

‘English’ and the Native Life world: The Malabar Episode

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Abstract

English was the medium through which British colonialism tried to harness the mindset of Indian people. It is evident that the most vital factor that distinguished the educated class of India from the rest of the population was their ability to make use of the language of the former rulers of the country. Colonial administration in India twisted the tool of diplomacy and knowledge for attaining control over indigenous communities. English education was introduced with a purpose to materialize the administrative needs of the British. In the case of Malabar, which is our region of analysis, introduction of English education can be seen as a rupture in human relationships and interregional contacts. As elsewhere in India, the prime motive of the British in Malabar was economic in terms of the cultivation of commercial crops and the maximum utilisation of its geographical potentialities especially the hilly areas of Wayanad and the coastal areas of Thalassery and Kannur. Malabar, a region occupied by heterogeneous cultural elements had a knowledge system catering to the requirements of contemporary society even before the arrival of the British. At the same time it showed no hesitation to accept the colonial cultural products which in turn affected the life styles and practices of upper middle classes and some sections of traditional elites. There was displacement of social and cultural hierarchies in the background of English education.

Keywords: Dominance, metropolis, modernity, public sphere, social fabric, commoditization, orientalism.

Introduction

This article provides an introduction to the cultural interaction between the coloniser and the colonised in the region of Malabar with an emphasis on English education. This study is not in the pattern of domination v/s resistance narrative appeared in the Modern Historical studies. While dominating the cultural diversities of the colonies, a

close scrutiny and reinvention of tradition was made in the colonial period. Type of the soil, natural varieties and native potentialities, process of marginalization in the traditional societies, social intercourse, communication and other were scrutinised by the specially appointed colonial officers and missionaries. Colonial survey and mapping of even the remotest areas of Asian colonies offered a space to the colonisers to analyse the pros and cons of traditional state system. Familiarization of an alien society and its stability in the colonies was enforced through various cultural technologies of the rule. It was very powerful to alter the cultural priorities of the colonised and 'the West is now everywhere within the West and outsides, in structures and in minds' (Nandy, 1983: XI).

Cultivation of English as a Language of 'Power'

Structure of colonial state was not uniform in every colony. In India the British hunted the possibility of an indirect rule. It is argued that colonial encounter did not simply operate through coercion, but also through concessions, contestation and resistance (Mamdani, 1996:16). As stated by Mamdani, colonial powers generalized decentralized exploring and describing one's perceptions, thoughts and beliefs (1996). In the process of domination, in India the British never intended for cultural displacement by destruction but they preferred persuasion, if possible and coercion only if necessary (Panikkar, 2007:10). Extension of the ideologies of western 'liberal state' over indigenous majority was primarily linked with language, science and technology, the biggest weapons of colonialism. Liberal structures have the potential to produce difference through displacement and translation (Naregal, 2004:142). English language introduced by the British could cut across the boundaries prescribed by the dominant native groups and that touched every walk of life. The new language had inward penetration to the native environment, action, resistance, and liberation. As Gauri stated, imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and that of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways (1990:3). English literature was made as a major subject in the Indian Civil Service which moulded a generation capable of running the administrative machinery of the British and played a crucial role in the ideological formation of the empire. The British state had a strong interest in creating a hegemonic culture that could marginalize local and regional as well as subaltern ways of life and knowledge systems (Mamdani, 1996). Naregal's study shows the ways that colonial

rule in South Asia restructured social hierarchies by altering the nature of relation between ‘high’ and ‘low’ languages (Naregal, 2004:139). Theory of imperialism imparted superior objectivity and rationality that always have primacy over values such as compassion, freedom and participatory democracy (Nandy, 1987:87). Paradox is that it was the same rationality psychologically harnesses the nation’s mindset and that shaped future generation of intellectuals, thinkers and national leaders who were instrumental in the liberation of the nation from the charge of British imperialism.

Following Weber’s logic, it was the new class situation which was determined by the kinds of skills and abilities obtained by education credentials that create life chances outside of the life chances of direct property ownership which made English as the language of power (Weber, 1978: 928-30). Michel Foucault’s comment on the interrelations between citizenship and power is pertinent here. He viewed cultivation of knowledge through language is irrevocably linked to power. When the British appeared in the Asian scene, they were in total confusion with regard to the cultivation of an ‘alien’ language there. The British language policy in India offers us more contradictions than similarities. As stated by Boman, the debate about the nature of education imparted to Indians as embodied in the Anglicist - Orientalist controversies reflected the cultural space that colonial state was seeking, for establishing its hegemony (1943:VII-VIII). Confusion on the part of the British was evident in the speech of Randle Jackson in the British parliament that blamed the secession of the American colonies to the English folly of opening schools and colleges there. Jackson warned the directors to avoid and ‘steer clear of the rock that the British split in America’ (Kochar, 2008:45).

The supporters of Orientalist school of thought in administration were in favour of using indigenous languages for establishing effective rapport with native people (Mohanty, 2008:103). The acquisition of knowledge about the colony is very essential to the colonial state for domination and control (Gauri, 1999:28). Orientalist schools of thought put an argument that money of a colonial state mainly derived from the colonies so that something to be returned to the colonial subjects. The Evangelicals like Charles Grant offered two ways to communicate European enlightenment to the Orientalist world, first, through the medium of the native language and second, through the English language. In their version, when natives became acquainted with the English language, they could immediately read everything written in

it, and thus the field of knowledge open to the native mind would be greatly expanded (McCully, 1966:12). Grant argued for a structural change in the native religion for the effective implementation of western knowledge. After the Charter Act of 1823 some of the missionary groups began to toy with Grant's idea. A reverse view was offered by British officials like Elphinston, Munroe and Malcolm. Elphinston laid down the principle that the promotion of native education required considerable assistance from the government. He was in favour of extending the benefit of English education only in metropolitan cities like Bombay where there was the settlement of business community who was always supportive of the British. This was with a view that only those 'civilized' have access to European rights. As Mamdani stated the British civil society was presumed to be 'civilized society' from whose ranks the 'uncivilized' were excluded (1996:16). Elphinston's plan was not acceptable to the English official like Francis Warden, who submitted a different plan. Warden wished to give greater encouragement to the study of English and to drop the arrangements for extending native schools (McCully, 1966:29). The Anglist faction had been built up through the appointment of men like Trevelyan, Wilberforce and John. R. Colvin who were strongly opposed to the practice of patronizing Oriental learning.

The controversies were settled in 1835 when the Government of India decided to devote to the teaching of western sciences and literature through the medium of English alone. The British government in India decided to patronize English over Oriental education and also began to make government employment increasingly dependent upon possession of educational qualifications. Macaulay's Minute was a transition from religious to secular motives in English education (Gauri, 199:145). From the 19th century onwards the colonial powers had emerged as the principal agents in disseminating modern education in India. They got immense help from the missionaries who came with a different plan. The annual reports of Basel Mission give a detailed explanation of their aims and objectives which were philanthropic, pedagogical, and financial. The philanthropic objective was to extend health services and to provide honourable means of subsistence to many Christians as well as probationers, who otherwise could hardly know what to live upon¹. A major part of the financial resources for running the mission institutions in India came from British residents of the region. The Missionaries suspected that official policy of secularization in the early phase of imperialism in India had been instituted

in a spirit of experimentation and for testing the non-religion theory of education (Gauri, 1999:8). According to them knowledge without religion produced infidels who were the spiritual equivalent of political rebels imbued with contempt for constitutional authority (Gauri, 1999:47). Character Act of 1813 relaxed the colonial control over missionary activity in India. The demand for English education was gradually developing among metropolitan elites. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there existed a small English speaking nucleus among the wealthy native merchant families of the metropolis. In the Bengal presidency, where the government offices and the commercial activity of Calcutta produced a greater degree of intercourse between the European community and the natives, an increasing number of the Calcutta aristocracy had begun to adopt English dresses, to adorn their home with English furniture and to assume English manners. From a geographical point of view the inhabitants of coastal areas, especially those close to the growing port towns, were favourably situated to undergo primary westernization (McCully, 1966:54).

As mentioned in the outset, colonial cultivation of English language was centered on big cities like Bombay and Calcutta. As there were no such big cities in Malabar, English came late to this region. At the same time, as the northernmost colony of the British in the Madras Presidency, Malabar district was at least culturally linked to the colonial project of “one power, one mind.” As in other regions of India, in Malabar the forces of colonialism consisted of two phases. In the first phase of colonial rule, Malabar was not an outstanding territory with multiple interests. The British conquest during its first phase showed all the signs of being integrated to native society (Nandy, 1983:3). The British treated the region as an important centre for revenue extraction. For the same reason, the stupendous material remains of the British administrative machinery, characteristic of many of the Indian cities, can’t be seen anywhere in Malabar. In the second phase of colonialism the British were guided by capitalist economic interests which demanded availability of citizens free from traditional bondages.

Native Responses

In Malabar, the British made only a minimal effort to create a group of lower grade officials for the functioning of the administration system. Only a tiny fraction of the population came in to direct, face to face, contact with the British or other Europeans, and those who came in to such contact did not always become a force for change. Each community of the region had its own way of subsistence in which

upper castes dominated the mode of production. Education in the traditional society of Malabar was devised in tune with the existing social and economic needs of the region. Its power structure, land relations and judicial system were locally developed one. Contemporary society hardly required universal accessibility to all kinds of cultural skills and knowledge forms, since skills and knowledge were functionally specific, hereditary and also caste oriented (Gurukkal, 1999:77). It is mistaken to argue that social progress in Malabar was exclusively associated with the British. Lower caste groups of the region even practiced medicine and *vishachikitsa* as a means of subsistence. Even in the midst of western practices the avarna and dalit groups of Malabar had carved out their own space in the treatment of certain diseases and in attending delivery. There were well known persons throughout Malabar known as *vaidyan* who practiced medicine and *vishachikitsa* as private practitioners. The tribals like *mavilans* and *karimbalans* had attained proficiency in *vishachikitsa* (treatment of snake bite) and they were approached by snake bitten people. People of Malabar rarely approached hospitals during pregnancy and delivery. There was certain experienced group of women in Malabar to attend delivery. A letter from Tellicherry Municipal Chairman to Madras government indicates the colonial process of making unskilled *Malayi* (lower caste women) to a trained midwife in attending delivery. The Municipality proposed to train the *Malayis* at Civil Hospital at Tellicherry to attend delivery in the town.² Series of articles that appeared in the native newspapers lamented that, the introduction of Allopathic medicines provided a serious setback to the traditional medicine practiced by *vaidyans* and that the people were intoxicated by the charms of the western medicine (M.D, 1918:3-3).

Social transformation in the midst of the British institutions was a slow process in Malabar. Implementation of English education does not offer a steady and progressive graph in the case of Malabar. The Imperial Census of 1871 suggests that total population of Nambudiris in Malabar was 22188 and out of which only 169 were in government service with a total percentage of 0.7³ Missionary reports speak of the initial difficulties they had in the field of education because of the stiff opposition from upper caste people. Their reports stated that many of the higher caste people in Malabar were afraid of the modern school. The low caste people who were attracted to the missionary schools had to face stiff opposition from the local *janmi* or landlord. Even in the beginning of the twentieth century there were several people from the

high castes who were cherishing the memory of old educational practices. Some of the dissenting notes on English education appeared in contemporary journals and newspapers are worth inspecting. A newspaper report quoted the opinion of Carlyle and say: “there is a limit to attaining knowledge, going beyond this is not good for human beings” (Anantha Pillai, 1917:4-11-12).

The percentage of attendance of Muslim students in schools belonging to Malabar indicates their attitude towards western system of education. In 1854, even after the implementation of Charles Wood despatch, there was only two Muslims in the Provincial School at Calicut where the number of students belonging to the Hindu community were 108⁴. In Tellicherry School, the ratio between the Hindu students and Muslim students was 87:9⁵. The Imperial Census of 1871 indicate that out of the total Muslim population of 274320 in Malabar only 39 Muslims in schools with a total percentage of 0.01⁶. Several cases of Mappila agitation against the missionaries were reported from Malabar. When the missionaries started preaching at Panur, a crowd of Mappilas raised tumults, pecked stones at them and forced to stop preaching and some of them challenged the missionaries for a debate.⁷ *Kerala Patrika* reported that some Musaliars in Kannur town prevented the Mappila boys from studying English for the reason that studying English was ‘injurious’⁸. A short story titled *Asakula* appeared in a contemporary weekly read thus: Ayisha a small girl coming from conservative Muslim family in Malabar, completed her fourth standard and came out with flying colours. When she approached her *Bapa* (father) for higher education, he said:

...now your formal education is over. English is the language of *narakatile ahilukar* (those who are in hell). I will recommend you to Moyiliar (religious teacher) to study Pathu Kittab (religious scripture) (Abdul Wahid, 1937:15-7-3).

Moidu Moulavi once lamented: education of Muslim girls ended with the study of Quran. Then they never came back from the darkness of their taravadus (Moulavi, 1981:10). Even in the royal families of Malabar, the educational status of the women was not satisfactory. In Chirakkal royal family, woman matriculates came only by late 1940⁹. However, some of the rich Muslim families in Malabar like Keyis, Maliekkal, Koyas and Arakkal family have sent their girls to English schools and took western education. One of the obstacles in the way of female education, as per the official view, was the absence of stimulating rewards and the apathy on the part of parents. One of the Brit-

ish reports said: parents were always averse to keeping their daughters beyond a very early age in schools taught by males. Where the staff entirely composed of women, the duration of school life tends to rise.¹⁰

‘Modern’ character of reform movements

There was a continuous interaction between the colonial order and social ethos of Malabar. It is generally argued that the rise of reform movements were in the context of colonial education. The spread of English education and the social awakening that followed led to rapid changes in human interactions and power relations in the region. The colonial order underlined the weakness of the traditional order and the need for reform and regeneration of institutions. Political resources of lower caste groups were not adequate for dislodging the actual bases of inequality (Naregal,2004:139). In Malabar, their acquaintance of English language with the support of missionaries and reformers turned as a determining factor in the new social formation. Following Weber’s thesis, interplay of the authority of rationality and the power of charisma was relevant in the case of Kerala where the British served as the authority of rationality and religious leaders as the power of charisma. Divinity attached to the reform leaders like Sree Narayana Guru helped in the easy assimilation of their rationalist ideas in Kerala. Miller has argued that the combined influence of modern education, communist critique and economic needs have reduced the dominance of religious concerns; religion became a private matter while the public concern of the community became social progress (1992:23).

The attempt of social reformers in Kerala to impart education on modern lines to lower caste people and their call for a decent way of life by abandoning prejudices and superstitions in the society were the attempts to follow some aspects of westernization. As observed by Osella, the slogan ‘one caste, one religion, one God for human kind of the same blood and form’, a bold scientific insistence upon empirical equality, is articulated in Kerala not by a biologist or political activist but by a Guru (Osella and Osella, 2004:46). The lower caste movements in Kerala had emphasized the link between power and knowledge with a perception that one of the prerequisites to achieve a casteless society was the dissemination and democratization of knowledge. Ayyankali tried to assimilate the practices of the West and East by making his body itself a symbol. His use of ornaments, turban, overcoats etc. has much significance as it extended a message of breaking caste oriented social boundaries and entering the public sphere. Theatre art forms were widely used by *Yogakshema Sabha* for propagating the

themes of education, social participation, marriage reforms etc. The influence of colonial modernity and western practice was visible in such instances like the inter-dining event of Sahodaran Ayyappan to promote the concept of universal brotherhood, Sivayogi’s emphasis on women education and attempt of Chalilakathu kunhammad Haji to reform the class rooms on western model by introducing black board, chalk, charts, map etc.

Social mobility and cultural practices

The ideology of progress which tagged along with English education has shaped a new condition for social mobility in Malabar. The reorganization of family structure, urbanization of economy, new concept of time, improved employment opportunities etc were the visible outcomes of a society groomed by western education. In Marshal Berman’s discourse cultural capitalism and the expression of modernity have the potential to cut across all boundaries of geography, ethnicity, class and nationality (1982:15). While occupation in the traditional caste system was rated in terms of ritual purity and pollution, they are today rated to some extent in terms of income they produce (Rao, 1972:137). Women of Malabar were succumbed under the weight of the oppressive caste system and the social regulations imposed by it. Social reformers of Kerala supported by educated middle class prompted a barrage of questions to be raised on women education, marriage reforms and ritual practices. Progress was visible in the formation of various women organizations like *Vanitha Samajams*, *Strivedis* and *Mahila Sangams* in Malabar. From 1887 to 1975 there were more than twenty women magazines in Malabar.

The creation of a new public sphere in the form of newspapers and socially committed organisations provided a platform for newly educated intellectuals, social reformers, *vakils*, and women leaders to discuss the crucial issues connected with Malabar society. These initial efforts combined with the positive attitude of the British officials and law courts created a favourable condition for family reforms. People were now talking of the success stories of educated people who were getting employed in the British firms and civil service and migrated to distant lands to make their fortune. Chandu Menon’s hero Madhavan, Potheri Kunhambu’s hero Marathon and Joseph Mulyils heroine Sukumari directly speak of the success stories of those who were English educated.

One of the aspects of colonialism which Hebermas identified was

the intense commoditization of private life. Leisure, family life, sexual relationship, and one's sense of self and development as human being, increasingly become targets of commoditization (White, 1988:115). Colonisation and its products, i.e. western education and urbanization, resulted in a secularization of the life styles of the Malabar region. Colonial practices in Malabar were at first taken up by the *Malayalees* of Madras city went for educational and occupational purposes. There was large number of people who served the British as housekeepers, butlers and servants of the British officials, planters etc. They tried to introduce new pattern of dress style, food habits and construction style of residential building. Colonial taste had its presence in towns like Tellicherry with the opening of Mampally Bakery by Karai Bappu. Words like 'sorry', 'excuse', 'hallo', 'sir', 'saree', 'shirt', 'coat', 'shop', 'market' etc. became vernacular words. Old place names were changed in tune with its English pronunciation. Tellicherry (Thalassery), Cannanore (Kannur), Calicut (Kozhikode), Trichur (Trissur), Aleppy (Alapuzha), Quilon (Kollam) and Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) were some of the important changes.

Conclusion

The 'power' of language was instrumental in creating changes in the existing order of society. The British made English as a compulsory target for getting employment opportunities and social status in the colonial countries. Along with the English language some western practices also percolated into the Indian social fabric. As the region which first experienced foreign practices, introduction of western education provided a new face to the socio-economic set up of Malabar. Colonial administration and Christian missionaries played an important role in the spread of English education and culture in Malabar. Western science was also imparted along with English language. Schools and colleges served as the instrument of western culture and religion. There was a continuous interaction between colonial order and social ethos of Kerala. After the initial apathy, almost all communities of Malabar responded positively to the western mode of education. But it does not mean that every section of the society received English education. It was limited to a minuscule minority. The way of life of the indigenous people, their customs, beliefs and practices, knowledge, morals, laws and arts were allowed to decay and the western culture was communicated as role model of high culture to reorder the society. It can be fixed as the root of 'micro family' system to the western education and the new mode of job opportunities created by it. Though the indigenous system of education suffered a decline, the traditional knowledge like *Ayurveda*, *Vishachikitsa*, crafts, technology etc continued for a long

time. The extensively praised Kerala model and the identity formation of this region are to some extent connected to the introduction of English education.

Notes

1. 40th *Basel German Evangelical Mission Report* for 1879, Mangalore, 1880, p.213. It has stated its educational objectives in the following words: ‘We purpose under the head to treat education as one of the organization for building up church. It is an essential duty of every church, a condition of its very life and programme to “feed the lambs” and knowing, that it is idle to expect that this duty can be properly attended to in the family, we do the utmost in our power to establish primary schools in all our churches so that even the poorest and most ignorant may be brought up in the nature an admonition of the Lord and may receive the amount of education that will enhance their to read and understand the word of God and to become intelligent members’.
2. *Letter from Municipal Chairman, Tellicherry to the Secretary, The Government of Madras*, B&A, Go No 864, Local Self Government, Regional Archives Kozhikode, P.3. Native reports of Malabar speak the presence of families and individuals who were expert in the field of medicine. Nadumbrath Kandiyil, a prominent Tiyya *taravad* popularly known as Uracheri family at Menapram has produced well known Ayurvedic physicians. Nedumbrath Koman Vaidyar, a member of this *taravad* was a well known Ayurvedic physician. His sons Kunhi Kannan, Chathappan, Kunhi Chandan, Kunbhi Koran and Othenan were great Sanskrit scholars. In the first phase of colonialism, instead of spending much money on medical research in the area, they sought the help of local physicians for curing diseases, believing that they were likely to be better acquainted with the diseases and remedies. Recurring presence of Malaria and Cholera in the region alarmed the British and they took a sudden turn to allopathic practices at least for saving ‘their citizens.’ The new generation of Ayurvedic physicians also responded positively to western medical practices by introducing scientific methods in diagnosis and treatment.
3. Census of 1871, vol II, Madras, 1874, C/28, Regional Archives Kozhikode, P.131. In the initial phase of colonialism Nambutiris were not sympathetic to English education. The British official reports characterised the Nambutiris as a ‘section who were famous for their aloofness from the ‘world’ and their adherence to the ‘old order of things’ and were largely engaged in priestly duties and temple service.
4. *Report on Public Instruction under Madras Presidency*, 1856-57, Madras, Appendix A/766, Regional Archives, Kozhikode, p.27.
5. Ibid.

6. *Census Report*, 1871, Madras, vol-II, c/28, Regional Archives, Kozhikode, p.131.
7. *Basel German Evangelical Mission Reports*, Basel Mission Press, Mangalore, 1906, p.78
8. *Kerala Patrika*, 26 May 1894, *Native Newspaper Report*, Tamilnadu National Archives, Chennai. Mappila reservation towards English education was due to political and religious reasons and was connected with global and local issues. Some observers like J Murray Mitchell attributed this hostility to Muslim sense of common pride. He argued that Mappilas were convinced of the infinite superiority of Arabian and Persian literature to the production of the West. In the East, Pan Islamism responded to the challenge of European economic and cultural penetration. The British revenue policy and their prolonged hostility to the Muslim community in Malabar resulted in a series of uprisings in the region. Mappila experience from the British hands created a deep suspicion of western institutions such as secular education, medicine and bureaucracy. Among the Malabar Muslims, one half or three fourth was extremely resistant to English education.
9. Interview with Raveendra Varma, senior member of Chirakkal Royal family on 4/5/2013.
10. *Report on Public Instruction under Madras Presidency*, 1916-17, Madras, A/819, Regional Archives, Kozhikode p.104. The 1871 Census Report indicates that Malabar occupied third position in Madras Presidency in female instruction. In 1881 Census Malabar ranked first in the female rate of attendance in the districts of Madras presidency. But 97.52% of women were illiterate. Official estimates suggests that girls did not pass the primary level even in the 1890's when out of 200647 girls for school going age only 11164 or 5.6% were registered as pupils and only 9463 or 4.7% actually made it to the school.

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