

REDEFINING FAMILY: DISCOURSES IN EARLY WOMEN'S MAGAZINES IN KERALA

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Abstract: The main theme of this paper is to find out the role of early women magazines in developing a favourable attitude among the people for changes in the age-old customs and traditions constituting family in Kerala. This paper considered the articles in *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai*, the early women magazines in Kerala and tried to find out the extent to which the articles influenced the reform of family system in Kerala. It is evident that the magazines focused on uplifting women but one could clearly comprehend the way the new ideas and developments related to women also contributed to family reform. The paper only intends to show this trend rather being preoccupied with renaissance of women. In short, this paper aims to look into the part played by *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* in reconstituting family in Kerala.

Keywords: Women magazines, family, reconstitution

Kerala at the beginning of the twentieth century was in a transitional phase. From a phase of traditionalism and conventions, it had marked a move towards modernisation and development in all spheres of activity. Needless to say, the colonial modernity in India altered the existing system and like all the other states, Kerala too underwent a tremendous transformation. This paper tries to analyze the discourses on the family and familial system in Kerala published in the selected editions of *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai*, the early women's magazines of Kerala.¹ The articles in these magazines mainly focused on topics related to women. As women were the main part of the family,

¹ The issues of *Sarada* for the years 1906, 1908, 1909 and the issues of 1911 and 1934 of *Lakshmibai* were referred for the purpose. The lack of availability of all the issues made it difficult to refer to all the issues. This article is mainly based on the available issues.

the topics discussed in these magazines were directly or indirectly related to the nature and functioning of the family. The main theme of this paper is to find out the role of these magazines in developing a favourable attitude among the people for changes in the age-old customs and traditions constituting families in Kerala. The articles discussed in the women's magazines clearly indicated the change in the outlook of a group of reformed people. The paper is limited to the discussions and discourses related to family and assesses the part played by these magazines in redefining family in the context of the colonial period in Kerala. So, to understand the importance of the topics discussed in these magazines related to family, one needs to comprehend the familial system in Kerala prior to the influence of modern ideas.

The constitution of family in Kerala in the pre-colonial period

Kerala in the pre-colonial period was caste-dominated. No aspect of the society was out of the purview of caste. The Caste system defined family and so the privileges offered and obligations demanded from families of different castes were subject to variations. In the case of Christianity and Islam, there were divisions within them, and similar to caste differentiations among Hindus, they too experienced different status and privileges which had an impact on their familial formations. The affiliation to a particular caste determined the ways and manners in which they had to behave. The family had a definite role in the system as it was the training ground for any person to imbibe the caste rules and regulations. In fact, family during the pre-colonial period was a factor enforcing the caste system and preserver of customs and traditions. Caste determined the rules to be followed by families in various instances, such as birth, menarche, marriage, pregnancy, delivery, death, and inheritance. In the caste-based hierarchical structure of hypergamy and hypogamy, marriages existed. In the former case, an upper-caste man married a lower caste woman and in such a case the man did not lose his caste status or ritual purity but the woman and the children suffered. In the latter case, the low caste man who married an upper-caste woman occasionally failed to get social sanction. These rules were put forward through *Vyavaharamala* and *Sankarasmrithi*.² In the sessions of the Synod of Diamper (a meeting conducted by the Portuguese in Kerala in 1599 AD as an attempt to Latinise the Christian church), it was realized that the Kerala

²*Vyavaharamala* and *Sankarasmrithi* were social codes dictated by the Brahmins which in detail mentioned the mode of behavior expected from each person as a member of the society. It described the rules to be followed from birth to death which included the various rites and ceremonies to be performed.

Christians had no adequate Christian formation and their identity was merged with the decadent attitudes and aspirations of medieval Kerala (John 164). The sessions demonstrated the influence of the caste system on Kerala Christians. Similarly, Moplahs of North Malabar, those in Tellichery and Quilandy had the features of the Nair Tharavad (D'Souza 495). The impact of the caste system in its minimal form existed among Christians and Muslims as they were earlier converted from Hindu communities. The observance of *pula* (ritualistic pollution) was also practiced among them. In the caste-based society disobedience to its rules was severely punished and so no one dared to question it. The rights and obligations devolved not on individuals but on the families (Miller 142). Thus, families were reinforced by the caste system, it defined the nature, the form, and the functioning of the family in pre-colonial Kerala.

The customs and practices determined the functioning of the family. The internal structure of *jati* and its functioning was strictly based on locality and its customary framework (*Maryadai*) (Kurup 113). Irrespective of caste, all were bound by *Maryadai*. The family and its duties were all subject to this customary framework. Thus, the family which formed the most primary unit of the village was the basic institution in which an individual was prepared to live in the society. The pre-colonial society in Kerala was a village-based economy, that was self-sufficient and so any family located within its territorial extent had its own importance. In a feudalistic society like Kerala (as it was during the pre-colonial period) according to EMS Namboodiripad, three important aspects formed the social structure and they were the caste, joint family, and the village organization.

But generally speaking, the structure of the family was joint in nature. Both patrilineal and matrilineal systems existed in society, but it was different for different castes. The practices of polygamy and polyandry were also present, but that too varied on the basis of caste. It determined the status and position of men and women in the family. The family remained a self-sufficient unit which is composed of many members. The rules of the family were dictated by religion and caste. The family in joint nature had a common economic source based on agriculture and the senior male member took the lead. Seniority, not only determined the headship of the family, but also the eligibility of being the ruler. Though mainly the inheritance was through the female line for most of the castes, the patrilineal system was followed by the Brahmins. Several customs like

Thaliketukalyanam, *Therandukalyanam*, *Mannanpedi*, *Pulappedi*, and *Parapedi* existed.³ The Christians and Muslims were also not free from the bondage of caste and the customs and traditions that prevailed in Kerala during those times which had an impact on their lives too. So, family in pre-colonial Kerala was a kin-based institution that was defined within the context of a self-sufficient village economy and functioned according to the rules of caste, customs, and traditions.

Beginning of new ideas and reform in Family

It was difficult to ascertain when and how the displeasure towards the existing family system developed. But one could clearly perceive from the historical events that since socio-economic conditions started altering due to the intervention of new forces and ideas, the family system was also subject to discussions. This might be because the familial system had much influence on each individual and it was a closely-knit unit and that a slight change due to alterations had its impact on all members of the family and vice versa. It was in this context one could see that when the British introduced reforms in the land system, it had its impact on the landowning families and thereby their inheritance. The reforms in the *Marumakkathayam* system (matrilinal system) and partition of property have resulted in this background.

The process of transformation from a traditional society to a society ready to imbibe modern ideas was not all of a sudden. Both the external and internal factors led to the dynamic changes in the society of Kerala. The European intervention into the soil of Kerala had set the pace for transition in all fields. The role of missionaries in this regard was of prime importance. They had an immense role in introducing regenerating thoughts and hope among the common people who were shunned away from the basic needs, knowledge, and facilities that kept them subject to the whims and fancies of the powerful. The new faith that developed among the people brought changes in their attitude and made them able to imbibe the ideas of modernity which they had never imagined. With the introduction of English education and starting of schools both in the vernacular and in English, the ideas of a reformed society based on freedom, equality, and progress gained currency. As a result, a handful of people belonging to the upper and middle-class families

³*Talikettukalyanam* was a costly pre-puberty 'mock-marriage' usually performed on a number of Nair girls at the same time. *Therandukalyanam* was a ceremony related to puberty. *Mannanpedi*, *Pulapedi*, and *Parapedi* were peculiar customs that prevailed in Kerala until the 17th century whereby men from Mannan, Pulaya and Paraya castes could abduct women of Nair caste who were found alone in the dark.

who were able to secure the merits of education started to develop a modern outlook. Besides this, the social reformers of Kerala emphasized the need to stop the evils prevailing in society. They were united in spreading the importance of education among all people irrespective of caste, class, and sex. Gradually, the new conditions that developed, favoured the rise of an educated middle class who excelled in various professions such as teachers, lawyers, judges, and journalists. This enlightened group became the vanguard for reforming the society through thought-provoking ideas which were spread through the newspapers, magazines, books, discussions, and debates. The beginning of newspapers and magazines was the product of these enlightened groups. The women's magazines that emerged by the end of the 19th century had a great part in spreading the ideas of modernity and reform.

Sarada and Lakshmibai: Early Women magazines of Kerala

Sarada was the second women's magazine after *Keraleeya Sugunabhodini* which is considered to be the first women's magazine started in 1885. The latter was started by men for women and many remarked it to be more a literary magazine than a women's magazine. The magazine, *Sarada* was started in 1904 and K. Narayana Menon was the owner and manager of it. The magazine was printed in Bharathi Vilasam press. This magazine was truly a women's magazine as most of the articles were written by women journalists. Rani Sethu Lakshmibhai, Rani Parvathy Bhai, and Ikkavuamma Thampuran were the patrons of the magazine. The magazine had T C Kalyaniamma and T Ammukutty Amma from Ernakulam and B Kalyani Amma from Thiruvananthapuram as its editors. It was published only for two years and then again published by Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai in the next year which had to be stopped when his press and newspaper were confiscated in 1910.

Lakshmibai was started in the year 1905. Vellaykkal Narayana Menon was the manager and editor. It was started in memory of Rani Lakshmi Bhai and focused on the upliftment of women. The magazine was first owned by Vellaykkal Nanikutty Amma and later by B Kalyani Amma. Many women journalists contributed through articles that aimed at awakening the womenfolk. The magazine stopped its publication in 1940.

These women's magazines spread new hopes for women. They discussed, debated and shared ideas of reforming women and highlighted the need for a change from the traditional system. It clearly stood for the liberation of women through education. Though the magazines mainly highlighted women's issues, the ideas propagated through them had paved the way to reforms in the family. Moreover, women's issues were in one way concerned with the system of family. Women in the earlier times were purely a matter of family and did not relate to anything outside its domain. She never had a role nor was expected to do anything outside the household. With the emergence of new conditions arising from the dominance of British rule, the women started finding a new space apart from family. This indeed was a way to the transformation of family in Kerala. The paper does not intend to discuss women's issues rather it tries to see how the topics discussed in these magazines favoured new alterations in the existing system of family and its impact on society. These women's magazines became the medium to sensitize the readers to modern ideas and popularize the good and inspiring matters from the other parts of the country and the world. These magazines widened the thoughts of the readers and became a means to gain knowledge for self-improvement and progress and thereby regeneration of the society.

The themes in the different issues of *Sarada and Lakshmibai* could be broadly classified into those concerning women and development, social reformation, family, and articles related to eminent personalities and similar details from other parts of the world. Though the magazine focused on uplifting women, the focus was on the need of bettering the living conditions through women's education.

There were many articles in *Sarada* about women and freedom, women's education, women and English education, women and journalism, women's organizations, women and law, women and government jobs. All these articles favoured the equality of men and women. They argued that a woman who had the same freedom as a man and who was educated had a greater role in her family and society. In an article on Women's freedom (*Sthree Swathanthriyam*), the author justified equal rights for women and men (*Sthree Swathanthriyam* 57-59). He opined that works done jointly by men and women would be complete and successful in all manners. The author strongly opposed the old system of women being subjected to do only the homely duties of her husband. The author emphasized the fact that an educated woman would use her freedom

judiciously and would be a great help to her husband. Another article by K Padmavathiamma, entitled *Malayalikalum Sthree Vidhyabhyasavum*, stated that an educated woman could make a good homemaker. She supported and demanded education for women (5-9). In the article, *Sthreekalkku Vendathaya Vidyabhyasam*, Padmavathiamma, justified the fact that an educated woman in a family could avoid quarrels and conflicts, and splits within a family (165-170). T Ammukuttyamma stated the need to educate women in English which would make them helpful to their husbands. She even argued that such a woman would increase love, affection, trust, and unity. Her article, *Nammude Sthreekalum English Vidyabhyasavum* illustrated the women of English families who did all the works which were considered man's work (Ammukuttyamma 50-52). Women were encouraged to manage the money matters of the house. This was against the old notion of money being a matter of concern only for men. In the article *Sthreekalum Panabaranavum*, the idea was projected. The author protested against the existing belief that women were not good at managing money, instead tried to state that only if they were given such an opportunity, one could prove whether they were good or bad money managers.

The women journalists enthusiastically wrote articles to provide awareness among women on different issues. As they aimed at uplifting the position of women, they wrote on all subjects providing information on development and progress. K Ramakrishna Pillai, the editor of the newspaper *Keralan* presented the possibilities of a woman becoming a journalist. He suggested the different ways in which women could contribute. Women according to him could write about fashion and other stories which could help them earn income. The article raised the new prospects of women journalists (9-11). A Sankunni Menon B.A. had penned about the merit of women in government jobs. His article, *Sthreekalum Government Udyogavum*, indicated the beginning of favourable attitude towards women willing to work outside their home. A. Sankunni Menon, stated that with the increase in education among men especially of the middle classes, the conventional attitude of subjecting women indoors started changing. These groups began promoting women to explore new avenues and thereby encouraged them to play an active role in society. The indigenous legal system was never in favour of women in Kerala. These magazines took initiative to present the defects of the existing legal system and how it was not equal for men and women through the articles on 'Women and Law'.

The magazines functioned as a weapon for social reform. *Marumakkathayam* (matriliny) and *Sambhandham* (The simple Nair marriage ceremony involving the presentation of cloth by the man to the woman) were highly criticized by the educated middle class and there were articles on it. The articles on the Nair community discussed the condition of Nairs before the arrival of the British and how they got transformed after it. P.C Narayanikuttyamma in her article on the Nair community emphasized the need to educate Nair women for the wellbeing of the community (141-143). K Padmavathiamma's article expressed her opposition to the caste system which had adversely affected the upper castes. She was against caste classification and demanded a choice of jobs. Mrs. Raman Thampi had carried out an active discussion on the topic of *Marumakkathayam* in *Sarada*. K.Padmavathiamma in the article *Parasthreemargamm* discussed the defects of *Marumakkathayam* system and the need to reform it (1-4). These articles testify to the fact that the system of *Marumakkathayam* had already been part of the heated debates among the educated class. There were articles on *Kettukalyanam* (A term for ritual marriage used by groups other than Namboodhiri) and Child marriage (*Shaishavavivaham*) which dealt with its origin and how it became part of the society. The articles expressed the need to stop those practices which affected the growth and development of women. Subjects related to social reform were included in these magazines. Ms. Chinnamma wrote about social reform where she emphasized equality between men and women in matters of education. Mannathu Padmanabhan, the founder of Nair Service Society wrote in *Sarada* in July 1908, entitled *Sthreesamudayam* in which he strongly argued for women's freedom, education, and right to choose (Padmanabhan). Such articles were really inspiring during those times when a group of educated Nair youth (including Mannathu Padmanabhan) had already started their protest against the obnoxious customs.

The magazines upheld the contributions of great women who displayed their merit for the revival of society. Articles on Valiya Ikkamma Thampuran (Patron of *Sarada* magazine), Rani Lakshmi Bhai, Miss S B Williams, Lady Grisal Baily, Mrs. Dosbai Cowas Jijangir Jasvala, (a Parsi lady who fought against the evil system in her society), Augusta Ema Blanford (founder of Girls School at Thiruvananthapuram) were of this kind. Such articles made the readers aware of women who played a commendable role in their society made them realize their hidden strength and inspired them to come into the forefront by protesting against the evils that existed. Even great

women leaders in foreign countries were introduced. In the July issue, there was an article on Queen Victoria.

A remarkable effort was taken by these magazines in reforming the household duties involved. Such an attempt in providing suggestions to the womenfolk in bettering their role in the family was entirely a shift towards new ways of living. Earlier, customs and caste system determined the modus operandi for a family which was hardly disobeyed. In the newly emerging conditions resulting from the interactions with the British, a new educated class influenced by modern ideas started making changes in their age-long practices. *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* had a great impact on these groups of men and women. The articles on the duties of a householder, duties to a husband, housekeeping, duties of a wife, etc. were some among them. K Padmavathiamma while writing about the act of serving their husband (*Bharthrusuraksha*) was emphasizing the role of education among women which could help her improve her service to her husband (Padmavathiamma). T Narayana Nambi had justified male-female equality by testimonies from the Hindu religious texts. He strongly stated that man and woman are two halves and they should join together in worldly and religious matters. The existing system denied any equality between man and woman and the article, *Hindusthreekalkku Kalppichittulla Yogyatha* was an attempt to change the existing practice without denying the religious ideas which they dared to do (Nambi 415-422). There were articles on parenting where parents were asked to educate their children. Guidance was given to girls through these magazines.

As these magazines focused on encouraging women to rise up from disadvantageous conditions, various news and events related to the progress of women were published through it. The details of Trivandrum Sthree Samajam of 1908, Sevasadan in Bombay, and the information of women's meetings were of this kind. There were articles giving details about English households, the women of China, women's education in Japan, and similar ones. These topics made the women readers of Kerala understand the way of life led by women outside the country. These articles helped them to realize the fact that they were not the weaker sex. These articles on great women in different parts of the world were real illustrations that depicted the resourcefulness of women and strengthened the belief that women had the potential and they were in no way to be restricted within the walls of their house.

Did these magazines, *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* influence changes in families in Kerala? To what extent did these magazines have an impact on the changes in the family system? Certainly, these magazines did create a new attitude that favoured changes in the family. This could be understood from the nature of membership, the contributors of the articles, and the type of articles in these magazines. Taking the nature of membership, one could observe that all of them belonged to educated, upper and middle-class group. While *Lakshmibai* was started in memory of Rani Lakshmbhai who initiated social reform in Travancore, *Sarada* had as its patron women of the royal family like Rani Sethu Lakshmbhai, Rani Parvathy Bhai, and Ikkuvamma Thampuram. All of them were women of great merit and they favoured the ideas of social reform and female education. It was a clear fact that the magazines had been subscribed by only educated people who could read and afford them. The list of subscribers in *Lakshmibai* clearly showed that most of them belonged to upper-class Hindu families. The Census of 1901 provided the number of educated people in Travancore. Out of 1000 people of both sexes and of all ages, 124 were literate. In the case of 1000 females, 31 were literate. With regards to literacy in English, out of 1000 of all population, 5 were literate while out of 1000 literates, it was 41 (Aiyer 218). In the case of education in urban areas, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, Parur, Changanassery, Ambalapuzha, Quilon, and Karthikapalli respectively occupied the highest positions (218). Even in the matter of professions, the number of people engaged in literature was 3517 which included 2614 writers and private clerks and 867 copyists. The number of people engaged in education as a profession was 12812 and in law was 5455. All these showed that there were educated men and women in Travancore who were influenced by these magazines as there were not many magazines as in present times. According to the 1901 Census, most of the females who were educated were interested in religion and literature. This indicated the higher probability of influence through these magazines and the increased possibility of membership. In the 1911 issue of *Lakshmbai*, there were 25 subscribers which hint at the possibility of the spread of their ideas among 25 families.

With regard to the impact of these magazines, they definitely had their role in changing the attitude and way of life. Looking from the perspective of the contributors, the themes they discussed were sure to bring a revolutionary change in the institution of family that already existed. Their voices supported a new educated and reformed woman who would be an asset to the family and society. As these magazines were women-oriented, almost every topic discussed in it, directly

and indirectly, brought changes or favoured alterations in the family system as women formed the most inalienable member of the family. Family in Kerala had remained stagnant for a long period and was subject to religious and caste rules and regulations. The superior and influential group (Brahmins) determined the order of the society by their hold on religious and spiritual knowledge. No one dared to change the social order which was gradually crushed down by the intervention of the British. These magazines were truly in favour of new ideas and the articles mainly dealt with new changes which were required for the goodness of all. As these were women's magazines, most of the themes related to elevating the status and position of women had a direct impact on the existing family system where women hardly had a good position. Women were restricted indoors with a lack of freedom and liberty. But the ideas which were discussed in these magazines justified female education, freedom, and choice. They encouraged male-female equality and tried to demonstrate it through examples from other countries. The need of educating women was supported by all the authors who all together justified how an educated lady could take care of her family better than before and how she could be a good associate of her husband and an able caretaker of her children and family. Various articles discussed reforms to be made in the family and also critically analysed the defects of the old customs and the merits of the reformed system. *Marumakkathayam* and *Kettukalyanam* are some examples of this kind (Ramanthampi). These articles indicated a positive nod for reforming the old family system which was based on customs and conventions, where there was no scope for male-female equality, no conjugal love between husband and wife, no sound communication between husband and wife or between parents and children, and lots of imbalances in the power structure within the family. The discussions in these magazines raised the possibility for a new family system that was yet to be fully formed. The new family was composed of educated women, who were encouraged to do jobs outdoors, to take up jobs that were earlier the domains of men, and to move out of the age-old customs and practices. All these were to alter the nature and structure of family where women had hardly found a place of prominence and recognition. The new roles which were encouraged by these magazines paved the way for a reformed family system in Kerala.

It is difficult to assess the extent of contribution of these magazines in reforming family but definitely, it had an evident role in it. Through the subscribers and the whole unit behind the functioning of these magazines including the contributors of the articles, there was a good

enlightened team who spread the idea of reforms in the family. These women's magazines were successful in gathering momentum towards reform. The legislation related to *Marumakkathayam* took place in 1908 which consequently led to Marumakkathayam Reform Act in Travancore. The Nair Regulation was passed in 1912 which abolished the customs like *Sambandham* and legalized marriage and made children inherit their father's property. The strength of educated and employed women increased thereby ending the customary ban on women's mobility outside the domain of the family.

Thus, *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai* could sensitize the women about the existing old order and the need to reform. Though the magazines focused on reforming women, it gradually led to changes in the existing nature of the family in Kerala. The major shifts which were introduced into the life of women eventually made drastic changes in the constitution of families in Kerala. The various discussions conducted through these magazines familiarized the educated group on the concept of a new family in which an educated woman had a premier role. The idea of a new family constituted by conjugal love, sharing of responsibilities, gender equality, and as an institution preparing the members to exist for the wellbeing of the society started developing. In the earlier period of the twentieth century, this concept of the family became part of heated debates in these magazines and thereby they waited for a ripe opportunity to be brought through a series of legislations and reforms.

Endnotes:

1. The issues of *Sarada* for the years 1906, 1908, 1909 and the issues of 1911 and 1934 of *Lakshmibai* were referred for the purpose. The lack of availability of all the issues and damage of the material made it difficult to refer to all the issues with its correct page numbers and some other details. This article is mainly based on the available issues.
2. *Vyvaharamala* and *Sankarasmrithi* were social codes dictated by the Brahmins which in detail mentioned the mode of behavior expected from each person as a member of the society. It

described the rules to be followed from birth to death which included the various rites and ceremonies to be performed.

3. *Talikettukalyanam* was a costly pre-puberty 'mock-marriage' usually performed on a number of Nair girls at the same time. *Therandukalyanam* was a ceremony related to puberty. *Mannanpedi*, *Pulapedi*, and *Parapedi* were peculiar customs that prevailed in Kerala until the 17th century whereby men from Mannan, Pulaya and Paraya castes were feared to abduct women of higher castes who were found alone in the dark.

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