



Vocational Higher Secondary Schools in Kerala

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Summary- *A study of two Vocational and Higher Secondary Schools in Kerala at present: St. Ignatius VHSS, Ernakulam and Rahmaniya VHSS for Handicapped, Kozhikode, to track factors that influence the aspirational Malayalis' Higher Education choices.*

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“People think Bio-Maths is the only option. They do not know about these courses. There is a stereotype that only students with less marks would opt for the VHSS courses. That impression should be changed.”

- Krishnindhu, VHSS student

Vocational educational institutions have been in existence in Kerala since the 1980s. Yet, not many people know about these higher secondary institutions that provide vocational training together with general education. I conducted interviews with the present and retired staff at St. Ignatius VHSS, students of St. Ignatius VHSS, a researcher-cum-teacher of a VHSS in Thrissur, and staff and students at Rahmaniya VHSS for Handicapped to understand the vocational educational space at present and why there is a lack of awareness about the course among the general public.



Figure 1. St. Ignatius VHSS, Kanjiramattom. The vocational school began in 1991, while the vernacular school started in 1939. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

I did my initial interviews at St. Ignatius School to understand what the courses are and the educational trajectory of the students who study in Vocational Higher Secondary Schools (VHSS). St. Ignatius School was the first aided vocational school to be started in Kerala in 1991 and is located in Kanjiramattom, Ernakulam district. I did another round of interviews with staff and students at the Rahmaniya

VHSS for Handicapped near Medical College, Kozhikode to get a different perspective from another location. Rahmaniya VHSS was also started in the same year to cater to students with hearing disabilities.

In this article, St. Ignatius VHSS and Rahmaniya VHSS have been taken as examples of the larger space of vocational schools in Kerala. The story of these two schools mirrors the aspiration of the people of the two regions and the transformation of the vocational educational space over the years. The interviews were conducted to understand the changes that the vocational educational space has undergone since its inception.

Background to Vocational Education

Missionaries introduced modern schools in various Malayalam-speaking regions in the early nineteenth century, and skill-based education was an important part of the curriculum.¹ Later, when the various governments in Malayalam-speaking regions took up the responsibility of formal education in the early twentieth century the importance given to skill-based or technical education was carried forward by them.²

Christian missionaries recognised the importance of providing practical education to the people when they initiated various

¹ Huizinga, Henry. *Missionary Education in India*. 2015th ed. Michigan: University of Michigan, 1909. <https://ia801301.us.archive.org/5/items/missionaryeducat00huiz/missionaryeducat00huiz.pdf>.

² For instance, see reports like the Blue Book (1914), the Papworth Committee report (1946), and the Statham Committee Report (1933).

Banerji, A.R. *Blue Book Containing Important Orders and Official Papers Connected with the Progress of Education in the Cochin State During the Past Quinquennium*, Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1914.

Statham, R.M, K. Sivarama Panikkar, and D Jivanayakam. 'Report of the Travancore Education Reforms Committee'. Trivandrum, 1933. <https://ia902904.us.archive.org/23/items/pli.kerala.rare.30923/pli.kerala.rare.30923.pdf>

Papworth, H.C. et al. 'Report of the Travancore Education Reorganisation Committee'. Trivandrum: Department of Education, 1946.

religious activities. They established schools and workshops to teach skills like carpentry, blacksmithing, and printing to equip the local population with employable skills. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Basel Evangelical Missionaries (BEM) played significant roles in setting up vocational schools in Kerala. They established Industrial Schools in the mid-nineteenth century.

In Travancore and Cochin, vocational education received royal patronage by the mid and late-nineteenth centuries. Several schools and workshops to teach various trades to the population were started in both the princely kingdoms. The Travancore government had established technical high schools by the early twentieth century. These played a crucial role in expanding vocational education initiatives.

In 1946, the Papworth Committee recommended adding the following subjects to existing technical high schools.³

Agriculture	Art (For Commercial And Industrial Purposes)	Automobile Engineering
Carpentry And Furniture Making	Castings	Clay Modelling And Plaster Casting
Dairy Farming	Electric Fittings	Electricity
Home Science	Ivory Carving	Kuftgari (metal inlay)
Leather Work	Manufacture Of Fittings	Mechanics
Metal Work	Music (Instrumental And Vocal)	Painting (Mural And House Decoration)
Plumbing	Printing	Sanitary Engineering
Textiles	Wood Carving	

³ Papworth, H.C. et al. 'Report of the Travancore Education Reorganisation Committee'. Trivandrum: Government Press, 1946.

The idea put forward by the committee was that students would not need further education. They will be fit to enter a trade or start a career after high school. The committee had also recommended including technical or vocational courses at the primary level for students who did not wish to continue their education but wanted to enter a trade.

After India gained independence in 1947, there was a growing emphasis on industrial development and skill training across the country. In the 1950s and 1960s, the government of Kerala established Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and Polytechnic Colleges to provide formal vocational training to the youth.

Education for Jobs and Skills

In 1983, the Kerala government introduced Vocational Higher Secondary Education (VHSE) to provide job-oriented education at the higher secondary level. This curriculum integrated academic knowledge with vocational skills, preparing students for various job roles. In its inception year, VHSE was implemented in just 19 schools, offering a limited selection of courses. In 1985-86, it expanded to encompass 73 schools with 27 vocational courses.⁴ The programme diversified its course offerings, incorporating disciplines ranging from technology, healthcare, hospitality, and commerce to arts and crafts.

Over the years, the Kerala government has continued to focus on skill development and vocational education. In 2010, 67.1% of the vocational courses were in government schools and 32.9% of the courses were in the private-aided sector.⁵ Various vocational courses have been introduced in schools and colleges to cater to the diverse needs of the job market.

In 2018-19, the National Skill Qualifications Framework (NSQF) started to be implemented all over India. In Kerala, existing vocational higher secondary

⁴ By 1988-89, the programme had grown exponentially to include 100 schools, accommodating a total of 200 batches across the state.

⁵ From www.vhse.kerala.gov.in

courses were revamped to accommodate the NSQF framework. Dr Anil Kumar R. Kurup, a VHSS teacher from Thrissur and researcher mentioned, “The original idea of the NSQF was that students from classes 9 to 12 will be given vocational training. This has been reduced to classes 11–12. It is meant to be a terminal course that would enable students to enter a trade. The plan was to implement NSQF in normal higher secondary schools. The vocational schools already have a vocational element. At least 30 per cent of the student population needs to be given training in trade. However, students do not stop their education after VHSS in Kerala. Also, Kerala is not currently giving training in trade to enough students due to various reasons.”⁶

Vocational Schools: The Background

Vocational schools were introduced in Kerala in 1983 as mentioned earlier.⁷ A VHSS course in a school typically has five subjects—one of which would be a vocational course, one a language, and three other subjects. These schools were brought under the higher education system in 1999 as part of the de-linking of the pre-degree course and placed under the Department of General Education (Vocational wing).

When vocational schools were started in Kerala, the idea was that equal importance would be given to the vocational subjects and the general subjects. Dr Anil Kumar said, “This was thought of as a terminal course by the Centre due to the high school dropout rate in North India. That is not the case in Kerala. The trend of doing higher studies has made this into a transitional course. Though the idea was that the course would enable the student to enter a trade directly, that has not happened the way the VHSS courses have been implemented.”

⁶ Interview with Dr Anil Kumar R. Kurup on 3 August 2023.

⁷ Mitra, Ashok, S Anandalakshmy, N. Balakrishnan Nair, K Gopalan, T.N Jayachandran, C.T. Kurien, K.N Panikkar, P.K Umashanker, and M Vijayan. ‘Report of the Kerala Education Commission’. Kochi: Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, January 1999.

Johar N. Chacko, a retired staff at the St. Ignatius school mentioned that VHSS students have 10–20% reservation in diploma courses and that made it attractive to students. By the 2010s, more importance was given to vocational training.⁸ From vocational education, the focus moved to skill training.

As of 2020, 136 VHSS schools have been brought under the NSQF in Kerala. Resultantly, earlier vocational courses were revamped and renamed. Jaymol Thomas, one of the teachers at the St. Ignatius school opined, “This was to fit in with international job descriptions.”⁹ Though the renaming was a central government directive, the idea fits in with the larger Malayali aspiration towards international migration.¹⁰

Early Initiatives

St. Ignatius VHSS

A vernacular school (Vernacular schools taught the subjects in Malayalam), St. Ignatius School was started in 1939 as an upper primary school near the St. Ignatius Church in Kanjiramattom.¹¹ Kanjiramattom did not have a school till then. The idea to start a school was proposed by Bishop Mar Athanasius and taken forward by K.V. Ittan Master (Founder manager) and others from the area.

The St. Ignatius VHSS was started in 1991 and was the first aided VHSS in the state of Kerala. The school was chosen to study the transformation of VHSS because of its history and its semi-urban location, which is representative of a majority of such educational institutions in central Kerala.

⁸ Johar N. Chacko, telephonic interview with the author on 20 May 2023.

⁹ Interview with Jaymol Thomas,, Kanjiramattom, 9 February 2023.

¹⁰ According to the Kerala Migration Survey, 2018, 21.22 lakh emigrants from Kerala live across the world.

¹¹ Hassankutty, T.A. ‘Praghalbaraya Randu Pradhaana Adhyapakar’. In *Bodhi - 2015: Platinum Jubilee Smaranika*, 59–56. Kanjiramattom: St. Ignatius Vocational and Higher Secondary School, 2015, p.56.

Rahmaniya VHSS for Handicapped

The Rahmaniya School for Handicapped was started in 1973. It was started to provide vocational and all-round development for children with special needs. It is run by the Association for Welfare of Handicapped (AWH), which runs several such educational institutions throughout Malabar.



Figure 2. The High School Section of Rahmaniya for the Hearing and Visually Impaired Students, Kozhikode. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

The Rahmaniya VHSS was started in 1991 to continue providing vocational support to hearing-impaired students (hearing-impaired, HI, is the term used by the staff to refer to the students) in the Rahmaniya School. The Higher Secondary Section (HSS) became a part of the school in 1998.

Taught Courses

The St. Ignatius VHSS started with a civil-engineering-based course and an electronic-based vocational course. The courses were selected since they would have helped the students with lateral entry to engineering diploma courses. These courses were in high demand in the 1990s. According to Johar, the original electronic course was based on radio technology. But by then, the technology was becoming outdated. So, in 1992, the course was changed to Refrigeration and Air-conditioning which was mechanical-based.¹² Civil, mechanical, and electronics were the top engineering courses students were opting for then. All the vocational courses that were started in

¹² Johar N. Chacko, 2023.

St. Ignatius were from these streams in keeping with the aspirations of the students in Kerala.

Initially, the building for the VHSS had only two classrooms and the teachers used to sit in a temporary shed made of coconut palm leaves remembered Bessy Mathew, one of the teachers who joined the school the year it began.¹³



Figure 3. Bessy Mathew in the Draughtsperson Civil Work (DCW) Laboratory, St. Ignatius VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

By 2000, the school had a total of six courses. One was called General Insurance and included a computer component. This had been a typing course that was upgraded to a computer course once the technology became obsolete.

At present, six vocational courses are being offered to students under the NSQF. These are:

- Draughtsperson Civil Work (DCW)
- Field Technician Computing & Peripherals (FTCP)
- Field Technician Air-conditioner (FTAC)
- Lab Technician Research and Quality Control (LTR)
- Dietetic Aide (DIA)
- Business Correspondent & Facilitator (BCF)

Five courses are currently offered in Rahmaniya VHSS to the students. Three are

¹³ Interview with Bessy Mathew, Kanjiramattom, 9 February 2023.

in the mathematics stream (First group)¹⁴ and two are in the biology stream (Second group). These are:

- Four Wheeler Service Technician (FST)
- Field Technician Computing & Peripherals (FTCP)
- Junior Software Developer (JSD)
- Fitness Trainer (FNT)
- Lab Technician: Research and Quality Control (LTR)

An Entrepreneurship Development course, “Develops the entrepreneurship abilities of the students. They become capable of starting businesses of their own after their education,” say Habeebu Rahiman T.V.¹⁵ Earlier, the course was called General Foundational Course and was part of the vocational syllabus of the Kerala state.



Figure 4. An Entrepreneurship Development (ED) class in progress at Rahmaniya VHSS. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

The courses were different before the implementation of the NSQF. For instance, the FNT was called Physiotherapy Course, the LTR course was Medical Laboratory Technology (MLT) and the FTCP was Maintenance and Repairs of Radio and Television course. The changes in the names and the corresponding changes in the curriculum have brought about changes in the aspiration, demand for, and quality of certain VHS courses that will be explained later.

¹⁴ First Group has mathematics, physics, chemistry, vocational subject, and a language, Second Group has physics, chemistry, biology, vocational subject and a language, and Fourth Group has accountancy-based subjects with a language.

¹⁵ Interview with Habeebu Rahiman T.V. Rahmaniya VHSS on 7 August 2023.

Practicals

In the 1990s, students learnt the plan and layout of buildings as part of their practicals in the civil course in St. Ignatius. As the course changed to Draughtsperson, the practical aspects included survey with tools, use of AutoCAD, etc. “The teachers have also been learning new technology with the students”, according to Bessy Mathew.

Dr Anil added, “Learning new things, field visits, learning the current trends, and the small part that is related to product making and marketing—all of these make teaching the vocational subject interesting for me.” Saji K.I., a teacher at St. Ignatius, mentioned that following the change to NSQF, there is more practical evaluation than before.¹⁶ The students work with a company or a factory for a week.¹⁷

At Rahmaniya, the students are encouraged to do small projects as part of their practicals. Yoonus C.P., a teacher of FST, said, “We give them general guidelines on what to do. The students would find the engines from scrap yards. They are encouraged to dismantle these at the school laboratory. These add to their understanding of the working of the machines.”¹⁸



Figure 5. The inside of a gearbox cut out to show the working at the Four Wheeler Service Technician (FST) laboratory, Rahmaniya VHSS. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

¹⁶ Interview with Saji K.I., Kanjiramattom, 9 February 2023.

¹⁷ Johar N. Chacko, 2023.

¹⁸ Interview with Yoonus C.P. on 7 August 2023.

There are also Interaction Classes where speakers who work in the field are invited to speak to the students at the VHSS.¹⁹ The government pays them remuneration. They do a one-hour PowerPoint presentation on a topic on which they work. As a result, the students have more awareness of what is happening in the field than in previous decades.

Johar added that when the vocational courses were started, the practicals were conducted by the teachers, who were enlisted as instructors. With the NSQF, the instructors for the practicals need not be trained teachers but can be people with work experience in a corresponding trade.

In the past year, while the practical evaluation had increased, the practical segment or course content has been reduced. For instance, the DIA teacher at St. Ignatius, Jancy Joseph mentioned that due to changes in governmental policies, students at the secondary education level are not allowed to draw blood and so on. Now, the most they do is “make shakes, juices, and pickles. Most of the time, the students already know this. Teaching the practicals is not as fun as it used to be.”²⁰ When the MLT course was removed, most schools took DIA or LTR, which are the closest to the MLT course.

The LTR laboratory had a clean feel, unlike the other laboratories at St. Ignatius. Praseetha E.P., the LTR teacher said that the microscopes are kept inside a cupboard ever since COVID-19.²¹ The laboratory gets quite dusty due to a slight gap in the roof. Moreover, other students sometimes use the lab. The microscopes are taken out only when there is a practical scheduled for the day. The LTR lab also had a cupboard full of preserved animals. The current law and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act do not allow these to be displayed to the students. “They are shown diagrams of the animals. There is no dissection also. The students draw these diagrams. Different plant sections are

dissected, and cheek cells are shown through the microscope,” she added.

Jaymol mentioned that the students find the theory related to the vocational subject easier since they start at a beginner’s level. The students who join without a good grounding in existing subjects like physics, mathematics, etc. find it difficult to cope. She also added, “They are very good in their vocational subjects. They find the practicals easy and do well in them.”

Evaluation and Assessment

The students have to write a report based on their Interaction Classes and they are awarded marks for the same.

Fifteen marks are set aside within the practical work for the Interaction Classes. This comes under a scheme called work evaluation. This is important since, even though the course has theoretical and practical aspects, the field experience of the speakers is different from the one they get through the practicals at school. The people called to talk to the students are architects, supervisors, people in the construction field, fitness trainers, pharmacists, etc. The instructors for these classes are drawn from places near the schools.

Add-on Courses

The Rahmaniya School is considered the top private-aided VHSS in the state. The office of the principal was covered in various certificates and trophies won by the school for academic excellence.

Habeebu Rahiman T.V., a teacher at Rahmaniya, said that the school has maintained its position and popularity due to the effort taken by the school to keep everything up-to-date. The laboratories are well-maintained. The students are given classes on entrepreneurship as mentioned earlier. The ED Club, as it is called, invites speakers to talk to the students. Yoonus added, “They are given classes by former students who are well-placed, thus providing the students with an awareness of the possibilities of the courses.”

¹⁹ Saji K.I. on 9 February 2023.

²⁰ Interview with Jancy Joseph on 24 July 2023.

²¹ Interview with Praseetha E.P. on 24 July 2023.

There is a training session given to them by faculty from the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Indian Institute of Spices Research (IISR), or Centre for Water Resources Development and Management (CWRDM) every year. This is possible because the school is located in the city, added Habeebu.



Figure 6. Invited speakers for an event of the Entrepreneurship Development Club, Rahmaniya VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

The students are taken to these institutions and given a tour of the campuses. As part of the course, they are also taken to nearby industries, Milma, etc. to familiarise them with the working of machines in industries. When the school does not have the resources at hand, the teachers make sure that the students have access to it at other places. Yoonus C.P. added that they hold their sports events at a different location since the school campus does not have enough space to hold these. The students are given an awareness of what are the possibilities for higher education and trade/job at the school level. They are provided opportunities for all-round development.

Student perspectives

Saji from St. Ignatius recalled that the school used to receive academically brilliant students. The St. Ignatius VHSS was even conferred a national award for being a model VHSS in 2004. Currently, most of the students are not aware of VHSS courses or schools in Ernakulam and Thrissur. They join the schools through the

single window entry because the courses and schools that were their first choice are not available. But all the students interviewed—at Ernakulam and Kozhikode—said they were happy with the courses. They enjoy having more practical courses and the edge it gives them over Higher Secondary School (HSS) students.

Krishnindhu, a second-year DIA student, who joined St. Ignatius from a CBSE school mentioned that the courses were not exactly what she expected.²² The students doing the DIA course have decided that they will either go for nursing or a paramedical course. Annmarie and Lidhiya from second-year DIA have plans to go to Germany to do their nursing course.²³ The DIA students study anatomy, diet, and nutrition. They do not have mathematics. Most of them found mathematics difficult. Krishnindhu said, “People think, Bio-Maths is the only option. They do not know about these courses. When I told people I had taken this course, the general reaction was, ‘Why this course?’ There is a stereotype that only students with less marks would opt for the VHSS courses. That impression should be changed.” Many other students and teachers echoed her sentiments.

Annmarie’s mother had done the MLT course at St. Ignatius School several years ago. She said that her mother was happy doing the course. In those days, she said, “The courses were different and people’s impression of the course was different.” Her mother now works as a manager in a More store in Ernakulam.

Abhijith, who is doing FTCP, said “I used to find Physics and Chemistry difficult at school. Now I find it easy to study. I like having two hours dedicated to practicals (laboratory).”²⁴ He hopes to do a B.Tech in mechanical/automobile or something related after he finishes the course. His father also works in the mechanical field.

²² Interview with Krishnindhu Reju on 24 July 2023.

²³ Interviews with Annmarie Biju and Lidhiya Anna Ben on 24 July 2023.

²⁴ Interview with Abhijith K.V. on 24 July 2023.

Adarsh doing DCW hopes to do a B.Tech course after the course.²⁵

Shivapriya and Vismaya, two other students, mentioned that they had less opportunities and access to extracurricular activities like sports.²⁶ Since there are only around 120–140 students in the VHSS, the school does not have enough funding for various activities. The students were generally embittered that the Higher Secondary School (HSS) (with 600 students) across the playground had more activities and competitions.

The students interviewed at Rahmaniya VHSS had been aware of the school and the courses before they joined. Most of the students had relatives who had studied in the school and had given glowing reviews of Rahmaniya. These students were also happy with the facilities and opportunities that they had at the school. Raniya Marva E., who is an LTR student was the only one who said, “I had wanted to join the MLT course. My cousin had done that. But, due to the implementation of the NSQF, that course is no longer available. I am a bit disappointed because of this. Now, I study more about pharmaceutical drugs and so on.”²⁷ However, she was happy with the vocational subject and said that was her favourite of all the subjects offered. She plans to do higher studies in a pharmaceutical course at the Medical College in Kozhikode.

Rasha Fathima and Fidha Fathima mentioned that they wanted to do a course abroad if circumstances allowed it.²⁸ Both she and Rasha are Fitness training students at the school. Fidha said, “I knew about vocational courses and wanted to do one. However, I did not know much about my course when I joined. I like the course and want to do higher studies in fitness training or nutrition after this.”

Seenath P., a teacher at Rahmaniya VHSS, was herself a VHSS student in the early 90s. She studied in the Nadakavu (Kozhikode) VHSS. She was an MLT student. In 1993, immediately after she passed out of the VHSS, she joined Rahmaniya as a VHSS instructor.



Figure 7. The Fitness (FNT) laboratory at Rahmaniya VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

She said that she was not very interested in the medical laboratory aspect of her course. So, when she decided to continue her education after her marriage, she did a physiotherapy course and then re-joined the school as a physiotherapy teacher. She found the vocational course to be useful. She made her son take it during his higher secondary education and made other relatives also take up the course. In Seenath’s words, “Almost 90% of the people who studied in the VHSS with me are employed now. The percentage of my contemporaries who are employed is much less in the case of those that studied Plus Two or pre-degree” (which was the higher secondary equivalent in the ’90s). She said that being employed was very important to her. She had told her husband at the time of their marriage that she wanted to work. She was the first woman in her family to go out to work. Now, she says, many women in her family are employed.

Biju Kuriakose, Clerk at St. Ignatius VHSS, Kanjiramattom was part of the second batch of students to have joined a VHSS after these schools were started in 1983–84.²⁹ He did a course related to

²⁵ Interview with Adarsh K.S. on 24 July 2023.

²⁶ Interviews with Shivapriya and Vismaya Shibu on 24 July 2023.

²⁷ Interview with Raniya Marva E on 7 August 2023.

²⁸ Interviews with Rasha Fathima K. and Fidha Fathima on 7 August 2023.

²⁹ Interview with Biju Kuriakose on 9 February 2023.

agriculture and mentioned that the course helped him try innovative methods in cultivating his *parambu* (agricultural land around the house). There is a general sense among the staff that these courses are useful and provide a step up to the students compared to traditional courses.

One thing that all the teachers mentioned about the VHSS students was their skill with machinery and creative talents.



Figure 8. An engine part was dismantled and put together by the students at Rahmaniya VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

Many of them struggle with the basic courses. But they excel in the vocational course, especially the practicals. They enjoy these courses.

Special Needs Students

The special needs students have common classes with the other students at Rahmaniya VHSS. Currently, the VHSS has only HI students. The Rahmaniya School has visually impaired students up to class 7. All the teachers at the VHSS know sign language, which they said they picked up along the way. They have informal sensitisation classes when they join. Abdul Rahim M. is a teacher with a Psychology degree and has experience teaching special needs students in other schools.³⁰ He has been at the Rahmaniya VHSS for 17 years. He works as a councillor for the special needs students. He said, “The teachers give the HI students special instruction if they need it. Otherwise, the HI students sit with the other students and attend the classes

³⁰ Interview with Abdul Rahim M. on 7 August 2023.

and practicals. I give them counselling on a case-by-case basis.”



Figure 9. Hearing-impaired students, Muhammed Sinan, Arun, and Abdul Samad at the FST laboratory at Rahmaniya VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

Most of the HI students at the VHSS are from the Rahmaniya School and a few come from other schools. Earlier most of the students from the Rahmaniya School used to join the VHSS. After the government passed policies enforcing compulsory reservation for children with disabilities, many students opted to join other VHSS with courses of their choice.

Rasha mentioned that initially there was reluctance on their part to mingle with the other students. But, very quickly they learned sign language. “There was a week-long NSS camp. We became very close after that.”³¹

Habeebu Rahiman said that some of the concepts are difficult for special needs students to grasp. So, they use visual aids to help them. The teachers were all using smart boards and audio-visual aids in all the classes. Many of the students join the government polytechnic in Kozhikode. “A few have gone on to do a B.Tech and study at IIM,” Habeebu added with pride. Since the Rahmaniya School was started for special needs students, integrating them within society is very important to the teachers and management of the school.

Teachers and Principals

When the St. Ignatius school was started in the early 1990s, it was a huge opportunity

³¹ Interview with Rasha Fathima K. on 7 August 2023.

for the teachers, the students, and the community in Kanjiramattom. The vocational teachers are engineers and engineering diploma holders. At Rahmaniya also the teachers were appointed based on their specialisations and qualifications. The teachers are engineers or degree-holders in the relevant specialisations.

However, not all vocational schools had qualified teachers, mentioned Dr Anil. It was only later that the government VHSS started appointing teachers with the appropriate qualifications to teach the subject. Initially, the principals of the VHSS schools attached to government schools did not have a separate principal. The principal of the high school acted as the principal for the vocational courses. “Most of these principals were only 1–2 years away from retirement. They did not understand the challenges or needs of the vocational course. Now, the situation has changed. Now, it is a vocational teacher who is in charge of the vocational section,” said Dr Anil.

Abdul Gafoor, principal at Rahmaniya, said principals and teachers of VHSS have regular training now. He was attending a training programme for principals from Kozhikode, Wayanad, and Malappuram when I visited the school.

VHSS Over the Years: Gender

Saji K.I. mentioned that when the St. Ignatius school only had civil-based courses (under the First group), the gender ratio was roughly 50:50. With the introduction of the Second and Fourth group courses, the First group batches have been seeing a drastic reduction in the number of girls applying for admission with the ratio of boys to girls changing to 90:10. Given the choice, the girls are taking up subjects that have traditionally been associated with feminine capabilities.

Dr Anil mentioned that in his school, the number of girls applying for vocational courses has reduced over the years, “The number of girl students has reduced overall. The girls prefer to join HSSs. They

get admission to the HSS since they usually have better marks than boys. The change is not so obvious in MRT courses. Those courses used to get ten boys, then and now. That percentage has remained the same. But, in the First group and commerce courses, the percentage of girls has reduced. Also, we used to get 165 students; this year the number of students has gone down to 140. Ever since the number of Plus Two seats increased, we have been getting fewer students. There is no awareness about this course.”



Figure 10. The Frontline Worker, now Lab Technician: Research & Quality (LTR) laboratory with a large number of female students. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

Feminine capabilities like patience, kindness, caregiving, gentleness, etc are held to be important in teaching, nursing, etc. and deemed more suitable to the temperament of women. Women could go out to work in the early twentieth century, the time when many new jobs became available to them, because it was considered that (1) feminine qualities were considered necessary for these jobs, (2) the jobs would not hinder the women from carrying out certain chores and duties traditionally done by them, (3) these jobs were seen as complementary to the nation-building process that was happening simultaneously in the social sphere. This phenomenon has been noted by social scientists like J. Devika (2007) as emerging in early twentieth-century Kerala.³²

³² Devika, J. *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-Forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007.



Figure 11. Girl students at St. Ignatius VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

Praseetha E.P., the LTR teacher said that the school has been seeing 2–3 male students take up the DIA and LTR courses for the past few years. These are kids who plan to do nursing after school.

Contrary to the trend in rural Ernakulam and Thrissur, the Rahmaniya School has not seen a reduction in the number of girls applying for the VHSS courses. However, even there, most of the girls were in biology-based courses.

Courses and Aspirations

In 1999, the St. Ignatius HSS started functioning within the compound. This was a state-funded institution. Saji stated that the academically brighter students opt to take up the HSS courses that are pitched at a higher social class and align with the aspirations of the students and families. Bessy Mathew added that now, not many people are aware of the existence of VHSS, the courses, and the lateral entry option to other courses.



Figure 12. St. Ignatius institutions. From left to right: The church, HSS (with cars parked in front of it), VHSS, and parish hall. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

Before the NSQF, when the general subjects and the vocational subjects were given equal weightage, the idea was that students could either go for an engineering diploma or take a general science, commerce, or biology course. The teachers divulged that the students who passed out of the school earlier were in high positions within and without Kerala because not only were they academically brilliant, but they also had an edge over other students due to the practical aspect of their education. For example, the students from the medical technician course learnt to draw blood, take blood pressure, etc. Now, the focus is on the students being able to get a job as soon as they finish the course or do a minimal higher education and go abroad, Johar stated.

However, Dr Anil had a different take on the academic abilities of VHSS students. He mentioned that his school did not get academically brilliant students. Earlier, when the number of colleges and HSS were less, they would occasionally get a few brilliant students. He mentioned that when he did his research on vocational schools in the 2010s, the case was the same in the other schools. Now they hardly ever get students that are interested in the vocational course. But, he added, “The students develop an affinity for their course. They get a direction. Some students who would otherwise not think about taking the stream would go on to do higher education in that. This is especially true of the MLT, tourism, and automobile/engineering-related courses.”

Habeebu Rahiman, Rahmaniya VHSS, said that they have been seeing more children applying to their courses than before. He added that this was because of the popularity of the school and the awareness that people in the area have about the prospects of the courses. Though they have a cross-section of students from all social classes, the majority of the students that join Rahmaniya are from the middle and upper-middle classes. All the private VHSS in Kozhikode have excess applicants for courses and their seats are full. However, he did mention that there was a general

sense that VHSS courses were not as good as HSS. And he added that the government VHSS in Kozhikode had seats that had not filled up that year.

With the implementation of the NSQF, the theoretical part of many of the courses has changed. Seenath said that earlier, when the Fitness trainer course was physiotherapy, there was more content in the course. The courses were divided into four modules and each module led to a skill certificate. Now, the students get a certificate from the state for the general courses and the Centre for the vocational course. Habeebu said that the NSQF certificate is recognised in the rest of India and even abroad. But it does not lead directly to jobs in Kerala.

Yoonus mentioned that when the FTCP course was offered as four modules, the students had computer hardware, robotics, telecommunications, and electronics. “The students who joined polytechnics and BTech courses found the courses easy and outshone the other students with a general higher secondary background.”

The school ensures that the students are aware of the prospects of the courses. The courses that are offered in Rahmaniya VHSS are those that have closely related higher education courses. Thus, their courses work as feeder courses to further education. Moreover, entrepreneurship training enables the students to start their businesses if necessary. The economic class of the students that join the school has influenced the way the courses are offered and implemented.

Before the NSQF, many of the courses were recognised by the Public Service Commission (PSC). Seenath remembered that there were ongoing strikes to get the VHSS courses recognised by the PSC during her time at the Nadakavu VHSS. That was how these courses gained acceptance and led to jobs. She got the job in the VHSS immediately after she finished because of this. Now that the courses and nomenclature have changed in the last two years, the whole process may have to be

repeated to get the courses recognised by the Kerala PSC.

Discipline

Together with the changes brought about by COVID-19, and the change in the social class of the students, the teachers of St. Ignatius school have perceived a change in the disciplinary aspect, punctuality, tidiness, etc.

The floor of the corridor had small paper pieces and other dry waste materials, typically found on school corridors. In interviewing the teachers at the school, one of the important issues that came up was that of discipline. The teachers perceived the state of the floor as indicative of the student’s lack of discipline, which they considered to be the key factor distinguishing a well-run school from a poorly managed one. According to them, discipline was reflected not only in the condition of the floor, but also in factors such as noise levels, cleanliness of walls, student attire, punctuality, and more.

Dr Anil, who has been teaching in a VHSS since 1997 opined that there have been changes in the attitude and discipline of students over the years. Post-COVID, there has been a marked change, though that was not the only reason. With COVID-19, the students had more access to mobile phones. At his school, the teachers had pooled money to buy mobile phones for students who could not afford to buy one for the online classes held during the pandemic. That has added to a general sense of relaxation in the academic atmosphere. The use of the internet and mobile phones has made a change in students’ attention span. He also added that students are becoming lazy when it comes to reading.

When I asked the students at Rahmaniya if COVID-19 had an impact on their general attitude to school and education, they reiterated what some of the teachers had said: that there is a general feeling of relaxation. They mentioned that getting used to sitting in class was a bit difficult

after spending two years at home and attending online classes.

At Rahmaniya, the teachers are pretty strict about discipline. Mobile phones are allowed only with the express permission of parents, and not during school hours. They make sure that there are teachers at the bus stop, after hours, to maintain order. The students did appear well-dressed and disciplined at the school.

Interrelated to discipline is the presentation or condition of the uniform. The teachers in St. Ignatius pointed out how their students were not as smartly dressed as students in some of the other VHSS they had visited in north Kerala.



Figure 13. Students in the parking lot of the St. Ignatius VHSS. Image: JANAL archives, 2023

Clothing has always been an item of contention in various social, religious, and political spheres in Malayalam-speaking regions. From the lower caste asking to be allowed to dress like the upper caste in the nineteenth century and debates on women's clothing in women's magazines in the early twentieth century to the recent discussion on a teacher in north Kerala lodging a complaint against the headmistress of her school for passing derogatory comments on her wearing leggings under her kurta,³³ clothes have been in the news as markers of tradition/modernity, morality/immorality,

³³ *Onmanorama*. 'HM Hauls up Malappuram Teacher for Wearing Leggings'. 1 December 2022, sec. News. <https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2022/12/01/teacher-complaint-leggings-malappuram-school-headmistress.html>.

decency/indecency, authentic/inauthentic, etc.

St. Ignatius School owned by Christian management is situated in a locality that has a strong Muslim presence. The design of the building seems to reflect this Islamic influence with the arc-like structures shown here. In addition, the girl students from the Muslim community wear a scarf over their regular uniform pointing to the secular and liberal nature of the institution.

Rahmaniya VHSS is located in a predominantly Muslim area that also has a large number of Hindus. At first glance, all the women seemed to be wearing the Muslim headdress. When I asked the students and teachers if the student population was all Muslim, they mentioned that there were Hindu students, but very few Christian students. This is because the Christians are concentrated in certain other areas of Kozhikode. The students mentioned that when they first joined, they also thought that all the students appeared to be from the Muslim community, but that was not so.³⁴

Conclusion

VHSS were, initially, imagined as feeder schools to technical colleges and polytechnics. However, with the introduction of the NSQF, and even earlier, the courses had been revamped from skill-based education to skill-based training. Students who join to take certain courses, for instance, MLT, are upset that the course is no longer offered. The theoretical aspect of many VHS courses have been reduced. Courses that had four modules were reduced to just one module when skill-based training gained prominence in the curriculum.

In the educational scene of Kerala most of the students hope to continue their education till graduation. Additionally, there is a move towards taking up the so-called "white-collar jobs" within Kerala—or the aspiration is that a student will land one

³⁴ Interviews with Rasha, Raniya, and Fidha on 7 August 2023.

such job after graduation. So a course that is designed and advertised as a terminal course is not appealing to the students.

The teachers have noticed a change in the academic quality of the new students. Due to lack of awareness about the VHSS, and the positive publicity enjoyed by HSS, the vocational schools are not getting academically brilliant students as they did before, in most places in Kerala. The renaming of the courses to reflect international standards points to migratory aspirations.

As Dr Anil noted, the VHSS courses need to be integrated into the higher education system. Many of the courses that have been implemented with the NSQF do not lead to further educational opportunities. In Kerala, the PSC does not recognise the current courses as mentioned earlier. Before, students who passed out of the agricultural and veterinary courses were absorbed into the agricultural and veterinary departments. So, these issues have to be addressed. The debate around the PSC points to the desirability of government jobs among a section of the population due to perceived job security and access to pension schemes.

With the increase in the number of courses and the addition of the Second and Fourth Groups, girls have started choosing courses historically considered appropriate for women. So, from a more gender-neutral position, the current structure seems to have aided or furthered gendered jobs and roles. There are a few exceptions, like the few male students that opt to go for nursing. This is again connected to the larger migratory aspiration with the high demand for male nurses abroad.

With the break in offline classes as a result of COVID-19 and because of the change in the class constituency of the students in the VHSS, discipline, punctuality, and tidiness have been perceived to have been affected or changed. Access to the internet and mobile phones is also affecting the students.

Vocational courses are immensely beneficial when there is adequate infrastructure, training, awareness classes, internship programmes, etc. In most cases, schools are not able to give importance to all these aspects due to a lack of funding (as it was in the case of St. Ignatius) and for other reasons. There is a definite difference in how vocational schools function and their position within the secondary school education system between different parts of Kerala as can be seen from the two VHSS visited for this article. In Kozhikode and generally north Kerala, they seem to be thriving according to the staff of various VHSS. The private-aided schools have a positive image not just in the immediate neighbourhood, but also in other locations in Kerala. They have been able to maintain their image due to funding, curricula, and infrastructure.

Overall, St. Ignatius VHSS and Rahmaniya VHSS were interesting case studies to track the working of Vocational and Higher Secondary Schools in Kerala through the curricular, gender, class, and disciplinary nodes. The differences in the publicity, funding, options for extra-curricular activities, availability of related higher education courses, and changes in the curriculum due to the implementation of the NSQF have adversely affected awareness about and desirability of doing a course at VHSSs in Kerala.

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