Kerala History and Studies Journal
Published by the Kerala History Conference
ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

Redefining Roles: Women And Transformation Of Family In Kerala

Author(s) Dr. Whyni Gopi

Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/16

Date of Release 28.11.2026

IP Address 216.73.216.174

Downloaded 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

Redefining Roles: Women And Transformation Of Family In Kerala

Dr. Whyni Gopi
Associate Professor,
PG Department of History and Research Centre
Assumption College Autonomous
Changanassery, Kottayam

Women have an indispensable role in any family as a mother, daughter, wife, sister, grandmother, and aunt. Be it a small or big family, women in all ages had a role defined by their own societies which was different for regions throughout the world. This paper tries to find out the influence of changing role of women in Kerala in the colonial context and its impact on the family system. The article discusses how women had started evolving into new roles and responsibilities in consequence to the developments and circumstances in the colonial context and leading to transformation of family.

Woman and Family in the pre independence period

Woman hardly had an equal status with man in any traditional family in Kerala. Woman and her role were defined as per the norms and regulations of caste and religious authority that prevailed during those times. Her position was restricted to the domestic sphere engaged in cooking, caring the young and the old. She remained the custodian of customs and guardian of the age old traditions, practices and customs and was expected to transfer these ideas to the younger generations. She was to be the humble maid of her husband. *Sankarasmrithi*, a social code that existed in Kerala during the medieval period highlights the fact that for a woman, husband is a divine presence and she attains goodness in life only through serving her husband[1] . It depicted the daily routine of a good woman.

A good wife was subservient to her husband, she consumed her food only after his food, never disagreed or quarreled with him. Women were popularly considered without prudence and education of a woman was never considered important and necessary. They could not hear music or play [2]. Hindu scriptures hailed the view that a woman who

remained within the family doing her duty to her husband, parents, in- laws and children with utmost sincerity and obedience would attain *Moksha* (salvation).

Beliefs and practices were not different in the case of other religions like Christianity and Islam, as in Kerala prior to the intervention of these religions, all followed the same customs and traditions. Even when many got converted to Christianity and Islam, the dominance of the age old customs and traditions had for a longer period continued as what they did before conversion. It was a general norm that women's role was within the family and subject to men. Male dominance was an unwritten law among all of them. The customary practices like child marriage, polygamy, polyandry, practices related to puberty, menstruation, widowhood and child birth had made the life of women in the earlier periods very bleak and difficult. All these customs stamped women as a weaker sex, ignorant, incapable, and unable to make important decisions and survive of her own. The mobility of women was generally restricted to the household. Even in the case of women of the lower castes and of other religions like Christianity and Islam, the attitude towards women was more of the same. Though lower castes women worked outside their houses, women were subjected to their men. They neither had the power to take their own decisions and do whatever they want or travel at their own interests. They did manual jobs supporting their husbands which was not a factor of independence for them.

In Kerala, during the earlier times, the internal structure of jati was based on locality and customary framework (Maryadai)[3]. This too added to the hardships of women in Kerala as the social codes and customs never considered men and women as equals and such regulations were not questioned or disobeyed by the people.

Women and Change

With the mid of 19th century, Kerala underwent tremendous changes in the time worn practices. Several factors culminated together to provide a favourable context for women advancement in Kerala. The pace of women advancement was slow but these conditions predicted a tremendous change in women development in the days ahead.

The intervention of missionary groups like Church Missionary Society (CMS), London Missionary Society (LMS) and Basel Evangelical Missionaries (BEM), the subsequent introduction of English education, increase in schools, protests by social reform movements, popular participation in national movement and working class movements, the role of press and magazines and legal reforms became catalytic and had their impact on the life of women in Kerala. Let's assess the involvement of these facets in redefining the role of women in Kerala.

The role of Missionaries

The part played by missionaries in educating and increasing the social mobility of women has been the most influencing factor in bringing tremendous change in the position and role of women in Kerala. The missionaries had a religious motive and they aimed at making good Christians out of convert women[4] . The boarding schools provided training in English, sewing, Bible studies and lessons on neatness, cleanliness and industry. By 1870's it became a rule of the mission that boarding girls could not be married before 17years old[5]. This could give opportunity to those girls in boarding schools to undergo education and learn the lessons of self- empowerment. Though the number of girls in the schools were less in number, gradually it increased with the increase in the number of schools. According to Robin Jeffrey, matriliny allowed women to go to local schools even before there were government financed schools[6]. Following details show the part played by missionaries in managing vernacular schools:[7]

Vernacular schools by Missionaries in 1867

Missionary	No.of schools	No. of pupils	
		Boys	Girls
LMS	137	4040	1036
CMS	110	2600	560

Source: C D MacLean, Standing information regarding the Official Administration of the Madras Presidency, Govt. Press, Madras, 1877, p.52

Working women

The Travancore Administration Report of 1927 stated that for the first time women were appointed as clerks in the office of the Inspectors of Girls School[8] . The Report mentioned that in His Highness Maharaja's College for Women, there were 87 women, 38 Hindus and 49 Christians[9] . Female education had started increasing by this time[10].

Number of educational institutions for girls and their distribution in Travancore in 1927

No. of recognized educational institutions for girls		495	
Distribution of girls among various institutions			
Colleges	English Schools	Vernacular Schools	Special Schools
192	9585	165118	1524

Source: Travancore Administration report of 1927 (TAR 161)

These tables clearly testify to the increase of women's education in Travancore in 1927. Educated women began entering jobs as teachers, clerks in the education department, writers, journalists, and in the medical field as nurses and midwives. In 1930s, 30 percent of teachers in Cochin and 15 percent of Travancore were women[11] . In 1896, when Travancore established a Women's and Children's Hospital at Trivandrum, there were already 21 midwives and later in 1930, Travancore employed 90 midwives and 14 women doctors, among whom majority were Christians and from upper castes[12] . TC Kalyani Amma, T. Ammukutty Amma, B. Kalyani Amma, TK Kalyanikutty Amma, K Chinnamma, Tharavath Ammalu Amma, Muthukulam Parvathi Amma, Anna Chandy, Haleema Beevi were some of the great women who proved themselves different from the common women of those days.[13] The subscriptions of the early women magazines were a clear indication to the presence of educated women.

Women as social reformers and freedom fighters

The inspiration and the ray of hope given by the social reform movements had created great sway on the women of all categories. Generally, the social reform movements in

Kerala, protested against the caste and the social evils which had existed in the society. The issues of women in Kerala like *Kettukalyanam*, *Sambhandham*, polygamy, widowhood, *Thirandukalyanam*, ignorance and lack of education, denial to make personal choices and lack of social mobility and the subordinated position were raised up by every social reform movements. Parvathy Eyyakutty, Parvathy Manazhi, Parvathy Nenmenimangalam, Arya Pallam, Kajoor Gouri Antharjanam were a few among the many who boldly protested against the religious and social evils.[14] The great support from the social reformers for women uplifment was so convincing that the educated and enlightened men of Kerala took up the issues of their sisters, mothers and wives and decided to fight for their cause. The *Travancore Ezhava Sabha* in 1896 AD had branches in different parts of Travancore and they taught boys and girls to fight against evil customs, remove disabilities, and reform temples[15] . C Krishna Pillai who started *The Malayali Social Union* took initiative to fight against the evils which affected the system of marriage, economic conditions, and inheritance in Kerala. The role of Nair Service Society (NSS) and *Samastha Keraleeya Nair Samajam* played a notable role in family reform [16].

By the beginning of 20th century, women had already started making greater strides in the path of emancipation. The impact of social reform movements and politicization of women due to the influences of national movement had led to the awakening of an educated middle class who were in the vanguard of social reformation in Kerala. Economic and social background could be gauged as a reason for the spurt to occur among the educated middle class. This could be comprehended from the cases of early women participants in the freedom movement who were supported by their modernized men who were educated and got employed under the British or the native Kings and belonged to upper caste middle class families. The cases of Kuttimalu Amma, Ammu Swaminathan, Gracy Aron, Kamala Prabhu, Swarnakumari Menon, Akkamma Cheriyan, Anne Mascarene, Koothattukulam Mary, PC Karthiyani Amma were a few among the group of educated women.[17] These women were brought into the forefront by their

educated men who were inspired by Gandhian method of mass protest which upheld the role of women in the national movement.

The participation of women workers also had great impact on the society. The women workers in the struggles in the weaving mills at Kozhikode, the teacher's movement in Malabar, working class movement in Travancore were the earlier references for active participation of women for their rights[18] . They joined with their men and gained momentum mainly through working class struggles during 1934-35 at Kozhikode, Kannur and Thrissur[19] . This struggle for emancipation forced tremendous changes in the society of Kerala which in due course gained for women a space in the public sphere which led to her development and increased social mobility.

Role of Women magazines

The role of women magazines in instilling thoughts of modernity was also a major factor for women advancement in diverse fields. *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* were the prominent women magazines in Kerala during the beginning of 20th century. These women's magazines widened the thoughts of the people popularized among them modern ideas and led them through the path of self-improvement, progress and an instrument to inspire women towards empowerment. In an article entitled, *Sthree Swathandriyam* in the magazine *Sarada*, the author argued equal rights for women and men, he confidently stated that works would be successful if men and women stood together[20] . T Ammukutty Amma put forward her justification for educating women in English as they would be helpful for their husbands and could increase love, affection, trust and unity in family[21]. These magazines also discussed on issues such as the need to reform *Marumakkathaym*, the importance of women education, new careers for women, improving the role of a wife, lessons from the life of great women in India and abroad and also ideas of reform relating to family. Several articles in *Sarada* during 1906, 1909 and 1913 were of this kind. Articles were written by educated women and men who encouraged the readers to follow the path of reform. Though the early women magazines like *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* had subscriptions from only educated and

wealthy families, one can view it as a reform among the women in the initial stages who later own carried it forward to the common fellow beings through words and deeds.

The New Women and transition in Family

The changing social scenario that favoured women mobility unveiled new possibilities for women advancement. Unlike the traditional system where men were considered bread winners, women also came forward as income producers. With this new role of women, the old style of women being completely subjugated to domestic chores underwent changes. The 'new working women' introduced a new concept of women which took even more years to be accepted into the Kerala society. Nevertheless, legislations related to family such as Madras Malabar Marriage Act (1896 AD), Nair Regulation Acts (1913 & 1925 AD), Nair Act (1937 AD), Ezhava Regulation (1925 AD), Madras Marumakkathayam Act (1933 AD), Christian Succession Act (1916) and Moplah Marumakkathayam Act (1933 AD) subsequently led to changes in the traditional family system. These legislations legalized marriage, rights related to inheritances, abolished Sambhandham and polyandry. The greatest outcome was that, it marked the way to the breakdom of the joint family system which functioned according to the norms of caste and customs. Between 1896 and 1976, at least 20 pieces of legislations were passed to modify and abolition matrilineal practices ownership, inheritance of property and legal guardianship of children[22] . The emergence of a new educated middle class youth driven by the ideas of modernity actively supported the new reforms in the family. This newly developed concept of family gave women more freedom to interact with her husband and family. The educated men supported their women as is evident in the case of many of the middle class women who came into the forefront to participate in the freedom movement and social protests against the outdated evil customs and traditions. The new situations opened up possibilities for women to march towards the vanguard. With the popularity of Gandhian philosophy, women's public role and participation was received with wide acclaim.

Thus with the spread of education both English and vernacular by the missionaries and the government, the first step of women advancement had made its spectacular beginning. Secondly, the family reforms which resulted from many legislations recognized the role of husband and wife, conjugal relations, right for individual share, putting an end to the traditional customs and system. This may be the initial stage for the formation of new concept of family with father, mother and children. This new family recognized the role of woman more than the previous times. In addition, the influence of colonial modernity provided women equal space as men. Missionaries had already provided new job opportunities for women in nursing, midwifery, teaching, embroidery and printing presses. All these opportunities helped her to be income producer like her men. Gradually, women's role once limited to the domestic household shifted to the public sphere. The new roles of women reshaped the old notion of family where women were immobile. With the increasing social mobility of women, family and its functions got tuned to the requirements of the new women. The men had to accept the new roles of women as it benefitted the family as a whole.

While summing up the role of women in the family system in Kerala during the early 20th century, one cannot candidly state that women emancipation was complete in all sense and that the position of women in the family had undergone a tremendous change. Critically analyzing, one can observe that the position of women in Kerala had a positive turn in respect to opportunities of education, jobs, legislations related to inheritance, ownership of property, increasing age of marriage and abolition of caste based notions on widowhood and chastity. But, the attitude towards the position of women within the family did not undergo significant change. The role of women as a cook, caretaker of the family, and the concept of motherhood hardly changed. The reformers, according to Sheeba, were primarily concerned with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only limited and controlled emancipation; women themselves were not always partners in the schemes created repeated engagements within the idea/ideal of marriage[23]. In such a stance, though the mobility of women shifted from the domestic sphere to the public sphere, it was not the case of majority and of all categories. Women

of the affluent families of the upper castes were more benefitted in terms of higher education and better job opportunities while many of the lower castes were less favourable in terms of higher education and jobs in the organized sector. So the nature of family changed in its structure and form thereby shifting from a joint family to nuclear family. The nuclear family developed new roles for husband and wives, sharing and contributing to the existence of the family. The role of women became more complicated with women handling both indoor and outdoor matters. Nevertheless, women's effort in getting herself recognized in different arenas had already started. By this, family in Kerala started evolving new trends and styles which created shifts in the traditional nature and structure. With changing roles of women made possible by the influence of modern ideas and new circumstances, the traditional family system in Kerala underwent significant transformation which became evident in due course.

Endnotes:

1. *Sankarasmrithi: Laghudharmaprakashika*, Part I, Bharatvilasam, Thrissur, 1906, p.63.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
3. K K N Kurup, *Modern Kerala-Studies in social and agrarian relations*. Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1988,p.113.
4. Jane Haggis, "ironies of Emancipation: Changing Configurations of Women's Work in the Mission of Sisterhood to Indian Women", No.65,Summer ,2000,pp.108-126. Downloaded from https://www.jstor.org/stable/395852. 117.204.100.207, p.112.
5. *Ibid.*,p.114
6. Robin. Jeffrey, "Legacies of Matriliny: The Place of Women and the "Kerala Model" *Pacific Affairs*, Winter, 2004/2005, Vol. 77, No. 4, pp. 647-664. This content downloaded from 43.229.89.136 on Tue, 15 Apr 2025.
7. MacLean,C D. Standing information regarding the Official Administration of the Madras Presidency, Govt. Press, Madras, 1877,p.52..
8. Travancore Government, Report on the Administration of Travancore, 1927, Govt. Press, Trivandrum, 1928, p.154.
9. *Ibid.*, p.156.
10. *Ibid.*, p.161.
11. Jeffrey, p.655.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *T C* Kalyani Ama was the founder of *Sarada*, women's magazine started in 1904.
    T Ammukutty Amma was one of the editor of *Sarada*, women's magazine started in 1904
    B Kalyani Amma was one of the editor of *Sarada*, women's magazine started in 1904
    T K Kalyanikutty Amma was the founder of *Sarada* magazine started in 1913.
    K Chinnamma (1882-1930) held the post of Assistant Inspectress of Travancore Education Department. She also ran a school to train poor girls.
    Tharavath Ammalu Amma was the first woman dramatist in Kerala.

Muthukulam Parvathi Amma (1904-1971) was a famous Malayalam poet, writer, teacher and social reformer.
Anna Chandy (1905-1996) was a writer and became the first woman judge in Kerala and first woman judge in High Court.
Haleema Beevi (1918-2000) started the magazine, Muslim Vanitha in 1938.She formed Akhila Travancore Muslim Women Conference ,

14. Parvathy Eyyakutty was the first woman to make a public speech and she was the wife of Sahodaran Ayyappan, a social reformer.
Parvathy Manazhi was the first Namboodiri woman to protest agaist purdah system among their community.
Parvathy Nenmenimangalam protested against the restriction imposed on them. She was the epresentative for Namboodiri Bill.
Arya Pallam was engaged in the activities of Yogaskshema Sabha which was a popular social reform movement protesting against the social evils among the Namboodiri community.
Gouri Antharjanam in reform activities among Namboodiri women.
15. P K K Menon,. (1972) *The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala 1885-1938.* Trivandrum: Govt. of Kerala, pp. 543-544
16. Mannathu Padmanahbhan, *Reminiscences of my Life,* Cultural Publications Department, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003, pp.69-72.
17. Kuttimalu Amma and Ammu Swaminathan belonged to Anakkara Vadakkath family, a rich family with many landed properties and members educated and employed under the British.
18. Gracy Aron, was educated and her husband who was a socially conscious man, participated in Congress related activities.
19. Kamala Prabhu, wife of freedom fighter LSS Prabhu and daughter of scholar Seshagiri Prabhu.
20. Swarnakumari Menon was daughter of U Gopala Menon, a Congress activist. She was influenced by her parents.
21. Akkamma Cherian was educated and was born in a family devoted to national movement.
22. Anne Mascarene was educated and her father was employed under the Diwan of Travancore.
23. Koothattukulam Mary was educated and belonged to a family that was nationally conscious.
24. PC Karthiyani Amma was influenced by her father and husband.
25. Meera Velayudhan, "Growth of Political Consciousness among Women in Modern Kerala", Perspectives on Kerala History. Kerala, Gazetteer, Thiruvananthapuram,2024, p.368.
26. *Ibid.*,, p.506.,
27. " Sthree Swathanthriyam", *Sarada* ,no.4,Feb. 1906 , pp. 57-59..
28. Ammukutty Amma,T. "Nammude Sthreekalum English Vidyabhyasavum", Sarada, pp. 50-52.sssss
29. Jeffrey, p.651.
30. Sheeba, K.M. "Modernity In Social Reform Discourse: The Women Question In Colonial
31. Kerala", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* , 2002, Vol. 63 (2002), pp. 931-938 https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158163