

The Contributions Of The Travancore Royal Family To Kerala's Educational Development

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformative educational policies and initiatives introduced by the Travancore royal family from the early 19th century to the early 20th century. By analysing reforms implemented by Rani Gouri Parvathi Bayi, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma, Maharaja Marthanda Varma, Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma, Maharaja Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma, Rani Setu Lakshmi Bayi, and Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal Rama Varma, the study elucidates how a blend of traditional knowledge and modern educational practices laid a robust foundation for Kerala's high literacy rates and social inclusivity. The paper discusses the historical context, specific policy implementations, and the lasting impact these reforms have had on the state's educational landscape.

Key words Royal patronage, educational reforms, Sangam age, Proclamation, Oriental, Western education, equality, Shift system, Scholarship.

Introduction

Kerala's educational heritage, with its roots stretching back to the Sangam period, witnessed a decisive transformation during the reign of the Travancore Kingdom. Glimpses of the educational system of ancient Kerala, of which Travancore was a part are provided by ancient Tamil works. One of the salient features of ancient Kerala society before the penetration of the Aryan culture was the prevalence of equality and freedom. There were no caste barriers segregating the different sections of the population. It was quite natural that in such a society all people, irrespective of caste or sex enjoyed the right to education. Communities like parayas, Kuravas, paanas and others who came to be considered as the lower caste in

medieval Kerala enjoyed a respectable position in the society. They were held in high esteem by kings and chieftains. They moved about freely and had the right of free access to royal courts. It is believed that the great Sangam poets Kapilar, Parinar, belonged to the Pana community. This shows the prevalence of a fairly good standard of education among them.

The progressive vision of the Travancore royal family laid the groundwork for an inclusive and dynamic educational framework by integrating indigenous knowledge systems with modern educational practices. This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of the educational reforms initiated under various rulers of Travancore, demonstrating how royal patronage fostered widespread educational accessibility and contributed to Kerala's reputation as one of India's most literate regions.

Travancore could claim a long history in the field of education. The educational system of Travancore had gone through a process of evolution, by which the disorganised schools were encouraged and brought to fit in with a well devised scheme of primary, secondary and collegiate education. The government of Travancore had been closely watching the development in the field of education outside the state.

Historically, education in Kerala evolved through contributions from various local dynasties. However, it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries that formal educational reforms took shape under the patronage of the Travancore royals. Early initiatives in language-based instruction, teacher recruitment, and community involvement were complemented by later efforts that introduced modern disciplines and institutions.

- Menon (1970) and Nair (1983) provide early analytical overviews of Kerala's historical evolution, emphasizing the critical role of royal reforms.
- Subsequent studies by Chakravarti (1995), Rajagopal (2002), and Varma (2008) have compared traditional and modern systems and highlighted the socio-cultural impacts of these educational reforms.
- More recent scholarly articles (Iyer, 2011; Mathew & Joseph, 2016) discuss the continuity from royal initiatives to modern educational practices, while works such as Raghavan (2018) and Krishnan (2020) have expanded the discussion by examining innovation and legacy within Kerala's education system.

This review not only underscores the significance of royal patronage but also sets the stage for an in-depth exploration

of individual contributions by specific Travancore ruler Rani Gouri Parvathi Bayi's regency marks the beginning of structured educational development in Travancore. In 1817, her Proclamation mandated the appointment of one Malayalam and one Tamil teacher in each district. This policy institutionalized regional language instruction, ensuring that indigenous languages and cultural knowledge were central to the educational process. Moreover, by introducing primary Malayalam education for children between the ages of five and ten, she emphasized community responsibility in sustaining and expanding the educational framework. For this purpose, schools were established in many places and men of suitable qualifications were appointed as teachers. The Tahsildars of the Taluk was to inspect the schools once in fifteen days.

Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma played a dual role as both a patron of the arts and a progressive educational reformer. He visited the English Seminary at Nagercoil and was impressed with its functioning. He invited Mr. Roberts, the Headmaster of that institution to start a similar English school for boys at the capital. Accordingly, the first English school owned by the government was established at Trivandrum in 1835, with subsequent establishments in strategic towns such as Thackalay, Alappuzha, and Kayamkulam by 1835. This early adoption of English education not only predated but also complemented the reforms introduced under British colonial influence. He initiated the establishment of the Granthappura (a library for ancient manuscripts), an institution that later evolved into the Oriental Manuscripts Library, ensuring the preservation and dissemination of Kerala's literary heritage. This initiative not only preserved historical texts but also facilitated the growth of scholarship in Kerala. His reign was marked by an interest in scientific knowledge as well. He founded the Thiruvananthapuram Observatory in 1836, which housed some of the most sophisticated astronomical equipment available at the time, making significant contributions to the field of astronomy in Kerala. The establishment of the Thiruvananthapuram Observatory in 1836, equipped with advanced instruments for its time, underscored his commitment to modern scientific inquiry.

During Maharaja Marthanda Varma's reign, education was further institutionalized through various policies. The Maharaja personally oversaw examinations and engaged with students, subsequently offering high-achieving students posts in government services to encourage academic excellence. His endorsement of Western medical practices signalled an effort to integrate modern scientific methods into traditional practices, thereby influencing the development of healthcare education in the region.

Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma expanded the educational horizons of Travancore by Founding Maharaja's

College in 1866 in Thiruvananthapuram, this institution became the state's first Grade One higher education institution, attracting scholars from across the region. His reign saw the expansion of both English and vernacular schools. The introduction of scholarship schemes supported economically disadvantaged yet capable students, while vocational and technical education initiatives aligned academic training with emerging professional needs.

Maharaja Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma is remembered for his significant strides in making education accessible. In 1887–1888, he made free primary education available to backward classes, including marginalized groups such as fishing communities. Under his regime, specialized institutions such as the Ayurveda College, Sanskrit College, and Law College were founded. Additionally, vocational training centres in agriculture and industry were established to cater to diverse professional domains.

Rani Setu Lakshmi Bayi continued the tradition of progressive educational reform by expanding Primary and Vernacular Education. She introduced a double-shift system in schools to manage rising enrolments and enhance accessibility. Her administration provided fee exemptions for students from oppressed communities and established hostel facilities especially for women and rural students along with noontime meal programs to support daily attendance and well-being.

Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal Rama Varma is widely regarded as a transformative figure in modern Kerala's educational history. The government of Travancore appointed a committee in 1917 under the Presidentship of Mr. L. C. Hodgson to investigate and report on the question of the creation of a separate university for Travancore. This committee was named Travancore University Committee and it consisted of 17 members. After a detailed discussion the committee submitted an interim report to the government in 1919. The committee found that there were three colleges in Travancore providing Degree and three other colleges for intermediate courses. At this time all the colleges of Travancore were affiliated to Madras University. There were large number of students studying inside and outside the state. Naturally the state of Travancore had no control over the education of these students. In these circumstances the university committee felt the necessity of the creation of a separate University of Travancore. In the year 1923 the government appointed another committee under the Chairmanship of Sri. Krishna Aiyankar to report on the question of a separate University for Travancore. In 1937, the establishment of Travancore University (later known as Kerala University) set a high standard for higher education within the region and aligned it with international academic norms. His reign also witnessed the formation of a Medical College, an

Engineering College, and the Swathi Thirunal College of Music, emphasizing both scientific and cultural dimensions of education. His proactive stance on women's education and marginalized communities further underscored his commitment to an inclusive educational system.

The educational reforms implemented by the Travancore royal family were both pioneering and transformative. Key themes include:

- **Inclusivity in Education:** The consistent emphasis on providing free, quality education to marginalized groups—from backward castes to rural and tribal communities—helped lay the foundation for Kerala's remarkable literacy and social progress.
- **Balancing Tradition with Modernity:** The integration of traditional educational methods, such as instruction in regional languages and preservation of ancient manuscripts, with emerging modern disciplines like engineering, medicine, and astronomy, created a multifaceted educational landscape.
- **Long-Term Impact on Society:** By establishing a robust network of primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions, the Travancore reforms generated a skilled and educated workforce. This, in turn, has been instrumental in Kerala's economic, cultural, and social development.

These policies not only addressed immediate educational needs but also anticipated future societal requirements, ensuring that knowledge remained accessible and relevant across generations.

The progress achieved by the state in the field of school education 1892-1893 to 1896-97 shows the significance given by the rulers for the progress of education.

Year	No. of Schools	No. of Scholars
1892-93	2489	113972
1893-94	2658	119046
1894-95	2816	131294
1895-96	3335	156530
1896-97	3274	160368

Conclusion

The legacy of the Travancore royal family's educational reforms is a testament to the transformative power of visionary leadership and inclusive governance. By prioritizing education and harmonizing traditional learning with modern scientific inquiry, these rulers played a critical role in creating a sustainable framework for knowledge dissemination. As a

result, Kerala has emerged as a beacon of literacy, social equity, and intellectual advancement in India. The liberal patronage extended by the rulers of Travancore was mainly instrumental in bringing about the progress of various branches of higher education. The historical initiatives examined in this paper continue to influence contemporary educational policies and serve as a source of inspiration for inclusive governance and progressive reforms. Today, Kerala stands as a model of educational achievement, and the legacy of the Travancore royal family continues to be felt in the state's high literacy rates, its thriving intellectual culture, and its ongoing commitment to education as a tool for social progress.

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