

Literature as a Vehicle for Ideas: Indulekha and The Victorianization of Kerala Society

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Abstract

O. Chandumenon's *Indulekha*, published in 1889, is generally considered to be the first Malayalam novel. The book was a complete success. The first edition sold out within three months and the English translation was published within a year. By 1989, the 100th anniversary of the novel's publication, 72 reprints of *Indulekha* had been made. In 1889, the Malayalam-speaking region of India was divided into Malabar, ruled directly by the British under the Madras Presidency, and the princely states of Cochin and Travancore. *Indulekha* sold spectacularly in all three regions. The state of Kerala was only founded in 1956, but the concept of Kerala is at least as old as the *Raghuvamsha* of Kalidasa, where it is mentioned. My article attempts to analyze and evaluate *Indulekha* as a vehicle for Victorian ideas. The Kerala of 1889 in which the novel appeared was ripe for a socio-cultural revolution and *Indulekha* was both a product and a catalyst of this revolution. Queen Victoria's reign lasted from 1837 to 1901. She was proclaimed Empress of India on January 1, 1877 at the imperial Durbar festival in Delhi. The most valued values of Victorian Britain included sexual restraint, the glorification of family life and hard work. My article argues that *Indulekha* acted as a vehicle for transporting Victorian ideas to Kerala. First of all, the novel can be seen as a piece of propaganda for English classes. Madhavan, the hero of the novel, is passionate about

English education. The novel presents a contrast between the *sambandam* marriage, which was then almost universal among the *Nayars* of Kerala, and the monogamous marriage, which was the ideal of Victorian society, and valorizes the latter. Indulekha, the novel's titular heroine, escapes a *sambandam* relationship to marry Madhavan. As the narrative comes to an end, we learn that Madhavan has been appointed to the civil service. Instead of being an unemployed parasite in his *tharavad*, Madhavan decides to make a living. He marries Indulekha and goes to Madras, and one can read the trajectory of Madhavan's life as a movement from the joint family of *tharavad* in a village in Kerala to a nuclear family in Madras, the seat of the British presidential government.

Keywords – Malayalam Literature, Kerala Society, Victorian Values, English Education, Colonialism, Social Reform

Introduction

O. Chandumenon's *Indulekha*, published in 1889, is considered to be the first modern novel in Malayalam literature (Menon, 2010). Within just three months of publication, the first edition was completely sold out. Furthermore, an English translation by the author was published in 1890, indicating the novel's great popularity (Pillai, 2005). By its centenary in 1989, *Indulekha* had been reprinted in 72 editions, cementing its canonical status in Malayalam literature (Menon, 2010).

The novel managed to gain wide appeal in the Malayalam-speaking regions, which were divided between the directly British-ruled Malabar and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin in 1889 under the Madras Presidency (Lukose, 2005). It was only in 1956 that the state of Kerala was formed by uniting Malabar, Travancore and Cochin, but the sense of Kerala as a distinct cultural and linguistic region existed long before that. The Kerala region is already mentioned in the 4th century Sanskrit text *Raghuvamsha* by Kalidasa (Ayyar, 1938). Despite the political divisions of 1889, Chandumenon's novel managed to strike a chord in

British and princely Kerala by criticizing the social customs of the locals and offering a vision of progress and reform.

This article analyzes how *Indulekha* served as a literary vehicle for transmitting Victorian values and ideas into Kerala society against the backdrop of colonialism and impending social change. The hugely popular novel succeeded in triggering a revolutionary transformation of Kerala culture along the British-Victorian principles of morality and respectability. A product and catalyst of the socio-cultural upheaval in late 19th-century Kerala, *Indulekha* vividly illustrates the role of literature as a powerful channel for ideological change in colonial contexts.

The Context of 1889 Kerala

Kerala at the end of the 19th century was characterized by an extremely rigid and feudal caste system, with the Namboodiri Brahmins occupying the top position in the hierarchy. Among them were castes like the *Nairs*, *Ezhavas*, *Pulayas* and others (Menon, 1971). Among the *Nairs*, the tradition of matrilineal *Marumakkathayam* connection families, so-called *Tharavads*, was dominant. The *Tharavad* consisted of all members descended from a common ancestor in the female line and functioned as a self-sufficient economic unit with extensive land holdings (Panikkar, 1995).

Nayar women during this period practiced a form of loose marital alliance known as *sambandham*, whereby they entered into informal and permanent relationships with men from the Namboodiri or Nayar caste after reaching puberty. They continued to live in their natal *thavad* while the men visited them for marital relations, but did not assume financial responsibility for them or their children (Lukose, 2005). This fluid system of sexual alliances was inextricably linked to the *Tharavad* structure and matrilineal joint family patterns.

Politically, Kerala was divided in 1889 between the directly British-administered Malabar region and the nominally independent princely states of Travancore and Cochin.

However, Western colonial influence permeated all regions through channels such as Christian missionaries, English education, and the modernizing Kerala intelligentsia. Many Hindu customs such as *Sambandham* were attacked as regressive by both Christian evangelists and Hindu reformers (Menon, 1971). Missionary and government schools promoted English education with the aim of creating native employees and officials loyal to the British. Prominent personalities like V.K. Krishna Pillai urged Malay youth to abandon traditional occupations and take up government jobs instead (Lukose, 2005). Amid such calls for progress and reform, the novel *Indulekha* appeared in 1889, criticizing the orthodox practices of the Nayar and introducing new forms of social organization.

The Reign of Queen Victoria

Queen Victoria ruled the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1837 to 1901, a period that became known as the Victorian Age. She was declared Empress of India at the Delhi Durbar in 1877 after the British Crown formally took over the administration of India from the East India Company following the 1857 rebellion (McLeod, 2000).

Three core values that shaped Victorian morality in Britain were sexual restraint, family life and hard work (Helsing et al., 1983). Sexual restraint manifested itself in social attitudes that strongly opposed premarital sexual relationships, prostitution, and loose marital bonds such as mistress culture. The ideal was a lifelong, legally sanctioned monogamous marriage based on mutual love and companionship. The Victorian family unit with clearly defined gender roles was celebrated as a sacred institution (Davidoff & Hall, 2002). In addition, virtues such as industry, earnestness, self-improvement, and thrift were revered as part of a Protestant work ethic that viewed hard work and education as integral to both individual and national progress (Houghton, 1957).

These Victorian values and notions of respectability reached Kerala in the 19th century through various channels of imperial contact, such as Christian missionaries, British

administrators, and Western-educated Kerala intelligentsia who studied and worked closely with colonial officials. As Lukose (2005) notes, “the colonial encounter produced a discourse of social reform that was expressed in Victorian ideals such as monogamy, domesticity, and women's chastity and domestic confinement” (p. 6). Literary texts such as *Indulekha* also played a key role in transmitting Victorian morality to Kerala by strongly indicting and attempting to reform native customs such as *Sambandham*.

Indulekha's Promotion of English Education

A major theme running through *Indulekha* is the vigorous promotion of English education in line with colonial policies and the priorities of the time. The protagonist, Madhavan, makes impassioned speeches extolling the virtues of English education, declaring at one point: “It is my strong belief that English education alone can eradicate the social ills of this country” (Chandumenon, 2005, p. 23).

He argues that modern subjects such as science, history, philosophy and literature taught in English will help improve the intellect, morals and culture of Kerala society. Madhavan's own mastery of the English language, evident in his eloquent speeches and arguments, enables him to secure a coveted position in the civil service by the end of the novel. This confirms that teaching English is the path to lucrative employment and high social status.

However, the novel advocates the spread of English education not only for individual development but more generally for the moral and cultural improvement of society. English is portrayed as a carrier of reformist ideas, scientific thinking and progressive values that will help overcome Kerala's 'backwardness'. The protagonist, Madhavan, turns out to be a downright messianic champion of English education, which he sees as crucial to the renewal of local culture and society.

This enthusiastic maintenance of English-language education is consistent with colonial educational policies, which aimed to create a class of Indians capable of Western knowledge and capable of meeting the administrative needs of the British Empire. Madhavan's journey from enthusiastic student to civil servant reflects precisely this colonial agenda. The novel's powerful message about the power of English education to strengthen native society is also consistent with the Victorian emphasis on self-improvement through diligent study and mastery of the English language.

Criticism of Sambandham

Relationships one of the key ways Indulekha propagates Victorian values is through its scathing portrayal and criticism of traditional Nayar *sambandham* relationships. The protagonist, Indulekha, is trapped in a deeply unhappy *sambandham* marriage with the cruel and much older man Kalyanam, even though she secretly loves the handsome bachelor Madhavan.

To free herself from this oppressive connection, Indulekha writes in her diary: "I will marry the man I love and be his wife until death do us part" (Chandumenon, 2005, p. 46). She expresses her desperate desire for a recognized, legal marriage based on mutual love and a lifelong commitment to a partner. This idea of a morally sanctioned monogamous marriage is in direct contrast to the loose, informal norms of *sambandham* relationships that were common among *Nayars*.

By portraying Indulekha as a person who rightly loathes her *sambandham* and longs for a legitimate connection, the text validates her aspirations and criticizes *sambandham* as morally regressive. Monogamous marriage based on emotional bonds is elevated to the very ideal according to Victorian norms of gender relations, erotic life and domesticity. Indulekha's comments reinforce colonial criticism of native customs such as *sambandham* as licentious and uncivilized.

Thus, the novel combines a stirring romantic narrative about following one's heart with sharp social commentary denouncing Nayar marriage practices, all in keeping with Victorian ideas of morality, respectability and progress.

Madhavan's Embodiment of Victorian Values

The character of Madhavan serves as the ideal embodiment of Victorian morals and values throughout the narrative. He strongly rejects the stagnation of traditional Nayar family life in the feudal *Tharavad* or joint family system. Instead, he pursues a modern, English education that ultimately leads him to a prestigious position in the colonial government's civil service. Madhavan's intelligence, personal industry and mastery of the English language clearly distinguish him from the other Nayar men, who are portrayed as lazy, ignorant and rooted in outdated customs. He insists on entering into a formal, legal marriage with Indulekha based on mutual affection and a lifelong commitment, rather than simply keeping her as a temporary *sambandham* wife, as per tradition.

At the end of the novel, Madhavan moves to the colonial capital of Madras after securing the coveted position of deputy collector in the provincial civil service. This career path - from traditional family background to English education to government job - largely reflects the rise of the Western-educated Indian middle class under colonial rule. Madhavan's life path models all the core Victorian values of individual effort, secular occupation and nuclear family in direct contrast to the usual Nayar kinship patterns and occupations.

Overall, Madhavan strongly supports the colonial "civilizing mission" through his strong advocacy of enlightening English education and his reformist zeal for revising native customs. An ideal Victorian gentleman hero, his character legitimizes the moral superiority of British values and the need to reform Kerala society along Western lines.

Indulekha as a Catalyst of Social Change

Given the reformist climate that was brewing in Kerala in the late 19th century, O. Chandumenon's novel *Indulekha* proved extremely popular precisely because it actively propagated Victorian values and ideals. While the novel strongly indicted and ridiculed many indigenous customs, particularly Nayar marriage practices, it also accelerated revolutionary change by widely disseminating social ideas and morals modelled on British Victorian norms.

Several scholars have noted that ideas of progress, respectability and civilization inspired by colonial contacts were already circulating in Kerala, for example through Christian missionary activity, English-language education and Western-influenced intellectuals who pushed for social renewal (Lukose 2005, Menon 1971). *Indulekha* gave creative literary expression and impetus to these emerging attitudes. The character of Madhavan was an aspirational model for Malay youth who sought upward mobility in colonial institutions such as English schools and government jobs.

By granting Victorian morality the authority of a canonical literary text, *Indulekha* catalysed Kerala's broader socio-cultural revolution. It stimulated change by romanticizing progressive ideas that were already germinating through colonial channels. Although the novel itself was a product of larger historical forces, it further accelerated the rapid anglicization of Kerala in the areas of education, law, morals and social reforms.

Conclusion

This essay has analysed the sensational popularity and immense influence of O. Chandumenon's novel *Indulekha* when it was first published in 1889. The novel served as a highly effective literary vehicle to actively transport Victorian social ideals and morals into Kerala society, which was ripe for profound socio-cultural upheavals and reforms during this period.

Through various textual strategies such as critiquing indigenous customs, glorifying English education, and creating an idealized protagonist, Indulekha vigorously promoted colonial notions of progress, civilization, and social respectability. The novel helped spread ideas and values that were consistent with British Victorian morality and were already circulating in Kerala through colonial channels such as missionary work, English schools and Western-influenced intellectuals.

Indulekha powerfully demonstrates literature's immense ability to channel far-reaching ideological transformations by embedding rejected concepts in an entertaining narrative format. By romanticizing Victorian values, the novel catalysed Kerala's enthusiastic acceptance of Western morals and its desire to revise native practices that were considered backwards. The sensational popularity of this groundbreaking text underscores how fictional narratives can profoundly shape social reality as Kerala rapidly modernized under Indulekha's cultural revolutionary influence.

The analysis of this groundbreaking novel offers vivid insights into the complex workings of colonial discourse and cultural technology in 19th century India. It demonstrates the influential role of literature in spreading the colonial civilizing mission and reform plans by stimulating the reader's imagination. Indulekha is a testament to the power of stories to bring about far-reaching social change.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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