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MALAYALAM WRITINGS;  
MOULDING KERALA AS AN  
INDEPENDENT ENTITY IN  
EARLY 20'S

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## **THE DISCOURSES ON HISTORY IN MALAYALAM WRITINGS; MOULDING KERALA AS AN INDEPENDENT ENTITY IN EARLY 20'S**

Colonial India developed a new historical tradition from the inspiration of colonial historiography and practiced to write its histories in a positivist methodology.<sup>i</sup> During the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a discursive space was formed in the Malayalam magazines, regarding the historical consciousness and the crafting of history of Kerala. Malayalam literary scholars were the main participants of these discussions. They wrote articles about how to craft history and how to collect source materials for it. Thereby, Linguists had an agenda to establish a particular political unit called Kerala for the validation of the Malayalam language. This study uses a random selection of a few Malayalam essays describing how to write history or Kerala history in the first half of the twentieth century.

The debate<sup>ii</sup> regarding the historical consciousness of Indians began with the advent of Europeans to India. In the context of the colonial agenda, Europeans began to look for the political history of India in positivist methodology. On-the-contrary, the historical consciousness of Indians had been arranged within the notions of society. So, colonizers were prejudiced that Indians were 'a-historical'. All the oscillations that happened in the Indian historical writing during the colonial period caused various impacts on even regional writings.

It was the advances in printing that turned people, who were subsisted into three political entities (Princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and British District Malabar) during the colonial period into Keralites.<sup>iii</sup> It plays a major role in the popularization of the idea that the *imagined community*, Kerala.<sup>iv</sup> During the early twentieth century, a discursive space was formed in Kerala regarding the crafting of Kerala history. Malayalam magazines like *Mangalodayam*, *Rasikaranjini*, *Bhashaposhini*, *vidyavinodini* etc. had a vital role in it. Middle class educated Malayalam literary scholars had active participation in these discussions. Some of the articles published in these magazines were added to the textbooks of students like *ChinthamaniPadamala*.<sup>v</sup> The main thrusts of these articles were the significance of the writing of Kerala history and introducing certain scientific sources for crafting Kerala history.<sup>vi</sup> Because of the absence of customary reading practices among common people, these magazines were aimed at middle class educated people in Kerala.

None of the pioneers who made significant contributions to the historiography of Kerala from the nineteenth century to early twentieth century (except K. P. PadnabhaMenon) was professionally trained in the field of history. The articles delivered by them had a new historical perspective that elicited from the synthesis of both the traditional school of historical thought (tracing history from myths and traditions - which ended in KunjikuttanThampuran) and western school of historical tradition (It was introduced by Dr. Herman Gundert in Kerala. The colonial historians also had an important role in it.). By virtue of the new understanding of objectivity, facts, evidence, etc., it can be seen that history was understood as science. Hence the domination of western historical thought was evident here.<sup>vii</sup> Malayalam linguistic scholars had been actively involved in the writing of Kerala history despite the realization that history of land/nation was different from history of language. They had a precise idea about the differences in the duty of historians of land and historians of language. *MalayalaBhashaCharithram* published in 1881, had explained that it was the obligation of national historians to scrutinize myths and scientific knowledge, on the genesis of Kerala. It added that the historical facts should be detected with the help of evidence by the national historian.<sup>viii</sup> At the same time, P.Govinda Pillai realized that national consciousness could be molded through the historical writings of land/nation, language and literature.<sup>ix</sup>

Dr. Herman Gundert was first to put forward the outlook that history of language, land/nation and literature were interlinked to the making of Kerala as a nation. In 1859, at the requisition of the Madras government, Gundert prepared a textbook named *LokaCharithraSamkshepam*, which explained what history is and why it is written. Gundert explained that history was written about actions and virtues of 'great *vamshas*' only, while the definition given to a 'great *vamsha*' was a group of people performing great deeds.<sup>x</sup> Linguists including Gundert had traced AdiChera rulers as the first rulers of Kerala in the aspect of 'exigency' to describe a 'great *vamsha*' and its great deeds in the history of Kerala. Linguists such as Dr. Caldwell, Rev. Mr. Foulkes, Dr. Gundert, Major Oldham claimed that the Chera Kingdom and Kerala were the same.<sup>xi</sup> The comments like Indians had little interest and skill in writing history and that statement was more relevant in the case to Keralites were common in Malayalam magazines. Such references were kept reiterated not only in Kerala but also in historical investigations conducted in different parts of India. Such notions were brought out as part of the colonial agenda, for establishing power by putting up *Primitive* v/s *Civilized* binary. The colonizers fabricated impressions that the progress could only take

place in a *civilized* society and history writing was for record this progress. The perception that history can only be written by a *civilized* society had rapidly diffused in India. Echoes of this notion can be seen in the strivings for the history writing projects which took place in the British districts and Princely states. *Primitive / Civilized* binary was interpolated into the Indian consciousness through pan Indian history writing ventures by colonial historians. These campaigns became the templates for writing history in the Princely states and British districts. *Malabar Manual*, *Travancore State Manual* and *Cochin State Manual* were examples of this. In an article published in *Mangalodayam* to explain what history is, the author elucidates that only the section on *Descriptive Sociology* was useful in history.<sup>xii</sup> The author presented the study of *primitive* and *civilized* Societies and their social institutions as a model for Keralites who kept writing history. The view that history was written only by *civilized* people has stimulated the idea that Kerala history should also be written.

The efforts of crafting Kerala history were organized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It had an aim to establish a Malayalam speaking country. From the later period of the nineteenth century, Kerala witnessed the proliferation of feelings of nationalism and social reformation movements. As a result, Kerala was marked as part of a larger entity called India. It became the turning point in the history writing trends of Kerala. Thereupon, in the historical enquiries of Kerala modified with ideas like legitimization of Malayalam language, civilization theory and the feeling of nationalism. In another article, the author who already mentioned says that the intention of his historical articles was to arouse curiosity among Keralites about their past. He explains the reasons for it. “People should need to know how Indians were in a worse position than other communities in the present. For that, Indians need to identify the most prosperous period and the period of decline of them. People need to know how the different communities and regions of India led to the growth and decay of the country. The nature of the growth and decay of other countries must also be studied. By understanding of the past in a chronological manner, people will have respect for their ancestors and self-respect about their country. Thus we, who were great in the days of our forefathers, will realize how much suffering we have today and make sure that our future generation will never face this suffering. Therefore, the desire to reach the heights that are achieved by other countries now will arise. As a result, all communities in India, and all its castes, and men and women in all castes will have the pride of being our India. They will put aside all differences and work together for the betterment of the country... The past is plotted

for the needs of the present.”<sup>xiii</sup> In a nutshell, the author looks at historiography as a tool to civilize India that has deteriorated to the primitive stage.

During the British Raj, history flourished as a part of the Pan Indian level Knowledge producing project. The Colonial Government itself appointed officials to collect and preserve data about all the localities in India. *Natives* also had an important role in it. Colonial government took initiatives to collect local histories, folk songs, customs and rituals at the village levels. It conducted projects in all the Princely states and British districts to identify historical sources, order them and preserve those sources. Lord Curzon took a lot of measures to promote it. The Governments of Princely Travancore and Princely Cochin had conducted projects in their own principalities as part of it. Parallely, historical endeavors about Kerala were gaining strength in Malayalam scholars. Although the colonial historiography projects carried out in British Raj influenced Kerala history writing process, the divergences in the intentions of both were clear. There were references to it in several contemporary articles in Malayalam. “Certain writings of foreigners about Kerala which were beneficial for its historical investigations had been translated by the English. But foreigners were more likely to make faults in the understanding of *Malayalees*... Although the works currently written by Modern English writers on Kerala were more objective, it is an embarrassment that our efforts as *Malayalees* on these issues are inadequate.”<sup>xiv</sup> The author realizes that the aspiration of historical inquisitions led by the colonial government was fashioning the British Raj.<sup>xv</sup> Meanwhile, with a colonial agenda, the historical investigations preside over the Cochin and Travancore Princely states (under the order of the Madras presidency) endeavored to keep the validity of power groups in both countries. Hence, writing a history of Kerala wasn't the concern of anyone other than the Malayalam linguistic scholars. The author encouraged the Keralites to write Kerala history out of the apprehension that devising Kerala was a necessity for the *Malayalees* only. Therefore, he was compelled to disclose that his mission was to make curiosity among Keralites about the history of Kerala. This distress can be seen in all Malayalam linguistic scholars in the early twentieth century. The attempts of Scholars like Attoor Krishna Pisharadi, Ulloor S. ParameswaraIyyer in the Kerala history writing project were part of this concern. RamavarmaAppanThampuran an eminent scholar in Malayalam was devoted most of his life time to espouse the flourishing of Malayalam Language. He died shortly after designing all the layouts to write the history of Kerala. Malayalam magazines had been published many articles by the scholars including

anonymous authors on the history of Kerala like studies on various sources inside and outside Kerala, translations of inscriptions, trade relations with other countries, certain events etc.

The first person who made the demand to write the history of India was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. It was patriotism that inspired him to do so. In a similar fashion, history writing endeavors were being formed as part of the efforts to form an independent political unit as 'Kerala'. Malayalam linguists had a perception of the importance of history writing in shaping the land of Kerala, long before the emergence of professional historians in Kerala. That is why the discourse on history was started by Malayalam literary scholars. The idea that Kerala should have its own history stemmed from the consciousness that *NammudeSwabhashayakunna Malayalam*<sup>xvi</sup>. Their intention was to mould a Malayalam speaking territory called Kerala. Print media was wielded as the channel for this agenda. As part of it, many Malayalam articles were scribbled on history writing and historical sources about Kerala during the early twentieth century. All these ideas of writing Kerala history were integrated with contemporary ideas such as (emerging) Indian nationalism and colonial notions. In a nutshell, Malayalam articles talking about history were crafted during early twenties as part of the establishment of *Kerala desam*.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>The method of writing history using Indian 'sources' was developed in India within the framework of the western style of history writing.

<sup>ii</sup>Colonial historian James Mill set up the discussion on the 'absence' of historical consciousness in India through his work *The History of British India*. Indian historians such as Romila Thapar (*Cultural Pasts, The Penguin History of Early India*), Aloka Parasher Sen (<https://youtu.be/cLIXLULODsI>) reject it and give a clear explanation about what historical consciousness was in Pre-colonial India.

<sup>iii</sup>This has explicated in

A.G., Sreekumar, *Achukoodathile Keralam*, Kairali Books, Kannur, 2014.

... *Pusthakavum Kerala Samskara Parinamavum*, Kerala University Press, Thiruvananthapuram, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup>Here the concept of 'imagined community' is taken from the work of *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson.

<sup>v</sup>"Malayalathile Charithra Samagrikal" in *Chinthamani Padamala*, Fourth Forum, Ramanujamudralayam, Thrissivaperoor, 1925.

<sup>vi</sup>"Charitraneshanavum Sila Lekhanagalum" *Ramanuja Padavali* Part II, Ramanujamudralayam, Trissivaperur, 1924, Pp.143-148; K.M., "India Charithram", "Charitrasamagrikal", "Malayalathile Charitra Samagrikal" in *K. M. Ezhuthiya Upanyasangal*, K.N. Kunjanmenon (Ed.), Thrissivaperoor, 1914, Pp.78-137.

<sup>vii</sup>In *Malayala Bhasha Charithram*, P. Govinda Pillai presents the historical interpretations in the Puranas, *Keralolpathy* and English Scholars on the genesis of Kerala. But he makes it clear that he accepts the English interpretation because it is logical, though contrary to *nattupuranagal*; In his article titled "History" in *Vidya Vinodini*, M. Rajaraja Varma commented that history is science. It was republished in *Gandhyamalika*, Part III, Cochin-kuru Ramavarama Kochuthampuram, Thiruvananthapuram, 1924, Pp. 1-8.

<sup>viii</sup>P. Govinda Pillai, *Malayala Bhasha Charithram*, 1881, P.8, Retrieved from [www.internetarchive.org](http://www.internetarchive.org).

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<sup>ix</sup>Sreekumar A.G, *Pusthakavum Kerala SamskaraParinamavum*, Kerala University Press, Thiruvananthapuram, 2016, P. 206.

<sup>x</sup>Albert Frenz, ScariyaSakariya (Ed.), *Herman GundertKeralolpathiyumMattum*, D.C Books, Kottayam, 1992, P.xxxvii, Retrieved from <http://idb.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/opedigi/33A11414>.

<sup>xi</sup>K.P PadmanabhaMenon, *History of Kerala*, Volume IV, Cochin Government Press, 1937, Pp. 496-97.

<sup>xii</sup>K.M,“Charitram” in *Mangalodayam*, Volume II, Issue II, Trissivaperoor, 1910, P. 96. Herbert Spencer, a proponent of *Social Darwinism* is the author of *Descriptive Sociology*, which interrupted in 1881.

<sup>xiii</sup>K.M,“IndiaCharithram” in *K.M EzhuthiyaUpanyasangal*, K.N Kunjanmenon (Ed.), Thrissivaperoor, 1914, Pp.78-88.

<sup>xiv</sup>K.M, “MalayalathileCharitraSamagrikal” in *K.M EzhuthiyaUpanyasangal*, K.N Kunjanmenon (Ed.), Thrissivaperoor, 1914, P.107.

<sup>xv</sup>Anonymous author, “Charitraneshanam” in *Mangalodayam*, Volume IV, Issue IX, Trissivaperoor, 1912, P.268.

<sup>xvi</sup>These words can be found in many writings of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The preface of *MalayalaBhashaCharithram* starts from these words itself.

