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

Gender, Regency And Governance: The Administrative Legacy Of Sethu Lekshmi Bai Of Travancore

Author(s) Nishana N.

Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/36

Date of Release 28.11.2026

IP Address 216.73.216.174

Downloaded 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

Gender, Regency And Governance: The Administrative Legacy Of Sethu Lekshmi Bai Of Travancore

Nishana N.
Research Scholar
Dept. of History
Govt. University College
Thiruvananthapuram

INTRODUCTION

A new era began in the history of Travancore with the reign of Marthanda Varma. Ascending the throne in 1729, he faced significant challenges from various powerful factions within the state. However, he successfully subdued these feudal elements, achieved the political unification of Travancore, and initiated the modernization of the country.[1] Marthanda Varma introduced several administrative reforms to strengthen Travancore and promote the welfare of its people. He established a strong, centralized administrative system. To ensure fiscal control, a dedicated budget was allotted to each department. Furthermore, he systematically classified land into distinct categories: Devaswom, Brahmaswom, Danam, and Pandaravaka..[2] To strengthen the economy, Marthanda Varma created a commercial division called Mulakumadisheela and set up check-posts to collect import and export duties. Militarily, he fortified the state by constructing forts and palaces, established a standing national army, and arranged for European training of his elite Nair brigades.

Marthanda Varma was a devout follower of Lord Vishnu, famously dedicating his kingdom to the deity in the historic Thrippatidanam ceremony, after which he ruled as Padmanabhadasa (the Servant of Padmanabha). He undertook major restoration projects, including the Ottakalmandapam at Shivalipuram and the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, using Shalagramam stones from Nepal for the central deity. His reign was also a golden age for the arts; poets like Ramapurathu Warrier and Kunjan Nambiar were highly respected in his court, and traditional art forms such as Koothu and Koodiyattam flourished. He also instituted the Murajapam and Bhadradeepam festivals. Following Marthanda Varma, the throne passed to Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma, who is celebrated in history as the Dharma Raja. Ascending the throne at 34, he proved to be a capable ruler for many years. His significant achievements include moving the capital from

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

Padmanabhapuram to Thiruvananthapuram and constructing the massive Nedumkotta (Travancore Lines) fort to defend against Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. In contrast, his successor, Avittom Thirunal, had a very brief and ineffective reign.

The period following the Veluthampi Revolt saw significant changes in Travancore's leadership. The state was next ruled by Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bai, the first female ruler of Travancore. During her regency, with Colonel John Munro as the Diwan, she enacted progressive reforms, most notably the abolition of the slave trade on November 5, 1812. She was succeeded by her sister, Rani Gowri Parvati Bai, who continued the reformist agenda. Her reign saw the introduction of formal primary education and a landmark social reform allowing people from lower castes to wear gold and silver ornaments. A pivotal figure in Travancore's history was Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma, the son of Gowri Lakshmi Bai. His reign is often regarded as the "Golden Period" of the kingdom. A brilliant music composer and visionary administrator, he introduced English education in 1834, abolished the oppressive *Suchindram Kaimukku* tax, established a Munsiff Court, and conducted the first comprehensive population survey in 1836. He was named as "Garbha Sreeman' and he constructed Nakshatra Bungalow, Napier Museum, Zoo and Government Press, Kutiramalika etc.[3] He was the first king of Travancore to have his name printed on the Tapal Stamp, and Mohiniyattam first appeared under his administration. The Channar insurrection was put an end in 1859 during the authority of Uttram Tinual, the following monarch of Travancore, who also built the first post office and established a coir plant in Alapuzha.

Next ruler was the Ayilyam Tirunal, he received 'Maharaja' title from Victoria Queen. He established Law College, General Hospital, Secretariat, Punalur Bridge, Arts College, M.C. Road from Kesavadasapuram to Ankamali. Pandarapatta Proclamation was declared by him. After Ayilyam Tirunal Travancore was ruled by Vishakam Tirunal, he introduced Police facilities and conducted complete Survey after his death the Travancore came into the hands of Sree Moolam Thirunal from 1885 to 1924, he established Sanskrit College, Women's College, Ayurveda College, Archaeological Department, VJ.T. Hall and constructed Mullaperiyar Dam in 1895.[4]

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

The reign of Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai from 1924 to 1931 marked a significant period of social reform in Travancore. Ascending the throne after the passing of Sree Moolam Thirunal, she enacted a series of progressive legislations that were groundbreaking for their time. Her administration proactively addressed complex social issues through landmark acts, including:

The Nair Regulation Act and the Ezhava Regulation Act, which modernized community-specific personal laws.

The Nanchianad Act, which resolved a longstanding territorial dispute.

The Cinematography Act and the Newspaper Regulation Act, which established early frameworks for media and public information.

The historic abolition of the Devadasi system, a major step towards social justice.

These reforms, often originating from petitions presented to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly (such as those from the Nair and Ezhava communities in 1888), were ambitious. While they challenged orthodox views and were met with resistance from conservative sections of society, they were instrumental in steering Travancore toward modernity.

Memorials were given by Nair's and Ezhavas during his rule to the Sree Moolam Praja Council in 1888. Maharani Sethu Lekshmi Bai reigned from 1924 to 1931 as the Travancore Ivory Throne after Sree Moolam Tirunal's death. She enacted some of the most memorable social laws throughout her reign, which went against the true course of the other kings. Sethu Lekshmi Bai's social laws were too controversial for those with a simple mind set when they were carefully examined. From 1924 to 1931, the Maharani reigned. During this time, she regularly issued social proclamations and laws that had a significant negative impact on Travancore. Her noteworthy social laws include the Cinematography Act, the Nair Regulation Act, the Ezhava Regulation Act, the Nanchianad Act, and the News Paper Regulation Act. She also abolished the Devadasi system.

ADMINISTARTIVE REFORMS OF SETHU LEKSHMI BAI

Sethu Lakshmi Bai held a distinctly progressive worldview, which was clearly reflected in her groundbreaking social legislation. Years of bookishness so scornfully

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

dismissed by everybody had in fact equipped her with a board mind and an incisive, almost academic understanding of her political surroundings.[5] Most importantly, Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai refused to operate within the entrenched communal parameters that had come to define public life in Travancore. However, dismantling such deeply ingrained systems was a complex challenge that provoked violent resistance and intense resentment. This opposition erupted publicly when her choice of Minister was announced, inciting furious politicians in Trivandrum to cry foul. Her determination to govern independently was evident in her ongoing correspondence with the Government of India since October 1924. She had already rejected their suggestion to appoint an Executive Council to assist the Diwan, arguing that politicians would inevitably insist on elections for these roles. The Maharani was not inclined to provide the various communal factions with yet another platform for conflict.

She finally put forward a name on her own in January 1925 after giving it some thought, though this was not formally proposed to the authorities until April. The candidate in question was M E Watts, a lawyer with a London address. After the news leaked, all newspapers except "The Western Star" and "The Standard" expressed disapproval of the ruler's selection. Sethu Lekshmi Bai's cool and collected demeanour in the face of all the opposition surprised and perhaps even impressed the Resident. She emphasises the need for an officer with no recent interest in local politics who is independent of any factions and free of racial bias as something Travancore currently lacks.[6]

Sethu Lakshmi Bai articulated her perspective with clarity, outlining her analysis of the political challenges in Travancore. She observed that the political landscape was deeply fractured along communal lines:

The Nair Party would only accept an "ultra-Nair" Travancorean.

Brahmins, as a political entity, were viewed with suspicion by nearly all other communities.

Christians lacked a unified political identity, as various denominations sought recognition as separate groups.

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

Therefore, she concluded, the appointment of *any* Travancorean, regardless of their affiliation, was unlikely to achieve broad satisfaction, as it would inevitably favor one faction over others.

The only point therefore to be considered is that the holder of the post must be fit for it. Maharani was therefore quite firm that in selecting her right hand man, neither religion nor community could play any role.[7] Mr. Watts had qualifications for this position, he was actually a Travancorean, had a long history in the state going back at least to the 18th century she announced Mr. Watts as her next Diwan in May 1925. She woke up to unabashed criticism in the Newspapers, neither the Brahmans in the palace nor the Nair's outside supported her on this one, she was going against the tide alienating each faction in the country which was a massive political risk.[8]

Despite her firm idealism, the Maharani was acutely aware that favoring any single community would perpetuate the very communal divisions she sought to eradicate. With the conviction to prioritize governance over communalism, she steadfastly adhered to her principles. To institutionalize this vision, she issued official orders establishing the standards for all appointments within her administration. The guiding principle was straightforward: equal and fair opportunity for all. Consequently, candidates for government positions were selected solely on the basis of merit.

However, in a nuanced approach to achieving equity, preference for initial appointments—but not for promotions—was given to candidates from "unrepresented" and "poorly represented" communities. This policy was based not on raw population numbers, but on the actual availability of qualified candidates from these groups. This transformative policy was widely praised. As one Christian leader noted, "We want our public service to be open to the public and a service." This statement applauded the Maharani for effectively ending the historic dominance of specific Hindu castes and making the government accessible to all sections of society, including the most disadvantaged.

A Christian was for the first time appointed Chief Secretary, a position second only to the Diwan, another was made a member of the medical board. By 1928, an Ezhava was appointed a District Judge and another Divisional Assistant, both of low caste but now bossing over hundreds of Nair employees. A Muslim official was promoted

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

as a Magistrate, another Christian as Peishkar and at lower level too, hundreds of non-Nair's, non-Brahmins were absorbed into the State services, weakening the upper caste monopoly. As J. Devika notes, in a Nair-Brahmin dominated Hindu state, Sethu cared to listen to the minorities and seriously take them on board. It was a democratization something that was never done after her time. In the eyes of history Maharani has been lauded for this, but at the time she only earned remonstrations and dislike from the leading, entrenched classes of the country.[9]

One of the honorary employees who works for charitable organisations teaches the prisoners about religion and morality and receives a salary of R.25 per year. Two classes were established in 1922 to instruct teenagers who could not read up to Class IV in the fundamentals. The majority of illiterate offenders show a strong aptitude for learning to read and write, and they like these lessons a lot.

In September, 1925, Maharani completed her first year in power and it had been a year of. great success, it was a year in power and it had been a year of great success it was a year with great deal of positive energy and enthusiasm. The pace of big and small reforms was accelerated and the work of the Maharani's Government's was already bringing lauded as exemplary. She had succeeded in appointing loyal ministers on terms that made her active hand in the administration quite clear her relationship with government of India and its Resident was cordial and positive and while her refusal to countenance communal proclivities did not impress many politicians the people of the state saw in her an inspiring self-assured monarch and vindicated her policy.

The gates of Satelmond Palace were flung wide open, an uncommon gesture that began to dissolve public resentment. Women, in particular, developed a deep admiration for Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai's graciousness and accessibility. Each morning as the Rani concluded her rituals, a long queue of women would form on the palace sidewalk, clutching petitions and proposals. She made it a daily priority to listen attentively to each one, offering consolation through her compassionate words and a warm, reassuring smile. This direct engagement with common men and women was a cornerstone of her rule. One of the most significant acts of her reign was the opening of the road surrounding the Vaikom Temple to members of the scheduled

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

castes—a landmark decision in the struggle for social justice and temple entry in India.

According to Lekshmi Raghunadhan, the granddaughter of Sethu Lekshmi Bai.:

"Let me briefly thinks upon the significance of her contributions to the modernisation of Travancore, one of the first reform she made was to open up roads leading to Vaikkom temple for scheduled caste. If this step had not been taken it is doubtful whether the Temple Entry Proclamation that came be later would have been accepted by the conservative members of the society.[10]

Gandhi held this step with enthusiasm when he wrote in Young India in April 23, 1925.

"I tell them congratulate the Travancore Government on their admirable spirit with which it is acting in the manner of long delay reform'.

According to Malajinkeezhu Gopalakrishnan a historian quoted that.

"The principle requirement of backwards was the right to enter the temples for the entire Hindu Community including the backward castes. It wasn't just the entry to the temple that was restricted, even the roads leading to the temple was restricted. Vaikkom Satyagraha was the first ever public revolt against the untouchability prevalent in the Hindu community, under the rule of Sri Moolam Tirunal. It was during this ongoing revolt that the Maharaja Sri Moolam Tirunal passed away and Regent Maharani Sethu Lekshmi Bai took over the reign".[11]

FREEDOM TO WALK THROUGH VAIKOM ROAD

In 1923, leading Ezhava, T.K Madhavan attended the Kakkad session of Indian National Congress with special aim of interesting Gandhi in the untouchables of Travancore.[12] The following year, the battle was joined for the right of the untouchable Hindus to use the roads around the temple at Vaikkom in North Travancore. This was the famous Vaikom Sathyagaraha and Gandhian methods were adopted. The Satyagaraha was initiated by Caste Hindus, but supported by hundreds of volunteers fasted before the temple, caste Hindus brought out castes with them on to the forbidden ronds, a great Jatha of caste Hindus from Vaikom to Trivandrum was led by the founder of Nair Service Society, Mannath Padmanabhan to place the demand before the Maharani Regent, Gandhi himself came to Trivandrum to plead the cause of the

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

untouchables with the Regent and it was his intervention that finally secured the victory.[13]

At first it applied only to Vaikom, but within the next four years the approach to temples all over Travancore was thrown open to Hindus irrespective of Caste. Sir William Barton's book, "The Prices of India' gives a very inaccurate account of the whole affair, Maharani Sethu Lekshmi Bai who gave way and the whole episode was regarded locally as a victory for everybody except the obscurantist's. The Vaikom Satyagraha is rightly regarded as a turning point in the emancipation of the Harijans as Gandhi was now calling them. It was recognized as the preliminary step towards the major objective of opening the temples to the untouchables an objective which was to be achieved after a further struggle of more than a decade.[14]

The Vaikom Satyagraha marked a pivotal moment, uniting various castes and communities and serving as Travancore's first major entry into the Indian national struggle. Mahatma Gandhi's first visit to the region during this time significantly amplified the movement's impact and national prominence. This satyagraha was notable for its collaborative nature across Hindu communities. However, broader social reform in Kerala was often driven by numerous community-based associations. This decentralized approach was a practical response to the region's rigid socio-cultural hierarchy, where severe distinctions of caste and sub-caste necessitated that reformers first address issues within their own groups. Each community contended with unique social evils that had to be confronted internally before its members could effectively unite for broader societal change.

In 1925, Gandhi reached Vaikkom to support the Vaikkom Satyagraha, thus Gandhi happened to meet Regent Sethu Lekshmi Bai and Gandhi was amazed mainly because this was around the time when he had returned from South Africa and had attended a public function in connection to the inauguration of the Banaras Hindu University.[15] He had witnessed the pompous attires of various Kings and the arrogant British officials. He had spoken against the Kings and British condemning them openly, so much that Miss Annie Besant had to sat 'Sit down Gandhi'. All that despite against the Kings was gone when he met Maharani Sethu Lekshmi Bai, later Gandhi wrote in "Young India", "that he had imagined a Queen dressed in expensive attires, gold and

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

precious stones but he was pleasantly surprised to be in the esteem presence of a humbly dressed Queen'. He further wrote that Sethu Lekshmi Bai set an example to Kings and Queens across the Nation. Gandhi spoke to Queen about granting permission to the entire Hindu community to enter the Temples. The Queen said that she was just a temporary ruler until her Nephew Sri Chitira Tirunal grows up and takes over the reign, she assured him that the permission will be granted, in his reign. In 1920, when the initial preparations to commence the Cochin Harbor began, the Government of Madras back then, invited the collaboration of Travancore also in the project, mainly because the expenses to build the harbor were far too high for the Madras Government and the King of Cochin, to bear alone.

The Maharaja of Travancore, Sri Moolam Thirumal finally gave consent to draft an agreement by 1923, but nothing was finalized up until his death. When Maharani Sethu Lekshmi Bai came to power, the discussions about the Cochin harbour resumed. Despite numerous protests against the project within Travancore, Her Highness decided to sign the agreement on 23rd July 1925. Thus she became a part of one of the most momentous developments in the history of South India that earned Cochin the title of the Queen of the Arabian Sea. With each year trade only grew here, bringing with it greater revenues and a number of forward and backward linkages, business, banks, hotels and more. Employment was generated in the vicinity and incomes rose for common men and women.

CONCLUSION

Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai's regency, though a brief interlude in the long history of Travancore, stands as a period of profound and courageous transformation. Defying the entrenched communal politics of her time, she wielded her authority with a unique blend of intellectual clarity, moral conviction, and administrative acumen. Her legacy is defined by a deliberate and principled assault on social inequity—from her landmark temple road openings at Vaikom and the abolition of the Devadasi system to her revolutionary policy of merit-based, equitable public service. While her reforms provoked fierce resistance from powerful orthodox sections, they were instrumental in dismantling feudal monopolies and steering Travancore decisively toward a more modern and inclusive future. Her reign was not merely a period of

 IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

female rule but a definitive demonstration of how regency, guided by progressive idealism, could challenge the status quo and lay the foundational stones of social democracy. Sethu Lakshmi Bai thus deserves recognition not just as a custodian of the throne, but as a visionary architect of modern Kerala.

ENDNOTES

1. A. P. Ibrahim Kunju, *Rise of Travancore, A Study of the Life and Times of Marthanda Varma*, p.78.
2. P. Shangunni Menon, *A History of Travancore from The Earliest Times,* p.348.
3. Dr. Shuranada Kunjan Pillai, *Swathi Thirunal Ramavurma Maharajavu,* p.20.
4. Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, *Progress of Travancore Under Sree Moolam Tirunal,* p.39.
5. Manu S. Pillai, The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore, p.156.
6. Robin Jeffery, Decline of Nair Dominance Society and Politics in Travancore, p. 12.
7. R. Kulathu Iyer, Maharani Sethu Lekshmi Bayi Thirumamasukandu, p.89.
8. Louis Ouwerkerk, No Elephants for the Maharaja Social and Political Changed in Travancore-1921-1947, p.257.
9. Report on the Administration of Travancore for 1925-26, Government of Press, Trivandrum, 1927.
10. Lakshmi Reghunandhan, At the Turn of the Tide Life and Times Sethu Lakslimi Bayi the Last Queen, p.56.
11. Malayinkeezhu Gopalakrishnan, Sree Chithira Thirunal Avitsansthe Ezhunalathu, p.73.
12. Dr. T.K. Ravindran, Vaikkom Satyagraha and Gandhi, p. 89.
13. PKK. Menon, History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala Vol II. p.116.
14. Sreedhara Menon, Kerala and Freedom Struggle, p. 90.
15. Mery Elizabeth King, Gandhian Nan Violent Struggle and untouchability in South India, p. 222.

IP Address: 216.73.216.174 Downloaded: 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST