

Samuel Mateer's Libraries and the Weaving of Intellectual Life in Colonial Travancore.

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Abstract- Samuel Mateer emerged as a pivotal figure in the transformation of intellectual life in 19th-century Travancore through the establishment of reading rooms and libraries. Amidst a rigid caste hierarchy and traditional societal structures, Mateer recognized the essential role of accessible knowledge in fostering social progress. His initiatives were not merely about providing books; they served as vital platforms for education, community engagement, and social reform. By promoting literacy and critical thinking, Mateer challenged prevailing norms and encouraged empowerment among marginalized communities. Moreover, his multilingual reading rooms became hubs for diverse audiences, fostering inclusivity and dialogue among different social groups. Ultimately, Mateer's legacy endures as a testament to the power of knowledge in driving societal change and promoting human dignity in Colonial India.

Key words- Samuel Mateer, Reading room, missionaries, low caste education

Before European influence, the Kingdom of Travancore remained an impregnable stronghold, resolutely impervious to missionary incursions. Governed by an autocratic Hindu Rajah in concert with an entrenched Brahmanical priesthood, it served as a formidable bastion of orthodox and an uncompromising caste hierarchy.¹ British support against Tipu Sultan earned the gratitude of the Travancore² King, leading to an agreement that expanded British influence.³ Then, using this power, the British officials helped the missionaries come and work in Travancore, even though the local rulers had some initial worries. The arrival of Europeans, particularly the British, provided the foundation for the London Missionary Society's (LMS) work in India. Established in England in 1795⁴ with the aim of global evangelization, the London Missionary Society (LMS) began sending missionaries to various parts of the

world, including India. The LMS Society's interest in expanding to South India, especially the Tamil and Telugu areas, was prompted by invitations from prominent Danish missionaries in Tranquebar, Drs. John, Rottler, and Caemmerer (Senior).⁵ Vedamanickam's early embrace and propagation of Christianity ignited a spiritual movement in South Travancore, laying a foundational chapter in the region's modern Christian expansion. William Tobias Ringle Taube became the first Protestant missionary of the LMS to arrive in Travancore in 1806, marking a significant moment in the region's missionary history. This Protestant mission swiftly progressed, fostering a flourishing Christian community and representing a pivotal chapter in the origin and expansion of Protestant Christianity in Travancore. Indeed, as early as 1804, the pioneering efforts of W.T. Ringeltaube, his association with Maharasan (Vedamanikam), and the backing of the British Resident at the Travancore court, Colonel C. Macaulay,⁶ were instrumental in enabling Christianity to thrive in the region. In 1870, missionaries established the earliest reading room for all classes in Kotar. A considerable amount of work had already been undertaken by missionaries before the arrival of Samuel Mateer. However, concerning the historiography of libraries within the erstwhile Travancore, a paucity of awareness persists amongst the general populace. However, following his advent, he made significant contributions in various domains. Nevertheless, this article is confined exclusively to an examination of his role in establishing reading rooms in Kerala. Library development in Travancore gained significant momentum through the efforts of visionary individuals like Samuel Mateer, a name frequently appearing in the missionary records of Travancore. Recognizing the pivotal role of accessible knowledge for societal advancement, particularly within the context of 19th-century Travancore, Mateer embarked

on establishing Reading Rooms. These were not merely repositories of books; they served as crucial catalysts for intellectual growth and social reform within a society undergoing significant transformation influenced by missionary activities and evolving social structures. Understanding Mateer's contributions to these early reading rooms offers valuable insights into the intellectual landscape of Travancore during this transformative period, building upon the foundational growth of learning in Travancore.

Samuel Mateer was born in 1835 near Boardmills, Belfast,⁷ Northern Ireland, grew up in a Methodist household where he developed a strong commitment to Christianity. Initially working as a bookkeeper, at a linen and cotton manufacturing firm in Belfast, Ireland, where he gained expertise in muslin trade and manufacturing techniques.⁸ The young man, excited about his new Christian faith, wanted to help others. Endorsed by society, he undergoes rigorous training at a missionary college, likely in Bedford, England. He studied for the ministry at Belfast Academy and the old institution. In 1846, he received a license to preach. He immersed himself in the complexities of theology there, honing his expertise before catching the attention of the London Missionary Society. Bestowing upon him the mantle of a Christian missionary in South Travancore, the society dispatched Mateer on his journey, bidding farewell to his homeland on October 15, 1858,⁹ accompanied by his wife and three children. Their voyage culminated in Parassala, where he quickly mastered Malayalam and became a prominent figure in the region. He possessed an extraordinary command of Malayalam and Tamil, languages that few foreigners could master. Mateer's impactful ministry was characterized by his eloquent oratory and dedication to social justice, aligning with the Methodist emphasis on ethical living. In 1867, he published his first volume of Tamil sermons, followed by a Malayalam one in 1875.¹⁰ He edited a children's magazine for three years, creating botany lessons and various Tamil tracts.¹¹ Samuel Mateer's proficiency in Malayalam and Tamil served as a powerful bridge, enabling him to deeply connect with the people of Parassala on multiple levels. Furthermore, his ability to create educational materials in Tamil, particularly for children, demonstrates how his language skills empowered him to contribute meaningfully to the intellectual and moral development of the community, leaving a more lasting

impact than would have been possible without this linguistic gift. Throughout his career, he published three special works, including "The Land of Charity"¹², Gospel in South India,¹³ and "Native Life in Travancore,"¹⁴ documenting his experiences and the conversions he witnessed. Mateer contributed articles to renowned academic journals. For over half a century, Samuel Mateer diligently gathered materials on Travancore and its culture from diverse sources. Through his personal experiences and insightful observations, he unveiled the region's lesser-known past to the world, earning recognition as a distinguished LMS historian of Travancore—shining like a star in its historical narrative. The three books published by Samuel Matter in 1871, 1880, and 1883, respectively, stand as a testament to his remarkable academic achievements and intellectual prowess. In an article for the April 1884¹⁵ Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, he meticulously examined the socio-cultural significance of the Paraya caste, shedding light on their position within the region's complex societal structure. Before this, in 1883¹⁶ his work "Nepotism in Travancore" offered a comprehensive analysis of the Malabar Coast's intricate social hierarchy, dissecting the roles and relationships between Brahmans, Nayars, and lower castes, and also delving into the marriage customs prevalent among Malayalam Brahmins. These works provide invaluable perspectives on the social dynamics of the era. Each publication marks a significant milestone in his scholarly journey, reflecting both the evolution of his ideas and the depth of his expertise in his chosen field. As congregations and schools expanded, he focused on evangelism. Fluent in local languages and skilled in pastoral care, he delivered Christ's life lectures using innovative methods like lantern transparencies and musicians trained by his daughter. He also opened reading rooms, inviting high-caste Hindus to engage in Christian literature and discussions in a tranquil environment.¹⁷ He implemented innovative teaching methods and opened reading rooms to encourage dialogue with high-caste Hindus. His legacy includes not only the spread of Christianity but also a profound influence on education and community engagement in Travancore. In 1863, Mateer's headquarters became Trivandrum, while in 1866, Mr. Wilkinson took charge of Quilon. For the next twenty-five years, except during furloughs and temporary charge of Quilon, he was continuously in the Trivandrum district.¹⁸

During the 19th century, Travancore, a princely state under British colonial authority, experienced a tightening of existing caste discrimination, which fueled significant resistance from marginalized communities like the Nadars, whose Channar Lahala (1822, 1829, and 1858-59)¹⁹ marked a crucial moment in the burgeoning struggle for social equality and women's rights amidst the backdrop of colonial influences. It was almost impossible to change this situation for the lower castes without external help.²⁰ At the same time, the upper castes did not want such a change.²¹ European missionaries in Southern Travancore offered more than just a new religion; they brought the promise of improving the lives of the lower castes in this world. This "secular salvation" meant a chance to escape the rigid traditions that had kept them socially and economically oppressed for centuries. The initiatives of the London Missionary Society (LMS) were particularly important. Travancore faced severe social issues, including caste pollution, coerced labour (uriyam), and slavery tied to debt and rent. Evidencing this inhumane practice, an August 1800 proclamation in Ernad mandated the registration of land and the sale of Chermars, underscoring the existence of slavery within the community.²² According to missionary Abbs, enslaved people in Travancore faced extreme social isolation, cut off from their free countrymen for generations, making it difficult to trace the roots of their bondage.²³ Travancore unfolded during a period where the realities of slavery were starkly evident, as documented in the 1830 Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, and testimony from figures like Thomas Warden,²⁴ revealed that a hereditary system of slavery existed in Malabar, closely tied to the land itself. Warden described individuals as being born into servitude and essentially owned by the landowners. T. H. Baber's evidence portrayed slaves in Malabar as absolute property, akin to cattle, who were bought and sold and generally prohibited from owning land, with their owners claiming any possessions. He described their population as exceeding 100,000 and their physical appearance as indicative of a profoundly wretched and degraded condition.²⁵ Their detailed accounts and strong criticisms would have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the growing awareness and understanding of the inhumane conditions of slavery

in the region. Such evidence, presented to the British authorities, would have played a crucial role in shaping the discourse and building momentum towards legislative action against this practice. Therefore, while not the sole catalyst, their reports likely served as important pieces of evidence that informed the eventual steps taken towards the abolition of slavery. The abolition of slavery occurred gradually between 1854²⁶ and the 1860s marked a shift away from these practices. As the pioneering figures of the LMS work, Ringeltaube, Charles Mead, and John Cox spearheaded a significant transformation in the London Missionary Society's endeavours within Travancore. Historical analysis suggests that Reverend Mead's²⁷ educational contributions were foundational, extensive, and transformative to a degree that surpassed other Protestant missionaries. They likely introduced new strategies, expanded the mission's reach, and deepened its impact on the local communities during their pivotal time. Having the foundation established by earlier missionary efforts in Travancore, Mateer encountered a smoother path for his work. The advent of Christianity in the Nadar community fostered a paradigm shift, underscoring principles of egalitarianism and inherent human worth, concurrently cultivating a nascent esprit de corps and collective identity. Within the dominion of Travancore, the British administration manifested a relatively enlightened disposition, actively promoting societal amelioration and championing the elevation of marginalized castes. This discernible alteration in policy can be ascribed to a confluence of factors, notably the persuasive advocacy of Christian missionaries. Samuel Mateer, dedicated to the low caste communities, highlighted their suffering and degrading social status, emphasizing their lack of education and voice.²⁸ He pointed out the extreme restrictions on lower castes, such as being barred from public roads and courts, and the humiliation they faced daily. The significant efforts of missionary agencies towards the "social uplifting" of the local populations, framing their motives as inherently good and selfless ("truly laudable"),²⁹ highlight the role of Christian evangelism as a primary means to achieve this upliftment, noting the success in bringing many into the "fostering embrace of Christianity." It further articulates a goal of enabling these communities to approach more closely to high caste Hindus,

suggesting an aspiration to break down the rigid social barriers imposed by the caste system.

"Libraries serve as vital spaces for knowledge and discourse, fostering intellectual growth and social equality within communities. Unlike in the past when access to information was restricted to the elite,³⁰ modern public libraries embrace democratic principles, allowing individuals from all backgrounds to seek knowledge without racial or socioeconomic barriers.

This missionary method of establishing institutions like libraries and promoting Christian conversion to achieve social upliftment aligns with a philosophy rooted in Christian philanthropy and a belief in the transformative power of the Gospel and education.³¹ In 1826, missionary Mault reported 33 Readers submitting weekly activity reports.³² The 1864 LMS Juvenile magazine mentions native missionaries.³³ The arduous efforts of the catechists were duly noted in the London Missionary Society's journal of November 1875, which reported that 'on the whole, the catechists have laboured very hard. This dedication bore significant fruit, as evidenced by the remarkable growth of the Chani congregation, (Travancore) which had become the mission's largest, boasting a membership of 352 souls.³⁴ The prosperous state wasn't limited to Chani alone; other congregations such as those in Quilon, Parachaley, and Neyoor also thrived. The indigenous Christian pastors, known as *Upadeshis*, have toiled extensively under the auspices of the LMS, with luminaries such as Vedamanikam and Rev. C. Masillamani adorning their distinguished lineage. Unlike Europeans, native agents were fluent in local languages and culture, serving as educators in both Christianity and general education. This philosophy held that by introducing Christian principles and providing access to knowledge, particularly through literacy and reading, individuals from marginalized communities could be empowered spiritually, intellectually, and socially, thereby challenging the existing hierarchical structures of Travancore society, including the rigid caste system. While external missionaries provided the initial spark, the enduring prosperity and deep integration of Christianity in regions like Travancore were primarily achieved through the dedicated efforts of indigenous *Upadeshis*. Their linguistic fluency and cultural understanding made them uniquely effective in empowering local communities spiritually and

socially, leaving a lasting legacy of faith and progress. Missionaries played a vital role in developing and promoting the Malayalam language. Developing Gutenberg's printing press³⁵(1436), Christian missionary John Gonsalvez created the Malabar types in 1577, which spurred the evolution of Malayalam printing and the establishment of various presses starting in 1811, including those of the London Missionary Society in 1820 and the Christian Missionary Society in 1821. The Portuguese, among whom were Jesuit missionaries,³⁶ were indeed the first to introduce the printing press to India, setting it up in Goa in 1556, significantly predating Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg's³⁷(German Missionary under the patronage of the Danish King) arrival with a printing press in Tanjore during the 18th century. This earlier introduction by the Portuguese marked the initial foray of printing technology onto the Indian subcontinent. This could have included establishing printing presses,³⁸ translating texts (like the Bible), and developing educational materials. Numerous pioneering initiatives, including the establishment of the earliest English educational institution, the advent of the inaugural printing press, and the publication of the first newspaper,³⁹ pioneers of Western or English education and also pioneers in Female Education,⁴⁰ can be attributed to the profound and multifaceted influence exerted by missionaries.⁴¹ Charles Mead made a significant contribution by establishing the first seminary and, importantly, the very first printing press in Travancore, which was located in Nagercoil, all in the year 1820.⁴² In 1820, during a visit to Tanjore, Mr. Mead obtained a printing press and materials from the Tranquebar Mission Press to start printing in Travancore. He hired an experienced printer named David Adiappen (Thávitthoo Maistry) to operate the press and train students at the Industrial School, considering the press a vital part of the missionary establishment.⁴³ Printing presses were later established at Nagercoil, Neyoor, and Quilon.⁴⁴ Displaying remarkable initiative, Mr. Benjamin Bailey taught himself type-founding and, utilizing local craftsmen, created superior and cost-effective Malayalam types, even training an orphan boy as the head printer, thereby overseeing the entire process of translating and printing the Scriptures(1821)⁴⁵. The establishment of the first Malayalam printing press by Christian missionaries marked a significant milestone, leading to a well-established tradition by 1879 when Reverend

S. Mateer's hymn book⁴⁶ was printed by the C.M.S press for the Trevandrum (Trivandrum) Tract Society. This growth in Malayalam printing, supported by government and private presses, greatly increased the availability of reading materials, contributing significantly to literacy and the spread of knowledge in Travancore, with missionaries playing a vital role in this progress. The Nagercoil Mission's congregations in 1842⁴⁷ featured Bible classes accessible to all who could read, with some individuals showing significant progress in both reading and understanding scripture, finding joy in the process. Believing biblical knowledge to be the key to the community's betterment, the mission prioritized these classes. George Christie's⁴⁸ native teacher recounts being appointed a Moopen and supported by Abbs to dedicate himself to learning, progressing from illiteracy to reading the New Testament with ease within two years. This personal account demonstrates the rapid acquisition of literacy and engagement with religious texts among individuals within the mission's sphere. Yesudian,⁴⁹ despite being illiterate, memorized numerous catechism questions and exemplified a strong desire for his family's spiritual guidance through biblical teachings. Another native convert observed that the English Missionaries had come to do us good by sowing the seed of spiritual life.⁵⁰ This effort was crucial in standardizing and expanding the use of Malayalam, missionaries specifically empowered those in enslaved castes to use the Malayalam language. In a society where literacy and access to knowledge were often restricted based on caste, this was a revolutionary act. By using the Bible as a tool for education, missionaries provided access to reading and writing, essentially unlocking a world of knowledge and communication that was previously forbidden. The Bible, in this context, served not just as a religious text but as a key to social empowerment for these communities, the Bible was more than just a religious book. It was an instrument of social change, a tool for gaining literacy, and a source of empowerment that had broader implications beyond religious belief. This could have led to increased self-awareness,⁵¹ the ability to engage with new ideas, and a challenge to existing social inequalities. The Christian community actively promoted literacy through Bible reading and Sunday schools, offering education to low-caste converts often excluded from traditional systems. Their desire to

understand their faith and seek better employment further motivated them to learn.

Drawn by the opportunity to serve marginalized communities, Mateer was particularly focused on the socio-economic conditions of the Shanar, Paraya, and Pulaya castes, who faced immense discrimination and hardships under the prevailing caste system. His background in theology and his experience within missionary circles cultivated a strong desire to not only convert individuals to Christianity but also to empower them through education and social reform. Mateer's impactful thirty-three years in Travancore, marked by dedicated service, significant literary contributions about his adopted land, tireless work with the poor, and the respect of all classes, left a lasting legacy.⁵² Mateer viewed knowledge dissemination as a crucial catalyst for social change, believing that education was essential in uplifting oppressed communities and enabling them to transcend their marginalized status. He recognized that access to knowledge could empower individuals, enabling them to assert their rights and break free from the shackles of caste discrimination. Through his efforts to establish schools and promote literacy, Mateer sought to instil a sense of agency among the converts, equipping them with the tools necessary for informed decision-making and active participation in society. His understanding of knowledge as a transformative force was not limited to mere academic learning; he believed in fostering moral values and spiritual awakening, underpinning the belief that true liberation could be attained through both education and the teachings of the Gospel. This holistic approach greatly influenced the social dynamics of the communities he served and left a lasting legacy in the region's religious and social landscape.

His profound connection with books wasn't merely a personal affinity but a driving force behind his mission to establish reading rooms across the region. This makes him a foundational figure, effectively the forerunner of today's librarians, as he single-handedly initiated and nurtured the reading system in Travancore. His work laid the groundwork for broader access to knowledge and played a crucial role in the intellectual and social development of the community. Libraries became important in Travancore with the work of Samuel Mateer. He realized that having access to books was key for people to learn and grow. So, Mateer started reading rooms in Travancore. These

reading rooms helped people gain knowledge and played a role in the social changes of that time. Learning about the libraries started by Mateer helps us understand the history of Travancore.

"The Juvenile Magazine" (1870)⁵³ an article by Rev. James Duthie provides a valuable parallel and forerunner to Samuel Mateer's work in promoting literacy through reading spaces in Travancore. Missionaries established this reading room a few months ago for people of all classes here. Rev. James Duthie's writing explicitly states the aspirations for the Kotar reading room, revealing the underlying motivations of these missionary initiatives in Travancore. The aim was clearly to create a welcoming space for diverse audiences ("all who wish") to engage with knowledge through lectures and reading materials in multiple local languages (Tamil and Malayalam) alongside English.⁵⁴ This multilingual approach underscores the missionaries' efforts to connect with the local population on their terms.

Beyond just literacy, the description of the reading room as a potential "centre of light in that large town and neighbourhood" reveals a clear evangelistic purpose intertwined with the educational goals. These reading rooms were not only intended to disseminate knowledge but also to introduce Christian perspectives and values. Finally, the direct appeal for donations of books and pictures⁵⁵ highlights the resourcefulness and reliance on external support in establishing and maintaining these institutions, offering a glimpse into the practical aspects of promoting education and their religious message in Travancore during this period.

While Mateer's article (1891) focused on the LMS efforts in Trivandrum, Duthie's account highlights a similar initiative by missionaries in Kotar, South Travancore, a region also within the sphere of LMS activity. The description of a newly built reading room "for the use of all classes of people" echoes the underlying goal of making knowledge accessible, a principle evident in Mateer's establishment of reading rooms in Trivandrum as well. Furthermore, the support from His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore and other native officials for the Kotar reading room indicates a broader acceptance and encouragement of such educational endeavours within the local society, mirroring the potential positive context in which Mateer operated his reading rooms in Trivandrum. The establishment of reading rooms was a more

widespread phenomenon driven by missionary efforts in Travancore during the latter half of the 19th century, with Samuel Mateer being a significant contributor to this movement.

Samuel Mateer played a pivotal role in promoting literacy and spiritual education through various initiatives, including significant events such as the annual presentation of Scriptures at the Free Reading room in Trivandrum. On July 1st of (1883),⁵⁶ Mateer organized a meeting in collaboration with the Bible and Tract Societies, inviting graduates and undergraduates from Madras University to attend. The event attracted nearly 150 participants, including notable guests like H.H. the Elaja Rajah of Travancore and other European dignitaries.

During the gathering, Mr. John T. Mateer delivered an engaging address highlighting the importance of the Bible and its relevance in contemporary society. Accompanied by Mr. E. J. Parker, who performed Gospel solos as part of their evangelistic tour, the young audience demonstrated close and respectful attention to the proceedings. Following the address, copies of Scriptures and companion volumes were distributed, with the participants receiving them with enthusiasm and appreciation. Rev. V. Moses later took on the responsibility of further distributing the remaining books to students, ensuring that those who could not attend the meeting still had access. Through events like this, Mateer not only facilitated access to religious texts but also reinforced the importance of knowledge and literary engagement in transforming societal norms and empowering individuals across different communities in Travancore.

He started a public lecture hall and free reading room in Puthenchantha in 1884. Rev. V. Moses, a local LMS pastor, was in charge of the reading room. Samuel Mateer's initiatives extended beyond just establishing libraries; he actively engaged in broader evangelistic and educational efforts. One significant endeavour was the construction of a lecture hall in Travancore, which he envisioned as a centre for evangelistic work and a venue for frequent lectures focused on religious teachings. As he noted, "We shall have frequent lectures (mostly directly religious and evangelistic) ... a great centre for evangelistic work." This hall served as the foundation for the Puttenchanda Bible Association, where multitudes of people—including many from the Mohammedan (Muslim) community—gathered to hear about the teachings of Christ.⁵⁷ At

times, the attendance reached as high as 300 people, demonstrating the growing interest from various communities. The Free Reading room is overseen by a native minister, who, along with the support of catechists, other Christian volunteers, and occasional missionary visitors, conducts services for both Hindu and Muslim communities every Sunday and Wednesday evening. This inclusivity highlights the reading-room's commitment to fostering interfaith dialogue and community engagement. Attendance at these services can vary widely, ranging from as few as thirty participants to a full-capacity crowd. While the atmosphere is generally serene and devoid of controversy, there have been instances where tensions surfaced, reflecting the diverse and sometimes polarized views among attendees. Such episodes underline the challenges faced in promoting open discourse within a multi-religious context. Overall, the reading room not only serves as a hub for literary engagement but also as a venue that attempts to bridge cultural and religious divides, embodying the principles of inclusivity and understanding that are essential to community building in Travancore.⁵⁸ These meetings, held twice a week, were attended by prominent community leaders and reflected the increasing readiness of the populace to engage with new spiritual ideas. This holistic approach, emphasizing empowerment through knowledge found not only in religious teachings but also through access to libraries and educational resources, solidified his mission and highlighted the essential role of educated discourse in fostering societal change in Travancore. In the July 1888 edition of the LMS Missionary Chronicle,⁵⁹ Samuel Mateer authored an insightful article discussing the establishment of a free reading room in Travancore. Accompanying his narrative is a woodcut illustration that vividly depicts the interior of the reading room, highlighting its purpose as a space for knowledge and community engagement. Samuel Mateer's article on the establishment of a free reading room in Travancore also appeared in "The Juvenile," a magazine aimed at the young audience of the London Missionary Society, in its seventh issue (No. 7).⁶⁰ This dual publication not only reinforces the significance of Mateer's message across different audiences but also illustrates the vital connection between missionary work, education, and the promotion of human dignity in the 19th century.

The Free Reading room in Trivandrum, which stands at a strategic location along a busy thoroughfare connecting the fort—home to notable landmarks such as the palace, the great temple, and Brahmin houses—with the public offices and courts. This prime location ensures a steady flow of patrons, reflecting its significance as a community space.⁶¹ The facility features a reading room and lecture hall that spans around fifty by twenty-two feet, offering seating for about 250 individuals, with additional capacity for those willing to stand outside due to the design of its walls, which rise only four feet high. The roof is supported by pillars, creating an open and inviting atmosphere conducive to learning and engagement. This reading room serves not only as a repository for literature but as a venue for public lectures and discussions, embodying the spirit of intellectual growth and civic engagement in Travancore. In addition to regular services, the Free Reading room also hosts occasional lectures in English covering a wide range of interesting topics.

Furthermore, the reading room organizes magic-lantern lectures, which not only serve to entertain but also educate attendees about significant themes such as the life of Christ and other Scripture subjects, fostering a deeper understanding of religious narratives among participants. Periodically, the reading room observes a special mission week dedicated to evangelistic efforts, during which several mission agents collaborate to enhance outreach and engagement with the community. These initiatives highlight the reading room's role not just as a place for reading and reflection but as a vibrant centre for education and spiritual discourse in Travancore. Accessed through a door in the corner, the Bible and Tract Society Depot⁶² serves as a vital resource for the community, maintaining a wide array of Scriptures available in various languages. This depot also features a collection of English and vernacular books, school materials, and informative pictures designed to engage and educate visitors. The clerk assigned to the depot plays a crucial role in facilitating meaningful interactions with patrons. Always approachable, the clerk is prepared to engage in conversation, read the Scriptures with those seeking understanding, and address any questions or concerns that may arise. This personalized assistance helps cultivate a welcoming environment, ensuring that individuals can explore their spiritual inquiries and deepen their knowledge of

religious texts. The meeting room is meticulously prepared to facilitate evening gatherings, equipped with comfortable benches, tables, lanterns, and a clock and bell provided by local supporters. The ambience is further enhanced by portraits of notable figures such as the Queen Empress, the Prince of Wales, Dr. Waring, and various missionaries like Moffat and Williams, showcasing their contributions to the cause.⁶³ Adorning the walls are sheet almanacs, maps, Scripture texts, and a variety of pictures, creating an inviting atmosphere for attendees. Additionally, the room houses a library of approximately 300 volumes in both English and vernacular languages, offering participants a wealth of knowledge to explore before or after meetings. The flexible design of the space allows for the swift clearing of reading-room furniture and papers, ensuring the area can be readily adapted for community discussions and engagements in just a few minutes. The room features a dedicated space for engaging with Scripture and other literary works, with one table displaying a selection of Bibles in various languages, including Tamil, Malayalam, Canarese, Telugu, and Hindustani, alongside English revised versions, notes, and commentaries. Another table is stocked with an array of newspapers, magazines, tracts, and books, available in both English and local languages, promoting a rich environment for learning and reflection. All clean and well-mannered individuals are warmly invited to enter and read at their leisure. This inclusive approach has proven popular, with nearly 8,000 readers taking advantage of this opportunity. Additionally, the room has hosted ten lectures, attracting a total of 1,860 attendees, highlighting its role as a hub for education and community engagement.

After use, the papers are moved to a smaller reading room located in the country congregation of Neyyattinkara, (Neyyattinkara).⁶⁴ Mateer expresses a strong desire to establish one or two additional reading rooms in various regions, aiming to expand the circulation of these valuable books and publications. He warmly welcomes contributions, particularly illustrated papers, from friends and supporters to aid in the growth and enrichment of this beneficial institution.

On March 25th, 1889, a significant milestone was celebrated in the realm of literacy and community engagement in Travancore with the inauguration of a new Free Reading Room, established in connection

with the London Mission at Neduvengad (Nedumangad) near Trivandrum.⁶⁵ The event drew a diverse assembly of approximately eighty local inhabitants, including Brahmins, Sudras, and officials, who gathered at the mission chapel to partake in this momentous occasion. Mr and Mrs Samuel Mateer graciously welcomed the attendees and guided them to the newly opened reading room, which, although modest in size, was described as neat and clean, adorned with framed pictures, and furnished with tables laden with newspapers, magazines, and books in English, Tamil, and Malayalam. This thoughtful setup reflected Mateer's commitment to creating an inviting environment for learning and information sharing. During the ceremony, Mateer delivered an address in Malayalam, highlighting the significance and popularity of reading rooms both in England and India. He referenced the historical context of similar establishments in Trivandrum and Neyyattinkara, acknowledging the support from the local Talisildar, who donated the woodwork for the facility, and local contributors who facilitated the construction of the building. Mateer expressed hope that this small yet impactful beginning would lead to greater usefulness in the future, fostering a culture of reading and engagement within the community. The celebration further featured musical interludes by the Mission Band, who performed Christian hymns and, to the audience's delight, concluded with the Malayalam hymn "God Save the Rajah."

On November 19th, 1890, a significant event occurred in Quilon⁶⁶ with the inauguration of the Free Reading Room, facilitated by Rev. Samuel Mateer. This gathering was met with an enthusiastic response, drawing an impressive crowd of around 270 local attendees, including the beautifully dressed children from the Caste Girls' School and several European visitors. The event was presided over by C. R. Vernede, Esq., the Conservator of Forests, setting a tone of community support and administrative backing. The ceremony commenced with a prayer led by Rev. Mateer, who took the opportunity to share the progress made in establishing similar reading rooms in places such as Travancore and Nagercoil. He acknowledged that the funding for this project was generously collected by Knowles from friends in England, highlighting the international support for local educational initiatives.

A key focus of the Free Reading Room is to promote the spread of religion. To this end, Bibles in several languages were to be made available to the community. Furthermore, Rev. Mateer announced that meetings would take place every Wednesday evening aimed at Divine worship and elucidating Christianity to both Hindus and Mohammedans, (Muslims) fostering a spirit of inclusivity and understanding among different faiths.

Mr. Nagam Aiya, B.A., Dewan Peishcar, addressed the attendees next, emphasizing the positive impacts of missionary work in Travancore and the importance of literature and popular education. He generously contributed a Madras newspaper, committing to continue sending it as long as he remained in the district, further enhancing the resource pool of the reading room. In addition, the native missionary, Rev. C. Samuel, delivered a concise address in Malayalam to accommodate attendees who did not understand English, exemplifying the commitment to inclusivity in this initiative. Musical interludes provided by the Mission Band, featuring native Christian songs, enlivened the event, culminating with the singing of “God Save the Maharajah” in Malayalam to close the meeting on a high note.

Later that evening, Rev. Mateer delivered a lecture titled “Scenes from Various Lands,” which was illustrated by a magic lantern and attracted an audience of over 500, with nearly half being Mohammedans (Muslims). However, it was noted that due to a shortage of sufficient personnel in Quilon, the vital opportunities for engagement and discourse currently available in Travancore, such as those led by Rev. V. Moses, could only be conducted weekly.

In Mead’s time (1792-1873), the Manalicaud Church minister defied norms by admitting a slave boy to school. Recognizing its impact, Mead introduced financial incentives for enrolling enslaved children and prioritizing girls.⁶⁷ This policy led to over a thousand enrollments in Neyoor’s Christian schools, marking a pivotal step in education for the marginalized. In an 1891 LMS journal article, Mateer detailed the London Missionary Society’s very long years of work in Trivandrum. He highlighted their mission compound with several schools, including an Anglo-vernacular school for 82 boys receiving Bible instruction and a Pulayar school funded by Dr. Waring that provided rice and a Sunday service. The establishment of the LMS Pulayar Charity School in

Trivandrum in 1861⁶⁸ stands as a testament to the missionaries’ commitment to the upliftment of marginalized communities. This initiative provided crucial educational opportunities for Pulayar children, who had historically been denied such access, especially considering their recent emancipation from slavery.⁶⁹ The school’s financial sustainability, supported by the Travancore government’s grant of rice and the interest from a significant Endowment Fund largely invested by Dr Waring, highlights the collaborative effort and importance given to this endeavour. Mateer emphasized the importance of their free reading room on a main thoroughfare for evangelizing Hindus and Muslims, attracting around 800 monthly readers and serving as a depot for religious texts.⁷⁰ He also mentioned valuable Sunday and Wednesday meetings for these groups and the work of a Bible-woman in the area.

Samuel Mateer, driven by his religious belief in human equality, actively opposed the deeply rooted caste slavery in Travancore within the context of Colonial Modernity. He likely established schools, advocated for the poor, created libraries, and crucially, wrote about the issue, raising awareness in India and abroad. Mateer’s early guidance inspired William Fletcher’s liberation songs⁷¹ and Moses Walsalam Sastriyar’s impactful music and advocacy for education in Travancore.

The LMS Lecture Hall and Free Reading Room at Puthenchanda, Trivandrum, Neyoor Victoria Jubilee Reading room, Free Reading room Quilon, Free Reading room Marthandam was open daily except Sundays, as noted in the Travancore Almanac and Directories of 1893,⁷² and 1911.⁷³ In them, I H. Hacker in 1893 and H.T Wills Esq as manager are mentioned and a page is dedicated to the name of European missionaries and native pastors.⁷⁴ The library functioned there at Puthenchantha as attested in the Almanac of 1923 and 1934.⁷⁵ There were several mission stations at that time Nagercoil, Tittuvilei, Neyoor, Paraychaley, Trevandrum, Quilon, Nagercoil, Dennispuram, Weravilei, Neyattinkara, Agasteeswaram, Santhapuram, Sionpuram, Devikodum Kadamalakunoo, Amaravila, Nelikakuli.⁷⁶ The reading room existed until the first half of the 20th century, but later that part was rented out to The Educational Supplies Co. There was a case up to the Supreme Court regarding the vacation of the building, and after the verdict and eviction, a multi-

storied building (CSI Building, Puthenchantha) was constructed under the supervision of Engineer J. C. Alexander.⁷⁷ The Bible and Book Depot, which had been operating on the ground floor since Mateer's time, continued to function there. A few decades ago, the book depot was relocated to the LMS compound. Later, the CLS Bookshop (Christian Literature Service), which is the successor of the Madras Tract Society mentioned earlier, operated there for some time. After it closed down, a photo studio is currently operating there on rent.

Missionary writings played a crucial role in documenting the experiences of lower castes in Travancore, where literacy was limited among these communities. These records not only preserved their narratives but also illuminated their struggles and aspirations. By accessing literacy—the "world of words"—entering public spaces, adopting clothing previously reserved for upper castes, and constructing new homes with missionary support, marginalized groups took significant steps toward social mobility and empowerment. Missionaries actively collected information about the lives of enslaved castes, demonstrating a deliberate effort to understand and document the social realities of the time. In this sense, these writings can be viewed as the "first library" before the formal establishment of libraries in Travancore. Though not a library in the modern sense—with organized cataloguing and public access—these accounts served as an early repository of knowledge. They made information about marginalized communities accessible to both local and external audiences, ensuring that their histories, struggles, and progress were recorded rather than lost to time. Mateer's establishment of schools for marginalized communities like the Pulayar (former slave caste) can be seen as providing education, support, and dignity to the "least of these." This aligns with Jesus' teaching that caring for the vulnerable is equivalent to serving him directly, exemplified by the rice grants and Sunday services offered to the low-caste community. Mateer strongly criticized the Travancore administration for systematically denying access to government-run schools for native Christians, even when they appeared "decently clothed and cleanly"⁷⁸—a standard that typically ensured entry elsewhere in British India. Mateer's criticism of the discriminatory policies practised by the native government of Travancore against native Christians—

particularly those who were formerly from lower castes and had converted to Christianity. Although Mateer speaks generally of "native Christians," it becomes evident from the context—especially his emphasis on exclusion from district schools and lack of representation in public services—that he is referring primarily to low-caste converts. These individuals, after embracing Christianity, were still denied access to government institutions such as schools and civil service positions, even though they were expected to be treated equally in a Christian framework. Mateer's indignation over their exclusion ("a crying shame and a serious blot upon the administration") underscores the persistence of caste-based prejudice, despite religious conversion. He draws a contrast with British India, where such exclusion was less pronounced, advocating that Christians in Travancore—who formed a significant portion of the population—deserved fair and equal treatment in education and public employment.

The first public library initiative in Kerala began in Travancore in 1836 (or potentially earlier in 1829⁷⁹ according to later reports). Initially conceived as a private club with English books, the Trivandrum Public Library Society was formed in 1847, with its foundation stone laid in 1849. Key figures included Sri Swathi Thirunnaal and Col. Edward Cadogan, the first president. After advice from Grigg, it registered as the Travancore Public Library Society in 1894 and was taken over by the government in 1898, becoming a truly public library with the merger of the People's Library in 1899. The new library building was completed in 1902 and was well-organized with a membership fee and a system to track book availability. The Public library was then known as Trivandrum People's Library and Reading Room mentioned in several Almanac.⁸⁰ In 1886 it was called the People's Library⁸¹ and in 1898 this institution was opened to the public. Later it was called the Public Library.⁸² In the year 1958, the Trivandrum Public Library was declared as 'State Central Library.

While the Public Library in Trivandrum (est. 1836) likely excluded lower castes due to the rigid social hierarchy (slavery ended in Superintendent, Government Press, Trivandrum, 1925, p. 168. 1854), Mateer's libraries, though open to lower caste Christian converts, strategically targeted higher castes for conversion. Both illustrate how caste and religious

aims controlled access to knowledge in 19th-century Travancore.⁸³ Even as late as 1925, the Legislative Assembly reported that nearly 70% of Pulaya and Paraya children were out of school, urging immediate state action.⁸⁴ Drawing upon the efforts of Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, the Vaikom Satyagraha(1925)⁸⁵, much like the earlier approaches of missionaries, underscores the deeply rooted caste discrimination of that era, yet simultaneously signifies a powerful and growing movement for social justice. Therefore, labelling it a truly 'public' library might be inaccurate considering the social context of the time. Missionary reading rooms in Kotar (c. 1870), Puthenchantha (1884), Neyyattinkara, and Kollam served a dual purpose of promoting literacy and facilitating Christian evangelistic work amongst various communities. LMS reading rooms established in the late 19th century marked a significant turning point in Kerala's library history. Likely motivated by the exclusive nature of the Trivandrum Public Library, which initially served only the elite, the LMS initiatives in Trivandrum, Quilon, and Vadassery became the first truly open public libraries in the region.

To the slave-castes, interaction with missionaries and learning from them were moments of salvation. Missionary Christianity was found to offer an alternative worldview to the oppressed slave castes in Kerala. Despite the established hegemony of indigenous libraries and educational forms over the upper caste elites in Travancore, the educational

interventions spearheaded by Protestant missionaries exerted a pervasive influence across the entirety of the region. This impact extended beyond the traditional confines of existing knowledge structures, shaping the intellectual and social landscape of Travancore at a broader level. It can be asserted with considerable confidence that the democratization of education owes a significant debt to missionary institutions, whose foundational role in extending educational opportunities to marginalized populations cannot be overstated; absent their interventions, vast segments of society may well have remained excluded from formal learning, underscoring their pivotal contribution to social upliftment. Thus, for many among the oppressed, access to missionary education was akin to a key unlocking door previously sealed by caste and tradition, opening pathways to dignity and empowerment. And so, in a land where social barriers erected by a rigid caste system left an entire community in the darkness of ignorance, Mateer poignantly highlighted the question, "For who would be found willing to teach or even to approach the impure one?"⁸⁶, a new chapter began. Driven by their belief in a compassionate God, missionaries dared to cross those lines, offering the light of education and the promise of a better future to the long-neglected low-caste people, marking a significant turning point in their history. This enduring legacy continues to shape the pursuit of knowledge and social justice in the region today.

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