

## DOMESTIC LIVES AND LEISURELY PURSUITS IN COLONIAL MALABAR\*

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### ABSTRACT

*In the early twentieth century, when matrilineal tarawads were breaking down and patrilineal nuclear households were slowly replacing them, an educated elite in Malabar re-invented the notion of 'home.' In valorizing 'home', they were influenced by the colonial conditions they were living in, and the Victorian debates on domesticity. The imagined 'home' in middle class discourse, however, remained more of an ideal, for, in reality, it remained a place seething with internal conflicts — male-female, master-servant, as well as family-individual. In spite of women being placed at the centre of the domestic universe on paper, in reality, the father, the head of the family, remained its central element. The ultimate power in the domestic sphere including decisions concerning education and marriage remained in his hands. Meanwhile, new, secular ways of spending leisure at home were devised, gardening and listening to radio, to name just two. And, with the growth of individualism, individualistic ways of spending leisure came to the fore, none more illustrative than reading, which a literate class took to with passion.*

**Keywords:** Middle class, Malabar, home, woman, domestics, childhood, leisure, radio, reading

### Introduction

In 1975, Arnie J. Mayer, while lamenting that academics, over time, have not done research on the middle class, even as they write prolifically on the working and peasant classes, wondered whether it was due to the fact that social scientists are hesitant to expose the aspirations, lifestyle, and world-view of the social class in which so many of them originate and from which they seek to escape. (Mayer, 1975: 409) This was the period when the Indian academia as well, dominated as it was, by the Marxists of various persuasions, exhibited a similar reluctance in exploring the history of the Indian middle class. Since then, however, a large body of work on the middle class has piled up both internationally and nationally. Regional studies have enriched

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our knowledge about this class which came into their own during the colonial period. However, not much work has been done on Malabar in this regard. This paper is an attempt in this direction insofar as it seeks, by examining fiction and non-fiction produced in late colonial Malabar, to show how the new middle class conceptualized domesticity, and how far it reflected reality. The second part of the essay shows how new, secular forms of leisure emerged during this time to enliven life at home.

## The Setting

In late nineteenth century Malabar, the new middle class did not constitute a high percentage of the population. According to the 1871 census, in Calicut, the most important of the towns in the district, out of a population of 48,338, there were only eighty government servants and 188 learned professionals.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, the number of graduates, undergraduates and matriculates in the district was about 1,000 and the number of officials drawing a salary of more than 10, 20 and 50 rupees a month was 1063, 245 and 90 respectively.<sup>2</sup> Though a minority, the influence of the middle class was disproportionate to their numerical strength, a fact acknowledged by the Malabar Marriage Commission in the context of their demand for marriage legislation:

Though the minority that desires legislation is small, it is a growing and an educated minority, and every year will add to its strength and influence. The educated few are the leaven which will leaven the whole lump, and...their good example will in two or three generations ... lead the rest to adopt the same standard.<sup>3</sup>

The new middle class came from different sections<sup>4</sup> even though, as the Statistical Atlas of Malabar, 1906, says the “Nayars supply the bulk of the learned professions such as vakils and schoolmasters and a large proportion of those engaged in scriptory work.”<sup>5</sup> According to K. N. Panikkar, the reluctance of the British authorities to appoint as revenue and judicial officials those men of wealth and respectability due to their role in rebellions, threw open opportunities for the Nairs of inferior economic status. Amassing wealth using their official status they raised their social prestige. Their children who went to the government run schools and colleges ended up being munsiffs, magistrates and judges while they themselves had begun as petty village officials. It was this class which had the economic independence, and who had imbibed new cultural values that were at the forefront of the agitation for marriage and other reforms at the turn of the century. (Panikkar, 1977: 38)

However, the Thiyyas, inspite of their relatively low social status in the Hindu caste hierarchy, produced a high percentage of middle class

professionals and bureaucrats during the colonial period. In the mid-nineteenth century, Uppot Kannan and Dewan Bahadur E.K. Krishnan, both belonging to the Thiyya community, became deputy collector and sub-judge respectively. The community had made tremendous advances during the colonial period. Initially, during the Company rule, a sizeable section among them had become economically prosperous through trading links with the English, which, in the course of time, even led to loose conjugal ties with the colonizers, “their caste rules not making so much objection to temporary alliances as other castes.” (Dunsterville, 1898: 52) Moreover, as there was a superstratum of Thiyya pundits throughout the land, the Englishmen used them as *munshis* to learn Malayalam. Naturally, therefore, there were several Thiyyas occupying clerical jobs, positions in the police department, and even junior executive posts in the revenue sections.

It was, thus, the lower strata of the upper castes (Nairs) and the upper strata of the lower castes (Thiyyas) who, by acquiring English education, and, consequently, obtaining government jobs, constituted the majority among the Hindu middle class. On the other hand, the Nambuthiris, the erstwhile privileged group in society took time to adapt to the new circumstances. Of course, a radical intelligentsia did emerge from among the younger generation in the group in the context of the reform movement led by the *Yogashema Sabha*. But, for a significant section amongst the community as well as a few elite Nair feudal chieftains, loss of political power did not put an end to their illusions of grandeur. Turning their back on English education, they tried to maintain the indulgent life of the past, still possible through the possession of extensive lands.

Upto the early twentieth century, amongst the various communities in Malabar, polygamy and polyandry prevailed, best exemplified by *Sambandham*, the multiple, loose conjugal ties which existed between the Nambudiri males and Nair women. It was only later, with the backing of the English-educated natives, that the colonial government passed Acts which brought into existence monogamous marital unions among the Hindus. Other Acts followed which destroyed the *Marumakkathayam* (matrilineal system) and the *tarawads* (joint family households).<sup>6</sup> The stage was thus set for the emergence of patrilineal nuclear households in the region which G. Arunima deals with in great detail in her work. (Arunima, 2003)

### **The Home**

In a tract from Malabar of the early twentieth century, the ‘home’ was described as:

...one of the most sacred places on earth, where children possessing innocence akin to angels are born and grow up. This is the place made

sacred through the performance of hospitality, and which provides fertile ground for the 'divine radiance' of matrimonial love to emanate. (Menon, 1912: 2)

In the imagination of the middle class during the colonial period, as is clear from the passage above, 'home', counterpoised to the world outside, was given a great deal of importance.<sup>7</sup>

From the late nineteenth century onwards, alongside the traditional homesteads, houses constructed along modern lines were coming into existence in Malabar. In the fiction of the times, the ambience of these new homes is vividly described. In *Vasumati*, for instance, Murkoth Kumaran begins the story with the description of a bungalow belonging to a well-off Thiyya, one of the upwardly mobile lower castes, with a neatly kept garden outside, while inside, in the drawing room, the heroine plays harmonium, and the hero sits on a sofa amidst curtained windows, tables, and chairs. (Kumaran, 1935: 257)

The ideal was the middle class home in Victorian England. During his stay in England for higher education, M.A. Candeth, who later became one of the first Indian Director of Public Instruction, wrote thus of the house he stayed in:

Very nice house, parallel walls, low ceilings, long nooks and fireplaces, the whole house ramblingly built. One of the country houses of which I have read so much. There is a very fine garden with hedges, small apple trees. Oh! All so lovely...How nice English home life is... so lovely, so clean. There was a very nice gramophone ...At heart, I wish I were an Englishman. It is an honour to belong to this nation. (Candeth, 1907)

A feature of Victorian middle class domestic life had been the display of surplus wealth in over-cramped living rooms filled with curios. Home had become a site to express one's taste. Piano, sculpture, paintings, and a few green plants indicated a well domesticated nature. In Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi*, the interior of the home is done up in the style of the Victorian bourgeois domestic spaces with painted mirrors, expensive carpets, sofas, chairs, glass lamps, and there is a library with two cupboards holding Sanskrit and English books. (Nair, 1949) Inside middle class houses, in the sitting room, shelves lined with books had become the norm. In *Indulekha*, for instance, Surya Namboodiripad, who represents the old order, is stunned by the number of books kept on the shelves in the drawing room of the heroine. (Menon, 2010: 117) At a time when, transport and communications were in their infancy, the home library was a window to the outside world. It encompassed the world within the confines of the home, and satisfied the desire to know the world without leaving home.

Perhaps, some of the descriptions of inner spaces in novels and short stories could have been mere flights of fancy. But there are indications that, in some cases at least, they reflected reality. For instance, Balamaniamma, in her autobiographical writings notes the changes inside the home during her lifetime. During her childhood in the early part of the twentieth century, decorations at home were minimal, confined to shiny aluminium pots and tobacco boxes her grandma would place under the cots in dark small rooms. Later in her life, she was to live in modern houses where there were changes in architecture as well as decoration, which reflected both the changing role of women as well as her own individuality in nucleated families. There were gardens, high boundary walls and gates outside, while the interiors of the house would inevitably have a showcase with dolls, other toys, well bound books, kitchenware, and colourfully decorated handfans as well as Ravi Varma paintings on the wall. (Balamaniamma, 1982: 10) In the photos available of public figures during this time, the background is almost always provided by bookshelves. A section of the traditionalists did not take kindly to the mimicking of the West. For instance, it was pointed out that “the blind imitation of western architecture in the construction of houses without properly comprehending it had resulted in the absence of beautiful houses, and the proliferation of fourth-rate English houses without taste. Like Varasiyar in *Parangodi Parinayam*, a drawing room was compulsory, even if the rest of the house is dirty — crowded with chairs and tables of little use or aesthetics; a gramophone in one corner, and a harmonium in the other just to look civilized.” (Menon, 1918: 270) The new products carved out by the carpenters reflect the changes taking place in the interior of middle class homes. M.S.A.Rao, at the end of our period of study, wrote:

a significant change in the articles prepared about thirty years ago can be observed. They [carpenters] were preparing mostly agricultural implements, cots, boxes, benches, doors and windows. Now they make chairs, tables, modern cots, almirahs, easy-chairs, tea-stools, dressing tables, mirror-stands... (Rao, 1957: 41-42)

Another new development was the photograph, which, in the course of time, replaced portraits. Most of the photos were taken from the studios which cropped up in different parts of the district, like *Pinto* studio in Tellicherry, *Pithambhar* and *Nina* studios in Calicut. Those who could afford, got theirs taken from home. As a form of inheritance these fixed images of the self and family — its changing lifestyles, family events — were stored for posterity on mantelpieces, and elaborate frames, or else, albums. Traditionally, in India, portraits and later photos of the dead ancestors were placed alongside those of deities. So, photos, in a way, had been portends of death, but this

did not prevent them from catching the imagination of the newly emergent middle class. As Malavika Karlekar points out, “precious evidence of a recently acquired mobility and status, the photograph’s value obviously outweighed likely proscriptions of caste and community.” (Karlekar, 2005: 72) Several photos are available of the middle class representatives in Malabar belonging to the first part of the twentieth century, the males in modern attire, in some cases where the photos had been taken at home, with shelves lined with books in the background, and later, photos of the whole family including women and children.

### **The New Woman**

In Partha Chatterjee’s opinion, as an alien rule established its sway over the Indians in the external domain by virtue of its superior material culture, the Indian intelligentsia gave shape to an inner space that was taken to be inviolate and autonomous. (Chatterjee, 1997: 238-239) The Hindu home was thus counterposed to the world outside which lay beyond their immediate power and control. With the strategic placement of the home, the Indian intelligentsia invented the new cult of domesticity, where women were to play a crucial role. In the middle class division of the world into public and private spheres, women’s role was confined to the latter. The dominant view was that they should not have to go out and work for their maintenance, which should be the responsibility of the menfolk. The rationale for this was:

There is and should be a division of labour. In every family there are two kinds of work — earning wealth and household work. Only men can do the former as that work entails staying far away from home for long hours. Due to problems like menstruation, pregnancy, child birth, child rearing, etc women cannot do that. Instead, they should concentrate on running the household. (Nambuthiripad, 1926: 288)

The ‘ideal’ type of woman portrayed in literature was someone who was educated enough to be a friend to the enlightened middle class husband, in conformity with the concept of ‘companionate’ marriage’ popularized by Victorian sensibilities, but who would, at the same time, stay at home and perform her role as wife and mother to perfection.

The education of women was expected to help ‘create’ this New Woman. From the late nineteenth century onwards, girls were being admitted to schools, but not always in institutions meant exclusively for them.<sup>8</sup> This invited criticism, and the *Kerala Sanchari* of August 21, 1889 drew the attention of the Directorate of Public Instruction to evils arising from sending girls to boys’ schools.<sup>9</sup> But by the fourth decade of the twentieth century, attitudes had changed. It was, for instance, felt that “apart from the fact that

co-education reduces expenditure, boys would not feel unnecessarily shy in the company of girls, nor misbehave with them if given a chance from a young age to mingle with them.” (Kuruppu, 1939: 49) More persistent was the disquiet regarding the content of education. In an article informed by current patriarchal values, an editor of a women’s magazine wrote of the need to restructure women’s education in which ‘housekeeping’ was to get pride of place in the syllabus, and which would include courses in primary economics, cooking, child-rearing, etc. (Bhagirathy Amma, 1932:35) The outcomes expected from education varied for men and women. In the novel *Indulekha*, whereas Madhavan’s education is geared to gain him employment and thereby independent income, the heroine’s is of a private nature meant mainly to sanitise the mind. In Malabar, by the 1940s, the percentage of girl students to female population constituted 10.6 which was the second highest in the Presidency.<sup>10</sup> However, a dominant male discourse ensured that very few girls went for higher education, and even those who did, ultimately ended up staying at home, performing household chores.<sup>11</sup> Even someone like K.P. Kesava Menon, educated at Madras, editor of *Mathrubhumi*, and a Congress leader of prominence by the 1920s, writes in his Memoirs that even though his wife was educated only up to the fourth standard, it did not matter as she was adept in household matters, and that to someone like him who was particular about food, her culinary talents came as a blessing. (Menon, 1957: 23) Muliyl Krishnan, lecturer at Presidency College in Madras, kept an English mistress to tutor his semi-educated wife, sixteen years younger to him. Everyday, before going to college, he used to assign ‘homework’ to her in order to improve her handwriting and knowledge in Maths. It is not clear whether her English and Maths improved, but Krishnan’s biographer points out that she became adept, like many other women of her generation and class, at cooking, once winning the first prize in an ‘Indian Food competition’ organized by the National Indian Association. (Nair, 1932: 36-37) Within the limits prescribed for them, and not grossly violating the stereotypes they were supposed to conform to, some women did try to combine the qualities of a good housewife with their own creative and commercial initiatives. For instance, Madhavi Amma, wife of C. Krishnan, though she spent her time mostly in the kitchen, had started her own business from home – ‘Mrs. Krishnan’s Malabar Medical Store’, specializing in Ayurvedic medicine, which soon attracted orders from even distant Ceylon, Burma and Singapore. (Sankaran, 1967: 92)

The new conceptions of sexual difference built upon existing traditions ensured that women stayed at home, and the few who ventured out had to face the consequences. Revathy Amma, wife of a police commissioner at



Mahe, recounts in her Memoirs how her attempts at a life outside the home even in philanthropic activities came in for much criticism. (Revathy Amma, 1977:28) Similarly, Parukutty Amma, a character in the *Wound of Spring*, after a stint as a music teacher, finds a life of isolation at home. (Menon Marath, 1997) Under the circumstances, the sole objective in a woman's life was to find an ideal husband. It was pointed out that "the biggest thing for a woman in material life is marital happiness, and to gain a conducive husband for that."<sup>12</sup> While talking of her childhood in Malabar, Kamala Das refers to one woman in her neighbourhood who ended up being a spinster because no one was willing to marry her as she was too highly educated! (Kamala Das, 2003: 179)

Some men belonging to the middle class found it difficult to combine public life with their family life. An active public life prevented a few from providing sustenance to their family. K.P. Kesava Menon, with his wife increasingly becoming ill, had to give up his public life as well as the editorship of *Mathrubhumi*, which was anything but remunerative in those days, and go first to Madras, and then abroad. When it appeared that his wife was expecting another child, G. Sankaran Nair noted in his diary "I fear she is getting pregnant. God help her and me. My family seems to grow and it is high time that I took to my own affairs instead of spending all my time for the public." (Sankaran Nair, 1926) The reverse was also true. For those men whose family life was a failure, there was the possibility of fulfilment in the world outside. K.P.S. Menon, after revealing his share of problems at home, consoled himself thus: "Felt perfectly miserable as Chima is becoming more and more indifferent. How the romance of our marriage has fled. I feel she does not care for me. The old spontaneity is gone. But it is all my own fault. Why should I, after all, allow myself to be wrapped up in a mere girl. I have other interests in life, enough to make man ignore such worries." (Menon, 1923) For women there was rarely such duality; home was their 'all in all', the 'natural' site of their femininity.

Husbands of those women who did not conform to the expected norms were pitied. As one sarcastically put it,

There are organized efforts on to protect the tenant from the oppression of the *jenmi* (landlord), the worker from the capitalist, the debtor from his rich creditor, and the nephew from his *karanavan* (the all-powerful maternal uncle under the matrilineal system). But it is a pity that there is not any such equivalent attempt to save from the wife the husband who, in effect, is more oppressed than any of the ones mentioned.<sup>13</sup>

## Childhood and Domesticity

Childhood attained importance during this time. Earlier, during a period



of domestic production, after infancy, a child became an adult, helping in the production process. Now, there was a long process through which a child went through before attaining adulthood.(Bose, 1995) Children provided a lot of joy to devoted parents. As someone put it, “a child having the traits of both husband and wife, a source of great joy, was somebody to shower all your love on.” (Elayathu, 1932: 26) Manuals appeared telling housewives how to raise children. In well-to-do families, separate physical spheres were kept aside for the children. To keep the kids amused, a variety of toys became available in shops specializing in them.

In the new nuclear households, keeping a domestic servant became a criterion of social distinction; every middle-class housewife wanted one. Attitude towards them was a bit ambiguous, though. Normative texts on child-rearing denounces servants for their bad influence and ill-treatment of the children. Murkoth Kumaran who authored a Mothers’ Manual, cursed “those lazy mothers who out of consideration for their own convenience, beauty and health put the responsibility of feeding and bathing their children to paid Ayahs.” (Kumaran, 1977: 22) The latter was also blamed for depriving the young mothers of any kind of physical exercise.(Menon, 1916: 32) But, lived experiences were sometimes radically different from the contents of these normative texts.<sup>14</sup> Murkoth Kunhappa recollects how Koran, one of their servants, had his wedding at their house, and his son, who was born and brought up there, stayed with them even after his father’s demise. Later he became a peon, and when Kunhappa’s mother lay dying, sent a sad letter accompanied by a five-rupee note.(Kunhappa, 1975: 88) While talking of Krishna Menon’s childhood, his biographer mentions how the children were taken wherever they wanted to go by a horse-drawn carriage, the coachman of which was their cherished friend. When the latter got unfairly implicated in a criminal suit, Krishna, though still a child, volunteered to go to court as a witness for the hapless coachman who was finally acquitted.(Ram, 1997: 4)

## **Leisure**

In spite of a busy schedule, the urbane middle class in colonial Malabar found space for leisure. As one writer put it “while entertainment without purpose is like dead leaves, life without entertainment is like a tree without leaves.”(Kumaran, 1936: 158) Leisure was given its due importance in the life of the individual, and indeed, in some cases, its relevance as a serious topic of research was stressed. As was noted in the pages of *Malabar Quarterly Review*, one of the premier contemporary English magazines from these parts, “it is not the serious side of man’s nature alone that deserves our careful study. His games, his pastimes, his diversions... equally call for minute

research...For, there, the spirit, bereft of artificial conventionalities, runs riot in her perennial atmosphere, and shows herself in her true colours. It is in those happy moments of relaxation that the inmost virtues of man come out...relaxation repairs his weakened spirits and makes him the fitter to face the future struggle..." (Varma, 1904: 158)

According to Joffre Dumazedier, the French sociologist, leisure serves three main functions to the individual - relaxation, diversion and personality development. (Dumazedier, 1967: 16) Work is distinct from leisure. While the former is specific as well as predictable, the latter is not. But this was not the case earlier when there was hardly any distinction between the two. Leisure, according to Stanley Parker, was a product of industrial society. When work came to be done in a separate place, with special timing and under special conditions, all of which were absent in earlier times, leisure got its new identity distinct from work. (Parker, 1976: 27) George A Lundberg defined leisure as "the time we are free from the more obvious and formal duties which a paid job or other obligatory occupation imposes upon us." (Lundberg, 1934: 2) In more recent times, feminist scholars have rejected such a residual definition of leisure by pointing out that such an explanation fails to account for the unpaid labour women (both housewives and employed) perform at home in the form of child-rearing and housekeeping. For women, the private domestic space is not always a realm of non-work. Women have less time of their own after their household chores, whereas men's leisure activities get priority. Home, thus, becomes a gendered space reflecting the unequal relations that exist between men and women outside it. (Wearing, 1998; Deem, 1986)

John Mcguire observes that in colonial India, leisure for the British ruling class meant a closed class activity revolving around ritualistic club life, whereas the *bhadralok* preferred to relax in traditional ways, most of which involved household activities. (Mcguire, 1983: 77) The same could be said of the middle class elsewhere in the country.

In Malabar, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under the impact of colonial modernity, changes occurred in the modes of leisure. Some among the middle class, recollecting a 'golden past', rued these changes, and fondly recalled an era when, for instance, during the Onam celebrations, "people enjoyed new clothes, the feast, and games afterwards, where women, children and men participated" in contrast to the present where "after the perfunctory meals, the husband takes a newspaper, and smoking a cigarette, settles down on his armchair." (Govindan, 1934: 8)

With the growth of individualism, leisure, like other things, had taken an individualistic turn. This is indicated in the nature of reading. In earlier

times it was a collective enterprise. The growth of the private domain and changes in the nature of enjoyment ensured that reading now took place at home. The emergence of the novel reflects best this transition. As K.N. Panikkar observes, the emergence of the novel was rooted in the intellectual needs and aesthetic sensibility of the burgeoning middle class. (Panikkar, 1995: 96) Similarly, Shivarama Padikkal argues that the novel was an entirely new genre, arising from the historical moment when the English educated middle class is attempting to imagine a modern nation. (Padikkal, 1993) Early novels in the Malayalam language beginning with *Indulekha* enjoyed colossal success.

In earlier times, leisure was not seen as something distinct from religious activities. For instance, in Malabar, as M.S.A. Rao points out, women in old *tarawads* and *illams* spent their leisure hours in reading sacred lore. (M.S.A. Rao, 1956: 179) Religious literature continued to have its fans even in the twentieth century. For instance, in the novel *Premabandham*, Devikutty reads out *Puranas* and stories of mythical heroes to her daughter Amukutty. (Menon, 1917: 17) Churia Canaran, who went on to become the deputy collector of Malabar, spent his leisure hours in reading Sanskrit works, especially those devoted to theology and philosophy. (Krishnan, 1904: 29) But these instances were becoming rare as religious poetry based on the epics gradually gave way to secular prose in the popularity stakes.

Even as novels and other forms of fiction took their rightful place in the reading world of the newly emergent middle class, critiques were produced against popular novels by some middle class intellectuals. Vengayil Kunhiraman Nayanar made fun of intending novelists who were proliferating in an article titled 'Akhyayika Allengil Novel.' (Nayanar, 1987) Ramankutty Menon wrote a novel titled *Parangodi Parinayam* which was a parody of the immensely popular *Indulekha* as well as a critique of modernity. (Menon, 1892) These critiques were prompted partly due to the male middle class fear that reading novels might develop base instincts and corrupt the readers, especially women. A critic pointed out that "in most of the novels, which, in their wisdom, text-book committees prescribe for young students, there are vivid descriptions of the amorous activities of love-lorn couples... if only the talents of these writers are used for narrating the biography of great men which would set the right example for young minds." (Sukumaran, 1933: 167) As Tapti Roy says, in India, initially, the colonial regime categorized the press and defined what is obscene and what is not. Later, it was left to the indigenous elites to define what was 'proper' and 'improper' in literary aesthetics. (Roy, 1995)

Before the advent and popularization of electricity, evenings were spent in darkness. In his account, Mayer wrote that in many parts of the district,

“lighting is made possible using coconut –oil lamps, or lanterns of kerosene oil; electric power exists only in the largest towns.” (Mayer, 1952: 108) But that did not prevent those who were swept off their feet by the printed word from devouring books by daylight. For example, Sanjayan, the famous satirist, during his childhood used to rush home from school and before the sun went down, read his favourite *Bhaktamala* authored by Tharavathu Ammalu Amma. (Pazhassi, 2000: 17) Sukumar Azhikode who later went on to acquire fame as orator-writer-academician writes of how in his childhood, his reading habit got a boost through his father’s library which, according to him, contained more books than some of the public libraries around! (Azhikode, 2010: 23)

That the middle class had taken seriously to reading is clear from the diary of G.Sankaran Nair, a lawyer and a congress activist who regularly used to read, apart from Malayalam magazines like *Mitavadi* and *Prabudha Keralam*, English newspapers like *Times of India*, *The Hindu* as well as *The Modern Review* published from distant Calcutta. Sanjayan was an ardent reader of *Punch* from young days as well as *Tit-bits*. (Pazhassi, 2010) Often, members of the middle class subscribed to more than one magazine, and, in some cases, even foreign ones. Kamala Das, the famous poetess, recalls how, while in Calcutta, her father used to get the British ‘Daily Mirror’, and the American weekly ‘Saturday Evening Post’, and while staying at her village in Malabar, he used to subscribe to *Manorama*, *Mangalodayam*, *Parijatam* and *Mathrubhoomi*. (Kamala Das, 2003: 106-107) Men, since they were more literate and had better access to the public sphere and, therefore, kept track of literary and cultural developments, had a wider range of periodicals to choose from, but women were not altogether kept out of the process. Kamala Das, for instance, talks in her Memoirs of how she was an avid reader of the weekly-love stories of Uroob and Pottekkat, and used to enjoy solving puzzles which appeared in the magazines. (Kamala Das, 2003: 107) One periodical the middle class in these parts could identify with was *Mathrubhumi*. Beginning with articles and short stories, it soon had different sections on children, women, science, gardening, literature, cinema, etc. alongside its regular commitment to nationalist politics. A.R. Venkatachalapathy has shown how, in the context of Tamil Nadu, the magazines, as a new business tactic, indulged in a successful mix of humour, crossword puzzles with fabulous prizes, cartoons, fiction with its thrills, suspense, melodrama, and passed them under a new legitimising label-nationalism. (Venkatachalapathy, 1997)

Another source of home entertainment was the radio. It had its origins in 1926 when a private concern under the name of the Indian Broadcasting Company Limited, in an agreement with the Government of India, set up two

stations, at Bombay and Calcutta. The former was inaugurated on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1927 and the Calcutta station on 26<sup>th</sup> August the same year. By the mid-30s, the Government had taken over, and on June 8, 1936, the Indian State Broadcasting Service was re-designated as All India Radio. (Awasthy, 1965:2-3) In Malabar, during the first half of the twentieth century, the initially bulky and expensive apparatus was not very common, and in the smaller towns and villages, it was almost unknown. Even as late as 1939, “Ottapalam had only one [a battery – operated] radio set in its only club.” (Kutty, 2009: 51) Those who could not afford it, listened to the radio at restaurants and other public places, while others took refuge in their rich neighbour’s house. In late 1933, one girl recalled in the pages of *Mathrubhumi*, the excitement she felt while listening to music from the radio of her doctor neighbour who had invited her family over in the evening. (Sumangaladevi, 1933: 24) Radio programmes included music, news, weather report, market fluctuations, etc., and had a wide audience. Of radio’s significance, one commentator observed:

Only twenty years have elapsed since its inception. But during this short period it has assumed such marvelous proportions that today it has almost become a household necessity...only problem is its prohibitive cost...the government should do something. (Chintan, 1938: 4-5)

By the middle of the twentieth century, there was the widespread use of radio.<sup>15</sup> M.S.A. Rao writes, “with the invention of the wireless, gramophone has become less popular. For the people who can afford to possess a set, it is the chief mode of spending one’s leisure. As it caters to different interests (music, songs, news, lectures, plays and sometimes religious programmes) it has come to be considered as a necessity of a home.”(Rao, 1956: 183) Many people who could not afford it, listened to the radio in public places, restaurant and parks. In Calicut, for instance, there was a big transistor radio placed at the Mananchira square where people in the evenings used to come and listen.

We have already seen the interest shown by the middle class in decorating the interior of their homes. If a spurt of interest in maintaining flower gardens is any indication, they were equally concerned about how the house looked from the outside. The fiction of the times is replete with gardens adorning middle class homes. In *Vasumati*, for instance, Murkoth Kumaran begins the story with the description of a garden with marble statues, fountain and benches belonging to a well-off Thiyya. (Kumaran, 1935: 257) The coming into being of nucleated families living in separate homes enabled people to work out their botanical fantasies. The vegetable garden which partly fed the family continued to exist, but the new craze was for the flower garden which soon became a symbol of middle class status. Appreciating flower gardens

has been traditionally seen as a feminine attribute, but there is no evidence for that in contemporary literature. Members belonging to both the sexes recognized in equal measure the aesthetic pleasures they offered, and the health benefits one stood to gain while working in them. The following passage from a college magazine is a case in point:

a flower garden is a veritable paradise on earth. It has a charm of its own. A beautiful garden in front of a home or a public institution is indeed a delightful sight that welcomes the visitor...Gardening...besides giving exercise to the muscles, provides an interesting and useful pastime for one's leisure hours. Ministering to the dumb colourful plants and flowers in the open air, inhaling the sweet scented air, is sure to add to physical as well as mental growth and refinement.(Iyer, 1938: 21-22)

The middle classes, in order to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, avoided menial labour at any cost. But there was no such taboo as far as garden tending was concerned.

Of course, it is not always possible to distinguish between leisure partaken at home and those available outside it. In many cases, as in certain kinds of games, as well as music, there is an overlap. Similarly, talking was an important pastime, traversing both home and outside. "Talking," according to Nels Anderson," is the most universal of pastimes, and also quite the cheapest, in our society...it has its place in every society. To be exiled from it, as when prisoners are put into solitary confinement, often leads to madness. It enables one to identify with one's social milieu." (Anderson, 1974: 94) Dipesh Chakravarty writes of the institution of *adda* in colonial Bengal which, as a legacy of an earlier period, persisted inspite of Victorian reservations regarding it as it went against the values of modernity. It was believed to confirm the 'laziness' of the natives and hinder family life. In spite of such reservations, *adda* in the coffee houses, parks and beaches helped one to feel at home in the epoch of modernity, providing a democratic space – though women were conspicuous by their absence- the discussions not having any telos, no conclusion, and no agenda.(Chakravarty, 2007: 180-213) The talking sessions were facilitated by the proliferation of friendships, similar professions and common public interests bringing people together. Kamala Das writes that her uncle's friends including advocates, literary figures, diplomats, and physicians would turn up at their home in the evenings and have conversations on the verandah, and that when the discussions got heated and lasted long, some stayed back overnight. (Kamala Das, 2003: 15-18) Visiting homes of people with similar background and interests had become popular. P.S. Variar of Kottakkal Arya Vaidyasala fame was "a great host," his biographer notes, "and entertaining guests was like a hobby to him."(Nair,



1953: 164) By the early twentieth century, the institution of caste no longer had the prohibitory effect it had earlier in restricting public interaction between members of different castes.<sup>16</sup> The period threw up several close friendships between the Nairs and the Thiyyas in spite of the latter occupying a distinctively lower status than the former in the traditional caste hierarchy. Murkoth Kumaran, a prominent Thiyya literary figure, while staying at Tellicherry, was a friend and neighbour of K.T. Chandu Nambiar, a well known criminal lawyer as well as a leading literary critic. Regarding literature, they had their differences which they made public through their respective columns in the leading magazines of the period. Later, Murkoth and Nambiar started separate newspapers - *Katora Kutaram* and *Ramabanam* respectively- where they continued their literary dispute, which, however, did not, in any way, affect their friendship. Infact, Chandu Nambiar was Murkoth's *Shashtipoorthi* celebration committee's chairman, reading out his *Mangalapathram* on the occasion.<sup>17</sup> There were other instances as well. Murkoth Kumaran, in his biography of Chandu Menon, the famous early Nair novelist of Kerala, writes of his subject's close friendship with E.K. Krishnan, a prominent Thiyya of Tellicherry. - "it was only natural that both of them being accomplished, honest and innocent, they would get attracted to each other. While Krishnan was a natural scientist with a keen interest in plant and animal life, Chandu Menon was an expert on human affairs, caricaturing their faults and exalting their qualities. Both were interested in hunting." (Kumaran, 1996:36) As G. Arunima points out "sharing the same literary space created a community of intellectuals with at least one shared concern – of engaging with the experience of modernity that was shaping and often, confusing them.(Arunima, 2004: 213) Often, these friendships did not remain confined to the public domain, but extended to the interiors of their respective homes. The closest friend of C. Krishnan was Manjeri Sundarayyar, one of the prominent Brahmin *vakils* of Malabar who used to frequent the former's house in the evenings. This was the period when 'taste' was gaining in prominence in middle class life, the capacity to discriminate beauty and perfection in art and literature. The art of conversation, the ability to express the opinions gained through appropriate reading marked out the 'cultured' from the rest.

A relevant question in this context is whether leisure and work are inherently incompatible. H.L. Wilensky distinguishes between two types of people – those who try to compensate for the frustrations they experience while at the work place through leisure, and others who look for similar experiences during their leisure time to those they experience while in the office. While the former holds true for those whose working conditions are



harsh, the latter refers to those whose work is interesting and requires a certain amount of skill and education. (Wilensky, 1960: 544) Among the latter, would be examples of the middle class. O. Chandu Menon, the famous novelist who combined his literary work with a job in the judiciary, is a case in point. On reaching home after settling a difficult case, he would relax at home by making his servants take sides in a mock case, occasionally joining in himself. (Vaidyar, 1913: 12) On other occasions, during office hours, after his superiors had left for home in the late afternoons, he would indulge in songs and dance with friends. (Kumaran, 1996: 46)

## Conclusion

Administrative changes during the colonial period provided the backdrop to the emergence of a new middle class in colonial Malabar. Government offices and the courts provided the arena where the educated natives could hope to find employment. When the sale of land became common following the break down of *tarawads*, and marriages began to be registered, registration offices became a reality. The spread of education witnessed from the late nineteenth century onwards resulted in the creation of several hundreds of school and college teachers who became an important segment of the new middle class.

Among the Hindus, the middle classes came from all the castes. However, the financially less privileged among the Nairs and the slightly well-off among the Thiyyas, who went for western education, dominated. The rich Nairs and the Nambudiris, in general, took time to adjust to the rapid changes taking place around them, and, in the process, got left behind.

Though in the initial stages, the middle class was not dominant numerically, its influence was significant all along. The middle class had become the custodians of dominant cultural values in a society undergoing rapid transition. This was possible due to the knowledge the group possessed, mostly through western education, and its ability to communicate it. Almost inevitably, it dominated a nascent public sphere. However, women only had a minimal presence here.

Even as men dominated the public sphere, the 'home' was designated as the realm where the woman was expected to hold sway. Here, she was expected to raise children and perform her wifely duties to perfection. There were calls during this time for women's education to be re-structured to suit her role at home. Though theoretically, women controlled the home, in practise, men continued to dictate terms. Laws strengthened the position of the father, as did the literature of the times. Women's financial dependence on their men ensured their subordinate status at home.

Leisure took new forms during this time. Religious functions which passed off as entertainments in the past gave way to new secular ones. Now, within home, one important way to spend time constituted reading which was, in no small measure, helped by the spread of education and literacy. And, with the proliferation of publications, there was sufficient reading to be had. Of the literature available, secular prose attracted readers the most; spiritual poems, which was the main component of literature in an earlier era, now, catered to a minority. Radio provided information as well as entertainment. Some took to gardening, while others engaged themselves with the interior decoration of their house.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Statement of Population of 1871 in Each Village of the Malabar District Arranged According to Area, Caste and Occupation*, Govt. Gazette Press, Madras, 1874, p.7
- <sup>2</sup> *MMCR*, The Presidents Memorandum, p.9 cited in K.N. Panikkar, 'Land Control, Ideology and Reform: A Study of the Changes in Family Organization and Marriage System in Kerala', *The Indian Historical Review*, 4, no. 1, (1977). In contrast to the West, in India, the middle class was also marked by their linkages to land. As K.N. Panikkar shows, those who secured government jobs or practiced as advocates, also held Kanom tenure or belonged to 'tarawads' which had Kanom rights over land. *Ibid.*, p. 38
- <sup>3</sup> *Report of the Malabar Marriage Commission*, Lawrence Asylum Press, Madras, 1891, p.43
- <sup>4</sup> Even among the Mappilas, for long stereo-typed as backward, there were the occasional professionals and bureaucrats. Lord Pentland, Governor of Madras, on a visit to Malabar in 1913, in his reply to Himayat-ul-Sabha, notes that "you now have a Mappila tahsildar, and a deputy superintendent of police besides a number of Mappila officers in the Registration, Police and Educational services with many representatives in the clerical posts." *First Tour of H.E. The Right Hon. Lord Pentland, Governor of Madras (Coimbatore and Malabar)* Govt. Press, Madras, 1913, p.103
- <sup>5</sup> *Statistical Atlas of Malabar*, 1906, p.10
- <sup>6</sup> The acts include The Malabar Marriage Act which sanctioned the registration of customary *sambandham* union as legal marriage where the wife and children could claim maintenance from the husband/father without forfeiting their rights to property from the household. The Malabar Wills Act of 1898 gave right to individuals to pass on their self-acquired property to their wives from legal marriages. In 1933, the Madras Marumakkathayam Act was passed by the Legislative Council which effectively ended the *tarawad* (joint family household) system. It legalized *sambandham* marriages, granted the right of adoption, and allowed branches the right to

- demand partition. It also legalized inheritance from father to son. Meanwhile, these changes as well as the various tenancy Acts in the twentieth century affected the Nambudiris which necessitated changes in their own community. The *Yogaksema* movement which was started in 1908 had, among other objectives, the reform of marriage laws within the community. Partly due to its efforts, the Nambudiri Act of 1933, was passed, according to which, younger Nambudiris could now marry Nambudiri girls, and *Illom* (house of the Nambudiri Brahmins) property could be inherited by the younger sons.
- <sup>7</sup> In spite of differences in specificities, following urbanization after which the division between ‘home’ and the ‘world’ gets pronounced, in middle class discourse, there is a universal valorization of the former. For instance, the middle class of England in the nineteenth century, found “the market place ... dangerously amoral. The men who operated in that sphere [thought they] could save themselves only through constant contact with the moral world of the home, where women acted as carriers of the pure values that could counteract the destructive tendencies of the market.” Catherine Hall, ‘The Sweet Delights of Home’, in Michelle Perrot, ed, *A History of Private Life, Vol. IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p. 74. According to John Tosh, a home was seen by the English middle class as a haven from all the troubles in the outside world, to spend with your wife and children, where there would not be intruders to destroy your peace and privacy. John Tosh, ‘The New Men; The Bourgeois Cult of Home’ in *History Today*, Vol. 46 (12), December, 1996, pp. 9-15.
- <sup>8</sup> By the late 1930s, the number of girl students even in the centres of higher education was quite significant. T. Narayanan Nambiar, while proposing the ‘Toast of the College’ twenty years after he had graduated from Government Brennen College, mentions how while he was a student there, “we had very few girl students .... In those days we lived in two different worlds. But now I find the girl students moving freely with boys and taking an active part in all the activities of the college.” T. Narayanan Nambiar, ‘Toast of the College’, *Government Brennen College Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No.1, December, 1939, p. 84
- <sup>9</sup> *Kerala Sanchari* 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1889 in NNPR in the week ending 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1889, p. 172
- <sup>10</sup> *Report on Public Instruction in the Madras Presidency for 1939-40*, Vol.2, Parts I and II, p. 51
- <sup>11</sup> A Women’s Education Commission appointed by the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha, in its report, recommended that if considerable number of Illams existed together, schooling could be organized in one of them, thereby denying the need for public schooling. Education was also to be limited to girls between five and twelve. Married women’s education, meanwhile, was to be decided by their husbands. K.M. Sheeba, ‘From the Kitchen to the Stage and Back: Continuing Forms of Women’s Exclusion in

- Keralam.’ in *Journal of South Indian History*, Vol.2, No.2, March, 2006, p. 65
- <sup>12</sup> Bandhusamudayangalile Manya Sahodarikaloduoru Apeksha, Unsigned Article *Unni Nambuthiri*, Vol.8, No.12, 1928, p.682
- <sup>13</sup> Unsigned article, ‘Bharthakkanmarude Vishamasthithi, *Vijayan*, vol.2, no.7, August 1938, p.17
- <sup>14</sup> Swapna M. Banerjee, ‘Child, Mother, Servant : Motherhood and Domestic Ideology in Colonial Bengal’, in Avril A. Powell and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, eds. *Rhetoric and Reality : Gender and the Colonial Experience in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006
- <sup>15</sup> In the post–independence period, the government consciously promoted the use of radio. According to an analyst, this was for two reasons: the need to speak directly to a huge population of illiterates, and to preserve the cultural–literary tradition of the region. K.M. Narendran, ‘Kozhikode Akashavani’ in *Malabar: PaithrukavumPrathapavum*, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode, 2011, pp. 535-536.
- <sup>16</sup> But a genuine breaking down of the caste barrier, especially at the personal level, still remained a distant dream. The biographer of Muliyl Krishnan, one of those Thiyyas who ‘made’ it, having become, among other things, a teacher at Presidency college in Madras, recounts how Nair friends of Krishnan used to say good things about him on his face, while pouring scorn on him behind his back, and how they would take food from his home, but would be wary of others coming to know of it! K.M. Nair, *Muliyl Krishnan*, Norman Printing Bureau, Calicut, 1932, pp. 72-73. Murkoth Kumaran is said to have confided in private his anguish that his good friend O. Chandu Menon, in his first and most famous novel, *Indulekha*, did not include as a character a single Thiyya, a community numerically dominant, and by then educated and decently employed. Murkoth Srinivasan, ‘Apoornamaya Oru Atmakatha’, *Mathrubhumi*, Vol. 22, No. 16, July2, 1944, p. 1. C. Krishnan ended up converting to Buddhism, which would suggest that he never felt quite comfortable with his Hindu identity, where, in spite of his material success and public fame, he continued to occupy a lower position in the caste hierarchy.
- <sup>17</sup> Mangalat Raghavan, ‘Poyi Poya Thalamurakal’ in *Thalasserry: SaradaKrishnanyar Memorial Fine Arts Society Smaranika, Chitra DTP Solutions, Tellicherry, 2002*, p. 73 In his presidential address on the occasion of the *Sashtipoorthi* of Murkoth Kumaran, Ulloor waxed eloquently of his friendship with the former. According to him, both of them, vassals at the temple of Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge, enjoyed a special bonding, ‘taramaitri’, possible due to compatibility of their respective star signs. *Sreeman Murkoth Kumarante Sashtipoorthi Aaghosha Vivaram*, Imperial Printing works, Tellicherry, 1934, p. 2

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