

Contributions of Queen Mother Sethu Parvathi Bai to Travancore Culture

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Abstract

Rani Sethu Parvathi Bai was praised as the *Queen Mother* or *Amma Maharani* in Malayalam. She was the mother of *Chithira Thirunal* Maharaja. Her parents were *Kerala Varma Thampuran* of Palliyakkara Eastern Palace and *Bhagirathi Bai Uma Kochukunji Amma Thampurati* of Mavelikara Royal House. She was born on 7th November, 1896. She was a granddaughter of the celebrated artist *Raja Ravi Varma* and cousin of *Sethu Lakshmi Bai* who was the regent. Queen Sethu Parvathi Bai's son *Chithira Thirunal* Maharaja ascended the throne in 1931. Queen mother did not want to have control over the young Maharaja, but at the same time she wanted to direct her son in the right path in the administration of the Travancore Princely State. It was in the angle of a woman to have control over the future King, which was the opinion of the Resident while observing the relationship between the Queen mother and the Maharaja at close quarters. For that, the Government of India had separated the Maharaja from the Queen mother officially in the name of administrative training for one full year. Even after completion of the training the ruling power was not invested with him for about two years. But, when the Queen mother approached Lord Willington in suitable channel, his installation was celebrated on 6th November, 1931. It was before the legally expected age. After the crowning ceremony, the Queen mother was very affectionate to the Maharaja as before. She took part in many functions and even in some management activities of the Government. Therefore, it is presumed that the Queen mother was always behind every social reform of the young Maharaja in Travancore, which of course enabled us to appreciate that the Maharaja might have discussed all the matters of Legislative Assembly with his mother before the enactment of legislations. The Queen mother appeared in most circumstances in which the King had taken part in opening ceremonies, social gatherings and others. From the available sources, it is clear that the Queen mother might be at the back of the Maharaja in every forward step not only for the welfare of the people under the sovereignty of *Sri Chithira Thirunal* Maharaja but also she played a prominent role preserving the culture and tradition of the Travancore Princely State. In this research paper an attempt has been made to analyse the contributions of Queen mother to preserve the culture of the Travancore Princely State.

Key Words: *Princely State, Contribution, Culture, Preserving, Queen Mother.*

Introduction

Rani Sethu Parvathi Bai was praised as the *Queen Mother* or *Amma Maharani* in Malayalam. She was the mother of *Chithira Thirunal* Maharaja. Her parents were *Kerala Varma Thampuran* of Palliyakkara Eastern Palace and *Bhagirathi Bai Uma Kochukunji Amma Thampurati* of Mavelikara Royal House. She was born on 7th November, 1896. She was a granddaughter of the celebrated artist *Raja Ravi Varma* and cousin of *Sethu Lakshmi Bai* who was the regent. Queen Sethu Parvathi Bai's son *Chithira Thirunal* Maharaja ascended the throne in 1931.¹ Queen mother did not want to have control over the young

Maharaja, but at the same time she wanted to direct her son in the right path in the administration of the Travancore Princely State. It was in the angle of a woman to have control over the future King, which was the opinion of the Resident while observing the relationship between the Queen mother and the Maharaja at close quarters.² For that, the Government of India had separated the Maharaja from the Queen mother officially in the name of administrative training for one full year. Even after completion of the training the ruling power was not invested with him for about two years. But, when the Queen mother approached Lord Willington in suitable channel, his installation was celebrated on 6th November, 1931. It was before the legally expected age. After the crowning ceremony, the Queen mother was very affectionate to the Maharaja as before. She took part in many functions and even in some management activities of the Government. Therefore, it is presumed that the Queen mother was always behind every social reform of the young Maharaja in Travancore, which of course enabled us to appreciate that the Maharaja might have discussed all the matters of Legislative Assembly with his mother before the enactment of legislations. The Queen mother appeared in most circumstances in which the King had taken part in opening ceremonies, social gatherings and others.³ From the available sources, it is clear that the Queen mother might be at the back of the Maharaja in every forward step not only for the welfare of the people under the sovereignty of *Sri Chithira Thirunal* Maharaja but also she played a prominent role preserving the culture and tradition of the Travancore Princely State. In this research paper an attempt has been made to analyse the contributions of Queen mother to preserve the culture of the Travancore Princely State.

Opening of Art Gallery

Queen mother and the young Maharaja had a huge collection of paintings and sculptures, which were bought by the Royal family to the palace from various locations during their tour to Europe, Netherlands and other countries.⁴ In order to preserve all the collected artistic materials instead of keeping them all in a room, she decided to establish an art gallery. The thought of creating an art gallery in the fort appeared in her mind for the conservation of the events of the past in the form of paintings and drawings, relaxation for visitors, picture-education of tourists, admiration of artists, and for excitement of the people of Travancore.⁵ Having visualized that the palace *Renga Villas* built by *Ayilyam Thirunal Maharaja* (1860-1680 C.E.) was left unused by any of the Royal family, the Queen mother urged the Maharaja to convert the Palace into an Art Gallery within the fort. It showed the real spirit and impulse of the young Maharaja got from her to establish the *Ranga Villas Art Gallery* in Trivandrum.⁶ With the great effort of the Queen mother and with the advice of Dr. J. S. Cousins, who was the Art Adviser of the Madras Government, this art gallery was established. It was a treasure house of arts of all kinds so as to include varied compilations of paintings for art-lovers. In 1935, the Queen Mother opened the *Renga Villas Art Gallery*. In Malayalam, it is known as *Ranga Mallika* and it benefits the Indian Artists and outsiders whosoever visiting Travancore for sightseeing.⁷ In addition, for beautifying the art gallery, the Queen mother made arrangements for installing statues of different postures of *Kathakali* at corners of the gallery and latest paintings from different countries were also included in it. The sculptures of important characters of Epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana

were made in wood and installed in suitable places of the gallery.⁸ Further, Music texts of *Swathi Thirunal Maharaja* and others, Chinese lamps, Chinaware, Kerala vessels made of bell-metal,⁹ glass lamp made by *Vishakam Thirunal Maharaja*,¹⁰ Ivory articles like paper cutter, walking sticks, chuckaram boards, chess boards, etc., Maharaja and Maharani of Travancore royal family, a rifle used by commander-in-chief of Travancore Army during Portuguese war, Tibetan paintings,¹¹ religious paintings, copper plates and silver plates containing proclamation of previous rulers,¹² pearls, precious stones and others has had been preserved in this art gallery. While opening the Art Gallery, *Sethu Parvathi Bai* had spoken out that it was the careful collections of the royal family members at the time of their travel abroad. Even now the *Ranga Villas Art Gallery* has been a wonderful place attracting thousands of people, who are interested in music, paintings and sculptures, every day.¹³

The Sri Chithralayam

The Maharaja got the notion of creating a temple for arts from Promode Kumar in Masulipattanam (Old Madras).¹⁴ Immediately, he discussed the idea of organizing such a one with the Queen Mother who was an enthusiastic art lover. It was encouraged by his mother. Hence, His Highness constructed the *Sri Chithralayam* with the assistance and careful planning of J.H. Cousin who was a pet with the Maharaja and expert in paintings.¹⁵ It appears from the evidence that, on 25th September, 1935, the *Sri Chithira Thirunal Maharaja* had opened the museum of fine arts called *Sri Chithralayam* within the premise of Napier Museum. All sorts of painting from different Indian provinces were collected and deposited in *Sri Chithralayam*. It included Ajanta paintings, Tanjore paintings, mural paintings, paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, Cousins, Rajput paintings, Mughal paintings, various styles of Indian paintings, Chinese and Japanese paintings, painting of Bagh caves, painting maintained in Kilimanoor Royal family, religious paintings of various kinds, modern arts, paintings of puranic folklores, famous paintings of notable artists like Vishnu Bharathi, Nandanlal Bose, Gogonendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Devapradas Roy, Nicolas Roerich, Svetoslave Roerich and others.¹⁶ While opening this institution, the Maharaja stated that it would fulfil the desire of the painting lovers and promote the opportunities for aesthetic education that is one of the major components of the culture.¹⁷ The *Sri Chithralayam* has been functioning as a museum of paintings. It depicts the ancient, medieval, and modern culture of the Indian sub-continent and these paintings would be useful references for historical and cultural studies. For the construction of *Sri Chithralayam*, the Maharaja and the Queen mother *Sethu Parvathi Bai* have been remembered by artists and art-lovers coming from other states of India and from abroad.¹⁸

Preservation of Music and Drama

Perusal of the historical works on the rulers of Travancore makes out a clear idea that most members of the royal family had excellent talent in Music and Drama which were once the chief modes of entertainments among the people. The Maharaja *Swathi Thirunal* (1813-1847 C.E.) was an outstanding scientific music composer who had retained many eminent musicians and dramatists from other countries in the palace for promoting both skill and created many texts relating to the musical concerts.¹⁹ His

notable Musical lyrics include *TanaVarnam*, *SwokaVarnam*, *Padam*, *Navrathri Kirthanas*, *Nava Raga Mallika*, *Ghana Raga Krithi*, *Ramayana Kirthi*, *Bhagavatha Kirthi*, *Desavatara Kirthi*, *Kirthana*, *Mangalam*, *Thillana* and others. For the composition of which His Highness has been praised by musicians having similar footings in other countries.²⁰ It should be noted here that a palm script manuscript of “*Theory of Music*” written by *Swathi Thirunal* has been preserved in the Oriental Library in Trivandrum. In the lineage of Travancore royal family, some were Music composers while some others were popular instrumentalists who had made their tributes to the world of entertainment. Beside these, the Queen mother *Sethu Parvathi Bai* was an excellent *Veena* player and the Maharaja was a skilful vocalist.²¹ The Queen mother and the Maharaja felt that it is their moral duty to revive and save the music and drama that were once thrived under the reign of their predecessors, for which they started a *Music School* in Trivandrum and celebrated Music festival during the *Navarathri* festival on Maharaja’s birthday in the palace for the promotion of *Kathakali*, *Ottamthullal*, *Drama* and other fine arts.²² This school has trained thousands of boys and girls to become efficient in various musical instruments, dances and dramas even today. Without doubt the Music School was definitely an achievement of the Queen mother and Maharaja in their life time. By this way, she had contributed her role to preserve the culture of Travancore Princely State. Not only that, she had done a great service by reviving and preserving the knowledge and tradition of their predecessors. She had proved that she was the granddaughter of the celebrated artist Raja Ravi Varma.

Endnotes:

1. *Letter from the Resident to Political Secretary of GOI*, dt. 26st August 1929, GOI (IOR/R/2/886/177)
2. “Cited from *Caroline Keen’s “Princely India and the British”* in Manu S. Pillai’s “Ivory Throne of Travancore” p.303.
3. *The Indian Social Reformer*, 5th June, 1937, p. 626.
4. Padmanabha Iyar, A., PadmanabhaIyer, A., *Modern Travancore: A Handbook of Information*, The Sridhara Printing House, Trivandrum, 1941, p.48.
5. *Ibid.*, P.46.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p.47.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p.48.
10. *Ibid.*, p.49.
11. *Ibid.*, p.51.
12. *Ibid.*, p.52.
13. Interview with S. Padmini Jaganathan, Trivandrum, dt. 25th March, 2019.
14. Padmanabha Iyar, A., *op. cit.*, p.61.
15. *The Indian Social Reformer*, October, 1935, p. 241; A. Padmanabha Iyar, *op. cit.*, p.50.
16. Padmanabha Iyar, A., *op. cit.*, pp.53-63; T. Sree Devi, *The Social Reform Movement in South Travancore 1806 - 1936*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Kerala, Trivandrum, 2007, p.11.
17. *The Travancore Directory for 1941*, Part 1, Trivandrum, 1940, p.181.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Padmanabha Iyar, A., *op. cit.*, p.117.
20. *Ibid.*, p.119.
21. *Ibid.*, p.123.
22. *Ibid.*, p.125.