



Educational Narratives of Malayali Women

Teena Antony

Summary: Mapping women's voices on their educational experiences in the last 120 years through interviews, autobiographies, and biographies.

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Robin Jeffrey's seminal book, *Politics, Women, and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a "Model"*, argues that women's educational access played an important part in raising the literacy levels in Kerala. He, of course, presents this as one of the many factors that influenced the literacy levels in the state. Statistics and census reports for the twentieth century show that women from Kerala—Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore before Independence—had higher rates of literacy compared to most other places in the country.

This article maps women's voices through interviews, autobiographies, and biographies on their educational experiences in the last century. Their voices paint a picture of the past—the happenings—that influenced their own and other people's access to education.

B. Kalyani Amma

Ormayil Ninnu (1964) is the autobiography of B. Kalyani Amma (1884–1959), a teacher, writer, and editor from Kerala. She was one of the three female editors from Kerala (then Travancore) who brought out the first women's magazine run by women, *Sharada*, in 1904. Kalyani Amma's childhood was spent during a time when Kerala was undergoing significant social, political, and economic changes.



Figure 1. The Zenana Mission School, where B. Kalyani Amma studied. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, science, health, hygiene, and rational thinking were becoming markers of modernity in Malayalam-speaking regions. Educational institutions were one of the avenues through which these ideas were being spread among the common people.¹

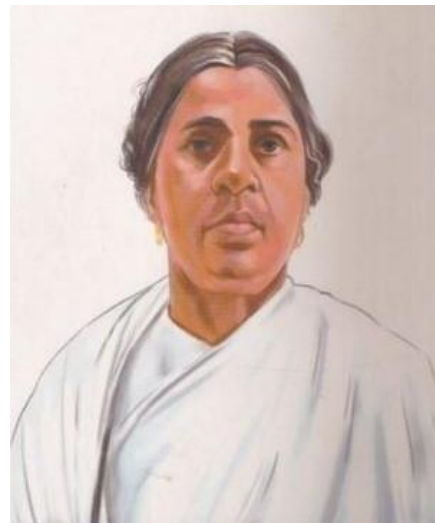


Figure 2. B. Kalyani Amma. Image: Kerala Book Store, 2024

Kalyani Amma was a student of the Zenana mission school in Thiruvananthapuram, housed in one of the old palaces belonging to the ruling family. The building was reputed to be haunted by a ghost. Girls used to faint occasionally inside the building, and unusual noises could be heard from the top floor. Kalyani Amma believed that there must indeed have been a ghost there, while her best friend, Chinnamma, did not believe in such supernatural beings. Kalyani Amma mentions that the study of science and scientific principles changed her beliefs. The top floor of the building was made entirely of wood, including the floor and walls. The eerie bumps and knocks were caused by the seasonal shrinking and expansion of the wooden boards, she realised. Despite Chinnamma's and her effort, they were not able to persuade other students and

¹ Kalyaniamma, B. *Ormayil Ninnu*. Edited by K Gomathyamma. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, 1964.

teachers that the ghost did not exist. Not everybody was ready to give up traditional beliefs when confronted with the rationality inherent in modern education and science, writes Kalyani Amma in her autobiography.



Figure 3. An upstairs corridor of the Fort Girls Mission School, Thiruvananthapuram. The school was earlier known as the Zenana Mission School. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

School is a place where people learn about culture and gendered behaviour. Sometimes, they learn these things not from their regular lessons, but from the other ways that teachers teach or discipline them. For example, Kalyani Amma mentions that when the students (there were only three female students in that batch) kept shaking their legs despite being told not to, their teacher changed their usual benches to shorter ones.

Kalyani Amma enrolled in school around the turn of the century. For Kalyani Amma, attending school posed challenges due to her family's financial constraints. However, during that period, there was a growing acceptance of education for women within the Nair community; education was increasingly viewed as essential. Upon completing middle school, her family hesitated to continue her education, but with the assistance of the school administration, books, stationery, a monthly stipend, and private tutor were secured for Kalyani Amma and her peers.

² Antony, Teena. 'Malayali Women: Education and the Development of the Self in the Early 20th Century'. *Academic Studies - National Journal of Jyoti Research Academy* 7, no. 1 (June 2013): 24–30.

Though education was recognised as important, her family did not prioritise her pursuit of higher education. The family's reluctance stemmed from two main factors: their financial limitations and the societal norms of the late nineteenth century. At that time, while literacy was starting to gain recognition as valuable, women were not typically encouraged to pursue practical skills and higher education.² Kalyani Amma completed her high school education as a private student of the school, as the institution did not formally offer a high school section. This initiative underscored the school's commitment to providing educational opportunities for its students, reflecting their dedication and enthusiasm.

Ambadi Karthiyaniamma

Many of the women writers, thinkers, and educationists studied in missionary schools and colleges in the early twentieth century. Ambadi Karthiyaniamma was the first woman to graduate from the princely state of Cochin.³ She was a teacher, writer, public speaker, and intellectual. She did her schooling at St. Teresa's School and her Intermediate (pre-degree) at Maharaja's College. She was the only girl in her class that year. She graduated from Madras University in 1917. She passed her B.T. (teacher training) from Lady Willingdon College in 1920.

She was a well-known public speaker and used to speak at various conferences. Very few people could handle both Malayalam and English with ease in those times, and it is said that Karthiyaniamma could do this.⁴ She wrote articles in both English and Malayalam. She was the vice president of the Kerala Sahitya Academy and a member of the women's association. It was with the help of the women's association that the

³ Leelavathi, M. 'Ambadi Karthiyaniamma'. In *Jeevitham Thanne Sahithyam: Ambadi Karthiyaniamma*, 7–13. Kochi: Pavana Prakashan's, 2001.

⁴ Leelavathi, 2001.

Ernakulam Government Girls School was upgraded to a high school in 1817. She became the headmistress of the school in 1919 and retired from there in 1951.



Figure 4. Ambadi Karthiayaniamma (1895-na) was the first woman to graduate from the princely state of Cochin. She was instrumental in raising the Ernakulam Government Girls School to a high school. Image: *Jeevitham Thanne Sahithyam*, 2001



Figure 5. GVHSS, Ernakulam, which was upgraded to a high school with the help of Ambadi Karthiayaniamma. She was the first headmistress of the school. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Anna Benjamin

Anna Benjamin, born in 1904, was a student of the Baker Memorial School in the 1910–20 period. Her schooling was unusual in that her fees were paid for by the last living Baker descendant, Miss Isabel Baker, who had a soft corner for this quiet daughter of the local priest.⁵ She went on to do her BA at Women’s Christian College, Madras. CMS College in Kottayam did not allow women to join the institution then. Anna joined Women’s Christian College following in the footsteps of one of her older sisters, who was already studying there. She came back to the school and joined as a teacher in 1928, while her sister joined the Buchanan Institution at Pallom, Kottayam, as a teacher.



Figure 6. An early image of the female students at the Baker Memorial School. Image: *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 1908

Miss. Meagre, the then principal, felt that the school needed to instruct the students in cooking and home management. So, Anna was sent to St. Christopher’s Training College in Madras for a year to study home science. She studied psychology, economics, baby and child care, and nutrition, and returned to the school with a BALT degree. Later, in 1938, she became the first Indian headmistress of the school. A year before that, she was sent to England for a year’s training. Uma Chandrakumar, a

⁵ John, Susan. *Love Never Faileth: The Life and Times of Sister Anna Benjamin*. Kottayam: Christava Sahitya Samity, 1996.

student at the school, mentioned that Miss Benjamin was known for her faultless English and efficiency as an administrator, “She was very strict.”⁶

Throughout Anna Benjamin’s tenure as headmistress of Baker’s school, the teachers and students continued missionary activities in the poorer suburbs of Kottayam. She herded the school during the difficult years of civil unrest in the late 1930s in Travancore and the Second World War, when there was a food shortage. The school had innovative projects like gardening, which had to be taken up by a class for a term or a year, running a stationery shop by a class from which the whole school had to buy their supplies, etc. The idea was to teach the girls the rudiments of trade. Or the girls would gather medicinal herbs from within the school compound to sell to shops selling herbs. The money thus made and through other activities was usually used for charity.



Figure 7. Miss Anna Benjamin studied at the Baker Memorial Girls’ School in the early 1920s. She later became the first Indian headmistress of the school. Image: *Love Never Faileth: The Life and Times of Sister Anna Benjamin*, 1996

⁶ Interview with Uma Chandrakumar on 24 June 2023.

K.R. Gouri Amma

K.R. Gouri Amma (1919-2021), lawyer, former revenue minister, and noted Communist Party member was born in a fairly rich Ezhava family. She went to a primary school at the Thuravoor Thirumala Devaswom School in the 1920s.⁷



Figure 8. Gouri Amma, former minister, former Communist Party member, and lawyer, was also the first Ezhava woman to pass the Bachelor of Law in Travancore. Image: *Aatmakatha*, 2010

Before that, she went to a local school run by a single teacher. The land and building for this school were donated by her father. All the children in the locality studied at that school. In her autobiography, Gouri Amma mentions that the teacher gave individual attention to each student.

The children were taught to write, speak with clarity, read according to their ability, read and understand poetry by Kumaran Asan, learn certain poems by Kunjan Nambiar and

⁷ Gouri Amma, K.R. *Aatmakatha*. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2010.

Ezhuthachan, taught arithmetic, addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division according to the child's ability... (p. 65)

...It was only students from rich and propertied families among the Ezhavas that went for English education in those times. There were no fees for lower castes and Dalit students. Even then, very few went to school. None of my uncles' children had a college education. Students from Dalit communities studying in English schools were about five per cent, less than their numbers in the total population. (p. 84)⁸

Kumaran Asan, one of the triumvirate poets of Kerala, was from the Ezhava community. He was a revolutionary figure in the early twentieth century. The other two writers mentioned in the quote are pioneer Malayalam writers and poets from the past. Even at her local school, the curriculum was changing as a result of the teacher. She mentions elsewhere that not everyone sent their children to the *ezhuthupalli* for formal education.



Figure 9. The T.D.H.S. where K.R. Gouri Amma did her schooling. Image: *Aatmakatha*, 2010

When Gouri Amma joined the high school in Cherthala, she found that the students were

from a different social background than the one she was used to:

Around half the students at Cherthala High School were the children of government officers, businessmen, and landlords. Their behaviour and dressing styles were different. As a result, the atmosphere and discipline in this school were also different. It was compulsory to wear clean clothes, to plait or brush one's hair, and to learn one's daily lessons (p. 102).

Getting educated was a matter of pride for many individuals, especially those who belonged to marginalised communities. It represented empowerment, knowledge, and the ability to challenge existing norms. However, education was unaffordable for common people due to various socio-economic reasons. The cost of education, lack of resources, and societal restrictions prevented people from accessing formal schooling.

Moreover, education did not always mean the academic kind during that period. Her elder sisters, who were not brilliant academically, were trained in vocal music, fiddle, veena, and harmonium. Gouri Amma remembers acquaintances coming to the house to listen to her elder sister K.R. Narayani Amma's musical performances. She recounts that her sister, uninterested in household chores or other conventional pursuits, held significant importance in her own understanding of women's lifestyles.

K.R. Narayani Amma, adept at riding a motorcycle with a sidecar, would often take her child and Gouri Amma (7–8 years of age) on rides into town in the 1930s. In an era where cars, buses, and even bicycles were rare, crowds would gather to watch her ride, cheering and whistling, much to her sister's annoyance. Despite the attention, her sister persisted until their father intervened, citing that the time was not right.

⁸ Gouri Amma, 2010.



Figure 10. Gouri Amma did her BA at St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Gouri Amma admires her sister's courage and accomplishments. She was a woman ahead of her time—a pioneer who dared to experiment with new technology. And so, in those early days when motorcycles were rare and women riders even rarer, Narayani Amma blazed a trail that would inspire generations to come. Narayani Amma's story is one of courage and determination—a testament to breaking barriers and embracing new possibilities—in Gouri Amma's retelling of her story.

Gouri Amma did her Intermediate at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, and her BA at St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam. Later, she earned a law degree from the Ernakulam Law College. She was the first female law graduate from among the Ezhavas in the princely state of Travancore.

Devaki Nilayangodu

By the mid-twentieth century, education became more accessible to those who desired it, promoting social equality and inter-caste and inter-religious solidarity. However, that did not mean schooling was always an option. Writer and social activist, Devaki Nilayangodu (1928-2023) mentions in her autobiography *Kalappakarchakal* (2008) that after the death of her father, there was a time when things were a little less

orthodox in her Namboothiri *illam* (Namboothiri household). Girls were not allowed to join school, but tutors were engaged to teach them at home.



Figure 11. Devaki Nilayangodu born into a Namboothiri family, learnt English at home under the guidance of a private teacher. Image: *The Hindu*, 2023

In her early teens, she insisted that she wanted to study English. Her elder brothers, the ones running the *illam*, agreed:

A Nair woman called Thankam from Guruvayoor was brought to stay at the *illam*. She had passed tenth. The teacher taught me mainly English. And a little bit of history and geography. I did not like mathematics; so, the teacher did not teach that.

Thankam teacher taught me for six months. I attained enough proficiency to read the Standard 8 textbook. I could read boards and write my address. I could read certain English novels after my marriage with this knowledge of English, like Pearl S. Buck's *Good Earth*, *Stories of Tagore*, *Pride and Prejudice*, etc. (p. 34)⁹

Thus, English education was something many people aspired to. A decade earlier, her sister had insisted on studying Sanskrit. Her father was alive at that time. Women were not allowed to study Sanskrit in their community, and her mother strongly

⁹ Nilayangodu, Devaki. *Kalappakarchakal*. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2008.

objected to this. But her sister was so adamant that their father relented. Nilayangodu says her father was not sure if she should study Sanskrit. Hence, he decided to allow her to study astrology (*jyothisham*). By then, her sister had had her menarche. This again posed a problem because women who had reached menarche were not supposed to see (male) strangers. Their father found a solution. The teacher and student were made to sit in adjacent rooms, and their father sat in the doorway of the two rooms. The guru would say the slokas aloud. Nilayangodu's sister would repeat it aloud from the other room. Once their father became busy and could not find time to sit in between the rooms, her sister's education came to an end.



Figure 12. Books atop a bureau in an old tharavad. Devaki Nilayangodu and sisters were avid readers and were lent books by their brothers who had access to libraries. Image: JANAL Archive, 2023.

Uma Chandrakumar

The inclusion of subjects like domestic science and needlework in the formal curriculum continued into the mid-twentieth century in Kerala. Uma Chandrakumar, who studied at Baker Memorial Girls High School in the mid-century, had chosen needlework as an optional subject in high school.¹⁰ Daughter of a lawyer belonging to a Nair household, access to school was relatively easy for her, socially and distance-wise.

¹⁰ Interview with Uma Chandrakumar on 24 June 2023

Uma mentioned that the first thing that the teachers used to check at the school on Mondays was the length of the students' nails. Discipline and deportment were given importance in the school. Health and physical exercise were given equal importance in missionary schools. In Baker's school, there were baseball and athletics. They used to have inter-school competitions. She later joined the Women's College in Thiruvananthapuram to do a BA in chemistry.



Figure 13. Uma Chandrakumar studied at Baker Memorial School in the early 1950s. Image: Arun Kumar, 2023.

When asked if she had wanted to do a job, she mentioned, "I wanted to teach. That was the best job for a woman." She had taught English for a short while at a nearby school after her graduation. Though she had wanted to do medicine, her father said it would take a long time to complete the course. Consequently, her marriage would be delayed. Since she had younger sisters, he could not wait for her to finish her

education, as their marriages would also be delayed.



Figure 14. Uma Chandrakumar in NCC uniform from the mid-1950s. Image: Arun Kumar 2023.

11

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC EXAMINATION MARKS.

* Name of candidate, *Uma Devi. P.*
 Register Number.....*836b*.....of 1952.

Subjects.	Maximum Marks.	Minimum for pass.	Public Examination marks.		School average.	State average.
			In figures	In words.		
I. First Language Malayalam/Tamil/English/Sanskrit	100	40	51	Fifty One.	44	42.
II. Second Language English.	100	35	60	Sixty Only.	46	36.
III. Third Language	50	17 1/2	27	Twenty Seven.	23	18.
IV. Non-Language Subjects						
1. Ele. Mathematics	100	35	83	Eighty three.	73	52.
2. Ele. Science	100	35	65	Sixty five.	47	40.
3. History & Civics and Geography.	100	35	63	Sixty three.	49	38.
4. Everyday Science, Domestic Science & Public Health OR Vocational subjects OR Arts & Crafts.						
except the following: i. Drawing OR ii. Needle work OR iii. Indian Music OR iv. Sanskrit Music Theory	15	5	5	Five.	24	22.
Practical	85	17 1/2	24 3/4	PLACED IN THE FIRST CL. '53		
† The candidate should secure a minimum of 12 1/2 marks for Practical.						

* Vide note on page 1.

Director of Public Instruction.

Figure 15. Uma Chandrakumar's SSLC book. She had needlework as an optional subject. Image: Arun Kumar, 2023

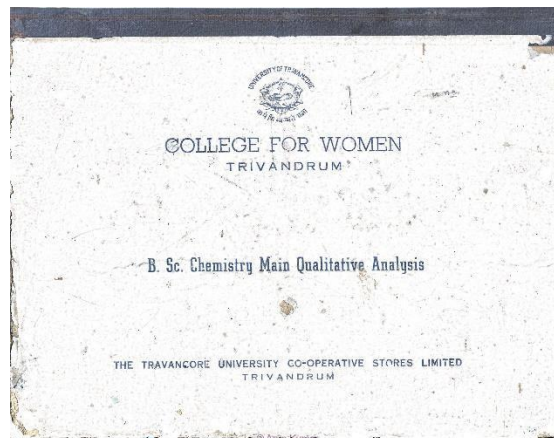


Figure 16. BA chemistry textbook from Women's College, Thiruvananthapuram, in the 1950s. Image: Arun Kumar, 2023.

Lucy Varghese

Lucy Varghese, an 88-year-old with a Diploma in Physical Education from Chennai, chose an educational trajectory that was not typical for someone from the Syrian Catholic community. She did her schooling from St. Teresa's High School until Standard 7. She stayed in the boarding school.



Figure 17. Lucy Varghese studied at St. Teresa's School, run by the Carmelite Missionaries, in the mid-twentieth century. She went on to do a diploma in physical education from the Y.M.C.A.

College of Physical Education in Chennai. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Lucy remembered that one of the subjects that she studied at school was sewing—hand sewing, embroidery, etc. She added:

When we were studying, we did not have any idea that we would choose a profession later. Our parents only wanted us to graduate and get married. They would not have thought of sending us for a job. We studied in good schools, but there was no guidance. We took whatever subjects we liked.¹¹

Later, she stayed with her parents and completed high school at St. Joseph's Girls High School, Changanassery. At St. Joseph's, she realised that she had an aptitude for sports when she came much ahead of the other competitors in a running race. "It is in Changanassery that I started my sports career. I used to go to competitions, and I used to get prizes also." She studied at Women's College, Thiruvananthapuram, for her Intermediate:

In the first year itself, I became the inter-collegiate champion. There was no looking back for me. When they started hockey, I was on the team.

She was the vice-captain. When they won an out-of-state competition, the team was given a party at Thangassery in Kollam because that was the first time that a women's team from Kerala had won a game. Additionally, most of the team members were Anglo-Indians from Thangassery. She added:

Usually, women from our families—of our standing in society—did not allow girls to participate in sports. But my parents were broad-minded. They did not have any issues with me participating in sports.



Figure 18. University College, Thiruvananthapuram, where Lucy Varghese did her BA. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Lucy Varghese did a BA in Economics at University College, Thiruvananthapuram. She said of her sports career in Kerala, "There were many people to encourage us. It was nice." One of her teachers directed her to the Y.M.C.A. College of Physical Education since she thought Lucy would do well in a physical education course as she had an affinity for sports and was part of the hockey team. Later, she joined the Thiruvananthapuram Women's College as a physical education teacher.

After a period of break, she taught at a few colleges in Kozhikode. Lucy retired as Principal of the Physical Education College in Kozhikode, where she worked for 10 years. She said:

I used to teach principles of physical education, administration of physical education, psychology, and rules. The students were also taught administration, organisation, and anatomy at the college. After I became the principal, I did not need to teach. But I used to take 1–2 hours because I enjoyed teaching.

Lucy was the state president of the women's hockey team for several years. When asked about her opinion as an educator on what the current education system needs, she replied that students

¹¹ Interview with Lucy Varghese on 24 June 2023.

should always have a basic degree. They can do a specialisation later.



Figure 19. The open gym in Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, where Lucy Varghese taught. Sports and exercise have been a part of the curriculum since the beginning of modern education. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Mercy Alexander

Mercy Alexander was born in Mariyanad, Thiruvananthapuram. She is a trade union activist, trustee of the Sakhi Centre, and part of other collectives that work for the improvement of the living and working conditions of women from the fisherfolk community.

The fisherfolk in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam are among the most disadvantaged along the coast of Kerala.¹² Even the children from the community were discriminated against. Mercy said:

I stopped studying after Standard 9 because of the extreme discrimination in the school run by nuns in our area. There were divisions A, B, C, and D. A was for children from wealthy families, B was for children from slightly less wealthy families, and we were in division D. We were treated as outcasts. Children used to refuse to sit with us, saying we were smelly. We had two sets of uniforms, one of which had to be

kept at school. In case it rained and our dress got wet, we were supposed to change into the one kept at school. I did not often have this spare and was made to stand outside as punishment. School life was really difficult.¹³

Mariyanad was developed into a village by a Latin Catholic bishop to relocate fisherfolk families from densely populated coastal villages nearby. Italian missionaries were brought to the village to work among the villagers. Women's collectives, creches, fishworker's cooperatives, cooperatives for house construction, and so on were started there under their direction. These were different kinds of activities from what had existed. They also tried to protect the fisherfolk from monopolistic trade practices.



Figure 20. Fisherwomen at Valliyathura, a village near Mariyanadu. Image: Soteyn.pro, 2024

Mercy explained:

Together with other social workers from India, they started a six-month residential training programme for girls who had not passed the 10th Standard exam. There were 12 students per batch. After training, these young women could go back to their villages and start women's samajams, nursery schools, credit unions, and health-related activities... In those days, there

¹² Devika, J. 'Land, Politics, Work and Home-Life at Adimalathura: Towards a Local History'. Working Paper. Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, January 2014. <https://cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/WP455.pdf>.

¹³ In conversation with Mercy Alexander on 18 February 2024.

were around 5,000 women in the fish-selling business in Thiruvananthapuram.

An older girl from my village had gone there, returned, and started a nursery school. She asked me to join the training since I had not passed my 10th. She said, ‘You have an affinity for social work and a talent to speak. Why don’t you join this training programme?’ I was interested. There are eight children in my house—three of us older girls and five boys after that. My father used to go fishing, and my mother used to go to sell the fish. They did not have the time and ability to nurture our other talents. This was the same for other fisherfolk families in coastal villages.

I went for training. The 6-month training was not theory alone. We were given practical experience. After the training, I had the opportunity to work in Mariyanad again. I could teach young girls to make nets, sew, and so on. The Programme for Community Organisation (PCO) was started in Mariyanad in 1978 by bringing in members from various women’s organisations in several villages. The main office was located in the city, providing easy access for women from all the coastal villages. PCO started asking for development in children’s access to education, health, combating alcoholism, and buses for women to transport fish to the city.

Mercy explained how being a female child from a fisherfolk community changed her perception of the world:

I am the third girl in the family. When my mother went back to her house with me, they asked her, ‘Do you have any financial savings here to come back after having given birth to a girl?’ I grew up listening to this. My mother suffered emotional hurt from her family members because I was born a girl. She used to cry about this. Hence, I decided

from childhood that I would create an atmosphere in my community where a girl child is not considered a burden and dowry is not a hurdle. I grew as a feminist, environmentalist, and social worker, and gained the ability to raise my voice against inequality under the guidance of Nalini Nayak and Aleyamma chechi. I did not complete my 10th, but I grew capable of countering the inequalities in my surroundings with their help.

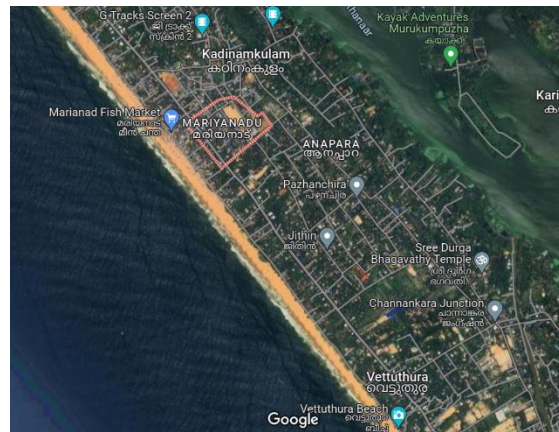


Figure 21. Google image of Mariyanadu. Mercy Alexander grew up in this village. Image: Google Maps, 2024.

Mary V.D.

Mary V.D. is a 64-year-old, who works as a maid at the household of the local landlord in Purapuzha. Her family has traditionally worked on the grounds of the landlord’s family. Originally Pulayas, the family converted to Christianity 2–3 generations ago.

She was sent to an *asan kalari* to learn writing. Everyone in the locality was sent to this *asan*. She remembered sitting down cross-legged and writing in the sand in front of her. They used a palm leaf to write the Malayalam alphabet.

She spoke of her educational journey:

I studied in two schools—in the local government L.P. school till fourth and

then one year in fifth at the English school, St. Sebastian's School. All the people in the locality studied in these two schools then, since the government school only had up to Standard 4. We did not have any bags. We carried the books in our hands. I found English and mathematics difficult. Malayalam wasn't so bad.¹⁴



Figure 22. Mary V.D. at her landlord's house. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Mid-day meals were a programme that was implemented in schools more than 50 years ago. Mary remembered being served upma at school:

We were given upma at school. I used to come here (the house of her landlord) during lunch and have *kanji* daily. Nobody remembers that now. I used to not eat the upma.

She is one of the oldest remaining traditional labourers in the landlord's house. Hence, there was no one to corroborate her story.

She did not continue her education for long:

My sister and one of my brothers went on to college. I was the oldest; so I did not continue my education as I needed to work. I entered work as a housemaid soon after because money was needed at home. In some places, I worked for a year, and in some places, I worked for 5–6 months. Here, I have stayed on for a long time (close to 20 years or more). I have only worked at places near here.

I wasn't really sad about stopping school. I went because that was what everyone else was doing. I liked school. But I did not have friends at school.



Figure 23. Mary coming out of the storage room located at the entrance hall within the landlord's house. A member of the landlord family remembered that she was not allowed inside the house by the other servants in the past because of her caste. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

When asked if her parents had gone to school and if she thought that going to school had helped her, she replied:

I do not think my parents have gone to school. I don't think schooling has particularly helped me. Of course, I did learn to read; that was useful. Most of the people in my locality who went to school did not benefit much from schooling. They are working in Kudumbasree now (a local self-governing group for poverty eradication and women's empowerment instituted by the government of Kerala).

Sidra Ali Palazhi

Sidra Ali passed her MA (Sociology) from Delhi University in 2022. She is a lecturer at the Nasra College of Arts and Science, Malappuram and the NAAC Coordinator

¹⁴ Interview with Mary V.D. on 17 January 2024.

there. Unlike the other Malayali women discussed in this article, Sidra did her schooling in Saudi Arabia. She moved to India after her 12th and did her entire university education in Delhi.

Schooling in Saudi Arabia was different from what it was in Kerala in the 2000s.

All schools in Saudi only work till 1:45 or 2:00 PM. There's a rule that boys' and girls' schools should be separate. From the third standard onwards, boys and girls will be in separate schools. We had separate buildings for boys and girls in our school in Jeddah. Our bus service would start at 7:15 and go on till 1:45. The boys' section would start at 9:30 and end at 3:00. So my brother went to school at a different time.¹⁵



Figure 24. Sidra Ali, extreme left, with friends at school in the mid-2010s. Image: Sidra Ali, 2024

Moreover, she felt that though they had more opportunities to grow as individuals in the gender-segregated school, certain things were difficult in a girls' school.

Sometimes there were restrictions in school that even the Saudi government did not impose. For example, all schools used to take their students on field trips—to the nearest amusement park or hill station. These trips would take place every three years or so. Our school was very reluctant about sending students on field trips.

Especially in the 12th Standard. The boys could go on trips, but the girls had to beg; they had to write thousands of letters. And then finally we would get like a one-day camp or something.

Sidra mentioned how students are subtly pushed towards the science stream in the Indian schools in Saudi Arabia.

In the Gulf, people are there to have a career and make money, so the teachers also pushed the students towards a career that would make money.

The humanities teachers did not have any place to guide the students towards, because they were sure that the humanities stream wouldn't make enough money... Most of the Malayali teachers were in the science stream. I don't know why. So most of our family friends would be Malayali science teachers or the people we would meet outside the school would be Malayali teachers. Their students were guided onto science streams based on their marks; only students with high marks entered the science stream. Everyone else's move to the humanities and arts stream. So the Humanities was belittled.

There is very little awareness among the Non-Resident Indians (NRI) about the options for students not taking up an engineering or medicine course. Sidra attended an orientation course and she says that the NRI students who wanted to opt out of the science stream were generally directed to educational institutions outside Kerala.

There were no issues with sending me to Delhi because my elder brother and sister studied outside of Kerala. Also, we were not aware of the admission process in Kerala. Other than

¹⁵ Interview with Sidra Ali Palazhi on 17 March 2024.

Engineering and NEET, the NRIs are not very aware of other courses and humanities. So, they did not even know where to send me and what to do. My mom did her pre-degree at MES College. She knew they had an MA and BA in History, and that Farooq College also had something. Those were my first two options. However, I did not know that there was this Calicut University option or autonomous colleges. I did not even think about asking my cousins in Kerala. And the Orientation I got in Jeddah was to go to IIT Chennai or other such places.

word. I read this article and it said you can become a social scientist. I took a cut out of the article and pasted it into my journal. I still have it.

In many families in Malappuram, where Sidra hails from, the women are more educated than the men. In her family, her father has studied only till the 9th, while her mother has a degree in Economics. Her father used to run a grocery store in Saudi Arabia and her mother used to teach in the Madrasa there. When asked if this causes issues in marriages, Sidra described:

In Malappuram, and Malabar in general, women are more formally educated than men. Men usually try to settle down earlier. Women usually continue their studies even after marriage. There would be issues; in the case of my cousins, there were issues. Most of my cousins got married after the 12th. So, these aspects are discussed beforehand. It will be like an agreement that they will be allowed to continue their education. The educated women in my generation and the older generation, like a majority of the women from my mother's generation, are working—there are teachers, doctors, and engineers. Some are in government service. Some had done a Teacher Training Course after 10th and gotten into government service. The husbands usually engage in business or are based in the Gulf.



Figure 25. Advertisement of TISS that influenced Sidra. Image: Sidra Ali, 2024

So how did she choose sociology when the push was towards the science stream?

My sister and I used to read these supplements from Manorama. There was this article that said, 'Do you want to be a social butterfly? Then join TISS.'¹⁶ Somebody who had studied at TISS wrote this. I was like, wow, what's a social butterfly? What a wonderful

In the Gulf, most of the Madrasa teachers are women. This is because, according to Sidra, the men go there looking for work and later bring in their families. So, the men are already employed and the women take up the cause of education.

While Sidra is a teacher by training, she has a side hustle—she is an illustrator. She used to work for the Dalit Art Archive. She got

¹⁶ Tata Institute of Social Sciences

into illustration because she wanted pocket money in college. She used to go for a lot of competitions, but had never won any prize, "I did not take it very seriously." However, her artwork is now exhibited in a few locations.

Sidra studied in a school that had children from various ethnic backgrounds - Indian, Saudans (mixed Indian and Saudi Arabian heritage), Yemenis, Afghans, and so on. When asked what she would like to see changed in the education system she passed through, Sidra said, "I really wish that teachers had better training in dealing with children from different cultural backgrounds. They understand the financial

aspect of it, but not the cultural differences."

Conclusion

Women's educational narratives in this article chronicle the challenges women faced in the last century, their journey of self-discovery, and how many of them broke stereotypes about women. Further, they provide us with the historical context of their lives from the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century. These narratives show us the intersectionality of gender, community, and caste in Kerala.

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