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The Royal Patronage In The Development Of Education In Kerala

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Abstract

This paper examines the innovative 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 is celebrated across India and globally for its exceptionally high literacy rate and strong educational infrastructure. One of the most critical influences behind this success story is the sustained support and visionary leadership provided by the Travancore royal family. While the roots of education in Kerala can be traced to ancient times, it was under the rule of the Travancore kings and queens particularly between the early 19th and mid-20th centuries that systematic and inclusive educational reforms began to flourish. The royal family treated education not just as a means for literacy but as a tool for social empowerment, gender equality, and regional progress. This article explores the multi-generational contribution of the Travancore monarchs to the field of education and their role in transforming Kerala into a knowledge society.

Rani Gouri Parvathi Bayi's regency (1815–1829) is widely regarded as the starting point for organized educational reform in Travancore. In 1817, she issued a royal proclamation that marked a turning point in the history of Kerala's education. The proclamation mandated the appointment of a Malayalam and a Tamil teacher in each district, thus formalizing state-sponsored education. This move ensured that both linguistic groups in the state had access to primary education in their native languages.

She also introduced compulsory primary education for children aged five to ten, placing the responsibility on parents to send their children to school. Schools at this stage included instruction in Malayalam, arithmetic, basic sciences, and moral values. Salaries offered to teachers were attractive for the time, reflecting the administration's commitment to quality education. Her policies were instrumental in laying the foundation for a structured and culturally inclusive educational system.

Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (reign: 1829–1846) continued the educational initiatives with a progressive vision. In 1834, he established the first English-medium school in Travancore at Thiruvananthapuram, even before the British formally implemented English education through Lord Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835). By 1835, he had opened five more English schools in strategic locations, such as Alappuzha, Thakkalay, Nagercoil, and Kayamkulam.

Apart from promoting modern education, Swathi Thirunal was keen on preserving Kerala's traditional literary wealth. He founded the "Granthappura," a royal manuscript library dedicated to the collection and preservation of ancient texts. This later became the Oriental Manuscripts Library. He also had a strong interest in science and established the Thiruvananthapuram Observatory in 1836, which housed state-of-the-art astronomical equipment. This institution was among the earliest scientific establishments in India and contributed significantly to the development of astronomy in the region.

Marthanda Varma (reign: 1846–1860) focused on strengthening the quality of education and supporting students in their academic pursuits. He personally attended school examinations and interacted with students, thereby motivating them to perform well. High-performing students were often rewarded with government jobs, linking education directly to career opportunities.

His reign also saw an interest in integrating modern medicine into the educational system. Western medical practices began to be introduced, and hospitals were attached to schools where students could learn practical medicine. This combination of traditional and modern knowledge reflected a forward-thinking approach that bridged ancient wisdom and emerging scientific disciplines.

Ayilyam Thirunal (reign: 1860–1880) is remembered for laying the foundation of higher education in Kerala. In 1866, he founded Maharaja's College in Thiruvananthapuram, which became the first Grade One college in the state. The college initially offered programs in English literature, mathematics, and philosophy and attracted some of the brightest minds from across South India.

He expanded the network of vernacular and English schools and introduced a scholarship scheme to support meritorious students from economically weaker sections. His administration encouraged the development of technical and vocational education, especially in areas such as printing, mechanical crafts,

and surveying. These steps ensured that education in Travancore was not just academic but also practical and employment-oriented.

Moolam Thirunal (reign: 1885–1924) is credited with some of the most far-reaching reforms in education. He is particularly noted for his inclusive policies that extended educational access to marginalized communities. In 1887–88, he introduced free primary education for backward classes, including Dalits and the fishing community. This was a pioneering move, as very few princely states in India had taken such inclusive steps at that time.

He established specialized institutions like the Ayurveda College, Sanskrit College, and Law College. Vocational training schools were also developed to provide skill-based education in agriculture, carpentry, weaving, and metalwork. These institutions created a pipeline for both higher academic learning and practical workforce development

During her regency Rani Setu Lakshmi Bayi (1924–1931), introduced several measures to expand school infrastructure and ensure that no child was left behind. To accommodate increasing enrollments, she introduced the double-shift system in primary schools. She also ensured the waiver of examination fees for students from oppressed communities, which significantly reduced dropout rates.

She was a strong advocate for women's education. Hostel facilities were created for girl students and for children from remote rural areas. The provision of mid-day meals encouraged regular attendance and helped poor families who were otherwise unable to feed their children while sending them to school. These efforts were vital in expanding education to the most vulnerable segments of society

Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal Rama Varma (reign: 1931–1949) focussed on Building a Knowledge Society' The last ruling monarch of Travancore, Sree Chithira Thirunal, made perhaps the most significant contribution to higher education by founding the University of Travancore in 1937, which later evolved into the University of Kerala. This institution became the apex body for coordinating academic standards across colleges in the region.

He also established key institutions like the Government Medical College, the Engineering College, and the Swathi Thirunal College of Music. These institutions elevated the status of Kerala as an educational hub in South India. Chithira Thirunal promoted gender equality and social justice through policies that ensured access to education irrespective of caste, religion, or gender (Panikkar, 1989).

Conclusion

The Travancore royal family played a transformative role in the development of education in Kerala. Their initiatives spanned more than a century and addressed every level of education—from primary schooling to university education and from general learning to technical and vocational training. Their policies not only expanded access to education but also emphasized quality, inclusivity, and modernization. Kerala's current position as a leader in literacy and education is a testament to the visionary leadership and commitment of the Travancore monarchs. Their legacy continues to inspire educational reforms and social development in the region today.

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