

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY KERALA AND ITS “NEW”: SOME REFLECTIONS ON EARLY PRINT FORMS IN MALAYALAM

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The nineteenth century occupies a special place in accounts of modern Kerala’s past and present. Many changes occurred in Kerala—which was then under three separate administrative regimes—during this period, when the British established varied degrees of colonial control over the region.<sup>1</sup> These changes include the inception and spread of printing in Malayalam; the introduction of a western education system; the emergence of modern Malayalam language and literature; initiatives for community reforms and; anti-caste movements. In the years to come, these events would be construed as constituting the “Kerala Navodhanam” or Kerala ‘renaissance’ in historiographical accounts, journalistic writings and public debates.

Academic writings in the past few decades have attempted to give a more complex understanding of Kerala’s nineteenth century events—mentioned above—by employing the conceptual term, “modernity” while analysing them. This paper attempts to revisit these debates, with the intention to take them forward, by focussing on a few writings that appeared in the final decades of nineteenth century Kerala in a prominent periodical of the period, the *Vidya Vinodini*.

Established in 1889 in Thrissur, with stated aim of nourishing and reforming Malayalam language and literature, *Vidya Vinodini* published numerous articles on the present condition of Malayalam language, various ways to improve it, literary criticism, literary reviews, history of the language and also articles on science and contemporary social issues. Starting from the inaugural issue, it serialised a history of the land called Malayalam, titled in the first edition as *Keralolpathi* and in the subsequent twelve editions as *Aadikeralacaritram*. The name of the author of these articles was not mentioned, a practice that was not uncommon during the period. It is worth commenting on a few

things about the change of the title of this account from *Keeralolpathi* (literally, ‘creation of Kerala’) to *Aadikeralacaritram*. *Keralolpathi* was also the title of another text, based on the Parasurama myth—in circulation in Kerala in the nineteenth century—which presented a view that the Brahmins were the original inhabitants of Kerala. Similar views were also expressed by other texts, like *Kerala Pazhama* and *Kerala Mahatmyam*, which were also in circulation during this time. It was perhaps to distinguish itself from these texts that the historical account changed its title to *Aadikeralacaritram*. And it indeed provided a story of Kerala’s pasts which countered the claims made in *Keralalolpathi* and *Kerala Pazhama*. *Aadikeralacaritram* put forward the view that it was the Nayers, a dominant community of Kerala, and not the Brahmins, who were the original inhabitants of Kerala. *Aadikeralacaritram* was, in fact, a response to the demand of the changing time. We need to see the emergence of these writings in the context of the formation of community movements witnessed in Kerala in the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

Among a range of new developments, such as the emergence of a strong print culture, the development of a modern literary space and the inception of modern literary forms like the novel and the short story, which marked the last decades of nineteenth-century Kerala, the forging of new community identities was significant in many ways. On the one hand, it enabled a collective bargaining with the state and, on the other there were demands for reforms within the community. The Nayers, a prominent erstwhile matrilineal community of Kerala, initiated steps for reformation during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The main target of the Nayar reformers of the period was *marumakkathayam*, the matrilineal system of inheritance, and *sambandham*, a non-marital form of sexual relation, for the Nayar women. *Sambandam* also enabled Namboothiri—the Kerala Brahmin—men to claim sexual access to the Nayar women. The modern educated Nayar men, who were at the forefront of the reform movements, considered this practice as a sign of decadence of the community caused by Brahmin hegemony. We can find strong resonances of these concerns in *Aadikeralacaritram*. It sought to challenge the claims of Brahmin supremacy over Kerala’s past and present expressed in texts like *Keralolpathi*.

The narrative of *Keralolpathi* is built around the Parasurama myth. According to this account, Parasurama—the sixth incarnation of Hindu mythological figure Vishnu—threw his axe into the sea and reclaimed the land of Kerala and distributed it to sixty-four Brahmin families as a penance for having killed all the Kshatriya

men on earth. It is this narrative that *Aadikeralacaritram* attempted to counter by providing a counter-narrative of Kerala's past. However, this account does not qualify to be considered as a historiographical account in the strict sense of the term. This is not merely on account of its communitarian partisanship; the text shows major deviations from the protocols of modern historiography. *Aadikeralacaritram* does question the logic of mythological narratives like *Keralalolpathi*, but in many instances, the text breaks itself into the very mythical narrative mode it criticises. Instead of seeing this feature of the text as signs of a latent, underdeveloped historiographical sensibility, we need to use it as an entry-point to study the structure of the larger Malayalam print-space of nineteenth century in Kerala. Hence, in the following analysis of the text, even while paying attention to the argument put forward in *Aadikeralacaritram*, we shall also pay sufficient attention to its generic structure.

Questioning the logic (*yukthi*) of the claims of *Keralolpathi*—and other brahminical texts like *Keralamahatmyam* and *Keralavisheshamahatmyam*—that castes like the Shudras were brought to Kerala as slaves (*adiyaanmaarum kudiyaanmaarum*) by Parasurama to serve the Brahmins, *Aadikeralacharithram* suggests that the history of the region needs to be seen as a history of immigration of various social groups. This would help in getting a certain idea about the early settlers in Kerala: the time of their immigration and also about their roots (*Vidya Vinodini*, 1065 M.E. *Vrishchikam* 6-11<sup>2</sup>). This move towards a more historiographical account needs to be seen as an act of opening the domain of past to new enquiries; claims about the present could no longer be made on a past based on mythology. What are the ways in which a historical past was constituted in these new regimes of writing? And what did such writings entail? We shall find answers to these questions by further looking at *Aadikeralacaritram* and the way it attempted to construct a new history for the region of Kerala.

According to *Aadikeralacaritram*:

The people who inhabit Kerala now can be classified into two categories: the natives and non-natives. While various barbaric (*nikrishtajathikkar*) groups inhabiting the land from early times constitute the former, the latter is constitutive of various groups that migrated to Kerala and eventually became Malayalis. The natives include the agricultural labouring castes such as the Cherumar, the Pulayar, the Vettuvar, and those who inhabit the forest and the hills such as the Kuravar, the Paanar, the Kurichiar, the Malayar, and the Kadar; the immigrant castes include the Namboothiris, the Nayars, the Thiyyas and Ezhavas, Chovvanmaar, Mannanmaar, and Syrian Christians (*Makaram* 6).

Hence, in this narrative, it is the non-native immigrants who were ascribed the status of the Malayali identity, something to which the 'barbaric' natives had no claim. However, we will see a moment of rupture in the narrative when the native/non-native binary will be replaced by another oppositional pair of social categories: the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin castes. Before that we shall elaborate further on the possibilities that the native/non-native binary allows in constructing a particular narrative. The focus of attention here is the non-natives, since they were the ones who eventually became Malayalis. Among the non-natives,

[T]he Thiyyas were considered to have immigrated first to the land. The term Thiyya was considered to have evolved from the word "dweep" meaning Island, and this association of the work with Island led to the theory that Thiyyas were immigrants from an island and also brought the coconut tree along with them. It is the close traditional occupational association of the Thiyyas with the coconut tree that allows us to establish a tentative period of the migration of this community into Kerala. There are references to the coconut tree in a traveller's note written in the sixth century. If it were the Thiyyas who brought the tree into Kerala they would have immigrated to the land somewhere between 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century. There are also references to the Thiyyas in a copper edict presented to the Syrian Christians by a Raja of the region. The exact age of the edict has not been ascertained; some are of the opinion that it belongs to a time somewhere between 3<sup>rd</sup> century and 9<sup>th</sup> century. However, with no concrete evidence available, Thiyyas could be considered to have inhabited the land somewhere in the early centuries of the Christian era (Makaram 6-9).

We may pay attention to the way an attempt was made here to establish the identity of the Thiyyas with the region through their traditional occupation associated with coconut tree. The term Kerala is also said to have derived from the term Keram, meaning coconut. Thus, Keralam also assumes the meaning 'the land of coconut trees'. Compared to the indefiniteness regarding the Thiyyas and their immigration, a tone of certainty marks the description and the immigration of the Nayars to Kerala.

The term Nayar is a corruption of the Sanskrit term *Nayakar*, meaning the protector and the arbitrator. They were responsible for protecting the land in early times. There are references in *Keralolpathi* that Sri Parasurama bestowed the Nayars with the powers 'to oversee, to execute and to order' (*kannum, kayyum, kalpanayum*), and their principal occupation was to protect the right (of the Brahmins over the land) without any failure. A few are of the opinion that the Nayars are the vellalars or the farming community of the neighbouring land. This is not

appropriate, since the Nayars primarily indulge in protecting the land and the laws of the land after their migration to the land (Kumbham 5-6).

After this brief but definite description of the community, focussing on their occupation, which is distinct from the Shudras elsewhere, the narrative attempts to identify the Nayars with the Dravidian race. Here, language becomes the key link to establish this association:

The Nayars are the Dravidians who migrated into Malayalam from the eastern coast. The similarity between the term Nayar and the caste names of the Dravida Shudras of this region, like the Naikkar and the Naidu, shows that they are two branches of the Dravida race. Their language clearly points towards this association. Some are of the opinion that Malayalam is only a branch of Tamil and hence need not be counted as a separate language. ‘Caldwel’ Sayyip, an authority on Dravidian languages, who also extensively studied the nature of various languages, is of the opinion that Malayalam was originated from Tamil and eventually became a separate language due to the influx of Sanskrit words. However, Gundert Sayyip, who has a better grasp in Malayalam language opined that it should not be considered to have originated from Tamil; instead both Malayalam and Tamil are branches of a proto-Dravidian language. One thing is clear despite this difference of opinion: the root of Malayalam language is a Dravidian language...Consequently the Nayars whose mother tongue is Malayalam are Dravidians (7).

The shift in this narrative seen here to contemporary discussions on language is worth our attention. It is true that these linguistic debates were used in *Aadikeralacaritram* to build the argument that the Nayars were the original inhabitants of Kerala. By associating the Nayars with Malayalam language, and therefore, to the region, allows to build an argument for nativity and ownership of land. And by linking the Brahmins with Sanskrit, now conceived as a foreign language, makes it possible to treat them as outsiders. But the narrative shift from historiography to discussions on language is what merits our attention here. These two elements do not seem to fit well with each other. What does this narrative structure alert us to? Before addressing this question, we shall have another look at the question of the narrative shifts I am hinting at in *Aadikeralacaritram*:

There are references in chapter 14 of *Keralamahatmyam* that some Brahmins, after Parasurama brought them to Kerala, have taken away a fortune from the land and left for their own land. Parasurama, in order to prevent this from happening in the future, made some changes in the rituals of the Brahmins and along with this also altered their language and created Malayalam for Kerala. This is neither logical nor worth

acceptable...It is now an indisputable fact that Sanskrit is the language of the Brahmins who were brought to Kerala from the Aryan land, and Tamil is the language of the Shudras, who came from the neighbouring land. Following their immigration at the insistence of Parasurama, neither Brahmins nor Shudras could perform any rituals independent of each other, and this led to a greater interaction between them. In such a condition, a language of mutual comprehension became necessary. Eventually, Sanskrit and Dramila mixed together to form a language called Malayanna. In *Keralakaumudi*, Kovunni Nedungadi imagines Malayalam as a virgin born out of the confluence of Aryan Sanskrit and Dravidian Tamil. Further, he attributes fatherhood of Malayalam to Sanskrit and motherhood to Tamil (8-9).

When we read *Aadikeralacharithram* as long historical narrative these elements make us feel as if we are entering into a different narrative territory whose idioms are different from that of historiography. As we read on, there are further surprises. The identification of the Nayers with the territory is further established by citing examples of the non-Sanskrit lexicon signifying agrarian relations of the region: 'the words that signify noble ownership (*ulkristavakshangal*) of land and land relations belong to the Dravidian lexicon (10)'. This is done to imply that the Nayers who use the Dravidian language are the real owners of the land. But here again, there is a rupture in the narrative when this argument about the ownership of the land is discussed. It is more in tune with legal discourses.

Further, we also can find logical incoherence in *Aadikeralacharithram*. Now, in order to push the argument about the ownership of the land, we can find that the immigration theory adopted earlier is discarded. Here, certainty paves way for uncertainty: "Along with the opinion that the Nayers immigrated from elsewhere to Malayalam, there also exists another opinion that they were natives of the land. However, normally they are considered to be among the natives. At the same time one can neither completely rule out the possibility of their immigration from other places" (11). Nonetheless,

[E]ven if they were settlers, they would have immigrated from the neighbouring Tamil regions in the early times. When the Aryan Brahmin Namboothries came to Kerala the Nayers were the rulers of the land. Despite being ascribed the status of Shudras, the special status the Nayers enjoy compared to the Shudras of other regions is a testimony to their high social status before the invasion of the Brahmins. By ascribing the status of Shudra to the Nayers, the Brahmins could gain hegemony over them. Despite this, the status as an overseer of the land and also as those who 'uphold the rule of the land' as inscribed in *Keralolpathi* allowed Brahmins to make use of the service of the Nayers for their own benefit.

After the conquest of Kerala, the Brahmins who became the owners of the land (*janmi*) made Nayers the overseer (*kanakkaran*). Brahmins had other benefits because of their close association with the Malayali Shudras. In order to protect their land from dividing, the Brahmins permitted only the eldest son to marry within the caste, the younger sons had to enter sambandham with Nayar women. Marumakkathayam was a direct consequence of this arrangement (Medam 9-10).

It is true that *Aadikeralacaritram* propose to subvert the mythological account of the past of Kerala presented in texts like *Keralolpathi*. However, the newness of *Aadikeralacaritram* does not consist in a historiographical account replacing a mythological one. This text replaces mythology with a narrative form that is amorphous, where elements of mythology, historiography and an essay on language could be found woven together. And this account also allows us to see that in the last decades of the nineteenth century the question of the community became important. We also see the formation of debates about Malayalam language. We saw that in *Aadikeralacaritram* the relationship between Sanskrit and Malayalam is presented in oppositional terms: Malayalam as native language and Sanskrit as foreign. However, when we look at the discourses on literature that also began to emerge in the print space of Malayalam in the final decades of the nineteenth century we see this relation presented as a relationship of affinity. We shall take a glimpse into these discourses in order to understand the various ways in which conception about the identity of languages and literature shaped during this period.

Nourishing the language was an important project that preoccupied the intellectuals in Kerala during the last decades of nineteenth century. The establishment of journals like *Vidya Vinodini* was a sign of the emergence of this project. The statement (*Prasthavana*) published in the inaugural issue of the journal appealed to the contemporary writers to change their indifferent attitude to the Malayalam language: The learned (*vidvan*) among the Malayalis, the *Prasthavana* argued, seemed to give primacy to Sanskrit when it came to writing literature, treating Malayalam as inadequate for literary expression (Tulam 1-2).

The project of nurturing the language created an occasion to reflect up on some of the issues related to the way in which an identity of Malayalam literature could be conceived. What was *bhasha kayva*? How was it different from the Sanskrit tradition? What could be the distinguishing features of this literature? The early editions of *Vidya Vinodini* carried numerous articles on these issues related to Malayalam language and literature. These writings definitely tried

to effect a change in the literary taste of the reading public which was shaped predominantly by the Sanskrit literary tradition. But interestingly, here we don't see Sanskrit posited as a contaminating presence for the emerging Malayalam literature; on the contrary, it appears as a nourishing element.

*Vidya Vinodini* took up the task of nurturing Malayalam language, and published a series of articles in its early issues on various aspects of literature (*kavyam*). These proposed a set of normative ideas about the vernacular literature. Beginning with a definition of *Kavyam*, these articles touched upon various aspects of a literature proper. Although written as general aspects of literature, they were clearly aimed at setting norms to the nascent vernacular literature which was in the making. Questions related to lexicon, genres, the social function of literature and grammar became important issues in discussing Malayalam literature (*Bhasha Kavyam*). Drawn from the Sanskrit poetic tradition of *rasa* theory, these would become the defining features of *Bhasha Kavyam*.

The issue that became a matter of concern for the self-identity of Malayalam was that of inclusion, in the Malayalam lexicon, of a large number of Sanskrit words. Debates about *bhasha kavyam* addressed this issue and suggested that a mixed lexical model—mixing Sanskrit and Dravidian—could be appropriate for Malayalam language.

The discussion about language did not revolve solely around Malayalam and Sanskrit. English, which had already made its appearance in the literate scene of Kerala during the period, also animated these discussions. Contemporary writers, like Kandathil Varghese Mappila and C.D. David brought in this issue in their writings which they published in periodicals and newspapers of the time, like *Malayala Manorama*, *Basha Poshini* and *Vidya Vinodini*.

In an editorial in the *Malayala Manorama*, a newspaper which he established, Varghese Mappila raised the issue of the contemporary condition of Malayalam and appealed to the Sovereign government of Travancore to initiate certain measures to reform Malayalam (*Malayala Bhashayum* 43-44). He criticised the government for its preference for English as a language for everyday governmental transaction, and urged the government to make Malayalam the language of governance. According to Varghese Mappila, the fascination (*brahmam*) for English for all purposes related to governmental institutions was not only affecting the reformation of the *bhasha*, but even detrimental to its growth on account of its shrinking domains of usage. Similar concerns were echoed in the writings of C.D. David, a regular columnist in contemporary



magazines in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Kerala, as well. *Keralamitram*, one of the early newspapers in Malayalam established in 1881, initiated a debate in the 1890s by suggesting that the responsibility of conducting exams to test the proficiency in Malayalam, so far held by the Madras University, needed to be entrusted to Bhashaposhini Sabha, a newly formed organisation for enriching Malayalam. *Malayala Manorama* asked its readers for their responses to this suggestion. David published his response in *Vidya Vinodini*, where he seconded the suggestion. These debates and ways of thinking about language were shaping in the new spaces of literacy produced by the print artefacts like the newspaper and magazines. One crucial aspect of this print space of debate was that such exchanges were not confined solely within forms like editorials and essays. We find them shaping the emergent narrative space of contemporary literary forms like the play, the short story and the novel. Seemingly, these forms also opened their generic boundaries to participate in these debates. I shall illustrate this point with Kandathil Varghese Mappila's two plays that he published in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Kandathil Varghese Mappila published a translation of Shakespeare's play *Taming of the Shrew* in 1896. The translation, titled *Kalahinidamanakam*, is a free adaptation of the play and makes a significant attempt to domesticate the play in the literary idiom of the target language. In doing this, Varghese Mappila created two fictive domains of literary representation in his play: one resembled the more local space of Malayalam writing, and the other resembled a Sanskrit literary world. The Prologue of *Kalahinidamanakam* is set in a local social space with characters carrying regional sounding names like Chirattaykathu Varkki and Chokothi who speak a language that could be identified as ordinary and everyday. However, this is not the case with the scenes of the play. They are set in what could be called a Sanskrit literary-space in locations like Padalipuram and Varanadesam, inhabited by characters with Sanskrit-sounding names, such as Pavanashayan, Vighneshwaran, Parthasarathi, and Anandavalli. Varghese Mappila's own literary practices are symptomatic of the complex formation of a new literary-space in late-nineteenth century Kerala with the co-existence of the 'new' and the 'old,' although in his literary critical writings Mappila often quarrelled against the dominance of Sanskritic literary traditions.

Interestingly, as I mentioned above, even the space of the literary proper was not untouched by contemporary debates about language and literature. They often shared the narrative space of literary

writing. There is a scene in the Prologue of *Kalahinidamanakam* in which two characters discuss the issue of the importance of *shlokam* in the plays. One of the characters suggests that *shlokam* should not be included in a play, and by doing this the effectiveness of the play could be improved in terms of its performance and reception by the audience. This point was picked up and discussed in a review of the play which appeared in *Vidya Vinodini*. C. P. Achuthamenon, an important critic of late-nineteenth century Kerala and the founder editor of *Vidya Vinodini*, wrote this review where he pointed out that *shlokam* formed an essential element of a play. It is interesting to see not just the contrary views on literature held by these important figures, but also the generic space of a play which could accommodate these without worrying about the economy of literary writing. This enables us to see that the generic boundary of the forms that began to appear in the print-space of the last decades of the nineteenth century was not stable. We saw the same tendency at work in the historiographical accounts and literary writings discussed above.

This somewhat detailed discussion of a historical narrative and discourses of literature that *Vidya Vinodini* published helps us to gain a sense of the structure of the Malayalam print space during the period. In terms of the structure of the genres that came to be written during the period, our discussion of *Aadikeralacaritram* reveals that they had an amorphous character. The instability of the form can also be seen in the ideas generated at that time. The identity of the Malayalam language and its relation to Sanskrit were articulated differently in the historiographical account and discourses of literature we discussed. We also saw that the question of community was also important in shaping the debates on language. Literary forms like the novel began to be written in Malayalam in this rather “unstable” space.

We have seen how strands of different discourses are interlocked in the formation of discourses of Malayalam language and literature. At the same time, we can also see different forms cohabiting in writings we now label—based on the now available normative notions of genre—as history, literary criticism, poetry, drama and so forth. The early novels in Malayalam were no exception to this. A range of non-novelistic forms such as essay, legal documents, religious sermons, journalistic writings, Sanskrit and Malayalam *shlokam* inhabit the fictional space of these novels, making them appear unstable formally. Similar was the case with other writings like historiography: many different forms cohabited in the narrative space of these writings. These forms are neither seen as a simple

sign of an underdeveloped literary field, nor as writers' artistic deployment of available forms to create a novelistic space. They should, instead, be seen as sites to begin an investigation of what the early Malayalam novel was, at the time and in the space of its own production; and further, by implication, what fresh insights such enquiry would yield in understanding the constitutive process of modernity of nineteenth-century Kerala.

### Notes

1. Malabar in the north was a district of the Madras Presidency, and the British established indirect control over the princely states of Kochi and Travancore in the south by appointing a Resident.
2. Henceforth I shall refer to issues of this periodical by the Malayalam month and the page number.

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