

# 4

---

## **Exploring the Role of Mathrubhumi and Malayalarajyam Newspapers in Shaping Public Discourse and Socio-political Dynamics in Travancore**

---

**Athira H.S.**

Research Scholar,

Department of History, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Email: athiravishnu74@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The newspapers of Travancore provided a significant role in shaping public opinion, historical understanding, social change, legacy, and academic scholarship of Travancore during the specified period of study (1900 to 1950). The controlling research question for this study is, how the political events were represented discursively by Malayalam newspapers Mathrubhumi and Malayalarajyam to disseminate desired political ideologies in Travancore during the first half of the twentieth century. The present study employs a rigorous and multi-faceted approach that integrates historical research, content analysis, contextualization, and interdisciplinary perspectives, which analyses some newspaper articles which were published by two circulated newspapers in Travancore during the first half of the twentieth century, Mathrubhumi and Malayalarajyam. The study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the crucial role newspapers played in nurturing radical ideologies within the socio-political landscape of Travancore during the predetermined time. These papers were vital in molding radical thinking and directing social change in Travancore during the first half of the twentieth century. Limited availability and accessibility of the newspapers, editorial biases, political affiliations, and

ensorship were some of the restraints of the study. By acknowledging and effectively addressing these research limitations, scholars can the soundness and trustworthiness of the study, thereby strengthening its overall methodological rigor and contributing to the robustness of the findings. Top of Form The empirical results of this study extend across diverse fields, including, policy-making, communication, social activism, education, cultural preservation, diversity, and media literacy. They hold forth to ongoing challenges and elevate positive social change.

**Keywords:** Newspapers, radical Thinking, Travancore, Social Change, Political Movements.

## **Introduction**

The introduction of the press was to be followed by every nook corner of the socio-political life of Kerala. Print media is one of the most important arenas in which power is exercised in a modern and post-modern cultural system. Marshall McLuhan in his *Understanding Media* refers to printed media as the architect of Nationalism.<sup>1</sup> The growth of the print media and the political process are closely related. Psychologically printed media provides birth to a new perspective on human visual experience. While socially it gave birth to the development of education, nationalism, and literacy. Harold Innes and McLuhan belong to the Canadian School of Media Studies and concentrated on the development of print media's influence on technological innovations over society.<sup>2</sup> McLuhan, Innes, and Benedict Anderson have popularized the theory of Modernity over media.<sup>3</sup> The printing press created the greatest influence behind various changes that, transpire at the individual, societal, and national levels. Newspapers played a crucial role in the development and promotion of vernacular languages, by catalyzing the spread of nationalism rooted in these linguistic identities.

## **History**

Newspapers in Travancore as in many other localities played a noteworthy role in shaping public opinion during their time. By serving as primary sources of public news and facts newspapers give an account of a wide range of local, national, and international events. Thereby fulfilling a crucial role in informing and appealing to the populace. These papers presumed readership with a broader understanding of

---

<sup>1</sup> McLuhan, Marshall., 1964, p. 170-78.

<sup>2</sup> Malayala Padana Sangham, 2017, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> Sangham, Malayala Padana Sangham, 2017, p. 363.

the world around them and helped to educate the populace and shape their mastery of current affairs. The first Malayalam journal was published in Nettur (Malabar) in 1847<sup>4</sup>. Over time, plenty of newspapers were published in different parts of the state. The monumental among them were, *Malayali*, *Service*, *Mitavadi*, *Vivekodayam*, etc. All these flourished even during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Mathrubhumi*, *Samadarshi*, *Prabodhakan*, *Kesari*, *Malayalarajyam*, *Malayala Manorama*, and *Deepika* were some newspapers that existed during the first half of the twentieth century. All these newspapers commenced as weekly publications, subsequently transitioning into daily formats, thereby advancing into comprehensive sources of global information dissemination since their inception.

### **Mathrubhumi Newspaper**

Mathrubhumi, begun in 1923 was unusual among Indian newspapers in that it was a public company with some shareholders. The best known of these was the founder of the paper, the British-trained barrister and nationalist, K P Kesava Menon.<sup>5</sup> Mathrubhumi newspaper appeared as a prominent forum mirroring the emotions and expectations of the freedom movement of Kerala. In its inaugural edition, the newspaper forwarded a positive message of unanimity with the National Movement and a devotion to electrify the chaotic Malayalee populace towards a common cause. Mathrubhumi newspaper arose as an invaluable source of information attributed to the freedom struggle, disseminating news, editorials, features, and articles covering a diverse assemblage of topics applicable to the movement. These papers were rich with short stories and poems by contemporary writers. It takes the engrossment of the people by providing reports on their national heroes including Mahatma Gandhi, C F Andrews, Professor Carve, who was the founder of a women's university at Poona, etc. *Mathrubhumi newspaper* consisted of a special page concerning the civil disobedience movement that took place in Bombay, United Province, Maharashtra, Bengal, Central Province, Punjab, New Delhi, Karnataka, Madras, Gujrat etc. An article in this newspaper dated 21<sup>st</sup> March 1931 questioned the improper functioning of the railway department and provided valuable details about employment opportunities for the Indian Youth.<sup>6</sup> By introducing divergent outlooks and arguments, newspapers helped to clear the way for public debate and opinion formation on important affairs.

---

<sup>4</sup> Raghavan, Putuppalli., 1985, pp.29-31.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey, Robin., 2000, p.82.

<sup>6</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, March 14, p.4.

Newspapers often included certain pages, which allowed individuals to express their views on various topics. By presenting different perspectives and arguments these papers helped to facilitate public debate and opinion formation on important issues. The page named *World of Women* in *Mathrubhumi* provides a thorough criticism of the dowry system that existed during the time in the society it can be considered an example of promoting the progressive thinking of the then society.<sup>7</sup> This page also contains information about the achievements of women in society. *Mathrubhumi's* paper engaged a multifaceted role in fostering women's progress by acting as catalysts for awareness, advocacy, empowerment, and community building. They worked as active representatives of change in advancing women's progress by providing visibility to their accomplishments, upholding their rights, and empowering them through guidance. By contributing a platform for women's voices, newspapers assisted in boosting their concerns, inspiring action, and fostering solidarity among women across diverse backgrounds. By disseminating news, editorials, and features, newspapers contributed to hoisting public awareness about gender equality issues and promoting a more comprehensive and equitable society. As key influencers of public opinion newspapers played a crucial role in shaping viewpoints, policies, and social norms related to women's roles and rights. Their role in promoting women's progress remains noteworthy in the historical narrative of social transformation and gender equality. These papers were written formally in a more conversational tone and focused on the national events that affect the wider population. By highlighting such issues *Mathrubhumi* influences which topics gain recognition and evaluation within society to prioritize certain issues and shape public opinion accordingly.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the newspapers of Travancore would have played a crucial role in circulating information about scientific progress and achievements to society. They assisted in instructing the people of Travancore about advancements in various fields of science. In 1932 an article was published in *Mathrubhumi*, about the scope and relevance of Robots in contemporary society. "The use of robots is now lavish in Western countries, pick up goods in shops, robots are being used in banks for calculating money and has started a new type of work with robots in a place called Prague, where this machine has volunteered to convey essential life stories to outsiders in the city. Robots are installed in the road safety zones. If you want to know an important thing, it must have been written on it. Press the nail. A piece of paper that pops out which contains the needed

---

<sup>7</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, March 21, p.23.

information.”<sup>8</sup> Such news about scientific procurements could have inspired individuals in Travancore to pursue careers in science and modernization. This could have led to the maturing of local competence and brilliance in various scientific fields, contributing to the overall progress of society. Better-informed citizens could then apply this knowledge to intensify their lives and livelihoods. These things brought outstanding transformation to their lives and positive transformation in their worldview. News like this would have lent a hand to tie up the people of Travancore to the global scientific community. Reporting on inventions from the world newspapers would have accelerated the exchange of ideas and knowledge, authorizing Travancore to benefit from advancements that take place elsewhere. They enlightened and guided society as a whole by providing information about different changes happening around the globe. The access to news about scientific discoveries through newspapers would have played a crucial role in shaping the society of Travancore, fostering education, progress, and innovation.

Another article vehemently criticizes the government. “Today many Indians who have completed their English education are strong enough to do government jobs. But if anyone openly opposes it is asses high treason and blameworthy. Telling the truth here is often punishable. Today for many reasons truth has been lost in the British war history. Before the establishment of British rule, there was anarchy all over India and the Britishers said that India was conquered by the sword and so on”.<sup>9</sup> These types of news and articles, in printed media, have created a huge impact on people’s beliefs about the royal dynasties and the colonial administration.

Newspapers served as platforms for organizing public outlook and radicalism on various questions. They could galvanize favor for social movements, protests, or reform efforts by raising recognition, mobilizing benefactors, and advocating for change. This phenomenon created a positive impact on society and it enlightened the people against the ill-treatment made by the royal dynasties and the paramount power and thereby these papers and magazines played an integral part of the society. The reading of these papers controls the lives of the citizens positively.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the passing of the Vernacular Press Act, the government took an active step to control seditious writing which created a strong public reaction towards the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, May 9, p.26.

<sup>9</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, June 27, p.4.

government and hence this act was replaced. The colonial age was highly critical and it made several restrictions on the freedom of the press and freedom of speech. In such a society an article was written by D Padbhanabhanunni in a leading Malayalam newspaper of Travancore under the title *Establishment of British Rule*.<sup>10</sup> In this article, the author was highly critical of the colonial rulers. He questioned the Western notion that Indians have no sense of history. Those who examine the truth should understand that even the ancient stories circulating in India are not as deceiving to the world as the books written and published by these historians. In their history many of the ordinary events are hidden, changing the type and color of what is represented, creating what is not there, eliminating what is there, and so on. Because of this, it is not acceptable to say that today's historical diversity is better than the historical diversity of ancient times.<sup>11</sup> The British interpretations of Indian history served to degenerate Indians and their achievement and justify the colonial rule.<sup>12</sup> This idea of historical sense has similarities with the writing during the first half of the twentieth-century newspaper. Many of the Englishmen who were in charge of the Indian administration understood the actual situation. So, they are capable of writing the history of the British administration. However, due to nepotism, they are not open-minded and courageous. If anyone ventures out what will be their experience can be known from the bites given by Captain Cunningham, Major Evanabel, etc. Many of the Christian pastures of the time in India can understand the nature of the administrative strategy. But they also do not tell the truth. They seem to fear exposing the violence of those who belong to the religion they think they are. "If you look at it like this, it is understandable that no Englishmen is capable of writing the history of British rule in India and many English-educated Indians today are strong enough to perform this job and hence anyone ventures into it, it is considered high treason and punishable. Telling the truth here is punishable. Thus, for many reasons, truth is rare in British history."<sup>13</sup> The British administrative measures and atrocities inspired several journalists to fearlessly pick up their pens and continue to publish nationalist articles that openly criticized British rule and called the people for action. These voices are heard by millions of Indians in general and Travancore in particular. All these writers from Travancore proved that the pen could indeed be mightier than the sword and they

---

<sup>10</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, June 27, p.4.

<sup>11</sup> Padmanabhanunni D, M A., 1932, *Establishment of British Rule*, Mathrubhumi, 27 June, p.4.

<sup>12</sup> Sharma R S, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, June 27, p.4.

took an active part in writing nationalist articles calling for swaraj. In Travancore, print media took an active role in the creative expression of people of that age. These earliest newspapers are invaluable resources for historical understanding and serve as primary sources of historical information, furnishing firsthand accounts of events, people, and societal trends from the period in which were published. These sources put forward direct insights into the historical events perceived and reported by contemporaries.

There are special columns for their poems, short stories, photography, achievements of women, etc. All these resemble the features of the society of Travancore. *Decline of the Russian Empire History of Rasputin the Human Devil* was another important article which was made by K P Kesava Menon published in a newspaper in the fourth decade of the twentieth century describes how Rasputin was captivated by the royal family how the emperor and the queen became puppets in his hands and so on.<sup>14</sup> In addition to describing empires religion also became a part of discussion in that society. K Kelappan in his article *Community and Religion Harm from Proselytizing Efforts* shows how religion affects people in their daily lives which provides some data about discrimination in terms related to the caste society of Travancore.<sup>15</sup> Newspapers mirror the viewpoints, prejudices, and preferences to the time they were published. By learning early newspapers historians achieve a nuanced understanding of the opinions, speculations, and cultural standards prevalent during specific historical periods.

### **Malayalarajyam Newspaper**

*Malayalarajyam* newspaper was founded at Kollam in 1929 with the primary purpose of circulating the perspectives and doctrines of the Indian National Congress, and by 1931, it transitioned into a daily publication, with K. G. Shankar assuming the role of its inaugural editor. *Malayalarajyam* was also rich in the promotion of literature, art, and science. In this newspaper, a devoted column was assigned to the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Bhai Parmanand, alongside translations of their literary works thereby promoting the spreading of their prominent contributions to literature and encouraging cultural exchange and appreciation.<sup>16</sup> Bhai Parmanand's speech at Kozhikode in January is noteworthy. That speech was made to remove the misunderstanding about the Hindu Mahasabha and explain its purpose and activities reading about this speech creates awareness in the minds

---

<sup>14</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, July 18, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, July 18, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> *Malayalarajyam*, 1934, January 11, p.15.

of Travancore about the essentiality of Hindu-Muslim friendship and hence an alliance with various community organizations has been started on this occasion. Ulloor S Parameswar Iyer, one of the modern triumvirate poets of Kerala during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph Mundassery, a great Malayali literary critic and known as the education minister behind the controversial education bill of the first Communist ministry of Kerala under EMS were wrote columns in various newspapers. Newspapers played the role of a powerful medium for spreading information all over the land. News connected to Mahatma Gandhi, Civil Disobedience movement affairs which spread over Bengal, Bombay, united Province, Sindh, Gujrat, and Punjab took an active part in this regard. "Mahatma Gandhi and K Kelappan who decided to start fasting from 21 January have finally decided to stop the same. Caste Hindus of Ponnani Taluk doing everything possible to open the Guruvayoor temple to the Harijan people. Now there is a legal formality that will require this delay. Mahatma Gandhi suggested that it would not be honest to start the fast after this".<sup>17</sup> The entry of untouchables into the Guruvayoor temple is the miracle of the modern period as per Mahatma Gandhi. This proclamation created an immediate and far-reaching impact on Kerala society and culture. Poems, Scientific Facts, Philosophy, and National and international news flourished through this paper. While *Mathrubhumi* concentrated more on nationalism and freedom struggle, *Malayalarajyam* took an active part in the spread of religious harmony in this area. It created the concept of nation through it's articles like *Ancient India State and Monarchy*.<sup>18</sup> P Damodaran Pillai in his article says the use of the word *Rashtram* in Malayalam does not seem to be in its technical sense. English words such as political (national) are translated as political in the newspaper language. Regardless of political or national *Rashtram* is the people who function systematically within a certain national boundary.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The newspaper movement outlooks a central characteristic of early nineteenth-century Travancore society, marking a notable transfer in the dissemination of information, disclosure of public discourse, and making of public opinion within the region. The power of newspapers is meager in countries where populist rule exists because of independent interaction. The strategy of the government towards the press was drastic. The passing of the Indian Press Act in 1910 was due to the demolition of several newspapers. Its consequences are

---

<sup>17</sup> *Mathrubhumi*, 1932, January 2, p.14.

<sup>18</sup> *Malayalarajyam*, 1934, January 11, p.25.

<sup>19</sup> *Malayalarajyam*, 1934, January 11, p.25



thrown back in Travancore soil also. Many vernacular newspapers are dying due to antagonistic conditions, insufficient capital for journalists, and individual unconsciousness. However, they overcount the English newspapers. The journalists of this period provided the right information on numerous national and international subjects by supervising and edifying the tastes of people. These papers played a crucial role in inspiring and spreading as an important agent of nationalism in Travancore. Papers like *Mathrubhumi* and *Malayalarajyam* popularized the ideals of patriotism and subversive ideas of liberty and equality. These printed media act as an agent of the national movement that, takes place all over the region. Newspapers document not only major historical incidents but also the daily lives of the common man. They contained advertisements, local news, and human-interest stories that provided insights into everyday life, social customs, economic activities, and cultural practices. Early newspapers offer precious historical context for understanding wider historical developments. They work as vital repositories of information concerning the socio-political, economic, and cultural era, presenting invaluable insights that aid historians in contextualizing and elucidating other historical sources and incidents. Newspapers often contemplate the power dynamics of the societies in which they operate. By inspecting early newspapers historians can recognize patterns of impact, censorship, and advocacy engaged by governments, political factions, or social elites to structure public opinion and maintain control. Studying early newspapers empower historians to unearth the progress of journalism as a profession and as a societal alliance. They can scrutinize changes in reporting practices. Journalistic standards technological upheaval, and the role of press in molding public dialogue over time.

These papers especially *Swadesabhimani*, *Kesari*, *Prabodhakan*, *Samadarsi*, *Mathrubhumi*, and *Malayalarajyam* played an important role in spreading different ideas to the people of Travancore which elevated the emotions of the Indian public versus the British authorities. They nurture the motives of nationalism, patriotism, justice, liberty, and equality in the country. These regional language newspapers which is penetrable by the people and they can also take part in the freedom struggle. These papers succeeded in the advancement of art and literature. Most of them condemn the prejudiced approach of the British Government. People became knowledgeable of the challenges happening all around the world through these papers. Thereby due to the definite social and political transformations, the people demand the policies and programs for their advantage. *Mathrubhumi* was one such paper in Malayalam that particularly inspired the people to extend nationalist ideologies and take vigorous participation in the freedom struggle.

Printed media take part in a critical role in the development of radical thinking in Travancore and it took an active part in the pursuit of the freedom of the press in Travancore. The names of Swadesabhimani Ramakrishnapillai, Kesari A Balakrishnapillai, and K P Kesava Menon were always recollected in this regard.

*Mathrubhumi* and *Malayalarajyam* newspapers in Travancore played a diverse role in forming public outlook by circulating information, setting agendas, enabling debate, speaking for political agendas, discussing cultural and social questions, and assembling fanaticism. Their impact widened beyond mere reporting to actively forming public communication and shaping the route of society. Early newspapers are vital tools for historical understanding, offering rich and diverse insights into the past from a variety of perspectives. By inspecting these primary sources, historians can reconstruct historical chronicles, elucidate past events, and obtain great insights into the difficulties of human societies over different phases.

Newspapers of Travancore commend education chiefly for girls and lower caste communities, demanding traditional standards that limited access to education. They underscore the momentousness of literacy and the call for educational reforms. The newspapers principally *Mathrubhumi* and *Malayalarajyam* vigorously advocated against caste discrimination and untouchability. They uncover injustices faced by lower caste communities and stimulate social impartiality and fairness. Newspapers played a notable role in developing women's rights and challenging patriarchal standards. They provided a platform for interrogation on women's education, empowerment, and social reform movements. In Travancore, they were noteworthy in exposing political reforms and democratization. They agitated for Representative Government, constitutional Reforms, and increased participation of the masses in the decision-making proceedings.

Newspapers played a decisive role in encouraging nationalism and the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. They circulate instructions about nationalist leaders, movements, and ideologies, and strengthens the sense of unity and collective recognition among the people. Newspapers raised consciousness about numerous social affairs such as poverty, unemployment, health, and sanitation. They accentuated the need for social welfare measures and urged the government to address these themes. Newspapers assisted as platforms for intellectual dialogues, discourses, and conferences on various social, political, and cultural matters. They provided space for intellectuals, writers, and activists to convey their perspectives and suggestions, sculpturing public discourse and thoughts. Overall, newspapers played

a pivotal role in commencing and enabling social change in Travancore during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, donating to the alteration of society towards a more diverse, impartial, and progressive direction.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Jeffrey, Robin., 2000, *India's Newspaper Revolution*.
2. Macluhan, Marshall., 1964, *Understanding Media*, MC Graw Hill.
3. Raghavan, Putuppalli., 1985, *Kerala Patra Pravarthana Charitram (Mal.)* Trissur.
4. Sangham, Malayala Padana., 2017, *Cultural Studies History Theory and Practices*, Vallathol Vidhya Peedam.
5. Sharma, R S., 2005, *India's Ancient Past*, Oxford University Press.