

# MAKING SPACE FOR WOMEN: ROLE OF EARLY MALAYALAM MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS IN KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

*As a medium of public opinion and discourses, the press did a lot in evolving, identifying and locating new spaces and the creation of space in the public sphere of Kerala. The press played a significant role in creating a platform for public opinion and establishing a new print community in Kerala. Newspapers and magazines opened a space for women to raise, discuss and debate their issues and express their views, ideas and talents. Women's magazines debated, discussed and spread the need for reforming women in society from the traditional system. They stood for the liberation of women and provided new hope for women to fight for their rights and break the chain of restrictions imposed by society just for being women. Not only women's magazines but Malayalam newspapers and magazines, in general, stood for addressing the issues and upbringing of the talents and voices of women.*

**Keywords:** Public sphere, Renaissance, Print media, Women's magazine, Newspapers, Women's rights.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every society depends on and creates its own public space for interacting with society in various spheres of life. It is in this space that ideas are developed, and the collective awareness of the public is formed. Entrikin's book, 'The Betweenness of Place', published in 1991, considers social space as where individuals come together, interact, and socialise on a regular basis, leading to the formation of opinions and the moulding of the collective mindset (Entrikin, J. Nicholas, and J. Nicholas Entrikin.,1991). Habermas, in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, conceived the public sphere as a space where controversial issues were discussed, deliberated and weighed rationally (Habermas, J.,1991). Henri Lefebvre argued that every society had produced its own space in the reproduction of social relations existing in society and in moulding socio-political contradictions (Henri, Lefebvre., & Nicholson-Smith Donald.,1991).

The press is considered to be one of the most important tools of society in modern times as it has the power to reach out to a large audience and create an impact wherever it can reach. Habermas considers "the press" as the "preeminent institution" of the public sphere. According to him, Print is essential for the "public sphere" because it enables the rational debate of intelligent citizens (Habermas, J.,1991). For Anderson, print and newspapers produce the common language and constant experience essential for creating the emotions of nationalism (Anderson, B., 1983). In Kerala, the social turbulence of the twentieth century happened in a "public sphere," which was made possible partly because of the spread of print, publishing, and newspapers, and the "public sphere" cannot happen without print and regular publications (Jeffry, R.,2009).

As a medium of public opinion and discourses, the press did a lot in evolving, identifying and locating new spaces and the creation of space in the public sphere of Kerala. The press played a significant role in creating a platform for public opinion and establishing a new print community in Kerala (Priyadersanan, G., 2011). The tireless efforts of Christian missionaries to promote Christianity resulted in a substantial increase in the number of newspapers in Kerala, which played a crucial role in shaping the state's society. During the beginning stages, the Basel Evangelical Mission and the Church Mission Society were instrumental in advancing the press in Kerala. Initially, the main objective of journalism was to spread Christian teachings and knowledge to the masses. The focus was on sharing their opinions and news with the public. One significant development in Kerala during the late 1800s was the rise of a literate population and the emergence of a 'reading public'. The group of individuals who had received an education in the English language and literature started to evaluate the existing structure of society. The academic community has shown particular interest in the gradual emergence of a population that actively reads and consumes literature.

During the late 19th and early 20th Century, the introduction of socioeconomic reforms in Kerala brought about the creation of new public spaces, such as tea shops, pan shops in villages, youth clubs, and reading rooms. These areas served as hubs for discussions centered around pluralistic and progressive ideas, which contributed to the development of a lively public sphere in Kerala. Notably, the library movement played a crucial role in establishing an intellectual public sphere that is both rare and valuable. The rural masses were drawn to the mainstream. It provided them with a platform to share their news and opinions and voice their concerns about their rights and grievances. The printing press and the printed book were the cultural icons of the Renaissance that shaped modern Kerala society. Habermas's view of the role of newspapers in the evolution of a "public sphere" fits with the Kerala experience (Jeffry, R.2009).

One of the peculiarities of the Renaissance movement in Kerala, as compared to other states of the country, was that women were at the forefront of various struggles (Somarajan, C.N.,1995). Women who have been confined to the kitchen and interiors of houses for ages have come to the mainstream of society. Kerala's progress in empowering women has been historically more advanced compared to other Indian states. The Channar Revolt, also known as the Maarumarkkal Samaram, was the first organised fight for women's rights in Kerala. This movement demanded the right to dress in a dignified manner and is considered the first "Human Rights" movement for women in the region.

## **MAKING SPACE FOR WOMEN: ROLE OF WOMEN'S MAGAZINES.**

Up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were very few women from those who were able to write. These women belong to the upper caste. Press opened a vast opportunity for Malayali women writers. The advent of the press created a group of women writers. A woman writer in Malayalam was created by the press in the twentieth century. Educated housewives learn a lot about *Vaikom Sathyagraha* and *Temple entry* from the newspapers (Anandi, T. K, 2006). The Renaissance movement in Kerala had a positive effect on women's journalism. Several women's magazines and newspapers were published to showcase the talents, achievements, and issues faced by women in society, including *Keraleeya Sugunabhodini*, *Bharati*, *Sarada*, *Mahilaretnam*, and *Mahila*.

Women's magazines, starting from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of *Keraleeya Sugunabhodhini*, focused primarily on self-transformation and the identity of females in society (Devika, J., & Sukumar, M.,2006). They opened a space for women to raise, discuss and debate their issues and express their views, ideas and talents. The paper analyses the role of early Malayalam newspapers and magazines in Kerala in highlighting and addressing women's issues and the efforts of newspapers and magazines in mainstreaming women in society.

From the very beginning, women's magazines and periodicals played a significant role in mainstreaming women in Kerala by supporting and giving strength to the agitations of the downtrodden to the freedom of travel, the right to education, wear upper clothes, and the right to enter temples (Lalkar, P.B.,1999) The first women's Publication in Malayalam was started in 1885 in Trivandrum under the title *Keraleeya Sugunabhodhini* (Raghavan, Puthuppally.,1985). But it lasted only for six months. It was revived in July 1892, and in the same period from Madras, another woman weekly in Malayalam named *Maharani* was published. Its owner and editor was Rao Bahadur Krishnamacharya, and it was published bimonthly. In *Keraleeya Sugunabhodhini*, philosophy, moral stories, cookery topics, music, history, book reviews etc., were incorporated. Speeches of eminent personalities were sometimes included in prose form or poetry. Although it was a woman's publication, the people behind it were mainly men((Raghavan, Puthuppally.,1985). The first volume of *Keraleeya Sugunabhodhini* published a poem titled *Sthree Vidhyabyasam* (Women Education) written by Kerala Verma Valiyakoyi Thamburan(Krishna Kumari, A.,2010).

*Sharada* was the second Malayalam women's magazine, started in 1904, November from Tripunithura, with K Narayana Menon as its owner and manager. It was printed in Bharathi Vilasam Press. Its patrons were Rani Setu Lakshmi Bai and Rani Parvati Bai (Gouri Lakshmi Bai, 1995). T C Kalyani Amma was its publisher at Ernakulam and Ammu Kuttiamma in Trivandrum. *Sarada* was started exclusively for women. The pages of the magazine were filled with all the topics related to women and their interests, like women's education, beauty, cooking, health news and stories, novels and dramas. All the necessary women-related topics were regularly published through *Sharada*'s 'Sthree lokam' (women's world).

Lifestyles of women not only in India but also in foreign countries like America, England, Japan and China were included in its various issues. Some articles in *Sarada* even had messages about family planning (Lalkar, P.B.,1999). Multiple issues of *Sharada* have given utmost importance to women's freedom and equality, women's education, the need for imparting English education to women, the importance of women's organisations, women and law, and the need for government jobs. Several articles were published in *Sharada* regarding reforms in the Nair community, inter-caste marriage and mixed dining. The chief editor of the magazine T.C. Kalyaniamma contributed most of the articles in this area. Kerala Varma Valiyakoi Thampuran, K Ramakrishna Pillai, Velupillai Piramal, and Udaya Varma Raja were the main male contributors to the magazine. An article in *Shadara* titled *Malayalikalum Sthree Vidhyabhyasavum (Malayali and women education)*, by K Padmavathiamma, strongly supported the need for women's education and opined that an educated woman could make a good homemaker (Krishna Kumari, A.,2010). She also highlighted the need for English education for women. Padmavati Amma reminded us that women are as educated as men in countries like Europe and America, and both groups have equal freedom in all aspects of life. She emphasised that if the country wanted to prosper, the condition of women must improve, and for this, they must give proper education. She urged the government to start special schools for women and focus more on women's education. B Bhageeraty Amma, a notable female intellectual, during the Sahitya Parishad conference held in Ernakulam in 1932, objected to the organisers' decision to permit women speakers in a separate session and prohibited them from participating in the general sessions. This incident was documented in "Mahilabhashanam," an article in *The Mahila* magazine in 1933 (Devika, J., & Sukumar, M.,2006).

The publication of *Sharada* lasted only for two years. After one year, again re-published from Trivandrum under the responsibility of Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai. This time it was published by Swadeshabhimani Press along with *Keralan, Vidyarthi and Swadeshabhimani Daily*. The exile of Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai led to the abrupt end of the daily and weekly.

*Bharathi*, a women's weekly magazine, published its first volume in June 1904 from Kozhikode. Even though there was no explicit mention of the owner and editor of the magazine, the quality of its content and vision of the magazine reveals that it was started by those who had a modern education and fascination towards language. The magazine's main focus was to expose women's issues and talents; it emphasised many other important issues of society, especially the need for education for everyone in society (Raghavan, Puthuppally.,1985). Its content included many subjects that were beneficial to the students and presented in a language that children could read. *Bharati's* main contribution was several brilliant essays that evoked readers' thoughts. In the magazine, *Lekshmibhai* (1905), Devakiamma, a writer, described the plight of a girl (Lalkar, P.B.,1999) who married a man of her grandfather's age and had to live as a widow at a young age.

Again in 1913, from Punalur, a weekly named *Sharada* was published. This had a relation with earlier *Sharada* in name only and was also a women's magazine. Its proprietor was TK Kalyanikutty Amma. Again in 1915, another magazine under the editorship of Anchal R Velu Pillai was published, namely *Bhasha Sharada* (Ibrahim Kunju, AP.,1976). Though this Magazine contains essays on women and their issues, it is more of a literary magazine.

In the February 1921 issue of *Mahila Magazine*, Lakshmi Amma wrote an article entitled *Ceeveeyude Nayikamar*. Lakshmi Amma presented the heroines in this article, Subhadra, Savithri and Meenakshi, as strong characters who play an equal role with men in the development of society. Its female characters are the symbol of strong women with progressive thinking.

*Mahilaretnam*, another women-centric magazine published in Thiruvananthapuram in 1916, provided a public sphere for women to express their talents and skills. The publisher of the magazine Lakshmi Kutty Amma, Kalyanikutty Amma, K. Chinnamma, and Mayyanadu Ekkamma were the women who regularly contributed sumptuous articles to the magazine. Even though women's issues were the main themes in the magazine, they were mainly contributed by eminent personalities like Kumaran Asan and Ulloor and Moorkoth Kumaran (Krishna Kumari, A.,2010). This can be seen as evidence of the support of males for gender equality and mainstreaming of women in society. Ramakrishna Pillai's appreciation and praise of *Sarada* for its contribution to dealing with the diverse abilities, issues, and concerns of women through his article '*Sthreekalum Pathrapravarthanavum*' (Women and Journalism) is another example to support this argument. Through this article, he explained how women journalists can contribute to the press (Krishna Kumari, A.,2010). He encouraged women in the field of journalism by stating that the writing of stories and articles about fashion and costumes could also be a source of income for them. He also opined that women dominated the press literature in countries like the United States and Great Britain and enjoyed economic and social benefits. In the article, K Ramakrishna Pillai inspires women using the European proverb '*The hand that rocks the cradle will rule the world*'.

*Sanghamitra* was a magazine started for the upliftment of Ezhava women. It was started in the year 1920 from Kollam. P K Vadhiyar and P R Narayanan were the managers of this magazine. The name Sanghamitra was proposed by the famous journalist C V Kunjuraman. There was a regular column titled *Sthreelokam* which highlighted the biographic sketches of world-famous women.

Under the initiative of Chengannur Mahilalayam, *Mahila* was published by B Bhagirathi Amma, the wife of Attukal Neelakanta Pillai, in 1921. It lasted for long 20 years. *Sumangala*, *Vanitha Mithram*, *Sthree Sahodari*, *Muslim Vanitha* and *Vanitha Kusumam* were other women's magazines that emerged in Malayalam. *Vanitha Kusumam* (1926) was the first magazine that contributed to more women writers in Kerala (Priyadersana, G., 2011). It was a prominent women's magazine that strongly advocated for women's freedom, and its sole intention was women's overall development and prosperity (Priyadersana, G., 2011). The political freedom of women was the main focus of VC John, the editor of the newspaper. Through women's periodicals, women reacted strongly against the oppression of women, dowry and child marriage in society.

*Sthree* was a women's magazine started in the year 1933 under the auspicious of the great social reformer Sahodaran Ayappan. His wife, Parvathy Ayappan, was the editor of this magazine. *Sthree* magazine emphasised the importance of women education. *Sthree* magazine provided a platform for upcoming women writers like Parvathi Nenminimangalam, Ambadi Karthiayani Amma and Lekshmikutty Nethyaramma.

## **ROLE OF NEWSPAPERS IN ADDRESSING WOMEN'S ISSUES.**

Not only women's magazines but Malayalam newspapers and magazines, in general, were constantly vigilant in bringing forward women's issues and rights in one way or another. An article titled *Sthree Vidyabhyasam* (Women's Education) by Balanda Swamikal was in the very first issue of the *Arayan magazine*, published in 1917 (Rajesh, C. and Rajesh K. E., 2017). The magazine *Muslim* started by Vakkam Abdul Khadar Maulavi, initiated a positive step for the education of Muslim women. He believed that in society, women should be more enlightened by education than men, and the growth and culture of women influence society more than men (Aboobacker, Kathiyalam.,2008). The Maulvi spoke about the importance of women's education and the indispensability of public education.

Mathrubhumi has been at the forefront of protecting women's rights. Editorials and news reports on violence against women are evidence of Mathrubhumi's strict stand in this regard. An example of this is the action of the Sub Divisional Magistrate (Nair, Sukumaran. P.C & Sudhakaran P.M) who demanded the ornaments including *Kettuthali* of Kamalabai Prabhu, the wife of L.S Prabhu, a prominent lawyer and Congress leader in Thalassery, as bail in relation to her support in the civil disobedience movement. Mathrubhumi newspaper criticised the action of the Sub Divisional Magistrate. The editorials of newspapers like Mathrubhumi on the *Kettuthali* issue and the women's agitation opened the eyes of the Madras government and asked the Sub Divisional Magistrate to return it to Kamalabai Prabhu, yet, the proud woman was not ready to take it back.

Maman Mappila was one of the first journalists to speak about the plight of women in society and their multifaceted progress. He promoted all the initiatives of women and initiatives undertaken by others for women through his newspaper. When a women's conference was held at Aruvippuram Siva Temple on Sivarathri in 1904, Malayala Manorama (Priyadersanan, G.,2014) emphasised publishing that news. The chairperson of that meeting advised the assembled women to sell all the ornaments and use that money to educate their children was also highlighted by the newspaper.

Newspapers also stirred the waves of progressive change among Brahmin women who were confined within the interiors of their *Illam*. Brahmin women who gained knowledge about the outer world by reading periodicals like *Yogakshemam* argued for their rights and claims. A meeting of Brahmin women held at Karunagapalli in 1929 demanded the abolition of polygamy and requested Brahmin men to marry from their own caste. They also decided to conduct an All-Kerala Brahmin Conference at that meeting. *Unninamboothiri* severely criticised polygamy and the severe restriction imposed on Namboothiri women by the tyrannical male-dominated Namboothiri system and drew attention to the educational backwardness of Namboothiri women. In an editorial named *Antharjenangalude Unercha* (Priyadersanan, G.2014), Malayala Manorama encouraged this awakening of Brahmin women and requested to extend all kinds of support to them.

*Malayala Manorama* also raised its voice against the dowery system in the state through its editorial. *Sthree Dhanam* (Dowery) on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1905 and *Sthree Dhanam* on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1906 were examples. *Malayala Manorama*, through its editorials ((Priyadersanan, G.2014), strongly advocated for freedom (22<sup>nd</sup> May 1926), the right to education (1<sup>st</sup> September 1923) and the franchise of women(26<sup>th</sup> August 1920). An editorial published by Malayala Manorama *Sthrikalumlum Sammadhidana avakasavum* (Women and Voting Rights) points out the need to grant voting right to women for social equality and to stop atrocities against women folk (Priyadersanan, G.2014). In connection with the *smartavicharam* of Kuryedath Tatri, Mammen Mappilla published an editorial(Malayala Manorama,12<sup>th</sup> July 1905) '*smarthavicharathinnu edavaruthunnathinte chila karanangal*' (Some reasons to the smartavicharam), exposing the problems related to the *smartavicharam*. *Malayala Manorama* strongly opposed this inhuman practice.

## CONCLUSION

Women's magazines debated, discussed and spread the need for reforming women in society from the traditional system. They stood for the liberation of women and provided new hope for women to fight for their rights and break the chain of restrictions imposed by society just for being women. Not only women's magazines but Malayalam newspapers and magazines, in general, stood for addressing the issues and upbringing of the talents and voices of women. They opened a space for women to raise, discuss and debate their issues and express their views, ideas and skills.

The press is undoubtedly the most powerful and proficient mechanism for preferred and progressive changes in society. It plays a vital task in creating awareness of social emancipation and awakening among women in Kerala.

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