

# **An Introduction to the Early Malayalam Women's Magazines**

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**Abstract:** Malayalam magazines for women are usually analysed as an adjunct to mass media studies or as part of the larger cultural sphere of Kerala. There are very few studies on the twenty-five or more magazines published for women in colonial Kerala as a field in itself. Women's magazines published during the colonial times focused more on their education and progress than providing entertainment. In Kerala, they were also owned, edited, and authored by some of the early feminists. As such these magazines provide a vibrant women's history different from the canonical history of Kerala. The ideas and issues discussed in the magazines informed and shaped the public sphere in Kerala for decades into the future. This paper is in the form of an exploratory study of the field. It probes the intended readers, the writers, and the concepts and topics that were under discussion in early Malayalam women's magazines.

**Keywords:** Women's history, Malayalam women's magazines, periodicals for women, women in colonial Kerala

## **Introduction**

Special publications for women in Malayalam were started in 1888. The publication of *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini* was started by the royal decree of Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Thampuran, the then King of Travancore. In addition, women's publications such as *Sharadha* (1904), *Lakshmi Bhai* (1906), *Bhasha Sharadha* (1914) and *Mahila Ratnam* (1925) were in

circulation. “It is apparent that, most of these publications dealt with topics such as cooking, art, and decoration” (emphasis added) (K.P. 11).

The above quote is from an academic essay about one of the women editors, writers, and publishers from Kerala. However, even when lauding the editor/writer/publisher, there is a dismissal of the entire genre of women’s magazines from early Kerala (which consisted of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and British Malabar). Periodicals for women, especially those that were edited by women, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be relegated as dealing only with “cooking, art, and decoration”. They dealt with diverse issues. While the topics can be classified as being generally women-centric, they had a broader focus in terms of the aspects of women’s lives that they discussed. Nevertheless, history has not recorded the considerable and critical role played by women’s periodicals. Scholarly works have pointed out the systematic erasure and outright misogyny inherent in contemporary Kerala (For details, see Devika and Sukumar; Devika, “Clue to Why”), especially in the field of literature and literary studies. There is very little information available in the public sphere or even academic circles about the scores of women’s magazines, women writers, political activists, and social reformers from the twentieth century (and before). Most of the women’s magazines of the period were run by early Malayali feminists. These women were accomplished in other spheres of life. There were teachers, legislators, councillors, doctors, writers, scholars, and students contributing articles to the magazines. As such, their tone and engagement with the topics under discussion in the periodicals were different as I will detail in the following sections.

This article is divided into three sections. The first part deals with the intended reader, circulation figures, and writers of the magazines. In the second section, I give an overview of the Malayalam women’s magazines that were being published in the first half of the twentieth century. In the final section, I review the subjects and concepts that were frequently discussed in the women’s periodicals from colonial Kerala.

### **Who were the readers and writers?**

By current standards, the early Malayalam periodicals did not have many readers. The largest subscription figure for a women’s magazine, as per administrative documents, is 2000. This was for *Vanitha Kusumam*, which started publication from Kottayam in 1927 (*The Statistics of Travancore 1929-1930*, hereafter *TST* 378; Priyadarshanan 182). The (*Christhava*)

*Mahilamani* had the next highest publication figure at 1500. It was published from Thiruvalla (TST 370). In Thrissur, *Lakshmibai* had a subscription figure of 1300 (*Report on the Administration of Cochin for the year 1090 M.E.* 50). One of the longest-running women's magazines to be owned and edited by women was *Mahila*. It was started in 1921 and went on to be published for twenty years (Rekha 91). This magazine was also subscribed to in government schools from 1924. The government documents put the subscription figures for *Mahila* at 500 (TST 371).

The population of Travancore according to the 1921 census was around 40 lakhs (*Travancore Administration Report 1929-30*, hereafter *TAR 1929-30* 2). Around 4 lakh students were enrolled in schools of which a little less than half were girls. The number of departmental schools for the same period varied between 1100 to 1150 (200-201). Therefore, considering the number of students and the population, the subscription numbers for *Mahila* are not high. The highest subscription figure for a Malayalam publication in the period, according to government documents, was only 5000. Thus, the circulation figures for these women's magazines were not abysmal, rather they did quite well for the period.

The periodicals were pitched to a group that could afford to subscribe to them at ₹2 to ₹4 per annum or that had access to them in an educational institution, reading room, or library. Though the magazines were supposedly for all women, there were quite a few that were printed for women belonging to specific communities. There were also magazines started for women from specific communities that later catered to other communities as well. The magazines did not outwardly publicise or present themselves as belonging to a particular region. Despite that, there would be issues specific to a region (Travancore, Cochin, or Malabar) or articles addressing women from a particular region (essays starting with the salutation "My sisters in Kochi"). The periodicals had the primary objective of educating and improving the status/condition of women. Entertainment was secondary to the primary objective of education. Here education does not stand for the act of going to school, rather it stands for a broader definition of the term. This consisted of broadening the world view of the women, introducing them to happenings in other parts of India and the world, having discussions on issues specific to women and laying these out in non-academic or easy to understand language, and allowing women to practise their literacy skills in terms of reading and writing.

There are no records of the actual number of women who contributed to the various women's magazines that were published in colonial Kerala. However, rough estimates put this number at somewhere above 220. Biographical details available about a majority of these writers are scant. The following paragraph introduces a few women writers.

M. Haleema Beevi was the writer, editor, and proprietor of four periodicals—three of these were women's magazines. She was a municipal councillor at Thiruvalla for five years (Muringatheri). She was the first Muslim woman to become a councillor in Kerala. She was part of the Independence movement and had been jailed during the regime of Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. Anna Chandy, another writer, was the first woman judge in India, and later the first woman High Court judge in the country. She was a vociferous champion of women's rights in the public sphere and private realm of the family. K. Chinnamma held the position of Assistant Inspectress at the Travancore Education Department (Devika, "Her-self" 29). She also ran an institution to educate and train girls from poor families. K. Chinnamallu Amma was a teacher and social reformer (Devika, "Her-self" 75). B. Kalyani Amma was a teacher, author, and social reformer. She edited two different women's magazines at different times. B. Bhagirathy Amma was a public speaker and an advocate of an "active, informed and disciplined domestic role" for women (Devika, "Women and Literature"). B. Anandavalli Amma was a professor and later principal of the Women's College in Thiruvananthapuram (Saradamoni 123). Tharavath Ammalu Amma was an author and a Sanskrit and Tamil scholar. She had translated several works from Sanskrit and English into Malayalam. A few of her books were in use as textbooks ("Tharavath Ammalu Amma"). She took an active part in the literary scene, including chairing the Sahitya Parishath meetings in the 1920s and 1930s. The women's magazines had articles by non-Malayali women also. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Tamil doctor, social reformer, and member of the Madras Legislative Council, contributed articles regularly to Malayalam magazines. Additionally, the women's periodicals carried translated works of authors from other parts of India and the world.

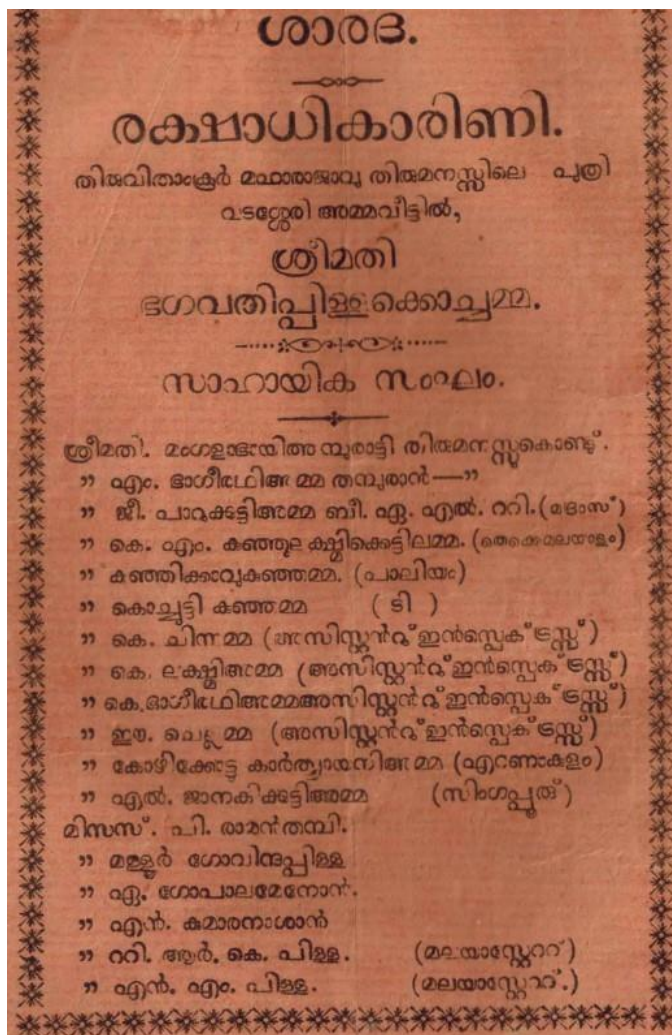


Figure 1. Inside cover of *Sharada* (1919, vol. 4, no. 12) with the list of patrons and the editorial team

In other words, these were the first and second generation of women who had been educated through the then modern schools—schools that had been instituted by the missionaries, government, and private entities, which were different from the *ezhuthupally* (local school run by a single teacher), *asankalari* (single teacher school run at her/his home) or home-schooling done under traditional teachers. Even when these women were not educated in the modern schools, they had access, contacts, and the wherewithal to start, write, edit and/or run these magazines. The writers of the time, both women and men, contributed to several magazines, were editors of multiple magazines, and/or were prominent in the public sphere in different capacities.

In the section following this, I give a short introduction to the women's magazines that were published in Malayalam-speaking regions—Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar—till 1950. At the outset, there are a few things, that this research article would like to point the readers' attention to. (a) One of the serious issues with historical research is the lack of access to systematic documentation. Hence, there would be lacunae in the figures and details of the magazines. (b) Many of the periodicals from this period that are available in the public archives belong to hegemonic castes and communities. A reading of the past through these periodicals is, in consequence, bound to be influenced by hegemonic ideas of that period. Simultaneously, it should be remembered that these magazines were not representative of other communities, particularly subaltern groups. (c) The early Malayalam magazines did not have the kind of reach and readership enjoyed by contemporary women's magazines. And (d), though most research aspires to take an objective standpoint, our location in the present and our beliefs and ideology are the lenses through which we read and analyse the past.

### **Which were the magazines?**

*Keraliya Sugunabodhini*, the first women's magazine from Kerala was printed from Thiruvananthapuram sometime in the 1880s (different sources put the year at 1884, 1885, or 1886). Scholars are divided as to whether the magazine had any women writers, although some of the articles in the magazine purportedly had women's names in the authorial space (Priyadarshanan 14; Rekha 80, 84). The magazine had poetry, essays on social issues, astrology, Ayurveda, short stories, reviews of literary works, biographies, and short news articles (Rekha 80-81). Though the magazine was started for women, the content was literary. There were not many articles that dealt with women-specific issues.

<b>Sl no.</b>	<b>Name of Magazine</b>	<b>Year(s)</b>	<b>Place(s) of publication</b>
1	<i>Keraliya Sugunabodhini</i>	mid 1880s	Thiruvananthapuram
2	<i>Sharada</i>	1904-1910	Thripunithura
3	<i>Lakshmibai</i>	1905-1940	Thrissur
4	<i>Sharada</i>	1913-1924	Thiruvananthapuram/Punalur
5	<i>Bhashasharada</i>	1915-1919	Punalur

6	<i>Mahilaratnam</i>	1916	Thiruvananthapuram
7	<i>Sumangala</i>	1916	Kayamkulam
8	<i>Sanghamitra</i>	1920	Kollam
9	<i>(Christhava) Mahilamani</i>	1920- 1940s	Thiruvalla
10	<i>Mahila</i>	1921-1941	Thiruvananthapuram/Thiruvalla/Chengannur
11	<i>Sevini</i>	1924	Kollam
12	<i>Araya Stree Jana Masika</i>	1924	Karunagapally
13	<i>Muslim Mahila</i>	1926	Cochin
14	<i>Sahodari</i>	1925- 1940s	Kollam
15	<i>Vanitha Kusumam</i>	1927	Kottayam
16	<i>Mahila Mandiram</i>	1927	Thiruvananthapuram
17	<i>Sreemathi</i>	late 1920s	Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam
18	<i>Malayalamasika</i>	1930	Kozhikode
19	<i>Sthree</i>	1933	Ernakulam
20	<i>Muslim Vanitha</i>	1938	Thiruvalla/Kodungalloor
21	<i>Vanita Ratnam</i>	late 1930s	Thiruvalla
22	<i>Vanitharamam</i>	1942- 1950s	Kottayam
23	<i>Vanitha</i>	1944	Thiruvalla
24	<i>Vanithamitram</i>	1944	Thiruvananthapuram/Kayamkulam
25	<i>Aruna</i>	1950	Kozhikode

Figure 2. List of early women's magazines with the year(s) and place(s) of publication

The next women's magazine to be published in Malayalam-speaking regions was *Sharada* in 1904. It had three women editors, T.C. Kalyani Amma, T. Ammukutty Amma, and B. Kalyani Amma ("Swayamprasthavana" 3). The magazine went on till 1910 with a break in between (Rekha 85-86). In 1913, another magazine called *Sharada* was published by T.K. Kalyanikutty Amma. This magazine ran for around ten years (Rekha 86; *The Travancore Almanac & Directory 1921*, hereafter *TTAD 1921* 131; Madras Publicity Bureau 232).

In 1905, around the time *Sharada* was being published, a women's magazine called *Lakshmibai* began to be published from Thrissur in Cochin. This magazine was in circulation till 1940, but not continuously. *Lakshmibai* had 221 women writers according to Therambil Sankunni Menon as quoted by Rekha (86-87). *Mary Rani* was another magazine for women that started from Thripunithura (in Cochin) in 1913. The magazine was owned and edited by men, but the articles were similar to those found in then contemporaneous women's magazines (Rekha 86-87) and it had women writers. *Mary Rani* was quite popular for that time with a subscription figure of 600 (*Report on the Administration of Cochin 1915* 50).

The most popular magazine, going by circulation figures, was *Vanitha Kusumam*. It had around 2000 subscribers which went up to 3000 (Rekha 94). This magazine was started in Kottayam in 1927. Eminent women writers, reformers, and politicians of the time wrote in this magazine. The magazine carried pictures of events and famous people unlike other women's magazines from the early twentieth century. The records do not provide information on how long the magazine existed. *TTAD* for 1930 lists *Vanitha Kusumam*, but not the one for 1937. The magazine may have been in print for only three to four years.

In terms of subscription figures, in the first decades of the twentieth century, periodicals run by the Christian communities (even among women's magazines) had more readers. This could be attributed to the cohesiveness and close-knit structure of these communities which made dispersal/circulation easier for their periodicals. People from castes within the Hindu religion started coming together as formalised communities in the early twentieth century, while the different sects of Christians already had community structures and contacts through their churches and leaders. They were also the first groups to have access to modern printing presses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When communities began forming organised and formal structures, they started periodicals for the upliftment/development/emancipation of their members.



*Sanghamitra* was a periodical that began publication from Kollam, specifically for the Ezhava women, in 1920. The writers of this magazine overlapped with then concurrent magazines (Rekha 90). *Sanghamitra* was in existence for three to four years and was edited by P.K.N. Vaidhyan (*TTAD* 1922 101). *Sevini* was another periodical that began publication from Kollam in 1924. It had financial support from the prominent Ezhavas in the region (Rekha 92). Many of the women writers wrote in this magazine. It was meant for the upliftment of both women and students, according to its editorial (Rekha 92-93).

*Mahila*, as mentioned before, commenced from Thiruvananthapuram in 1921, and was later moved to Thiruvalla and then Chengannur (*TTAD* 1937 167). *Mahila* was owned and edited by B. Bhagirathy Amma (*TST* 371). Yet another magazine, *Christhava Mahilamani* started publication in 1920 from Thiruvalla. It was in print till the mid-1940s and was hugely popular in both Travancore and Malabar with an estimated circulation of 1500 copies (Pradeep; *TST* 370). The magazine was meant for Christian women in the beginning. The “*Christhava*” was dropped from the name in 1932 when the proprietor realised that people were not subscribing to the magazine in Cochin thinking it was a Church magazine for proselytisation (Pradeep).

*Araya Stree Jana Masika* (called *Arayathi Janamasika* in other locations) was started for Araya women by Dr Velukutty Arayan in 1924. There is not much information available about this periodical besides that it was printed from Karunagapally. *Bhashasharada*, *Mahilaratnam*, and *Sumangala* began printing from Punalur in 1915, Thiruvananthapuram in 1916, and Kayamkulam in 1916, respectively (Rekha 88; Priyadarshanan 105, 111). *Sumangala* was more in the line of a family magazine and none of these magazines lasted for long.

*Sahodari* began from Kollam in 1925 (Priyadarshanan 178). Like many other women’s magazines, it had a break in publication. From the third volume, *Sahodari* re-started in the mid-1940s. By then, the magazine was more like a general literary magazine with short stories, poetry, a few essays based on current affairs, and had no articles with women-specific focus.



Figure 3. Top of the back cover of *Sahodari* (1945, vol. 3, no. 12) with the licence number from 1926.

The *Muslim Mahila* was launched in 1926 to better the condition of Muslim women. Published from Cochin, this periodical had many Muslim and Christian writers (Rekha 93). Another magazine called *Muslim Vanitha* was brought out by M. Haleema Beevi (mentioned at the beginning of this article) from Thiruvalla in 1938. This magazine had to be stopped due to a financial crunch and backlash from conservatives within the Muslim community (M.P.). However, Haleema Beevi went on to start a general monthly by the name *Bharatha Chandrika* in 1944 (K.P. 11). Many of the well-known authors and poets of the time contributed to *Bharatha Chandrika*. It was converted to a daily in 1947. She also started a women's magazine called *Vanitha* in 1944.

The periodical, *Sthree*, was set up by the social reformer, K. Sahodaran Aiyappan and edited by his wife Parvathy Aiyappan. The magazine began to be printed from Ernakulam in 1933 and many of the writers were women. Starting in 1927 at Thiruvananthapuram, *Mahila Mandiram* was launched under the patronage of the Sreemoolam Shashti poorthi Memorial Mahilamandiram. It had a good circulation figure of 1400 (*TST* 363), but like other women's periodicals it does not appear to have run for more than a few years. There is no mention of the magazine in *TTAD* 1937.

*Srimathi* was brought out sometime in the late 1920s. The government documents list two magazines, one spelt *Sreemathi* and edited by Mrs Anna Chandi in 1930 (*TTAD* 1930 141) and another spelt *Srimathi* and edited by Sri. C.O. Ponnammamma in 1937 (*TTAD* 1937 164). *Sreemathi* was published simultaneously from Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam, while *Srimathi* was published from Thiruvananthapuram alone. The magazines were possibly the same since writers and editors of the time were part of interconnected social networks. Though Anna Chandy is the listed editor in the government document, in actual practice, the

periodical was edited by a group of women including V.M. Katherine, A. Vijayamma, Bhagavaty Lakshmy Ammal, and C.P. Saradamma (Devika, “Clue to Why”). The magazine(s) lasted only for a few years (Rekha 98).

The *Malayalamasika* requires special mention here since it was the first women’s magazine to be published from Malabar, specifically Kozhikode in 1930. One of the editors of the magazine was B. Kalyani Amma who had been the editor of the earlier *Sharada. Aruna*, which possibly started publication in 1950, seems to be the next women’s magazine to be printed from Kozhikode. This magazine had colour pictures from the mid-1950. *Aruna* also carried news items about cinema together with articles for women.

വിഷയവിവരം	
ക്രമം	പേജ്
1. മുഖവിവരം—തൃമതി ജാനകീദേവി	
2. ഭാരതം സംസ്കാരം— സാവിത്രി	5
3. പുതിയ തലമുറ (ചെറുകഥ)— തൃവിക്	6
4. ശിശു സംഭാഷണം— പി. ആർ. കെ. നായർ	9
5. ജീവിതവൈജ്ഞാനി (പ്രശ്നം)— മിസ്സിസ് അമ്മിണി കെ. മേനോൻ	10
6. ഗ്രഹനായിക— സി. പി. സുരേ	11
7. ആ തവകൾ (ചെറുകഥ)— പുണ്യനായി നാരായണി	14
8. തൃമതി ജാനകീദേവി— പി. കെ. ദേവകി	17
9. പുഷ്പവാടി (ബാലമുഖ്യം)— കെ. ലീലാവതി	20
10. തിരുമാനം—നാനാകുൾ	21
11. സുരേ—സുരേഷ്വരനാഥൻ	24
12. പക്ഷികൾ ഗാനം (പ്രശ്നം)— കെ. പി. ബി. പാട്ടം	25
13. ചാരിത്രം: അതാരു പഴഞ്ചെറേണോ?— സരോജം	27
14. 12 വയസ്സായ ഗണകന്തി—	30
15. അടക്കമയിൽ	31

Figure 4. Content page of *Aruna* (October 1950, vol. 1, no. 8).

*Vanitharamam* was published from Kottayam from 1942 onwards. Like *Mahila*, this magazine was also subscribed to in schools and colleges. It had literary and language-related articles (Rekha 98). *Vanithamitram* commenced in 1944 from Thiruvananthapuram and was later moved to Kayamkulam. Details are not available for *Vanita Ratnam*, another magazine,

except that it was being printed from Thiruvalla in 1937 with K.C. Achamma as the proprietor and editor (*TTAD* 1937 168).

The public archives do not have copies of many of these periodicals. Most of the issues of *Mahila*, *Sharada*, *Sreemathi*, and *Lakshmibai* are obtainable in a few government archives. Some of the community and caste-based magazines are available in private libraries and collections. The lack of access to most of these magazines are interstices in our understanding of the era—a lack that may or may not change our current understanding of the period. Nevertheless, the existence of 25 (or more) magazines specifically for women in a span of half a century is something that needs to be studied and analysed further. These magazines did not exist in a vacuum, separate from each other. In the case of *Sharada*, when the first magazine stopped, another publication was started under the same name. Before Haleema Beevi brought out *Bharatha Chandrika* in 1944, there was another weekly being printed at Kollam under the same name and owned by M.K. Abdulrahiman Kutty (*TTAD* 1930 137). Sometimes, an article that appeared in one magazine had responses appearing in another magazine. For instance, in the September 1945 issue of *Sahodari*, there was an article titled “Nalla Chilla Kathakal” (some good stories) by Moorkoth Kunjappa. This was written in response to articles written by someone called “G.M.” in the magazine, *Mangalodayam* in the January and February issues of the same year. The prominent writers, editors, and owners knew each other. B. Kalyani Amma was the editor of *Sharada* and *Malayalamasika* as aforementioned. The editor of *Mahila* was her sister and the editor of *Mahila Mandiram* was her friend. Haleema Beevi and her husband helped the owners of *Malayala Manorama* when they ran into problems with the authorities. Additionally, the writers of many of the magazines overlapped as mentioned earlier.

Not all the periodicals listed here appear in the government documents. This could be because (a) they did not last long enough or had sufficient circulation to appear in the records, (b) they were not licenced periodicals, and (c) the government records consulted for this paper were not exhaustive. In the following section, I look at certain recurring issues or ideas that were discussed in the women’s magazines.

### **What did the early magazines write about?**

Women’s magazines in Malayalam went through various stages of evolution or transformation over the years, as they did in the rest of India. Francesca Orsini in her study of

Hindi women's journals identifies two phases: the first phase from the 1890s to the First World War and the second phase from the 1920s to 1940s. The first phase is when the magazines started to be published and they aimed to reform women into appropriate forms of domesticity. The second period is a radical period, where the focus was on "reforming society on women's behalf" (138). This rough periodisation is applicable in the case of Malayalam-speaking regions, with certain differences stemming from the cultural specificities of the regions. Towards the mid-century, there is yet another transformation that happens in the content and vision of women's magazines in Kerala. By then, it was assumed that women had achieved most of what they had set out to do. Thereafter the tone of the magazines was more relaxed. By this time, publications entered the "mass" media stage (Jeffrey 467). Robin Jeffrey differentiates three stages in the evolution of print and newspapers in Kerala. In the first stage, which he calls "rare", printing presses existed and were rare and exclusive. This went on till the 1870s. The second stage, he calls "scarce" (467). At this stage, print media was scarce, but potent. Print could influence people and in turn, create trouble for political authority.

In Kerala, the socio-cultural sphere was brimming with possibilities in the early twentieth century. Religious and caste groups were working towards the development of their community members. Missionary endeavour had sown the seeds of western knowledge. There was a redistribution of power and authority within governmental structures. New notions of rituals, faith, and religion had taken root among the populace. Economic production had diversified in terms of labour, technology, and ethics. Printing had taken off all over India. There was the rise of new civil society organisations like reading clubs, debating societies, women's associations, etc.

If on the one hand, the first half of the twentieth century was rife with promise for printing establishments, on the other hand, the colonial and native governments were keeping a close watch on the press. The administration reports had columns detailing the subject matter of individual newspapers, periodicals, monthlies, etc. (Jeffrey 475-478). The *Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency during the year 1914-15*, for instance, stated, "The powers of the Indian Press Act were applied in demanding security in 8 cases, and in forfeiting in 17. There was one prosecution under the Press and Registration of Books Act.

The proprietors of 4 presses and the editors of 24 newspapers were warned for various reasons” (129).

Hence, women’s magazines were generally circumspect about what they printed. The *Cochin Administration Report for 1915* remarked of *Lakshmibai*, “This is ladies’ magazine containing literary matters only” and of *Mary Rani*, “Contains poetical contributions” (50). The periodicals for women touched upon a variety of subjects and issues. It was not that they did not write about current affairs. However, the manner in which the issue was presented was most often mellow, not incendiary.

The bulk of early women’s magazines falls within the categorisation of scarce media. The editors and writers were using this novel medium to discuss, debate, propagate, and disseminate issues and subjects that they thought pertained to women and that women needed to know. There were articles on women’s education, conjugality, childcare, reform involving rituals and customs specific to women, home management, chastity, dressing styles, jewellery, and so on. Many magazines carried short biographies of famous women, both within and outside India. Other than these, there were short essays related to health, contraception, Ayurveda, medicines, hygiene, recipes, and even science. Art, music, and history found their place in the periodicals for women. Articles based on theology, astrology, spirituality, ethics, and economy can also be found in the colonial magazines for women in Kerala. Since education or furthering women’s education and literacy was the main objective of these magazines there were short essays on current affairs, short stories, poetry, stories from the Puranas and mythology, literary criticism, and novels. Many eminent novelists, critics, and poets used to publish their work in both women’s and general magazines/weeklies in colonial Kerala. Several magazines carried reports on the meetings held by the various women’s groups or *samajams* that existed in the era. Women’s magazines also carried accounts of the lifestyles of women from other parts of the world.

A small section was set aside for advertisements. There were advertisements for hair oil, ayurvedic medicines and practices, treatments for sexual problems, infertility, contraception, menstruation, pregnancy-related complications, post-parturition care, digestive problems, tuberculosis, tiredness, muscle pain, etc. Shops selling clothes, batteries, dynamos, sewing supplies, rewinding shops, tailoring shops, and so on were also advertised in the women’s

magazines. In addition, one could find advertisements for other magazines, publications, and printing presses in these periodicals.

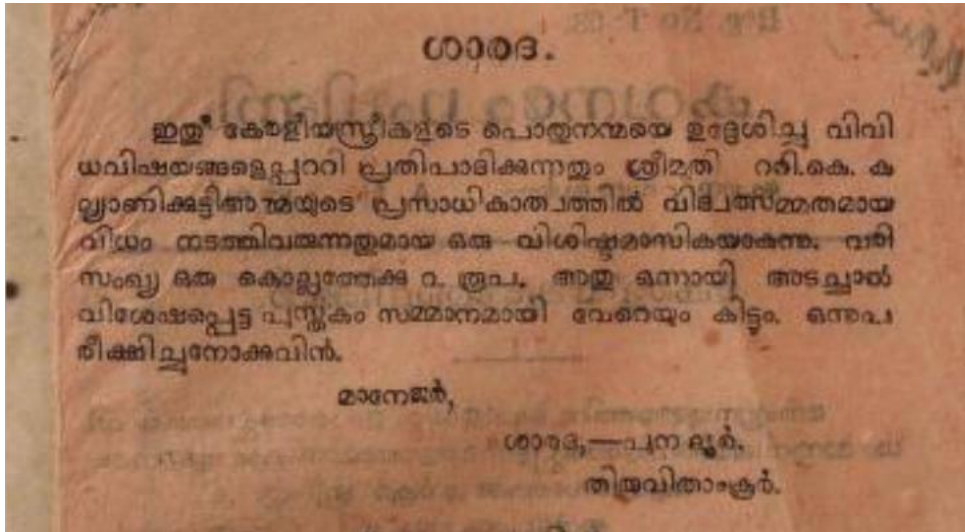


Figure 5. Advertisement of *Sharada* on the inner side of the back cover of *Kavanaposhini Masika* (1923, vol. 3, nos. 2-3)

Periodicals for women that existed before the 1920s in Malayalam-speaking regions had differing focus and concerns as compared to those that were published after this period. By the 1920s and 1930s, modern education was firmly established and caste and community groups had solidified. This was also when women were asking for rights and reservations in various locations, including the Travancore legislative assembly. More and more women were part of the public sphere in new capacities like nurses, doctors, teachers, school inspectors, orators, lawyers, editors, publishers, legislators *et al.* The discussions regarding women's education in the periodicals from before 1920 were mostly on whether women needed education. After that, the understanding was that women needed education and the focus moved on to the kind of education that women needed. Writers were vocalising discussions happening elsewhere on what was the modern woman, who was the modern woman, what were the factors that made her a woman, what needed to be done so that she remained a woman (and not become masculine/man). What was femininity or *sthreethwam*, what were women's *dharmam* (duties) towards the family, community, caste, and nation? Managing the home, servants, finances, husband, children, etc. were debated from various standpoints. Women were presented with role models both within and outside Malayalam-speaking regions.

One of the heated discussions was regarding the woman's chastity (Antony 31-32). There was a feeling that with the changing social landscape, influence of the West, and access to education, Malayali women would become more like Western women, follow western cultural markers, become individualistic, amoral, and more. This discussion on chastity found echoes in other parts of India, but in Kerala, it was also closely related to the position of women within matrilineal communities. The nuclear family (here it means the family group that had the parents and children and not the current two-child norm) was a relatively new phenomenon in that era. Within matrilineal communities, women were moving away from their maternal homes and moving in with their husbands as opposed to the custom of taking a sexual partner or entering a *sambandham* (roughly translated as consensual relationship) while staying in their natal families.<sup>i</sup> The *sambandham* had come under a lot of criticism in colonial Kerala. It was perceived as an immoral and exploitative relationship. Likewise, among the patrilineal families, women and men were moving away from the joint family and starting nuclear families due to various reasons. The "modern" woman in the early twentieth century, it was felt, was no longer under the direct control of the extended family. She had a mobility that came with this spatial move away from the joint family and also because of modern education and jobs. Women had more freedom than in the previous decades and centuries. There was a lot of fear that because of the changes wrought by the formation of the modern nuclear family, access to education, and opportunity to work, women would abandon their traditional roles within the family, caste, and community.

A woman's chastity did not revolve around the husband. It was an internal quality that led to the development and success of the marriage, family, society, and nation in the popular imagination. Mythological and historical women like Sita, Damayanti, Savitri, and Queen Victoria were evoked to emphasise the positive outcome of emulating this quality. Enculturing the quality of chastity was extremely important to many writers of the period. Even textbooks from the period had references to women's chastity (Antony 152-170). Allied to this idea was that of love marriages and arranged marriages. A legal or Sanskritic marriage ritual was the hegemonic ideal. The chaste, loyal, steadfast ideal woman/demi-goddess from mythology or the past was portrayed as enjoying an exalted position in ancient India. However, it was not that everyone subscribed to this view. Mrs C. Kuttannair, a magazine writer, for instance, pointed out that real women were neither treated in the same manner as goddesses nor did they aspire to be positioned as goddesses and queens in the home (422).<sup>ii</sup>



*Sthreedharmam* (women's duties) and *sthreeswathandryam* (women's freedom) were loaded ideas that were debated even more than chastity. *Sthreedharmam* was a blanket term that was linked to women's duties, qualities, chores, and activities. The duties included taking care of the husband, children, elderly relatives, the sick, and the poor. Being loving, capable, compassionate, humble, feminine, generous, etc. were part of women's *dharmam*. It incorporated chores like cooking, cleaning, gardening, childcare, etc. Conversation skills, money management, and even education were grouped under the ambit of *sthreedharmam* by the 1930s. During the later years, working for the nation and taking a passive part in the Indian Independence movement were added to the duties/activities of women. Therefore, *sthreedharmam* was an adaptive and fluid concept. It was to do more with one's actions than an inner quality. Women's periodicals in colonial Kerala had large numbers of articles describing, teaching, and deliberating on what constituted *sthreedharmam*.

Similarly, *sthreeswathandryam* was a concept that could mean a variety of things in early twentieth-century Kerala. It was used to encompass qualities like self-reliance, ability to deviate from cultural codes of conduct, right to education, ability to break away from caste and community rules, individualism, financial freedom, *et al.* It could also mean developing a nationalist sense of identity. This identity did not clash with the regional identity of the writers.

Connected to *sthreedharmam* and *sthreeswathandryam* was the idea of *sthreethwam*. Roughly translated as femininity, *sthreethwam* embodied qualities categorised as innate to women like kindness, generosity, patience, love, compassion, comportment, and spirituality. Since *sthreethwam* was innate, it was not something that could be taught. Nevertheless, it was believed that the right type of education would enhance a woman's *sthreethwam*. Taking this idea further, it was argued that women could work if they maintained their *sthreethwam* or they could take up jobs that did not compromise their *sthreethwam*. *Sthreethwam* was one important aspect of Malayali women that differentiated them from Western women. There was a seamless blending of concepts like chastity, *sthreethwam*, *sthreedharmam*, and *sthreeswathandryam* with domesticity and the home. In some ways, the discussions enmeshed women more firmly within the domestic sphere while paradoxically taking them out of the physical space of the home.

Since the early twentieth century was a period of transformation, reform, progress, etc., the idea of change was an important area of debate within the magazines. *Parishkaaram* was the term that stood in for civilization, reform, progress, culture, innovation, change, and material development. The idea of *parishkaaram*, like that of chastity, was so important in the first few decades of the twentieth century, there was a textbook from Malabar that had a chapter on this in 1937 (Eshwarapilla 52-64). *Parishkaaram* was taken to be positive or negative based on the context. Any kind of *parishkaaram* that affected culture, lifestyles, *sthreedharmam*, and *sthreethwam* was presented as problematic in the periodicals. The changes wrought in ideas on health and hygiene, scientific innovations, etc. were acceptable. *Parishkaaram* and *adhunikatha* (modernity) were related. Modernity—a literary, social, and political movement that occurred in nineteenth and early twentieth century in Kerala—was perceived as one of the reasons for the arrival of *parishkaaram*.

Minute aspects of women's lives were dissected in the colonial women's magazines—from discussing whether women needed contraception to the need for servants in households. That these periodicals were meant for the middle and upper classes need to be reiterated here. While it is not conceivable for us in the twenty-first century that magazines would discuss whether girls/women need to be taught music and dance, this was indeed a topic of discussion in the early magazines. There was a very real fear that women would lose their femininity, role in the domestic sphere, motherly spirit, morality, and spirituality. It was also assumed that these were qualities inherent in women.

## Conclusion

There was a shortage of newsprint towards the beginning of the Second World War. Many of the women's magazines stopped publication towards this period. The nationalist movement had gained momentum by then and the attention of the politically inclined editors and writers among the women was diverted towards this. As mentioned earlier, early women's periodicals can be categorised as falling within the scarce medium stage. The stage after the scarce medium, Jeffrey calls the mass media stage. This started in the 1960s when newspapers began to be mass-produced following changes in the economic, social, and political realm. What this did then was to change the nature of the “economy of printing” (479), with the newspapers depending on various agents from advertisers and newsagents to the State for its smooth functioning. When print media became mass media, it lost its

idiosyncrasies which were inherent in the multiple print media scenario. Profitability is what drove print media in this later stage as opposed to the literary, reformatory, emancipatory, and developmental agenda in the scarce media stage. When the economy of printing changed, the focus of women's magazines changed with it. Education and upliftment became secondary to the leading objective of recreation. Further, the language and the essay form used in the magazines changed with the times and changing needs of the time. Early women's magazines and current women's magazines, therefore, appear fairly unrelatable when read from the present. Mainstream magazines in contemporary Kerala are more like lifestyle magazines. The feminist and reformatory elements in the early magazines have detached to form a new genre among women's periodicals. Magazines/journals that take up such issues use the newer media like the internet, catering to a different clientele, and are seen as separate from the popular magazines.

The concepts, writers, and even magazines discussed in this article are neither exhaustive nor an in-depth study of the field. There were differences in how women from different castes, communities, and economic backgrounds approached several issues about women in the periodicals. Further research is needed to bring out a more nuanced and rich history of colonial Malayalam women's periodicals.

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<sup>i</sup> For more details on matriliney/*sambandham*, read Kodoth.

<sup>ii</sup> A few women used to write under their married name, often without using either their own first name or surname, but the salutation 'Mrs' and their husband's name.