Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture
Vol. 7, No. 1, January 2022

Contesting Sartorial Reforms: The Discourse in Colonial Malabar

V. Ashwini

Abstract: The paper makes an attempt to analyze the discourse of sartorial reforms which transpired in the early twentieth century Malabar so as to understand the participation of women in the discourse. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century were rife with discussions regarding the changes that were being witnessed in the sartorial realm owing to the increased influence of western lifestyles. Divergent opinions were voiced regarding the level of 'modern' influence to be allowed in the sartorial realm.

Keywords: Sartorial, *Parishkaram*, Modernity, Public Sphere, Women

Introduction

By the nineteenth century, colonial India had become a site of political, economic and social transformation owing to both colonial interventions as well as indigenous developments. This gradually paved the way towards internalizing various elements of modernity by the contemporary society. The encounter with the elements of colonial modernity prompted the natives to take up attempts to reform and revitalize their society burdened by the conditions of the caste system and other stagnant traditional norms and rules. Such attempts at introspection were also partly in response to the ridicule of the colonial masters who declared the Indian society as 'degenerated' and 'barbaric'.

The emergence of the spirit of reform in the nineteenth century could also be seen as being indebted to the spread of "colonial education, purveyed through state and Christian missionaries,

that led to an alteration and modernization of traditional social perception" (Sarkar 1). Further, the spirit of reform was closely associated with the ideals of modernity. Apart from the "changes affecting the material conditions of social life, modernity implied a rupture or distortion in the continuity of established beliefs, customs, attitudes and the hierarchy of norms and values that determine the nature of social interaction" (Bose). The colonial society of Malabar also witnessed the reverberations of such endeavors of reforming and refashioning the traditionally validated social and cultural practices so as to tide over the internal decay caused by the age-old traditions and practices as well as to meet the external challenges that were posed by colonialism (Panikkar 133).

Such seeds of reformist ideas sprouted among the small group of English educated intelligentsia. The colonial education policy which endorsed English education along with the endeavors of missionary societies in starting schools and printing presses, the possibility of availing university education and ultimately a job in the colonial administration presented conditions favorable for the growth of a class of educated intelligentsia, mainly belonging to a new social stratum called the middle class. Being aware of the new world view, an understanding that the contemporary was different from the past and informed by the new ideas which they imbibed from Western thoughts, they set about for a critical introspection and the consequent moulding of the prevailing social institutions and practices.

Formation of Public Sphere[1]

The terrain for reforming the traditional society on the lines of modernity saw the inauguration of an era of widespread public debates and dialogues regarding diverse social and cultural issues including questions regarding the futility of tradition, the nature of modernity, the authenticity of social and cultural practices and so on. These intellectual, social and cultural concerns were the main locus of social engagement in early colonial India. These can also be regarded as the initial expression of the emergence of public sphere (Panikkar 134). Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Malabar also witnessed the emergence of a public sphere in which 'public interest' became the key concern and issues came to be debated in its terms. Such an emergent public sphere could be viewed as "the presence of several fora of discussions, in which participants who had acquired certain skills attempted rational deliberations on issues and themes that were identified, for limited purposes, often, as, 'public'" (Devika 6). The emergence

of the new forms of social interactions such as dialogues and debates, the development of printing presses along with the spread of education especially helped in facilitating the emergence of a reading public.

Thus, by the end of nineteenth century, the public sphere emerged as a space in which new forces confronted the entrenched socio-political and cultural forces of hegemony. However, the public sphere was not 'public' in the literal sense as not everyone was granted equal access. It was largely the educated groups, who came into contact with modern ideas and institutions, who actively took part in the public sphere. Despite this, the public sphere that emerged became an important space which determined the way in which Malabar society was to be shaped. A wide range of subjects concerning the society came under scrutiny and was vigorously debated and discussed in the public sphere.

One such issue of concern was the western ways of living which came along with the Europeans. The subsequent transformations that were brought about in the society were together referred to as *parishkaram*, which meant reforms or reorganisation. They were also perceived as the indicators of 'purogathi' (progress).[2] Hence, the trope of *parishkaram* assumed a large space in the discussions and debates of the contemporary period.

Colonial Malabar: The Discourse on 'Parishkaram'

The term *parishkaram* became current in the society especially in the late nineteenth century and went onto be interpreted in different manners. The writings of the period provides an understanding of how *parishkaram* of the times were perceived and contested. For some, *parishkaram* meant all the transformations that were brought about in the society especially owing to the establishment of colonial rule. For some others, it meant the adoption of those aspects which were seen as western or European. For yet another group of people, *parishkaram* signified a blind imitation of Western ways of living whereas yet another group of people perceived *parishkaram* to be the freedom to exercise one's own choice (Pillai 50).

Most people saw it as an 'anukaranam' (imitation) of the Western ways of living. Consequently, they were of the opinion that this imitation has reached a level of frenzy which they termed as *anukaranabrahmam* (craze for imitation/imitation frenzy). This was an opinion popular among both men and women. P Raman Menon writes, "The craze for imitation that has crept into

the contemporary society has reached alarming levels and when looked closer, one realizes that this frenzy is often paving way for vulgarity and disrespectfulness" (P. R. Menon 389). Further, he writes "in Madras province, it is among the 'Malayalarajyam' (Malayalam speaking region, i.e., Malabar) that *anukaranabrahmam* is more powerful" (P. R. Menon 393). Often, the frenzy for imitation were equated by the contemporary writers with madness and intoxication indicating addiction to 'English fashion' which leads to the destruction of the inner being similar to how addiction to alcohol can lead to losing of the body and the mind. The writings of the period, basically, expressed ridicule at the attempts by the natives of the Malabar society to accept and imitate the ways and manners of the Europeans. Ridiculing the imitation frenzy that was seen in the contemporary period, Raman Menon writes, "Thank God that an Englishman has not come to our land with enlarged bleeding noses. Otherwise our young people would consider breaking their nose and walking about with a bleeding nose thinking that this is also a *parishkaram* to be imitated in order to fashion themselves as 'modern'" (389).

In general, the contemporary opinions differentiated the penchant for imitation into external and internal imitation. External imitation meant the imitation of the external aspects of an individual which included, the ways of dressing, the various mannerisms including the style of speaking, walking and so on. Such imitation of the external aspects was widely criticized and ridiculed as the contemporary public opinion voiced concerns about the unfavorable results that such blind imitation would result in. An analogy that was used to portray the external imitation frenzy that was witnessed was that of a person trying to imitate a renowned musician only through action, without singing (K. N. Menon 247). This analogy indicates how only the externalities are aped irrespective of the question of capability. Thus, the people of the time were portrayed as being fixated only on external imitation without bringing about positive changes that could enhance their internal qualities.

Under the rubric of *parishkaram*, it was the adoption of a new sartorial code— inspired by the European ways of dressing— that was the most visible among those who took to western education as well as among those were influenced by the West. In the case of male attire, the most visible changes include the use of shirts, suits and shoes. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the caste groups that were more in contact with the western culture being the ones actively adopting western sartorial codes, letting go of their traditional sartorial manners which included

baring the upper body and using a *mundu* and a *thorthu* only. It was "especially in the towns and amongst the officials, and peons, the European shirt, worn with the ends hanging down over the *mundu* was becoming common; as is the round cloth cap and dark short coat and among the more advanced, trousers and collars."

When delved deeper, the donning of the European sartorial styles could be understood as a part of strategies to manipulate one's own identity. Clothing signified social distinction in the colonial society in certain ways similar to what was present in the precolonial Malabar society. In general, clothing transmits a diverse range of cultural meanings and signifies a variety of social as well as political ideas such as hierarchy, exclusion, solidarity and respect (Roche 33). Consequently, the body through the clothes becomes a bearer of cultural signs (Wickramasinghe 2). Hence, sartorial changes had the capability to signify new social hierarchies as well as new means of attaining mobility in the hitherto hierarchical society based on the system of castes.

For instance, as the reformer C.Krishnan has noted, on "… a journey to Ceylon in 1899; 'To be free of nuisance from other people, I started off in European fashion, hat and all. I was convinced of the efficacy of this trick after journeying in a train for some time. Because people would move away at the sight of the hat, there was no nuisance in the compartment at all.' Thus, dress could differentiate people" (Devika 257).

The popularity of the use of shirts itself asserts the idea that the acceptance and the use of western sartorial codes were often considered as symbolic of breaking the strong caste norms. Those educated under the system of English education were the forerunners in the adoption of European styles of dressing to show their western influences and thereby expressing their reluctance to bow down to the prevalent caste norms. It could also be perceived as an attempt to identify with their current rulers, the British, and thereby disregard their erstwhile superiors, especially the Nambuthiris, who trailed behind in their attempts to acquire Western education. The embracing of new sartorial codes based on western ways of dressing was also a popular way to circumvent the existing social customs and social behavior required from them. In fact, the acceptance and adoption of Western sartorial styles espoused different meanings to different groups of people.

However, despite the popularity and the subsequent respect that the Western inspired sartorial styles earned, it also invited stringent ridicule. More often, those who adopted the western

styles of dressing were mocked at and were addressed as a class of 'koothankeeri jathi' (a loathsome hybrid race) (K. R. K. Menon). Those who took to such fashions were regarded as lacking in manliness, proper culture and lazy.

For instance, in a cartoon (Fig. 1.1), one of the guests comes for a marriage fully attired in western sartorial style. The bride's father asks his house helper to bring 'cobra shoe polish' for the gentleman whereas, for the rest of the guests, he demands water to be given so that they could wash their feet while everyone laughingly looks on. The cartoon here ridicules the use of western style of clothing in a traditional marriage setting. This reflects the contemporary times where the use of western style dresses was employed by those who had even a wee bit exposure to the culture of colonialism. Further, what is mocked here is the blind aping of the west irrespective of the context— a traditional marriage setting.

Fig. 1.1 (**Source**: *Vishwaroopam*, October, 1940.)

More than the male attire, it was the female attire that was in the eye of the storm. The changes in female sartorial styles were widely discussed and debated within the rubric of *parishkaram*. In the pre-colonial Malabar society, the caste norms necessitated both men and women to uncover the upper part of their body as a mark of respect. By the late nineteenth century, such norms were disregarded and the contact with the British, along with the spread of western styles of attire, popularized the use of blouse or jacket. However, over time the adoption of modern sartorial styles as a means of rejection of older customs and conventions began to become popular

which led to women's attire being specifically analyzed and widely commented upon. Conservative criticisms largely by men accused women of blindly chasing, and imitating modern fashions. Such empty imitation was said to have led to untoward consequences that were widely seen among the women's realm. Women were accused of not following the long-held traditions including their duties, of not respecting others and of destroying domestic happiness and community love (P R Menon 224).

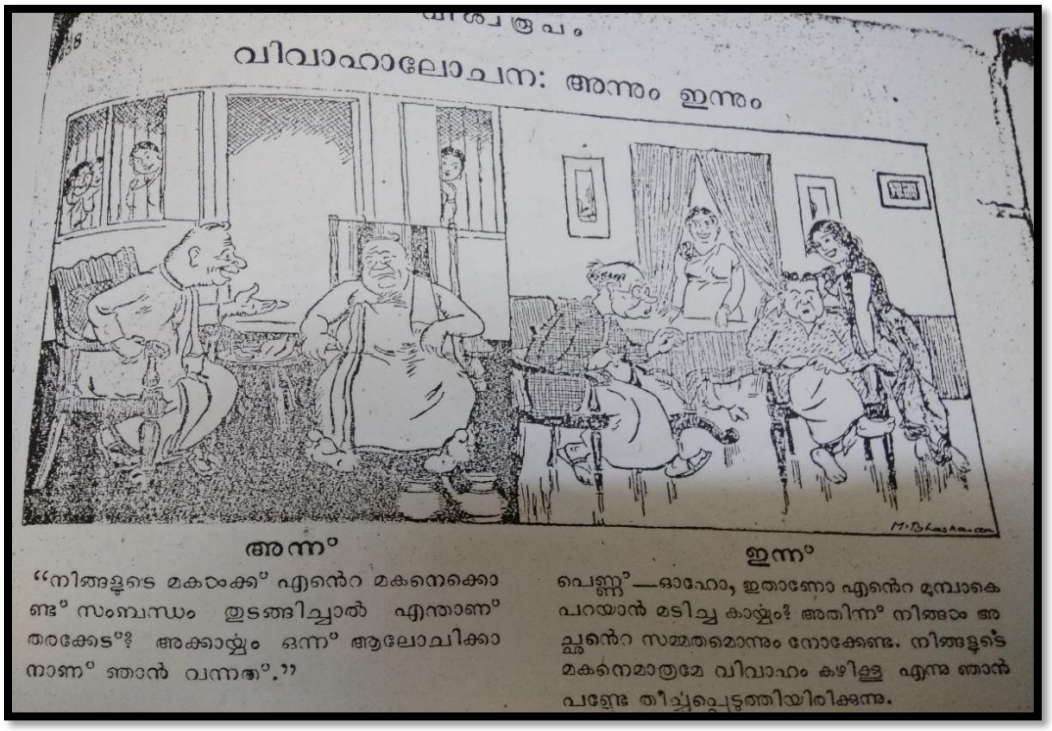

Fig. 1.2 (Source: *Vishwaroopam*, April 1941)

Another satirical cartoon (Fig. 1.2), titled 'Then and Now', tries to chronicle the changes that has been brought about in the society with the onset and spread of modern reforms. The scene here is the groom's father trying to broker a marriage alliance for his son. Here, the father has come to meet the girl's father to discuss a prospective marriage alliance with the latter's daughter. In the former frame, the father asks the girl's father, "I have come here to discuss a marriage proposal for my son. So can I ask your daughter's hand in marriage for my son?" In the second cartoon the girl is seen as replying, "Oh is this what you felt difficult to talk in front of me? For this, my father's opinion is not necessary. I had decided beforehand that I would marry your son only." The cartoonist here tries to portray the changes that have been brought among women owing

to the spread of education and the new reforms. Material objects in both the frames indicate the change of times with sartorial changes being clearly etched out. In the former the girl's father is seen in the traditional attire wearing only the *mundu* and a *thorthu*. The other man is seen in a similar style except that his upper body is covered. The women of the house remains in the backdrop peeking through the windows. Whereas in the second frame, the attire as well as the attitude of men and women are portrayed differently. The use of coloured and printed shirts and coats are seen as becoming the de rigeur. The women have come to the fore of the frame and are depicted as wearing saris including coloured saris. The girl is seen as sitting in the armrest of the chair talking directly to the guest. Both the men seem miffed at the way the girl is talking. This indirectly indicates the discomfort of the men with the changes happening among their women.

In general, one can argue that women were criticized for falling prey to the ever-expanding and ever-changing fashions and reforms of the time. Yet another contemporary writer, V.K.R. Menon, narrates an incident wherein the protagonist was rushing with a bag of newly brought clothes. When one of the onlookers asked him as to where was he scurrying off. The man replied, "I have to takes these newly brought clothes to my wife and I have no time to waste lest, these dresses would go out of fashion. If so, she would be furious and would refuse to wear all these and would throw it away" (V. K. R. Menon 230). This incident is quoted by the author to illustrate the fast pace of change in fashions as well as the way how these changing fashions have captivated the women who are trying to keep pace with the changing fashions, often with futile outcomes.

Thus, it is amply clear that women were more often ridiculed and castigated for adopting 'modern changes' in their ways of living especially in their modes of dressing. Also, women were accused of pauperizing their husbands with increased expenditure because of their frenzy for new sartorial styles.

Conclusion

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Malabar witnessed discussions regarding the changes brought about by the onward march of colonial modernity. Such changes were grouped under the trope of *parishkaram* and became a matter of intense debate that helped the moulding of a nascent public sphere in Malabar which transfigured itself into a site that saw a participation of both genders. As evident from the above discussion, within the rubric of reforms,

sartorial reforms underwent vehement scrutiny in the backdrop of the changing socio-economic conditions of the people belonging to the different strata of the Malabar society.

In other words, the site of sartorial codes was one of the important arenas through which the presence of modernity was echoed. As noted before, a significant trope visible in the discourse regarding *parishkaram* has been the ridicule and mockery meted out towards those who accepted and incorporated western lifestyles. Such ridicule and lampooning were coupled with sharp criticisms against the uncontrolled emulation of the western ways of living by both genders. Nonetheless, the rationalities behind the opposition and ridicule were varied. Firstly, breaking the ties with the traditional customs and thereby losing the uniqueness of the society were often used a reason to oppose the new reforms (P. R. Menon 430). Secondly, economic reasons in the form of an increased expenditure was also regarded as a cause for eschewing the use of western clothing. On the contrary, those who adopted and appropriated western or western-influenced attires cited the notions of progress, civilization and superiority to justify it.

Further, on the sartorial front, the female sartorial styles were vehemently debated, and often criticized, more than their male counterparts. Arguments were mustered to demonstrate how, despite moving out into the public sphere, men were more traditional than women who largely remained isolated from the public view. By and large, the criticisms emanated from the apprehension of men that women— hitherto deemed as the guardians of tradition who confined themselves in the 'inner domain'— were gradually claiming the public space at the former's cost. Such apprehensions were bolstered by the belief that women were in charge of retaining the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. Hence, notwithstanding the changes, women were expected not to lose their essentially spiritual (feminine) virtues by becoming "essentially westernized" (Chatterjee 126). In other words, even in the sartorial realm, while debating the desirability of reforms, the distinction in the social roles of men and women were preferred to be kept unperturbed.

References

Bose, Satheese Chandra. "(Re)constructing of 'the Social' for Making a Modern Kerala." *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, Orient Blackswan, 2015.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press,1993, p.126

Devika, J. *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Keralam*. Orient Longman, 2007.

Menon, Kizhakkepattu Raman Kutty. *Parangodiparinayam*, Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2004.

Menon, Korathe Narayana. "Parishkaram." *Sarabodhini*, vol. 1, no. 7, 1905, pp. 247-251.

Menon, Puthezhuthu Raman. "Anukaranabrahmam.", *Lakshmibhayi*, vol. 10, 1914, pp. 389-393.

Menon, V. K. Raman. "Parishkaragathi." *Lakshmibhayi*, vol. 23 no. 6, 1927, pp. 230-231.

Panikkar, K.N. "Whatever Happened to the Renaissance in India." *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*, OUP, 2007.

Pillai, R. Ishwara. "Nammude Parishkaram." *Lakshmibhayi*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1926, pp. 50-62.

Roche, Daniel. *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancient Regime*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Sarkar, Sumit, and Tanika Sarkar. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*. Permanent Black, 2007.

Wickramasinghe, Nira. *Dressing the Colonised Body: Politics, Clothing, and Identity in Colonial Sri Lanka*. Orient Longman, 2003.

Notes

[1] Habermas considered public sphere as a domain of common concern and a space for critical rationalist debate which is inclusive in nature.

[2] 'Parishkaram' and 'Purogathi' were the terms that were used to express the changes which were regarded as modern.