ABSTRACT

At a time when the state of Kerala is presented in general as having one of the highest literacy rates for women, it is also surprising that not much is known about the history of women’s education in the state. Other than some linear accounts of how women’s education progressed in Kerala, detailed academic work has not been done on this field from the period 1880 to 1940. I base my research project on the debates on women’s education in the Malayalam-speaking regions between the 1880s and the 1930s. It was during this time, particularly from the 1920s to 1935, that an image of the Malayali woman was constructed indirectly through the debates on education. Earlier notions about women were along caste, community and religious lines. Travancore and Cochin were Princely states at the time, while the rest of present-day Kerala, particularly Malabar, was under British rule. These two states had high levels of female literacy compared to other parts of India. The native governments had a stake in this field. The Travancore and Cochin governments were offering incentives in the form of abolishing fees for girls at primary school levels. There are detailed administrative reports on the state of education (in school and college) by the Department of Education in Travancore and Cochin which emphasis the governments’ interest in the field. There was also interest among the people of the region as is evident from the large number of articles on education in the magazines/journals of the period, the increase in the number of private management schools and the steadily increasing number of literate women in the Malayalam-speaking regions.

The project proposes to account for some of the questions raised by my preliminary reading of the sources [some of the women's magazines, government records and a few fictional materials from 1880 to 1940] and to map the changes in the meaning of concepts like
sthreedharmam [roughly translated as woman’s duties], parishkaaram [roughly translated as reform] and sthreeswaathandryam [roughly translated as women’s independence]. My interest would be in understanding the role played by the education debates in the way in which these concepts were formulated, and how these discussions then construct the image of a Malayali woman that was different from earlier notions of the Malayali woman. I specifically show how the notion of the Malayali woman is often conflated with the image of the Nair woman in the magazines and even in the government writings. I demonstrate how writers from other communities question this notion in subtle ways consciously or unconsciously. I propose that an image of a modern Malayali woman is constructed through these writings on education [from before the 1940s] different from earlier notions which were fractured and community/caste based. The notion of sthreedharmam was deployed to construct this image of the modern woman and in the process sthreedharmam itself gets reconstituted. The writings and discussions on and around women’s education then become one of defining sthreedharmam.