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From Reading Room to Cultural Hub: A Historical Study of Vigyanadayini Library, Maniyat

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Introduction

The history of the library established in 1927, brings along with it the history of the intellectual evolution of the villagers of that time. The period saw the emergence of patriotic feelings as well as that of printing press and print media. Maniyat is a remote village in Kasaragod where the villagers were mostly illiterate as in any other village in the late 1920s. So, the establishment of Vigyanadayini library was a new and enlightening experience to the village folk in having relevant knowledge on freedom movement which was gaining strength in the second and third decades of the 20th century. In no time, the library turned into a cultural hub, shaping the social awareness and political consciousness of a people who until then had no such ideas of historical development in them.

The circulation of newspapers enabled the common man to engage in public debates, stage performances, study circles, and in social activities. All these indicate that the village library had outgrown its nature and presence as a mere reading room or as a depository of books. Evenings were lit up with lively discussions on nationalism, social justice, and the importance of being literate. For nearly a century, the library continued to serve the public in transforming their views on the social, cultural, political and intellectual activities going on in the country.

Broader Historical Context

The Vigyanadayini library has proved to be humanity how one of its kind could deeply upset even the thinking process of simple villagers and inspire them to be a part of freedom movement which was gaining strength in the early part of 20th century. Parallel to the spread of formal education by establishing schools, reading rooms and lending libraries sprang up in the state as part of the library movement. The movement aimed at forming public opinion and political views on the happenings in the country, and across the world.

The general public of North Malabar become culturally conscious and politically aware through the print media which was a novelty then. Kerala Pathrika, Kerala Sanchari, Mithavadi, Mathrubhumi, and Al-Ameen were the leading newspapers of the time, and they ignited the patriotic spirits of the village folk.[1]

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Those who could not afford a newspaper daily, depended on the libraries in the locality from where they heard the daily news read out to them. Thus, the literate and the illiterate became conscious of what was happening around them.[2] In the evenings, libraries became public forums where intellectual discussions kept people engaged.

The libraries in Kerala became centres of learning through discussions,[3] apart from where daily news could be known. In some libraries, night classes were conducted to promote literacy. The common folk had their say in the discussions, and the discussions contributed heavily to the spread of nationalist ideas in the region.[4] In Malabar the Library movement and Nationalist movement grew in tandem, each complementing the other.[5] The socially conscious people trained through the discussions and public reading did their best to block superstitious beliefs and age-old customs. The spread of newspapers also helped in boosting nationalist sentiments.

The efforts of eminent political leaders were linked with libraries. E. M. S. Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan, K. P. R. Gopalan, K. Damodaran, K. A. Keraliyan,[6] and Moyarath Shankaran,[7] were promotors and part of library movement in its early stages, though its spread was uneven.

The political backwardness of the northern part of Kasaragod those days could be identified with the absence of libraries in those places, apart from other reasons. The region comprised plantation and the labourers involved in it, the southern part of Kasaragod bordering Payyannur, linked with Kannur and Thalasserry was dynamic in intellectual activities. C. Balan, an historian and academician, has recorded this paradox through his writings.[8] Maniyat, located in the southern part of Kasaragod, drew inspiration from the movements in Payyannur, Kannur, Thalasserry and Kozhikode, and they became conscious of the need of a library. This led to the founding of the Vigyanadayini libarary at Maniyat in 1927.

A link in the Malabar Library Movement

The history of Vigyanadayini library is linked to the library movement, which was political in nature. Unlike in Travancore and Cochin where libraries were established through royal patronage and state-led administrative reforms, in Malabar, they were founded with public support, which stemmed from their passion to know, learn and realise the updated information on nationalist movement.[9] The libraries in Malabar were mostly run by Congress workers then. The meeting of the Malabar District Congress Committee on 4 May 1916, under the chairmanship of Annie Besant, through a resolution, urged the need of establishing autonomous panchayats, with powers to found schools and libraries in every village. The Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) meeting on 24 July 1924, appealed to congress workers to use libraries in spreading the party ideology. In 1927, along with the congress meeting, a library meeting was conducted to promote political education.[10] Progressive ideas bordering on socialist principles found their space to spread through libraries. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which had been formed by then, organised peasants, workers

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and teachers under its banner. The year 1934 was eventful politically with the formation of CSP.[11]

The link between libraries and its political initiatives of the period, can be further substantiated by the meeting at Payyannur in 1928,[12] which served as a prelude to the Civil Disobedience Movement, especially Salt Satyagraha at Payyanur. The procession to Payyannur from different parts of the suburbs were well planned, with immense public participation, most of these started from village libraries and reading rooms.[13] In every sense, in Malabar, libraries were training grounds for future politicians and social workers to go ahead with their respective ideologies.

The 1930s saw a big increase in the number of libraries all over Malabar, though their sustainability become a relevant issue. Many libraries were closed due to want of funds, and the stiff opposition from the colonial administrators who were fully aware of the impact the libraries have made in public minds. Attempts to restrict such spaces of social interactions were made without any mercy. When finance become unavailable, many libraries died a natural death. Moreover, the economic hardships caused by the great depression (between 1929 and 1939) was visible in many fields of human activity, including the functioning of libraries.[14]

The politically active individuals of Malabar took upon themselves the responsibility of addressing the grievances of libraries. K. Damodaran took the initiative in organizing a meeting to this effect at Thrissur Grama Bandhu Library on 20 April 1937. Again, on 11 June 1937, an elaborate meeting of the functionaries of library movement was held at Calicut Town Hall. K. Kelappan, who was then the president of Malabar District Board, presided over the meeting. Malabar Vayanasala Sangham was formed, with E. Raman Menon as President, and K. Damodaran as Secretary. The other office bearers were Madhuravanam C. Krishna Kurup, P. T. Narayanan Nair and A. Balagopalan.[15] The Sangham, through a resolution, urged KPCC to set up libraries at grassroot level. Two members of each library attended the meeting, but the arrest of K. Damodaran put an end to the functioning of the organization. The Sangham was revamped on 6 December 1943, as Kerala Granthalaya Sangham, with Madhuravanam C. Krishna Kurup at the helm of affairs. It was under its auspices that S. R. Ranganathan, a prominent member in Indian library science visited Kerala in 1945.[16] The new Sangham operated with the aim of expanding library movement across Kerala.[17]

In 1950, Malabar Local Library Authority (LLA) was formed in accordance with the Madras Public Libraries Act of 1948, with Calicut as its headquarters. K. P. Kesava Menon served as its first chairman, and K. Kunju Kaimal as its first secretary. With the formation of Kerala state, Calicut, Cannanore, and Palghat had three separate Local Library Authorities functioning with central, branch, rural libraries and book delivery centres under them.[18] Libraries functioned as the hub of democratizing knowledge, and as the spots where individuals from all walks of life could gather and be a part of the debates, discussions and meetings. In addition to all there, youth clubs, drama clubs, charity initiatives and so on emerged as part of the library

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movement.[19] Maniyat, a village in the southern part of Kasaragod came into the limelight because of its prestigious library.

Vidwan P. Kelu Nair, the Visionary Behind the Institution

Vidwan P. Kelu Nair, the founder of Vigyanadayini library, a teacher by profession, was in essence a versatile genius whose intellectual outreach was far beyond his area of operation. Apart from being a teacher, he was a Sanskrit scholar, dramatist, Congress worker, and a progressive thinker. He was born on 27 June, 1901, in Nileshwaram. Later, he moved to Vellikoth, a village near Kanhangad.[20] He obtained his Vidwan degree from Pattambi Sanskrit School.[21] He joined military service, and was part of the first world war. On his return from military service, he was engaged in cultural activities of the locality. Drawn towards the national movement which was gathering support from the public at a rapid pace, he too joined the Congress party. He was an actor himself, and a promoter of plays. He was instrumental in forming the Parassinikadavu Muttappan Daivavilasam Drama Company in 1921. The drama troupe staged many shows across north Malabar.[22]

In 1926, he founded the Vigyanadayini Sanskrit School at Vellikoth, Kanhangad. He became the founder principal of the institution. He needed a platform to spread Gandhian ideals and expand the base of congress party in the regain.[23] The version of K. Madhavan, the late freedom fighter and communist leader, has it that Kelu Nair, A. C. Kannan Nair and K. T. Kunhambu Nair was the formidable trio that built the Congress party in Hosdurg. They came to be known as the "Political Trinity" of Hosdurg.[24] These three founded the Vellikoth Vigyanadayini National school, with Kelu Nair as the master brain behind it.[25]

It is said that A. C. Kannan Nair had the rare fortune of laying the foundation stone and later on, inaugurating the school, on 17 April, 1926 and 22 May, the very same year. The inauguration was in the presence of the doyen of Achikkanam (also Echikkanam) family. Ninety-five students got enrolled in the year of inception. Later on, 300 students or more joined the institutions irrespective of caste and creed. "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" and "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai" reverberated the premises while the inaugural ceremony was going on.[26]

The primary objective of the National School was the propagation of Congress policies. The National School Theatre was utilised for this purpose.[27] Kelu Nair's mission in life was to train students to be meaningful citizens of the nation. The tagline of the school was "Knowledge plus action". Physical training, vocational training, cleaning of roads, service to the public, including the upliftment of Harijan Community, were incorporated in the curriculum. Spinning Charka was also a part of the syllabus. Students also used to collect from houses, a handful of rice, (known as the "Pidiyari Fund" drive) once a week. This fund was used to sustain the needy ones at school.[28] K. Madhavan, had recorded that the progressive steps undertaken by the school authorities and the students, brought them into direct conflict with the conservative elements of the locality.[29] Sanskrit, Malayalam, Kannada, and English were taught in classrooms.[30]

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The Sanskrit Patashala had to its credit eminent faculties and they included Kottayil Kelu Nair for English, Mr. Damodaran for Kannada, Puravankara Krishnan Nair for Astrology, Puravankara Koran Nair for Medicine, and Mrs. Cheiyamma Chettiar for weaving.[31] Kelu Master was the headmaster. A. M. Kunhambu Nair, V. M. Krishnan Nair, and Krishnan Gurukkal were the other teachers. Except for the Krishnan Gurukkal, all others did their duties on an honorary basis.[32] The school rose into eminence, and towering personalities like K. Kelappan, K. Madhavan Nair, Krishnaswamy Iyer, Moyarath Sankaran, Hareeshwaran Thirumumb, and Ramunni Menon (editor of Mathrubhumi) were visitors to the institution.[33]

Kelu Nair was a promoter of Khadi too, and stayed connected to the Khadi store in Kanhangad in a responsible position.[34] Attracted by Gandhian ideals, he fought relentlessly against untouchability and alcoholism.[35] He attended the Madras AICC session in 1927. He was also associated with Bharat Yuvak Sangham,[36] as its president, and was in the forefront of the Adi- Dravida conference at KPCC Convention in Payyannur.[37] He wrote his clear-cut views in handwritten issues of Shakti, periodical of Bharat Yuvak Sangham. A. C. Kannan Nair was in charge of the periodical.[38]

Formation of the Library

Kelu Nair's activities were not confined to Vellikoth, and they spread across the neighbouring villages of Maniyat, Udinur and Chandera.[39] He used to shuttle between Kanhangad and Calicut, Kanhangad and Mangalore as part of his social, political and cultural work. E. P. Rajagopalan, a literary critic, opines that railway stations and railway tracks were spaces unaffected by insular feelings. So, people preferred to travel by train even in the first decade of 20th century.[40] Kelu Nair used to visit Puthiyaveedu Tharavad in Maniyat and from there he interacted with others on topics related to theatre, literature, and the need of reforms in society. He was aware of the fact that a literary could create wonders in public minds. With the ample support of people like Kuppadakkal Krishnan Nambiar, Puravankara Kunhambu Nair, C. M. Kunhiraman Nair, M. Ambu Panikkar, and K. V. Chindan the library was established in 1927.[41]

Initially, the library functioned as a reading room. Kelu Nair encouraged youngsters of the time to read, learn and react. The library came to be known as Vigyanadayini library. It began its operation from first floor of a private residence, and that became the epicentre of all reformist activities in Maniyat.[42] It was at this juncture, Kelu Nair staged his musical drama, "Vivekodayam", which blasted the prevalent traditions of matrilineal inheritance system (Marumakkathayam), and cross-cousin marriage (Murappennu).[43]

Kelu Nair was the livewire behind every social, political, and culture function. His oratorial skills drew the common folk to the activities of the library. He was a die-hard critic of alcoholism, untouchability, and such other evils.[44] He died by suicide on 18 April, 1929. At the time of his death, he was only 27 years old. According to E. P. Rajagopalan, Kelu Nair's suicide was the young man's sincere response to society's

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orthodoxy and dogmas.[45] He was not lucky enough to see his brainchild operating from a four-cent land of its own. The land was donated by Kallat Krishnan Master, who was also inspired by the activities of the library.[46]

Cultural Expansion and Public Sphere

The Vigyanadayini library hall had always been vibrant, with programmes one after the other, and they included discussions on theatre, literature, and politics. Many of the popular dramas like those of T. C. Achuthamenon's Sangeetha Naishadham, Sadarama by K. C. Kesava Pillai, a few Tamil plays, Amshumathi Dharmaguptam by Kuttamath Kunhambu Kurup, Devayani Charitham and Balagopalan by Mahakavi Kuttamath, Kelu Nair's musical dramas,[47] and productions by Paramashiva Vilasam Drama Troupe (P. S. V. Natyasangham) were staged there.[48] Through instances in the puranas, Kelu Nair created plays and conveyed his strong views against social evils like untouchability, and casteism, and strongly advocated for national unity, and religious harmony. He used the medium also to orient the public on the challenges of modernity. Above all, Gandhian ideals found their expression through his speech and deeds.[49]

By 1950s, Maniyat Cultural Committee came into existence, as an arm of the library, and the committee organized monthly cultural shows. On 1 May, 1957, E.M.S. spoke to the villagers, invoking the importance of May Day, and the responsibilities of the working class across the world. In March, the same year, A. K. G. had paid a visit to the library and contributed books worth Rs. 100. The Kerala Granthasala Sangham[50] granted 347 Malayalam books and 15 English publications when the library got affiliated to it in 23 November 1957, and by 2016, the library had a collection of around 10,000 volumes. Meetings of Mixed Marriages Association, training sessions for youths, and seminars on village leadership were also conducted at regular intervals. On 2 May 1993, the library moved into its present building, the construction of which were sponsored in parts by Kerala Granthasala Sangham and Pilicode Grama Panchayat. This new building was inaugurated by Subrahmanya Shenoy, the late freedom fighter and communist leader. The Labourers Club formed in 1967, and the Koras Kala Samithi founded in 1990, actively worked in league with the cultural committee. Folklore events, Kathaprasangam workshop, film festivals, public speaking training, and Aksharaslokasadasu were part and parcel of the cultural activities sponsored by the library.[51]

A Space Filled with Memory

Another aspect worth mentioning about the library, is the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi it has since 1957. It was painted by Kizhakedath Krishnan Kuttan, the art teacher of Rajah's High School, Nileshwaram. The portrait was unlike the other pictures of Gandhiji. It portrayed an unspectacled Mahatma, looking depressed, ruminating on the pitiable condition of India, perhaps. Nowhere else can such a portrait of Gandhiji be seen. It reflected truly the mood of the nation then. It was not just a portrait, but

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the noble spirit of the Mahatma addressing his people. Kelu Nair's commitment to Gandhian ideals also finds its sad presence through the picture.[52]

Conclusion

The evolution of Vigyanadayini library at Maniyat is also the evolution of a modest rural institution into a powerful centre of knowledge, culture and social transformation. It did not remain a silent spectator to the events around it, but remained proactive to all changes in society, be it political, economic, cultural, or social. It shows how a rural library could transform the common people into socially conscious, politically oriented, and culturally reformed ones. It also proved to the world how a library got integrated with the daily lives of the people of a village by giving access to print media, bringing up discussions, and nurturing critical and progressive thinking. It provided a gateway to aspiring learners, thinkers, politicians and the like, to shine in their respective fields. Through the discussions, debates, shows, cultural and social activities sponsored by the library, many got access to the public sphere. Maniyat and the neighbouring villages in Kasaragod, owe a lot to Vidwan P. Kelu Nair for his untiring efforts in rejuvenating the thoughts of the people, and in directing them to constructive path. The active presence of Vigyanadayini Library, Maniyat, reveals a legacy of a century-long contribution towards democratizing knowledge in a once socially stratified region.

Endnotes

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11. Raman Nair, *Op. cit.,* p. 5.
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13. Raman Nair, *Op. cit.,* p 5
14. K. S. Ranjith, *Op. cit.,* p.8

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22. Present day Sree Nilakanta Government Sankrit College in Pattambi, it founded in 1899 by Sri Punnasseri Nampi Neelakanta Sarma, A. K. Nambiar, *Vidwan P. Kelu Nair* (Mal.), in "Vidwan P. Kelu Nair Smaranika", Sree Vidya Publication, Trichur, May, 1989, p. 53, also in, K. K. N. Kurup, *Payini Kelu Nairum Desiya Prasthanavum* (Mal.), in "Vidwan P. Kelu Nair Smaranika", Sree Vidya Publication, Trichur, May, 1989, p. 43.
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34. *Ibid.,* p. 28.
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36. K. K. N. Kurup, *Ibid.,* p. 44.
37. A branch of Bharat Yuvak Sangh founded by T. L. Vaswani was opened at Vellikoth Vigyanadayini Sanskrit School under the leadership of Vidwan P. Kelu Nair, K. T. Kunhiraman Nair and A. C. Kannan Nair. Vidwan K. K. Nair, *Vidwan P. Kelu Nair (Mal.), Op. cit.,* pp. 77-78.
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39. Ibid., also in Vidwan K. K. Nair, *Vidwan P. Kelu Nair* (Mal.), *Op. cit.,* p. 78.
40. Vidwan K. K. Nair, *Ibid.,* p. 78.
41. Railway station existed in Thrikkaripur and Cheruvathur as early as 1904. however, chandera railway station was established in 1948. The distance to Vigyanadayini library is 4.1 km from Thrikkaripur, 5.1 km from Cheruvathur, and 1.3 km from Chandera. *Njan Adhyam Kanda Pusthakam*, Interview with E. P. Rajagopalan, The Kerala Library Movement Interviews, Memoripedia, Episode 15, 4 April 2026. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KhBx6flYjs&list=PLFGu2905bo9_6Cg1LDvrULZVBAB6dbcKL&index=13
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51. C. P. Sreedharan, *Nadakamahakaviyum Nadakangalum* (Mal.), *Op. cit.,* pp. 14-16.
52. After the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956, the Akhila Thiruvithaamkoor Granthasala Sangham was renamed the Kerala Granthasala Sangham (KGS). The unified body was formed by merging library networks from Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar under the leadership of P. N. Panicker. *Indiayile Adhyathe Public Library, Op.cit.*
53. *Kala-Samskarikam Chanderayude Mannil* (Mal.), *Op. cit.,* pp. 43-46, also in K. Balakrishnan Nambiar, Vidwan P. Kelu Nair: Jeevithavum Krithikalum, *Op. cit.,* p. 98
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