

## Royalty, Women and Politics in Travancore

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### ABSTRACT

*Travancore was the southernmost native state of British India and comprised the present day lands of the southern part of Kerala and Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. It was a caste ridden society with upper class dominance. Naturally, the condition of people belonging to the other castes, particularly lower castes was highly deplorable. But most pathetic was the condition of women. Even though the condition of women was very deplorable, the state witnessed the rule of three Regent Maharanis. Much legislation was made during their periods. The paper aimed to reveal the administrative capabilities of Maharanis which helped the socio- political development of the people of Travancore.*

**Keywords:** royal women, Travancore, legislations, reforms, administration

The social structure of Travancore was almost similar in the administrative divisions as it was predominantly based on the institution of caste, but political condition was divergent in these regions. Travancore had a rich political tradition of dynastic rule. But with the colonial penetration, the power fell into the hands of British paramountcy. The state bureaucracy was dominated by the feudal institutions like caste hierarchy and conventions. In the early period, the appearance of women in Travancore politics was exceptional one. Yet women maintained the spark of political interest that ignited the state widely from time to time. First woman administrator of Venad (earliest name of Travancore) was Umayamma Rani.<sup>i</sup> She was popularly known as Aswathy Thirunal Attingal Thampuratti. Her period of administration was action-packed. This Attingal Rani gave permission to the British to establish their factory at Anjengo in Quilon which later led to the first organised popular revolt against the British in India in 1721. It was known as Attingal revolt in the history of Kerala.

In 1729, Marthanda Varma came to the throne of Travancore and the modern Travancore was created by his administrative and annexation policies. There was a tradition of regency rule in Travancore in the absence of male heir. Despite the deplorable position of women in general three women in Travancore excelled as Regents during times of administrative crisis. Travancore witnessed the regime of three princesses on different occasions. Two of them ruled in the 19th century and the third in the 20th century. Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai assumed the reign of Travancore government in 1810 after the demise of Balarama Varma which lasted up to 1815.<sup>ii</sup> Gouri Parvathy Bai acted as Regent during the period of the minority of His Highness Swathi Tirunal from 1815 to 1829. Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bai adorned the throne of Regency from 1824 to 1831 during the minority of His Highness Sri Chithira Tirunal Balarama Varma.<sup>iii</sup>

The administration of Ranis was renowned for the virtual open-mindedness and the more liberal attitude towards social freedom and equality. The liberal attitude enabled them to erect the most modern state based on certain considerations of social equality without discrimination of sex, creed, caste or religion. It brought about major changes in the social and political participation of women in the State. She appointed the British Resident, Col. Munro as Diwan and she was ably assisted in the task of administering Travancore in a British model by him. Her Highness's period was an era of social legislations in Travancore. The abolition of slavery in Travancore was the most important administrative reform done by Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai. Slavery was abolished in Travancore by a Royal Proclamation on 5<sup>th</sup> December in 1812 but the total abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of slaves took place only in 1855.<sup>iv</sup> It can be considered as the opening of the liberation movement in Travancore. In 1812, with the help of Colonel Munro, she issued new laws called *Chattavariola* for taxation, civil and criminal departments.<sup>v</sup> Five Zillah courts were set up at Padmanabhapuram, Thiruvananthapuram, Mavelikkara, Vaikkom and Alwaye.

The regency of Gouri Parvati Bai was an epoch of administrative and social growth in the history of the Travancore. Colonel Munro installed the thirteen year old Rani Gowri Parvathi Bai as the ruler of Travancore after the death of Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai in 1814. Rani Gowri Parvathi Bai's sovereignty lasted for fourteen years from 1815 to 1829 covering the land of Travancore over the territories of Edappally.<sup>vi</sup> Agriculture and trade attained amazing progress during her period. She abolished repulsive taxes like *chettupattom*.<sup>vii</sup>

Major educational developments took place in Travancore under her regime. She believed that by the diffusion of education the people of Travancore might become better subjects and public servants and the

reputation of the state might be highly developed thereby.<sup>viii</sup> She approved the starting of public schools at Mavelikkara, Karthikappally, Thiruvalla and Kottarakkara.<sup>ix</sup> Thus English education was going ahead immensely in Travancore under Rani Gowri Parvathi Bai. She gave enormous freedom to English missionaries.

Due to the dowry issue, Namboothiri women were forced to remain unmarried till 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> years of age and consequently many untoward things were seen to happen. So the queen issued a proclamation that "All virgins in the families of Namboothiries and Potties should be married between the ages of ten to fourteen. No person shall demand and none shall pay more than 700 *fanams* i.e., Rs 100 as dowry. All the women above fourteen, remaining unmarried shall be married with in a period of two years from this date. Those who violate this law will be subjected to judicial process and punished in conformity with the Dharma Sastra.<sup>x</sup> The period of Rani Gowri Parvathi Bai, was an epoch of a lot of royal proclamations dealing with legislations, orders grants etc.

Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bai was the most important women ruler of Travancore. Actually Sethu Lakshmi Bai was adopted from the family of the Utsavamadam Palace in Mavelikara along with her sister Gouri Parvathi Bai when Travancore dynasty became heirless in female line. Her mother Ayilyam Thirunal Mahaprabha Thampuratti belonged to the branch of the Kolathunad Royal Family that had settled in Travancore towards the end of the 18th century. Her father was Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuraan of Kilimanoor palace. The Mavelikara family was intimately associated with the Travancore family. At the age of six, Sethu Lakshmi Bai succeeded as Senior Rani of Attingal and Travancore while Sethu Parvathi Bai became Junior Rani. In 1912, when she became major, the Maharaja granted her the rights to control the *Sreepadam* Estate which consisted of revenues from Attingal and large landed properties traditionally held by the Senior Rani.

The regime of Sri Mulam Thirunal ended in 1924, after his demise on behalf of Sri Chitra Thirunal Bala Rama Varma his maternal aunt Sethu Lakshmi Bai ruled the princely state from 1924 to 1931. The regency had opened amidst many dilemmas including a Satyagraha at Vaikom. Almost immediately after 1925, Gandhiji made a personal interview with the Maharani and had all praise for her simplicity and nobility.<sup>xi</sup> As a result, a royal proclamation was issued by which all the public roads and streets in Travancore were thrown open to all Hindus irrespective of caste. Senior Maharani's period witnessed tremendous progress in social, political, administrative and legal fields.

Maharani introduced a series of legislations for the welfare of her subjects. In 1925, animal sacrifice was prohibited in Travancore. In 1926, she abolished the *Devadasi* system in temples. By doing so, she saved the life of women from the clutches of age longed system. She avoided the conservative tradition of appointing upper-caste Brahmins and Nairs as Diwans. M E Watts, a Travancore Anglo Indian Christian, was appointed as her Dewan in 1925. The marriage and inheritance laws of the Nairs and Ezhavas were reformed. Amendments were brought about in the same year regarding the Travancore Nair Act pertaining to the *Marumakkathayam* system of inheritance. Nair Act of 1925 was passed with depriving the nephews of all claims to the properties of their uncles. It made provision for the partition of Nair *tharavads* and incised the very root of *Marumakkathayam* system.<sup>xii</sup> The Nair Act was a predecessor of similar enactments like the Ezhava Act of 1925 and the Nanchinad Act of 1926. These reforms conferred on the women equality of inheritance to property. Matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy.

Ultimately in 1928 the *marumakkathayam* system was away with, by introducing patrilineal nuclear family system in Travancore. An Act regarding the formation of Panchayats in rural areas was passed in 1925 with the purpose of developing local self government.<sup>xiii</sup> Judicial power was also given to Panchayats to act as juries in small and petty civil cases. Newspaper Regulation Act was passed in 1926 to control the misuse of press. It became a disputable topic as it curbed many rights of the press. Education got more significance under her regime. Mainly she concentrated on women education.

Maharani introduced a handful of reforms for the welfare of women. As a first step, in 1920's she had announced that all girls who went to college in the state would be rewarded with an invitation to join their queen at her palace for tea. It was an attractive inducement for women at that time. Just after her succession, the Maharani had elevated Dr Mary Poonen Luckose, Travancore's first woman graduate and a product of one of the best medical colleges in the West, from being surgeon in charge of the Women and Children's Hospital and her personal doctor, to the head of the Medical Department of Travancore. Dr Mary was nominated by the Maharani as a member of the Legislative Council.<sup>xiv</sup> She was the first woman who got an opportunity to take a seat in the house of administration. It was the first time in India that a woman was being selected the head of a major department, and also the first example of a Lady Legislator. The news of her appointment was printed in the Madras Mail under the caption of 'Feminism in Travancore.' Maharani again nominated Mary Poonen Luckose in the next session of the Council. There was a chorus of

admiration about the liberal and wise step taken by Sethu Lakshmi Bai in opening doors to educated women.

In 1927, the Maharani provided an opportunity to study of law to female students. Miss Anna Chandy became the first woman judicial officer not only in Travancore but also in the entire Anglo Saxon world. She started her practice at Kottayam, stood for elections to the legislature but lost and became a criminal lawyer in the High Court in Trivandrum by 1930. Being a woman advocate she was scorned by some people. They contempt her by saying that she made use of her femininity to win cases, with one disgruntled colleague's claiming that if he would wore a blouse and a sari, he would also have won cases.

In 1927, Sethu Lakshmi Bai raised the Women's College in Trivandrum from second grade to first grade, obtaining affiliation with the University of Madras and starting classes on history, natural science, languages and mathematics.<sup>xv</sup> Trained lecturers and teachers from Europe were also brought down here at considerable expense for providing better education to women. There were about 232 women studied in the college of Travancore, and about 9,500 girls in English schools. Indeed, such was the explosion in women's education that by 1928, about 450 qualified women were being churned out each year, and the Unemployment Enquiry Committee that the Maharani would constitute had, to the surprise of its members, to carry specific studies on the problem of female unemployment in Travancore. 'A degree,' it would note in its report, 'makes a daughter as valuable in the parents' eyes as a son,' also expressing some amazement that women 'look for employment as eagerly as men do...'<sup>xvi</sup>

In 1928, the Maharani nominated Mrs Elizabeth Kuruvila, another woman to the legislature. Maharani made several attempts to give equal chances to women in government appointments, with men by the following year. By 1931, in the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, she more nominated five more women. Sri Mulam Popular Assembly represented local needs of the various classes of people in Travancore for the government. She revised its rules as to allow women to become members and to vote. Dewan announced that elected women would take their place at the future sessions of the Assembly. By fulfilling the Maharani's solicitude, rightful place in the political life of the country was given to women. It was noteworthy that these five women belonged to various castes, high as well as low, in order to represent the needs of their respective sisters.

Women began to experience the impact of colonial modernity from the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ramifications of colonial modernity felt in the public sphere in different times and in different degrees. One of the most important impacts was felt in the social realm, in the form of efforts at reforming customs and democratizing social relationships. The Christian missionaries took the pioneering steps in promoting social reforms. They actively engaged in spreading the message of reform by imparting modern education to the untouchables. It resulted in the emergence of a new social order in Travancore, which was actually the outcome of the assimilation of traditional and colonial ideas. Actually these factors paved the way for the formation of a civil society which watered the growth of women empowerment in Travancore.

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