

A Century of Women's Dress Styles in Educational Institutions

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Summary: *A pictorial story of the evolution of school and college dresses for girls and women over a century, as institutions balanced modesty, materials, and cultural milieu while navigating the classroom, playground, extracurricular activities, and the world outside.*

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“When uniforms were white, it was very difficult to keep them clean. On Wednesdays, we had PT period, and everyone’s uniform would be shades of brown. White shoes retain stains, and during assembly, we would be pulled up and punished. Sometimes, we were required to wear the full uniform with the shoes, and on a rainy day, that would be difficult. Parents later raised this during parent-teacher meetings, and some rules regarding uniforms were changed.”

- Sreelakshmi, History Student, 2023.



Figure 1. Casement fabric was widely used for uniform blouses and shirts in the past in Kerala. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

Clothing is a fundamental aspect of human culture, serving as both a practical necessity and a powerful social symbol. This article explores how women’s clothes in Kerala went beyond mere fashion and style, becoming emblematic of social identity, colonisation, urbanisation, modesty, and education through a series of images set within the space of educational institutions from the colonial and post-independence periods.

In the context of colonial India, the impact of British imperial presence ushered in a significant transformation in not just governance, language, and education but also in clothing. “After the Dutch and the British entered our country, they imported textiles and flooded the market,” said Nair Supriya Damodaran, a Fashion Technology teacher,¹ “influencing dress materials and styles.”

¹ Interview with Nair Supriya Damodaran at Ernakulam on 10.10.2023.

In 19th century India, a change in dressing style was more than a sartorial choice; it was perceived as an act of desertion or a shift in one’s social affiliations. The British imperial presence in India introduced a new paradigm of adopting Western clothes. As the Indian elite began to embrace English and European dressing styles, it sparked intense discussion on the subject.

Concurrently, clothing in Colonial Kerala went beyond utilitarian function and assumed aesthetic importance, becoming an instrument of self-expression. Moreover, it played a significant role in commodifying women’s bodies, reflecting the complex dynamics of gender and power. For many women in the early 20th century, covering their bodies through clothing was not just a matter of modesty but a mode of self-assertion. Clothing became intertwined with social movements in this period. For instance, during the “Kallumala Samaram” in 1915, Pulaya women discarded their stone necklaces and demanded the right to wear gold and silver ornaments, dress like upper castes, access public roads, receive education, and use umbrellas.

The images used in this article have been organised thematically to highlight the changes in women’s dressing styles, extra-curricular activities and training, and the evolution of the spaces that housed their educational institutions. They are compiled from several sources:

- Internet archives
- Institutional magazines and photographs
- Screenshots from the PDF format of books from the early twentieth century, and
- Photos received through crowdsourcing.

Dresses from 19th century Kerala

Missionaries started formal educational institutions for girls in Kerala from the early nineteenth century onward. The London Missionary Society (LMS), Church

Missionary Society (CMS), Carmelite Missionaries, Franciscan Missionaries, and the Basel Mission were the major missions that started schools in Kerala. Kerala was divided into the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, British Cochin and Malabar, and South Canara before Independence, and each mission worked in a different location with very little overlap. Except for the Carmelites and Franciscan missionaries, the other missions were Protestant missions. The worldview and aim of each mission were different, and these can be read from how the people and objects within the images have been arranged.



Figure 2. Scripture class conducted by Augusta Blandford at Fern Hill Bungalow in Thiruvananthapuram. Image: *Fort Girls Mission High School: Sesquicentennial Celebration 1864–2014*

Augusta Blandford started the Zenana Mission School in Thiruvananthapuram in 1864. The women in figure 2 appear to be upper-caste women with their hair tied in a topknot and an upper-cloth covering their chest. Unlike other women missionaries in South Travancore, Ms Blandford worked among the Nairs and Brahmins.

The women in figure 3 are Bible women, being trained to preach the Bible to non-Christians at Kanyakumari, part of the princely state of Travancore, by the LMS missionaries. The Chanar Rebellion, or the Breast-cloth Rebellion, had started among the Nadar community, the earliest converts by the LMS in the mid-nineteenth century, for the right to wear an upper cloth. The Bible women,

mostly converts from the lower castes, including the Chanars, wore simple sarees or the two-piece set mundu. The sarees appear to be in dark colours as opposed to the set mundu in lighter colours. This photo was probably taken after the 1880s.



Figure 3. Mrs Thomson and Bible women. Image: *Hundred Years in Travancore*, I.H. Hacker



Figure 4. Students at Nagercoil around 1908. Image: *Hundred Years in Travancore*, I.H. Hacker

The worldview of the LMS by the early twentieth century was that the students and catechists (those teaching faith through education) should be well-versed in the vernacular languages. They did not expect the local converts to imitate Western styles and dress, and therefore, the male children in Figure 4 have no upper clothes and the older female children are covered in a single piece of loosely draped cloth on the upper part of their body, as was customary.



Figure 5. Orphanage at Nagercoil. Image: *A Hundred Years in Travancore* by I.H. Hacker.

Nagercoil was part of the princely state of Travancore. In Figure 5 from 1908, the women and girls at the LMS orphanage are wearing dark-coloured sarees and long skirts. As we move towards central Kerala during the same period, women's clothes appear lighter. It was only later, towards the 1930s, that prints and dark colours appeared in large numbers in predominantly Malayalam-speaking regions. Until then, across Kerala, clothes worn by people were shades of ivory.



Figure 6. Syrian Christian girls at Baker School, 1908. Image: *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, W.J. Richards

The Baker School was one of the earliest mission schools for girls established in north Travancore by the CMS. The pupils were mostly from the Syrian Christian community, an indigenous Christian community present in Kerala from the 1st century AD. Different from the Tamil-speaking LMS students of South Travancore, the girls in figure 6 are wearing the typical white, *chatta-mundu* of the community. The *chatta* is a loose

blouse with no openings and the *mundu* is a long piece of cloth worn around the waist with pleats shaped like a fan at the back.



Figure 7. Basel Mission Girls School in Malabar, 1910–14. Image: USC Digital Library

Modesty in dress was quite important in the Basel Mission worldview. This idea of modesty is influenced by Western styles of dressing from the period. Malayalam literary figures who were educated in the Basel Mission institutions spread from Palakkad to South Canara, reinforced the idea through their works. Basel Mission photos from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figure 7) show the students wearing frocks and blouses with ruffles, high collars, and full sleeves in a pattern similar to European women's dresses. Notice that those in sarees are wearing full-sleeved blouses.



Figure 8. Intermediate Class 1925, St. Teresa's. Image: *Memory Book*, St. Teresa's Library

Taken in 1925, this photograph (figure 8) of teenagers and nuns from Kochi shows various styles. Traditional *chatta-mundu* and sarees vie with frocks and a skirt and blouse worn by the girls and the habits worn by the Carmelite nuns. The cut of the veil and dress of the nuns are different from the current custom. The draping of the saree, as shown here and in the previous images, was quite new. It

was popularised by Jnanadanandini Devi, a Tagore daughter-in-law, and the nationalist movement in India.



Figure 9. Hostel in Calicut, 1931. Image: Basel Mission Archives

Figure 9 from a Basel Mission hostel in 1931 shows students dressed in simple, long dresses, or skirts following the Western style. The figure on the right is a missionary wearing a blouse, long skirt, and hat.



Figure 10. BEM Girls School, Calicut, March 1931. Image: Basel Mission Archives

Some of the girls and women in figure 10 from the Basel missionary school are wearing sarees, while others are in full skirts and blouses. Most of the clothes appear to carry prints, unlike pictures from the early decades. These students would be day scholars, different from the children in the previous picture. The missionary influence on day scholars differed from that of the boarding school students and orphans in the previous image since the latter stayed with the missionaries.



Figure 11. A school in Calicut, 1932-33. Image: Basel Mission Archives

The clothes have been given various colours in this hand tinted Basel Mission Archive photograph (figure 11). The children and teachers appear in indigenous clothes as opposed to the ruffles and high necks from earlier images. The hand-painted photographic style was quite popular in the early part of the twentieth century.



Figure 12. First Holy Communion. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual, 1937*

The First Holy Communion is the celebration of a sacrament that is specific to Catholic communities. The prevalent styles in the Communion dress of Catholic students in Cochin (now, Kochi) in the late 1930s are seen in figure 12. At present, First Holy Communions are organised by parishes and parents, not schools. This is because religious instruction has been removed from Christian educational institutions and

taken up by communities as a result of governmental policies in the 20th century.



Figure 13. College Rangers and High School Guides. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual, 1938*

The saree worn by the girls in figure 13 is the uniform of the College Rangers, a youth organisation that worked in St. Teresa's College, and the girl wearing the skirt and jacket (on the left) is a High School Guide. Several British-style organisations along the lines of Scouts and Guides functioned in missionary educational institutions, and their uniforms were adapted to the indigenous styles in the case of the older women.

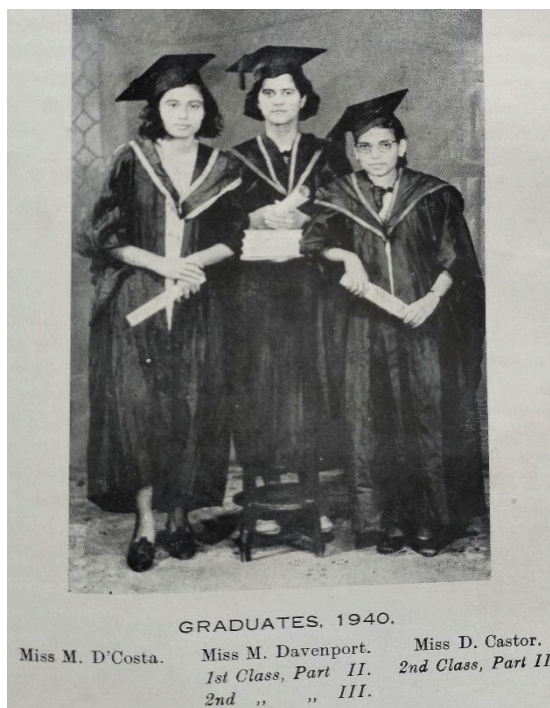


Figure 14. Graduates from St. Teresa's in 1940. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual, 1940*

It is only towards mid-century that the graduation gowns make an appearance in the annuals of St. Teresa's College. The photo in figure 14 seems to have been taken at a studio.



Figure 15. Cannanore Mission, 1940–50. Image: Basel Mission Archives

Figure 15 from the Basel Mission archives did not have a description. The photo was taken by Minerva Studio, Cannanore (Kannur). Since the photo was taken towards the middle of the century, the clothes worn by the women are more festive, with bold prints compared to previous decades. This was also due to the increased availability of factory-made clothes from outside Kerala and abroad. "I have heard my mother and aunts speak about the foreign saree. It was very famous at that time. It was probably made of rayon or nylon, easy to wash, and easy to wear. Whenever people used to come from places like Singapore, they brought foreign sarees. They were very soft to the touch and flowy. They were not made in India then," mentioned Supriya, teacher.



Figure 16. B.A. Students, Mount Carmel College, Thrissur. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1945

Taken around the same time, but located in central Kerala, figure 16 shows women in similar prints and drapes of saree. There is a single, seated student wearing a frock. The frock was not common attire for girls in their mid- to late teens in the 1940s. Geetheshwari Rajan, an entrepreneur from Thrissur, whose grandmother went to school in this period, mentioned that her grandmother used to wear just a *mundu*. She stopped going once she hit puberty. The family did not want her to wear a blouse just for school. In the early twentieth century, when the number of school- and college-going children increased, families and women had complex negotiations on the kind of clothes women could wear, especially within the home and in spaces outside, like the school. In some sense, this debate is an ongoing one.



Figure 17. Hostelites at St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam, in 1946. Image: *Memory Book*, St. Teresa's Library, Ernakulam

The women in figure 17 are in sarees, with a few wearing frocks or dresses. Kochi had a strong population of Anglo-Indians, and the frock was mostly worn by the Anglo-Indian community in this period. In this photo, taken around the same decade as the previous images from Kannur and Thrissur, the bold prints on the saree are quite similar, pointing to a homogenisation of dressing styles.

Figure 18 shows that government school students did not have uniforms until fairly recently. Unnikrishnan K., who studied in a government school in Thrissur in the 1960s, mentioned that he did not have any uniforms in lower primary school. In upper primary, the school uniform was a

blue shirt and shorts. Once he grew tall, a teacher suggested he wear mundu, and he switched to the uniform shirt and mundu. The change in uniform had more to do with convenience and keeping with what was worn by most people in that location. The missionary schools near his place had full uniforms during the period, including shoes, socks, and ties.



Figure 18. Students at the Government Lower Primary School, Ponnurunni in 1981. Image: Santhosh Kumar K.T.



Figure 19. St. Mary's School Narakkal in the mid-1980s. Image: Sumi Joseph

The female students in primary school wore various kinds of attire, including pinafores, and skirts and blouses, as seen in figure 19. Suja K., a housewife who did her schooling in the 1970s, mentioned that there were no uniforms in the government school where she studied.

She wore short skirts and blouses. The short skirt that came much above the knee was the norm. It was considered shameful if the skirt was longer. Even if the skirt was stitched to be longer, the girls used to fold it at the waist to maintain the length. Later, the uniform skirt became a maxi skirt that came up a little above the ankles. The girls used to wear pretty petticoat skirts beneath the outer skirts. Showing off the petticoats was something that every girl did. Her family could not afford the long petticoat, so she wore a frock-like petticoat that was not very long. Slippers were not commonly worn in their locality. She mentioned that cloth was not an easily available commodity. The length of the skirts, according to her, was directly proportional to the availability and affordability of clothing for the middle class.



Figure 20. Students at the Sacred Heart Convent Girls Higher Secondary School, Thrissur, in 1988. Image: Dhanya Babu P.

Unlike the Narakkal School, the urban school in figure 20 has girls wearing the uniform in a more disciplined and tidy manner. The girls are also wearing ties, and some of them are in pinafores while others are in blouses and skirts. Saro Krishna, a graphic designer who studied in a government school, mentioned that in government schools and certain schools in rural areas, the school authorities would bring in a particular style of uniform. However, it did not mean that the students would follow it either because they could not afford it or did not care for the style. Thus, rules regarding uniforms were not always enforced, and the ability to enforce a particular style depended on the school authorities and external factors.



Figure 21. High school students at St. Mary's High School, Narakkal, in the mid-1990s. Female students used to wear skirts and blouses in most schools until the late twentieth century. Image: Sumi Joseph

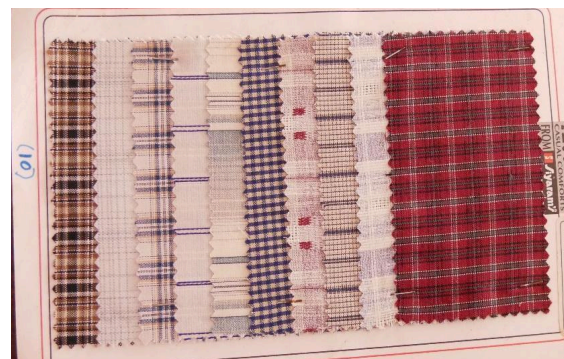


Figure 22. From plain, solid-coloured shirts, blouses, and kameezes, uniforms moved to checked patterns in many institutions in the 1990s. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

The uniform materials changed over the years, from pure cotton to mixed materials, shown in figure 22. "Cotton is a good fabric for our weather. In uniforms, we cannot use pure cotton; terry cotton (a mix of cotton and polyester) is used. Polyester is used because uniforms should dry easily and does not require ironing. Initially, uniforms may have been made with cotton, but seeing how these requirements of being easy to wash, dry, and iron were there, these materials started to be added to cotton," mentioned Supriya, Fashion Technology teacher.

By the 1990s, as seen from figures 23 to 25, the usual dress for women was the salwar kameez, or saree. The men wore pants and shirts. One of the male students (in figure 23) is in shorts

because they are outside the space of the college in this instance. Sreelakshmi, a student, speaking about colleges at present, mentioned, “I have heard that in other colleges, they insist that women wear a dupatta with the salwar kameez. They are allowed to wear any colour and pattern. The one sentence we hear repeatedly is, ‘You are here to study, not for a fashion show.’”



Figure 23. A group of medical students during a trip at the turn of the century. Image: Ayesha Yasmine



Figure 24. Commerce Students at Mar Ivanios College, 2003. This photograph taken in a studio shows the students in salwar kameezes and a lone girl in the top left wearing a top/blouse. Image: Amritha Sebastian



Figure 25. Students at the College of Applied Science, Vadakkanchery, in 2002. The clothes worn by the women are similar to the pictures from Mar Ivanios College. Image: Dhanya Babu P.

By 2015 (figures 28 to 30), higher secondary students in schools were wearing salwar kameezes or pants and shirts with waistcoats. “Schools that switch over to the waistcoat do not switch back to the dupatta,” mentioned graphic designer Saro Krishna, speaking about uniforms in high schools.



Figure 26. Government Higher Secondary School, Patla, Kasargod, in 2015–16. The female students are in plain pinafores and checked shirts, while the boys are in plain shorts and checked shirts. Both girls and boys are wearing shoes, socks, and belts. Image: Sanaullah



Figure 27. St. Francis Church L.P. School, Fort Kochi in 2018. The female students are in their uniform pinafores and the male students are in shorts and shirts during a picnic. Image: St. Francis Church L.P. School Bicentenary Celebration Souvenir, 1817–2018.



Figure 28. The Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Ernakulam. The school has students wearing various kinds of uniforms depending on their age. Students wearing pinafores can be seen in the foreground. Students in the background are wearing pants, waistcoats, and shirts, or salwar kameezes with waistcoats. Image: JANAL Archives 2023



Figure 29. Students at the Rahmaniya Vocational Higher Secondary School, Kozhikode. Image: JANAL Archives 2023



Figure 30. Students at St. Ignatius VHSS, Kanjiramattom. Girls wear pants, shirts, and long waistcoats in school. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

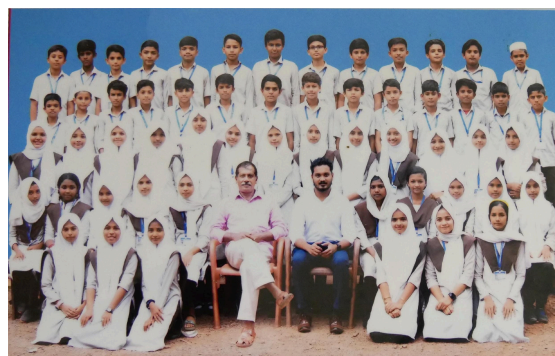


Figure 31. Government Higher Secondary School, Patla students in 2023. Image: Sanaullah

In figure 31, high school female students are in salwar kameezes with a dupatta, and the Muslim students have white scarves over their heads.



Figure 32. Female students at the Brilliant Study Centre, Thiruvananthapuram. The students shown here are in colours and styles typically worn by female students in Kerala at present. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Skills and Activities



Figure 33. Doing Laundry, Basel Mission, 1902. Image: University of Southern California (USC) Digital Library

Domestic work was an intrinsic part of the Basel Mission training for girls. In this photo, the students are posing with the various utensils and implements used to do laundry. They are wearing a sort of uniform, a checked blouse, and a dark mundu in figure 33.

The Basel Mission institutions, as mentioned earlier, included domestic training. The photograph in figure 34 shows a variety of implements like mortar and pestles, *uruli* (flat vat), billhooks, grinding stones, different kinds of woven baskets, and mixing vessels used in Malayali kitchens. Many of these are no longer in use. These images are from the Chombala mission house in 1914.



Figure 34. Kitchen Accessories. Image: USC Digital Library



Figure 35. Children showcasing laces and thread at Kollam, 1920–40. Image: USC Digital Library

The image in figure 35 shows orphan children with Carmelite Third Order nuns at Kollam. The kids are displaying hand-made lace on small stands. A little girl seated on the left has a thread in her hand to make lace. Most of the work or skill-related images within missionary archives were usually from an orphanage or boarding school. These skills were supposed to make the children financially self-sufficient and bring in money to the institution through the sale of the items.

The undated image in figure 36 is from the Chombala mission house, Malabar. It shows the children engaged in weaving coconut palm leaves into various objects under the supervision of the Western missionary. This is also a Basel Mission initiative. The students who passed out of institutions that had skill training kept in touch with the missionaries later, since

items like lace were sold through missionary institutions and connections.



Figure 36. Weaving with Coconut Leaves. Image: USC Digital Library

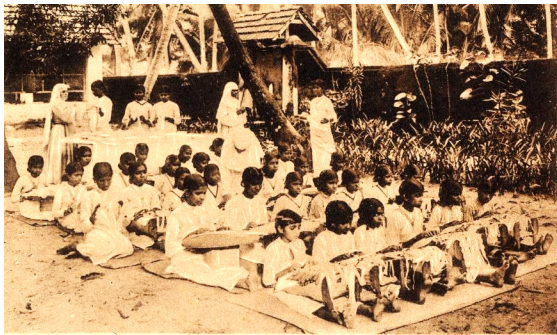


Figure 37. Sewing Class in Kochi. Image: USC Digital Library

Figure 37 is a postcard printed between 1920 and 1940. The nuns are Franciscan missionaries, and it presents a class in progress as opposed to the children displaying their work in the Basel Mission and Carmelite Mission images. The children are seated on mats and appear to be making lace. The children either lived in a boarding school or were orphans, as mentioned before, since ordinary/day schools did not have this extent of skill or craft training.

The photograph in figure 38 was originally a postcard printed between 1920 and 1940. Here, the nuns are Carmelites, and the students are displaying myriad techniques like lacemaking, embroidery, and sewing.



Figure 38. Another Mission, Another Sewing Class. Image: USC Digital Library

The photograph in figure 39 is one of a set of four photos from the photo album at St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam. It shows the students at work in their chemistry laboratory in 1950.



Figure 39. Chemistry Laboratory, 1950–51. Image: *Memory Book*, St. Teresa's Library



Figure 40. Students playing on the newly installed swings during Onam at Cottonhill Girls Higher Secondary School, Thiruvananthapuram. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

During Onam 2023, educational institutions in Thiruvananthapuram installed several swings throughout campuses as part of Onam festivities. Onam is celebrated on a large scale in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram, with fairs, exhibitions, and entire neighbourhoods decorated in fairy lights. In figure 40, the girls in junior classes are in salwar kameezes with light waistcoats made of breathable material, while those in the background are in pants and shirts with waistcoats made of thick material.

Buildings

The school in figure 41 is probably in Eraniel (now in Tamilnadu) and was run by Mrs Ann Thomson from LMS. The students are wearing indigenous clothes, and the school building is a very basic structure. The roof is made of palm leaves. A horse carriage can be seen towards the left, and the European near the cart may be Rev. Thomson, Mrs Thomson's husband.



Figure 41. Female Missionary Worker with Students Outside School, Kerala, 1880–90. Image: USC Digital Library

The school in figure 42 was called the Zenana Mission School then and was housed in one of the palaces of the Travancore Royal Family. It was a three-storey structure within the Fort

area of Thiruvananthapuram. It was started for women from the upper castes and the royal family in the nineteenth century.

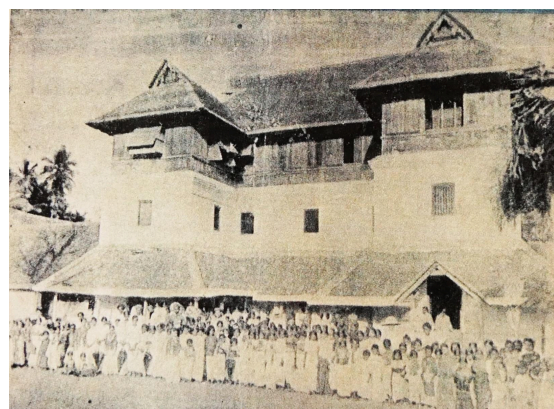


Figure 42. The Fort Girl's Mission School, Thiruvananthapuram, in 1900. Image: 'Shining Faces': A Souvenir Marking the Centenary of the Fort Girls Mission School



Figure 43. Baker Memorial High School for Girls, Kottayam, 1908. Image: *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas* by W.J. Richards

The Baker Memorial School belonged to the CMS, and the students were primarily drawn from the indigenous Christian communities. The original photograph is older than the book in which it was printed. So, figure 43 may be from the late nineteenth century. The school is a pucca structure. There are pillars surrounding the structure, giving it a European look. The students are in the traditional dress of the indigenous Christian community.



Figure 44. Hostel building in Calicut in 1931. Image: Basel Mission Archives

The hostel in figure 44 is a two-storey structure with semi-covered verandas. There is a well in the courtyard and a long, covered corridor on the left leading to some other building within the compound. There are toddlers, children, and young girls in this image. The woman drawing water from the well is probably a servant since she is dressed differently from the others, and the original title mentions that it is a group of girls and servants at the hostel.



Figure 45. Primary School under Basel Mission, 1936–47. Image: USC Digital Library

The inside of a primary classroom under the Basel Mission is presented in figure 45. The class is similar to a modern classroom, except for the absence of desks. There are pictures up on the walls and a blackboard. The teacher and

students appear to be wearing clothes made out of Khadi or homespun material.



Figure 46. Khadi cotton being home spun into thread. Wearing Khadi was fashionable in the 1930s since the national movement and Gandhian ideas were becoming popular then. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

The photo of the convent in figure 47 is framed amidst the convent garden, with the domestic animals visible in the frame. The inmates, including the children and the nuns, can be seen. Even today, most Catholic convents in Kerala have kitchen-gardens, extensive grounds, and domestic animals.



Figure 47. Infant Jesus Convent in Ochanthuruth. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Golden Jubilee Number 1887–1937*

By the late 1930s, the infrastructure and facilities for women's education had increased, especially in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. As can be seen in figure 48, the St. Teresa's group of institutions in Ernakulam had several buildings to accommodate the borders, hostelites, and school and college classrooms, including

laboratories. They also had fairly extensive grounds to hold sports days.

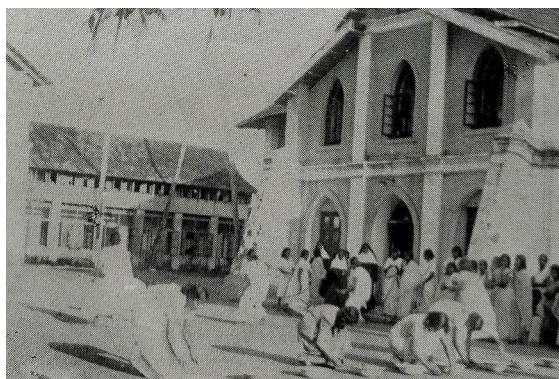


Figure 48. Marble Relay at College Grounds, St. Teresa's College. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1938



Figure 49. Government Girls High School, Ernakulam, in the early 1970s. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

Though the Government Girls High School in figure 49 has a pucca building on the left, some of the classes were still being held in the structure with the hay roof on the right in the 1970s. The skirts of the girls were short, either up to the knees or above them, during this period. In later years, the length of skirts became longer in many schools. Suja, a housewife, mentioned that the length of the skirts was directly related to the availability of cloth. In the 1960s and 1970s, dress material was in short supply. Once the availability increased, the length of students' uniform skirts also increased. From an earlier era when short skirts were the acceptable style, maxi skirts

became the norm by the 1980s and 1990s.

Events and Occasions



Figure 50. Orphans in Fancy Dress at Jubilee Celebration. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1938

In figure 50, the children on the right are wearing a variety of costumes inspired by both Eastern and Western cultures for this event. The kids are placed towards the right, with more importance given to the nuns. This is a typical Catholic missionary arrangement in which, in the placement of people, those wearing the habit are foregrounded. This can be seen in other group images. The prominence could be a matter of perception since the dark habit stands out amidst the other clothes and prints.

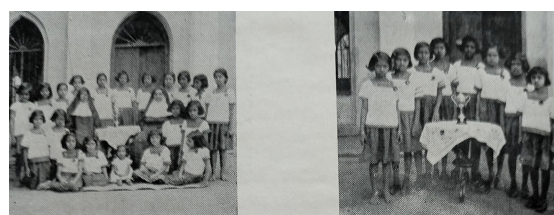


Figure 51. Blue Birds at St. Teresa's School. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1938

The Blue Bird was a primary school girls' organisation that functioned in St. Teresa's School, based on a British organisation. The children took part in rallies and activities in Kerala. Figure 51 shows children being taken to Bolgatty Island for a trip. Trips were an important aspect of the Carmelite educational vision.



Figure 52. Sports Day at St. Teresa's. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1938

By the 1940s, the annuals of the Carmelite missions had images of the various physical activities conducted for the female students (figure 52).



Figure 53. Sports Day at the BEMGHs in the 1950s. Image: JANAL Archives

In the 1950s, BEM Girls High School had white uniforms for the girls on sports days (figure 53). The white uniform was quite common in many schools until fairly recently. Many schools had a particular day in the week when the students had to wear white.



Figure 54. Mother India. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1939

The girl in the middle of figure 54 represents Mother India with her arm out and superimposed on a map of India. This image was in circulation from the early twentieth century, and earlier in Bengal. It was part of the wider discourse on nationalism to inculcate patriotic feelings. Missionary institutions present an easy movement between patriotic feelings towards the State, Nation, and British authority as can be seen in subsequent images.



Figure 55. St. Teresa's Girl Guides perform in honour of V.K. Lekshmykutty Nethyaramma, Consort of Cochin Maharaja. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1940

The students in figure 55 are displaying a variety of costumes worn by different communities in Kerala. The performance highlights the importance the Maharaja and Consort had in the popular imagination in colonial Cochin. The Consort had been awarded a Thanks Badge by the All India Girl Guides, and the performance was in honour of that.

St. Teresa's, located in the princely state of Cochin, and in close contact with British Cochin, had mixed loyalties. The Carmelite Third Order, to which the management of the school belonged, was a British Evangelical Catholic mission. In the same annual, there was a photo of the King of Cochin and the photo (figure 56) of the children showing their support to Britain. This was during the initial World War II years.



Figure 56. Britains Never Shall be Slaves. Image: *St. Teresa's College and High School Annual*, 1941



Figure 57. "Dance Vivante": A School Dance. Image: *Annual of St. Teresa's Congregation, Colleges, and Schools*, 1944

The sense of pageantry and opulence (figure 57) that is found in the Carmelite institutional photographs from the early to mid-twentieth century is rarely found in those of the other missions. This could

be a reflection of the difference in the vision and worldview of the Catholic and Protestant missions.



Figure 58. Independence Day ceremony held at BEM School, Kozhikode, in 1959. Image: JANAL archives

It was declared a holiday, yet students and teachers attended school for the flag-hoisting ceremony (figure 58). The school leader standing next to the guest, G.T. Sharada Krishnan, is wearing a plain-coloured uniform. Her hair is plaited and tied to both sides. Most schools in Kerala used to insist that female students with long hair plait their hair on both sides. This was changed only in 2016 when a Plus Two student from Kasargod filed a complaint, and rules were amended instructing school authorities not to force female students to plait their hair.

The students are in some kind of light-coloured dress, fancy accessories, and shoes and socks in figure 59. The regular school uniform did not require them to wear shoes.



Figure 59. Students at a school event in the 1970s at Government Girls High School, Ernakulam. Image: JANAL Archives.

The girls in figure 60 are in a typical band uniform with short check skirts, plain shirts, and ties. They are also wearing shoes and socks.



Figure 60. The School Band at the Government Girls High School, Ernakulam, in the 1970s. Image: JANAL Archives

Medical camps are held at least once a year in schools at present. Figure 61 from one such event shows the two types of uniforms worn at the school by girls of different ages: the check skirt and plain blouse, and the salwar and check kameez.



Figure 61. Medical camp held at Fort Girls Mission High School in 2013. Image: *Fort Girls Mission High School: Sesquicentennial Celebration 1864–2014*

The students and teachers in figure 62 are wearing styles currently worn in Kerala during events. There is the typical Kerala saree, the white salwar with the tricolour dupattas, girls in dance costumes, and the long skirt and blouse in this compilation of images in the sesquicentennial magazine.



Figure 62. Sesquicentennial (150 years) celebrations at Fort Girls Mission High School, Thiruvananthapuram, in 2014. Image: *Fort Girls Mission High School: Sesquicentennial Celebration 1864–2014*

Clothing as Control

Women's dresses in educational institutions have undergone a lot of change over the past few centuries. The transformation shows the influence of missionaries, and especially the British, in the cut and even the colours used. The length, type of material, and patterns have been influenced by the availability of material and access. In recent decades, Indian styles have been introduced as uniforms in several places.

Clothing style, material, colour, and accessories become grounds for debate in the public and within educational institutions. Discipline, uniformity, modesty, and aesthetics are considered more important than comfort and ease of maintenance when uniforms are designed for students, especially female students. While authorities have used them as sites of control, power, discipline, etc., students have used them as sites of protest, either through legal methods or subversively.

In India, women are perceived as bearers of culture, and women's clothing is perceived to be part of that. Therefore, there is a feeling that changes to women's clothing are equivalent to deviating from custom and tradition while challenging cultural values. Added to that is a general anxiety centred on controlling women's chastity and modesty, both linked to women's dressing. How else does one explain the bizarre rules that force female students to wear churidars or long leggings under a pinafore like in this picture?



Figure 63. School students from Thrissur on a trip. Image: Nidhin Anil, 2023

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