

Victoria Maharani: Queen Victoria and the Princely State of Travancore

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IN 1931, M. R. Madhava Warriar (1893–1952) wrote *Victoria Maharani*, a biography of Queen Victoria in Malayalam.¹ Warriar was a lawyer by profession and, later, editor of the newspaper the *Malayali*. An activist for responsible government in the princely state of Travancore and eventually a freedom fighter, Warriar published his biography in the last year of the reign of the then maharani regent, Sethu Lakshmi Bayi (r. 1924–31). In the preface to his work, Warriar explains that he has written the biography for the women of Kerala and because a proper biography of Queen Victoria does not yet exist in Malayalam. This article will survey works from Kerala related to Queen Victoria and will situate Madhava Warriar's biography against the backdrop of early twentieth-century Travancore. It will draw on threads related to the position of women on the Malabar coast, the actions of the maharani regent, and the political and social climate at the time of her reign. It will also consider the relationship between the qualities of Queen Victoria praised in *Victoria Maharani*, reforms instituted by Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, and the reputation of both in Travancore.

1. A CONGRESS MAN'S VICTORIA

M. R. Madhava Warriar was an advocate, journalist, editor, and freedom fighter. Born in Chengannur and educated at the University College in Thiruvananthapuram and at the University of Bombay, he practiced law in Kollam and Chengannur.² He also participated in the debates related to the Vaikom Satyagraha (a protest discussed later in this article), wrote letters to Gandhi about inequality in Kerala, and became treasurer of the Travancore State Congress (TSC). In 1938, when the TSC submitted a memorial demanding responsible government and the

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removal of C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer as *dewan* (head of the government of Travancore from 1936 to 1947), Madhava Warriar was a signatory.³ His work as an activist for change in Travancore also made him the target of violence in the late 1930s, when he and another editor were attacked for their alleged critique of the government of the day.⁴

So why would an activist and journalist publish a biography of Queen Victoria in Malayalam in 1931 in the princely state of Travancore? In the book's preface, Madhava Warriar lays out his motivations clearly—he hopes the biography will be beneficial to the women of Kerala toward emulating and cultivating positive qualities embodied by the queen. He also expects the work to provide a history of England to a Malayali readership.

I respectfully place before the eyes of Malayalis this brief account of the biography of Queen Victoria, Empress of India. Not only in her role as empress, but also as a virtuous jewel of a woman, the life of the great Queen Victoria is exemplary. Readers can also grasp the history of England from the very long life history of the Queen. If the biography of Queen Victoria, who is rich ground for good qualities such as strong religious faith, moral awareness, fondness for family, honesty, and freedom from ostentation, is beneficial to the noble women of Kerala, I will be satisfied. I have brought together in this work all the important events so that the biography and the history of England will be properly known. I have composed this work to remedy the lack of a proper biography in Malayalam of Queen Victoria, the first empress in the world.⁵

Madhava Warriar published his biography of the queen in the heat of the civil disobedience movement and in the midst of notable communal tension in Travancore. The remainder of the paper will discuss the relationship between Warriar's vernacular biography of Queen Victoria, the rule and character of Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, and the position of women on the Malabar coast.⁶

2. SETHU LAKSHMI BAYI AND THE MATRILINEAL LINE OF TRAVANCORE

The maharani of Travancore at the time that Madhava Warriar wrote *Victoria Maharani* was Sethu Lakshmi Bayi (1895–1985), the senior rani and regent of Travancore (1924–31) until her nephew, Sri Chitra Thirunal, came of age at nineteen. Sethu Lakshmi Bayi and her cousin the junior rani, Sethu Parvati Bayi, were adopted into the Travancore royal family when they were very young in order to preserve the matrilineal line. Within months of leaving their family home, three members of

the royal household passed away, and Sethu Lakshmi Bayi at the age of five was installed as the senior rani of Travancore.⁷ Her education in the palace included lessons in English, Malayalam, and Sanskrit as well as topics related to high culture in Europe such as music, painting, and etiquette. Sethu Lakshmi Bayi's great uncle, Kerala Varma Valiya Koyil Thampuran (1845–1914), the widower of Rani Lakshmi Bayi (1848–1901), served as her guardian during this time. Kerala Varma was a great academic and poet, visionary for the development of the Malayalam language and Malayalam literature, and advocate for educational reform in Travancore. His wife, Rani Lakshmi Bayi, was appointed to the Order of the Crown of India by Queen Victoria in 1881, in large part due to the strength of character, willpower, and devotion to her husband that she displayed during their extended separation.⁸ Kerala Varma himself was also recognized by Queen Victoria by being admitted into the Order of the Star of India in 1895.⁹

3. AS ALBERT TO VICTORIA SO RAMA VARMA TO SETHU LAKSHMI BAYI

Sethu Lakshmi Bayi married Rama Varma, the younger nephew of Kerala Varma, in 1906, though it was Sethu Parvati Bayi who gave birth in 1912 to a male heir who would eventually succeed Sri Mulam Thirunal.¹⁰ When Sri Mulam Thirunal passed away in 1924, the position of maharaja of Travancore was supposed to pass to Sri Chitra Thirunal, but as he was too young to rule at the time, a regent needed to be installed in his place. Historian Manu Pillai explains that, perhaps anticipating the potential complexities of such a situation for the princely state of Travancore, Sri Mulam Thirunal corresponded with Viceroy Lord Chelmsford to set the terms of the regency. In particular, he reminded Chelmsford of the law of matrilineal inheritance in Travancore and suggested that the choice of regent be “confined to the surviving ‘senior female member in the ruling family.’”¹¹ In contrast to precedent for regencies in North Indian princely states, the regent would not be the mother of the minor but instead would be the senior rani of Travancore, Sethu Lakshmi Bayi.

The princely state that the maharani regent inherited was riddled with social and political unrest that centered on issues related to caste and communal tension. She had to reckon with an increasingly active Indian National Congress, which was present in the region from the early 1920s onward.¹² She also witnessed the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25), which was a protest against *untāṭal* or distance pollution and the

prohibition of *avarna* communities from using the four roads surrounding the temple at Vaikom.¹³ Moreover, her desire to protect the reputation of the royal family, and the prince consort in particular, led her to actions that elicited fierce backlash. Rama Varma was ambitious in the early years of her reign and perhaps gave the appearance of being overly involved in matters of governance.¹⁴ The press focused on this behavior, leading the maharani regent to institute the Travancore Special Offences Regulation in 1925, which made it an offense to speak or write words of contempt against members of the ruling family, their consorts, or the representative of the paramount power.¹⁵ A year later, she autocratically instituted the Press Regulation Act of 1926, which gagged the press. The manner in which Sethu Lakshmi Bayi instituted the act led to debate in the Legislative Council, widespread protest beyond, and the creation of an All-Travancore Political Association devoted to seeking responsible government.¹⁶ Such public backlash eventually forced Rama Varma to retreat into the background.

Histories of Sethu Lakshmi Bayi repeat the notion that while Rama Varma did not openly engage in acts of rule, he was adept at influencing the maharani regent's position on matters of governance. In fact, these accounts of Sethu Lakshmi Bayi often compare their relationship regarding matters of state to that of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.¹⁷ For example, literary scholar Lakshmi Raghunandan and historian Manu Pillai both quote portions of a character sketch crafted by O. M. Thomas during the maharani regent's reign. Thomas explains in the preface to a compilation of his works that he wrote a series of "pen pictures" with the title "Under the Knife" for a Malayalam weekly published out of Kottayam.¹⁸ In the sketch for Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, Thomas describes the character and interests of Rama Varma, which include his dignified and affable disposition and skills in hunting and horsemanship. He then compares the Valiya Koyil Thampuran's position to that of Prince Albert.

His position, no doubt, is not an easy one, for he appears in the conflicting roles of husband and subject of her Highness at the same time. He is ever conscious of the line of demarcation between his privileges as royal partner and his duties as loyal citizen. This perplexing situation will tax any man's mental alertness. He may take a leaf out of the book of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, who were a wisely ordained combination. The Prince was reputed for his first class brains, but he never interfered with the affairs of the State. Well-informed students of British politics, however, hold that Prince Albert discreetly influenced the Queen's policy, especially in foreign affairs in the complexities of which he was well posted by reason of his

Continental birth and associations. In Travancore we are not concerned with higher diplomacy. We are only confronted with the pressure of the parish pump. The Valia Koil Thanpuran [*sic*] has a restricted field in comparison with his Anglo-German prototype. It enhances rather than diminishes the delicacy of his position. Of all the subjects of the Maharani-Regent, he must be the most interested in the unqualified success of her Highness's rule; we can rely on that interest to steer him clear of the rocks and shoals which beset her course.¹⁹

While the sphere of influence for Rama Varma may have been narrower than that of Prince Albert, both Raghunandan and Pillai are clear about its significance on Sethu Lakshmi Bayi's reign. Perhaps in contrast to Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, Rama Varma was compelled to demonstrate subtler advisory influence on Sethu Lakshmi Bayi as her reign progressed, whereas Prince Albert's popularity in the eyes of the public seemed to grow with time.

4. QUEEN VICTORIA IN THE LANGUAGES OF THE MALABAR COAST

Given that the relationship between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert has been woven into narratives about the maharani regent and Rama Varma, it is important to outline the works related to Queen Victoria that were produced on the Malabar coast in the period leading up to Sethu Lakshmi Bayi's rule and to the publication of *Victoria Maharani*. This bibliography includes titles in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and English, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they tended to emerge at the time of the queen's jubilees. Historian Miles Taylor has listed four biographies of Queen Victoria in Malayalam, spanning 1887–97, but they have not been located up to now.²⁰

Among related titles, we must also include the works in verse in the cosmopolitan languages of the time. These works were produced toward the end of the nineteenth century at a time when literati were enmeshed in the project of *bhāṣāpariṣkāraṁ*, the modernization of *bhāṣa* ("language"), often used to refer to Malayalam, the vernacular language on the Malabar coast.²¹ In addition to other things, this project was devoted to developing new print genres in Malayalam, theorizing good prose and poetry, and crafting genealogies and histories of the language. It also posited the relationship between Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil, and English, and established protonationalist roots in the region. One of the key actors of this movement was none other than Sethu Lakshmi Bayi's guardian, Kerala Varma. He was the first president of the

Bhashaposhini Sabha (“the Society for the Development of Bhāṣa”), which began in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and was the head of the textbook committee too. K. M. George highlights the traditional and modern impulses in Kerala Varma, who simultaneously advocated for Western education and the production of prose works inspired by English models, while also arguing for the maintenance of Sanskrit’s heavy influence on the production of poetry in Malayalam.²² While an important figure in the project of language reform, he was also a Sanskrit scholar deeply invested in the Sanskrit literary practices of the Malabar coast. As such, the poetic works in celebration of the queen and of British rule during this period, which were produced by Kerala Varma and the literati who surrounded him, were crafted in Sanskrit.

A Jubilee Tribute to Her Most Gracious Majesty Victoria the Queen-Empress (1887) was produced for the occasion of the queen’s golden jubilee and contains three poems in praise of Queen Victoria. The first is a Sanskrit poem called “Śrīvhikṭoriyācaritasamgrahaḥ” (“A collection of the deeds of Victoria”) in an auspicious 108 verses by Kerala Varma. He crafts an English preface to the work in which he explains why he wrote it. In the same way that Madhava Warriar hopes his Malayalam biography of the queen will benefit the women of Kerala, Kerala Varma also hopes that young girls studying Sanskrit will benefit from learning about her life. Indeed, he is careful to note that the work is not for the “Sanskrit-reading public” but is aimed at girls specifically. He writes, “As he [the author] was reading Mr. Barnett’s ‘Life of Her Majesty Queen Victoria,’ (to which excellent work he is indebted for the facts alluded to in the notes,) it occurred to him that the main features of so noble a life, if embodied in Sanskrit stanzas of simple diction, might exert a beneficial influence on the minds of the girls of this Coast who generally study Sanskrit in their early years. His object, therefore, is not to excite admiration, but simply to serve the above purpose.”²³ The second poem in the tribute, “Śrīvhikṭoriyācakravartinīguṇamaṇimālā” (“The necklace of virtues of the Empress Victoria”), is 59 verses. The author of the poem is only noted in the final verse as Ganapati Kavi, which is a reference to the celebrated Sanskrit scholar and friend of Kerala Varma, T. Ganapati Sastri (1860–1926).²⁴ The third poem in 51 verses at the end of the tribute is “Pañcāśatpūrtipañcāśikā” (“Fifty verses on fifty accomplishments”), by Kerala Varma’s nephew and star pupil, A. R. Rajaraja Varma (1863–1918), who at the time was himself still a student pursuing his BA in Thiruvananthapuram. A. R. Rajaraja Varma also provides a short preface to the work expressing that his chief aim in presenting it

to the public is “to show his deep loyalty and deference to the great Heroine.”²⁵

In 1901 the lineage of great scholarship and literary talent passed down from Kerala Varma to A. R. Rajaraja Varma manifested in a lengthy Sanskrit *mahākāvya* (“great poem”) on the British Empire called *Āṅgalasāmrajyaṃ*.²⁶ In 1910, a Malayalam translation with the same title was crafted and published by the important poet, composer, and friend to A. R. Rajaraja Varma, K. C. Keshavapillai (1868–1914).²⁷ In 2008, Sanskrit scholar K. H. Subramanian published a study on *Āṅgalasāmrajyaṃ*, in which he details the contents of each canto from the birth of the East India Company during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, to the proclamation of Queen Victoria as empress of India in 1877, until the last canto entitled “Sāmrajya Siddhi” (“Founding of the empire”). The sections related to Queen Victoria’s rule are concentrated at the end of canto 22 through the final canto 23 and document the transfer of governance to the queen, her proclamation and its reception, her title of empress and the related celebrations, and her golden and diamond jubilees in 1887 and 1897, respectively (137). Subramanian notes that in the preface to the work, A. R. Rajaraja Varma says that *Āṅgalasāmrajyaṃ* “owes its birth to the enthusiasm I felt at the general *rejoicing* of the Diamond Jubilee, which transported me all of a sudden, to the haunts of the Muse” (122). Subramanian also explains that A. R. Rajaraja Varma relied upon four historical accounts written by the British to construct the historical narrative (124). Unsurprisingly, then, Subramanian makes the claim that the use of foreign sources, as well as A. R. Rajaraja Varma’s own royal background, accounts for the commemorative tone that pervades the historical narrative in the work (164).

At the very end of the nineteenth century, when the zeal for English-language learning was at a high, S. Ramanath Aiyer produced an English poem called “Jubilee Leaves” in honor of Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee. In contrast to the courtly coterie producing poetic works in Sanskrit, the publications by Aiyer that follow this poem are prose works in English on the history of Travancore. “Jubilee Leaves” was published in 1897 by the Western Star Press and is dedicated to Marthanda Varma, nephew of then-reigning Sri Mulam Thirunal.²⁸ In the preface, the author unpacks his thinking on the relationship between science and poetry. He writes that they are “closely allied friends” and that “in whatever light the question may be viewed, Poetry makes sure, absolutely and securely sure, of its high and independent position, in a very striking manner. And above all it is the foundation of India’s

nationality in all periods of her history.”²⁹ Aiyer carries the tension between science and poetry into his laudatory poem for Queen Victoria. He praises the queen, England, and Victorian thought using familiar tropes, positing that they offer light where there is darkness, science where there is myth, and culture in contrast to nature. At the same time, he is careful not to discredit the intellectual and creative output and achievements of Indian poets. Instead, as he suggests in the preface to his work, science, as representative of England, and poetry, as representative of India, are indeed “closely allied friends.”

5. VICTORIA MAHARANI

In 1931, M. R. Madhava Warriar departs from earlier poetic works on Queen Victoria and produces *Victoria Maharani*, a prose biography in Malayalam. Warriar’s work is not an exact translation but is largely based on Sidney Lee’s *Queen Victoria, a Biography* (published in 1902 and later revised in 1904).³⁰ Lee’s biography is organized into forty-nine chapters, which Warriar collapses into thirty-six. Though Warriar reduces the precise number of chapters, the chapter titles, organization of biographical themes, and details in each are very closely aligned. For example, both texts progress predictably and chronologically through the life of the queen, with Warriar translating or adapting the English chapter titles into their Malayalam counterparts (e.g., “The Tuition of Lord Melbourne” becomes “The Position of Lord Melbourne as Guru”).³¹ Periodically, Warriar consolidates chapters, as is the case for Lee’s chapters 22 and 23, “India and the Princess Royal” and “The Resettlement of India,” respectively.

As mentioned previously, Warriar has both documentary and didactic intentions for the work—he wants to document the life of Queen Victoria and the history of England for a Malayali readership, and he also wants the life story of the queen to be enriching for the noble women of Kerala.³² Considering the political and communal unrest in Travancore at the time of publication, as well as the Congress’s policy of noninterference in the princely states,³³ Warriar’s sweeping aim to edify the noble women of Kerala raises the question of whether the biography was actually aimed at one of the noblest of them: Sethu Lakshmi Bayi. Indeed, the chapter that details the queen’s position on India and the one that outlines her character suggest that Warriar’s biography may have been a subtle form of literary activism in the form of a “mirror for princes.”³⁴

Warrier's chapter 20, entitled "India and the Princess Royal," stays remarkably close to the wide range of topics covered in Lee's biography, weaving from family-related concerns to larger political and military ones, including the 1857 Uprising in India. Taking into account both what he includes and excludes from the passages related to India, Warrier's narrative highlights the assertiveness of the queen regarding the Uprising of 1857 and the transfer of power to the Crown, as well as an overall caring approach to her subjects in India. However, he chooses to abbreviate several points included in Lee's biography, particularly regarding the dynamics between the queen and Palmerston, the specifics of Crown rule, and the queen's demand for religious toleration and respect for Indian customs that were essential to her proclamation.

The Uprising of 1857 forms a relatively small portion of the chapter itself. Warrier writes, "From the time that the queen heard about the sepoy riot in India, she urged the cabinet ministers that [they] must crush it immediately. At that time, the people objected that the queen had gone to Balmoral Castle to dwell in comfort. However, on September 10th the news arrived in England that [they] captured Delhi, the rioters' camp, and that Lucknow was protected" (67). Later in the chapter, Warrier returns to the uprising in order to detail the transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown and to outline how Queen Victoria asserted her power as monarch:

Parliament thought that the authority of the East India Company should be withdrawn as a result of the rebellion in India and that the right to rule should be given to the Crown. The queen was boundlessly happy in becoming the empress of India. However, the queen was not fully satisfied in accepting the role of empress in name only. The queen informed Lord Derby that the Crown must have authority to appoint officers in India and to control the army. Lord Derby objected that it was difficult to accept these requests and that if the queen's insistence became excessive, he would resign [his] position. Without any other option, the queen signed the bill for reform of Indian rule on August 2nd, 1858. Without much delay, a proclamation in the name of the *mahārāṇi* was also announced. (68–69)

In the final paragraph of the chapter, Warrier further valorizes the queen and her care for India during this period:

The queen was sympathetic to Indians. It is the *mahārāṇi* who stopped the ministers' effort to severely punish Indians after the sepoy revolt. The queen had written to Viceroy Lord Canning in December 1857 that the English do not have ill will toward Indians who have brown skin and that

she was happy in seeing them content and prosperous. The arrogance of the English had been fully revealed in the draft of the proclamation. Victoria herself had made various alterations to it. Moreover, the queen arranged the title the “Order of the Star of India” and bestowed honors on Indian kings and important officers who aided the British government at a time of peril. Reform of Indian rule created pride for the queen and for England. It is when India came under the rule of the queen that England really became an empire. (69–70)

Warrier’s version of history places Queen Victoria, in contrast to “the English,” as a person of honor and goodwill toward her subjects. While we know that, historically, Queen Victoria was an advocate of increased military presence in India to bring an end to the uprising, this version credits her with blocking the cabinet’s desire for violence. It also recognizes her input on the final version of the Government of India Act as well as her effort to implement the Order of the Star of India to recognize loyalty to the queen by Indian princes. Also of note in Warrier’s narrative is the lexicon that he uses to refer to Queen Victoria, including *rāṇi* (“queen”), *mahārāṇi* (“queen”), and *cakravarttini* (“empress”). In the examples just noted, Warrier uses *rāṇi* more than either of the two other terms, and a larger sample would be needed to fully consider whether he is distinguishing between *rāṇi* and *mahārāṇi*. However, his use of *cakravarttini* for the events of 1857–58 is notable, both because Lee does not use “empress” in this section of the biography and because Queen Victoria did not receive the formal title until 1877. This suggests that her legacy prevailed in popular memory despite the discrepancy in dates.

The final chapter of Warrier’s work, entitled “The Queen’s Position and Character,” illuminates readers on the queen’s style of governance, her disposition and interests, her dress and behavior, and her praiseworthy qualities. As such, the chapter is reminiscent of earlier Malayalam prose works aimed at edifying women in Kerala, such as the novel *Indulekhā* (1889), by O. Chandumenon, in which readers also learn about the physical, educational, and behavioral attributes of the heroine. The key difference in Warrier’s biography is that his heroine is not aspirational—she is a woman who actually lived, and not just any woman, but a ruler. The learn-by-example, didactic quality of the work thereby takes on greater import because it signals the possibility that the book was meant to speak to the *rāṇi* of a later time, the maharani regent. Moreover, at the same time that Warrier celebrates the positive qualities of the queen, he does not (and perhaps cannot) represent her as a perfect ideal because the documentary import of the genre of biography

presupposes a striving for historical accuracy. Nevertheless, there are moments when Warrier puts his own editorial spin on Lee's narrative.

Covering familiar ground, the chapter explains that even though, as monarch, Queen Victoria did not have real responsibility and power in matters of governance, her character and methods gave her a certain position regarding administrative matters. In particular, Warrier points out that, "Although the queen did not have a particularly strong intellect, her persistence, mental and physical vigor, and her feeling nature are well-known" (123). Indeed, Warrier highlights the way in which she gave her full attention to reading papers and related correspondence regarding governance and that, after understanding the cabinet's position in relation to the common good, she would declare her own opinion on any matter. Warrier also points out that Queen Victoria always ruled in accordance with the law, even in times when her ministers ignored her wishes and opinions.

Warrier also focuses on Queen Victoria's approach to care for others, remarking on her regular practice of traveling to foreign lands, her boundless love for children, and her concern for the well-being of humans and animals alike. Warrier details the queen's interests and aspects of her royal persona. He says that her pastimes included sewing, playing cards, singing, and drawing. While she did not care much about the fine arts, she had a natural taste for music and a fascination with drama. She was also an avid reader who consumed some piece of literature every day. He says that her dress was simple, but her way of moving was royal, and he explains that the defects of her simple dress and shortness of height were remedied by her leadership.

Warrier concludes the chapter with a paragraph that praises all the good qualities that he sees in Queen Victoria, and while he mentions her attention to public matters, her religious sensibility, and her moral virtue, he is particularly focused on her position regarding women's rights. He writes, "At that time, there were not a lot of women as honest in all matters as the queen. Her attunement to public affairs was admirable. The queen's religious understanding was simple. Her moral virtue was also praiseworthy. Victoria [also] did not adhere to the opinion that women should have all the freedoms that men do. She even opposed widow remarriage" (125). Importantly, Warrier opens the passage by refashioning the part of Lee's biography that is devoted to the queen's position on obsequiousness into a generalization about women's capacity for truthfulness. Lee writes, "Always frank and absolutely truthful in her own written or spoken words, she desired to be addressed in the same

spirit by all who came into personal intercourse with her; and the fear that statements made to her represented what the speakers believed she would like to hear, rather than what was precisely true, caused her frequent annoyance.”³⁵ The emphasis on women and the specific qualities of Queen Victoria in the passage support Warriar’s intent to edify by signaling what he valued about the queen as a ruler and as a woman, namely her honesty, attention to public affairs, religious sensibility, moral virtue, and position on women’s rights. With this in mind, we can turn to the question of how this relates to the ruler of Travancore at the time and to the status of women along the Malabar coast.

6. WOMEN AND REFORM ON THE MALABAR COAST

Words used by her dewans to describe the maharani regent include descriptions of her as statesmanlike, able, good, wise, sympathetic, possessing good judgment, calm courage, and a serene soul.³⁶ She reigned at a time when Victorian values and the example of Queen Victoria as a monarch were well known to the elite of Travancore in part through the influence of the Malayali authors described earlier in this article. The reforms that the maharani regent understood to be critical for her life and times were certainly informed by the reign of Queen Victoria a generation before, and as such, she sought to fashion a Travancore that diverged from the past to seemingly offer more opportunities in the future by fostering individual initiative and rights.³⁷

It is almost impossible to read narratives of nineteenth-century Kerala without an allusion to *marumakkattāyam*, or matrilineal property inheritance, a practice that is a distinctive feature of the region’s history and is often upheld as an example of how this part of the subcontinent offered women more freedom than much of the rest of India. Communities that followed *marumakkattāyam* also engaged in *sambandham* (in contrast to marriage) and resided in a joint family home called a *taravāṭa* in which the senior female member of the household held significant power. A *sambandham* also often offered more flexibility to both partners than the way that one may think about formal marriage during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—either party could dissolve the partnership, and the couple often did not reside in the same household. This practice came under great scrutiny in the latter part of the nineteenth century, particularly in Malabar (the only part of Kerala that was part of the Madras Presidency), when reformers promoting Victorian values and morality were attempting to refashion

sambandham as formal marriage through legal reform, thereby unsettling the existing system.³⁸

At the end of the nineteenth century, as *marumakkattāyam* was under review in Malabar, O. Chandumenon published one of the first novels in Malayalam called *Indulekhā* (1889). The first social novel in Malayalam, the work centers on a young Nayar woman from a matrilineal household who falls in love with her cousin, Madhavan, and who resists a *sambandham* with a Nambuthiri Brahmin man, thereby going against accepted practice. The educational pedigree of Indulekha is of central importance to the novel and to her capacity to choose a love match over a *sambandham*. She is educated in both English and Sanskrit, reads the newspaper and recites Sanskrit *śloka*, and her exterior beauty matches her interior intellect and spiritual grace. In an epilogue that accompanied the first edition of the novel, Chandumenon explains that young women should be educated in English just as young men are. He notes that a Sanskrit education is not enough, that knowledge outside of *śṛṅgārarasam* (“the sentiment of love”) comes from studying English, and that doing so is how women will gain independence and an awareness that they are the equal of men. In fact, Chandumenon credits Indulekha’s ability to select a love match to the courage and steadfastness that she received through her education.³⁹ Moreover, the novel proposes a path for a new generation of English-educated young men in the character of Madhavan, who leaves the confines of the joint family home to pursue a university education, returns to Kerala to marry his beloved, and all leave for Madras where he will start his new profession in government service. As the first Malayalam novel to capture the language spoken in the homes of Nayar communities in Malabar and to comment on a topic of great debate at the time, *Indulekhā* was part of the larger work of modernizing the language to suit modern fashions mentioned previously in this article.

Manu Pillai explains that the power Sethu Lakshmi Bayi held in her position as maharani regent relied on the history of matrilineal law on the Malabar coast and in Travancore specifically. In fact, she employed this logic to argue for her right to rule singularly and with full authority when she assumed the role of maharani regent. Her regency stood in contrast to those in other parts of colonial India, where regents served as part of a council of regency that included other leaders of the region and ensured that too much power was not concentrated in the hands of an individual serving only temporarily. Furthermore, regents were not able to make major legal or constitutional changes.⁴⁰ But the matrilineal

tradition of the Malabar coast put Sethu Lakshmi Bayi in an altogether different position. She judiciously argued for the right to rule as other women rulers had before her in Kerala. “A few days after Mulam Tirunal’s death,” Pillai writes, “the incumbent Resident, Mr. C. W. E. Cotton, called on the Rani to discuss her Regency government and other imminent matters. For all her previous trepidation and reluctance with regard to ruling, Sethu Lakshmi Bayi now, when it came to it, more than rose to the occasion. She pointed out her anomalous position in Travancore, citing that as per matrilineal law, she was now the head of the family and ought to rule in her own name and right.”⁴¹

The description of the strength with which Sethu Lakshmi Bayi argued for her right to rule without the aid of a regency council, and her intention to be more than a figurehead, is not unlike the description in Warriar’s biography of Queen Victoria at the time that the right to rule became invested in the Crown. The queen was also not content to serve only as a figurehead, and she clarified her expectations regarding more direct responsibility and authority on certain matters related to India. At the same time, it is difficult to read Warriar’s narrative regarding the right to rule and not reflect on the political movements for responsible government that were increasing in Travancore during this period, often in response to perceived overreaches by the royal family.

In the same way that Warriar’s biography seems to hold together the contradiction within Queen Victoria as powerful woman monarch and staunch critic of women’s rights, Sethu Lakshmi Bayi’s assertion of the power of her royal position on matrilineal grounds may seem in tension with reform of *marumakkattayam* during her reign. Yet by the time she became regent, legislation to reform matrilineal property inheritance was already in place, and it was looked upon as necessary and important for promoting individual rights and equal opportunity for economic advancement. Robin Jeffrey explains that the Travancore Marumakkattayam Act of 1912 “recognized *sambandham* as legal marriage (thus going some way towards satisfying the ideological pressure for ‘respectability’) and gave an intestate man’s wife and children legal right to half of his self-acquired property.”⁴² And it was under the maharani regent’s rule that the Travancore Nayar Act of 1925 was passed, which allowed *taravāṭa* members to demand their joint family property shares as a right.⁴³ The change from matrilineal to patrilineal property inheritance was popularly supported by matrilineal women in Travancore, who felt ideological pressure to conform to systems of monogamy and patriarchy and simultaneously desired the ability to

pursue salaried employment as a supplement to the family's income and position.⁴⁴ T. K. Vellu Pillai explains that the reform promoted notions of individual rights but had dire repercussions on the economic lives of the impacted communities, who often received a share too small for profitable cultivation.⁴⁵

Moreover, investment in education over the previous decades was also creating a class of educated individuals who were not gaining the positions in government employment that they thought their education would provide. This can be noted in the addresses of the dewans of Travancore from the 1920s forward. For example, T. Raghavaiah (dewan 1920–25) argued that the heavy focus on bookish learning made young men unsatisfied with their old environments and disappointed at the loss of their hopes for government employment. He saw practical or vocational education as a solution. M. E. Watts (dewan 1925–29) agreed that technical training needed to be promoted and argued that a progressive railway policy and electric and water supply schemes would open up fresh avenues of useful service.⁴⁶

Importantly, at the same time that these reforms were happening in Travancore, thereby seeming to institutionalize patriliney and strengthen patriarchy, so too was the continued promotion of education for women and the appointment of women into public service in a variety of departments. The maharani regent promoted early twentieth-century notions of progress for her subjects, especially when it came to reforms related to women. For example, she abolished the devadasi system during her regency. She also appointed Dr. Mary Poonen Lukose as surgeon in charge of the Women and Children's Hospital, Trivandrum, and gave her a seat on the Legislative Council.⁴⁷ Like Rani Lakshmi Bayi in 1881, the maharani regent was admitted to the Imperial Order of the Crown of India in 1929.⁴⁸ In a 1929 speech for the right of married women to seek gainful employment outside the home, feminist and eventually judge Anna Chandy remarked: "What scourge has overtaken the country because Shrimati Chinnamma and Mrs. Lukose, well known for admirable social service and prowess in the medical sciences respectively, have tied the knot? We are gathered here today to celebrate the birthday of the respected regent Maharani of Travancore. Does not her exemplary life announce that women with children can perform both maternal and public roles with remarkable competence?"⁴⁹ Dewan V. S. Subramanya Iyer (dewan 1929–32) reflected on such reforms in 1930.

For a long time now women have been employed in the Medical and Education Departments. In recent years there has been a demand that qualified women should be employed in other departments as well. A resolution moved at a recent meeting of the Legislative Council that women should be more freely recruited into the public service was withdrawn on a favourable assurance by the Government. I am glad to be able to say that something has been done to redeem the pledge by the appointment of women as clerks and typists in the Anchal Department, the High Court, the Office of the Land Revenue Commissioner, the Account Office and the Secretariat. It is, one might say obviously, quite in the fitness of things that this expansion of the scope of women's work in the public service should come while the country is being ruled by Her Highness the Maha Rani Regent.⁵⁰

Indeed, in contrast to the position noted in Warriar's biography that Queen Victoria did not hold the opinion that women should have the same freedoms as men, the reforms ushered in during the maharani's regency created space for women's employment based on educational achievement, even if only in support of a revised notion of family and incrementally at the time.

7. CONCLUSION

Warriar's Malayalam biography of Queen Victoria was a contribution to the literary landscape of Kerala at a time when Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, as maharani regent, was tasked with bringing continued progress to the people of Travancore. He offered readers the picture of someone navigating life both as a woman and a ruler. The values that Warriar details regarding Queen Victoria—honesty, attunement to public affairs, moral awareness, fondness for family, and freedom from ostentation—are also qualities he hoped to impart on the women of Kerala as matriliney was giving way to new ways of being. Moreover, Warriar crafts a picture of Queen Victoria as a monarch who is strong, benevolent, and recognized the limits of her own power. Read in relation to the reign of Sethu Lakshmi Bayi and the complex political and social climate of Travancore during the time, one may conclude that the biography was also intended to be a mirror for princes. We may never know whether the Sanskrit, English, and Malayalam works on Queen Victoria were part of the education or private reading of this elite member of the royal household, but there can be no doubt that the Victorian ideals which flourished in the generation before her time influenced the notions of progress that were advanced during her brief but important reign.

NOTES

1. Up to now, I have not been able to fully confirm that the author of the text is the same M. R. Madhava Warriar who was a freedom fighter and editor. However, it is likely the same person given that he wrote novels during his lifetime, wrote works on health and religion, and was well connected within literary and publishing circles. Warriar had a major interest in *prākṛticikitsa*, or naturopathy, and published an essay on the topic in a work called *Upaṇyāsamāla*, which was produced in 1932 by the same publisher (K. G. Paremesvaranpillai) and publishing house (Sriramavilasam Press) as *Vikṭoriyāmahārāṇi*. See Rāghavan, “Oru Kālaghaṭṭattinre Dhīra Śabdaṃ.”
2. Warriar, “About.”
3. Chatterji, *Towards Freedom*, 2871–72.
4. Alexander, *Through the Corridors of Power*, 71.
5. Mādhavavāryar, *Vikṭoriyāmahārāṇi*, mukhavura. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
6. I would like to thank Siddharth Satpathy for his invaluable comments on the structure of the article.
7. Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 46–55.
8. Bruce, *Letters from Malabar*, 81; A Malayallee, “The Late Mr. Kerala Varma,” 316–17. For more on their extended separation, see Ramakrishna Pillai, *Visakhavijaya*, 152, 156.
9. Great Britain and India Office, *The India List*, 138.
10. Raghunandan, *At the Turn of the Tide*, 43–49.
11. Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 93–98, 129–30.
12. Kumar, *Political Evolution in Kerala*, 119–21.
13. For more on *ṭiṇṭal* in Kerala, see the following: Hutton, *Caste in India*, 79–80; Samuel, *One Caste*, 26–27.
14. Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 204–24.
15. Raghunandan, *At the Turn of the Tide*, 192–93.
16. Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja*, 116.
17. Raghunandan, *At the Turn of the Tide*, 221; Thomas, *Under the Knife*, 68; Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 204, 222.
18. Thomas, *Under the Knife*, vi.
19. Thomas, *Under the Knife*, 67–68.
20. Taylor, *Empress*, 288.

21. For more on language reform in Kerala, see Arunima, “Glimpses from a Writer’s World,” 189–214; Arunima, “Imagining Communities—Differently,” 63–76; Arunima, “Writing Culture,” 271–90; Ambrosone, “Language Reform in 19th-Century Kerala”; Paramēśvarayyar, *Kēraḷasāhityacaritraṃ*.
22. For more on Kerala Varma’s role in the modernization of Malayalam, see Chaitanya, *A History of Malayalam Literature*, 167–69; George, *Western Influence*, 114–16; Paniker, *A Short History*, 53–54.
23. Tampuran, preface to “Śrīvhiṭṭoriyācaritasamgrahaḥ,” *Jubilee Tribute*.
24. Tampuran, *Jubilee Tribute*, 13, verse 59. See also Kunjunni Raja, *The Contribution of Kerala*, 257, where Kunjunni Raja attributes “Cakravartinīguṇamaṇimālā” to T. Ganapati Sastri.
25. Tampuran, Preface to “Pañcāśatpūrtipañcāśikā,” *Jubilee Tribute*.
26. Rajaraja Varma, *Āṅgalasāmrājyaṃ*.
27. Subramanian, *Kerala Panini and Sanskrit Works*, 125. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
28. S Ramanath Aiyar, *Jubilee Leaves. A Poem.*; and S Ramanath Aiyar, *Jubilee Leaves, and Other Poems*. The dedication refers to Aswathi Thirunal Marthanda Varma.
29. S Ramanath Aiyar, *Jubilee Leaves, and Other Poems*, ix.
30. Lee, *Queen Victoria*.
31. Melbōṇ Prabhuvinṇe Gurusthānaṃ.
32. Warriar uses *mahilakaḷ* (“women” or “noble women”) in the preface, in contrast to *stṛīkaḷ* (“women”), which he uses in other parts of the text. The semantic range for *mahiṭā* can include notions of nobility, respect, and honor. I am suggesting that this expanded semantic range for the term supports the argument for the intent to include the maharani regent as part of the audience for the biography.
33. Kumar, *Political Evolution in Kerala*, 127.
34. Thanks to Miles Taylor for bringing the “mirror for princes” genre to my attention.
35. Lee, *Queen Victoria*, 554.
36. Travancore (India), Dewan, *The Sri Mulam Popular Assembly Travancore: Opening Addresses of the Dewans of Travancore, 1915–1931*.
37. Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 179–188. Note in particular, Pillai’s perspective on Sethu Lakshmi Bayi’s views on reform of matriliney on page 187.
38. The history of matriliney in Malabar and its transformation has been expertly detailed by G. Arunima in *There Comes Papa* (2003).
39. Cantumēnōn, *Indulekhā*, 494–98.
40. Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 136.

41. Pillai, *Ivory Throne*, 138.
42. Jeffrey, "Matriliny," 375. See also Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance*.
43. Jeffrey, "Matriliny," 375.
44. Jeffrey, "Matriliny," 376.
45. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Manual*, 2:719.
46. Travancore (India), Dewan, *The Sri Mulam Popular Assembly Travancore*. See speeches of Raghavaiah and Watts.
47. Raghunandan, *At the Turn of the Tide*, 132–33.
48. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Manual*, 2:724.
49. Devika, *Her-Self*, 127. For more on the diverse perspectives of women during this period, see the other invaluable writings in this volume. For the relationship between notions of the individual and gender in early twentieth-century Kerala, see Devika, *En-gendering individuals*.
50. Travancore (India), Dewan, *The Sri Mulam Popular Assembly Travancore*, 412.

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