of Sivayogi, Sivananda and Ananda Tirtha in reform.
- ◆ assess the role of organisations like Ananda Samajam and Siddha Samajam.
- ◆ analyse the impact of spiritual reformers on Kerala's modern egalitarian identity.

Prerequisites

Kerala's early twentieth-century renaissance cannot be understood solely in political or literary terms; it was also profoundly shaped by spiritual reinterpretations that carried emancipatory potential. Significantly, some of the most radical challenges to caste hierarchy and untouchability were articulated not by professional politicians or social agitators, but by spiritual leaders who deployed the idioms of religion and philosophy to envision egalitarian futures. Thinkers such as Brahmananda Sivayogi, Swami Sivananda Paramahansa and Swami Ananda Tirtha exemplified what may be described as a theologically inflected critique of social stratification: by re-reading scriptural traditions and philosophical categories, they destabilized the metaphysical justifications for caste. Their interventions moved beyond the pursuit of individual moksha to encompass a collective soteriology seeking not merely personal salvation but the liberation of society itself from the oppressive grip of ritual hierarchy. Through the establishment of new communities, institutions and practices, these

figures advanced what might be theorised as a form of “spiritual social reform,” wherein theological innovation functioned as both a critique of orthodoxy and a resource for building alternative social imaginaries. Theirs was a radical project: to prove that true spirituality is inseparable from human equality. Each of them established organisations or ashrams Ananda Samajam, Siddha Samajam and Anandashram/Sri Narayana Vidyalaya that became living demonstrations of their principles. Through these, they inspired oppressed communities to believe that dignity and equality were not just dreams, but achievable realities.

Keywords

Anandamatham, Siddha Samajam, Anandashram, Temple Entry Proclamation (1936), Siddha Veda

Discussion

3.2.1 Brahmananda Sivayogi and the Ananda Samajam

Brahmananda Sivayogi (1852-1929) was born into a traditional Nair family in Palakkad, but his life journey carried him far beyond the world of conventional religion and caste. Educated in Sanskrit and philosophy, he became disillusioned with idol worship and ritualism, convinced that they chained people to ignorance. Influenced by the reformist climate of his time, he began to see caste itself as an artificial institution that dehumanised millions.

In 1907 Sivayogi renounced his teaching post and established a siddha ashram at Alathur. Here he developed his philosophy of *Anandamatham*, or the Religion of Bliss. According to him, the ultimate purpose of human life was not ritual or social prestige but the attainment of eternal bliss (*ananda*). This bliss was universal, belonging equally to every human being regardless of birth. By preaching this simple yet powerful message

in Malayalam, he challenged both priestly authority and caste barriers.

Sivayogi's critique of superstition and false scriptures was fierce. He urged people to liberate themselves from meaningless customs and to embrace rationality, compassion and equality. His sermons emphasised that all men and women are equal, that no one should be degraded because of their caste and that religion should never be a justification for discrimination. For those trapped in the cruel web of untouchability, his words offered a fresh breath of hope.

But Sivayogi did not stop at philosophy. He also built organisations that could carry these ideas into society. His Siddhasrama at Alathur became a hub of reform and branches like the Ananda Samajam sprang up in Malabar. The Ananda Samajam worked especially among the Ezhava community, who had long suffered exclusion. By pointing out how caste distinctions had already begun to collapse in the modern age, the Samajam encouraged people to reject the chains of ritual hierarchy.



Through lectures, communal gatherings and public debates, Sivayogi and his followers spread a culture of equality. In place of rituals that emphasised pollution and purity, he offered yoga, meditation and the pursuit of inner bliss. In place of rigid caste practices, he created a fellowship where people could meet as equals. His contribution lay not only in reinterpreting Vedanta but in translating that vision into an organisational movement that gave people the courage to rise against untouchability.

3.2.2 Swami Sivananda Paramahansa and the Siddha Samajam

If Brahmananda Sivayogi fought caste through philosophy and reinterpretation, Swami Sivananda Paramahansa sought to annihilate it through a radical experiment in social living. Born in northern Kerala, he had once served as a police officer, but renounced his career to pursue spiritual and social reform. His vision materialised in the form of the *Siddha Samajam* at Vadakara, a commune that rejected caste, ritual and private property.

The *Siddha Samajam* was startlingly unconventional. Within its boundaries, there were no caste labels, no marriages in the traditional sense and no personal property. Men and women lived together as equals, sharing labour and resources. Children were brought up communally, with everyone sharing responsibility for their care. Worship of gods was abandoned; the only temple-like structure in the commune was used as a memorial hall, not for ritual. For Sivananda, rituals and religious divisions were distractions from the simple task of living joyfully and equally.

He composed the *Siddha Vedam*, a new text that laid down the principles of this community. It rejected superstition and caste, called for collective living and urged

people to embrace simplicity. In his utopia, caste was banned outright. Everyone was equal in food, dress and daily work. Even surnames were abolished; children took on a common surname derived from Sivananda to symbolise shared kinship.

Life in the *Siddha Samajam* was rigorous but liberating. Members cultivated their own land, cooked and ate together and pooled resources. There were no hierarchy and no priestly class. It was, in effect, a caste-free republic of equals. For a society still governed by strict rules of pollution and exclusion, this was nothing short of revolutionary.

The *Siddha Samajam* did not grow into a mass movement, but its symbolic power was immense. It showed that caste was not a natural order but a man-made system that could be dismantled. It demonstrated that people could live together without the crutches of ritual or hierarchy. For many younger reformers and radicals in Kerala, Sivananda's experiment served as an inspiration. Even those who did not imitate its communal lifestyle could see in it a daring challenge to the caste system.

3.2.3 Swami Ananda Tirtha and the Anandashram/Sri Narayana Vidyalaya

Swami Ananda Tirtha (1905 - 1987) brought a somewhat different but equally determined approach to the fight against caste. A disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, he was also influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's call to serve the "Harijans" or oppressed castes. While Sivayogi emphasised philosophy and Sivananda built a commune, Ananda Tirtha combined spiritual teaching with social service, particularly in the field of education.

After receiving initiation from Narayana Guru in 1928, Ananda Tirtha travelled widely among Dalit communities in Malabar. He dined with them, stayed in their homes and

treated them as equals, an act of defiance at a time when untouchability still ruled daily life. He openly declared that his mission was to destroy caste inequality and he devoted himself to uplifting the most marginalised.

In 1931 he founded the Sri Narayana Vidyalaya at Payyanur, later known as Anandashram. This institution was specifically designed for Dalit children who were barred from most schools. It offered both general and vocational education, combined with strict discipline, moral training and a supportive hostile environment. Ananda Tirtha believed that education was the key to breaking caste barriers and he poured his energy into giving the oppressed access to learning.

The Vidyalaya became a haven for children of the so-called “untouchable” communities. Here they were treated with dignity, trained in skills and taught to believe in their own worth. Instead of being excluded, they were prepared to enter mainstream schools and society with confidence. Through education, Ananda Tirtha sought to erase the stigma of untouchability and build a generation that could stand shoulder to shoulder with others.

His approach was both spiritual and practical. He preached equality as a divine truth but also worked tirelessly to provide food, shelter, medical aid and employment opportunities for the poor. For many, he was more than a reformer; he was a living example of compassion in action. By uniting the universalist vision of Narayana Guru with the constructive programme of Gandhi,

he built a movement that directly attacked the roots of caste oppression.

3.2.4 Legacy

Though different in method, Brahmananda Sivayogi, Sivananda Paramahansa and Ananda Tirtha were united by a single conviction caste was a man-made barrier that contradicted both reason and spirituality. Each crafted a unique path to fight it. Sivayogi proclaimed that bliss is universal and destroyed the authority of ritual; Sivananda created a caste-free commune that lived his ideals; Ananda Tirtha turned schools into instruments of liberation.

Their organisations Ananda Samajam, Siddha Samajam and Anandashram were not merely religious bodies but laboratories of social equality. They introduced practices that directly challenged untouchability: communal dining, shared living, education for the excluded and the rejection of ritual taboos. For people long accustomed to humiliation, these spaces were transformative.

These movements also left a deeper imprint on Kerala’s history. They laid the groundwork for later mass struggles such as the Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas and they reinforced the message that freedom from caste was as vital as political independence. The Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, which legally abolished temple restrictions, did not come as a sudden gift. It was the fruit of decades of reform, much of it nurtured by leaders like Sivayogi, Sivananda and Ananda Tirtha.

Recap

- ◆ Kerala's renaissance combined politics, literature and spiritual reform.
- ◆ Sivayogi founded Anandamatham promoting bliss beyond caste divisions.
- ◆ Ananda Samajam worked among Ezhavas against ritual hierarchies.
- ◆ Sivananda created Siddha Samajam, a caste-free communal republic.
- ◆ Siddha Samajam abolished private property, caste and traditional marriage.
- ◆ Sivananda composed Siddha Vedam rejecting superstition and ritualism.
- ◆ Ananda Tirtha established Sri Narayana Vidyalaya for Dalit education.
- ◆ Education at Anandashram empowered untouchable communities through dignity.
- ◆ Reformers' organisations pioneered communal living and caste-free fellowship.
- ◆ Their legacy prepared ground for temple entry and equality.

Objective Questions

1. Which reformer founded Anandamatham and criticised rituals as chains of ignorance?
2. Name the community where Ananda Samajam mainly spread reformist influence.
3. Which commune banned caste, ritual, property and traditional marriage in Kerala?
4. Who authored Siddha Vedam to outline principles of caste-free living?
5. In which year did Ananda Tirtha receive initiation from Narayana Guru?
6. Which institution founded in 1931 gave education to Dalit children?
7. What common surname did Siddha Samajam children adopt symbolising shared kinship?

8. Whose reform experiments inspired future struggles like the Vaikom Satyagraha?
9. Which 1936 proclamation legally abolished temple restrictions in Travancore?
10. Which reformer united Narayana Guru's vision with Gandhian constructive programme?

Answers

1. Brahmananda Sivayogi
2. Ezhavas
3. Siddha Samajam
4. Sami Sivananda Paramahansa
5. 1928
6. Sri Narayana Vidyalaya
7. Sivananda
8. Sivananda Paramahansa
9. Temple Entry Proclamation
10. Swami Ananda Tirtha

Assignments

1. Critically evaluate Brahmananda Sivayogi's Anandamatham as a philosophy of equality.
2. Analyse the communal lifestyle of Siddha Samajam as a social experiment.
3. Discuss the role of education in Swami Ananda Tirtha's anti-caste reform.

Reference

1. Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar 1850–1940*. Orient Longman, 2003.
2. Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
3. Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Oxford University Press, 1996
4. Rao, M. S. A. *Social Change in Malabar*. The Popular Book Depot, 1957.

Suggested Reading

1. *In Search of India's Renaissance*. Vol. II, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1992.
2. *Kerala Through the Ages*. Department of Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 1980.



UNIT

Temple Entry Movement

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain the causes and significance of the Temple Entry Movement in Kerala.
- ◆ analyse the role of Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas in anti-caste struggles.
- ◆ analyse the 1936 Temple Entry Proclamation as a landmark in social reform.
- ◆ assess the wider legacy of temple entry struggles in Kerala's renaissance.

Prerequisites

Any account of Kerala's renaissance remains incomplete without a critical engagement with the struggles surrounding temple entry, which constituted one of the most visible arenas of contesting caste-based exclusion. Temples in Kerala, long regarded not merely as sites of worship but as symbolic markers of social privilege, reproduced and legitimised hierarchical boundaries through the systematic prohibition of access to "lower" castes. The denial of entry, therefore, cannot be reduced to a religious question; it represented a deeper struggle over dignity, recognition and the right to inhabit public and sacred space as equal members of society. The Temple Entry Movement, culminating in the landmark 1936 Temple Entry Proclamation, was the outcome of decades of agitation against untouchability, with decisive episodes such as the Vaikom Satyagraha of the 1920s and the Guruvayur Satyagraha of the 1930s. These mobilisations can be read as instances of what social theorists describe as a counter-public sphere, wherein subordinated communities articulated claims

to equality by directly confronting the spatial and ritual dimensions of caste power. Far from being isolated events, these struggles exemplified a broader process of social awakening, whereby ordinary men and women deployed collective action to destabilise the normative structures of ritual authority and recast the moral foundations of public life in Kerala.

Keywords

Vaikom Satyagraha, Guruvayur Satyagraha, Temple Entry Proclamation, Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, SNDP Yogam

Discussion

3.3.1 Vaikom Satyagraha (1924 - 1925)

The Vaikom Satyagraha occupies a central place in Kerala's modern history. Vaikom, a town in Travancore, was home to the great Shiva temple surrounded by four approach roads. By long-standing custom, only caste Hindus could walk these roads. The untouchables, including Ezhavas, Pulayas and other communities, were forced to take longer routes around the temple, publicly reminded at every step of their "polluting" status.

The agitation began when leaders of the Kerala Congress and the Ezhava movement resolved to challenge this prohibition. On 30 March 1924, volunteers attempted to walk on the forbidden road. They were stopped by police, arrested and jailed. But this was only the beginning. Inspired by Gandhian methods, the movement adopted non-violent satyagraha, where volunteers repeatedly marched to the roads in defiance, accepting punishment with dignity.

The satyagraha soon drew national attention. Leaders such as T.K. Madhavan, K. Kelappan and K.P. Kesava Menon

played important roles in organising the protest. The involvement of the Indian National Congress gave the movement broader political legitimacy and Gandhi himself visited Vaikom to mediate. Though Gandhi counseled patience and compromise, his presence ensured that the issue of untouchability in Kerala became a subject of all-India debate.

The local participation was equally striking. Volunteers came from Ezhava, Pulaya and other backward communities, standing shoulder to shoulder with upper-caste sympathisers who supported reform. Women too took part, braving insults and threats. The struggle was marked by endurance: it lasted for 602 days, with repeated arrests and harsh repression by the Travancore state.

The results were mixed but significant. By the end of the satyagraha, three of the temple roads were opened to all castes, though the eastern road leading directly to the temple remained restricted. More importantly, Vaikom shattered the silence around temple entry. For the first time, untouchability in the form of road exclusion had been confronted head-on. The movement instilled confidence

in the oppressed communities, teaching them that non-violent struggle could break centuries-old barriers.

3.3.2 Guruvayur Satyagraha (1931 -1932)

If Vaikom had tested the right to walk near temples, Guruvayur Satyagraha raised the question of entry itself. The Guruvayur temple in Malabar, dedicated to Krishna, was one of the most famous shrines in Kerala. But like other temples, it remained barred to Ezhavas and untouchables. In the early 1930s, leaders of the Kerala Congress and the SNDP (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) resolved to launch a satyagraha demanding temple entry.

The Guruvayur Satyagraha was spearheaded by K. Kelappan, who undertook a fast unto death to press the demand. Other leaders such as A.K. Gopalan mobilised volunteers. The satyagraha was marked by intense public debate, petitions and demonstrations. Unlike Vaikom, it directly questioned the right of untouchables to worship in the sanctum sanctorum of Hindu religion.

The movement highlighted the contradictions within society. On one side were reformers, nationalists and members of the oppressed castes demanding equality. On the other were conservative trustees and upper-caste groups fiercely defending tradition. The temple authorities resisted, arguing that customs could not be altered. The state remained hesitant, unwilling to provoke orthodox opinion.

Kelappan's fast electrified public opinion. Newspapers carried daily updates and support poured in from across the country. Mahatma Gandhi again intervened, advising against extreme measures but affirming the justice of the cause. The satyagraha did not succeed immediately in opening Guruvayur temple, but it had a profound impact. It mobilised

thousands, spread the message of equality deep into villages and prepared the ground for wider acceptance of reform.

For the oppressed communities, Guruvayur symbolised the right not just to approach temples but to claim full membership in Hindu society. The satyagraha linked the fight against untouchability with the broader nationalist struggle, demonstrating that freedom for India would be incomplete without freedom for its oppressed castes.

3.3.3 The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936

The decisive breakthrough came in Travancore with the Temple Entry Proclamation of 12 November 1936. Signed by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, the proclamation declared that all castes would henceforth be allowed to enter temples under Travancore's control. With a single act, centuries of exclusion were legally abolished.

The proclamation did not come out of the blue. It was the outcome of sustained struggles like Vaikom and Guruvayur, of petitions by reformist organisations and of the moral pressure created by leaders such as Sree Narayana Guru. The SNDP Yogam, representing the Ezhavas, had long campaigned for temple rights. The Indian National Congress too had made eradication of untouchability a part of its programme. The Maharaja's decision reflected both the growing tide of reform and the recognition that social justice was essential for political stability.

The proclamation was historic in its immediate impact. From that day, Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas and other formerly excluded communities could step into temples where once even their shadow was considered polluting. The temple ceased to be a fortress of caste pride and became, at least in law, a shared place of worship. For the oppressed,



it was nothing less than a revolution: an affirmation that they were equal children of God.

The announcement reverberated across India. Reformers hailed it as a bold step, setting an example for other princely states and British provinces. For Kerala, it marked the symbolic end of untouchability in religious life. While social prejudices persisted, the legal abolition of caste restrictions in temples was a crucial milestone on the road to equality.

3.3.4 Wider Impact and Legacy

The Temple Entry Movement marked a critical juncture in the socio-cultural transformation of Kerala, producing effects that extended far beyond the ritual sphere. First, it engendered among historically marginalised communities a renewed sense of collective agency and self-respect. The ability to cross temple thresholds symbolised more than access to sacred space; it signified an entry into the moral and symbolic order of society itself. In lifting the stigma of ritual exclusion, the movement reconstituted subjectivities, enabling oppressed groups to reimagine themselves as legitimate participants in both religious and civic domains. Second, the movement destabilised the ideological coherence of caste by foregrounding its internal contradictions. If religion claimed to embody compassion, universality and spiritual equality, how could it simultaneously sustain practices of systemic exclusion? Reformers strategically deployed this paradox to extend the critique of hierarchy beyond the temple into other arenas education, labour and civic life thereby linking the struggle for ritual inclusion to a broader discourse of social justice. This may be read as a process of counter-hegemonic appropriation, in which subordinated groups reinterpreted dominant religious symbols

to legitimise egalitarian claims, thereby transforming both the sacred and the secular dimensions of Kerala's modernity.

Third, the movement demonstrated the power of non-violent struggle. The satyagrahas at Vaikom and Guruvayur showed that sustained, disciplined protest could force change, even against deeply entrenched traditions. The willingness of satyagrahis to face arrest, humiliation and even death won them moral authority and drew national attention.

Finally, the proclamation of 1936 prepared the ground for Kerala's later achievements in social justice. It was followed by campaigns for access to education, government jobs and land. The self-respect and unity fostered by the temple entry struggles contributed to the progressive political culture for which Kerala is known today.

The fight for temple entry in Kerala was never only about worship. It was about the right to be treated as human beings, with equal dignity and honour. The Vaikom Satyagraha opened the roads, the Guruvayur Satyagraha demanded entry and the Temple Entry Proclamation made equality a legal fact. Together, they represent one of the most powerful chapters in India's battle against caste and untouchability.

These struggles remind us that social change does not happen overnight. It is the product of courage, endurance and the determination of ordinary people to challenge injustice. For the oppressed of Kerala, the opening of temple gates was a step towards opening the gates of society itself. It was a reminder that equality is not given as a gift from above but won through struggle. And in that struggle, the Temple Entry Movement stands as a shining milestone, inspiring future generations to carry the fight for dignity forward.

Recap

- ◆ Temples symbolised privilege and exclusion for oppressed communities in Kerala.
- ◆ Vaikom Satyagraha (1924) challenged caste restrictions on temple approach roads.
- ◆ Leaders like T.K. Madhavan and K. Kelappan organised Vaikom protests.
- ◆ Gandhi's mediation gave Vaikom national attention and political legitimacy.
- ◆ Guruvayur Satyagraha demanded untouchables' entry into Krishna temple sanctum.
- ◆ Kelappan's fast and A.K. Gopalan's mobilisation electrified Guruvayur struggle.
- ◆ Both satyagrahas exposed caste contradictions in Hindu religious practices.
- ◆ Temple Entry Proclamation (1936) abolished caste-based temple restrictions legally.
- ◆ Proclamation marked equality for Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas and others.
- ◆ These struggles inspired Kerala's progressive culture and egalitarian politics.

Objective Questions

1. Which temple's approach roads sparked the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924–25?
2. Name two major leaders who organised the Vaikom Satyagraha in Kerala.
3. Who visited Vaikom to mediate and lend national attention to protests?
4. Which satyagraha questioned the right of untouchables to enter sanctum?
5. Who spearheaded the Guruvayur Satyagraha with a fast unto death?

6. Which leader mobilised volunteers during Guruvayur Satyagraha alongside Kelappan?
7. In which year was the historic Temple Entry Proclamation issued?
8. Which Travancore Maharaja signed the Temple Entry Proclamation (1936)?
9. Which reformist organisation of Ezhavas campaigned for temple rights in Travancore?

Answers

1. Vaikom Shiva Temple
2. T.K. Madhavan, K. Kelappan
3. Mahatma Gandhi
4. Guruvayur Satyagraha
5. K. Kelappan
6. A.K. Gopalan
7. 1936
8. Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma
9. SNDP Yogam

Assignments

1. Critically examine the Vaikom Satyagraha as the first mass struggle against untouchability.
2. Analyse the significance of the Guruvayur Satyagraha in deepening the temple entry issue.
3. Evaluate the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 as a milestone in Kerala's reform history.
4. Discuss how the temple entry struggles shaped Kerala's modern egalitarian social order.

Reference

- ◆ Sen, Amiya P., editor. *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- ◆ Jones, Kenneth W. *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- ◆ Heimsath, Charles H. *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*. Oxford University Press, 1965.
- ◆ Cherian, P. J., editor. *Perspectives in Kerala History*. Kerala State Gazetteers Department, 1999.
- ◆ *Kerala Through the Ages*. Department of Public Relations, Government of Kerala, 1980.

Suggested Reading

1. Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar 1850–1940*. Orient Longman, 2003.
2. Rao, M. S. A. *Social Change in Malabar*. The Popular Book Depot, 1957.
3. Ganesh, K. N. *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*. Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2004.
4. Ganesh, K. N. *Keralathinte Innalekal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1995.
5. *In Search of India's Renaissance*. Vol. II, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1992.
6. Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
7. Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Oxford University Press, 1996.



UNIT

Later Movements

Learning Outcomes

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

- ♦ trace the historical background and social circumstances that led to the Paliyam Satyagraha.
- ♦ identify the key leaders, organisations and strategies involved in the Tali temple Satyagraha.
- ♦ discuss the social background and outcome of the Kalpathi Struggle

Prerequisites

Any analysis of Kerala's mid-twentieth-century social reform movements requires an appreciation of the historical conjuncture in which they unfolded, shaped simultaneously by entrenched caste structures, ritual exclusions and the broader currents of anti-colonial nationalism. Despite Kerala's reputation for high literacy and rich cultural traditions, the region remained bound by rigid hierarchies that governed access to temples, roads and other public spaces, thereby codifying social exclusion in everyday life. By the early decades of the twentieth century, reformist organisations such as the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and the Yogakshema Sabha had already articulated counter-hegemonic claims to dignity and equality, mobilising marginalised communities against caste oppression. Parallel to these indigenous reformist trajectories, the diffusion of Gandhian philosophy particularly the method of satyagraha provided both a moral vocabulary and a tactical repertoire for non-violent resistance. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) was especially significant in this regard, as it constituted not merely a protest spatial restriction but also an experiment in what Habermas might describe as the formation of a subaltern public sphere, where subordinated groups contested their exclusion from civic and sacred spaces. This struggle laid the groundwork for later mobilisations of the 1940s, including the Paliyam Satyagraha, the Tali

Temple Satyagraha and the Kalpathi Struggle, each of which expanded the terrain of civil rights by dismantling specific manifestations of caste-based discrimination. Viewed collectively, these movements represent a convergence of local reformist traditions, Gandhian praxis and nationalist aspirations, producing what may be theorised as a vernacular modernity that combined ethical universalism with the pursuit of social justice.

Keywords

Paliyam Satyagraha, Tali Temple Satyagraha, Kalpathi Struggle, Temple Entry, Caste Discrimination, Social Reform Movements, Civil Rights in Kerala, Non-Violent Protest, Community Mobilisation

Discussion

4.4.1 The Paliyam Satyagraha

The Paliyam Struggle also called the Paliyam Satyagraha was a post-Independence mass agitation in the princely state of Cochin that demanded equal access for “avarna” communities to a set of public roads adjoining the powerful Paliyam (Paliath) family’s residences at Chendamangalam. In a sense there was some similarity between Paliyam, Guruvayur and Vaikom struggles. All of them were popular struggles against the evil of untouchability. While the Guruvayur and Vaikom struggles were initiated and led by the progressive sections among the upper caste Hindus, the Paliyam struggle was unique since it was initiated by the Dalits and backward classes against the ban imposed by upper caste sections on the movement of Dalits on the Paliyam roads.

4.4.1.1 Historical Background and Beginning of the Movement

For centuries, the Paliyath Achans were hereditary chiefs and defacto power-brokers in

Cochin, serving as hereditary prime ministers to the Cochin Raja and controlling extensive estates. Their seat at Chendamangalam now conserved as the Paliyam Palace and Paliyam Nalukettu museums symbolised this authority. Within the palace complex and its immediate environs ran the “Paliyam road(s),” access to which the family claimed as a matter of private prerogative. In practice, caste norms meant that lower-caste people were prevented from using these thoroughfares, while select non-Hindu traders could pass for commercial reasons. The arrangement fused feudal privilege with caste exclusion in a way that, by the 1940s, reformists across Kerala considered untenable.

Kerala’s earlier reform politics provide crucial context. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) had targeted caste-based restrictions on public roads around a major Shiva temple and produced partial road-opening; the landmark Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation of November 12, 1936 then opened temples in that princely state to all Hindus, setting a powerful precedent even though Cochin and British Malabar did not immediately follow suit. In Cochin,

the ruler and temple authorities remained resistant until the later 1940s.

The Paliyam struggle officially began on 17 December 1947, though efforts to prevent the necessity of a mass movement had been undertaken earlier. On 26 August 1945, the Praja Mandalam Working Committee convened at Mala, deciding to submit a memorandum to the Cochin Raja and to establish a committee to initiate direct action if no favourable response was received. However, no concrete measures followed this decision.

Subsequently, on 18 May 1946, a delegation led by Kurur Nilakantan Namboodiripad met the Raja and presented a fresh memorandum. The Raja, while personally not opposed to temple entry for all castes, cited practical difficulties in implementing such a reform. In response, the delegation declared that a mass agitation would be inevitable if no action was taken.

On 1 June 1946, the Cochin Pulaya Mahasabha, an organisation representing Dalits, convened its annual conference at Irinjalakkuda. A significant number of Pulaya women attended the event, defying prevailing social customs by wearing blouses to cover their chests. This act, challenging entrenched caste norms, provoked strong hostility from certain upper-caste sections, who resorted to verbal abuse. The situation soon escalated into a physical confrontation between members of the lower and upper castes.

In response, the authorities issued a prohibitory order. The following day, M.K. Kattuparamban led a protest march against the ban. However, prominent Kochi Praja Mandalam leaders, Sahodaran Ayyappan and K.P. Madhavan Nair, intervened, urging the protesters to avoid aggravating the tense situation by violating the order. Despite this, the police filed false criminal charges against

several individuals. It is noteworthy that M.K. Kattuparamban had earlier been implicated in the well-known Pariyaram Case

4.4.1.2 Role of SNDP Yogam

On 14 July 1946, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam convened an All-Party Convention at Thrissur. The Kochi Praja Mandalam was represented by Ikkanda Warriar and K.P. Madhavan Nair, while K. Ayyappan, T.K. Kunjappan and P. Gagadharan represented the SNDP Yogam. The Dalit community was represented by K.K. Kannan, K. Kochukuttan and K.K. Madhavan.

In addition to the SNDP Yogam and the Praja Mandalam, the convention witnessed the participation of several other organisations, including the Communist Party of India, Youth Congress, Pulaya Mahasabha, Vettuva Mahasabha, Kanakka Mahasabha, Vaathi Samajam and Sambava Mahasabha. P.K. Deewar presided over the proceedings.

The convention resolved to constitute an Action Committee comprising Ikkanda Warriar, K. Ayyappan, P. Gagadharan, P.K. Deewar, C. Achutha Menon and K.K. Kannan. It was further decided to organize taluk-level conventions, establish local action committees and volunteer corps and raise funds to meet the necessary expenses.

4.4.1.3 Role of Working Class

The Paliyam Struggle was distinctive as it united Dalits with diverse sections of the working class. A key figure was A.I. Jaleel, regarded as the first communist of Chendamangalam. He rose to prominence by organising handloom workers at Aravinda Industries, owned by Nediyanpurathu Narayana Menon and at Pioneer and Victory Companies, owned by K.R. Kumaran. Most workers, primarily women, endured low wages and abuse. Jaleel, with T.E. Balan as Secretary, formed a union whose women



members led the historic Paliyam March.

The bidi workers joined demonstrations carrying red flags. Jaleel's dedication was evident when he contributed ₹12,000 from ancestral property to the CPI for translating *Communist Party of the Soviet Union* into Malayalam a considerable sum at the time. He organised daily picketing, shielded workers from police action and after the struggle was forced underground. Arrested during the Edappally Police Station crackdown, he was injured in a suicide attempt while in custody. Tensions escalated when news of a bayonet attack on Jawaharlal Nehru in Kashmir (1946) triggered local protests. Paliyath Achan's goondas attacked demonstrators, stabbing Jaleel's younger brother, Alla Bakshi a severe personal blow to Jaleel.

Meanwhile, Kelappanasan, founder of the Chendamangalam–Vadakkumpuram Ezhavodayam Sabha, joined the struggle. An Action Committee was formed with V.K. Narayanan (President), T.E. Balan (Secretary) and K.M. Kuttan (Treasurer). K. Purushothaman served as volunteer captain, assisted by V.C. Janardhanan (Vice-Captain) and P.K. Prabhakaran (Camp Manager). Other members included M. Kochu Velayudhan, P. Kumaran, T.E. Sudhakaran, V. Viswanathan and K. Jayadevan.

A delegation to the Valiya Achan Raja brought no results, prompting the committee to seek wider support in Travancore and Malabar. Both the Malabar Temple Entry Samithi and the SNDP Yogam's Malabar unit pledged full solidarity. The struggle's rallying cry was "Open Paliyam Roads", symbolising the demand for access and equality. In this situation, A.K. Gopalan emerged as a prominent figure. On learning that the Paliyam struggle was losing momentum, he resolved to visit North Parur, near Chendamangalam, located in the Travancore State. However, the Cochin Government prohibited his entry into Kochi. In response,

the Action Committee convened on 9 March and resolved to launch a mass Satyagraha to challenge the ban. It was decided that a group of volunteers would deliberately violate the order and march towards the temple, accompanied by members from both upper castes and Dalit communities.

However, even before this plan could be executed, A.K. Gopalan was arrested on 6 March at the Kozhikode railway station platform. Despite his arrest, the movement gained momentum. On 9 March, a large contingent of volunteers representing the Communist Party of India (CPI), trade unions, the Karshaka Sanghom, Students' Federation, SNDP Yogam, Pulaya Mahasabha and Yogakshema Sabha, along with several Namboodiri women and women from the royal households of Kodungallur Kovilakom and Thrippunithura Palace, actively participated in the Paliyam struggle and undertook Satyagraha.

4.4.1.4 Role of Namboodiri Women

The Paliyam Struggle saw the active participation of several women from royal families and Namboodiri households, who courageously supported the cause of Dalits. Notable among them were P. Priyadatha, I.C. Priyadatha, E.S. Saraswathy and Arya Pallam, President of the *Antharjana Samajam*. P. Priyadatha, wife of P. Nethran Bhattathiri, was associated with a handloom-weaving centre for Namboodiri women. Under the guidance of A.K. Gopalan, these women reached Kodungallur en route to Chendamangalam to participate in Satyagraha.

When P. Priyadatha and Chendamangalam Sujatha offered Satyagraha, some Nair policemen refused to assault them due to caste norms, but Inspector Ummer personally carried out the attack. Another group, including Saraswathy and Nandini, faced similar police brutality. Volunteers

like Sujatha, Prabala and Nandini came from working-class backgrounds, while activists such as N.K. Bhanumathi, Haridasi, Santhoshavalli and Satyabhama expressed defiance by singing the national anthem during the protest.

Royal participation was marked by the daring act of Indira and Rema, princesses of Kodungallur Kovilakam, who left their palace at night and reached Chendamangalam by boat. Declaring that their lives in the palace were worse than those of poor Dalits, they joined forces with princesses of Thrippunithura Kovilakam and other royal members in Satyagraha. Their open defiance shocked the police and though ordered to be arrested, they evaded capture. Communist leaders like C. Achutha Menon later advised them to return to their palaces, after which they were placed under strict surveillance by the Cochin Raja and denied allowances

4.4.1.5 Final Phase

On 9 March 1948, the concluding day of the Paliyam struggle, the police made elaborate preparations, even arranging elephants to disperse the satyagrahis. The Thrippunithura and Vypeen Jathas merged to form the South Kochi Jatha under the leadership of E.K. Narayanan, one of the earliest communists from Palluruthi. Beginning from Eda Kochi, the march gained strength as volunteers joined en route to Chendamangalam. Harijan women participated in large numbers at Elamkunnappuzha. Passing through Cherai and Wadakkekkara, they reached Chendamangalam, where police assaults left several activists, including M.S. Krishnankutty and A.S. Purushothaman, seriously injured.

Reinforcements from Ernakulam were blocked at North Parur in Travancore by protesters. On the Sivarathri day, a massive crowd gathered at the Parur–Chendamangalam junction. Communist

leaders, including K.C. Mathew and N. Sivan Pillai, resisted police entry, supported by local Congress leaders who urged peaceful protest. Tensions escalated when Inspector Pappaly ordered a lathi charge, injuring many, including N.K. Madhavan. News of the attack spread rapidly and complaints were lodged with the Aluva A.S.P. N. Sivan Pillai and Chandrasekhara Kurup were pioneers of communism in North Parur, while N.K. Madhavan was active in organising trade unions among coir workers and toddy tappers. In later years, Madhavan faced demotion for questioning party leadership and defending democratic functioning within CITU.

Police officers later admitted receiving lavish hospitality from the Paliyath establishment. Upon withdrawal, police looted property, including coconuts, rice, bananas and household items. During the struggle's final phase, several leaders stayed away on the advice of Sahodaran K. Ayyappan, including Action Council convener P.K. Deewar. Some linked the struggle with the Communist Party's Calcutta Thesis (Feb–Mar 1948), though the Paliyam events spanned Dec 1947–Mar 1948. T.K. Ramakrishnan, returning from the Party Congress, went underground due to an arrest warrant after learning of A.G. Velayudhan's martyrdom.

The Paliyam struggle formed part of India's freedom movement, continuing the legacy of the Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagrahas. While initially Gandhian in nature, its last phase witnessed police violence. Unlike the earlier struggles dominated by upper-caste Hindus, the Paliyam movement saw active lower-caste participation. Notably, historian Prof. A. Sreedhara Menon made little mention of it in his works. After nearly 97 to 100 days of continuous agitation, the road restrictions were lifted, allowing members of the lower castes to use the disputed pathways surrounding the Paliyam complex. More significantly, the



Cochin government, influenced by reformist pressures and the evolving national political atmosphere, undertook a broader reform concerning temple access. In December 1947, it issued a Temple Entry Proclamation separate from the 1936 Travancore order which came into effect on April 14, 1948. This proclamation opened all temples in the state to every Hindu, thereby removing the legal foundation for road restrictions linked to temple premises. The combined outcome of this proclamation and the satyagraha marked a decisive shift in Cochin's public sphere toward social equality, aligning it with the reforms already implemented in Travancore and those anticipated in Malabar.

4.4.2 Tali Temple Sathyagraha : Historical Context

By the early twentieth century, Kerala's caste system imposed stringent spatial segregation, whereby communities categorised as avarna were denied access not only to temples but also to public roads situated near temple premises. Such restrictions reflected the entrenched discriminatory practices that governed social interaction and movement. Reformers from diverse backgrounds social, religious and nationalist began to challenge these practices through critical writings, legal petitions and strategically organised acts of civil resistance.

The roads adjoining the Tali Temple fell within the jurisdiction of the Kozhikode Municipality. However, the Zamorin of Calicut retained traditional moral authority over the temple and its surroundings. This overlapping of civic authority and customary control became a central factor in the 1917 conflict. In that year, the Zamorin issued an order prohibiting avarna individuals from using the road adjacent to the Tali Temple. The municipal chairman, C. V. Narayana Iyer, initially refused to enforce this directive, arguing that the roads were

under civic jurisdiction rather than princely control. Despite this position, the district administration, acting in accordance with the Zamorin's wishes, erected a notice board on 1 November 1917 at Tali Road, declaring the caste-based prohibition. This notice became the immediate symbol and focal point of the organized resistance that followed.

4.4.2.1 The Tali Temple Agitation (1917)

The earliest recorded agitation associated with the Tali Temple in Kozhikode (Calicut) occurred in 1917, preceding the more prominent temple entry movements of the 1920s and 1930s. This was a localized protest aimed at securing the right of so-called "untouchable" castes particularly the Ezhava community to use the public roads and entrances surrounding the temple. At the time, caste Hindus claimed exclusive rights over these spaces, enforcing stringent caste-based restrictions, including the practice of "distance pollution," whereby the mere proximity of lower castes was considered contaminating.

The movement was led by notable reformists such as K.P. Kesava Menon, C. Krishnan and Manjeri Ramayyan. While not a satyagraha in the Gandhian sense, the agitation played a significant role in challenging deeply entrenched social norms. Its demand, though simple in expression, was radical for the period: the right to freedom of movement and equality for all individuals, irrespective of caste. The strategies employed by the Tali protestors combined symbolic acts of defiance *such as using the contested road in a carriage with* collective demonstrations *and* public advocacy through the press. C. Krishnan, as editor of *Mithavadi*, had already nurtured a reform-oriented readership, consistently arguing that civic freedoms were hollow if marginalised communities were denied access to common spaces. His act of defiance

in November 1917 is recognised in later scholarship as a significant early example of nonviolent civil disobedience in Malabar, specifically targeting public roads adjacent to temples.

Crucially, the site of contestation was a public road rather than the temple's inner sanctum. This approach reflected a strategic pattern later seen in the Vaikom Satyagraha: initiating reform by normalising unrestricted use of public approaches to sacred complexes, before advancing to broader claims of temple entry. Such a tactic minimised immediate sectarian confrontation while striking at the spatial framework that sustained caste-based exclusion.

4.4.2.2 Impact of the Sathyagraha

The Tali Road Samaram brought into sharp focus a significant legal-administrative tension in colonial Kerala—the conflict between customary religious authority and statutory civic jurisdiction. The incident began with the municipal authorities' refusal to enforce a caste-based road restriction, followed by the district administration's contradictory act of erecting a prohibition board. This inconsistency revealed the dual impulses within colonial governance: one side advocating the primacy of public law and the other seeking to appease entrenched caste customs in the name of maintaining "order."

The satyagrahis, through their symbolic carriage ride and public procession, deliberately challenged the enforcement of the ban. Their actions were intended to provoke either a legal resolution or a political retreat by the authorities. Later historical studies of Calicut's civic life record that municipal bodies often defended the public nature of roads against attempts to extend temple authority over them. This institutional stance provided additional moral legitimacy to the protestors' demands.

Although detailed police and court records of the 1917 incidents remain limited in the public domain, the Tali Road Samaram is widely remembered in Kerala's historical narratives as a successful assertion of the right to use public roads surrounding the Tali temple. The agitation significantly weakened the social enforceability of the ban and contributed to normalising the presence of avarna communities on temple-adjacent thoroughfares in Kozhikode. It also expanded the repertoire of anti-caste protest strategies in Malabar. Prominent leaders associated with the movement include C. Krishnan, Manjeri Rama Iyer and K. P. Kesava Menon. In the broader trajectory of temple entry movements in Malabar during the 1930s, certain Kozhikode-area temples such as the Sri Ramaswami temple at Tali opened their doors to "Harijans" in 1932. While distinct from the Tali Shiva Temple, such developments in the same locality demonstrate how earlier struggles over road access helped erode the legitimacy of caste-based exclusion and paved the way for temple entry reforms.

4.4.3 The Kalpathi Struggle: Social Background

The Kalpathi Struggle also called the Kalpathi Prakṣobham was a significant episode in Kerala's early twentieth-century social reform movements. It unfolded in the agharam (Brahmin Street settlement) of Kalpathi near Palakkad and revolved around a fundamental question of civic equality: could lower-caste Hindus use public roads passing through caste-exclusive Brahmin neighborhoods and by extension, could they participate in the temple festivals that shaped the locality's public life?

In late 1924 and early 1925, Ezhava activists, Arya Samaj reformers and sympathetic leaders challenged entrenched caste orthodoxy. Their agitation compelled



the colonial administration to address the contradiction between statutory public rights and “customary” caste privileges. The orders issued in January 1925 affirming all-caste access to Kalpathi’s roads marked the struggle as an important though often overlooked precursor to Kerala’s better-known movements for temple entry and civic equality. It is regarded as one of the earliest organized satyagraha-style agitations in Kerala against untouchability, predating the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) and running parallel to it in significance.

The struggle gained momentum following official measures by the colonial government. On September 25, 1924, the Madras Government declared that members of the “depressed classes” had the right to access public roads, wells and thoroughfares throughout the presidency. This order was widely publicised across the region through newspapers and pamphlets.

Inspired by this legal recognition, leaders of the Ezhava community and reformist organisations sought to assert their rights in practice. The upcoming Kalpathi Ratholsavam (car festival), scheduled for November 13–15, 1924, became a testing ground. Pamphlets urged the Ezhavas to utilize their legally guaranteed rights and walk through the agraharam streets. In Malabar, Brahmin agraharams such as Kalpathi were traditionally exclusive spaces where lower castes were denied entry. Although the streets were maintained using municipal funds, Tiyyas and Ezhavas were never permitted to pass through them.

M.P. Raghavan, an Ezhava lawyer, wrote to officials pointing out that the streets were public and maintained with state funds. The Palakkad division officer assured him that there would be no conflict if Ezhavas attended the festival. Municipal authorities even allocated spaces for the groups to gather.

However, these assurances proved hollow once caste orthodoxy was openly challenged.

4.4.3.1 The Kalpathi Incident

On November 13, 1924, around eighty Ezhavas arrived at Kalpathi for the festival in three groups, as per government permission. However, on their return, they were ambushed by Brahmin residents who attacked them with sticks and stones. Several were injured and some had to be hospitalised. Shockingly, the assault took place in the presence of police and government officials, who did little to protect the victims. This was despite the fact that the Ezhavas had sought prior permission, had given written notice and were exercising their rights under the government order. Even individuals of higher social standing within the Ezhava community lawyers, magistrates and wealthy landowners were not spared from caste violence.

Following the violence, the government issued prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, effectively banning Ezhavas from entering Kalpathi, while allowing the Brahmins to conduct the festival undisturbed. This glaring double standard revealed the colonial state’s tendency to appease dominant castes while denying the depressed classes their rights. The incident drew attention in the Madras Legislative Council. Krishnan Nair moved for an adjournment motion to discuss the policy of prohibiting Ezhava entry into Kalpathi, but it was rejected by the Council President.

The Kalpathi violence provoked reactions across Kerala and beyond. Leaders such as T.K. Madhavan (Secretary of SNDP Yogam) and Swami Satyavrathan rushed to Palakkad to mediate, condemn the attack and rally public opinion. Five hundred caste Hindus gathered at Akathethara, the seat of the Palakkad Rajas, to denounce the assault. Liberal Brahmins such as Sadasiva Iyer of

the Hindu Samajam also expressed their dissent and organised meetings in Madras at the YMCA Hall. Consultations were later held in Kozhikode and Calicut Bank, showing how the issue resonated across the presidency.

The incident highlighted a broader pattern: while caste Hindus were violently defending their privileges, the Congress and Gandhi maintained a cautious distance from direct struggles of untouchables. As B.R. Ambedkar later emphasised, it was the oppressed castes themselves who initiated satyagrahas to secure basic civil rights such as access to roads, wells and temples. Between 1924 and 1930, the Congress offered little tangible support to such struggles.

4.4.3.2 Role of Arya Samaj

The Arya Samaj actively intervened in the aftermath of the Kalpathi incident. Viewing the agitation as a platform to challenge untouchability and expand its *shuddhi* (re-conversion) movement, the Arya Samaj encouraged Ezhavas to join its fold. A branch of Arya Samaj was established in Palakkad and on October 31, 1925, twelve Ezhava Arya Samajis, along with Brahmachari Vedabandhu, walked through Kalpathi Agraharam. This again triggered violent resistance, with Brahmins pelting stones and attacking the marchers.

In one clash, an Ezhava was injured with a lathi blow and a Brahmin youth was stabbed in retaliation. Despite such tensions, the Arya Samaj persisted. In December 1925, the Madras Non-Brahmin Confederation condemned the authorities for restricting Ezhavas and Arya Samaj converts. By November 1925, the police themselves escorted Arya Samajis through Kalpathi to ensure their legal rights were upheld.

Orthodox Hindus resisted Arya Samaj involvement and pursued legal cases against converts. Yet in one landmark case, Ezhava

Arya Samaj convert P.C. Sankaran was acquitted of charges of defiling a temple, with the court ruling that converts ceased to be “polluting.” This case, along with later rulings of the Madras High Court affirming equal access to public roads, struck a legal blow against caste-based restrictions. The Arya Samaj’s activism in Kalpathi demonstrated how struggles over civic rights were intertwined with debates over religious identity, conversion and the preservation of Hindu unity. It also revealed the limitations of Hindu orthodoxy in containing reformist momentum once legal and religious platforms were mobilized against it.

4.4.3.3 Aftermath and Legacy

The Kalpathi struggle had long-term social and political consequences. In its immediate aftermath, many Ezhavas converted to other religions about twenty to Christianity, sixty to Arya Samaj and a few to Islam in protest against Brahmin dominance. While some later returned to Hinduism, the episode exposed cracks in caste hegemony.

Arya missionaries warned against conversion to “foreign” religions and encouraged oppressed castes to assert their rights within Hinduism. The Hindu leadership, alarmed by the prospect of mass conversions, sought to contain the damage through reform and selective concessions. This forced Hindu society to begin addressing untouchability more directly, paving the way for later temple entry movements, including the Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagrahas.

Despite setbacks, the Kalpathi agitation succeeded in undermining the authority of caste privilege. By the late 1920s, public opinion had shifted and the principle that all citizens had equal rights in public spaces was gaining ground. The struggle also expanded the social reform discourse by highlighting that civil rights such as access to roads and temples were inseparable from broader



questions of human rights and citizenship under colonial rule.

In historical retrospect, the Kalpathi Prakṣobham must be understood as more than a local conflict. It was a decisive moment

in Kerala's democratisation of public space, an assertion of dignity by marginalised castes and a forerunner to the state-wide struggles that culminated in the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936.

Recap

- ◆ The Paliyam Struggle demanded equal road access for Dalits.
- ◆ Paliath Achans controlled Cochin politics and enforced caste restrictions.
- ◆ Lower castes were barred from Paliyam roads for centuries.
- ◆ Vaikom and Guruvayur struggles inspired the Paliyam agitation.
- ◆ Praja Mandalam submitted memoranda to Cochin Raja in 1945–46.
- ◆ Pulaya Mahasabha's 1946 conference challenged caste norms openly.
- ◆ SNDP Yogam organised an all-party convention at Thrissur.
- ◆ Action Committee planned taluk conventions, volunteer corps and fundraising.
- ◆ A.I. Jaleel mobilised handloom and bidi workers in Chendamangalam.
- ◆ Women workers led the historic Paliyam March with red flags.
- ◆ Namboodiri and royal women joined satyagraha, defying caste traditions.
- ◆ Princesses of Kodungallur and Thrippunithura participated despite surveillance.
- ◆ Final phase saw violent police repression and elephant deployment.
- ◆ After 97 days, road restrictions around Paliyam were lifted.
- ◆ 1948 Cochin Temple Entry Proclamation ensured temple access to all Hindus.

Objective Questions

1. In which princely state did the Paliyam Struggle to be take place ?
2. Who were the hereditary chiefs of Cochin linked with Paliyam?
3. In which year did the Paliyam Struggle officially begin?
4. Who led the 1946 delegation that met the Cochin Raja?
5. Which Dalit organisation convened its annual conference at Irinjalakkuda in 1946?
6. Who led the protest march against the prohibitory order in 1946?
7. Which reformist organisation convened the All-Party Convention at Thrissur in 1946?
8. Which princesses of Kodungallur joined the Paliyam Satyagraha?
9. Which communist leader from Palluruthi led the South Kochi Jatha?
10. On which date did the Cochin Temple Entry Proclamation come into effect?

Answers

1. Cochin
2. Paliath Achans
3. 1947
4. Kurur Nilakantan Namboodiripad
5. Cochin Pulaya Mahasabha
6. M.K. Kattuparamban
7. SNDP Yogam



8. Indira and Rema

9. E.K. Narayanan

10. 1948

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of caste reform movements and political organisations in shaping the course of the Paliyam Struggle.
2. Examine the involvement of women in the Paliyam Satyagraha, with special reference to the contributions of Arya Pallam and the Kodungallur princesses.
3. Analyse the significance of the Tali Temple Satyagraha (1917) in the context of the early struggles for temple entry in Kerala.
4. Evaluate the contributions of communist leaders and organizations in mobilising public opinion and mass participation during the Paliyam Struggle.
5. Compare and contrast the Paliyam Struggle and the Tali Temple Satyagraha as milestones in Kerala's history of temple entry movements.

Reference

1. Menon, A. Sreedhara. *Political History of Modern Kerala*. DC Books, Kottayam, 2019.
2. Jones, Kenneth W, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
3. Kawashima, Koji, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988.

4. Manmathan, M. R. "Temple as the Site of Struggle: Social Reform, Religious Symbols and the Politics of Nationalism in Kerala." *Asian Cultural Studies* (via ResearchGate), 2013.

Suggested Reading

1. Heimsath, Charles. H, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1965.
2. *In Search of India's Renaissance*, Vol. II, Center for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, 1992.
3. Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics, Women and Well-Being – How Kerala Became a Model*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
4. Menon, Dilip. M, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
5. Puthenkalam, Fr. J, *Marriage and Family in Kerala*, University of Calgary, Alberta, 1977.
6. Rao. M.S.A, *Social Change in Malabar*, The Popular Book depot, Bombay, 1957.



UNIT

Caste in Post - Colonial Society

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ trace the evolution of caste-based organisations in post-independence Kerala and highlight their role in shaping political movements
- ◆ analyse the trajectory of reservation policies in education and employment after independence and their impact on social justice
- ◆ discuss the historical restrictions on temple entry and ritual participation by marginalised communities and the significance of reform measures
- ◆ assess the continuing debates on caste privileges in temple priesthood and the role of Devaswom Boards in contemporary Kerala

Prerequisites

The study of caste in post-colonial Indian society requires a foundational knowledge of how caste functioned during the colonial and pre-colonial periods. Students approaching this unit are expected to be familiar with the basic structure of the caste system, its hierarchical divisions and the socio-economic roles assigned to different communities. An understanding of social reform movements in Kerala such as those led by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Chattampi Swamikal will provide important context to the emergence of caste associations in the modern period.

In the post-independence era, caste did not disappear but acquired new forms of expression through political mobilisation. Organisations like the SNDP Yogam, Nair Service Society (NSS), Yogakshema Sabha and Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha played crucial roles in representing the interests of their communities and negotiating with political parties. Students are expected to be aware of India's democratic framework,

the significance of electoral politics and the mechanisms through which caste identities influenced party strategies.

Another important prerequisite is knowledge of the constitutional provisions on equality, affirmative action and social justice, which form the basis for reservation policies in education and employment. Awareness of landmark events such as the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 and its limitations will help learners contextualise ongoing struggles against ritual exclusion.

Keywords

Caste Associations, SNDP Yogam, Nair Service Society (NSS), Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha, Yogakshema Sabha, Reservation Policy, Political Mobilisation, Temple Entry Proclamation (1936), Social Exclusion, Devaswom Boards

Discussion

4.5.1 Emergence of the Major Community Organisations

After 1947 and especially after the creation of the state of Kerala in 1956 community reform associations adapted to a competitive party system anchored by alternating Congress-led and Communist-led fronts. The result is a political culture in which community organisations act as agenda setters, broker alliances and influence candidate selection and policy, even while universal adult franchise and programmatic ideologies (class, welfare, land reform, education) remain central.

The four organisations in focus Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam (Ezhavas), Nair Service Society (NSS) (Nairs), Yogakshema Sabha (Namboodiri Brahmins) and Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS) (Dalits, especially Pulayas) offer a cross-section of how caste/community bodies institutionalised claims, cultivated leadership and navigated alliances with the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), the

Left Democratic Front (LDF) and, in recent years, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Their trajectories are not static: at different conjunctures, they have been reformist pressure groups, civil society interlocutors and electoral power brokers.

4.5.1.1 Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam

The SNDP Yogam was registered in 1903 under the inspiration of Sree Narayana Guru and the organisational drive of Padmanabhan Palpu, Kumaranasan and among others. It worked for the social uplift (education) and economic mobility for the Ezhavas and other backward communities.

After 1947, the SNDP Yogam expanded its educational and cooperative networks and cultivated leadership that would liaise with parties and state agencies. As Kerala moved into competitive electoral politics post-1957, the SNDP Yogam calibrated relations with both Congress and the Communists, reflecting a dual strategy: protecting Ezhava/OBC interests (education, employment



reservations, welfare) and bargaining for policy concessions from ruling coalitions. Studies of district-level branches (e.g., Alappuzha) show how the Yogam translates local membership into electoral influence through endorsements, mass meetings and issue campaigns.

Contemporary political extensions. In 2015, a political outfit aligned with SNDP leadership Bharath Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS) was launched by Thushar Vellappally, aligning with the NDA in Kerala, signaling a more explicit electoral foray by segments of Ezhava leadership. Subsequent reporting shows periodic recalibration of that alliance, underscoring the fluidity of community-party ties.

4.5.1.2 Nair Service Society (NSS)

The Nair Service Society (NSS), founded on 31 October 1914 by Mannathu Padmanabhan, established a strong organisational framework comprising karayogams, educational institutions and welfare initiatives for the Nair community. Its most prominent political role was during the “Liberation Struggle” of 1958–59, when the NSS joined forces with the Catholic Church, the Congress and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) to oppose the first Communist ministry, eventually leading to the government’s dismissal. Although the NSS has often claimed to maintain “political equidistance,” it has consistently exercised influence by indicating political preferences, lobbying on issues related to education and service-sector policies and at times mobilising protests to shape governmental decisions and coalition dynamics.

4.5.1.3 Yogakshema Sabha (Namboodiri Brahmins)

In February–March 1908, a group of reform-minded Namboothiris assembled at

Cherumukku Vaidikan’s Illom on the banks of the Periyar River. The meeting, presided over by Desamangalam Valiya Sankaran Nambudiripad, marked the beginning of the Namboothiri Yogakshema Mahasabha, later known simply as the Yogakshema Sabha. The movement was led by prominent figures such as Kurur Unni Nambudiripad, Chittoor Narayanan Namboothirippad and V.T. Bhattathiripad.

The primary aim of these young reformers was to eliminate superstitions and outdated customs that, in their view, no longer suited the changing times shaped by Western education and social mobility. Among them, V.T. Bhattathiripad stood out as a radical reformer, advocating for modernisation not only within the Namboothiri community but also across the broader society of Kerala. While the Sabha gained recognition for its progressive activism in the pre-independence period, its post-independence role gradually shifted. It focused more on cultural advocacy, educational reforms and issue-based lobbying, although it remained less directly involved in electoral politics compared to organisations like the Nair Service Society (NSS) or the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam.

The 1960s–70s land reforms, which eroded large landlord holdings altered the political economy of upper-caste influence. Scholarship documents debate within the Namboodiri community over property, identity and adaptive strategies, with the Sabha providing a forum for negotiating these transitions in a Left-governed state.

4.5.1.4 Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS)

The Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha (KPMS) was officially established in 1970 under the leadership of P. K. Chathan Master, a prominent leader of the Pulaya community in Cochin. The idea for a unified state-level

organization emerged earlier, when on 17 March 1968, several activists from the Cochin and Travancore Pulayar Maha Sabhas gathered at Nandavanam School, Trivandrum. At this meeting, they resolved to form a single organisation for the Pulaya community and set up the 'Ekopana Samithi' (Coordination Committee), which began functioning immediately.

The KPMS evolved out of the activities and initiatives of this Pulaya Ekopana Samithi during 1968. In its formation, Chathan Master received significant support from the educated and progressive sections of the Pulaya community especially government employees and the younger generation. The first branch of KPMS was founded at Venganoor, the birthplace of Ayyankali. The organisation's founding leadership consisted of P. K. Chathan Master as President and K. Chandra Sekhara Sastri as General Secretary.

KPMS has engaged parties across fronts on reservations, welfare boards, hostels, SC sub-plan allocations and anti-discrimination measures. Its mobilisation is less about endorsing a single party and more about issue-based bargaining, with tactical alignments varying across districts and elections.

4.5.2 How Caste Alignments Shape Electoral Politics

1. Candidate selection and ticket-balancing

Both UDF and LDF practice ticket-balancing across caste, religion and region. This does not mean a simple quota by caste, but patterns are legible:

- ◆ Seats in central Travancore and parts of Malabar with higher Nair presence often see strong Nair candidates across fronts, with behind-the-scenes NSS scrutiny.

- ◆ Ezhava-dense coastal belts and working-class constituencies often field Ezhava candidates, especially for CPI(M)/CPI, reflecting union bases.
- ◆ Reserved (SC) constituencies become arenas where KPMS and other Dalit bodies negotiate candidatures, development promises and representation in cabinet-rank or board positions.

Scholarly work on Kerala elections notes competitive coalition-building in which caste/community endorsement or neutrality can swing close contests.

2. Issue-bundling: education, land, welfare

Community influence appears most clearly in education policy, where aided-school managements (linked to NSS and Christian denominations) push to protect appointment powers and funding flows. In land policy, the legacy of land reforms continues to structure class and status politics, with upper-caste bodies defending residual property rights and temple/corporate trusts and Dalit/OBC organisations pressing for remaining land redistribution and title regularisation. Welfare politics scholarships, hostels, cooperative banking, community halls and health schemes offers everyday arenas for bargaining.

3. New entrants and shifting atmospheres

While the BJP has struggled to win assembly seats in Kerala, scholarship documents long-term cultural work by Hindu nationalist organisations to shape a "Hindu atmosphere" including outreach to Ezhava networks and community bodies. The BDJS-NDA experiment is part of this fieldwork; even without large electoral returns, it repositions debate on minority influence, temple issues and communal balance, prompting counter-mobilisations by UDF/LDF.



4.5.3 The Reservation Question in Kerala

Kerala's reservation policy sits at the intersection of colonial-era "communal" arrangements, post-Independence constitutional guarantees, the state's distinctive social mobilizations and all-India jurisprudence on backwardness and equality. Unlike regions where affirmative action expanded primarily after the 1990 "Mandal moment," Kerala had already evolved a far-reaching, community-differentiated scheme by the 1950s and 1960s. That historical depth explains both the relatively muted street conflict around Mandal in Kerala and the persistence of intra-state debates led by organisations such as the Nair Service Society (NSS), Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and Dalit groups over who qualifies, how much to reserve and which criteria (caste, class, or both) ought to govern inclusion and exclusion.

Reservation in education and public employment in Kerala

Kerala's modern reservation edifice was constructed soon after the state's formation (1 November 1956), when Travancore-Cochin was merged with Malabar to create the new linguistic state. The Government framed the Kerala State and Subordinate Services Rules (KSSSR), 1958, under Article 309 of the Constitution. General Rules 14–17 institutionalised a system of reservation and rotation in direct recruitment across services. These rules aggregated earlier princely-state practices of community representation into a statewide, legally backed framework that allocated a fixed share of appointments to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and identified "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs).

In public employment, Kerala stabilized around a high OBC share (within an overall 50% ceiling) with an internal rotation

among sub-groups. The Kerala Public Service Commission (PSC) continues to publish the applicable rotation matrix and subgroup shares e.g., within the OBC block, earmarked turns for Ezhava/Thiyya/Billava, Muslims, Latin Catholics/Anglo-Indians, Nadars (Hindu and SIUC), SC Converts to Christianity, Viswakarmas, Dheeveras and a residual OBC pool. The PSC site explicitly lays down sample rotations (e.g., in a 20- or 40-post unit) and clarifies the interplay of merit and reservation.

Identifying "backward classes": State commissions (1960s–1970s)

To rationalise the categories and percentages for admissions and jobs, Kerala appointed a sequence of expert bodies. The Justice G. Kumara Pillai Commission (1964–66) examined reservation in educational institutions, debated criteria (caste vs. economic indicators) and proposed modifications to quotas. Its report is a core primary source on mid-1960s policy and the rationale for identifying Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs).

The Nettur P. Damodaran (NPD) Commission (1967–70) further reviewed backwardness and representation; in tandem, these commissions shaped Kerala's long-standing 40% OBC share within a 50% total reservation framework an arrangement notable for its internal sub-quotas and community-rotation logic

Consolidation in education and services

Kerala's education-sector reservation drew upon the same SEBC lists and percentages, with professional colleges, universities and special courses operating seat matrices that mirrored the employment rotation. Subsequent state circulars updated subgroup shares and operational details, but the fundamental architecture high OBC share, rotation among OBC sub-groups and separate SC/ST allotments remained

stable. Contemporary Government portals (Backward Classes Development Department, “Employment Reservation”) still reflect the granular, community-wise distribution (e.g., Ezhava/Thiyya/Billava 14%; Muslims 12%; Latin Catholic/Anglo-Indian 4%; Nadars 2% split; SC Converts 1%; Viswakarma 3%; Dheevara 1%; Residual OBC 3% = 40% OBC total), with parallel rules for Last Grade services.

Kerala also issued criteria and procedures to align with Supreme Court jurisprudence on the “creamy layer” (discussed below), including the creation of state committees and later the Kerala State Commission for Economically Backward Classes among Forward Communities for criteria-setting.

By the late 1960s, Kerala had a mature, rule-bound reservation system in both education and employment. Its hallmarks were (a) relatively high OBC shares; (b) detailed community rotation; and (c) periodic commissions to recalibrate lists and criteria.

4.5.4 Historical restrictions on temple entry and ritual participation

Pre-modern Kerala’s social order crystallized around a ranked hierarchy with Brahmins (especially Nambūdiri/Malayala Brahmins) at the apex and substantial “avarna” communities (Ezhava, Pulaya, Paraya, among others) consigned to varying degrees of ritual exclusion. Exclusion operated along three interlocking axes.

In large temples, particularly those under Brahmin and royal patronage, lower-caste persons were denied not only entry into sancta but often the right to traverse roads contiguous to temple precincts. The doctrine of untouchability was extended to “unseeability” and “unapproachability,” producing graded distances at which different communities could approach sacred space.

This inflected everyday mobility: public roads abutting temples could become off-limits, forcing detours for those deemed polluting. The famous Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924–25 directly challenged exactly this regime around the Vaikom Mahadeva temple, where access to surrounding roads rather than inner sancta was the initial demand. The eventual compromise opened multiple approach roads but still kept the east-side approach closer to the homes of higher-caste priests separate, revealing how reform often advanced by partial concessions while preserving ritual geographies of privilege.

Priesthood in most major temples was monopolised by Malayala Brahmins, while “temple service” occupations drumming, lamp-bearers, cleaning and supply of ritual items were caste-coded.

Yet Kerala also nurtured powerful counter-currents. Reformers within and beyond Hindu society Sri Narayana Guru’s consecration at Aruvippuram (1888) symbolised a direct challenge to ritual monopoly; Ezhava and Pulaya leaders such as T.K. Madhavan and Ayyankali and Congress figures like K. Kelappan pressed for civil equality in the sacred sphere. The Vaikom Satyagraha mobilised cross-caste and cross-regional support, including the participation of E.V. Ramasamy (“Periyar”) and a negotiated intervention by M.K. Gandhi. The Guruvayur Satyagraha of 1931–32 in Malabar further broadened the agenda to inner-sanctum entry for all Hindus, with Kelappan’s fast dramatising the claim that ritual citizenship must match civic citizenship.

4.5.4.1 The Temple Entry Proclamation (1936) and its Limitations

Against this background of agitation and reformist opinion, Travancore’s ruler, Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, issued the Temple Entry Proclamation



on 12 November 1936, on the Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar's advice. The decree opened state-managed Hindu temples in Travancore to "all classes and sections" of Hindus, formally abolishing caste-based bar on temple entry. It was a watershed for Kerala and for India's temple entry movement, becoming a touchstone for similar claims elsewhere.

In legal effect, the TEP removed the blanket civil disability attached to birth-status for temple approach and darśan in Travancore's public temples. It authorised entry and worship for communities previously excluded and signaled a royal commitment to redefine religious public space as a domain of equal access for all Hindus by birth or faith. Contemporary and later commentators compared its importance to the abolition of slavery, while also noting its pragmatic political calculus: aligning a modernizing princely state with anti-untouchability currents sweeping the subcontinent.

The TEP had significant limits that shaped the trajectory of post-1936 reform:

Jurisdictional limits: It applied to temples under the Travancore state's control, not automatically to Cochin or to the British Malabar district. Cochin followed with measures of its own and Malabar's Guruvayur remained a separate arena of struggle. This fragmented legal geography meant that "Kerala-wide" entry arrived incrementally, through a mix of princely legislation and later state acts.

Ritual office vs. entry: The proclamation addressed entry and worship, not priestly recruitment or rights in hereditary ritual offices. Questions such as who could be a santhikaran/archaka, who could serve as tantri and how "custom" could be balanced with constitutional equality remained live controversies long after 1936.

Gender exclusions and other bars:

The TEP did not speak to gender-specific restrictions (e.g., later debates at Sabarimala centered on women of a defined age range), nor to rules regarding non-Hindus, or caste-coded ritual protocols within the sanctum. Those would become subjects of post-colonial legislation and litigation.

Social practice lag: Even where formal barriers were lifted, social attitudes and daily practices changed unevenly. Contemporary reports Gandhi's own misgivings and carefully calibrated support highlighted that proclamation did not automatically translate into universal acceptance in all localities.

The Indian Constitution (1950) enshrined the abolition of untouchability (Article 17) and provided tools (e.g., the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955) to punish its practice. But temple governance remained largely a state subject and Kerala's institutional architecture after Independence would determine how far earlier exclusions could be dismantled.

When the princely states integrated, Kerala inherited multiple temple-administration regimes. Today, major clusters of temples are governed by statutory bodies: the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), Cochin Devaswom Board (CDB), Malabar Devaswom Board (MDB) and the autonomous Guruvayur and Koodalmanikyam Devaswoms. The TDB is constituted under the Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, 1950 and administers over 1,200 temples (including Sabarimala); the MDB in its current form dates from 2008 legislation; similar enabling statutes govern the other boards. Collectively, these bodies manage temple properties, finances, staff and day-to-day ritual operations subject to statutory supervision and judicial review

By design, Devaswom boards embody a hybrid model: religious institutions treated

as public trusts with secular management components. Board members are typically nominated or elected through processes tied to Hindu MLAs and ministers, producing recurrent debates about politicisation, transparency and the balance between “custom” and constitutional norms. Periodic High Court and Supreme Court interventions on everything from festival safety to bar on political activity on temple premises underline the public-law character of temple governance in Kerala.

To professionalise and standardise hiring, Government of Kerala established the Kerala Devaswom Recruitment Board (KDRB) through a dedicated state law in 2015. The KDRB conducts centralized recruitment for posts (including priests for TDB, CDB and MDB) following statutory rules, reservation policy and published syllabi/qualifications thereby inserting a civil-service-like layer

into what were once opaque appointments.

In October 2017, the TDB, acting on KDRB’s recruitment, appointed the first large cohort of non-Brahmin priests including candidates from OBC and Scheduled Caste communities to its temples. Reports note that 36 of the recruits were non-Brahmins, of whom six were Dalits, while the full select list comprised 62 candidates with a significant share from OBC categories. The move was widely described in Kerala as a “silent revolution,” welcomed by reformists and equality advocates and criticised by some orthodox organisations; subsequent policy discussions even touched on reservation formulas within Devaswom appointments. The symbolic weight of seeing Dalit and backward-caste santhikarans in historically exclusionary spaces marked a substantive break with a centuries-old order, now backed by judicial reasoning and statutory process.

Recap

- ◆ Community organisations became key agenda-setters in Kerala’s political culture.
- ◆ SNDP Yogam promoted education, welfare and political bargaining for Ezhavas.
- ◆ BDJS marked SNDP’s explicit electoral entry with NDA alliance.
- ◆ NSS played crucial role in 1958–59 Liberation Struggle.
- ◆ Despite “equidistance,” NSS shaped education and service-sector policies significantly.
- ◆ Yogakshema Sabha sought reform within Namboodiri community against outdated customs.
- ◆ V.T. Bhattathiripad emerged as radical reformer within Namboodiris.
- ◆ KPMS founded in 1970 under P. K. Chathan Master.



- ◆ KPMS mobilised Dalits on reservations, welfare and anti-discrimination issues.
- ◆ UDF and LDF balance candidate selection across caste, religion, region.
- ◆ Kerala's reservation system institutionalised by Kerala State and Subordinate Services Rules.
- ◆ Kumara Pillai and Damodaran Commissions shaped reservation categories and percentages.
- ◆ Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 abolished caste-based entry restrictions.
- ◆ Devaswom Boards manage Kerala's temples with statutory supervision and oversight.
- ◆ Appointment of Dalit and OBC priests marked silent temple revolution.

Objective Questions

1. In which year was the SNDP Yogam registered?
2. Which year marks the founding of NSS?
3. During which struggle did NSS play a major political role in 1958–59?
4. Where was the first meeting of Yogakshema Sabha held in 1908?
5. Who presided over the first Yogakshema Sabha meeting?
6. Which reformer of Yogakshema Sabha advocated radical modernisation among Namboodiris?
7. In which year was Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS) officially established?
8. Who was the first President of KPMS?
9. At which place was the first branch of KPMS founded?
10. Who issued the Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936?

11. Which princely state first implemented the Temple Entry Proclamation?
12. In year did the Travancore Devaswom Recruitment Board appoint non-Brahmins?

Answers

1. 1903
2. 1914
3. Liberation Struggle
4. Cherumukku
5. Desamangalam Valiya Sankaran Nambudiripad
6. V.T. Bhattathiripad
7. 1970
8. P. K. Chathan Master
9. Venganoor
10. Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma
11. Travancore
12. 2017

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of community organisations such as SNDP Yogam, NSS, Yogakshema Sabha and KPMS in shaping Kerala's post-colonial politics.
2. Evaluate the significance of the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 in dismantling caste-based exclusions in Kerala's religious life.



3. Analyse the evolution of Kerala's reservation system after 1956, highlighting the role of various commissions in determining backwardness and community quotas.
4. Examine the impact of caste alignments on electoral politics in Kerala with reference to ticket-balancing, issue-bundling and coalition-building.
5. Critically assess the transformation of caste organisations from reformist movements to electoral power brokers in Kerala's post-independence society.

Reference

1. Charles. H, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1965.
2. *In Search of India's Renaissance*, Vol. II, Center for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, 1992.
3. Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics, Women and Well-Being – How Kerala Became a Model*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
4. Jones, Kenneth W, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.

Suggested Reading

1. Kawashima, Koji, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988.
2. Menon, Dilip. M, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
3. Puthenkalam, Fr. J, *Marriage and Family in Kerala*, University of Calgary, Alberta, 1977.
4. Rao. M.S.A, *Social Change in Malabar*, The Popular Book depot, Bombay, 1957.

5. Saradamoni. K, *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*, Alta Mira Press, New Delhi, 1999.
6. Sen, Amiya P. (ed.), *Social and Religious Reform: the Hindus of British India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.
7. K.N. Ganesh, *Keralathinte Innalekal*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995.
8. *Kerala Through the Ages*, Department of Public Relations, Thiruvananthapuram, 1980.
9. P.J. Cherian (ed.), *Perspectives in Kerala History*, Kerala State Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999.



BLOCK

Rethinking Kerala Renaissance



UNIT

The Difference of Kerala Renaissance

Learning Outcomes

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

- ♦ examine the subaltern origins and grassroots character of the Kerala Renaissance, highlighting marginalised leadership
- ♦ assess the role of SNDP Yogam and SJPS in advancing social reform and uplifting oppressed communities
- ♦ investigate the role of popular movements and widespread public participation in driving social change
- ♦ evaluate the significance of the Vaikom Satyagraha in opposing caste discrimination and ensuring public access

Prerequisites

The Kerala Renaissance was a transformative socio-cultural movement that unfolded during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily within the princely state of Travancore and its neighbouring regions. This unit emphasises its deep roots in subaltern communities and its leadership by prominent reformers from marginalised backgrounds, particularly Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. These figures spearheaded efforts to dismantle the entrenched caste hierarchy and socio-religious inequalities that had long characterised Kerala society.

At the heart of the Kerala Renaissance was a vigorous critique of caste discrimination and Brahmanical dominance. Narayana Guru, hailing from the Ezhava community, rejected the ritualistic and hierarchical aspects of Hinduism. His revolutionary act of consecrating a Shiva temple at Aruvippuram in 1888 symbolised a radical departure from orthodox norms and asserted the spiritual rights of the oppressed. His slogan,

“One Caste, One Religion, One God for Humanity,” reflected a broader vision of social harmony and human equality. Ayyankali, another towering figure of the movement, emerged from the Pulaya community and led grassroots struggles for the rights of Dalits, particularly in the domains of education, land rights, and public space access. His efforts were instrumental in opening schools for Dalit children and in challenging the practice of untouchability in public spaces and transport.

The Renaissance was not solely a product of indigenous initiative. It was also shaped by external influences such as colonial modernity and Christian missionary activity. The British colonial administration, while driven by its own interests, introduced institutions of modern education, legal reforms, and print culture that provided the marginalised with new tools for self-expression and mobilisation. Christian missionaries, active since the early 19th century, played a critical role in spreading literacy and promoting egalitarian values among lower castes. Their educational and healthcare initiatives created a new social consciousness among the oppressed.

Movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) highlighted the mass mobilisation aspect of the Renaissance. This struggle for the right of lower castes to access public roads near the Vaikom temple became a landmark in India’s civil rights history and drew national attention, including support from Mahatma Gandhi. The Kerala Renaissance thus marked a turning point in Kerala’s social development, laying the foundation for a more democratic and inclusive society. It combined social and religious reform with a new political awakening that would later contribute to Kerala’s progressive policies and high social indicators.

Keywords

Kerala Renaissance, Subaltern Origins, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Caste Discrimination, Social Reform, Missionary Influence, Vaikom Satyagraha

Discussion

5.1.1. Subaltern Origins

The Kerala Renaissance was unique compared to other social reform movements in India because it emerged from the subaltern (marginalised) communities rather than being a top-down movement led by the elite. Unlike the Hindu reform movements in northern India, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s Brahmo Samaj or Dayanand Saraswati’s Arya Samaj, Kerala’s renaissance was led

by leaders from lower-caste communities who fought against the rigid caste system. Key figures like Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and Poykayil Appachan played vital roles in shaping this movement, providing a model that was later followed by the higher-caste elites.

Several organisations were formed to support the cause of marginalised groups, such as the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana

(SNDP) Yogam in 1903 by Narayana Guru, the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) in 1907 by Ayyankali, and the Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in 1910 by Poykayil Appachan. Other groups like the Vaala Samudaya Parishkarani Sabha by Pundit Karuppan and the Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangam by Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi also reflected the efforts of marginalised groups to assert their rights in Kerala. Reform movements such as the Yogakshema Sabha by the Nambutiri Brahmins in 1908 and the Nair Service Society by Mannathu Padmanabhan in 1914 followed the example set by these subaltern groups.

One of the most radical aspects of the Kerala Renaissance was its resistance to what has been termed “internal imperialism”. British colonialism was present for less than 200 years, but the internal imperialism of caste and Varna is still here and is in power through manufacturing consent by Hinduising the Avarna people and misusing their mandate. Thus, this lasting empire of caste and Brahmanism was under attack during the Kerala Renaissance rather than the short British Raj during which the subaltern in India got certain breaks and ruptures through colonial modernity. The fact that British rule in Kerala was directly felt only in British Malabar and that the Indian National Congress didn’t engage in the affairs of princely states could have played a role in directing the Kerala Renaissance against the caste structure rather than British imperialism.

Unlike nationalist movements that focused on colonial rule, Kerala’s subaltern movements sought to dismantle the deeply entrenched structures of Brahmanical oppression. The roots of these movements can be traced to the growing awareness among the oppressed classes about their social status, a consciousness that was often fostered by colonial interventions, missionary activities,

and exposure to new ideological discourses. Reformers like Narayana Guru understood that a fundamental transformation of the social order required not just advocacy but the creation of new institutions that could provide alternatives to Brahmanical authority. By consecrating temples that were open to all, organising educational institutions, and developing a distinct philosophical discourse, he laid the groundwork for a more inclusive society.

5.1.1.1 Influence of Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali

The intellectuals who had initiated a renaissance in the existing society were not Western educated, but oriented towards traditional knowledge. In these struggles, the native intellectuals played a prominent role, and their teachings, along with material developments in society, inaugurated major transformations. Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali were two pivotal figures in Kerala’s social reform movements, both emerging from marginalised communities and working relentlessly to challenge the oppressive caste system that subjugated the Ezhava and Pulaya communities.

Narayana Guru, born into the Ezhava community, and Ayyankali, born into the Pulaya community, recognised the urgent need for their communities to rise through education, spirituality, and social activism. Both faced exclusion from mainstream society, with their communities barred from temple entry, access to education, and even public spaces. Narayana Guru’s work with the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) and Ayyankali’s establishment of the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) provided critical platforms for the subaltern groups to assert their rights.

Narayana Guru’s call for “one caste, one religion, one God for all” echoed the idea that caste distinctions, especially in religious



Their work, rooted in subaltern resistance, not only addressed the immediate needs of their communities but also fostered a broader social consciousness, enabling Ezhavas, Pulayas, and other marginalised groups to organise and demand social equality and justice. Through their transformative leadership, Narayana Guru and Ayyankali demonstrated the power of subaltern agency, showing that those who were once oppressed could reshape their own destiny and challenge the deeply entrenched systems of inequality. This aspect of subaltern origin is unique to the Kerala renaissance.

Missionary activities played a crucial role in Kerala's social transformation. Christian missionaries established schools, printing

Christian missionaries played a pivotal role in transforming Kerala's social landscape by providing marginalised communities, particularly Ezhavas, Pulayas, and other lower castes, access to education. These communities, long relegated to subordinate roles by the caste system, fought to shed the 'inferior' status imposed upon them. Education became a vital tool in this struggle, enabling these groups to redefine their identities and gain opportunities that had previously been denied. The missionaries, though primarily motivated by evangelistic goals, made a significant impact by establishing the first schools accessible to lower-caste populations. Protestant missionary groups such as the London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, and the Basel Evangelical Mission set up a network of schools across Kerala, which offered both formal and informal education to lower-caste communities who had been excluded from traditional educational spaces.

The establishment of missionary schools was crucial in democratising knowledge, as these institutions were among the first to provide education to those who had previously been denied it, particularly to the agrarian and labouring classes. Although the missionaries' evangelistic motives were clear, their educational activities inadvertently fostered social mobility by giving the lower castes access to modern learning. These schools offered instruction in regional languages and English, and by doing so, they opened up pathways for the marginalised to

participate in broader economic and social spheres. The missionary-run schools were the first real alternatives to the caste-based education system, offering a chance for lower-caste students to learn, compete, and gain access to better livelihoods.

The printing presses established by missionaries further fuelled the spread of education by producing books, newspapers, and religious texts in the Malayalam language, which made knowledge more accessible to the wider public. These presses played a significant role in spreading both religious and secular literature, contributing to a wider political awakening in Kerala. The increased circulation of reading material provided marginalised caste groups with new ideas about social justice, political participation, and equality, all of which became foundational to the rise of anti-caste ideologies. The involvement of Sree Narayana Guru and other reformers in these educational movements was key to the social transformation that followed. Narayana Guru's advocacy for education and his efforts to challenge the Brahminical monopoly over public institutions were reinforced by the educational access made possible by the missionaries.

5.1.2. Popular Character

Another defining feature of the Kerala Renaissance was its widespread mass appeal. Unlike elite-driven movements, the reforms in Kerala were grassroots efforts led by the lower castes and working-class communities. This mass character was evident in the struggles for education, temple entry, and social mobility. The social reform movements in Kerala led to massive changes that took place in the social outlook. Any social reform movement will have its own agenda, and in Kerala, the main goals of the social reform movements are the abolition of untouchability, the abolition of caste discrimination, the

abolition of women's subordination, and the reform of society as a whole. Kerala's reform movements mainly revolved around two spheres—social and religious. Perhaps one of the distinct features of Kerala modernity is its solid base in public rationality. Unlike the rest of India, Kerala society was able to come out of the religious orthodoxy, social conservatism, and spiritual obscurantism. The social reform movements both in the lower and upper caste communities fought against traditions and myths prevailing in society. The reformist movements of Ezhavas, Pulayas, and others concentrated on their inclusion in the public sphere. The lower caste people fought for their visibility and inclusion in both religious and social life, thus making it a mass and popular struggle.

The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-1925) was a prime example of this populist nature; it was a landmark event in the history of Kerala's social reform movements, known for its significance in challenging the deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination and asserting the rights of lower-caste communities, particularly the Untouchables or *Avarna* castes. This movement, led by social reformers and spearheaded by K. Kelappan, T. K. Madhavan, and M. P. Manmadhan, became one of the first mass movements in Kerala to focus on the inclusion of lower-caste people in the public sphere, particularly in relation to temple entry and public spaces.

5.1.2.1 A Protest March during the Vaikom Satyagraha

The social reform movement, primarily the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-1925), marked a watershed moment in Kerala's pursuit of social justice due to its unprecedented mass participation and remarkable cross-caste solidarity. It directly challenged the entrenched system of caste-based segregation, specifically the denial of public road access



near the Vaikom Mahadeva Temple to “unapproachable” castes.

The movement drew diverse participants, notably Ezhavas, Pulayas, and other Dalit communities, who formed its backbone, directly confronting the dehumanising practice of forbidding *Avarnas* from using public roads near temples. Crucially, individuals from privileged castes, including Namboothiris (Brahmins) and Nairs, also joined the protests. This pioneering cross-caste alliance was rare in early 20th-century India, signifying a nascent recognition of caste injustice.

This solidarity was fostered by influential reformist leaders. Sree Narayana Guru’s philosophy of “One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man” provided the intellectual framework for challenging traditional hierarchies, with his SNDP Yogam mobilising the Ezhava community. Mahatma Gandhi’s direct involvement brought national attention, validating the Satyagraha as part of his broader fight against untouchability. His visit and negotiations contributed to the movement’s partial success through non-violent resistance.

Following Vaikom, the Guruvayoor Satyagraha (1931-1932), led by K. Kelappan, continued the struggle for temple entry. This movement, supported by the Indian National Congress, aimed to open the Guruvayoor Sree Krishna Temple to all Hindus. Kelappan’s fast and widespread public support eventually pressured authorities, culminating in the monumental Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 by the Maharaja of Travancore. This abolished the ban on untouchables entering Hindu temples, marking a colossal stride towards social equality in Kerala and a direct outcome of these sustained reform efforts.

One of the key instruments of SNDP’s reformist agenda was its official publication, *Vivekodayam*, launched on 31 Medam 1079 M.E. (May 13, 1904). The journal served as

a platform to articulate the ideals of the Guru and promote rational thought, equality, and social progress. Kumaran Asan, a renowned poet and disciple of Narayana Guru, served as the Chief Editor. Asan’s literary and editorial contributions helped to refine the movement’s ideological clarity and appeal to a wider audience. The publication was instrumental in fostering a sense of collective identity among the marginalised and in cultivating a new consciousness based on dignity and education.

Narayana Guru’s teachings emphasised self-respect, spiritual equality, and the transformative power of education. His vision encouraged the lower castes to question social hierarchies and seek liberation through self-improvement and moral upliftment.

In addition to organisational efforts, the popular character of the Renaissance was also visible in its engagement with literature, theatre, and print media. Reformers like Sahodaran Ayyappan used journalism and public discourse to challenge caste supremacy and Brahmanical nationalism. His publications, including *Sahodaran*, played a vital role in shaping a critical and egalitarian public opinion, making the Kerala Renaissance a truly people-centric reform movement.

5.1.3 Expansion of Social Welfare Programme

With the growing strength of mass movements, social reformers began advocating for institutional changes. Community-based organisations and labour unions were formed to demand better working conditions and wage parity. Welfare programmes focusing on public healthcare, housing for the oppressed, and cooperative farming initiatives began gaining momentum.

The role of women in the Kerala Renaissance was another crucial aspect. Figures like Poikayil Yohannan and Arya

Pallam played significant roles in advocating for gender equality. Women's participation in labour unions, educational reforms, and political activism contributed significantly to Kerala's unique trajectory of social progress.

5.1.3.1 Against Caste and Ritualism

The Kerala Renaissance fundamentally challenged caste-based discrimination and the rituals of Hinduism. It aimed to reshape the social framework by emphasising human dignity over established religious orthodoxy. Reformers such as Narayana Guru and Sahodaran Ayyappan were outspoken critics of Brahmanical dominance, working to establish a more inclusive and rational society. Through reforms targeting caste rituals, the Kerala Renaissance created new opportunities and visibility for oppressed social groups throughout the state. Movements like the *Villu Vandi Yathra*, *Kannadi Prathishta*, *Channar Lahala*, and the demand for education were all key struggles against caste rituals, aiming to create public spaces, challenge existing religious norms, and assert control over one's own body. This vision was captured by the Renaissance poet and disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaran Asan, who said, *Mattuvin chattangale! Swayamallenkil mattum, athukalee ningalethan!* (Change the rules! If you don't, those rules will lead to your big fall).



Fig: 1.5.1. Guru, along with Kumaran Asan.

The Kerala Renaissance was unique in its subaltern origins, mass participation, and strong opposition to caste and ritualism. It was not merely a Hindu reform movement but a radical restructuring of society that sought to dismantle internal hierarchies. By focusing on the liberation of the people rather than elite-driven nationalism, it set itself apart from other regional reform movements in India. Despite later attempts to co-opt its legacy into a homogenised Hindu identity, the Kerala Renaissance remains a landmark movement in the history of social justice and equality in India.

Recap

- ◆ Kerala Renaissance emerged from subaltern communities challenging caste and ritualism.
- ◆ Kerala Renaissance movement by marginalised figures like Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, Ayya Vaikundhar and Poykayil Appachan.
- ◆ SNDP, SJPS, and PRDS promoted social reform and Dalit rights.

- ◆ Channar Revolt (1818–1859) was the first organised anti-caste resistance.
- ◆ Marginalised groups demanded equal rights during the Channar Revolt.
- ◆ Sree Narayana Guru preached unity through “One caste, one religion, one God.” His teachings united oppressed communities and challenged caste divisions.
- ◆ Ayyankali fought for Pulayas’ rights to education and public spaces. He also led movements demanding temple entry for Dalits.
- ◆ Christian missionaries established schools and hospitals for marginalised people. They also introduced printing presses to spread reformist ideas.
- ◆ Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) protested caste discrimination and public space denial. The movement demanded temple access for lower castes.
- ◆ Kerala Renaissance focused on caste reform, unlike nationalist movements. Subaltern leadership shaped Kerala’s unique path to social justice.

Objective Questions

1. When was Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) founded?
2. Which revolt (1818-1859) was the first collective resistance against caste oppression in Kerala?
3. Who founded the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS)?
4. What was the slogan coined by Sree Narayana Guru promoting unity?
5. Which event in 1924-1925 was a significant mass movement in Kerala?
6. Who were the prominent leaders involved in the Vaikom Satyagraha?
7. Who was the chief editor of *Vivekodayam*, the mouthpiece of SNDP?
8. Which key organisation was founded by Poykayil Appachan in 1910?

Answers

1. 1903
2. Channar Revolt
3. Ayyankali
4. “One caste, one religion, one God for all”
5. Vaikom Satyagraha
6. T K Madhavan, K.P. Kesava Menon, and K. Kelappan
7. Kumaran Asan
8. Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha

Assignments

1. Discuss the key contributions of Narayana Guru and Ayyankali to the Kerala Renaissance movement.
2. Analyse the role of missionaries in the social transformation of Kerala, particularly for marginalised communities.
3. Evaluate the impact of the Vaikom Satyagraha on the social reform movements in Kerala.
4. Examine the relationship between colonialism and the Kerala Renaissance, focusing on how it influenced the subaltern resistance.
5. How did the Kerala Renaissance challenge the caste system and promote inclusivity in religious and social practices?

Reference

1. Sekher, Ajay S. “Kerala Renaissance and Resisting Cultural Nationalism: The Critical Legacies of Nanuguru, Sahodaran, Appachan, and Dharmateerthar.” In *Nationalism and Multiculturalism in India*, edited by P. K. Pokker, 142-66. Calicut University EMS Chair, 2016. ISBN 81-902675-0-2.
2. Ganesh. K.N, *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*, Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2004.
3. Menon, Dilip. M, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
4. Rao. M.S.A, *Social Change in Malabar*, The Popular Book depot, Bombay, 1957.
5. Ravi Raman, K. (2017). *Subaltern modernity: Kerala, the eastern theatre of resistance in the Global South*. *Sociology*, 51(1), 91-1

Suggested Reading

1. Balakrishnan, P. K., *Jativyavasthithiyum Kerala Charithravum*, National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1986.
2. Bhaskaranunni, P., *Keralam Irupatham Nuttandinte Arambhathil*, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, 2005.
3. Gopalakrishnan, P. K., *Jainamatham Keralathil*, Prabhat Book House, Trivandrum, 1998 (first published 1974).
4. Jeffrey, Robin, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847–1908*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1976.



UNIT

From Social Reform to Social Struggle

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ examine how key reformers in Kerala challenged caste and promoted social equality.
- ◆ assess how social reform movements evolved into radical political struggles.
- ◆ explore the influence of cultural expressions and folk arts on Kerala's communist movement.
- ◆ investigate the role of peasant struggles in shaping class-based resistance in Kerala.

Prerequisites

This unit provides an in-depth examination of Kerala's historical shift from social reform movements to radical political struggles, highlighting how challenges to caste-based discrimination gradually evolved into broader class-based mobilisations. It begins with the pioneering efforts of Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and Chattampi Swamikal, who played a transformative role in questioning the caste hierarchy, advocating for education, and promoting dignity and equality among oppressed communities. Their efforts laid the foundation for a more inclusive and rational society.

The unit also explores early political assertions for representation, such as the Malayali Memorial (1891) and Ezhava Memorial (1896), where marginalised communities demanded administrative inclusion and equal opportunities. Movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) and Guruvayur Satyagraha (1931–32) are examined for their significance in asserting civil rights and temple entry for lower castes.



As social consciousness deepened, the focus shifted to economic inequality and land struggles, especially in the agrarian context. The emergence of communist politics in the 1930s and 1940s, with strong support from peasants and workers, marked a significant transformation—from identity-based struggles to class-based resistance. The unit helps explain how Kerala's unique political culture was shaped by a continuum of reform and revolution, ultimately contributing to its modern democratic ethos.

Keywords

Left Politics, Satyagraha, Peasant Movements, Caste Discrimination, Social Reform, and Radical Struggle.

Discussion

5.2.1. Radical Social Reform

The social reforms led by figures like Sree Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal went beyond mere intellectual or spiritual exhortations; they involved active resistance to entrenched social practices. Their reforms were not moderate but radical in nature. For example, Sree Narayana Guru fought against oppressive customs such as *Thalikkettukalyanam* (a proxy marriage system) and *Thirandukuli*, urging his community to embrace reforms, including the practice of direct marriage ceremonies. His insistence on abandoning the practice of toddy tapping and his declaration that "whatever be one's religion, it is enough for him to be good" revealed a deeper vision for social equality. A pivotal event was the consecration of the Shiva idol at Aruvippuram in 1888, where, as a member of the oppressed Ezhava community, the Guru broke with tradition by performing a rite previously reserved for the higher castes. This act symbolised a direct challenge to the caste system and is seen as a defining moment in the reformist struggle.

Similarly, Chattampi Swamikal contributed significantly to Kerala's intellectual reform movements, advocating for the rejection of the myth of Kerala's creation by Parasurama, which reinforced Brahminical hegemony. Ayyankali worked towards the emancipation of the Pulaya community, challenging the oppressive symbols of caste such as the *Kallumala* (stone and wood ornaments worn by women). His efforts led to the Pulayas discarding these shackles of subjugation, adopting metal and gold ornaments instead, symbolising their newfound dignity.

Prominent Muslim reformers like Vakkom Abdul Khadir Maulavi also played a critical role in advocating for the social upliftment of the Muslim community. He encouraged the adoption of English education, the rejection of un-Islamic practices, and the active participation of Muslims in modern progressive movements, all contributing to Kerala's social reform narrative. All these social reform movements show the inherent radical nature and the quest for social change.

5.2.2. Radical Reform to Radical Politics

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the intellectual and social reforms had begun to shift from reformist measures to radical struggles aimed at achieving political representation and rights for oppressed communities. This transformation was evident in the form of the Malayali Memorial and the Ezhava Memorial, which laid bare the community's growing political consciousness.

In 1891, the Malayali Memorial petitioned the Maharaja of Travancore, Sree Moolam Thirunal, against the policy of appointing Tamil Brahmins to key government positions, which sidelined the local educated population. The petition, signed by over 10,000 people, called for the inclusion of native Keralites in higher public offices. A similar Ezhava Memorial presented in 1896 highlighted the community's grievances, particularly the denial of access to government schools and employment. Despite the Maharaja's dismissal of these petitions, the memorials served as a rallying point for the oppressed classes and laid the foundation for future struggles.

In 1900, a second Ezhava Memorial was submitted to the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, further escalating the demands for social justice and equal rights. Although the second memorial did not yield immediate results, it symbolised a shift towards radical political agitation for social equality and justice.

The early 20th century saw a deepening of the social struggle, which was increasingly intertwined with the broader political currents of the time. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-1925) and Guruvayur Satyagraha (1931) marked critical moments in this transformation, where social struggles merged with mainstream political movements.

These were non-violent protests aimed at challenging caste-based discrimination and promoting social equality, particularly in public spaces such as the roads around Vaikom Temple and the Guruvayur Temple, which were restricted to upper-caste Hindus.

Prominent leaders like K. Kelappan, T.K. Madhavan, and followers of Sree Narayana Guru led these protests, utilising methods such as fasting, civil disobedience, and marches to demand the rights of lower-caste Hindus. The Vaikom Satyagraha succeeded in securing access to public roads for all castes, while the Guruvayur Satyagraha resulted in the temple being opened to lower-caste worshippers, marking a significant victory for religious inclusivity and social justice.

The social struggles during this period also addressed the exploitative land relations tied to the caste-based hierarchy. One significant cause for these struggles was the British colonial rule. Upon assuming power, the British focused on two primary objectives: recovering the costs of war through taxes and establishing a social foundation for their authority. To maintain control, the British fostered landlordism, which empowered the Jenmis (landlords) to evict the Kudiyan (tenant farmers) at will. This resulted in the loss of land rights for the actual farmers. Additionally, the tax burdens were extremely high, covering everything from knives to boat travel and fishing nets. Between 1836 and 1921, numerous Mappila rebellions occurred, targeting both landlords and colonial authorities. Among these, the 1921 Malabar Rebellion stands out, as it was closely linked to the Khilafat Movement. In 1920, the *Malabar Kudiyan Sangham* (MKS), a tenant association, was formed in Pattambi, and violent incidents in places like Thalassery, Morazha, and Mattannoor helped raise class awareness among peasants. The national movement played a crucial role in strengthening this consciousness.



5.2.3. The Rise of Left Politics and Social Reform Movements in Kerala

In Kerala, the early 20th-century social reform movements were instrumental in shaping the spread of left politics and communist ideologies. The 19th century witnessed the emergence of various social reform movements that aimed to address oppressive caste hierarchies and social customs. These movements were not monolithic; some advocated for the abolition of caste-based hierarchies, while others sought to modify and reinforce existing caste structures. This heterogeneity led to significant social change, though the reform movements largely preserved the upper-caste hegemony. This period of reform, however, laid the groundwork for more radical democratic movements that followed, particularly the rise of communism.

5.2.3.1. Caste, Class, and the Emergence of the Communist Movement

The communist movement in Kerala is often seen as a continuation of the struggles initiated by the social reform movements of the 19th century. However, the communist ideology expanded upon the caste reform movements by introducing the language of class into social discourse. Lower-caste peasants, especially the Ezhavas, began to identify more with class struggles rather than solely with caste identities, which led to a differentiation within caste-based communities. While caste reform movements had radicalised over time, it was the communist movement that expanded their

scope to include political democratisation. The communists not only advocated for caste equality but also focused on the issues of class struggle. This shift in focus was accompanied by a cultural transformation, where the democratisation of literature and the emergence of progressive folk arts became integral in spreading communist ideologies and challenging caste oppression.

5.2.3.2. Cultural Shifts, Folk Arts, and the Role of Protest Songs

Culture played a central role in the communist movement's success in Kerala. The use of folk songs and arts by communist activists was a key tool for mobilising peasants and labourers who were unfamiliar with modern forms of organisation. Early peasant unions faced difficulty in organising workers due to their attachment to caste-based identities and their hesitance to challenge landlords openly. To overcome this, activists used songs, in familiar folk styles, to encourage participation in the unions and spread the message of equality. These protest songs, created by figures like K. A. Keraleeyan and K. P. R. Gopalan, became an integral part of Kerala's folk tradition and continued to resonate even beyond their time. The communist movement in Kerala was also deeply connected to the transformation of culture, as unions like the Alleppey Coir Factory Workers' Union recognised the power of culture in organising the working class. This connection between culture and politics culminated in the creation of the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC), which revolutionised the cultural scene, particularly through the medium of theatre.



Fig: 5.2.1. KPAC drama *Ningalenne Communistakki*

5.2.3.3 Peasant Struggles, Trade Union Movements, and Agrarian Revolts

The communist movement in Kerala was deeply tied to the agrarian struggles and trade union movements that emerged in the early 20th century. These struggles created a strong class consciousness among peasants and labourers. Key events like the Kayyoor incident, the Karivellur Struggle, and the Punnapra-Vayalar Struggles illustrated the increasing tension between the working class and the ruling elites, leading to widespread mobilisation.

In 1941, the Kayyoor incident saw peasants rise against local landlords, resulting in the death of a policeman and the subsequent hanging of party members. In 1946, the Karivellur Struggle saw peasants resist the exploitative actions of landlords, leading to police atrocities and further radicalisation. The Punnapra-Vayalar Struggles of 1946, sparked by opposition to the plans of the Dewan of Travancore, culminated in a massive revolt against the police and

military, which left hundreds of dead. These struggles, along with the creation of unions like the Karshaka Sabha, marked the shift towards a class-based resistance, which was deeply influenced by the communist party's agenda. The party's focus on class struggles also extended to the working conditions in factories, where labourers faced low wages and poor working conditions. The communist party's involvement in organising trade unions played a vital role in improving the conditions of the working class and solidified its base in Kerala. The defeat of the Dewan's plans for an independent Travancore and the subsequent inclusion of the state in the Indian Union was also a significant political moment for the communist movement.

In Kerala, the shift from social reform to social struggle was marked by a gradual but profound transformation of society. Reformist leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, and Ayyankali set the stage for a broader political awakening, leading to struggles that were not only about social equality but also political representation. As the struggles evolved, they paved

the way for the rise of Left politics, which expanded the discourse from caste-based equality to class-based revolution, thereby shaping Kerala's political landscape for the decades to come. The struggles for land

rights, labour rights, and political freedoms became intrinsically linked, creating a solid foundation for Kerala's distinctive leftist political culture.

Recap

- ◆ Kerala's social reform movements were primarily aimed at eradicating caste discrimination and untouchability.
- ◆ The reforms led by these figures went beyond intellectual advocacy, including direct challenges to oppressive customs and rituals.
- ◆ The Malayali Memorial (1891) and Ezhava Memorial (1896) marked the early stages of political struggles for representation and rights.
- ◆ The Vaikom (1924-1925) and Guruvayur (1931) Satyagrahas were significant non-violent protests against caste-based exclusion.
- ◆ Radical political movements emerged in response to social injustices, influencing the rise of Left politics in Kerala.
- ◆ The rise of Communist Movements in Kerala expanded the focus from caste equality to include class-based struggles and political democratisation.
- ◆ Peasant struggles, trade union movements, and agrarian revolts, such as the Kayyoor Incident and Punnapra-Vayalar Struggles, were crucial in shaping Kerala's political landscape.
- ◆ The use of culture and folklore, especially protest songs and folk arts, played a crucial role in spreading Left politics and mobilising peasants and workers in Kerala.

Objective Questions

1. Who opposed *Thalikettukalyanam* and *Thirandukuli customs* in Kerala?
2. Which slogan by Sree Narayana Guru emphasised ethical living over religious identity?
3. What social practice did Ayyankali help the Pulaya women discard?

4. Which myth did Chattampi Swamikal challenge to resist Brahminical hegemony?
5. Who was a major Muslim reformer advocating English education among Kerala Muslims?
6. What was the main demand of the Malayali Memorial in 1891?
7. In which year was the first Ezhava Memorial submitted?
8. Who was the Viceroy addressed in the second Ezhava Memorial of 1900?
9. What was the major outcome of the Vaikom Satyagraha?
10. Who were the leaders of the Guruvayur Satyagraha?
11. Which rebellion in 1921 was associated with both agrarian struggle and the Khilafat Movement?
12. What was the main aim of the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC)?
13. Name one major agrarian revolt linked to the rise of Left politics in Kerala.

Answers

1. Sree Narayana Guru
2. "Whatever be one's religion, it is enough to be good"
3. *Kallumala* (stone and wooden ornaments)
4. The myth of Kerala's creation by Parasurama
5. Vakkom Abdul Khadir Maulavi
6. Inclusion of Malayalis in higher government positions
7. 1896
8. Lord Curzon
9. Secured access to public roads for all castes



10. K. Kelappan and T.K. Madhavan
11. Malabar Rebellion
12. To spread leftist ideas through theatre and folk culture
13. Punnapra-Vayalar Struggles

Assignments

1. Analyse the role of social reform movements in challenging the caste system and promoting equality in Kerala.
2. How did the shift from social reform to radical political struggle influence the rise of Left politics in Kerala?
3. Explain how the Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas contributed to the fight against caste-based discrimination.
4. Evaluate the impact of the rise of Left politics in Kerala on social and class-based struggles.
5. Assess the role of culture, folklore, and protest songs in advancing Left politics and mobilising peasant movements in Kerala.

Reference

1. Bhaskar, Manu, *Press and Working-Class Consciousness in Developing Societies: A Study of an Indian State, Keraia*, New Delhi, Gian Publishing House, 1989.
2. Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala Became A Model*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993.
3. Mannathukkaren, N. (2013). *The rise of the national-popular and its limits: Communism and the cultural in Kerala. Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 14(4), 494–518.

4. Mattumannil, S. H. (2024). *The left approach to social diversity: How the Communist Party interacted with Kerala's social landscape?* *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2292840.
5. Rudolph Llyod, Susanne Hoeber, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967.

Suggested Reading

1. Devika, J., *Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 69, 2010.
2. Ganesh, K. N., *Keralathinte Innalekal*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995.
3. Jeffrey, R., *Matriliny, Marxism, and the Birth of the Communist Party in Kerala, 1930–1940*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1978, pp. 77–98.
4. Kurup, K. K. N., *Peasantry and the Anti-Imperialist Struggles in Kerala*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 16, No. 9, 1988, pp. 35–45
5. Nilsen, A. G., *The Persistence of Political Power: A Communist 'Party Village' in Kerala and the Paradox of Egalitarian Hierarchies*, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 36, Nos. 26/28, 2021.



UNIT

Patriarchal Agenda and Imagining of "New" Women

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ analyse the impact of colonial influence on the decline of matrilineal systems in Kerala
- ◆ examine how Western education contributed to the rise of patriarchy in Kerala
- ◆ examine the social and cultural transformations in Kerala in the late 19th and early 20th centuries
- ◆ explore how the changing roles of women in Kerala during this period were shaped by social reforms, literature, and education

Prerequisites

A thorough understanding of Kerala's social and cultural history—especially its unique kinship systems—is vital for comprehending the transformative developments discussed in this chapter. Kerala was historically known for its matrilineal system, particularly among communities like the Nairs, where inheritance and lineage passed through the female line. This structure influenced gender roles, property rights, and familial authority. However, this system began to erode during the colonial period due to multiple factors.

One of the most significant influences was British colonial intervention, which introduced legal reforms and promoted patrilineal inheritance aligned with Victorian ideals of family and gender roles. The spread of Western education further altered traditional perspectives, encouraging individualism and nuclear family structures, and promoting patriarchal values that marginalised women's roles in society.

Understanding these shifts also requires a basic grasp of caste hierarchies and the widespread social discrimination that characterized pre-modern Kerala. Reform movements led by figures like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and Chattampi Swamikal challenged caste oppression and played a crucial role in Kerala's social awakening during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, familiarity with kinship systems, colonial history, Western education, and caste-based reform movements is essential for analysing Kerala's complex journey toward modern social transformation.

Keywords

Matrilineal System, Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Social Reform, Colonial Influence, Kerala History.

Discussion

5.3.1 Matrilineal Tradition of Kerala

The late 19th and early 20th centuries in Kerala were marked by dramatic shifts in social structures and gender roles, especially as colonial influence began to take hold and reshape existing norms. At the heart of these transformations was the decline of matrilineal kinship systems and the rise of patriarchal frameworks. This unit explores the evolution of gender, kinship, and family systems in Kerala, beginning with the role of art in reinforcing societal changes, followed by the dismantling of matrilineal systems and the creation of modern gender roles in the region.

Matrilineal kinship is relatively uncommon in India, though it was not rare in Kerala. During the 19th century, almost fifty per cent of the Malayali population, across various castes and communities, practised matriliney. Although matrilineal systems have existed in different parts of the world, they were mostly confined to non-Western (non-Anglo-Saxon) regions. Kerala's matrilineal system was distinctive, especially among the Nairs, providing women with significant rights

within the family. This system, known as *marumakkatayam*, granted property rights through the female lineage, ensuring that daughters, rather than sons, inherited family wealth. Women in such households enjoyed financial security, access to education, and a higher social standing compared to those in patrilineal societies.

In this polyandrous system, remarriage of widows and divorcees was permitted, and women had considerable rights to terminate unsatisfactory marital relationships. Other distinct features of this system are that female veiling or seclusion was near-absent, enabling modern Kerala girls' easier access to schooling. Elsewhere, concerns about girls' sexual purity and the need for early marriage promote female seclusion and curtail girls' education. Also, the dowry custom is absent in matrilineal inheritance. Dowry given at marriage creates and buttresses the bride-giver's family's inferior status: though they provide lavish gifts, they are precluded from social/ritual equality with the bride-receiver.

5.3.1.1 Tharavadu

The origins of the *marumakkatayam*



system are speculative. Strictly speaking, the *Marumakkathayam* system was primarily followed by the Nairs, but other castes adopted it over time due to prolonged interaction with the Nairs. The Mappilahs and Christians who practised this system were descendants of converts from *Marumakkathayam* practitioners.

The Tarawad, a *Marumakkathayam* family, consists of all descendants in the female line of a common female ancestor. According to Nair regulations and the Malabar Marriage Act, a Tarawad is a joint family with communal property, governed by *Marumakkathayam* inheritance law. K. Padmanabha Menon, in his report to the *Marumakkathayam* Committee, described a Tarawad as a group of people, male and female, tracing their lineage to a common ancestress and managed by the eldest male, called the *Karanavan*.

The term *Karanavan*, in Bailey's Malayalam Dictionary, is interpreted to mean "father," "maternal uncle," "elder brother," or "lord," and generally refers to someone senior. According to the Nair Regulation, the *Karanavan* is the senior male member of the Tarawad and has authority over its management. In a simple household, the family would include the mother and her children, living with the maternal uncle (the *Karanavan*).

The *Karanavan* holds power over the younger members of the *Tarawad* and is not obligated to support those who leave the family home. Junior members cannot independently acquire property, as the rights to property rest with the male members or, if absent, the senior female members. The *Karanavan* is responsible for managing the family's affairs, overseeing its finances, and representing the family to the outside world. However, the *Karanavan*'s ownership of property is not absolute; he serves as a representative or agent of the *Tarawad*. In

the absence of male members, the senior female member assumes management responsibilities and can exercise the same powers as the *Karanavan*.

The *Karanavan* has control over both movable and immovable property of the *Tarawad*, but in cases where property is managed by a branch of the family under a maintenance arrangement, the *Karanavan* cannot evict them without making proper support arrangements. As the family head, the *Karanavan* manages the *Tarawad*'s finances, distributing income among family members. While the *Karanavan*'s authority over income is nearly absolute, he is not legally bound to account for his spending unless challenged in a lawsuit. The *Karanavan* has discretion in distributing the family's income, provided it is used for *Tarawad* purposes. Failure to comply with the *Karanavan*'s decisions could result in withholding maintenance. Though the *Anandaravan* (junior male member) has an interest in the property, it is primarily the *Karanavan*'s responsibility to ensure the property is properly managed and protected. Added to this was the loose marriage contracts of the Nair women, which were temporary arrangements and did not bind both parties. It was called *Sambandham*, which was nothing but a sexual association regulated by certain conventions convenient to them.

5.3.2 The Decline of Matrilineal Systems and the Emergence of Patriarchy in Kerala

The nineteenth century witnessed a social awakening of immense significance in Kerala, as the spread of Western education and rational thought brought about radical changes to existing social practices and patterns of life. This period marked a time when people began to critically assess the validity of deeply rooted traditions that had been sustained for generations. The system

of *Marumakkathayam* was questioned, and the structural significance of *Tharavadu* itself was scrutinised. The Nairs, influenced by Western education and intellectual thought, pushed for the abolition of various traditional customs that had adversely impacted their society. Western education gave Indians the opportunity to evaluate their long-standing practices from a moral perspective, and some missionaries even criticised certain socio-religious practices prevalent in Travancore, questioning their legitimacy.

A powerful representation of these changes can be seen in 1893, when the famous Malayali artist Raja Ravi Varma painted a piece titled *There Comes Papa*. The painting depicts a young Malayali woman holding her baby on her hip and pointing towards an unseen approaching figure. Her dog also seems to be alert, watching the figure in the distance. The painting evokes a sense of expectancy, drawing the viewer into a triangular space of interaction between the model and the absent figure, compelling participation. At first glance, the significance of a painting titled *There Comes Papa* may seem unclear, especially considering that both the artist and the subject were products of a matrilineal society. Without the title, the viewer would be unaware of whom the family in the painting is waiting for. The figure of the absent "Papa" becomes a symbol of the crisis that Nayar matriliney faced at the end of the nineteenth century. Ravi Varma's choice to depict conjugal domesticity and the nuclear family at a time when these ideas were relatively unfamiliar to large sections of the matrilineal population indicates his growing affinity with patrilineal values. Thus, *There Comes Papa* can be seen as a subtle call for the decline of matriliney.

In the larger ideological context, these changes were part of the growing caste consciousness among the Nayars and Namboothiris in Malabar. By the 1890s, caste mobilisation had already begun



Fig: 5.31. Raja Ravi Varma's painting titled *There Comes Papa*

among the lower castes, notably the Ezhavas, which marked a significant shift in social dynamics. The caste reform movements aimed to create a sense of homogeneous identity within castes, transcending class, regional, and sub-caste divisions. This new vision represented a break from the rigid class distinctions that had previously defined Nayar society. Caste, rather than family, became the central point of identity, and the traditional divisions within the *tharavadu* system were rejected. As part of this new discourse, matrilineal kinship, as exemplified by the *tharavadu*, was increasingly viewed as a relic of the past. However, paradoxically, while the caste movement sought to overcome the divisions fostered by the *tharavadu*, it did not challenge the core inequalities that existed within the caste system.

By the early twentieth century, opposition to the matrilineal *tharavadu* had grown more determined. The issue was no longer limited

to challenging the authority of the *tharavadu*; it was now about the broader question of matriliney's very validity. Two important dimensions of this shift contributed to the eventual legal abolition of the *tharavadu* as a joint-family institution with collective property rights in 1933. The first was the coalition of groups such as younger members of the *tharavadu* and tenants, who united to systematically critique matrilineal kinship. The second was the changing attitude of the state, which no longer saw the protection of the *tharavadu*'s property rights as necessary.

Equally damaging to the *tharavadu* system was the changing role of the colonial state in relation to it. In 1902, the state undertook a process of land surveying and resettlement to address the difficulties in collecting revenue. This process, which began in 1891 and continued until 1936, reduced the *tharavadu* to the status of a revenue-paying intermediary. Perhaps more significantly, the state no longer upheld the view that the *tharavadu* had 'immemorial' rights that exempted it from taxation. In the 1930s, two important legislative acts—the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 and the Madras *Marumakkathayam* Act of 1933—further eroded the power of the *tharavadu* by granting tenants security of tenure and allowing for the legitimate partition of joint property. These legal changes effectively dealt a blow to the institution of the *tharavadu* and its matrilineal inheritance system.

The legal reforms of the early twentieth century, such as the Travancore Nair Acts, played a crucial role in reshaping family property rights. These laws granted the *karnavan* the authority to pass on property to his own children rather than to his nieces and nephews, marking a clear shift from the matrilineal system to a patrilineal one. This transition was fuelled by a combination of factors, including the influence of British administrators who viewed matriliney as irregular and immoral, and the Nair men

who sought greater control over property, inheritance, and descent. As traditional military occupations declined, and with increasing criticism of the matrilineal system, this shift gained momentum. The changing attitudes toward women and marriage, particularly the negative perceptions of polyandry and sexual "looseness" in Nair society, further fuelled the decline of matriliney.

From the mid-nineteenth century, the spread of Western education and Christian ideologies, which regarded polygamy as immoral, created a larger ideological backdrop that hastened the decline of matrilineal practices. Under British colonial rule, the influence of Western values on the legal system, particularly regarding property ownership and inheritance, led to a concerted attack on matrilineal practices, which were seen as incompatible with the more dominant patrilineal structures. This cultural shift was further reinforced by Western ideals of monogamy and patriarchy, which became central to the social and moral order of Kerala.

Sambandam, the unique marital arrangement of the Nairs, came to be viewed as out of step with the values of Victorian monogamy, which promoted nuclear families centred around patriarchal authority. In this context, the traditional matrilineal family system, which had been followed by half of Kerala's population, was increasingly seen as backward and problematic. This shift, driven by the educated middle class and influenced by Western education, marked the gradual rise of patriliney and the erosion of matriliney in Kerala society. The matrilineal family, which had once been central to the social structure, came under attack due to the perceived moral and economic superiority of the patrilineal nuclear family system.

5.3.3 Engendering Individuals

The emergence of the notions of the individual and society, fundamental to the concept of "modernity," took shape alongside the formation of the public sphere in the early 20th century. Within this emerging public sphere, individuals began to be understood as gendered subjects, meaning that the process of becoming an individual was inseparable from the simultaneous process of becoming gendered. In this context, gender became a key component in the construction of modern individuals in Kerala. The term "engendering" is used here to denote both the "coming into being" and the "production of gender," as it draws upon the intersection of "ideas," "culture," and "materialities," which together constitute the discursive framework within which the modern man and woman were imagined.

A crucial aspect of this transformation lies in the way the new social category of the individual was constituted. This required a shift from the earlier social order based on 'jati' (caste) to a new order rooted in gender. Gender, conceived as a manifestation of a person's internal capabilities and attributes, was contrasted with 'jati,' which was viewed as an external, artificial construct in need of devaluation within the framework of modernity.

The internal nature of gender was understood to shape distinct social roles and spheres of authority for men and women. For men, authority was linked to material acquisition, political participation, and knowledge creation. For women, a different form of authority—emotional and sentimental—was assigned, positioning them as the overseers of domestic and emotional affairs. However, the limits of this authority were clearly defined by a distinction between 'swatanthryam' (self-sufficiency) and 'tantonmitham' (wantonness). A woman

could not claim 'swatanthryam' without first undergoing self-development, a process of education that aimed to clarify and cultivate her natural, internal attributes. This process was mirrored in the differential education provided to boys and girls at the time.

Both men and women were expected to align their notion of individuality with the collective good through an emphasis on productivity. The ideal new individual was someone capable of transforming personal energies into social benefit, contributing to society's welfare. In this context, women's education and development were viewed as essential in shaping their roles in the modern family and society. This period saw the rise of 'stree samajams' (women's associations) and women's journals, particularly in Kerala, as central institutions in shaping women's roles within modernity. It was in this context of transformation that the Nambutiri and the 'antarjanam' (Nambutiri women) underwent a transformation into man and woman, respectively. The Nambutiri reformer, often gendered male, became a symbol of modernity as he championed the transformation of both self and community.

The role of the press and literature during this period was also significant, reflecting the broader socio-economic and ideological changes occurring in society. One of the key themes discussed extensively in the literature was chastity, which became central to the construction of female gender identity. In 1901, Parameshwara K. Menon criticised the practice of separate living among couples, a feature of *sambandam* unions, as a key factor contributing to adultery. The societal perception of *sambandam*, and particularly its relationship to chastity, varied. Chastity was increasingly viewed as a dominant factor in defining female identity, and mythical chaste figures like Sita, Savithri, and Damayanti were presented as models of virtue, reinforcing this ideal.



In many essays of the time, as Kuttan Nair (1929) observed, women's loyalty to their husbands and their chastity were emphasised as central traits of womanhood. Women's duties towards their husbands, children, parents, and home were prioritised, reflecting the influence of orthodox Sanskritic Hindu values, as opposed to locally rooted norms. To perform these duties, women were expected to possess qualities such as compassion, generosity, humility, capability, and love. Practical knowledge, including money management, good conversation skills, cooking, childcare, and gardening, was also deemed essential to a woman's role, known as 'strī dharma'. These ideas contributed to the emergence of a new gender identity for Nair women.

Within modern families, women were assigned active roles as supervisors, with their education seen as a means to produce efficient homemakers and attractive wives. The "woman question" during this period was not resolved in favour of women's autonomy or their equal participation in community life or citizenship within the framework of modernity. Instead, it was framed in terms of "social need," which would later become a significant element in the democratic framework. The transformation of women's roles and identities was thus not only an issue of individual rights or equality but also a question of their social function in the context of a modernising society.

Recap

- ◆ The late 19th and early 20th centuries in Kerala saw major shifts in gender roles and family structures due to colonial influence.
- ◆ Kerala practiced a matrilineal kinship system, where property and lineage were passed through the female side, especially among the Nairs.
- ◆ Women in matrilineal societies had significant rights, including property inheritance, financial security, and greater social freedom.
- ◆ *Marumakkathayam* (female-based inheritance) allowed daughters to inherit property, in contrast to the patrilineal systems elsewhere in India.
- ◆ The decline of matriliney began in the 19th century, driven by Western education and rational thought challenging traditional practices.
- ◆ Raja Ravi Varma's painting *There Comes Papa* symbolised the shift from matrilineal to patriarchal family structures.
- ◆ Caste reform movements in Kerala contributed to the growing opposition to the matrilineal system.
- ◆ Legal reforms in the early 20th century, such as the Malabar Tenancy Act (1930) and Madras Marumakkathayam Act (1933), eroded matrilineal family structures.

- ◆ The rise of patriarchy was linked to changing perceptions of women, marriage, and social order influenced by colonial rule and Western ideals.
- ◆ The shift towards modernity involved redefining women's roles, focusing on their duties in the home and family, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Objective Questions

1. What was the name of Kerala's matrilineal inheritance system?
2. Who painted *There Comes Papa*?
3. Which act abolished matrilineal inheritance in Kerala?
4. Which colonial influence helped in the decline of the matrilineal system?
5. What were women's associations in early 20th century Kerala called?
6. What virtue became central to defining female gender identity?
7. What was the Nair marital arrangement known as?
8. Which system replaced matrilineal practices in Kerala?

Answers

1. *Marumakkathayam*
2. Raja Ravi Varma
3. Madras Marumakkathayam Act
4. Western education
5. *Stree Samajams*

6. Chastity
7. *Sambandam*
8. Patriarchy

Assignments

1. Discuss the key features of the matrilineal system in Kerala
2. Explain the role of Western education and colonial influence in the decline of the matrilineal system in Kerala.
3. Analyse how Raja Ravi Varma's painting *There Comes Papa* reflects the societal changes in Kerala during the late 19th century.
4. How did the transformation of gender roles in Kerala contribute to the formation of modern social structures in the early 20th century?
5. Examine the impact of the legal reforms of the early 20th century on the property rights and family structures in Kerala.

Reference

1. Arunima G., *There comes Papa – Colonialism and Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar C.1850- 1940*, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 11 (2002).
2. Devika. J, *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007.
3. Devika. J. (ed.), *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women 1898-1938*, Stree, Kolkata, 2005.
4. Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics, Women and Well-Being – How Kerala Became a Model*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
5. Gupta, Charu, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2001.

Suggested Reading

1. Chandy, Anna, *On Women's Liberation*, in J. Devika (ed. & trans.), *Herself: Early Malayalee Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women, 1898–1938*, Stree, Kolkata, 2005.
2. Chaudhuri, Maitreyee (ed.), *Feminism in India*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2004.
3. Devika, J. and Mini Sukumar, *Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 42, 2006, pp. 4469–4475. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418838>
4. Velayudhan, Meera, *Changing Roles and Women's Narratives in Travancore*, in Lotika Sarkar, Kumkum Kapadia and Rajeev Bhargava (eds.), *Between Tradition, Counter Tradition and Heresy*, Rainbow Publications, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 64–79.



UNIT

Emancipation Agenda and Community Politics

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the units, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine how social reform movements influenced communal identity and political awareness in Kerala
- ◆ evaluate the influence of caste-based politics on Kerala's secularism and inter-community relations
- ◆ trace the emergence of political organisations and their impact on Kerala's political landscape
- ◆ analyse the transformation of communal alliances in post-independence Kerala

Prerequisites

A comprehensive knowledge of Kerala's social reform movements is fundamental to understanding this unit, particularly in the context of caste, religion, and the evolution of political identities. These reform movements, which gained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were instrumental in challenging entrenched caste hierarchies and promoting a new sense of communal self-awareness among various social groups such as the Ezhavas, Nairs, and Syrian Christians. Leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and Chattampi Swamikal not only opposed ritualism and caste oppression but also inspired communities to organise themselves socially and politically.

The unit explores how these communities, previously marginalised or subordinated, began asserting their rights and demanding representation, leading to the emergence of communal consciousness. Social reform was closely linked with

political mobilisation, as seen in key events such as the Malayali Memorial (1891) and Ezhava Memorial (1896), which demanded equitable access to education, employment, and government services. These petitions, though rejected, marked the beginning of organised political activity among oppressed groups. Additionally, uprisings like the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 highlighted the intersection of class, religion, and colonial resistance, further intensifying political awareness.

The unit also analyses the process of secularisation that unfolded as caste-based movements gradually transitioned into secular political formations, such as the emergence of the Communist Party in Kerala. This transformation laid the foundation for Kerala's modern political culture—one rooted in social justice, equality, and mass participation.

Keywords

Social Reform Movements, Caste Identity, Communal Politics, Secularization, Malayali Memorial, SNDP Yogam, Nair Service Society (NSS), Communist Movement.

Discussion

5.4.1 The Rise of Communal Identity

The social reform movements in Kerala were driven by the goal of creating a dignified life and a strong social identity for oppressed communities. These movements, especially those among the lower castes, aimed at improving their social conditions while demanding better opportunities from the state. In practice, these movements often indirectly led to the assimilation of the lower castes into the Hindu fold, seeking upward mobility as a means of social emancipation. The core objective of these reforms was to facilitate upward movement in society, with a significant shift in dietary habits and ritual practices that aligned the lower castes with those of the Brahmins.

This movement led to a redefinition of identity, where the oppressed communities began to view themselves through a lens of communal solidarity, devoid of

antagonism towards others. This created a sense of community identity grounded in religious affiliations, yet without the transcendental, ritualistic, or spiritual significance traditionally associated with them. It was a community-focused identity that sought a larger share of wealth and power, in proportion to their numbers. The communalism observed in Kerala was distinct in its peaceful co-existence, a style of operation that was less confrontational compared to the traditional forms of communalism seen in other regions. In Kerala, secularisation took shape through this communal path, with communities initially organising around their caste and religious identities, but gradually evolving toward secular ideologies. The process of secularisation in Kerala is marked by the evolution of communal organisations that began with a focus on religious and caste identities. These organisations initially formed to address practical concerns such as education, health, and civil rights for

specific communities, rather than for religious or spiritual purposes. What distinguished Kerala's communal organisations from those in other parts of India was their emphasis on secular objectives, downplaying spiritual concerns.

5.4.2 Communal Tensions and the Rise of Political Identity

The turning point for political agitation in Kerala came in 1891, when the Malayali Memorial was presented, marking a key moment in the state's history. The unique aspect of this agitation was that it was organised around specific castes, sub-castes, and religious communities, rather than a broader national movement. The Indian National Congress had only begun to gain traction toward the end of World War I, and its influence was limited to British-administered Malabar. Meanwhile, the key administrative positions in Travancore were held by non-Malayali Brahmins, a situation that caused dissatisfaction among other communities. This led to the formation of a collective voice for the people of Travancore, particularly through the Nairs, who led the agitation against the dominance of Tamil Brahmins.

The Malayali Memorial sought to address the grievances of Travancoreans, culminating in a formal petition to the Maharaja of Travancore. The movement garnered support from various groups, including Namboodiris (Malayali Brahmins), Christians, and Ezhavas. These agitations highlighted the growing political consciousness of caste-based communities.

Despite the emergence of caste-based organisations with political demands, the focus was largely on securing privileges like educational advancement and government positions for specific communities, rather than advocating for democratic rights for all. Secular objectives were a central feature

of these organisations from the outset, with key issues such as access to education, government jobs, and land ownership playing critical roles in the shifting power dynamics. However, land was a more pressing concern in Malabar than in Travancore, where agrarian conflicts were less pronounced.

The Ezhavas, whose interests were not fully addressed in the Malayali Memorial, submitted their own petition in 1896, known as the Ezhava Memorial, demanding better access to education and government jobs. This marked the beginning of a more organised political awakening among the Ezhava community, which gained momentum with the establishment of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalna Yogam (SNDP), led by spiritual leader Sree Narayana Guru. The SNDP emerged as a pioneering organisation for the Ezhava community in Kerala, focusing on securing the rights of its members.

The Christian community also played a significant role in shaping Kerala's social fabric, with its well-established organisational structure and access to English education, thanks in part to the efforts of European Christian missionaries. The Syrian Christians, in particular, became an influential group in Kerala society, providing a model for other communities to follow in terms of educational advancement. Their strong organisational base and the benefits they gained from missionary activities in the 19th century made them a reference point for other communities seeking similar progress.

During British rule, the Anglican Church received preferential treatment, while Catholics and other Christian denominations struggled to gain access to government positions. In response, they turned to entrepreneurial ventures such as plantations, agriculture, and indigenous banking. In 1918, the Keraliya Catholic Mahajana Sabha was formed, marking a significant step in organising the community. Christians also

established the first newspaper in Kerala, *Nasrani Deepika*, in 1887. The Syrian Christians, who came into contact with Europeans, adopted a “new ethics” rooted in capitalism and individualism. Their family structure and inheritance system were more conducive to embracing these new values than those of other communities, allowing for the emergence of a strong middle class that began to assert its rights.

The Nair community, primarily landowners, formed the Nair Service Society (NSS) in 1914. Initially, its goals were limited to altering the matrilineal inheritance system and establishing a few schools. However, as Christians and Ezhavas began to assert themselves economically, the NSS became increasingly involved in Travancore’s political scene. The rise of the Christian community sparked a reaction within the Nair community. The NSS began challenging outdated religious practices and excessive consumption, calling for a religious reformation to modernise the community. They modelled their organisational structure and educational initiatives after the Christians. Education became a tool for social mobility, particularly for the lower castes and the Nairs, who sought to preserve their land-based status. Although the SNDP’s efforts pushed the government to open schools to the Ezhavas by 1910, it wasn’t until 1945 that exclusive schools run by SNDP emerged.

Despite the progressive nature of these movements, they also contributed to the rise of communal consciousness. Instead of fostering national unity, the growing strength of communal organisations solidified a parochial culture, which had lasting effects on Kerala’s political landscape in the following decades.

5.4.3 The Malabar Rebellion and the Rise of Communal Divides

In 1921, Malabar witnessed some of the worst peasant riots in Kerala’s history. The agrarian system was heavily tilted in favour of the Hindu landlords, the Jenmis, with multiple intermediaries between them and the actual peasants, who were predominantly Muslims. The peasants and agricultural labourers began to rise up against the system. The first major outbreak occurred in 1836, but it was the 1921 rebellion that marked the most significant challenge. This movement merged political and agrarian, and communal elements and became tied to the broader Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements. However, the British government responded with severe repression, while the Congress’s non-violent approach pushed the Muslim community into opposition. Historians considered the movement in various ways. Some considered it as a peasant movement, several others as peasant movement. Some historians analysed it as part of resistance against the British.

5.4.4 The Evolution of Political Movements in Kerala

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, two parallel movements emerged. The first was a modern, secular political movement, represented by the State People’s Conference, which campaigned for a responsible government. The second was a movement by non-Hindu and non-caste Hindu communities, who were now demanding electoral rights and a greater share in political power, not just access to government jobs.

Although communal organisations initially played a progressive role in fighting feudalism and religious conservatism, their role changed as socialism emerged as a dominant

ideological force. These organisations began to serve as reactionary entities within the class struggle. Over time, the state adopted a complex system of job reservations to address caste and communal inequalities, with a significant percentage of public sector jobs reserved for 'backward' communities.

In 1932, a communal alliance called the Joint Political Congress, which included Ezhavas, Christians, and Muslims, succeeded in securing communal representation in the legislature and civil services through the Abstention Movement. The Nairs, once opposed to these communities, now shifted their alliances, positioning themselves as protectors of all caste Hindus. This constant shifting of alliances highlighted the political maneuvering of communal organisations, which sought to secure secular benefits. However, the limitations of communal organisations in achieving broader secular goals soon became apparent.

5.4.4.1. The Shift Toward National Politics and the Role of Class Struggles

In 1938, the Joint Political Congress was dissolved, giving way to the Travancore State Congress, which became affiliated with the Indian National Congress. This marked the end of Christian support for British rule and brought Christians, Muslims, and Ezhavas into the mainstream of the Indian freedom struggle. During this period, class politics began to take shape. The working class, particularly through the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) founded in 1934, began to assert itself as a political force. The CSP gradually transformed into the Communist Party, which played a significant role in Kerala's political mobilization, alongside the Congress and its affiliate organisations.

5.4.5. Communal Politics After Independence

After India gained independence, communal politics in Kerala took a distinctive path marked by political realignments and the interplay of caste, community, and class interests.

5.4.5.1 Initial Phase After Independence

In the first elections of 1948 in Travancore, the Congress emerged victorious, but the party had to make compromises to address the demands of caste and communal groups. However, this was not a result of communal associations supporting the Congress for ideological reasons. Instead, these groups aligned themselves to ensure their interests were represented in the post-independence power structure. This period saw an increase in the influence of caste and communal organisations, which the Congress misjudged, inadvertently elevating their prestige.

The formation of the combined state of Travancore-Cochin in 1949 also led to a rise in Christian political presence, and subsequent governments in the region often changed hands as one community or another withdrew support from the ruling parties. This period was marked by considerable instability, and in 1952, the formation of a minority government by the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) led to the first non-Congress government in India.

5.4.5.2. The Role of Communal Organisations

Communal organisations continued to play a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape. The Nair Service Society (NSS) and the SNDP Yogam, which represented Nairs and Ezhavas respectively, began to take stances on behalf of their communities,

sometimes even forming alliances despite conflicting economic interests. By the mid-1950s, communal competition intensified, and the Muslim League became a significant player in the region's politics, particularly in the Malabar region, where Muslims were a majority.

The Communist Party of India (CPI), however, provided a shift in Kerala's political mobilisation. The CPI shifted the focus from caste-based politics to class-based politics. The 1957 election marked a landmark event, as Kerala became the first state in the world to have an elected communist government. The Communist Party's policies on agrarian reform and educational restructuring attracted the support of the working class but also brought the ire of communal organisations, particularly the Church and Nair factions, leading to the 1959 'liberation' struggle against the Communist government.

5.4.5.3. The 1960s and 1970s: Rise of Coalition Politics

In the 1960 elections, despite opposition from communal interests, the Communist Party of India (CPI) increased its vote share, indicating a deeper base of support among the working classes. However, in the wake of the growing influence of caste and communal groups, especially within the Congress, the CPI's shift from class-based politics to more community-driven politics became apparent. The Kerala Congress, a party primarily representing the interests of Syrian Christians and Nairs, gained a foothold by representing the interests of the Catholic plantation owners and middle-class agriculturists. The political landscape of Kerala became highly fragmented, leading to frequent electoral coalitions.

The 1965 elections saw further fragmentation, with the CPI (Marxist) emerging from a split in the Communist Party. The Congress also split, giving rise to the Kerala

Congress. The fractured nature of the political scene culminated in the 1967 elections, which resulted in President's Rule due to the inability of any coalition to form a stable government.

5.4.6. Caste and Community in the Late 20th Century

In the 1970s, Kerala's political structure began to see the resurgence of caste-based politics. The National Democratic Party (NDP), formed by the Nairs in 1974, and the Socialist Republican Party (SRP), formed by the Ezhavas in 1976, exemplified this shift. The Left Front's alliances with various Muslim League factions in the 1980s, especially as part of a broad anti-Congress front, led to controversies and criticisms that the Communists were abandoning their class-based ideologies in favour of communal alliances.

By the 1980s and 1990s, communal politics in Kerala witnessed a shift towards confrontational communalism. Issues such as temple administration, cow slaughter, and the construction of mosques gained prominence, as both Hindu and Muslim groups began to adopt more militant stances. This trend led to growing tensions between communities and, in some cases, outbreaks of communal violence, particularly against the backdrop of the Gulf employment boom and remittance-based economy.

5.4.6.1. Trends in Kerala's Communal Politics

Despite Kerala's deep-rooted communalism, there was a consistent feature of non-confrontational communalism in earlier decades. Communities primarily sought to assert their material interests and often allied with other communities to achieve common political goals. There was no significant animosity or rivalry between communities,



and religious tolerance remained a hallmark of Kerala society.

However, by the late 20th century, as communal politics evolved, the Kerala political landscape became increasingly divided along sectarian lines. The 1980s and 1990s saw a rise in religious fundamentalism, both among Hindus and Muslims.

The communal politics of Kerala from the late 1940s onward has largely been characterised by pragmatic and materialistic alliances among different caste and religious groups, with a focus on securing economic and political benefits. Although Kerala has witnessed

a few instances of communal violence, the communal politics of the state have largely been non-confrontational. However, with the rise of militant religious ideologies in the late 20th century, Kerala's communal politics became more divisive, signalling a departure from the tolerant, cooperative model that had defined the state for much of the 20th century.

The future of communal politics in Kerala will likely depend on the continued balancing of caste and community interests, the strength of secular movements, and the influence of class-based politics in shaping the state's democratic processes.

Recap

- ◆ Social reform movements in Kerala aimed at improving the conditions of lower castes and providing upward social mobility.
- ◆ The rise of communal identity in Kerala was driven by caste-based solidarity and a focus on securing material benefits.
- ◆ Secularisation in Kerala was shaped by communal movements initially focused on caste and religious identities.
- ◆ The 1891 Malayali Memorial was a turning point, representing caste-based political demands in Travancore.
- ◆ The Ezhava Memorial (1896) emphasised educational and employment rights for the Ezhava community.
- ◆ Christian communities, particularly Syrian Christians, gained influence through education and economic ventures.
- ◆ The NSS represented the Nair community's interests, particularly regarding inheritance and education.
- ◆ The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 was a major agrarian and communal conflict in Kerala, involving Muslim peasants.
- ◆ The Joint Political Congress (1932) succeeded in securing communal representation in Kerala's legislature.

- ◆ After independence, communal politics continued to shape Kerala's political landscape, with caste-based alliances playing a crucial role in elections

Objective Questions

1. What memorial did the Ezhavas submit in 1896?
2. Which memorial was presented to the Maharaja of Travancore in 1891?
3. What was the first newspaper started by the Christian community in Kerala?
4. In which year did the Malabar Rebellion take place?
5. What was the name of the Christian political organisation formed in 1918?
6. Who were the main landowning caste in Travancore?
7. Which caste group founded the Socialist Republican Party in 1976?
8. What was the name of the joint alliance formed in 1932 by Ezhavas, Christians, and Muslims?
9. Which political party formed the first elected communist government in Kerala?
10. In which year did the first non-Congress government form in India from Kerala?
11. What party represented Catholic plantation owners and Syrian Christian interests in the 1960s?
12. What was the main economic class represented by the Congress Socialist Party?

Answers

1. *Ezhava Memorial*
2. *Malayali Memorial*
3. *Nasrani Deepika*
4. 1921
5. Keraliya Catholic Mahajana Sabha
6. Nairs
7. Ezhavas
8. Joint Political Congress
9. Communist Party of India
10. 1952
11. Kerala Congress
12. Working class

Assignments

1. Analyse the impact of social reform movements in Kerala on the rise of community-based identity among the lower castes.
2. Discuss the role of the Malayali Memorial and the Ezhava Memorial in shaping the political landscape of Travancore in the late 19th century.
3. Evaluate the influence of Christian organisations in Kerala's political and social reforms during the colonial era.
4. Assess the role of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in shifting Kerala's political focus from caste-based politics to class-based politics.
5. Investigate the rise of coalition politics in Kerala during the 1960s and its impact on the state's political fragmentation.

Reference

1. K.N. Ganesh, *Keralathinte Innalekal*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995.
2. Kawashima, Koji, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988.
3. Mathew, George, *Communal Road to Secular Kerala, New Delhi*, Concept Publishing, 1989.
4. Menon, Dilip. M, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
5. Thukkaren, Nissim Manna, *Communal politics in Kerala (1980-1995)* (Master's thesis). Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, 1997.

Suggested Reading

1. Heimsath, Charles H., *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1965.
2. Mannathukkaren, Nissim, *The Rise of the National-Popular and Its Limits: Communism and the Cultural in Kerala*, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2013, pp. 494–518.
3. Sen, Amiya P. (ed.), *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003



UNIT

Formation of Hindu Identity

Learning Outcomes

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

- ♦ examine the historical origins and evolution of *Hindutva* in modern Indian politics
- ♦ assess how social reform movements contributed to shaping a unified Hindu identity
- ♦ explore the influence of print media in promoting *Hindutva* ideology, with a focus on Kerala
- ♦ analyse how the institutional mechanizations promote the Hindu identity formations in contemporary kerala society

Prerequisites

A comprehensive understanding of Indian history—particularly the legacies of colonialism, the formation of religious identities, and the hierarchical organisation of the caste system—is indispensable for a critical engagement with this unit. The content examines the intricate processes through which a homogenised Hindu identity was constructed during the colonial period, with particular focus on the ideological emergence and consolidation of *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* represents a politicised articulation of Hindu identity that has gained significant traction in contemporary Indian politics. The unit further interrogates how British colonial interventions—such as census operations, the codification of religious laws, and the privileging of selective caste narratives—played a pivotal role in redefining and institutionalising Hinduism as a singular, cohesive religious and cultural category.

Furthermore, the unit investigates how social movements and political organisations

contributed to the rise of contemporary Hindu nationalism, and how these developments intersect with caste, community, and marginalisation. The tensions between inclusive reformist agendas and exclusive religious nationalism are analysed to understand the complexities of Hindu identity in modern India.

Keywords

Hindutva, Hinduism, Caste system, Social Reform Movements, Hindu Identity, Religious Unity, Print Media, Nationalism

Discussion

5.5.1 Nationalism as Religion

India, a multicultural, secular, and democratic nation, has recently witnessed a shift toward Hindu nationalism, also known as Hindutva, which has become a prominent aspect of contemporary Indian politics. While Hinduism is native to the Indian subcontinent, *Hindutva*, as a political ideology, has emerged in modern society, often referred to as Hindu nationalism. This ideology was developed between the 1870s and 1920s, with its formalisation as a doctrine occurring in the early 1920s. Most contemporary scholars agree that Hinduism, in its modern religious sense, evolved during British rule in India, particularly in the 19th century, despite the term “Hinduism” being used in a religious context as early as the late 18th century. Charles Grant, in 1787, was among the first to use the term “Hinduism.” Scholars of Indian society generally believe that prior to British colonisation, Indian society was highly fragmented and divided along the lines of the *jati* system. In regions like Kerala, the *jati* system was even more complex and segregated. In such a society, a unified Hindu religious identity had to be developed, emerging within a context dominated by *jati-based* social relations.

5.5.2 From Caste to Community: The Hindu Community Formation in Kerala

The operational and ideological system of *jati* in Kerala created a rigid social structure that left little space for the intermingling of different jatis, except in socially approved locations. The *jati* system, governed by the principles of *aitham*, *anacharam*, *theendal*, and others, not only segregated society but also imposed strict surveillance through the *jatis* themselves. This structure restricted any interaction between people of different jatis, ensuring that the boundaries between them remained tightly controlled. In operational terms, the *jati* system in Kerala enforced the “feet-distance” rule, preventing people from different jatis from approaching each other unless sanctioned. This created a stratified society in which the dominant jatis were at the centre, holding social power, prestige, and authority, while others were pushed to the margins. This division presented a challenge when attempting to define a unified population for a single religion.

Under colonial rule, the state aimed to consolidate the fragmented and segregated non-religious jatis into a single religious umbrella, Hinduism. This process began



with the census, which became a critical tool for officially categorising the population under the Hindu identity. Over time, this forced people to adopt a dual identity: they maintained their traditional *jati* affiliation while also adopting a Hindu religious identity. This shift was particularly significant in Kerala, where the formation of a Malayali Hindu identity emerged. However, the adoption of this identity was not without its challenges. Many people, especially from the dominant castes, still resisted this blending of *jati* and religion, arguing for the preservation of traditional *jati* structures and their inherent value.

5.5.3 Social Movements, Print Media, and the Reformation of Hindu Identity

The challenge to the traditional *jati* system was further propelled by the socio-religious movements that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These movements were driven by leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal, and others, who sought to uplift the marginalised *jatis*, particularly the Ezhavas and Pulayas. These leaders pushed for the inclusion of lower-caste people in the social, political, and religious spheres, advocating for equal access to temples, public spaces, and education. The temple movement, which promoted the inclusion of the Ezhavas within temple practices and rituals, became a significant vehicle for social reformation. Sree Narayana Guru's teachings and practices, played a crucial role in transforming the Ezhava community into a more cohesive group with a distinct collective identity.

These reform movements were not just limited to social and political activism. They also utilised the print media as a key tool to spread their messages of equality and social justice. Publications like *Mithavadi*, *Kaumudi*, *Kesari*, and *Vivekodayam* became

vital platforms for popularising the ideas of the socio-religious movements and connecting the communities with the broader Hindu identity. The influence of print capitalism on the spread of Hindu religious ideas cannot be overstated, as it helped to link diverse groups under the umbrella of Hinduism. Through the circulation of prayer texts, litho-prints of Ravi Varma's paintings, and translations of Sanskrit texts, the print media played a significant role in reshaping religious imagination and facilitating the "Hinduisation" of both public and private spaces in Kerala. These materials not only familiarised people with Hindu rituals but also encouraged the internalisation of Hindu ethos in everyday life, including the decoration of homes with Hindu imagery and the adoption of daily religious practices.

Alongside the spread of Hindu religious ideas through print media, the social movements also aimed at breaking the food taboos and promoting inter-dining among the different *jatis*. These acts of defiance against caste-based segregation helped bring people from various *jatis* together, fostering a sense of collectivity and shared experience. Though these attempts were met with stiff opposition and sometimes even violence, they became symbols of resistance and inspired many to challenge the entrenched social divisions. However, it is also essential to note that, while these movements were aimed at breaking caste barriers, they still operated within a broader framework that sometimes-perpetuated gendered structures. Despite the emancipatory rhetoric of these movements, they also imposed certain patriarchal norms, which have been critiqued as a form of "Hindu patriarchy."

The leadership of figures like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali went beyond social and political reform. They intervened in the personal and familial lives of the people within their respective communities, prescribing new rules for daily conduct,

religious rituals, cleanliness, and even social interactions. These leaders provided detailed instructions on the recitation of religious texts, daily prayers, and attendance at public lectures, which contributed to shaping the personal and familial culture of the communities. While their instructions were often followed meticulously by their followers, it is important to recognise that these efforts also involved a certain level of gender encoding. The leaders' involvement in these matters helped to define the religious, social, and familial roles within the communities, often reinforcing traditional gendered structures.

The movements also sparked important political actions, such as the Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas, which were central to the broader social and religious reformation. These struggles for access to public roads and government temples played a critical role in fostering a collective Hindu identity that transcended the traditional jati divisions. The Vaikom Satyagraha, for instance, galvanised people from various castes to come together, forging a shared sense of collective identity based on religious unity rather than caste affiliation.

Swami Vivekananda's visit to Kerala in 1896, along with the efforts of other Hindu monks, helped to further the revival of Hinduism in the region. Sadananda Swami, concerned about the conversion of lower castes, sought the support of Ayyankali to uplift the lower castes and protect Hinduism from further fragmentation. This collaboration led to greater political representation for the lower castes, such as the nomination of lower-caste individuals to the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly in 1907. Ayyankali also used the Preja Sabha to voice the concerns of the Pulayas and other untouchables communities, emphasising their vulnerability and the need for social emancipation within the Hindu framework.

Many Dalit communities in Kerala had their own indigenous belief systems, with local deities and practices that were central to their daily lives. As these beliefs and practices were increasingly overshadowed by Brahmanical Hinduism, the Dalits were told that their deities were inferior and that their faiths were primitive. The Brahmanical forces sought to replace indigenous worship with Hindu deities, a process that K. N. Panikkar described as cultural colonisation. The Dalits' belief systems, such as their worship of local deities like *Chaathan*, *Kaali*, *Marutha*, etc were gradually displaced, which led to a profound sense of cultural loss and alienation.

Overall, while the process of Hinduisation and cultural assimilation was successful in bringing various communities under the broader umbrella of Hinduism, it did not eliminate the significance of caste and communal identities. The struggle for political and social recognition, coupled with the forces of Hinduism as an ideology for social and political gain, created a complex and often contradictory process of reformation in Kerala. It is important to note that the social reform leaders were not creating a Hindu identity; instead, they worked towards the upliftment of their respective communities and to create an egalitarian social structure, but in this process, they indirectly created a public space for Hindu religion.

5.5.4 Hindutva on the Political Front

The political ideology of *Hindutva* diverges fundamentally from the broader and more inclusive tradition of Hinduism, which does not mobilise religious identity for political ends. The first notable effort to unify various Hindu castes in Kerala under a collective platform emerged in 1924 with the convening of the Hindu Maha Sammelanam in South Malabar. This conference passed key resolutions advocating for progressive



reforms, including temple entry for all castes, the abolition of untouchability, and an end to animal sacrifice. During the 1930s, the Travancore administration also attempted to foster a sense of Hindu unity, partly as a strategy to counter the rising opposition of the State Congress to the autocratic governance of Diwan Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar. However, these efforts yielded limited results and failed to effect substantial socio-political transformation.

A more formal proposal for a unified Hindu political organisation did not materialize until 1949, prompted in part by the perceived ascendancy of Christian influence within the State Congress. In response, prominent community leaders R. Sankar of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam and Mannathu Padmanabhan of the Nair Service Society (NSS) established the Hindu Mahamandalam and subsequently founded the Democratic National Congress. Nevertheless, this political initiative was short-lived; it collapsed following the fall of the Congress ministry in 1951 and ideological disagreements between its key leaders. Despite these episodic attempts at forging a cohesive Hindu political identity, such efforts had limited resonance and failed to significantly reshape the public sphere in Kerala's sociopolitical landscape.

5.5.5 Strategies for the Identity Formations

Kerala, known for its secular values, rational thinking, and strong Left influence, is now seeing an increasing presence of the Sangh Parivar, especially in temples and daily cultural life. The Sangh Parivar is showing interest in the diverse religious practices found in Kerala as part of its effort to spread its ideology. Their focus on teaching temple traditions is a response to the growing influence of modern, secular ideas. They also aim to bring Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits—who have historically been

excluded from Brahmanical temples—into the fold by educating them in Brahmanical traditions.

The Sangh Parivar has been gradually consolidating its presence in Kerala through a range of strategic interventions. It is analytically significant to delineate these domains of engagement to comprehend the contemporary operations of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Among these, the domain of temple affairs has constituted a central focus for the RSS in Kerala since the 1960s. Scholarly discussions on the Sangh Parivar's involvement in Hindu temple affairs have largely centred on the Ram Temple movement, particularly during its peak in the 1980s.

In this context, S. Gopal's *Anatomy of a confrontation: The Babri Masjid–Ramjanmabhumi issue* edited volume offers a comprehensive account of the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhumi controversy, shedding light on the ideological and political dimensions of the movement. Debates surrounding temple politics have predominantly centred on the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhumi issue, owing to its pan-Indian significance and its role as a pivotal site of political mobilisation that profoundly influenced the trajectory of Indian polity.

Arvind Rajagopal, in his analysis, illustrates how the televised Ramayana series played a crucial role in shaping public consciousness and cultivating mass consent, thereby generating momentum for the Ram Temple movement. Beyond the Ram Janmabhumi movement, scholarly engagement has been limited in examining the more subtle and nonviolent activities of the Sangh Parivar in advancing the cultural project of Hindu nationalism. Temple culture occupies a central place within the Hindu nationalist imagination of India, serving as a crucial site for the articulation and dissemination of its ideological vision.

The construction of future citizens through the ideological framework of Hindu nationalism constitutes a pivotal component of the Sangh Parivar's broader political and cultural agenda. Both formal and informal educational initiatives function as critical mechanisms in this endeavour. Organisations such as Vidya Bharati, which manages an extensive network of schools across India; the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, dedicated to the education of Adivasi communities; Sewa Bharati, which operates schools targeting Dalit populations; and the Ekal Vidyalyaya Foundation, which provides educational access in remote tribal regions—collectively serve to inculcate a Hindutva-centric worldview among diverse socio-economic groups.

In addition to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), several affiliated organisations—most notably the Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (KKSS) and the Hindu Aikya Vedi (HAV)—actively engage with temple-related matters in Kerala. In 2013, HAV established the Kshetra Ekopana Samithi (KES) to coordinate the administration and activities of temples across the state. Through these organisations, the Sangh Parivar seeks to educate Hindu devotees in what it considers 'authentic' religious and ritual practices, largely derived from Brahmanical traditions. Nevertheless, their interventions have increasingly extended to encompass diverse ritual forms, including non-Brahmanical worship practices. A central aspect of their strategy involves the institutional training of resource persons, such as temple priests, to ensure the transmission and reinforcement of these ritual norms.

The Sangh Parivar's emphasis on the didactics of temple rituals and 'Hindu' culture can be understood as a response to the processes of modern secularisation. It also reflects their strategic ambition to incorporate Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits into the fold of Brahmanical

religious knowledge—communities that have not traditionally aligned themselves with Brahmanical Hindu culture or temple-based worship. The concept of the *matha padasala* was introduced to address anxieties surrounding the transmission of 'authentic' knowledge about Hindu culture and temple practices through structured pedagogical methods. Notably, most participants in these training centres belong to OBC communities, along with members of non-Brahmin upper castes and a minority of Dalits. Within the ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar, the temple serves as a pivotal site for the construction of Hindu nationalist imagination and the formation of collective identity.

The right-wing contends that the processes of modernisation in Kerala have brought about significant transformations in cultural practices and lifestyles, resulting in a perceived alienation from traditional customs, ritual practices, and value systems in everyday life. In response, they seek to engage with contemporary populations through novel forms of institutional intervention aimed at reasserting cultural continuity and religious identity. RSS leaders, religious orators, *tantris*, and astrologers consistently engage in educating devotees through three primary avenues: first, the establishment of *matha padasalas* (Religious Teaching) within temple premises; second, the delivery of speeches during various temple-related events; and third, the strategic use of television and electronic media. These efforts are aimed at addressing the perceived cultural and spiritual anxieties arising from modern societal transformations.

In the *matha padasalas* the curriculum is closely aligned with the ideological imagination of a Hindu India, embedding within it a symbolic geography that includes sacred rivers, mountains, and pilgrimage sites rooted in Puranic mythology. Simultaneously, it engages with localised religious traditions, including regional deities, temple practices,



and ritual performances. The concept of *matha padasala* has gradually permeated public discourse, extending its influence across broader segments of society. Temple administrations view the *matha padasala* to cultivate what they consider ‘authentic’ or ‘proper’ faith, in contrast to what they perceive as ‘superficial’ forms of belief. The underlying aim is to promote a deeper understanding of Brahmanical texts and traditions. The second mode of dissemination involves the use of speeches, print media, and digital platforms—including audio and video content—as instruments of ideological propagation. These materials serve a pedagogical function within temple spaces. Programmes such as the *Bhagavatha Sapthaha Yajnam* (a seven-day recitation of the *Bhagavatham*) and other religious discourses play a significant role in shaping the beliefs of devotees by transmitting specific religious values and ritual practices associated with temple culture.

RSS activists often draw comparisons between the present and the recent past, particularly the 1970s and 1980s—a period when temple committees frequently organised secular cultural programmes such as dramas and public lectures as part of temple festivals.

This retrospective framing serves as a critique of secular engagements within temple spaces and reflects a broader ideological emphasis on promoting explicitly religious programming. In response, the Sangh Parivar has devised strategic interventions aimed at reorienting temple activities. As a result, temple committees today largely prioritise religious and culturally aligned programmes during festivals and temple events, aligning more closely with the ideological goals of Hindu identity formations. The strategic interventions by Hindutva-affiliated groups in Kerala represent a broader ideological endeavour to construct and consolidate a homogenised Hindu identity within the state’s socio-cultural landscape. This identity formation process has accelerated notably since the early twenty-first century, with heightened activity observed during periods of right-wing dominance at the central level. Central to this project are mechanisms of officialisation and institutionalisation, through which select religious and cultural practices are systematically legitimised, standardised, and embedded within the institutional and political frameworks of the state, thereby reinforcing the ideological imperatives of Hindu nationalism in the regional context.

Recap

- ◆ Hinduism as a modern religion evolved under British colonial rule, particularly in the 19th century.
- ◆ The rigid *jati* system in Kerala created fragmented social structures, making the formation of a unified Hindu identity challenging.
- ◆ British colonial policies, including census categorisation, forced people to adopt a dual Hindu identity alongside traditional *jati* affiliations.
- ◆ Social reform movements, led by figures like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, sought to uplift marginalised jatis, especially Ezhavas and Pulayas.

- ◆ Print media played a key role in spreading Hindu religious ideas and encouraging the adoption of Hindu practices.
- ◆ Leaders like Sree Narayana Guru transformed the Ezhava community into a cohesive group with a distinct identity.
- ◆ Political movements, including the Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas, helped foster a collective Hindu identity that transcended *jati* divisions.
- ◆ The rise of *Hindutva* forces in Kerala led to significant political actions, although they have not yet become a dominant political force in the state.

Objective Questions

1. What ideology is often referred to as Hindu nationalism in modern India?
2. What social system fragmented Indian society before British colonisation?
3. Which principle in Kerala enforced caste-based physical distancing?
4. Which British tool helped categorise *jati* groups under the Hindu identity?
5. Which publication was key to spreading social reform in Kerala?
6. What kind of cultural materials helped spread Hindu ideas in homes?
7. What 1896 event influenced Swami Vivekananda's view of Kerala?
8. Who founded the Hindu Mahamandalam in Kerala politics?
9. When did the RSS begin its major activities in Kerala?

Answers

1. Hindutva
2. The *jati* system
3. The “feet-distance” rule

4. Colonial census operations
5. *Mithavadi, Kaumudi, Kesari, or Vivekodayam*
6. Litho-prints, prayer texts, and Hindu imagery
7. His 1896 visit, after calling Kerala a “lunatic asylum”
8. R. Sankar and Mannathu Padmanabhan
9. 1942

Assignments

1. How did the emergence of *Hindutva* influence the political and social landscape of India in the 20th century?
2. Discuss the role of the census in consolidating various jati groups under the umbrella of Hinduism in Kerala.
3. Examine the socio-political and cultural processes that have contributed to the construction of Hindu identity in Kerala during the twenty-first century
4. Explain the impact of the print media and socio-religious movements on the formation of Hindu identity in Kerala.
5. Critically evaluate the processes underlying the formation of Hindu identity in twenty-first-century Kerala.

Reference

1. Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2007.
2. Aiyappan, A., *Social Revolution in a Kerala Village*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965.

3. Arafath, P. Y. Southern Hindutva. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 56(2), 51, 2021.
4. Alexander, K. C., *Social Mobility in Kerala*, Poona: Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, 1968.
5. Ambedkar, B.R., *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, genesis and Development*, New York: Columbia University, 1916.
6. Kumar, M. P. S., *Formation of Hindu religious identity in Kerala: A study of socio-religious movements, 1792–1936*. Kannur University, 2016.
7. Roopesh, O.B., “Educating ‘Temple Cultures’ Heterogeneous Worship and Hindutva Politics in Kerala”, *Sociological Bulletin*, Indian Sociological Society, Sage, 2021.

Suggested Reading

1. Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991.
2. Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Samya, Calcutta, 1996.
3. Oddie, Geoffrey A., *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Construction of Hinduism, 1794–1900*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 42–43.
4. Sekher, Ajay S., *Kerala Renaissance and Resisting Cultural Nationalism: The Critical Legacies of Nanuguru, Sahodaran, Appachan, and Dharmateerthar*, in *Nationalism and Multiculturalism in India*, ed. P. K. Pokker, Calicut University EMS Chair, 2016, pp. 142–166. ISBN: 81-902675-0-2.



BLOCK

Renaissance literature



UNIT

Reform and Literature

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ explain the historical origins of print culture and its spread in Kerala.
- ◆ examine impact of missionary and colonial educational reforms on caste and gender dynamics.
- ◆ analyse how vernacular literacy and journalism contributed to Kerala's social awakening.
- ◆ identify the key reformers and journals that helped mobilise public opinion through print.

Prerequisites

To critically engage with the study of the Kerala Renaissance, students must be conceptually equipped to analyse the profound social, cultural and intellectual transformations that unfolded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period witnessed determined challenges to feudal structures, caste orthodoxy and gender restrictions, intricately linked to the emergence of print culture as a powerful medium for disseminating reformist discourses and creating a critical public sphere. It is essential to understand how the printing press, initially introduced by Christian missionaries and institutionalised by colonial and princely authorities, facilitated the spread of ideas contesting entrenched social hierarchies. Students must also comprehend the role of modern education in producing a new intelligentsia comprising clerks, teachers, journalists and social reformers who actively challenged caste privilege, untouchability and gender inequality by reinterpreting both Western liberal thought and indigenous traditions. Furthermore, an awareness

of vernacular education's significance in expanding access to knowledge for marginalised communities is crucial, as it enabled lower caste groups and subaltern voices to participate in the production of historical narratives and cultural critique. A foundational grasp of key concepts such as print culture, renaissance, caste critique and the politics of knowledge production is indispensable for understanding the Kerala Renaissance as a contested and politically charged movement that reshaped the region's social and intellectual landscape.

Keywords

Printing press, vernacular literacy, missionary education, social reform, caste critique

Discussion

6.1.1 The Printing Press and the Rise of Education in Kerala

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Kerala underwent a profound cultural awakening often described as a kind of Renaissance. This was driven in large part by the growth of print culture and education, which helped form a new literate public capable of debating social issues. The introduction of printing to Kerala dates back to the late 16th century. Christian missionaries installed the first presses, with records noting a Catholic mission press in Kochi–Vaipin as early as 1577. Such presses later appeared in other towns (for example, Kodungallur). In 1821, Protestant missionary Benjamin Bailey set up the C.M.S. Press and by 1836 the Travancore government had its own official press in Thiruvananthapuram. Once these presses existed, a variety of books and journals quickly followed. The earliest publications included Malayalam grammars and religious tracts. For example, a Christian catechism, *Samkshepa Vedartham* and a travelogue, *Varthamana Pustakom*, appeared in the

early 1800s. Notably, the Basel missionary Hermann Gundert published some of the first Malayalam newspapers, *Rajyasamacharam* and *Paschimodayam*, from Thalassery in 1847–48.

These print innovations went hand-in-hand with Western-style education. Missionary and state schools were established across Kerala. The Travancore queen even proclaimed education a state responsibility, distinguishing a modern “formal” system from the old hereditary “informal” schooling. Initially, emphasis was placed on English and basic literacy (reading, arithmetic, geography, history), though missionaries often taught the *Bible* alongside. English instruction remained dominant, but from the late 1850s, the Travancore government also began to encourage education in Malayalam. In sum, colonial authorities (British and allied princely states) aimed to produce a class of educated clerks and clerisy to run the administration. As one historian notes, “education (was) a means of subjugation and an instrument for the dissemination of colonial ideology,” and missionaries explicitly used schools and presses as tools of

proselytisation. Importantly, though, the new schools did not force students to renounce caste or religion; this “non-interference” policy meant even lower castes could attend without violating social norms. In practice, colonial education introduced Kerala’s people to Western ideas of liberty, equality, rationalism and even women’s liberation, which began to influence Western-educated locals.

Together, print and education created a new educated class in Kerala. As literacy spread, an emergent Malayali middle stratum of teachers, clerks, lawyers and journalists grew up with access to books and periodicals. Printing made texts “accessible to all without class/caste distinctions,” breaking the old notion that learning was sacred and exclusive. English education and new economic opportunities “contributed to the emergence of a new social class who had access to the texts.” This class eagerly formed public opinion and debated reforms. For example, the Malayalam novel *Indulekha* (1891), often called the first modern Malayalam novel, portrays its English-educated protagonists questioning traditional marriage customs. Reform journals and newspapers became the venue for intense debate. In short order, Kerala saw a flowering of Malayalam print media.

6.1.2 Early Newspapers and Journals

Kerala’s early newspapers and magazines played a crucial role in shaping public opinion on social issues. As noted, *Rajyasamacharam* (Government News) and *Paschimodayam* (Rise in the West) were pioneering Malayalam newspapers in the 1840s. By the late 19th century, many reformers and activists had launched their own publications. Sahodaran Ayyappan, for instance, organised a literary association named *Vidyaposhini* and started the magazine “Sahodaran” while also editing the rationalist journal *Yuktivadi*. C. Krishnan

edited another weekly, *Mitavadi*, urging the abolition of caste. Vagbhatananda, a non-dualist reformer, began the journal *Abhinava Kerala* in 1921 to spread egalitarian teachings. These and other presses (for example, the SNDP Yogam’s publications) provided platforms for reformers to attack social evils. They published essays, poems and news that challenged orthodox views. By offering a forum for new ideas, vernacular print helped critiques of caste and custom reach a much wider audience than ever before.

6.1.3 Colonial Objectives on Print and Education

The British colonial administration pursued education and printing with its own goals in mind. Primarily, the policy was pragmatic, aimed at training civil servants and integrating local elites into the colonial system. As noted, colonial governments emphasised English education in new schools and even established official presses and textbook committees, such as the Travancore Textbook Committee in 1867. Missionary schools, funded or supported by colonial powers, explicitly aimed at spreading Christian faith and Western culture. In one scholar’s words, missionaries “used education and the printing press for proselytisation.” In princely states like Travancore and Kochi, rulers also supported schooling once they saw the benefits of trained officials.

Importantly, British policy on caste in education was hands-off. The government’s new school curriculum “did not demand of the learners any change of caste or religion.” In other words, a Hindu child could attend without converting or abandoning his caste. This indirect approach actually helped fuel reform: freed from orthodox schooling, many lower-caste families sent their children to new state and missionary schools. Over time, the mix of students from different backgrounds in urban schools contributed to breakdowns



in caste barriers. In short, while colonial authorities primarily wanted a compliant intelligentsia, their investment in print and schools inadvertently empowered formerly excluded groups.

6.1.4 Vernacular Education and Literacy

As education expanded, vernacular literacy in Malayalam and other local languages also grew. In 19th-century Kerala, schooling before colonial times had been the monopoly of upper castes and typically conducted in Sanskrit or Tamil. With new English-medium schools, travellers' tales of average Malayalis learning to read began to appear. Notably, the Travancore government, from 1859, started promoting Malayalam-language education alongside English. Missionaries often taught in the local language too, since many converts came from the lowest castes and were illiterate.

Critically, literacy spread among communities previously barred from knowledge. Christian missionaries and their schools "provided education to all castes and gave a new status and resource to the lower and neglected castes in Kerala for the first time." Figures like Ayyankali illustrate this change. He led Kerala's first organised strike (1907–08) demanding the right of Dalit children to enter public schools. In 1912, he took a seat in the Travancore assembly to press for fee-free education and quotas for Pulaya students. He even organised meetings in 1915 where Pulaya women publicly removed the caste-marking stone necklaces from their necks. Similarly, Ezhava and Nadar communities launched their own movements for schooling. These campaigns, often called vernacular education movements, increased literacy among lower castes and marginalised groups.

By the early 20th century, Kerala's literacy was rising. The combined effects

of missionary and government schools, plus grassroots agitation, made education increasingly universal. Observers noted that Kerala, traditionally among the most literate regions of India, had now "achieved universalisation of education" through these struggles. English education and the free press also introduced liberal and egalitarian ideas that eroded caste barriers. In this new landscape, former untouchable groups began demanding equal rights in temples, workplaces and universities. In fact, sociologists argue that the spread of education gave voice to the people who had been the targets of atrocities and could now assert their rights.

6.1.5 Print, Reformers and Social Critique

The new schools and media gave Kerala's own social reformers powerful tools. A generation of Kerala thinkers and activists, often educated in mission or government schools, used writing and editing to challenge caste, gender and feudal customs. For example, Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) wrote extensively to attack caste inequality. He argued for the spiritual unity of all castes and opposed Brahmin dominance. In 1903, under his direction Dr. Pulpu founded the SNDP Yogam (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) to uplift the depressed classes. Guru did not confine his work to sermons; he published poetry and philosophical treatises in Malayalam and Tamil. These writings popularised his creed that "one caste, one religion, one God for mankind," critiquing the existing social hierarchy.

Other reformers similarly turned to print. Sahodaran Ayyappan, mentioned above, edited Sahodaran and Yuktivadi to promote communal dining and rationalism. C. Krishnan's journal Mitavadi echoed the call for ending caste. Vagbhatananda's Abhinava Kerala argued against idol worship

and caste rituals. Among the conservative Nambudiri Brahmins, V. T. Bhattatiripad broke ranks and co-founded a youth league, launching the journal *Unni Namputiri* to counter orthodox views. Bhattatiripad used his paper *Pasupatam* to campaign for widow remarriage (his own sister's marriage in 1934 was a famous reform act) and for broader female education. He even wrote plays and stories (e.g., '*Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*') to dramatise social change.

In literature, printed novels entered the debate. Indulekha (1891) is telling: its heroine, a modern-educated Nair woman, discusses with her suitor the unfairness of prevailing matrilineal marriage customs. These cultural products publicised what were once private concerns (such as women's inheritance rights). Meanwhile, reformers pressed for legal change. Public opinion, now informed by newspapers, helped prompt government action. In 1891, the Travancore government set up a Marriage Commission under public pressure, leading to legal recognition of Nair marriages. Between 1912 and 1939, a series of Acts reformed inheritance and forbade polygamy, partly reflecting the new consensus on gender justice.

In short, print and education became the weapons of social reformers. Their writing levelled criticism at caste hierarchy, temple entry restrictions, gender taboos (such as the Nair *Sambandham* and *Marumakkathayam* systems) and feudal landlord practices. By circulating pamphlets and journals and by engaging literate audiences, reformers created an enlightened public sphere. Kerala's social legislation and changing attitudes during 1900–1940 cannot be understood apart from this educated middle class.

6.1.6 Gender and Caste Equality Through Print

The impact of print and schooling is especially visible in the changing status of women and lower castes. Missionary schools and reformers extended literacy to girls and Dalit women, albeit gradually. Traditionally, Nambudiri Brahmin women were confined to the home and many communities even barred women from reading. Early 19th-century Kerala had severe prejudice against educating women. However, missionaries "made continuous efforts to popularise women's education and empowerment." By the early 20th century, female literacy among upper-caste groups was rising. (For example, Nair and Christian girls began attending the Malayalam-medium *Ezhuthupalli* schools once they were admitted.)

Print media reflected this shift. Women reformers and writers entered the public eye. Reform journals publicised women's issues: the fight against child marriage, domestic violence and seclusion came into the pages of newspapers and journals. The prose and poetry of the time often raised the question of women's inheritance and marriage reforms. Educated women joined political movements and even starred in social activism. By mid-century, newspapers celebrated the "new woman" of Kerala educated, articulate and mobilised.

Similarly, caste distinctions were publicly challenged. The loosening of caste hegemony is evident in both the press and the legal changes quoted above. By the 1940s, newspapers documented Harijans entering temples and forming unions and women writers openly demanding equal rights. Print helped create a climate in which caste discrimination became seen as anachronistic.

Recap

- ◆ Benjamin Bailey established CMS Press in Travancore in 1821.
- ◆ Hermann Gundert launched *Rajyasamacharam* from Thalassery in 1847.
- ◆ Early schools spread English literacy and Bible-based instruction.
- ◆ Print culture challenged caste hierarchy and ritual orthodoxy.
- ◆ Travancore promoted Malayalam-medium education after the 1850s.
- ◆ Ayyankali fought for Dalit access to public schools.
- ◆ *Indulekha* questioned Nair matrilineal marriage customs and gender roles.
- ◆ Reform journals like *Yuktivadi* promoted rationalism and social equality.
- ◆ Print empowered lower castes and women to speak publicly.
- ◆ Missionary education uplifted marginalised castes with inclusive literacy programmes.

Objective Questions

1. Which missionary set up the CMS Press in Kottayam in 1821?
2. Who was the Basel missionary that launched the first Malayalam newspaper?
3. What novel is considered the first modern Malayalam literary work?
4. Name the rationalist journal edited by Sahodaran Ayyappan.
5. Which Dalit leader led Kerala's first organised strike for school entry rights?
6. What 1867 committee regulated textbooks in Travancore's modern schools?

7. Which publication campaigned for widow remarriage among Nambudiris?
8. Name the journal launched by Vagbhatananda in 1921.

Answers

1. Benjamin Bailey
2. Hermann Gundert
3. *Indulekha*
4. *Yuktivadi*
5. Ayyankali
6. Travancore Textbook Committee
7. *Pasupatam*
8. *Abhinava Kerala*

Assignments

1. Explain how printing and newspapers helped build Kerala's public sphere for reform.
2. Evaluate the role of missionary education in increasing vernacular literacy among Dalits.
3. Analyse how women gained visibility and agency through education and print culture.
4. Discuss the social impact of journals like *Sahodaran*, *Mitavadi* and *Yuktivadi*.

Reference

1. Devika. J, *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007.
2. Cohn, Bernard S., *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.
3. Heimsath, Charles H., *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1965.
4. Menon, Dilip M., *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
5. Chatterjee, Partha, *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.
6. Ganesh, K.N., *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*, Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2004.
7. Sivadasan, S. *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. CISP (Centre for Indian Studies Publications), 2004.

Suggested Reading

1. Sen, Amiya P. (ed.), *Social and Religious Reform: the Hindus of British India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.
2. Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2000.
3. Saradamoni, K., *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*, Alta Mira Press, New Delhi, 1999.
4. Kawashima, Koji, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858–1936*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988.



UNIT

Newspapers and Journals

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ discuss the role of vernacular newspapers in shaping Kerala's public opinion.
- ◆ analyse how journals contributed to reform movements, caste critique and gender discourse.
- ◆ identify key publications and their ideological affiliations during the Kerala Renaissance.
- ◆ evaluate how print media became tools of political and social mobilisation.

Prerequisites

In 19th and early 20th century Kerala society underwent a major transformation marked by reformist aspirations, rising literacy and new political consciousness. Central to this shift was the growth of the print medium. As Western education expanded, a new class of educated Malayalis emerged. These individuals used the printing press as a powerful tool to question caste, gender norms and oppressive traditions. Newspapers and journals became instruments for critique and reform, bringing previously marginalised voices into the public domain. Many reformers, religious leaders, political thinkers and social activists used the vernacular press to campaign for change and challenge entrenched hierarchies. These publications documented the social awakening and provided space for women, oppressed castes and minority communities to participate in Kerala's public life. Understanding the function and legacy of these journals is essential for grasping the broader social history of modern Kerala.



Keywords

Swadeshabhimani, Sahodaran, Vernacular Press, Social Reform, Renaissance Kerala

Discussion

6.2.1 The Rise of the Vernacular Press in Kerala

The spread of Western education, aided by Christian missionaries and the colonial government, produced a new educated class in Kerala. As literacy expanded, so did the appetite for printed material. The printing press, introduced in Kerala in the early 19th century, created new possibilities for public discourse. This period also saw the growth of local publishing ventures, many of which were deeply invested in a reformist agenda.

Vernacular newspapers became an essential medium of communication. They published editorials, essays, poetry and letters from readers. Many of them served as organs of reformist organisations and individuals who used the written word to challenge orthodoxy, caste dominance, gender inequality and social stagnation.

The proliferation of newspapers and journals in Kerala during the Renaissance was more than a literary or technological development. It was an intellectual revolution that democratised knowledge, questioned orthodoxy and built bridges between isolated communities. These publications were not mere chronicles of events; they were active agents of change, committed to shaping public consciousness and building a just, modern society.

6.2.1.1 Key Reformist and Political Journals

Swadeshabhimani

Perhaps the most iconic newspaper of this era was *Swadeshabhimani* ("The Patriot"),

founded by Vakkam Abdul Khader Moulavi and later edited by the fearless journalist K. Ramakrishna Pillai. The journal became a symbol of bold opposition to autocratic rule and colonial complacency. It fiercely criticised the Travancore administration, especially Dewan P. Rajagopalachari and championed the cause of civil liberties.

Ramakrishna Pillai's editorials were known for their sharp reasoning and scathing critique. His writings attracted both admiration and suppression. In 1910, the Travancore government confiscated the press and deported Pillai. This act of censorship only strengthened the press's symbolic role in the resistance to oppression. *Swadeshabhimani* showed how the vernacular press could act as a watchdog, challenging unjust governance and awakening political consciousness.

Kerala Patrika

Kerala Patrika was founded in 1884 by C. Kunhiraman, a key figure in the Ezhava community and a close associate of Sree Narayana Guru. The paper supported the cause of backward castes and voiced their demands for social and educational advancement.

The publication worked in tandem with the SNDP Yogam and played a vital role in spreading Guru's ideals of social equality, spiritual reform and anti-caste activism. It encouraged public debate and provided a platform for subaltern voices.

West Coast Spectator

The *West Coast Spectator*, founded in

Calicut in 1879 under Dr. Keys and printed by Vakil Poovadan Raman, was among the earliest English weeklies in Kerala. It became an important medium for reformist thought. Its columns criticised administrative excesses and regressive customs while promoting education and civic responsibility as the path to renewal. Unlike later nationalist journals, it was cautious in tone, but its willingness to raise uncomfortable questions gave it significance in the Kerala Renaissance. By creating a space for debate among the educated classes, the paper fostered an awareness of social justice and the possibilities of modernity. Although it did not directly call for political mobilisation, its moral stance and reformist orientation anticipated the bolder interventions of papers like *Mathrubhumi*, launched in 1923 to serve the freedom struggle.

Prabhatham

Prabhatham, meaning “Dawn,” emerged during the early 20th century as a left-leaning publication aligned with socialist and early communist ideas. It was founded under the influence of the growing working-class movements and functioned as a vehicle for Marxist interpretations of Kerala’s social conditions.

It published critical discussions on land ownership, exploitation of labour and the need for class struggle. *Prabhatham* linked global ideologies with local struggles and contributed to the eventual political success of Kerala’s communist movements.

Al-Ameen

Founded by Mohammed Abdurahiman Sahib, *Al-Ameen* was a powerful Muslim journal that articulated the political and social aspirations of the Mappila community in Malabar. It sought to promote national unity and Hindu-Muslim cooperation while also addressing internal reform within the

Muslim community. *Al-Ameen* promoted secular education, women’s advancement and the importance of civic engagement. It opposed communalism and worked for the integration of Muslims into the broader national movement.

6.2.1.2 Social Reform and Community Empowerment

Nasrani Deepika

Nasrani Deepika, established in 1887, was the mouthpiece of the Catholic Church in Kerala and among the first Malayalam dailies. While religious in origin, it became a significant cultural and literary platform, discussing everything from theology to education and social questions. It encouraged debates on reform within the Christian community and supported efforts to improve women’s education and public hygiene. The journal reflected the evolution of the Christian intellectual space in Kerala.

Chandrika

Chandrika began publication in 1932 and quickly became the leading voice of the Muslim League in Kerala. Though political in character, it provided space for social and educational discussions. It addressed the socio-political upliftment of Kerala’s Muslim community and supported constitutional approaches to resolving communal grievances. It also featured essays on Muslim women’s status, the importance of modern education and interfaith dialogue.

Vivekodayam

Vivekodayam was an important literary journal associated with reformist intellectuals in Kerala. It provided a space for poetry, essays, short stories and philosophical reflections. The journal was known for its moderate tone and commitment to rational enquiry. It attracted contributors

from various communities and fostered a spirit of inclusivity and introspection. In the larger landscape of Kerala's public sphere, *Vivekodayam* represented the softer, reflective side of the reformist movement.

6.2.1.3 Radical and Subaltern Journals

Mitavadi

Mitavadi, edited by T. K. Madhavan, played a pivotal role in advocating for temple entry and the eradication of caste-based discrimination. Madhavan, an ardent follower of Sree Narayana Guru, used the journal to demand social justice and dignity for untouchables. The journal supported the Vaikom Satyagraha and engaged with nationalist and social justice narratives. It demanded access to public spaces, jobs and education for the oppressed classes.

Sahodaran

Edited by Sahodaran Ayyappan, the journal *Sahodaran* challenged caste orthodoxy, religious dogma and superstition. It promoted rationalism and was closely associated with the slogan "Jati Venda, Matham Venda, Deivam Venda, Manushyanu Manushyan Mathram" (No caste, no religion, no god, for humanity).

The journal's content included sharp critiques of Brahmanical supremacy, articles on science and progress and a passionate commitment to egalitarianism. It actively encouraged inter-caste dining and communal harmony.

Yogakshemam and Unni Nambutiri

These two journals were products of reform efforts within the Namboothiri Brahmin community. *Yogakshemam*, started in 1908 by the Yogakshema Sabha, sought to reform outdated customs such as polygamy, early marriage and the denial of education to women. It called for the dismantling of the *smarthavicharam* system, advocated widow remarriage and supported modern education for girls.

Unni Nambutiri, edited by V. T. Bhattathiripad and others, used satire, essays and autobiographical accounts to expose the plight of *Antharjanams* (Namboothiri women). It provided a rare platform for the voices of upper-caste women who suffered due to social seclusion and rigid tradition.

6.1.4 Journals for Gender Reform

Mahila, Lakshmibhai and Sreemati

These journals represented the emergence of women's voices in Kerala's public discourse. *Mahila* and *Lakshmibhai* were committed to promoting female education, health and empowerment. They published essays on domestic responsibility, hygiene, child-rearing and widow remarriage.

Sreemati, edited by K. K. Kunjamma, one of the early women editors in Kerala, provided space for feminist reflection and literary expression. It published poems, short stories and editorials encouraging women to become active participants in society.

Recap

- ◆ *Swadeshabhimani* challenged Travancore autocracy and demanded civil rights.
- ◆ *Kerala Patrika* voiced the Ezhava community's struggles and aspirations.
- ◆ *Prabhatham* promoted early Marxist ideas and workers' rights.
- ◆ *Al-Ameen* advocated Muslim reform and national unity in Malabar.
- ◆ *Chandrika* supported the Muslim League's politics and educational empowerment.
- ◆ *Nasrani Deepika* discussed reform within Kerala's Christian communities.
- ◆ *Sahodaran* challenged caste, religion and gender hierarchies.
- ◆ *Mitavadi* fought for temple entry and social justice.
- ◆ *Yogakshemam* and *Unni Nambutiri* addressed Brahmin women's plight.
- ◆ *Sreemati* encouraged women's expression and reform through literature.

Objective Questions

1. Who founded *Swadeshabhimani* and promoted civil liberties in Travancore?
2. Which paper was closely associated with Sree Narayana Guru and the SNDP Yogam?
3. Name the early Marxist journal that linked class struggle to Kerala's politics.
4. Who edited *Al-Ameen* and promoted Hindu-Muslim cooperation and secular reforms?
5. Which journal addressed Christian reform and literacy in Kerala?

6. What publication by Sahodaran Ayyappan promoted rationalism and inter-caste dining?
7. Name the reformist paper that advocated temple entry and equality for Dalits.
8. Which two journals focused on reforming Namboothiri Brahmin customs and women's roles?
9. Who edited *Sreemati*, a journal reflecting women's reformist literary expression?
10. Which publication was linked to the Muslim League's political voice in Kerala?

Answers

1. K. Ramakrishna Pillai
2. *Kerala Patrika*
3. *Prabhatham*
4. Mohammed Abdurahiman Sahib
5. *Nasrani Deepika*
6. *Sahodaran*
7. *Mitavadi*
8. *Yogakshemam*, *Unni Nambutiri*
9. K. K. Kunjamma
10. Chandrika

Assignments

1. Analyse the ideological significance of *Swadeshabhimani* in the early political awakening.
2. Discuss how *Sahodaran* and *Mitavadi* contributed to caste reform in Kerala.
3. Explain how women's journals like *Sreemati* influenced gender roles and self-expression.
4. Evaluate the impact of community-based journals on Kerala's broader social transformation.

Reference

1. Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
2. Jones, Kenneth W., *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1994.
3. P. J. Cherian (ed.), *Perspectives in Kerala History*, Kerala State Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999.

Suggested Reading

1. Kerala Through the Ages, Department of Public Relations, Thiruvananthapuram, 1980.
2. In Search of India's Renaissance, Vol. II, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, 1992.
3. K. N. Ganesh, *Keralathinte Innalekal*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995.



UNIT

Story, Drama and Novel

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ discuss how fiction and drama shaped the reformist discourse in Kerala.
- ◆ evaluate the literary representation of caste, gender and class inequalities.
- ◆ Identify the thematic and stylistic innovations in Malayalam Renaissance literature.
- ◆ explain literature as a site of resistance and imagination during the Kerala Renaissance.

Prerequisites

The late 19th and early 20th centuries in Kerala saw the convergence of social reform and literary innovation. As questions surrounding caste hierarchy, gender roles, education and labour justice entered public discourse, writers began to engage with these themes through fiction and theatre. The Kerala Renaissance provided fertile ground for a new kind of literature that was not limited to religious or mythological tales but addressed pressing social realities. Novels and plays became vehicles to articulate modern values, protest against regressive customs and present alternative visions of society. Writers from diverse backgrounds, including upper-caste reformers, Dalit thinkers and Marxist activists, used literature to reflect and influence Kerala's evolving society. Understanding these works offers valuable insights into the imaginative and intellectual ferment of the period. This unit provides a detailed study of key texts that emerged during this era and illustrates how literature contributed meaningfully to Kerala's cultural transformation.

Keywords

Indulekha, Caste Reform, Renaissance Literature, Gender Critique, Class Struggle

Discussion

The Kerala Renaissance was not only a movement of social reform and political awakening; it was also a literary transformation. The emergence of the novel, short story and social drama in Malayalam during the late 19th and early 20th centuries mirrored and deepened the spirit of change that swept through the region. Literature became a space where society was observed, questioned and reimagined. Writers used fiction and theatre to reflect the tensions between tradition and modernity, critique entrenched hierarchies and explore possibilities of justice, gender equality and dignity for the oppressed.

In this unit, we examine four important literary works: *Indulekha*, *Saraswati Vijayam*, *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* and *Thozhil Kendrathilekku*. Each of these works played a significant role in shaping public discourse, expanding the horizons of Malayalam literature and providing imaginative frameworks for understanding the Renaissance in Kerala.

6.3.1 *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon

Indulekha is widely considered the first major novel in Malayalam literature. Written by Oyyarathu Chandu Menon, a sub-judge in British Malabar, the novel reflects the emerging aspirations of the English-educated middle class in late 19th-century Kerala. It combines the narrative technique of the English novel with themes relevant to Malayali society.

The story centres on *Indulekha*, a beautiful and intelligent Nair woman educated in English. She is not a passive character but a strong-willed individual who chooses her own partner and rejects the advances of an older Namboothiri suitor. Her love interest, Madhavan, is also an educated young man who has returned from Madras with a university degree. The novel addresses several key issues of its time: the oppressive nature of the *Sambandham* system, the limited agency of Nair women within matrilineal households, the domination of conservative Namboothiri landlords and the social mobility promised by English education. The characters are drawn with psychological depth and the story unfolds with a sense of realism that was new to Malayalam readers.

Indulekha was more than a love story; it became a cultural milestone that questioned the moral and social legitimacy of traditional customs. It suggested that women could exercise choice and that the English-educated class had a role in reshaping society. Its publication marked a clear departure from mythological or religious narratives and introduced the idea of literature as a space for rational engagement with social questions.

6.3.2 *Saraswati Vijayam* (1892) by Potheri Kunjambu

Potheri Kunjambu, a Dalit social reformer, lawyer and educationist from North Malabar, wrote *Saraswati Vijayam* as a response to the social injustices of his time. The novel was



one of the earliest attempts by a marginalised writer to portray the oppressive structures of caste and the transformative power of education.

The novel tells the story of a young Pulaya boy who, through education and moral integrity, rises to become a respected judge. This remarkable narrative of upward mobility was radical in a period when Dalits were denied entry into schools and temples. It challenged the ideology of birth-based status and projected education as the key to self-respect and social inclusion.

The title itself, *Saraswati Vijayam*, translates to “The Victory of Saraswati,” the goddess of learning. The novel’s message is clear: social progress is impossible without universal education. The book directly confronts the practices of untouchability, exploitation and exclusion, urging readers to re-examine their own prejudices.

Kunjambu also wrote the novel in simple, accessible Malayalam, which enabled readers from lower castes to engage with the text. Unlike *Indulekha*, which had a refined and elite tone, *Saraswati Vijayam* embraced a wider readership and placed the Dalit experience at the centre of its narrative. As a social novel, it provided a counter-narrative to the dominant upper-caste voice in Kerala literature, imagining a future where talent and virtue, not caste, determined one’s place in society.

6.3.3 *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (1919) by V. T. Bhattathiripad

From the Kitchen to the Stage, as the title translates, was not a novel but a groundbreaking drama by V. T. Bhattathiripad, a reformer and writer from the Namboothiri community. His play was a bold attack on the patriarchal and oppressive customs that governed the lives of Namboothiri women,

especially *Antharjanams*, who lived in extreme seclusion.

The play follows the life of a young Namboothiri woman trapped in the *Grihabhavam*, the dark and restrictive inner quarters of the household. She yearns for knowledge, freedom and participation in public life. The title metaphorically captures her journey from the domestic confines to the public world of awareness and action.

This drama was revolutionary in more than one sense. It was one of the first literary works to question the so-called purity of Brahmin customs and the morality of a social order that forced educated women into lives of isolation and subjugation. It portrayed the emotional and psychological toll such a system imposed on women.

Bhattathiripad’s use of the stage as a space for reform was inspired by the broader tradition of Renaissance theatre in Europe but was deeply rooted in the local context. The drama was performed publicly, provoking controversy and heated debate. It mobilised support for the Namboothiri reform movement and encouraged women to pursue education and self-expression. *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* marked a turning point in Kerala’s cultural history, where the performance of social critique became a tool for collective introspection and transformation.

6.3.4 *Thozhil Kendrathilekku* by K. Damodaran

K. Damodaran was one of Kerala’s early Marxist thinkers and a committed advocate of workers’ rights. His novel *Thozhil Kendrathilekku* (To the Labour Camp or To the Work Centre) reflects the growing influence of class analysis in the 1940s and the rise of a radical, working-class consciousness.

The novel narrates the life of a group of labourers struggling against exploitation in the emerging capitalist economy of colonial Kerala. It delves into the hardships of industrial workers, the dehumanising conditions of plantation life and the greed of landlords and mill owners.

Unlike earlier novels that focused on caste or gender, *Thozhil Kendrathilekku* foregrounds class as the central category of analysis. It portrays workers as agents of change who must unite across caste and religious boundaries to fight for their rights. The protagonist evolves from a passive

labourer into an organiser and leader, inspired by socialist ideals.

The novel describes hunger, disease and the indignity of wage slavery without romanticising the struggle. The narrative offers insight into the contradictions of a society that claimed modernity but still depended on the exploitation of its poorest people. Damodaran's novel connected literature to political mobilisation, helping to build support for trade unions and communist movements, which would later shape Kerala's political landscape in powerful ways

Recap

- ◆ *Indulekha* portrayed educated women challenging Brahminical marriage practices.
- ◆ *Saraswati Vijayam* celebrated Dalit empowerment through education.
- ◆ *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* exposed Namboothiri women's domestic seclusion.
- ◆ Kunjambu's novel critiqued caste exclusion in schooling.
- ◆ Chandu Menon's work championed rational marriage and modern values.
- ◆ *Thozhil Kendrathilekku* presented workers' unity against capitalist exploitation.
- ◆ Bhattathiripad's play encouraged Namboothiri women's self-expression.
- ◆ Damodaran's fiction reflected early socialist mobilisation in Kerala.
- ◆ Each text used literature as a tool for social reform.
- ◆ These literary works shaped Kerala's modern public consciousness.

Objective Questions

1. Who is the author of the novel *Indulekha* published in 1889?
2. Which novel by a Dalit writer presented education as a path to justice?
3. What social institution does *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* primarily critique?
4. Who is the main female protagonist of *Indulekha*?
5. What profession does the Pulaya boy attain in *Saraswati Vijayam*?
6. Which writer used theatre to address Namboothiri women's domestic seclusion?
7. Which novel focuses on class struggle and workers' rights in Kerala?
8. Who wrote *Thozhil Kendrathilekku*, inspired by Marxist class analysis?
9. Which work depicts caste mobility through moral virtue and education?
10. What reform movement is closely connected with *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*?

Answers

1. O. Chandu Menon
2. *Saraswati Vijayam*
3. Patriarchal seclusion
4. *Indulekha*
5. Judge
6. V. T. Bhattathiripad
7. *Thozhil Kendrathilekku*

8. K. Damodaran
9. *Saraswati Vijayam*
10. Namboothiri reform

Assignments

1. Discuss how *Indulekha* challenged traditional Nair marriage practices and caste patriarchy.
2. Analyse the role of education in *Saraswati Vijayam* as a tool of empowerment.
3. How does *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* critique Brahmin domestic norms and women's seclusion?
4. Evaluate *Thozhil Kendrathilekku* as a novel of class struggle and early Marxist ideas.

Reference

1. Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar 1850–1940*, Orient Longman, 2003.
2. Devika, J. (ed.) *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women 1898–1938*, Stree, 2005.
3. Gupta, Charu. *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, Permanent Black, 2001.
4. Ganesh, K.N. *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*, University of Calicut, 2004.
5. Sivadasan, S. *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. CISP (Centre for Indian Studies Publications), 2004.

Suggested Reading

1. Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and Its Fragments*, OUP, 1999.
2. Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
3. Rao, M.S.A. *Social Change in Malabar*, Popular Book Depot, 1957.

SGOU



UNIT

Autobiographies

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ discuss how autobiographies contributed to the intellectual spirit of the Kerala Renaissance.
- ◆ analyse personal narratives as sites of caste critique, political resistance and gender reflection.
- ◆ examine the interplay between personal life experiences and collective reformist movements.
- ◆ interpret autobiographies as sources of social history in modern Kerala.

Prerequisites

To engage rigorously with the study of the Kerala Renaissance, students must comprehend it not solely as a period of collective social and political activism but as an era in which individual life narratives were consciously employed to reflect and interrogate wider societal transformations. Autobiographies emerged as crucial instruments through which reformers and writers critically examined tradition, confronted systemic inequality and articulated visions of justice, emancipation and modern identity. In contrast to conventional historical accounts that privileged the perspectives of rulers or elites, these personal testimonies illuminate the lived experiences of individuals navigating caste oppression, gendered confinement and political marginalisation. What renders these autobiographies particularly significant is their position at the intersection of the personal and the political; they provide not merely recollections of injustice, defiance and self-transformation, but also a profound reflection of the structural shifts unfolding in Kerala's social fabric.

Importantly, autobiographical writings do not merely recount individual journeys but collectively represent the evolving consciousness of progressive ideas, revealing how personal agency and critical thought contributed to reshaping Kerala's socio-political landscape. These texts thus serve as indispensable primary sources for understanding the Kerala Renaissance as not simply a reform movement but a revolution of consciousness that challenged hegemonic narratives and fostered intellectual emancipation.

Keywords

Autobiography, Reform, Caste Critique, Gender, Renaissance

Discussion

Autobiographical writing emerged as a powerful tool of self-expression and reflection during the Kerala Renaissance. It enabled reformers, intellectuals and activists to narrate their own lives as testimonies of struggle, transformation and social critique. These life stories were not simply recollections of private memories but served as political texts. They captured the dilemmas of a society caught between entrenched customs and emergent ideals. In many ways, autobiographies during this period became alternative histories from within communities that had rarely been allowed to speak for themselves.

6.4.1 *Kanneerum Kinavum* by V. T. Bhattathiripad

V. T. Bhattathiripad, also known as VT, was a key figure in the Namboothiri reform movement. A playwright, essayist and social activist, VT used his writings to question the rigid orthodoxy of his own community. His autobiography, *Kanneerum Kinavum*, is both a personal account and a cultural document of resistance.

The narrative begins with vivid recollections of the highly regulated domestic life

of the Namboothiris, especially the plight of *Antharjanams*, the secluded women of Brahmin households. VT describes the emotional and psychological violence inflicted on them through enforced widowhood, denial of education and confinement within ill-lit interiors. His sensitivity to the suffering of these women deeply influenced his lifelong activism. As the title suggests, the autobiography is a blend of sorrow and aspiration. The “tears” refer not only to the author’s personal anguish but to the collective sorrow of a society bound by unjust traditions. The “dreams” are those of freedom, equality and dignity, particularly for women and the lower castes.

VT also narrates the backlash he faced from conservative circles – he was ostracised, denied community rituals and verbally attacked. Yet he continued his efforts, organising the *Yogakshema Sabha* and producing reformist plays such as *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*. *Kanneerum Kinavum* is powerful because of its emotional honesty. It refuses to glorify Brahmanism and instead portrays the courage it takes to break free from one’s own privilege. It is a rare insider’s account of caste, complicity and conscience.

6.4.2 *Jeevita Samaram* by C. Kesavan

C. Kesavan's autobiography, *Jeevita Samaram* ("The Struggle of Life"), offers a vivid narrative of political awakening and the fight for civil liberties in Travancore. Born into a backward Ezhava family, Kesavan rose to become the Chief Minister of Travancore-Cochin. His journey is deeply embedded in the story of Kerala's political modernity.

The autobiography is marked by a keen sense of injustice and a sharp political intellect. Kesavan writes about his early experiences of caste discrimination and how these shaped his resolve to pursue education and social justice. He was one of the first generation of educated Ezhavas who challenged upper-caste dominance through both institutional engagement and public protest.

A major section of the book is devoted to his involvement in the *Responsible Government Movement* in Travancore. He narrates the events leading up to the historic Malayali Memorial, the Vaikom Satyagraha and the broader mobilisation for democratic representation. One of the most arresting episodes in the autobiography is his speech at Kozhencherry in 1935, where he criticised the Dewan of Travancore. This speech led to his arrest and imprisonment under sedition charges. Yet he remained steadfast in his commitment to civil liberties and justice.

Kesavan's prose is direct and passionate. He uses his life to illustrate the challenges of confronting authoritarian rule, religious conservatism and caste prejudice. *Jeevita Samaram* is as much about personal perseverance as it is about collective mobilisation. It stands as a key text in the history of Kerala's transition from monarchy to democracy.

6.4.3 *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal* by Mannath Padmanabhan

Mannath Padmanabhan's *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal* offers a valuable autobiographical perspective on early 20th-century caste and community reform in Kerala. As the founder of the Nair Service Society (NSS), Padmanabhan's work reflects a reformist agenda rooted in caste consolidation, education and social upliftment. His narrative, while self-reflective, is largely oriented towards the collective concerns of the Nair community during a period of socio-political transition.

Drawing inspiration from similar caste-based reform movements across India, Padmanabhan mobilised funds, land and volunteers to establish schools, hostels and cooperative institutions. The NSS functioned both as a cultural assertion and a response to declining status – a strategy of collective adaptation rather than revolutionary critique. As the *Formation of Modern Kerala* notes, caste associations like the NSS functioned as tools of negotiation in a stratified society where caste still determined access to capital, education and political representation.

In *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal*, Padmanabhan's tone is markedly pragmatic. He neither romanticises the Nair past nor indulges in idealistic notions of casteless reform. Instead, he advocates for rational modernisation from within the caste framework. His support for internal reforms, including the promotion of women's education and the abolition of extravagant rituals, reflects a moderate vision of social progress. However, scholars have also pointed out that such reforms were aimed more at strengthening the community's competitive edge than at dismantling structural inequalities altogether.

The autobiography also engages with national politics, albeit tangentially. Padmanabhan describes his participation in the Salt Satyagraha and his interactions with Indian National Congress leaders. However, his engagement with the national movement appears secondary to his commitment to caste-based mobilisation. This duality illustrates the complex interweaving of nationalist and communitarian impulses in Kerala's reform period.

Critics have also noted the limitations of Padmanabhan's approach. While *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal* champions modern education and democratic ideals, it largely bypasses questions of caste annihilation or radical redistribution of power. It represents what G. Arunima terms "an upper-caste reinterpretation of modernity". By choosing institutional empowerment over ideological rupture, Padmanabhan's reformism maintained caste identities even as it modernised them.

Nevertheless, *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal* remains a significant document. It is one of the few autobiographies from the early 20th century that captures the internal debates within caste-based movements. The text sheds light on the anxieties of a caste group negotiating loss of status, colonial modernity and the need for adaptive strategies in a changing world. Its importance lies not in its radicalism but in its embodiment of a moderate, organised and incremental vision of social reform.

6.4.4 *Aathmakathakoru Aamukham* by Lalitambika Antarjanam

Among the most moving and intellectually profound autobiographical works of the Kerala Renaissance is *Aathmakathakoru Aamukham* by Lalitambika Antarjanam. A pioneering woman writer from the Namboothiri community, Lalitambika's reflections blur the line between autobiography and philosophical meditation.

Unlike other autobiographies, this work does not offer a chronological narration of events. Rather, it consists of fragments, memories, thoughts and inner monologues that capture the mental and emotional world of a woman raised in an orthodox Brahmin household. Her writing explores the burden of silence imposed on women, the violence of enforced chastity and the hunger for freedom.

Lalitambika was not only a writer but also a reformer. Her activism was literary in form but radical in content. She refused to accept the spiritual and social marginalisation of women. Her autobiography gives readers access to Antharjanam's soul, a space historically denied even a voice. One of the recurring themes is the cruelty of imposed religious rituals. She writes with anguish about menstrual seclusion, the fear of sin and the longing for companionship and expression. Yet her prose is not bitter; it is poetic, restrained and layered with empathy. It is a cultural critique of patriarchy, wrapped in luminous language. It also introduces an important feminist voice in the male-dominated reform discourse of the Kerala Renaissance.

Recap

- ◆ VT's writing challenged caste and Brahminical orthodoxy from within.
- ◆ *Kanneerum Kinavum* combines social sorrow with a reformist vision.
- ◆ Kesavan's *Jeevita Samaram* chronicles Travancore's democratic struggles.
- ◆ The Kozhencherry speech led to Kesavan's arrest for sedition.
- ◆ Padmanabhan prioritised Nair community reform through institution-building.
- ◆ *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal* balanced tradition and modern progress.
- ◆ Lalitambika explored silence, gendered seclusion and feminist consciousness.
- ◆ *Athmakathakkoru Aamukham* blended memory, critique and poetic prose.
- ◆ Reform was articulated through community service and public sacrifice.
- ◆ Personal narratives enriched the historical memory of Kerala's transformation.

Objective Questions

1. What community did V. T. Bhattathiripad seek to reform from within?
2. Which autobiography reflects the life of an Ezhava political reformer?
3. What speech led to the arrest of C. Kesavan in 1935?
4. Which autobiography focuses on building the Nair Service Society (NSS)?
5. Who was the editor of *Athmakathakkoru Aamukham*?
6. What major protest movement did C. Kesavan support in Travancore?

7. What form of injustice does Lalitambika repeatedly explore in her autobiography?
8. What literary form did V. T. Bhattathiripad also pioneer apart from autobiography?
9. Which autobiography uses fragments and inner monologues instead of chronology?
10. What national campaign did Mannath Padmanabhan participate in besides caste reform?

Answers

1. Namboothiri Community
2. *Jeevita Samaram*
3. Kozhencherry Speech
4. *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal*
5. Lalitambika Antarjanam
6. Vaikom Satyagraha
7. Gendered Seclusion
8. Drama
9. *Athmakathakoru Aamukham*
10. Salt Satyagraha

Assignments

1. Analyse the reformist vision in *Kanneerum Kinavum* by V. T. Bhattathiripad.

2. How does *Jeevita Samaram* document Kerala's political awakening and democratic aspirations?
3. Discuss the community-building efforts described in *Ente Jeevita Smaranakal*.
4. Evaluate *Athmakathakoru Aamukham* as a feminist critique from within Brahmin society.

Reference

1. Devika, J. *En-gendering Individuals*, Orient Longman, 2007.
2. Awaya, Toshie. "Women in the Nambudiri Caste Movement," in *History and Society in South India*, 1996.
3. Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa*, Orient Longman, 2003.
4. Chen, Martha A. (ed.) *Widows in India*, Sage Publications, 1998.
5. Sivadasan, S. *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. CISP (Centre for Indian Studies Publications), 2004.

Suggested Reading

1. Devika, J. (ed.) *Her-Self*, Stree, 2005.
2. Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, Women and Well-Being*, OUP, 1993.
3. Puthenkalam, Fr. J. *Marriage and Family in Kerala*, University of Calgary, 1977.



UNIT

Critical Studies

Learning Outcomes

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

- ◆ discuss how Kerala's critical literature challenged caste and gender hierarchies.
- ◆ identify major reformist writers and analyse their literary-social interventions.
- ◆ critically assess the influence of literary texts on Kerala's socio-political transformation.
- ◆ explain the intersection of caste, religion and language in Kerala's renaissance thought.

Prerequisites

The social reform movement in Kerala was not limited to acts of protest or organisational efforts. It found an equally strong expression in literature. Writers, poets and public intellectuals used the printed word to challenge oppressive structures, expose inequalities and spark debate. At a time when caste restrictions were entrenched and access to education limited, literature emerged as a democratic space for dialogue and dissent. Reformist thinkers from different religious and caste backgrounds turned to essays, poetry and prose to question sacred authority and redefine human dignity. Figures like Chattampi Swamikal, Pandit Karuppan, Kumaran Asan and Makti Thangal brought their experiences and philosophical depth to bear on this task. Their works not only gave voice to the voiceless but also challenged Kerala's social elite to confront their privilege. A basic familiarity with 19th- and early 20th-century Kerala society and caste structure is essential to fully appreciate these critical texts.

Keywords

Caste critique, social reform, literary resistance, Kerala Renaissance, religious rationalism

Discussion

6.5.1 *Pracheena Malayalam and Vedadhikara Niroopanam* : Chattampi Swamikal

Chattampi Swamikal was one of the earliest intellectuals in modern Kerala to undertake a reasoned and fearless critique of the caste system and the hold of Brahmin orthodoxy over society. Born in 1853, he belonged to a modest background but went on to master Sanskrit and philosophy. His writings reflect his sharp analytical mind and strong commitment to social justice.

Pracheena Malayalam is a short but powerful historical argument against the dominant belief that Kerala was originally gifted to Brahmins by the mythical figure Parasurama. Swamikal argues instead that the Nairs were the original rulers and landholders of Kerala and that Brahmin dominance came later, through migration. He presents this view not as hearsay but through references to early records and historical reasoning. This directly challenged the notion that caste hierarchies had divine or ancient legitimacy.

In *Vedadhikara Niroopanam*, Swamikal turns his attention to the question of who has the right to study the Vedas. Traditional Hindu society held that the Vedas were the exclusive property of Brahmins. Swamikal rejects this completely, arguing that spiritual knowledge is a universal right, not a privilege based on birth. He supports his position by drawing from scripture and logic, demonstrating that the denial of Vedic learning to Sudras and other communities was a later distortion, not part of original Hindu thought.

Both these works were published in the late 19th century, at a time when caste and ritual hierarchy deeply influenced social life in Kerala. Swamikal's arguments were revolutionary because they combined spiritual authority with social critique. He did not simply call for reform; he dismantled the intellectual and religious justifications for inequality.

6.5.2 *Jathikummi* : Pandit Karuppan

Pandit Karuppan, born in 1885, emerged from the Dheevera fishing community in Cochin and became a remarkable scholar, poet and public intellectual. His literary works reflected a deep sense of injustice and a sincere desire to awaken the oppressed.

Jathikummi is one of Karuppan's best-known compositions. Written in the early 20th century, it uses simple Malayalam verse to attack the caste system. The word *Jathikummi* refers to a form of song or chant about caste. The poem explains, in clear and often ironic language, how meaningless caste divisions are. It tells the reader that no one is born with a caste and that society's obsession with purity and hierarchy only spreads suffering.

Karuppan intended *Jathikummi* for the common people, especially those without formal education. That explains its accessible style and catchy rhythm. It was widely recited among the fishing communities and other oppressed groups and it played a part in shaping early anti-caste consciousness in Cochin. At a time when the Pulayas and



other marginalised castes were denied temple entry, education and basic dignity, Karuppan's poem gave them language and confidence to resist. It did not merely express sorrow over caste injustice; it offered a challenge to it. The poem marked a turning point in Kerala's literary history, as it brought Dalit and backward caste voices into the cultural sphere with pride and clarity.

6.5.3 *Chandalabhikshuki and Duravastha* : Kumaran Asan

Kumaran Asan, born in 1873, was a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru and became one of the most important literary voices of the Kerala Renaissance. His poems frequently explored moral dilemmas, spiritual awakening and social oppression. Two of his most powerful works, *Chandalabhikshuki* and *Duravastha*, remain vital readings in the study of caste and gender.

Chandalabhikshuki tells the story of Matangi, a lower-caste woman who meets Ananda, a Buddhist monk. When he asks her for water, she hesitates, knowing that society considers her untouchable. But Ananda tells her that all people are equal and that he sees no difference between castes. Inspired and transformed, Matangi joins the Buddhist order. This simple story, based on a Buddhist legend, carries a profound message. Asan uses it to show that caste is not natural or divine; it is a human creation that can be undone through kindness, respect and spiritual insight.

The poem is written in a lyrical style, with beautiful imagery and flowing rhythm. But beneath the elegance is a clear moral argument: no one is born polluted or inferior and true religion must rise above man-made divisions. Matangi becomes a symbol of dignity reclaimed, not given. *Duravastha*, another of Asan's masterpieces, tells the story of Savithri, a young Namboothiri woman

who loses her family and social standing after a rebellion. In her desperation, she finds safety with Chathan, a Pulaya youth. Eventually, their relationship becomes one of love, breaking every social rule. The poem portrays how their union is viewed as scandalous by society, but Asan presents it as a natural expression of humanity.

This work boldly brings together caste and gender. Savithri is both a woman and a member of the upper caste; Chathan is both a man and a Dalit. By uniting them, Asan asks the reader to look beyond inherited identity. His critique is sharp yet poetic and he draws attention to the destructive power of rigid customs. *Duravastha* is not just about love; it is about the right to choose one's life without fear of exclusion.

6.5.4 *Kadora Koodaram* : Makti Thangal

Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Thangal was a key reformer of the Mappila Muslim community in Malabar during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A well-read scholar, he believed that Muslims in Kerala needed to embrace modern education and intellectual openness while holding on to their religious identity.

Kadora Koodaram, published in 1884, was written in response to the growing influence of Christian missionary literature that often criticised Islam. In this text, Makti Thangal counters such criticism with clarity and logic, using well-reasoned arguments to defend Islamic beliefs. While the work primarily engages with religious themes, its wider significance lies in its social message. He wrote in a sophisticated Malayalam style to show that Muslims too were capable of literary excellence in the regional language, not just in Arabic or Persian.

Through *Kadora Koodaram*, Makti Thangal also encouraged the Muslim community to modernise in its outlook, adopt rational thinking and support the

education of women. He believed that without reform, the community would fall behind in a rapidly changing society. His writing, though defensive in tone, called for self-examination and upliftment. It subtly critiques ignorance and blind imitation,

whether it comes from within or outside the community. While Makti Thangal did not directly attack caste, his works reflected the wider spirit of the Renaissance. He believed in universal values and insisted that dignity belonged to every human being.

Recap

- ◆ Chattampi Swamikal refuted the divine origin of Brahmin dominance.
- ◆ Vedadhikara Niroopanam argued for universal access to Vedic learning.
- ◆ Jathikummi questioned caste using a simple, accessible poetic style.
- ◆ Pandit Karuppan empowered marginalised voices through rhythmic satire.
- ◆ *Chandalabhikshuki* upheld Buddhist ideals of equality and compassion.
- ◆ *Duravastha* portrayed inter-caste love as an ethical rebellion.
- ◆ Kumaran Asan combined poetic elegance with sharp moral critique.
- ◆ *Kadora Koodaram* defended Islam while promoting rational modernity.
- ◆ Makti Thangal urged Mappilas to embrace women's education.
- ◆ Literature reflected Kerala's awakening to justice and social dignity.

Objective Questions

1. What argument does Chattampi Swamikal make in *Pracheena Malayalam*?
2. Who challenged Brahmin monopoly over Vedic knowledge in Kerala Renaissance writing?
3. What caste background did Pandit Karuppan rise from?
4. What is the central message of *Jathikummi*?

5. Who are the protagonists in *Chandalabhihshuki* and *Duravastha*?
6. Which reformer used poetry to express inter-caste love and gender resistance?
7. What values does *Chandalabhihshuki* advocate through the story of Matangi?
8. What triggered the writing of *Kadora Koodaram* by Makti Thangal?
9. How did Makti Thangal propose modernisation within Muslim communities?
10. What year was *Kadora Koodaram* published?

Answers

1. Brahmin migration
2. Chattampi Swamikal
3. Dheevera community
4. Caste is artificial
5. Matangi, Savithri
6. Kumaran Asan
7. Equality and compassion
8. Christian missionary attacks
9. Rational thought, education
10. 1884

Assignments

1. Analyse Chattampi Swamikal's critique of caste through his early reformist writings.
2. How does *Jathikummi* confront caste inequality through accessible language and form?
3. Discuss Asan's treatment of caste and gender in *Duravastha*.
4. Evaluate Makti Thangal's educational and literary contributions to Mappila Muslim reform.

Reference

1. Chatterjee, Partha. *Nation and Its Fragments*, Oxford University Press, 1999.
2. Ganesh, K.N. *Culture and Modernity: Historical Explorations*, University of Calicut, 2004.
3. Saradamoni, K. *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*, Alta Mira Press, 1999.
4. Sivadasan, S. *Renaissance in Kerala: A Revisit*. CISP (Centre for Indian Studies Publications), 2004.

Suggested Reading

1. Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
2. Sen, Amiya P. (ed.) *Social and Religious Reform*, OUP, 2003.
3. Heimsath, Charles H. *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, OUP, 1965.





SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE:

Reg. No. :

Name:

FIFTH SEMESTER B.A. HISTORY EXAMINATION
DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ELECTIVE COURSE
B21HS03DE - Kerala Renaissance: Problems And Perspectives
(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. Who was the author of the work *Tuhfat-ul-Mujahiddin*?
2. In which year did the Channar women lead the Upper Cloth Revolt?
3. What tax was imposed on lower-caste women's bodies in Travancore?
4. Who founded the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS)?
5. In which year was the first Ezhava Memorial submitted?
6. Who was the editor of *Atmakathakku Oramukham*?
7. Name the major scientific institution founded in England in 1660.
8. Who was the author of the novel *Indulekha*?
9. Which system replaced matrilineal practices in Kerala?
10. Which Portuguese route opened direct maritime access to Asia?
11. Which reformer edited the journals *Sahodaran* and *Yuktivadi*?
12. Who called modern bureaucracy an "iron cage"?

13. In which of his works did Chattampi Swamikal advocate the unity of all religions?
14. Who led the *Villuvandi Samaram* (Bullock Cart Protest) in Kerala?
15. Who launched *Rajyasamacharam* (the State Gazette) in Thalassery in 1847?

SECTION B

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

(10×2 =20 Marks)

16. Explain how Adukkalayilninnum Arangathekku reflects the transition from orthodoxy to modernity in Kerala society.
17. Write a short note on the Sahodara Sangham and its role in Kerala's social reform movement.
18. Explain the causes that led to the Tali Temple Satyagraha in Kozhikode.
19. Describe the introduction of western education in India.
20. How did the Taravadu system affect the status of women in matrilineal communities?
21. Write a short note on the Vaikom Satyagraha and its historical significance.
22. Describe the contributions of Chattampi Swamikal to the social reform movement in Kerala.
23. Explain how V. T. Bhattatiripad used literature and theatre as tools of social reform.
24. Compare how Chandalabhikshuki and Duravastha express Asan's philosophy of love, compassion, and social justice.
25. What are the major themes explored in Atmakathakku Oramukham?
26. Explain the impact of the Commercial Revolution on the growth of capitalism in Europe.
27. What were the main factors that led to the rise of the Scientific Revolution in Europe?
28. Explain the main causes that led to the Malabar Rebellion of 1921?
29. Explain the role of Enlightenment thinkers in shaping revolutionary ideas in France.

30. Discuss the role of education and reform movements in shaping the modern identity of women in Kerala.

SECTION C

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

*Each question carries **four** marks.*

(5×4 = 20 Marks)

- 31. Uzhiyam
- 32. *Smarthavicharam*
- 33. Temple Entry Proclamation
- 34. Colonial Modernity
- 35. SNDP Yogam
- 36. René Descartes
- 37. Humanism
- 38. Kumaran Asan
- 39. Al-Ameen
- 40. Arya Samaj

SECTION D

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

(2×10 =20 Marks)

- 41. Critically examine the concept of the 'Dark Ages' and discuss how modern historians have reinterpreted this period.
- 42. Evaluate how missionary activities contributed to the socio-religious transformation of Kerala society during the 19th century.
- 43. Analyse the emergence and growth of the vernacular press in Kerala and its role in shaping modern public opinion.
- 44. Evaluate the status and position of women under the matrilineal system in Kerala society.



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE:

Reg. No. :

Name:

FIFTH SEMESTER B.A. HISTORY EXAMINATION
DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ELECTIVE COURSE
B21HS03DE - Kerala Renaissance: Problems And Perspectives
(CBCS - UG)
2022-23 - Admission Onwards
MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SETB

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. Who first used the term "Hinduism" in 1787?
2. Which act was passed in 1925 to reform Nair inheritance laws?
3. In which year did the Malabar Rebellion take place?
4. Who authored Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe (1972)?
5. Who were the leaders of the Guruvayur Satyagraha?
6. Who was the author of the work *Atmakathakku Oramukham* ?
7. Which reform movement is closely connected with *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*?
8. The Arya Samaj encouraged which community to join its fold during the Kalpathi incident?
9. Name the major scientific institution founded in England in 1660.
10. Who proposed the heliocentric model that challenged Church cosmology?
11. What was the name of Sahodaran Ayyappan's publication that promoted egalitarian ideas?

12. When was the SNDP's official publication "Vivekodayam" launched?
13. Who propagated the philosophy of "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man"?
14. In which year did Narayana Guru perform the Aruvippuram installation?
15. Which group did Ayyankali form to support his resistance movement?

SECTION B

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

(10×2 =20 Marks)

16. Discuss the role of new trade routes and colonies in expanding European commerce.
17. Discuss how *Adukkalayilninnum Arangathekku* contributed to the Kerala Renaissance and social reform movements.
18. Explain the role of missionaries in the spread of modern education in Kerala.
19. Describe the nature of colonial modernity in Kerala's socio-economic transformation.
20. Discuss the formation and objectives of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) founded by Ayyankali in 1907.
21. Write the main features of the Temple Entry Proclamation issued by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma?
22. What were the main factors that led to the rise of the Scientific Revolution in Europe?
23. Describe the methods of protest and public response during the Tali Temple Satyagraha.
24. Examine the significance of the Temple Entry Proclamation issued in 1936 in the princely state of Travancore.
25. How does *Indulekha* criticise the practices of caste superiority and Brahmin dominance?
26. Discuss the role of the *Karanavan* (eldest male member) in the administration of the Taravadu.
27. How does *Jathikummi* criticise the caste system and untouchability in Kerala society?
28. How the Aruvippuram Installation became a turning point in the struggle against caste system in Kerala.

29. Explain the role of the Mappila peasants in the Malabar rebellion.
30. Discuss how *Jeevithasamaram* portrays the struggles against caste discrimination and social inequality in Kerala.

SECTION C

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

Each question carries four marks.

(5×4 = 20 Marks)

31. Kallumala Agitation
32. Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)
33. Channar Revolt
34. *Taravadu*
35. *Marumakkathayam*
36. Enlightenment
37. The Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha
38. Lalitambika Antaranjanam
39. Leonardo da Vinci
40. Chattampi Swamikal

SECTION D

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

(2×10 =20 Marks)

41. Assess how caste discrimination, untouchability, and inequality shaped Kerala's social structure before the reform movements.
42. Analyse how Sree Narayana Guru's teachings and the SNDP Yogam contributed to the upliftment of the backward communities in Kerala.
43. Analyse the growth of printing, the rise of Malayalam literature, and the expansion of education in Kerala.
44. Evaluate how Renaissance art, science and philosophy reflected the transition from the medieval to the modern worldview

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യായാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കുതിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

കുറിപ്പ് ശ്രീകുമാർ

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

Regional Centres

Kozhikode

Govt. Arts and Science College
Meenchantha, Kozhikode,
Kerala, Pin: 673002
Ph: 04952920228
email: rckdirector@sgou.ac.in

Thalassery

Govt. Brennen College
Dharmadam, Thalassery,
Kannur, Pin: 670106
Ph: 04902990494
email: rctdirector@sgou.ac.in

Tripunithura

Govt. College
Tripunithura, Ernakulam,
Kerala, Pin: 682301
Ph: 04842927436
email: rcedirector@sgou.ac.in

Pattambi

Sree Neelakanta Govt. Sanskrit College
Pattambi, Palakkad,
Kerala, Pin: 679303
Ph: 04662912009
email: rcpdirector@sgou.ac.in

**DON'T LET IT
BE TOO LATE**

**SAY
NO
TO
DRUGS**

**LOVE YOURSELF
AND ALWAYS BE
HEALTHY**



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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

KERALA RENAISSANCE: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

COURSE CODE: B21HS03DE



Sreenarayanaguru Open University

Kollam, Kerala Pin- 691601, email: info@sgou.ac.in, www.sgou.ac.in Ph: +91 474 2966841

ISBN 978-81-988379-1-2



9 788198 837912