Malayali Women's Magazines in the Colonial Period

JANAL Team and Teena Antony

Summary - *This overview of a century of magazines for women in colonial Kerala, reveal a generation of Malayali women emerging from entrenched patriarchy and caste–class nexus, and a politics within their seemingly apolitical presence.*

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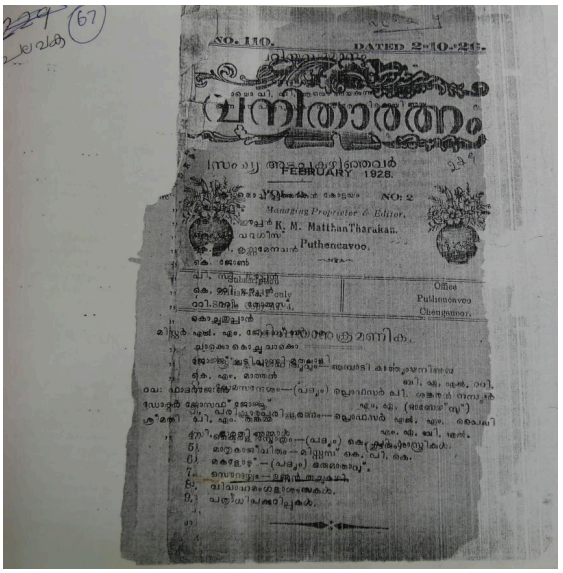
"There is a general feeling that women's writing from the period was backward. But the very fact that they were writing is saying something about them."

- Haneena P.A.

Until recently, history meant political history. Histories of communities and castes have received some amount of interest from scholars. Women's history in Kerala is an emerging area. There are multiple histories and multiple ways to recover women's histories. And one of the ways to do this is through a reading of women's magazines. Magazines and periodicals are often seen as ephemeral objects without substance. However, they capture the history of the present—what mattered to people, what were the raging issues of the times, what were considered fashionable, and so on. This article recreates the Malayali women's literary world through the medium of women's magazines published in the colonial period to understand women's cultural and social worlds.

The early 20th century is not known for strong women's movements in India or Kerala. It is mostly seen as the period leading up to Indian Independence, political movements, and community movements, especially in Kerala. Nevertheless, there is a small subset of recent women's scholarship that argues that women's writings from colonial Kerala i.e., Travancore, Cochin, Malabar, and parts of South Canara, have feminist leanings.[1] These writings from the colonial period debated significant issues related to women that catalysed women's education, health, and access to civil society. Mainstream media or academic circles do not speak enough about these writings or the women who wrote them.

Dr. Roopa Philip, teacher at Jyothi Nivas College, Bengaluru, who has worked on the colonial women's magazines states, "The editorials of these early women's magazines state their intention—to encourage women to write and contribute to the public fields. While their origins lie in the woman's question and the desire to 'reform' women, increasingly we find evidence of writings exhibiting women's views, especially since many of the early feminists of the region contributed features and articles. There are articles that refute and challenge the reformist and traditionalist views on the woman's question in these magazines."[2] Here, the women's question refers to the emergence of the question of women's status, rights, and equality/inequality during the nationalist movement and even earlier. It was a political question that was seen as important in the vision of a free India.[3]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വനിതാരത്നം.

FEBRUARY 1928.

NO: 2

Managing Proprietor & Editor.

K. M. MatthanTharakan.

Puthencavoo.

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Figure 1. The front page of the women's magazine *Vanitharathnam* (1928) at Appan Thampuran Library, Thrissur. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

[1] Devika, J. *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-Forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007.
Philip, Roopa. 'The Woman's Question: Negotiating Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Women's Magazines in Malayalam.' *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 7, no. 1 (January 2022).

[2] Interview with Dr. Roopa Philip on 9 January 2024.

[3] Mazumdar, Vina. 'Emergence of the Women's Question in India and the Role of Women's Studies'. Working Paper. Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1985. https://www.cwds.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Emergence-Womens-Question.pdf.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Malayalam women's magazines, along with their counterparts in other Indian languages, served as platforms for women writers and readers to voice their opinions and engage in discussions related to their lives. Women's magazines in Malayalam underwent distinct phases of transformation, mirroring the evolution seen in the rest of India.[4] The first phase, spanning from the 1890s to the First World War, marked their emergence, where the focus was on moulding women into conventional domestic roles. In the second phase, from the 1920s to the 1940s, a radical shift occurred, with a focus on reforming society that reflected broader social and cultural changes. Post-1920s, the content shifted towards social, political, and religious issues such as dowry, child marriage, home rule, marriage legislation, birth control, and more in most magazines. Notably, the dominant voices in these magazines adopted radical stances on these issues.

The Magazines

The first women's journal, *Kerali Sugunabodhini*, was launched in Thiruvananthapuram in 1884.[5] G. Priyadarshanan, the noted media historian and former teacher said of *Kerali Sugunabodhini*, "No woman has written in it. Scholars like M.C. Narayanapilla had written for the magazine. Even if there were women's names, it would have been the pseudonym for a male writer. The magazine ran for around one year initially."[6]

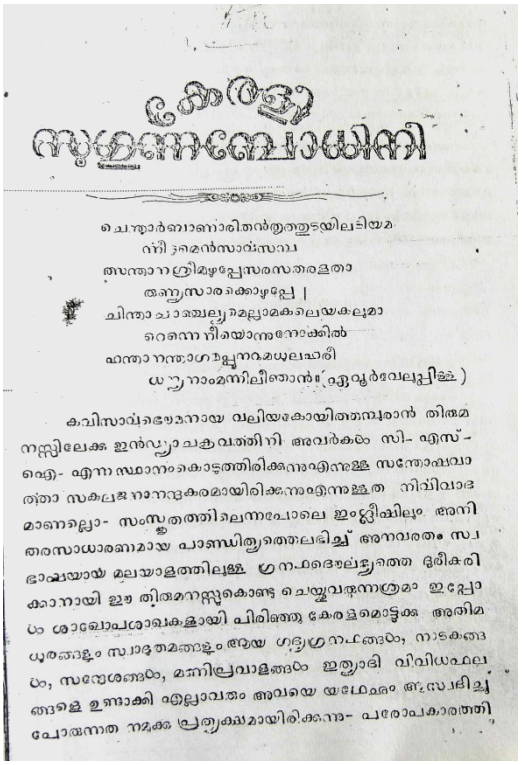


Figure 2. Front page of an issue of *Kerali Sugunabodhini*. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

Right from the outset, the popular magazines from the colonial era, especially those tailored for women, were deeply concerned with the education of Malayali women. Women's education and status were perceived as being connected to the status of the state and community, especially since there were debates in other locations about the backwardness of Indian women in general. "It is clear from the various issues of *Mahila* (Muslim Mahila) that the magazine is trying to eradicate prejudices and inequities rooted in Keralite women's world, especially Muslim women's world (p.97)," wrote a reader in *Muslim Mahila*.[7]

Numerous periodicals were specifically dedicated to women in Malayalam-speaking regions. Some of these publications included *Sharada*

[4] Orsini, Francesca. 'Domesticity and Beyond: Hindi Women's Journals in the Early Twentieth'. *South Asia Research* 19, no. 2 (1999): 137–60.

[5] The first journals or newspapers to be printed in Malayalam in Kerala were *Rajyasamacharam* and *Paschimodayam*, both by Herman Gundert, in 1847. The first magazine to be published was *Jnananikshepam* by the CMS Press in 1848. From Kerala Media Academy. 'History of Media in Kerala', 2015.

[6] Interview with G. Priyadarshanan on 18 September 2023.

[7] Satyanweshi. 'Letter to the Editor of Muslim Mahila'. *Muslim Mahila*, 1924.

(1904), *Bharathi* (1904),[8] *Lakshmibai* (1905), *Maryrani* (1913), *Bhashasharada* (1915), *Sumangala* (1916), *Mahilaratnam* (1916), *(Christava) Mahilamani* (1920), *Sanghamithra* (1920), *Mahila* (1921), *Sevini* (1924), *Sahodari* (1925), *Muslim Mahila* (1926), *Vanithakusumam* (1927), *Mahilamandiram* (1927), *Vanitharatnam* (1928) *Shrimathi* (1929-30), *Malayalamasika* (1929), *Sthree* (1933), *Vanitharamam* (1942), and *Vanithamithram* (1944).[9]

Sharada was edited by three women: T.C. Kalyani Amma, T. Ammukutty Amma, and B. Kalyani Amma. It ran until 1910, with a hiatus in the middle. A few years later, in 1913, T.K. Kalyanikutty Amma launched another magazine called *Sharada*, which lasted for about a decade.

G.Priyadarshanan mentioned, "*Lakshmibai* was started in Thrissur when the wife of Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran's wife passed away. It ran for 31 years (with breaks). It had several articles related to women and also on literature and poems. The well-known pandits of the time used to write in it, including Kerala Varma." These magazines are documented in various archives and are referenced in administrative reports from Malayalam-speaking regions.

During this period, readership was limited for all periodicals compared to the present. The highest recorded subscription for a women's magazine at the time was 2,000 for *Vanithakusumam*, which commenced from Kottayam in 1927. Priyadarsanan speaking about *Vanithakusumam* mentioned, "*Vanithakusumam* had women writers... It became a model for all the magazines that followed. This is a truth I realised in the course of my work and research. It had a clear-cut aim and wanted to achieve certain things... *Vanithakusumam* was published from Kottayam. It was in print for two and a half years."

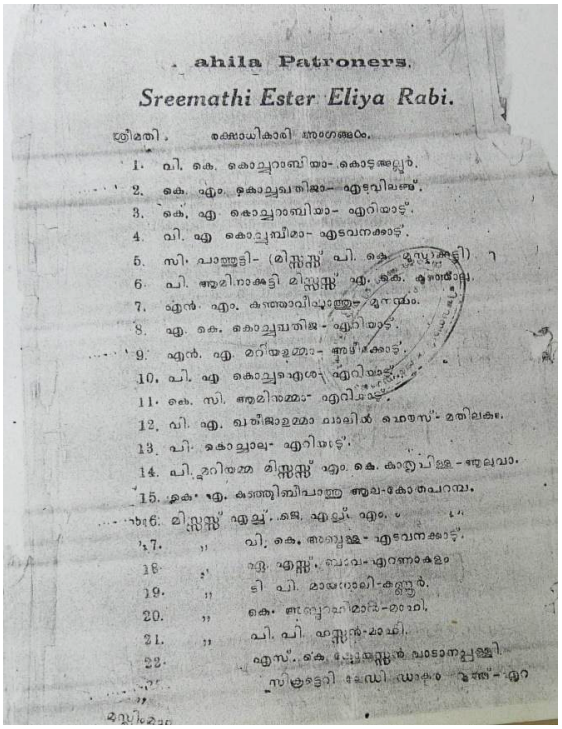
Christhava Mahilamani published from Thiruvalla followed with 1,500 subscribers, while *Lakshmibai* in Thrissur had 1,300 readers.[10] *Mahila*, one of the longest-running women's magazines run by women, was established in 1921 and continued for two decades. Government schools began subscribing to it in 1924, with official records indicating 500 subscribers. These numbers may seem modest by today's standards, but they reflect the historical context of women's readership.

In terms of subscription numbers, periodicals associated with Christian communities, including women's magazines, boasted larger readerships. This can be attributed to the organised structure within these communities, facilitating easier distribution of the periodicals. While Hindu castes started forming organised communities in the early 20th century, various Christian sects had already established community structures and connections through their churches and leaders. Moreover, they were among the first to access modern printing technology. As communities became formal structures, they began the publication of periodicals aimed at the betterment and empowerment of their members. These magazines played a significant role in women's education and empowerment, despite their limited circulation.

[8] Kumar K., Swapna, and Sibi Natuvilakkandy. 'Making Space for Women: Role of Early Malayalam Magazines and Newspapers in Kerala'. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/ZFQXS.

[9] Antony, Teena. 'Women's History: An Overview of Early Malayalam Periodicals for Women'. *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 5, no. 2 (31 July 2020).

[10] Antony, Teena. 'An Introduction to the Early Malayalam Women's Magazines'. *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 7, no. 1 (January 2022).



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Sreemathi Ester Eliya Rabi.

Figure 3. List of patrons on the back page of *Muslim Mahila* (1927). Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

The Writers

Prominent novelists, critics, and poets often contributed to both women's and general magazines in colonial Kerala. Many of the male contributors to these magazines are still well-known in the current era, while the women contributors have largely been forgotten. Haneena P.A., researcher and curator, mentioned that in her search for Muslim women's magazines she came across people who told her that the articles were probably not written by the women, but by their spouses or brothers. She asks, "Can one not extend the same argument to the male writers also? It may have been written by other men."[11]

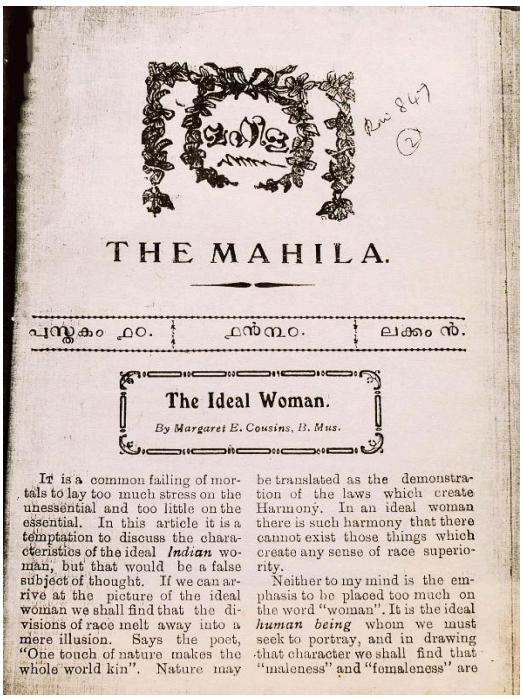
Figure 4. Haneena P.A. is a researcher and curator currently digitising Muslim women's magazines. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

The women writers came from diverse backgrounds. Notable figures from this era, such as K. Chinnamma (1882-1930), B. Kalyani Amma (1884-1959), Mary Poonen Lukose (1886-1976), Muthukulam Parvathi Amma (1904-1971), Anna Chandy (1905-1996), Haleema Beevi (1918-2000), and K. Kalyanikutty Amma (1920-1996) were writers and activists simultaneously holding various jobs—government jobs, school inspectors, professors, principals, doctors, lawyers, and legislators. There are no documented figures for the precise count of female contributors to the numerous women's magazines in colonial Kerala. Nevertheless, approximate estimations suggest that this number exceeded 220.[12] It should be remembered that this number is spread over more than half a decade.

The magazines featured contributions from other parts of India. Margaret E. Cousins, a contributor to *Mahila* was an Irish-Indian educationist and suffragist. Occasionally, articles in English and Tamil were published. The magazines also included excerpts from newspapers and magazines in other languages.

[11] In conversation with Haneena P.A. on 7 November 2023.

[12] Priyadarshanan, G. *Masikapatanangal*. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative Ltd., 1974.



THE MAHILA.

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The Ideal Woman.

By Margaret E. Cousins, B. Mus.

It is a common failing of mortals to lay too much stress on the unessential and too little on the essential. In this article it is a temptation to discuss the characteristics of the ideal *Indian* woman, but that would be a false subject of thought. If we can arrive at the picture of the ideal woman we shall find that the divisions of race melt away into a mere illusion. Says the poet, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin". Nature may be translated as the demonstration of the laws which create Harmony. In an ideal woman there is such harmony that there cannot exist those things which create any sense of race superiority.

Neither to my mind is the emphasis to be placed too much on the word "woman". It is the ideal *human being* whom we must seek to portray, and in drawing that character we shall find that "maleness" and "femaleness" are

Figure 5. English article written by Margaret E. Cousins of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) published in *Mahila* 10(9) in 1930. Image: JANAL ARCHIVES

The writers and editors of the magazines were mostly first-generation modern-educated women. Even when the women were not formally educated in modern schools, they had the means, connections, and skills to write, edit, or manage these magazines. Both male and female writers of that era were actively engaged in contributing to multiple magazines, held editorial positions, and played significant roles in the public domain. Despite their extensive contributions, these women and their writings have not been acknowledged or included in the canon of Malayalam literature.

The male contributors included renowned poets, novelists, and essayists of their time, such as Ulloor S. Parameshwara Iyer, Kumaran Asan, Vallathol K. Narayanamenon, and E.V. Krishnapilla.

Networks and Connections

The magazines were interconnected and not isolated entities. The writers and publishers were related or knew each other. Occasionally, articles published in one magazine would elicit critical responses that found their way into concurrent publications.[13] Periodicals with similar or even the same name were published from different locations at various times. For instance, in the case of *Sharada*, when one edition ceased, another publication emerged with the same name. Similarly, *Vanitha* was a popular name for many magazines started by various people in 1944, 1959, and 1975. Some magazines carried the term *Vanitha* with another word, like *Vanithakusumam* or *Adhunika Vanitha* started by Haleema Beevi. Prior to Haleema Beevi launching *Bharatha Chandrika* (a general magazine) in 1944, a weekly magazine with the same title was being printed in Kollam, owned by M.K. Abdulrahiman Kutty.

The Readers

Early Malayalam periodicals targeted a specific audience, those with the means to subscribe to them. The periodicals cost ₹1 to ₹4 annually. They were accessible through post, educational institutions, reading rooms, or libraries. While the magazines were ostensibly for all women, some were tailored for particular communities, later expanding their reader base. They did not overtly emphasise regional affiliations, yet issues touched upon region-specific matters.

For instance, the Muslim community in Kerala started several women's magazines. Haleema Beevi started *Muslim Vanitha* in 1938, *Vanitha* in 1944 and *Adhunika Vanitha* in 1970. The periodicals did not run for very long. The *Muslim Vanitha* was aimed at educating Muslim women. Anecdotally, researcher and curator, Haneena P.A. recounted her experiences of trying to locate the only known copies of the *Muslim Vanitha* lost in the Ulloor Smaraka library. "The library has been closed for 10 years. The person in charge finally opened the library for my

[13] Antony, 2022.

use after three months of request. I was given just three hours in this huge library. Everything was jumbled up, the call numbers of the books before and after this were on the shelf, but this particular magazine was missing... Trying to locate copies of these magazines is the most difficult aspect of the research."

The primary goal of these periodicals was women's education and upliftment, with entertainment serving as a secondary purpose. Education here encompassed a broader concept, focusing on enriching women's worldviews, introducing them to national and global events, discussing women-centric issues in accessible language, and fostering literacy skills like reading and writing. These periodicals played a crucial role in empowering women, disseminating knowledge, and promoting awareness, contributing to broader societal transformation and education of women.

The Social Landscape

In early 20th-century Kerala, the socio-cultural landscape was vibrant with opportunities and change. Religious and caste groups were actively working to uplift their communities, while missionary efforts introduced Western knowledge. Power dynamics in government structures were shifting, and new ideas about rituals, faith, and religion were taking hold. Economic production diversified in terms of labour, technology, and ethics. Printing gained momentum across India, and civil society organisations like reading clubs, debating societies, and women's associations emerged.

However, this promising environment for printing establishments was counterbalanced by colonial and native governments closely monitoring the press. Administration reports meticulously documented the content of newspapers and periodicals. For instance, the Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency (1914-15) noted the application of the Indian Press Act in several cases. This scrutiny led women's magazines to exercise caution in their content. While these magazines covered a range of subjects, including current affairs, they often presented their content in a mild, non-confrontational manner. The emphasis was on providing literary and informative material.

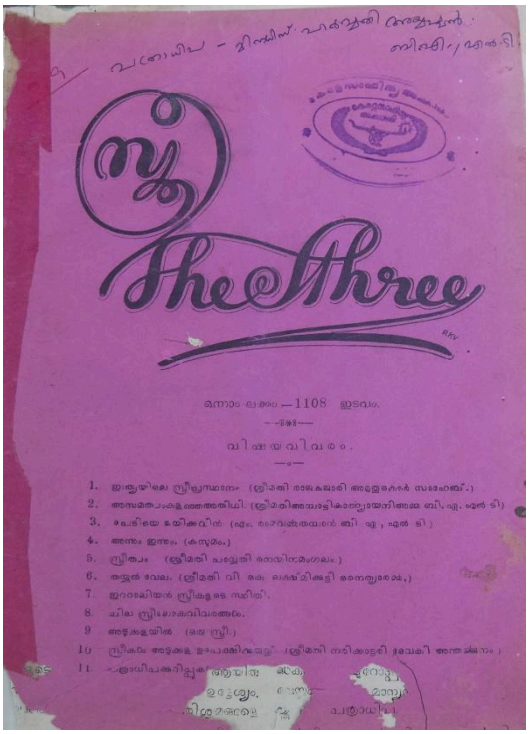

Figure 6. The cover page of *Sthree* (1933). The editorial thanked the government for permission to start and stated that the magazine will not deal with communal and political matters. Image: JANAL ARCHIVES

Themes and Topics

Robin Jeffrey distinguishes three stages in the evolution of print and newspapers in Kerala: the rare stage, existing until the 1870s, characterised by limited and exclusive printing presses; the scarce stage, where print had influence and potential to disrupt political authority; and a further stage, the mass media stage that followed the foundational phase.[14] These phases can be extended to periodicals and women's magazines.

[14] Jeffrey, Robin. 'Testing Concepts about Print, Newspapers, and Politics: Kerala, India, 1800-2009'. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 2 (2009): 465–89.

The women's magazines in colonial Kerala predominantly fit into the category of scarce media. Editors and writers used this innovative platform to engage in discussions, debates, and the dissemination of information they believed was relevant to women. The magazines covered a wide range of topics including women's education, marriage, childcare, customs and rituals, household management, chastity, fashion, and more. They featured short biographies of notable women, as well as essays on health, contraception, medicines, recipes, and scientific topics. These magazines explored art, music, history, theology, astrology, and economics.

As the primary objective was women's education and literacy, the magazines included essays on current affairs, short stories, serialised novels, poetry, tales from the Puranas and mythology, and literary critique. Furthermore, the periodicals reported on meetings held by women's groups from different parts of the world.

Figure 7. *Vanithakusumam* (1927) carried a photograph of Miss. Draupadi Amma and Miss. T.E. George who attended the AIWC in Pune in 1927, Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

Ideas and Concepts

Modern Education

Women's magazines in Malayalam from the early 20th century paint a distinct picture of women and education, one that deviates from the prevalent narratives found in development discussions and acclamatory accounts of the high literary and educational status of women in Kerala. During this period, women writers faced the challenge of articulating and demonstrating that modern education and schooling would not lead them astray but rather provide them with upward social mobility. They also emphasised that education was essential for managing their families and preparing for new professions such as teaching, nursing, and medicine, while navigating gender-power dynamics within the family and society.

By the 1920s, the idea that women needed education had gained widespread acceptance, and by the 1930s, women began to view education as a means of acquiring the skills necessary to enter new professions and gain useful expertise. They ventured into government and private service roles, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, advocates, and school inspectors, which had previously been reserved for men. Some women were seen as moving away from traditional domestic roles, with some even choosing to remain unmarried. This shift prompted a call for change; some believed that the syllabus needed to address this evolving landscape.

Muslim Mahila 2 (1) from 1927 carried an article on the need for education for Muslim women so that they could run the household better, help their husbands, teach their children, and improve their intellect. The percentage of Muslim women with modern education was less than that of many other communities during this period and, consequently, in this magazine meant for women from the community, the authors were trying to

create a need for adopting modern education.

As a result, there were voices advocating for separate schools for girls. Many writers believed that inherent differences between boys and girls warranted distinct educational approaches. Some thought these differences could be addressed by incorporating subjects like music, arts, and painting into girls' education. However, not everyone supported these changes, and some viewed subjects like music and painting as unnecessary. Given that aspects of culture were contentious, music, a cultural marker, was a frequently discussed topic. Music was also part of the curriculum in many schools and was considered a valuable skill for women, enabling them to earn a living through music teaching. However, not all writers supported music as part of women's education, and not all forms of music were deemed suitable. It is evident from the writings that disapproval was not limited to British or Western influences but also extended to cultural practices and art forms from other parts of India, in varying degrees.

Sthreeswathandryam: Women's Freedom

Advocates of women's education faced the challenge of assuring that education would not lead women astray or result in the misuse of *sthreeswathandryam*, a term originating from Hindu texts. *Swathandryam* initially meant taking responsibility for one's actions and later acquired the meaning of independence. An article on sthreeswathandryam in *Bashasharada* (1917) carried a picture of a Hindu Goddess in the beginning, seemingly to convey scriptural support for women's freedom. The first paragraph mentions that the freedom that women are asking for is not the Western kind.

The concept of *sthreeswathandryam* sought to free women from traditional roles within the family. Women's movements worldwide, particularly after World War I, resonated in Malayalam-speaking regions, with some radical thinkers hoping for the same freedom for Malayali women as experienced by Western women.

Vanithakusumam was one of the most progressive women's magazines to have been published during colonial times. It argued for women's freedom and education. It was also the first magazine to have pictures from around the world. The magazine had the highest subscription rates for a Malayalam women's magazine.

Critics, however, feared that excessive individualism stemming from education could lead to selfishness and egoism, undermining community and caste identities. They believed education might prompt women to demand independence in various aspects of their lives, which could be problematic. *Swathandryam* gained through education was associated with financial security and the absence of authority figures but also entailed responsibilities towards the family and society. This concept was multifaceted and not easily defined, but it was seen as potentially problematic and detractors did not want women to be swayed by the Western kind of independence.

Clothing and Styles

Another significant aspect of women's lives closely tied to modern education was their dressing styles. In 19th-century Kerala, different castes and religious groups were distinguished by distinct clothing styles that had to be strictly adhered to. This differentiation continued into the 20th century. Clothing was increasingly associated with attributes such as civilisation, modesty, decency, and culture.

Magazine writers discussed changes in women's clothing and the use of jewellery. It was not Western styles alone that raised concerns; Parsi, Tamil, and Bengali clothing styles were criticised as imitative. While simplicity and plainness

in dress were the norm for most Malayali women, those gaining access to new schools and jobs started adopting the Brahmo/Parsi sari, which was more colourful. Changes in dressing styles were criticised as being expensive and overly imitative of the West and other Indian groups. Supporters of the new dress reform, especially writers, had to demonstrate that adopting the new dress/sari did not signify dissolution or immorality. They framed their arguments in terms of utility, custom, and propriety. Clothing and jewellery were also linked to the concept of "*sthreeswathandryam*," which, to critics, represented the freedom and ability of educated women to embrace the dressing styles of other communities, thereby challenging certain aspects of caste.

Role Models

An intriguing aspect is the absence of female Malayali role models in the magazines of that era. The few Malayali women mentioned include Queen Rani Lakshmibai and Manorama Thampurati. One potential reason for this gap is that historical figures, like Unniarcha, were known for their involvement in combat. The other female role models introduced in the magazines were typically from a distant Indian past, with few exceptions like Sarojini Naidu, and a handful of English women such as Florence Nightingale.

Due to the strict control over the printing press by native governments and British authority in Malabar, individuals with a history of resistance against the British were not, in general, portrayed as role models in the magazines. Moreover, softer qualities such as compassion, generosity, chastity, kindness, and spirituality were valued. Figures like Unniarcha did not align with these softer attributes seen as feminine, natural, and essential for the then-modern Malayali woman. The exclusion of certain types of women from the list of model women in the magazines played a role in indirectly shaping the ideal Malayali woman.

Magazine writers frequently drew comparisons between Malayali women and their Western counterparts. Descriptions of women from various Western countries were featured, along with articles on women from Asian countries like Japan and Burma. Japan and the West served as common points of reference for the writers, with Japanese women often presented as positive role models to emulate. Thus, the women readers of that era were not only familiar with Western women but also had a broader worldview through the magazines.

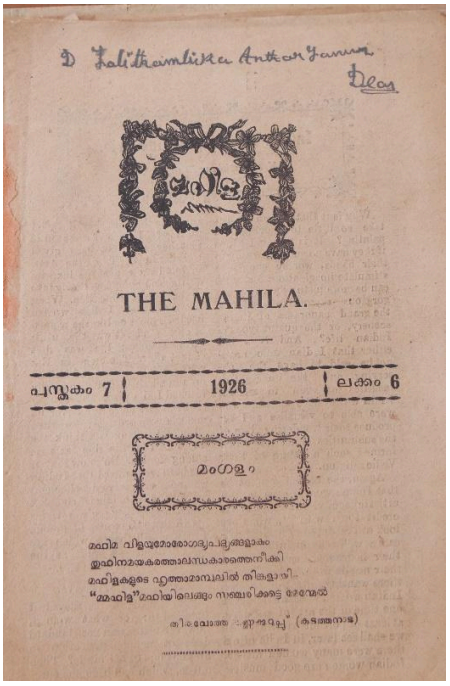
THE MAHILA.

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Figure 8. *The Mahila* was in print for 20 years. It carried articles on women from other nations. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

That said, certain writers and magazines did go against the grain and had laudatory articles on women that did not fit the feminine mould.

Sthreethwam and *Sthreedharmam:* Femininity and Womanly Duties

Two of the most frequently discussed concepts in early 20th-century articles concerning women were *sthreedharmam*

and *sthreethwam*. But what exactly was *sthreedharmam*? The word is derived from the Sanskrit term "dharma". According to linguists, it encompasses various meanings such as justice, custom, behaviour, duties, piety, virtue, and rituals sanctioned by the Vedas. Writers included a wide range of duties, activities, and qualities under this overarching term: responsibilities towards one's family members and home. It implied the so-called feminine qualities, as well as knowledge of money management, conversational skills, cooking, and gardening. Additionally, it encapsulated one's *sthreethwam*, or state of being a woman.

Sthreedharmam was action-oriented and not an innate quality, while s*threethwam* had more to do with qualities considered inherent in women, such as love, patience, kindness, spirituality, compassion, chastity, and humility. *Sthreethwam* was believed to be something that could not be taught but could be enhanced and brought out through the right kind of education, according to the writers. In this context, it implied that women could engage in work alongside men while still preserving their femininity.

However, it did provide them the option of giving up domestic responsibilities. There was a clear demarcation between women's and men's spheres, duties, and capabilities in the majority of the articles. Women's responsibilities were closely tied to activities in and around the home. In many instances, *sthreedharmam* took precedence over women's aspirations and rights, and transgressing the prescribed gender roles would often provoke the disapproval of orthodox writers.

Nationalism

The magazine articles of the time conveyed a sense of belonging to the broader Indian nation. A new dimension of *sthreedharmam* emerged, emphasising women's role in nation-building. Women were expected to contribute by raising their children in a manner that would shape them into ideal citizens. They were also encouraged to assist the nation in various small ways, such as establishing small-scale home-based industries like weaving or teaching less fortunate women in rural areas. These initiatives allowed women to remain close to home. The influence of the nationalist movement, particularly that of Gandhi, is evident in writings from the 1920s.

Figure 9. The image of nationalist leader K. Karthyaniamma. leader in the passive resistance movement, *Shrimathi Special Edition* (1935). Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

Parishkaram: Change, Progress, or Reform

Parishkaram is intricately tied to the ideal Malayali woman, as portrayed in magazine articles. It encompasses diverse meanings, including change, development, progress, reform, sophistication, and culture, with *adhunikatha* or modernity representing one form of *parishkaram*. For instance, in 1905, an article on women's education hailed it as an innovative change. In the Malayalam-speaking regions, while

addressing perceived changes, there was an endeavour to forge a uniform notion of "tradition." Writers and intellectuals recognised the intricacies inherent in this task and drew inspiration from various sources like Puranas, Mahabharata, Vedas, and historical figures to construct tradition. Those with English education were criticised for imitating English manners, dress, and lifestyle, leading *parishkaram* to be associated with change through imitation.

The introduction of the British education system brought about transformations in Malayali society, affecting customs, caste, community, family, lifestyles, food habits, clothing, and kinship. This led to Malayali women emerging or being given the position of guardians of tradition (like it is in most parts of the world). *Parishkaram* was divided into intellectual, physical, and moral dimensions, with a focus on women's intellectual growth and spiritual morality as they were the 'custodians' of Indian culture. There was a sense of competition between women and men for the same resources, jobs, and positions within society. Modern education and *parishkaram* were often held accountable for this competition, especially when linked to Western culture. Consequently, a consensus emerged that certain professions, like teaching and the medical field, were more suitable for women, subtly steering them towards distinct career paths.

Discipline, Hygiene, and Science

The ideal image of the Malayali woman, as depicted in magazines, was closely associated with her sexuality, marital status, and family responsibilities. Dating back to 1897, Malayalam magazines advocated for women's education to equip them with knowledge about health, nutrition, childcare, and other related matters. In the 1920s, the term "Home Science" emerged, implying that women and households could be modernised using natural scientific principles. However, by emphasising that women needed to study these subjects to be better mothers, wives, and hostesses, Home Science deconstructed the traditional link between women and domesticity.

The publication of Katherine Mayo's "Mother India" in 1927 heightened Indian awareness of scientific and hygienic medical practices, leading to critical references in Malayalam magazines. Child and maternal health became significant public concerns, particularly regarding population growth, women's control over their bodies, and family planning. Discussions on contraception and birth control arose as early as 1929.

Disciplining the body and mind of young girls and women was crucial in their reshaping. Education was the means to train the mind and instil good habits. This era also witnessed an increase in female suicides, attributed to changing educational statuses and women's evolving aspirations. Radical writers like Amma and Reddy highlighted the growing disparity between women's expectations and their reality, as education made them more aware of marital injustices.

The early 20th-century descriptions of a woman and her duties often lacked a space for her as an independent entity with agency or a sense of self. Malayali women were primarily directed towards fulfilling the needs of their families and the nation. The concept of self-development, prevalent in Western narratives of womanhood, which led to women's protests for temperance, wage parity, and suffrage, was viewed with fear and suspicion because it was seen as disruptive to traditional roles and family structures. The matrilineal Hindu writers of the magazines also grappled with the emergence of new conjugal units, where women and men had moved out of their natal families. The nuclear family, still in its nascent stage, relied heavily on women's energy and time for its smooth

operation, making it challenging for women to assert their self-interest over family needs. Contradictory opinions were expressed by dissident voices within the prevailing image of the ideal Malayali woman. Education was seen as essential for women but it often tethered them more closely to domestic roles and *sthreedharmam*.

Advertisements

In early women's magazines, a limited space was allocated for advertisements. These advertisements covered a wide range of topics, including hair oils, Ayurvedic medicines, treatments for various health concerns such as sexual issues and infertility, contraception, and pregnancy-related complications.

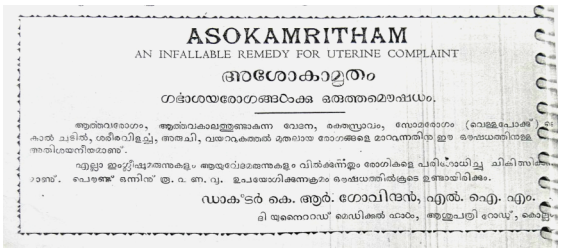
ASOKAMRITHAM
AN INFALLABLE REMEDY FOR UTERINE COMPLAINT
അശോകാമൃതം
ഗർഭാശയരോഗങ്ങൾക്ക ഒരുത്തമൌഷധം.
ഡാക്ടർ കെ. ആർ. ഗോവിന്ദൻ, എൽ. ഐ. എം.
ടി യുണൈറ്റഡ് മെഡിക്കൽ ഹാൾ, ആലുപ്പി റോഡ്, കൊല്ലം

Figure 10. Advertising a remedy for uterine complaints in *Shrimathi Special Edition* (1935) Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

There were also advertisements for clothing shops, battery and dynamo sales, rewinding services, tailoring shops, and related businesses. Furthermore, the magazines featured advertisements of other publications, magazines, and printing presses.

Conclusion

Women's magazines provide valuable insights into the social and cultural changes that occurred in 19th-century and early 20th-century Kerala. These publications reflect subtle shifts in arguments and have references to events, meetings, and conferences, offering a historical perspective not found in conventional history books. They also serve as a means to trace women's history in Kerala, albeit with certain limitations. The well-preserved magazines of this era were primarily created by and for the dominant caste and class groups, thus providing a historical view from that perspective.

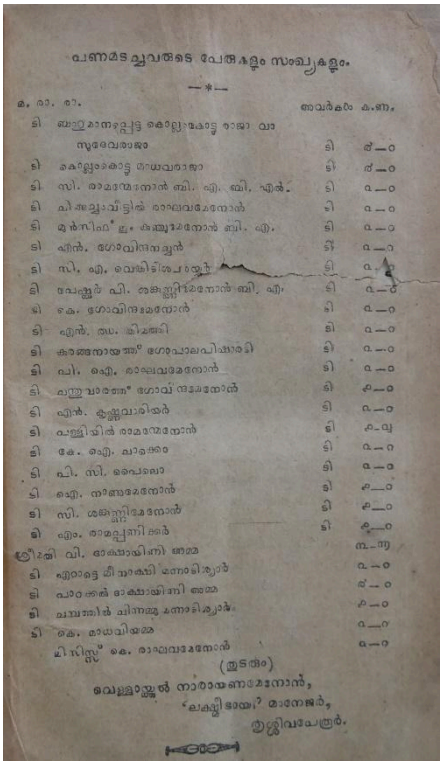
വണമടച്ചവരുടെ പേരുകളും സംഖ്യകളും.
വെള്ളാശ്ശേൽ നാരായണമേനോൻ,
ലക്ഷ്മിഭായി? മാനേജർ,
തൃശിവപേരൂർ.

Figure 11. List of subscribers printed on the last page of *Lakshmibai* 3(1), 1907 shows that most belong to those considered upper caste in those times. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

The magazines portray model women with certain common attributes, including chastity, obedience, education, domestic skills, modesty, altruism, courage, prudence, and self-effacement. These qualities are depicted as inherent in women from various backgrounds, regardless of location, time, class, caste, community, or stage of life. This representation of the ideal Malayali woman becomes increasingly influential over time and establishes itself as the dominant image.

At the outset of the Second World War, there was a newsprint shortage, leading to the cessation of publication of many women's magazines. This period saw a

shift of focus among the politically inclined women editors and writers toward the nationalist movement. The early women's periodicals can be categorised as belonging to the scarce media stage. A subsequent stage, known as the mass media stage, emerged in the 1960s as newspapers began mass production, altering the dynamics of the economy of printing.[15] Profitability became the driving force, displacing earlier objectives of literary, reformative, and developmental content. Consequently, women's magazines shifted their focus to entertainment rather than education. The language and essay form were adapted to the changing times and needs.

In general, the writers and the magazines were progressive thinkers for their age, discussing topics and issues related to women to a depth that one does not normally find at present. They challenged patriarchal norms and expressed their views on social issues. They wrote about topics such as women's education, gender equality, family planning, and health. They also experimented with different genres and forms of literature, such as novels, short stories, essays, and poems.

Figure 12. G. Priyadarshanan, former teacher and media historian. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

Vanithamitram 1 (11–12) published in 1945. carried seven poems, a laudatory piece (*mangalaashamsa*), serialised novel, short story, literary criticism, essay, and a one-act play. A far cry from current women's journals where neither plays nor so many poems are published.

Current mainstream magazines resemble lifestyle publications, while the feminist and reformative elements have formed a separate genre within women's periodicals. These outlets employ internet-based media to cater to different audiences for the most part. Therefore, looking back to the past from the present, colonial women's magazines appear very different from women's magazines in the present. When placed in perspective, within the socio-cultural milieu of the early twentieth century, the ideas espoused by the writers are truly remarkable.

G Priyadarshanan was one of the first to write extensively about the history of periodicals in Kerala. Along with others, he rues the fact that since women's magazines were not considered important, many of them were not preserved. More than 25 women's magazines were published during the various decades before Indian Independence and unfortunately very few of them are available in physical format.

[15] Jeffrey, 2009.

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