

Question of English Language and Higher Education: Early Twentieth Century Ezhava Women's Magazines in Kerala

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Abstract: The emergence of magazines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century opened up possibilities for the project of modernity among various caste communities of Kerala. Ezhava community has brought out a considerable number of magazines (*Vivekodayam*, *Sahodaran*, *Sahodari*, *Sthree*, *Sanghamitra*, *Mitavadi*, and the like) in the name of community and reform. My interest in the proposed paper is to critically engage with the discourse on English and higher education for women in the Ezhava women's magazines such as *Sanghamitra*, *Sahodari*, *Sthree*. Women's articles appeared in the Thiyya magazine, *Mitavadi*, and Ezhava magazines like *Mitavadi*, *Vivekodayam* and *Sahodaran* would also be referred as it addresses the question women's education.¹ The paper argues that the resistance of Ezhava reformers in facilitating English and higher education to women needs to be

¹*Sanghamitra* started publishing in November 1920 from Kollam. Though it was edited by P. K. N. Vaidyar, an Ezhava male, it is said that it was published for Ezhava women. We also see many articles by women from different communities in this magazine. *Sahodari* was published from January 1925, P. R. Mandakini being its publisher and P. R Narayanan as its manager. In the first issue of *Sahodari*, it is stated that "...communities like Nairs, Christians and Muslims have women's magazines. We do not forget the fact that there was *Sanghamitra*, a magazine for Ezhava women which ran for a short term. We introduce *Sahodari* because we feel that it is important and necessary to have a magazine with the aim of the progress of Ezhava women". Another magazine, *Sthree* was edited by Parvathi Ayyappan, an Ezhava woman, and claimed to be a journal for women and all those who are keen on women's progress. The editorial stated that the magazine would deal with matters concerning women and argue for women's freedom/liberation. They also note that there is no space for community arguments in *Sthree*. *Mitavadi* (weekly) started at Thalassery in the year 1906, with Moorkkott Kumaran as its editor. T. Sivasankaran was the owner of *Mitavadi*. It is said that Moorkkott Kumaran was attracted to the policy of Mitavadis and to bring popularity for their arguments he desired to bring out a magazine called *Mitavadi*. Moorkkoth Kumaran and T. Sivasankaran with the interest in the progress of Thiyyas began this magazine. After some time, *Mitavadi* (Monthly) was published from Kozhikode in 1907, with Murkkoth Kumaran and C. Krishnan as its editors. It is said that C. Krishnan was strongly against Hinduism. In 1913 he started to publish *Mitavadi* on his own in and in 1921 he made it a weekly. *Vivekodayam* was the first magazine that was published for the Ezhava community's development. *Vivekodayam* began as a bi-monthly in the year 1904 from Thiruvananthapuram. In the first issue of the magazine *Vivekodayam* (1904), its founder N. Kumaran Asan called it the powerful mouthpiece for the Ezhava community reformation. *Sahodaran* was edited by K. Ayyappan, a rationalist as well as a social reformer. Ayyappan was against Hinduism and he converted to Buddhism. This magazine was addressed to all outcastes. Though its primary aim was to fight against caste discrimination, various issues concerning Ezhavas were also discussed in this magazine. It should also be noted that very few issues of the magazines *Sthree*, *Sanghamitra*, and *Sahodari* (of which are said to be Ezhava women's magazines) are available.

problematized in the context of contemporary discourse on English education and lower castes in India. The paper also discusses the inextricable link between English language and caste. It brings out Ezhava women's voice in the subject and records the historical wrong that discouraged Ezhava women's access to the English language and higher education.

Keywords: Women, Magazines, English, Education, Caste, Modernity

Women's question and reform in India have been addressed in various ways. Although various castes and communities have actively engaged in the reform movements, the discourse is centred around the upper caste reform movements. Similarly, the feminist framework predominantly addresses the question of women in Hindu/ upper-caste/ middle-class communities (Vaid and Sangari; Tharu and Lalita; Chatterjee; Devika; Arunima; Kodoth). Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar write:

We find little about reforms among Muslims or among 'lower castes'. Attention is centred on upper-caste women's education and on their marriage practices – which were altered largely through new laws; in particular, those that banned widow burning, allowed widow marriage, restricted child marriage. (1)

As mentioned, the discourse around education and reform mainly focuses on the upper-caste women's issues and marginalize the question of Muslim and lower-caste women. Omvedt writes how the early women's movement in India was centred around the concerns of upper-caste and middle-class women. She notes:

The first wave of feminists in India (20th century) were women related to the reformers or the nationalists, mainly upper-caste women who lobbied tirelessly for the right to property and amendments in the Hindu law of marriage. These first-wave feminists were preoccupied with issues of 'status' rather than 'survival'. It was, therefore, the upper-caste, middle-class women who drew the benefits from the constitutional guarantees and legal measures. (1985)

Few studies question the exclusion of the study of the lower caste movements in India as well as lower caste women's participation in various movements (Rao; Moon and Pawar; Zelliot; Rege; Bharadwaj). Few scholars have worked on the Ezhava reform movement (Osella and Osella; Velayudhan; Jeffery) and Meera Velayudhan's argument that "the discourse signified both an attempt to build the 'reputation' and 'status' of a community as well as the subordination of women by controlling relations between the sexes within the family" ("Reform" 70) is relevant here. She does not seem to articulate the voice of

Ezhava women in the reform movement. The present paper while examining the discourse around higher education and English education of Ezhava women brings forth the women's voice and articulates the need for English education for lower caste women in contemporary Kerala.

Access to Public Education: Whose Rights?

While we address the question of women's higher education and English education, it is important to look at the discourse on lower castes' entry into government schools in the early twentieth century. Dr. Palpu writes about the educational status of Ezhavas of Thiruvithamkoor towards the end of the nineteenth century:

About thirteen percent of them are educated. Compared with Brahmins and Nairs, they are backward in point of education and this is mainly due to the reluctance of the Travancore Government to admit them freely into State Schools and employ them in the service of the State. (1)

As noted, the Government was reluctant to give free entry to the lower castes in public schools. He took the initiative and Ezhava Memorial (1896) was submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore, signed by 13,176 Ezhava community members to attain civic rights and access to education, jobs, and facilities for the lower castes.² Kumaran Asan's speech at Srimulam Popular Assembly also notes that Ezhavas were denied admission in government schools where upper caste students studied.³ In the editorial note of *Vivekodayam* (Vol. 10, no. 3&4, 1918) it has been mentioned that Government education is not available to all due to caste issues. Thiruvithamkoor Thiyyar or Ezhavar are said to be the most marginalized people and it is added that they are one out of five total population of the state and if this is their status, castes below them are in the worst condition. It is also added that thirteen girls' schools do not give entry to Ezhava girls.

² Following Ezhava Memorial, other movements of Avarnas and minorities also raised similar agendas. The Agitation for Civic Rights (*PouraSamatvavadaPrakshobhanam*, 1919) demanded posts in the land revenue departments for the avarnas of the Hindu community and Muslims and Christians. The Abstention Agitation (*NivartanaPrakshobhanam*, 1932) demanded representation in the state legislature for Ezhavas and the Muslim and Christian communities. On the one hand, these movements prove the government's injustice and indifference towards the lower castes and minorities, on the other, it marks the beginning of lower caste people's struggles against the discrimination they faced in the public sphere of Kerala

³ Legislative Council (1888) and SreeMulam Popular Assembly (1904) were established in Thiruvithamkoor, during the reign of SreemulamThirunal Maharaja. SreeMulam Popular Assembly was the platform where people could express their problems to the Maharaja. See Raveendran.

Coming to the question of girls' education, while arguing for the right to education for Ezhava girls, Asan criticized the government as girls' schools of the state were closed to them (Priyadarshanan 1). Priyadarshanan mentions that Asan has requested that the girls' schools of the state, now closed to the Ezhava girls, should be open to them as early as possible and that lists of the girls' schools that were closed or open to the Ezhavas girls should be published in the Gazette from time to time for the information of the Ezhavas (14-15). According to him, the Government seemed to worry on the assumption that higher caste children will leave school if they do so. Kunju Panikkar cites incidents where Nair girls have left school when Ezhava girls got admission. He argues that the government was adamant in this issue so that the Nair girls who left school joined back. Raveendran states that though a large percentage of Ezhava boys were attending schools, sufficient interest was not being taken by the department to spread education among the girls of the community. Out of three hundred and fifty-two girls' schools, only one-hundred and eighty were open to the community. He says that Asan had requested the government to look into the matter.⁴

Much later, Radha's article "Female Education in Travancore During 19th Century" published in the year 1981, addresses the progress achieved by Travancore in the field of female education in the nineteenth-century. She notes that although women enjoyed high status in the society, female education was limited to the Royal and a few rich families. She argues that the missionaries of the London Missionary society took the lead in the spread of education in Travancore and following this the government got itself awakened (93). It is very important to note her observation that it was the missionary women who took the lead in female education. The first girls' school was established in 1819 with fourteen girls as it was very difficult to get girls to be educated during the period. Her account of literacy by caste has to be noted. She writes:

The women of the Malayala Brahmins follow their English sisters in Enlightenment, but for them, the proportion of illiteracy is no less than 80.8%. Among the other Brahmins, 90 women per hundred were unable to read and write, the Ambalavasis intervening with an illiterate straight of 84%. The Nayar, the Kaniyan, the Maran, and the Vellala are the next best educated. Among the Kuravans, Kudumis, Maravas, Vanians, Mukkuvans, Parayas, Channar, Valens, and Pulayans over 99% of females are illiterate. It is noteworthy that among the native Christian the ratio of illiterates is as high as 94%. (108)

⁴ Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, 26 February 1919.

As noted, 99% percent of females from lower castes were illiterate. The situation was not quite different at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this context, let's consider K. Gauriamma's presiding speech at S. N. D. P Stree Samajam which was held on the fourteenth-anniversary meeting of S. N. D. P at Trivandrum in which she gives details of the census report (1911) on the education of Ezhavas. The title of the table is written as "The Progress in Education of the Ezhavas of Thruvithamkoor, Kochi and British Malabar" (19; *Vivekodayam* 1916). According to her as far as the growth in education is concerned, the Ezhavas of Thiruvithamkoor stand first, while that of Malabar and Kochi stand second and third respectively. She notes that the discriminatory attitude of the government and the upper castes has debarred lower castes' entry into the government schools for a long time. Now let us examine the educated lower caste women's opinions on English education and higher education. The coming section critically examines the same.

Ezhava Women as Culture Bearers: Primary Education/Higher Education/ and English Education?

In the initial stage, male and female reformers who have argued about the need for education for women insisted upon the need to have primary education and their training in feminine jobs. They primarily considered women as culture bearers and unanimously argued that the community's progress is dependent upon its women's progress. Together with the question of community, the question of religion was also addressed. While missionary schools gave preference to Christian religious and moral education, some of the educated Ezhavas emphasized upon spiritual education of women. The question of higher education for women was a contested area and many did not want women to go for higher education. Most importantly, many argued against women's access to English education that they thought probably it would spoil women. Some argued that one need not send women to schools and home schooling is enough for them. Few women indeed argue for women's higher education and English education.

Most of the schools emphasized religious/spiritual learning and provided education in the vernacular (*Bhasha*) language and English was only a subject to study. Radha writes: "The school was primarily intended to provide plain instruction united with a Christian religious and moral education. Apart from the instruction of the scriptures, some industrial arts like knitting, spinning, needlework, etc. were taught" (104). She adds that later several schools got established in North Travancore, Alleppy, etc., and

in these schools, girls were given instruction in vernacular on various subjects like history, geography, arithmetic & elements of natural philosophy, besides some English lessons. We need to note two important stages of female education as noted by Radha. In the initial phase women were trained in knitting, spinning, needlework, etc., and in the second phase, they were taught several subjects in vernacular (*Bhasha*). In the beginning stage of social reform, women were concerned about their access to educational institutions and argued for the need to get primary education. B. N. Meenakshiamma considers women as culture bearers and suggests education that would equip women to opt for feminine jobs such as agriculture, tailoring, and spinning. She notes that there are very few people in the Ezhava community who realize the need/value of women's education. She adds that many great men have said that the progress of all communities depends upon its women. According to her the education available is not enough to equip girls to follow *sthreedharmam*. She opined that if we do not include spiritual education, all other efforts will be useless. She reiterates that education should help women to interpret Hindu religion properly and to train and educate children who are the wealth of a community (*Sanghamitra*, 166).

In her presidential speech “*Sthreekalum Parishkaravum*” (“Women and Reform”) at SNDP Women’s Meeting held at Alappuzha, Ananda Lakshi Amma criticizes European women for liberty they have attained and adds that luckily the idea of liberation has not attacked women in India (11-12 *Bharatbhoomi*). She reminds women about the need to help men in handcrafts and business. She also emphasizes the social service of women by citing that earlier when Buddhism spread in India the Bikkunis used to help others by establishing madaas. She proposes home-schooling for women. She adds that the education that women got from our schools is not satisfactory. According to her, money and time spent on English education is useless and women must know about caring for husband and children. She adds that women will not get respect if they learn English and they’d become intellectuals who speak English but may not know how to cook. Like Buddhist Bikkunis, they should involve in charity work and people of all caste should get admission in such groups. She seems to critique English education for women as they may not get trained in homely duties. In the same issue of *Sahodaran*, K. Parvathi Amma’s article “*Sahodarasanghavum Sthreekalum*” (“Women and Sahodarasangham”) which was presented in Sthreesamajam of Sahodara Sangham held at Pallippuram, argues that women's duty is child-rearing as it would help for community’s development.

Men's articles that appeared in *Vivekodayam* also considered women as culture bearers. C. A. Rarichan Mooppar in his Presidential Remarks at SNDP Yogam's 10th Annual Meeting argues that the

community would not progress without its women's education (1918). According to him, children are under the custody of women therefore their mental development is important for community formation. According to him, although the Government, Missionary, and Convents have started schools, community members are not making use of it. He wishes that "Our girls should go to schools and should be good wives who are useful and intelligent mothers" (*Vivekodayam* 1918). He winds up his speech by reiterating that women's education is the primary thing for community reformation. In his presidential address at the 10th Annual meeting of SNDP Yogam held at Calicut, Roa Saheb P. Raman argues that higher education is mandatory for boys. In the editorial note of the same issue of *Vivekodayam* under the title "Female Education" it is written that:

The first consideration in connection with social reformation is female education. There can be no social advancement without it. You know very well that in the regulation of our domestic concern women play an important part. Almost all things connected with domestic life and happiness are in their hands. It follows therefore that the development of their mind is an important factor in our social fabric. (Vol. 10, no.3&4, 1918)

He also considers women as culture bearers and does not propose higher education for girls. According to him, women's education is needed only for the community's progress.

Few articles that appeared in *Sthree* written by women also consider women as culture bearers. The first issue of the *Sthree* (1933) begins with a write-up on the women's movement in India. It also raises the point that the Christian missionary's effort directly or indirectly resulted in the progress of women. Parvathi Neminimagalam in her article "*Sthreeethvam*" ("Femininity") vehemently argues for women's freedom and asks women to get rid of long hair and gold ornaments. She also argues that there shouldn't be any difference in the dressing of women and men. However, as far as the question of education is concerned, although she says it's mandatory, she adds women should be trained in household duties and child-rearing (16). An article titled "*Adukkalayil*" ("In Kitchen") written by a woman argues for the need to reform kitchen and eating habits. It reinforces the idea that cooking is women's duty and educated women should learn the science of cooking and take care of the reform in the field (23). Sreemathi Narikattiri Devaki Antherjanam in her article, "*Sthreekal Adukkala Upekshikkaruthu*" ("Women Should Not Abandon Kitchen") argues that along with the ideal of freedom, women should not lose the influence and power they have in kitchen. She says the reform should start from the kitchen and adds that caste is practiced in the kitchen and women should take the initiative to reform it.

According to her the base of the community is the kitchen. She compares community with the ship and its engine as kitchen and woman as its captain (26). A write-up titled “Women Now”, which appeared in *Sthree* criticizes the educated women who do not care about the household duties. It also laments that the current education does not train women in household duties and home science is not a subject in colleges. It is added that like earlier the educated women were good housewives and they do not need education in schools and colleges and should be trained at home under mothers' direction. B N Meenakshamma in her speech at the Sthreesamjam meeting of SNDP Yogam held at Perinadu argues for the freedom of women. She criticises the notion that marriage is the ultimate aim of girls and also dowry. But she says women should learn jobs that do not diminish *sthreethvam* (femininity). Regarding women's education, she held the view that women are culture bearers and advises women to give focus on children's education. She also argues for spiritual education. “*Adhunika Sthreekalotu*” (“To the Modern Women”) by Mundakal N Meenakshi Amma also argues for the training in womanly duties.

Several men's writings that appeared in these magazines criticize women's access to higher education and English education. “*Adhunika Sthree Vidyabhyasavum Bharya Padaviyum*” (“Modern women's education and Wifehood”) by V Ramakrishna Pilla glorifies wifely duties (69; *Sanghamitra*, 1921). He criticizes women who spent the major part of their life on education. According to him, modern higher education does not help women to become good housewives. Angamali M. KesavanIlayath vehemently criticizes Sitarama Mukherjee's “*A Letter to My Brother*” for his suggestion to have all subjects in the English language. Sreenivasa Sastri's “*Gruhanayika*” (“Housewife” or “Female Head of the House”) and “*Innathe Mahila Mandalam*” (“Today's Woman Space”) etc., give tips to women for being a good housewife. Sastri opined that rather than sending women to school they should be taught at home by a female teacher from the community itself. He wanted all English books to be translated into Malayalam.

Ponnamma emphasized feminine values but criticized the notion of the biological weakness of women and encouraged them to participate in public activities. Mayyanattu Ikkavamma in her presiding speech at fourth S. N. D. P. stree samajam points out the efforts made by S. N. D. P. for the entry of Ezhava girls into government schools. She expresses her dissatisfaction with the progress of women's education and criticizes uneducated parents who do not send their girl children to school even for primary education. Her account on the question of whether women should get higher education or primary (basic) education is interesting. She writes about the opinions of two groups: One group argues that women should get higher education since women must have equal knowledge as men. The other group argues that women do not have time for higher education so other than primary education they should

also be trained in house management, child care, health care, etc. However, Meenakshiamma supports the second group as far as feminine duties are concerned. For her, Indian women should consider “*Parishkaram*” (“modernization”) as education, taking care of husband, child caring, cooking, music, *kaithozhil* (handicraft), etc. (8; *Sanghamitra*, 1921). According to her, the major aim of women's education is to be trained in all matters which are useful for women (9). She adds that women should wear a white dress, be religious and consider Sita as a role model. However, her article points out that a few women argued for the higher education of women.

As already noted, a few women from the community articulated the need for higher education and English education for women. While mentioning the educational progress in the Ezhava community, in the year 1916, Gauriamma reminds the speech of Dr. Palpu's wife in the first women's conference which was held during the first annual conference of S. N. D. P in 1904. She has suggested that “members of the Yogam should be cautious that there shouldn't be any uneducated girl or boy in our community” (19; *Vivekodayam*, 1916). Gauriamma suggests that primary education should be made compulsory in the community. She says, once they get primary education, they will aspire for higher education. She adds that most importantly we should send our girls to school (25). It is important to note that she has promoted western education for girls while proposing that other than domestic duties women should be trained in teaching and nursing (19).

“*Sahodarikalotu*” (“To the Sisters”) by V Parukkutty Amma Perinadu notes that even the number of women who got primary education in the community is very low. She adds, some parents are unable to give education to their children due to poverty. She writes about the power of the newspapers in the social reform movement and how men achieved targets of reform through it. She points out that the community can bring about changes in their customs only if the majority are educated (*Sanghamitra* 54). According to her, education for women is necessary for them to participate in the reform movement independently for the community's progress. She considers Ezhava women as active agents of reformation rather than being mere culture bearers.

Kayyalakkal Saradamma in her speech at Eramallur SNDP Women's Samajam argued for the need for education of Ezhava women. Sreemathi Devaki Netyaramma's speech at Nari Samajam meeting for education that appeared in *Sthree* is an evaluation of it. According to her, women should be given an English education. She says one need not wait until we have science books in Malayalam; until then we need to depend on English. She argues that English is necessary for upward mobility. She adds that if

you need a woman only to cook, then western education is not necessary. If you need her help in other matters, western educated woman is the right match for a western educated man. It is important to note that the journal also includes articles that promote the higher education of women. The advertisement that appeared in the journal also promotes English education.

A few women were against gendered education for women in the community. Kalyani Mundakkal, in her article “*Bharatheeya Sthree Vidyabyasam*” (“Education of Indian Women”), discusses the curriculum appropriate for women. She says that Congress and conferences have given much more importance to women's education than men's education. However, she points out how the orthodox sections of the society and reformers have fought over the aim of women's lives and the contribution of women's education to make it practical. She pointed out that there should not be gender discrimination. According to her, both women and men have the same goals in life and the ultimate goal of education is to provide the same regardless of gender (103–108; *Sahodari*, 1929). Mundakkal N. Meenakshiamma’s “*Aadhunikasthreekalotu*” (“To Modern Women”) argues for the need for women to organize. She provides alternatives to Ezhava women and criticizes Ezhava women who are happy being housewives and urges them to earn a job that will provide them both money and honour.

A few write-ups supported English education for women. An article titled “*Alappuzha Vidyarthi Sadanam*”(Student House at Alappuzha), argued that all those who are interested in community development need to know the importance of educating children (36; *Mitavadi*, 1915). It talks about the balance to have English and Sanskrit education. It says it is impossible to live without an English education and it is important to have knowledge in Sanskrit for *Sanathanadharma*. In *Mitavadi* (41; 1915) a write-up under the title “*An Ezhava Sanyasini*” mentions that English Education had reached a small section of the community. Whereas upper-caste reformers like S. M. Kumaraswami Ayyar were strongly against English education and wanted to maintain the caste system. His “*Oru Prasangam*” (A Speech) strongly argue for the need to have caste difference and claims that it is scientifically needed (*Sahodaran*, vol. 2, no.2). He says the first power that stands against the great custom of the caste system is English education. According to him, English learning would spoil the ones who learn it. He assumes that Mahatma Gandhi consistently argued for regional language education so that the caste system is retained. In this context, it is important to mention Rita Kothari's argument on English education. Rita Kothari theorizes the relationship between caste and the English language and argues that English promises to the Dalit writers as both individuals and as representatives of communities, agencies, articulation, recognition, and justice. English is considered as the language of empowerment

and its castelessness is its strength not inadequacy and it does not normalize or legitimize caste. As noted, the language of socially and economically privileged English is distanced from Dalits and other marginalised communities. “Ambedkar compared English to the milk of the lioness, and said those who drink it become stronger,” said Chandra Bhan Prasad, Dalit columnist, researcher, and chief promoter of the pro-English campaign. He adds, "If your child learns English, it's as if he or she has inherited 100 acres of land"(“India’s Outcastes”, *The Guardian*, 2011).

We have noted many reformers' resistance to providing English and higher education to the Ezhava women. This historical wrong has resulted in a meagre number of lower caste women in the higher education sector of Kerala. We have also noted that very few women have supported English education and higher education of women. Still, a large number of women scholars in higher educational institutions are first-generation learners and it is important to encourage lower caste women and women from other marginalized communities to pursue English education and higher education in contemporary Kerala.

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