

## The Renaissance and Kerala's Project of Modernity

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### Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the process of cultural renewal that took place in Kerala in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, especially Kerala's engagement with modernity, modern culture and modern forms of subjectivity manifested chiefly in the unfolding of the reform movements and renaissance intellectual activities.

**Keywords:** Kerala, renaissance, modernity, cultural renewal, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20th centuries.

The aim of this paper is to present and critically evaluate the discourse of modernity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, especially in the light of the new understanding of the concept of 'culture'. Most contemporary scholars have recognized the need to integrate the issue of 'cultural differences' into the theorization of the concept of modernity (Chatterjee 18). That is, current scholarship discards the universality of modernity as a rationalised institutional and cultural order by asking whether 'the culture of modernity' is a generic experience that leads to common expressions and cultural forms all over the world. In his article titled "Multiple Modernities", S.N. Eisenstadt writes:

They all (classical sociologists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber) assumed...that the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately take over in all modernizing and modern societies....

The reality that emerged after the so-called beginning of modernity... failed to bear out these assumptions. The actual developments in modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing and hegemonic assumptions of this Western program of modernity (1).

The term 'multiple modernities' suggests that 'modernity' can no longer be conceptualized in the singular. That is, modernity has given rise to multiple and diverse institutional and ideological patterns in different parts of the world. Accordingly, Eisenstadt proposes the idea of 'multiple modernities' developing in parallel in different parts of the world "for which the original western project constituted the crucial (and usually ambivalent) reference point" (2). These multiple modernities, developing alongside each other, were

“greatly influenced by specific cultural premises, traditions, and historical experiences”, but yet all of them were “distinctively modern” (2).

The problem of linking ‘modernity’ to the cultural specificities of the West is that it reinforces a view of the West as inherently modern and progressive and Third world societies such as Kerala as tradition bound. Dichotomous representations of the East and West imply that the cultural capital for the transition from ‘primitive’ to ‘modern’ is exclusively located in the West. European civilization was the model which “other” societies should emulate in order to take part in modernity. In this dichotomous model, the scientific, progressive, industrial, and rational West is contrasted with a mystic and tradition bound East. Furthermore, a dichotomous model often conceals and negates the internal heterogeneity of the East and the West. As a corrective, Eisenstadt proposes the notion of ‘multiple modernities’ as a more effective means of evaluating encounters with ‘modernity’ outside the West.

Thus, today modernity as a theoretical construct constitutes a far more challenging issue to its critics and defenders alike than the earlier conventional theories of modernization. The notion of difference is quite essential to an understanding of the current notion of modernity, or more correctly, modernities. Contemporary thinking challenges the concealed Eurocentrism of conventional theories of modernization and refutes the hegemonic and homogenizing assumptions of Western intellectual dominance; it focuses rather on localized phenomena concealed from the West by many factors. This has led to renewed efforts to appreciate differing trajectories of contemporary socio-cultural development.

A quick glance at the historical literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would testify to the fact that the intellectual and institutional precursors to modernity in Kerala and Europe are significantly different. This fact highlights the need for redefining modernity in the Kerala context. In his article titled “The Intellectual Movements and Anti-caste Struggles in Kerala”, historian K.K.N. Kurup writes:

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century there had been an intellectual movement against the caste system and struggles for ameliorating its social evils. The intellectuals who had initiated a renaissance in the existing society were not western educated, but oriented with traditional knowledge.... In these struggles the native intellectuals had played a role of prominence and their teachings along with material developments in the society inaugurated major transformation (673)

Kurup’s words represent an attempt to emphasize the centrality of “traditional knowledge” and “native intellectuals” in materializing modern and progressive ideals in Kerala. In the case of Kerala, social reform movements led by leaders like Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan, Makti Thangal, Vakkom Moulavi, Kuriakose Elias Chavara,

Mannathu Padmanabha Pillai, V.T. Bhattathiripadu and so on had substantial role to play in inculcating modern outlook on matters of social life. Most of these reformers except a few like V.T. Bhattathiripadu belonged to caste groups considered lower in the social setting of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala and in contrast with their North Indian counterparts they have emphasized on the need for the abolition of caste system rather than the reformation of castes.

Modernity in Kerala achieved its full potential by engaging in critical dialogue with social issues like caste discrimination, untouchability, colonial oppression and so on. This indicates that post-colonial societies like Kerala can potentially open up new perspectives on the notion of modernity. At the same time, Kerala should not be taken as an unproblematised, unified entity; Kerala modernity is not a single, monolithic construct.

The Kerala Renaissance marks the era when certain traits of the new modern Kerala started to manifest themselves, animated by a spirit of rational inquiry combined with humanism. The organic intellectuals of the period believed in applying a spirit of rational criticism to all things including religion and politics.

Such ideological and intellectual transformation did not occur without serving a larger political function. They created profound disruptions in traditional social hierarchies as well as power and authority relations leading to democracy and the formation of a modern nation state.

Renaissance leaders perceived the liberating potential of modernity for freeing the historically oppressed and marginalized social groups from the injustice and exploitation by a centuries old hegemonic, patriarchal, caste-oriented feudal system.

The radical social reform movements led by leaders like Narayana Guru and Ayyankali challenged the conservatism of the caste-based social orthodoxy through counter-cultural practices. They rejected many discriminatory customs and social practices and advocated scientific rationalism over religious dogma. Also, nationalism, as an aspect of modernity, played a “liberating” role in Kerala society. The discourse of nationalism allowed the people of Kerala to imagine themselves outside their fixed identities and roles set by society based on caste, religion, region of birth and so on.

The socio-economic restructuring that occurred in Kerala under the impact of colonial capital and socio-religious reform movement led to the rise of modernity in Kerala. This also resulted in a significant re-evaluation of the idealized aesthetic of traditional literary forms. Renaissance literature marked a radical departure from previous literary practices and functioned as a subaltern social reform manifesto, bringing subalterns voice into the mainstream. Literature of the period served as counter-texts to the traditional Malayalam literary culture which had silenced the voice of the untouchable and rendered their presence invisible.

The emergence of anti-caste reform movement resulted in the inclusion of hitherto excluded social groups into the state's political and cultural process. The anti-caste social reform movements such as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha as well as the upper-caste reform movements such as the Nair Service Society, Namboothiri Yuvajana Sangham, Yogakshema Sabha and so on were vital for the creation and development of a democratic culture in Kerala. This also has substantially contributed to the inclusion of hitherto underrepresented social groups in the Kerala public sphere.

Thus, the Renaissance and reform movements contained the seeds of the institutional reforms that took place after the formation of the state in 1956. That is, modern Kerala is part of a continuum and the result of an ideological reorientation of the Kerala intelligentsia since the advent of the Renaissance period. This indicates the need for redefining modernity in the Kerala context and envisioning a Kerala modernity, responsive to and informed by the specificities and nuances of Kerala's cultural and political history.

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