

# PRE-COLONIAL EDUCATION IN KERALA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN

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**Abstract:** Education helps in the true manifestation of one's own capacities and capabilities and is an indispensable factor of a dignified life. To an extent, education is directly proportional to high living standards as it provides better employment opportunities, better income, better social status and better facilities. So, in a globalized world no one can exist without proper education. Governments both central and state governments in India are providing ample financial assistance to educational sector and students are given whole hearted support, particularly girl students. They are provided with various scholarships like Indira Gandhi Single Girl Child Scholarship and many others. Kerala, the God's own country, often hailed as the land of literacy had a firm foundation in the matters of female education. But the situation was not like this in the early period. In the pre-colonial Kerala, education was the monopoly of a few upper castes and the majority was deprived of education. There was gender bias as well. Women in general were deprived of education. This study aims at the true portrayal of the educational scenario of pre-modern Kerala.

**Key Words:** Kudippallikkudams ( school), Ezhuthasan (teacher), Gathika (a kind of school), Salai (schools), Namboothiri (Brahmin), Upanayana (ceremony related to starting of student life), Ezhuthupalli (schools), Payal school (a kind of school), Othupalli (schools).

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Women of Kerala enjoyed a lot of liberty from early days. They occupied a central position in the society and were provided with education. In Kerala history, we come across plenty of diverse women remarkable for scholarship and cultural accomplishments. Folk songs praise the martial powers and war tactics of *Unni Archa* (heroine of northern ballads). But in the realm of education, the condition of women became pathetic, particularly in the pre-colonial period. Education in general was denied to lower castes and all sections of women. Thus a kind of gender disparity became clearly visible in Kerala context from the medieval period.

## 2. OBJECTIVES:

- To find out the existed educational systems of pre-modern Kerala.
- To find out the general condition of women in the educational scenario.

## 3. METHODOLOGY:

Analytical method of historical research is used to conduct the study. Both primary sources and secondary sources are used. The primary sources include different reports and other documents collected from various repositories and secondary sources are mainly books, journals and websites.

## 4. DISCUSSION:

Kerala, the God's own country, occupies a prominent status in the realm of education. But the educational scenario of Kerala was not a linear line. It has witnessed various ups and downs. In the early period, Kerala was a part and parcel of ancient Tamilakam. Social conditions of that age can be reconstructed effectively from the Sangam works. Sangam Age or the period of ancient Tamil Anthologies comprised the early centuries of the Christian era. In that age, Education was universal in Kerala and there were high level of literacy[1]! The literary works of the Sangam Age clearly mention that all people irrespective of sectarian or sex consideration were entitled to get the benefit of full education. The communities such as Kuravas, Parayas, Panas, Vetas and others were held in high esteem by kings and nobles. The Panas were even superior to Brahmins of the day in their cultural and intellectual accomplishments[2].

Female education had a fairly wide popularity among all classes of the people of Kerala during the Sangam period. Sangam literature contains the references of many educated and learned women who contributed much to the cultural life of their times. Chilapathikaram belonging to Sangam era, mentions the powerful educative role of a Jain woman saint Kaundi Adigal[3]. Purananuru, a Sangam work gives the name of over fifteen poetesses. The most important Sangam poetesses were Auvaiyar, Adimandiyar, Vellividiyar etc[4]. Auvaiyar, the most important poetess

belonged to Pana caste[5]. The early epics like Manimekhalai, Neelakesi and Kundalakesi and several inscriptions in stones near Ayyanar temple at Kazhugumalai give indication of Jain female teachers and students [6].

Establishment of the Chera power under Kulasekhara Varman in 88 AD was an important epoch in Kerala history. Though the early history of Kerala was shrouded in mystery, a continuous historical outline was available from the Chera period. The Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram ruled until 1102 AD. This period witnessed the growth of education and learning, along with the progress in other fields such as art and architecture, trade and commerce [7]. With the rise of temples as a place of prominence in the social and cultural life of the people, educational institutions received special attention as they formed an integral part of the temple complex during this period[8]. There were schools attached to all important temples in Kerala. These educational institutions were known as '*Salais*' or Gathikas and they were centered on Brahmanic-Sanskrit traditions. Many of the *Salais*, though established by the rulers of the day, could go ahead primarily because of the magnificent donations received from affluent persons in the community for its maintenance [9]. *Salais* provided Vedic cum martial learning accessible only to the Namboodiries(Brahmins). Thus, education in general was the monopoly of Brahmins and they used this to suppress and exploit other sections of society. In the pre-colonial situation, they are being placed as the ritual authority and temple managers. Thus they got the opportunity to be spiritually superior. Upanayana(a hindu ceremony among Brahmins) marked the beginning of education of a Brahmin boy. At the end of this course, the learner was expected to acquire a through grounding in Sanskrit along with a working knowledge in Malayalam[10]. Some of these *Salais* were established in the early part of the Sangam Age, when the southern Part of Kerala was under the Ay rulers. The Ay Kings were generous patrons of education and learning. The most important *Salais* of the kingdom were Kandalur *Salai* and Parthivasekharapuram *Salai*. "Huzur office plate" makes it clear that admission to Parthivasekharapuram *Salai* was restricted to the Brahmins[11]. The Brahmin youth were provided with free boarding and lodging in *Salais*. In view of the strict enforcement of discipline the Kandalur, the Parthivasekharapuram and other *Salais* of the Ay kingdom become ideal educational institutions[12]. Kandalur *Salai* was considered as the Nalanda of the South. It was an ancient institution and was looked upon as a model by the people of that time. The Tiruvalla *Salai* and Muzhikulan *Salai* were the two important *Salais* that assumed importance during the Kulasekharas. These *Salais* offered specialised courses of studies in different branches of learning such as Philosophy, Grammar, Law, Geology, etc. There is a great difference between the earlier *Salais* and the later *Salais*. The former catered to the needs of only a selected few, but the latter admitted hundreds of students and provided them with free lodging and boarding and tuition [13]. An inscription of the twelfth or thirteenth century, found engraved in the Mani Kantaswara temple at Kottarakkara mentions of *Salais* or vedic colleges attached to it and also certain restrictions and privileges in regard to the admission of the people to this *Salai*[14].

The Chola-Chera war of the eleventh century which caused a social upheaval seems to have led to the decline of the *Salai*. One of the causes of the disappearance of the *Salai* might have been the decline in the character and caliber of the pupils. Many of them lost their interest in intellectual pursuit and took to military training. Perhaps these *Salais* might have lost their importance due to the downfall of the Second Chera Empire. The *Salai* pattern declined by 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. But a new chain of educational institutions sprang up in their place and flourished in the early medieval period. They are the Vedapata *Salais* and *Sabha Mutts*, which served the cause of religious instructions. They were temple universities. These institutions functioned mainly in central and northern Kerala. Like the Gurukulam(center of learning) of North India, these houses of learning were residential in character and instruction was imparted in the traditional Aryan way as prescribed in the Dharmasastras. The *Sabha Mutts* were intended for the education of the *Namboothiri(Brahmin youth)* youth in Vedas and Sastras. This rigid exclusiveness tended to make these institutions, the impregnable citadels of orthodoxy. The higher educational facilities offered by these repositories of ancient Aryan culture were in accessible to the masses[15]. After the *upanayana* ceremony, the *Namboothiri(Brahmin)* boy was sent to the residence of a teacher and he later completed his course of studies in the *Sabha Mutts*. The earliest of the *Sabha Mutts* was founded at Trichur by Sankaracharya himself. The *Mutts* of Trichur were richly endowed from the days of Sankara and they played an important part in the promotion of Vedic studies. Besides Trichur, Chovannur, Kumbalam, Tirunavai also had *Mutts*. It was customary on the part of the great literary men and poets to assemble before the temple adjoining the *Mutt* and conduct literary and scientific discussions. There were two *Sabha Mutts*, One for higher religious instructions and the other for liturgical training. It is through these *Mutts* that higher Sanskrit education gained ascendancy in Kerala. The student of a *Mutt* stayed on for the duration of the course covering twelve years and only at the end of it did he pay his '*Gurudakshina*' or teacher's fee. Nine years of curriculum covered a vast range of intellectual and religious subjects, including the Sutras, while the last three years were to be devoted mostly to authorship of books as well as participation in controversial discussions and debates held at periodical parishads[16]. The course terminated with an examination and the confirmation of titles.

After the Kulasekhara empire, the Kerala land was divided into several Nadus(small units) called Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. These kingdoms made successful efforts in encouraging and developing education in their regions. There were scholarly discussions in the royal courts as well as detailed sessions dedicated to poetry, literature and the fine arts including music and dance rituals. The language in use was mostly Sanskrit. Literary assemblies and

proficiency tests conducted in important centres were a feature of the intellectual life of the early and medieval Kerala[17]. Special mention should be made in this connection of the ‘Annyonyam’ ( a debate) held in the Katavallur temple and Revathi pattathanam held in the Tali temple, Calicut under the patronage of the Zamorins. The former was a proficiency test for the students conducted in the premise of the Sri Rama temple, Katavallur. The Namboothiri students from all parts of Kerala trained in the Trichur and Thirunavai Mutts converged on Katavallur to participate in the test and achieve distinction. The very best among the participants were given awards. The Revathy pattathanam was a literary assembly held with the object of finding out and honouring the most outstanding scholar of the high calibre associated with the *Sabha Mutts* in and out of Kerala. It was held in the premises of Tali temple, Calicut, for a period of seven days for conferring the tittle ‘Batta’ and giving cash awards to scholars of outstanding merit. The Chief Judge at Pattathanam was the head of the famous Payyur family. The period of Chola–Chera war witnessed the decline of many of these institutions[18]. Literary and historical records have shed enough light on the origin and character of the fore mentioned institutions that have served the cause of education at different stages and in varied forms[19]. But education was denied to women.

There was a parallel system of village schools called *Ezhuthupallis* or *Payal* Schools (schools) that were intended for the education of the non Brahmin students. The Village Schools were considered as one of the best organizations in the ancient times in Kerala society. The *Payal* schools or *Ezhuthupallis* must be taken to be a lasting contribution made by Buddhist culture to this southern corner of India. The *Ezhuthupalli* functioned in each ‘Kara’ or ‘Village’ under the *Ezhuthachan* or *Asan*. The *Asan* formally initiated the child into the mystery of the three ‘R’ at a very early age. The formal ceremony of initiation took place under solemn auspices either in the third year of the child or not later than the seventh year. It was formally held in Vijayadasami (Hindu Festival) days, a ritual in honour of goddess Saraswathi, the goddess of learning. There after the child attended the village schools regularly and receive instructions from the *Asan*. The pupils were squatting on little mats on the floor strewn with sand for writing on. There was no class gradation. Loud reading and group recitation were distinctive features to start with. Then the pupils were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, the *Kavyas* (poems), astronomy and astrology. The lessons were written by pupils on ‘Ola’ or ‘Palmyra’ leaf with an iron style.

The *Ezhuthupallis*, the indigenous educational institutions, were attended by girls along with the boys. William Logan pointed out that these schools were freely attended by women. The aim of women education in *Ezhuthupallis* was to give training in elementary education, moral instruction and some basic lessons in Music. Formal education of women was completely denied during this period. So education existed at that time was a kind of village education which was exclusively meant for high caste boys and a very small section of middle class girls[20].The women had certain special subjects in their course of studies. Conduct and discipline were maintained strictly. *Asan* received salary mostly in kinds besides special gifts on auspicious days and harvest seasons. The system of village education in *Ezhuthupalli* aimed at moral, intellectual and physical well being of the boys and girls. The *Asan* had greater influence on the pupils than their own parents and this made the *Asan* rather a very important figure in the social life of the village. The system of village education with the *Ezuthupalli* as the nucleus received an impetus in seventeenth century by Thunchath *Ezhuthachan*, the ‘Father of Malayalam language’. He revolted against the prevailing system under which the privileged minority of Brahmins enjoyed the monopoly of Sanskrit education denying it to the common masses. The *Ezhuthupalli* continued to function vigorously in Kerala till the advent of the British and the consequent restructuring of the educational system. At the same time, the education provided by these institutions were limited. Though women were provided education, it was confined to a microscopic minority, particularly the *Nairs*.

The Christians had not developed their own educational system. It is probable that they made use of the traditional institutions such as *Ezhuthupallis* and *Kudippallikutams(schools)* [21]. The Mappila Muslims developed their own educational system during the pre-colonial period. Mappila (Muslim) boys started their education in *Othupallis (schools)*[22]. Like *Ezhthupallis*, they were also single teacher schools. It is probable that Arabic was also taught in these *Othupallis* along with Malayalam. The educational scenario of pre-colonial period thus represents the compartmentalization of society.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

Educational scenario of Kerala was progressives in the Sangam age. But from the Kulasekhara period itself, it began to witness a drastic change. In the pre-colonial period, education was confined to a few, particularly the Brahmins. The *Salais* and *Sabhamutts* (schools) made education, the monopoly of Brahmins. The welfare of the society depended on the education of women. But women’s education was not encouraged in the early phase. There were many difficulties for the women’s education, such as superstitions, child marriage and other age old traditions. Education was not considered as a means of livelihood in the case of women. Thus the most effective stimulus for education was absent. Though *Ezhuthupallikkudams* (schools) were there, only a minority of women received education and that was also not a qualitative one. Various religious tried to compartmentalize education in this time.

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