

STATUS OF WOMEN IN PRE MODERN KERALA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TRAVANCORE

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Abstract

Kerala Model Development, Gods own country, the most literate state and so forth are nothing but common adjectives to Kerala. Behind the glorious achievements, one can find the fair hand of the fair sex. This is not an exaggeration. Being the most literate and most progressive state, Kerala owes much to women. Travancore was the southernmost native state of India and was merged with Cochin and Malabar to form the present state of Kerala in 1956. The state is hailed everywhere for its Human Development Indices, progress, women empowerment, transgender policy etc. Virtually, there is no gender disparity in Kerala. Women occupy the same status and position as that of their counterparts. But it was not the situation. The present study tries to trace the condition of women in pre modern Kerala, particularly in Travancore.

Introduction

Women occupy half of the world population. But they are historically oppressed and marginalized section in almost all societies. Normally, their position is considered as inferior to their counterparts, men. In his magnum opus *Politics*, Aristotle stated that women were inferior to men and must be ruled by men. They are considered as the weakest sections, mainly because of their biological differences. They had to fight for their rights, comprising basic human rights, economic rights and political rights. The condition of women is not much different in India as well. Though women were active in India from ancient time itself, their lives were face by continuous struggles. Being a part of India, the state of Kerala is not an exception. The status of women in Travancore had subjected to many changes over the past centuries. A woman according to most authorities was always a minor at law and was always under the tutelage of someone.¹ To justify this, Manu says, in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons - 'a woman

must never be independent.ⁱⁱ This concept of *Na sthree swathanthryamarhathi* ruled society of Kerala, in general and Travancore, in particular.

In fact, the condition of Travancore, the southernmost native state of British India, was more than pathetic. It was a land of superstitions, untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability. Pragmatism and atheism were given least importance at that time. It was a caste ridden society with Brahmanical dominance. Naturally, the condition of people belonging to the backward castes was highly deplorable. There were no poets like Kumaran Asan who said that *Jathi chodikkunnilla njan sodarii*ⁱⁱⁱ and there were no reformers to utter *One caste, one religion and one god for man* or an Ayyappan to eat with the outcaste by means of interdining. But the condition had changed drastically in present Kerala and the important factor which changed it was nothing but western education.

Status Of Women In India

In the ancient period, to an extent, women had a good position in Indian society. Though considerable evidence was not received on the Harappan civilization and position of women there, it is assumed that women were worshipped during this epoch. The terracotta figurines of Mother Goddess substantiate this. Rig Veda mentions it clearly that women occupied higher status in the then society. They enjoyed considerable freedom. At the same time, it was a patriarchal society by which the birth of a son was considered important and the duty as wife was primarily to satisfy her husband.^{iv} But they succeeded in providing ample space for women. They had the full right to take part in religious ceremonies and no religious rite and ritual could be complete without her presence. Women even have the right to choose their husbands and child marriage was not in vogue. It even mentions of late marriages.^v Widow re-marriage was common especially to childless widows and there was no *Purdah*, mask system. There were educated women scholars, the prominent are Apala, Ghosha, Viswavara, Mamata and Nirvavari.

It is presumed that the status of women began to deteriorate by the later Vedic period. The birth of a female child was considered as a sin. Child marriage became common and widows were prohibited from re marriages. They were not allowed to take part in religious ceremonies as well. Thus a kind of change in the attitude towards women had started. The epics which followed also illustrate the same trend with depictions of polygamy, polyandry etc. Mythology also played its role in deteriorating the standard of women. In almost all stories, one can find a hero saving a heroine and marrying her. There is almost no case of a heroine saving a hero. This helped in creating an inferiority complex in women. The undue

importance given to marriage is also a matter of concern. At the same time, there were *Swayamvara* forms of marriages which gave women a kind of choice to select their life partner. Generally they are not consulted.

In the medieval period, more or less the trend had been continued. In the Sultanate period, no women had an independent status. But the husband needs to honour her and must give required positions for her maintenance as it is considered as his duty. Child marriage and *Purdah*, mask system were popularized. Though *Sati*, death of wife in pyre of deceased husband, associated with funeral was not compulsory, it was common. *Stridhana* or dowry, *Devadasi* system, preference of baby boys etc were common at that time. In the Mughal period also, these practices continued. Polygamy was common and *Talaq*, a form of divorce among Muslims made the condition of Muslim wives more pathetic.

The *Arthanareeswara* concept of half man and half woman and *Sakthi* as one of the most powerful Hindu Goddess illustrate the fact that women are considered equal to men. *Where women are worshipped gods reside* is also an Indian concept. It shows the importance of women. But the fact is that generally all these concepts or sayings are not practiced and in almost all phases of Indian history, women is badly subjugated, oppressed and exploited by their male counterparts.

Status of Women in Tamilakam

While tracing the history of Kerala or Travancore, it was a part and parcel of ancient Tamilakam.. The first five centuries of Christian era is considered as Sangam Age but there was difference of opinion regarding the same.^{vi} Sangam literature or Ancient Tamil Anthologies composed during this period gave ample information about the condition of women at that time. Compared to all other areas, women were given much freedom and they were respected. The Chera Kings used the names of the father as well as mother along with their names.^{vii} Female education was imparted. There was even reference for over fifteen poetesses, including Adimandiyar, Vellividiyar, Kakkai Padiniyar, Nachchelliar and Auvvayar.^{viii} The Pana caste member Auvvayar is attributed as the most distinguished poetess during the respective epoch. Chilappathikaram of Ilango Adigal mentions of the educative role of a Jain woman saint, Kaundi Adigal.^{ix} Thus, these anthologies give a vivid picture of enlightened ancient Tamilakam with importance to women.

During Sangam Age, Child marriage was not practiced. *Gandharva* form of marriage, equivalent to today's love marriage was common. *Purdah* system and dowry were not known. However, the bridegroom had to give some price or presents to the father of the bride for marriage. Half of this amount goes to the bride's father where as the bride can keep the

remaining amount. Women also practiced various jobs during this period. At the same time, Sangam society was a patriarchal one where men occupied power positions. Simultaneous to this, women occupied good status. The birth of girl child was not considered as a sin even though they longed for the birth of a son. There was also reference of *Sati* especially among the ruling classes. The remarkable examples to this are *Masatikallu* or *Pulachikallu* which were Megalithic tombs found in these parts were erected over such burials.^x Female morality or chastity was also given prime importance. Tolkappiyam and Akananuru works depicts the glorification given to chastity.

Status of Women in Travancore

By 8th century, the Aryanization process had started in Kerala, particularly in Travancore. With this, status of women began to deteriorate. Women began to be considered as secondary citizens who have no basic rights. With regard to the condition of women one can have a general outline, speaking sometimes of one caste, or class or status, sometimes of another, as there are so many classes with corresponding diversity of manners, customs, habits, food, titles, marriage, laws, religion, property and rank in society.^{xi} But generally, in almost all these sections, women were thoroughly restricted from the main stream society by various prevalent evil practices. The practices continued till 19th Century. The fact is that women are the chief inventors and upholders of all these superstitions and follies. They are the principal sufferers of the above.^{xii}

Child marriage was widely practiced in Travancore. Sati or the ending up of the life of a widow in the funeral pyre of her husband, which was a notorious practice was not common in Travancore but prohibition of widow remarriage and considering themselves as bad omens were frequent and their lives were more miserable. The aspiration for baby boy was common and people were dejected with the birth of girl child.

Certain dresses and ornaments were prohibited to some castes here. As a matter of fact, the lower caste women were not even permitted to cover their bosoms before upper caste men. The Channar agitation of Travancore, which was for the clothing rights of lower caste women itself clears the point. As Velayudhan Panikkasserry says, women were forced to give certain taxes like the Mulakkaram, just because they have breasts.

Smarthavicharam is another important social evil that existed among the higher castes of Travancore, particularly Brahmins. It is actually to outset the polluted *Nambuthiri* lady from her caste and family in the name of adultery. She had to face trials if she was suspected by any of her family members or others that she had illicit relation with other man. In the trial period she had to be in *Anchampura* and must lead a secluded life. If adultery is proved, she

will be excommunicated from her community and thereby became a slave. The famous *Suchindram Kaimukk* is a remarkable example to Smarthavicharam.

Mannappedi, *Parappedi* and *Pulappedi* were the unreasonable customs prevalent among the higher castes. By these, *Mannans*, *Parayas*, *Pulayas* or others of lower castes can contact high caste women by means of touching, throwing stone or stick on some particular days. The direct or distant touch can even pollute the higher caste women and they will become outcastes.^{xiii} The man who contacted her can put claim over her. These customs can be considered as the tactics of higher castes to suppress females in their own caste.^{xiv} Protestant missionary J. W. Gladstone opines that it is a tactic from the part of Caste Hindus to increase the number of slaves. It also exemplifies the fact that one of the major axes of internal regulation among the high castes, particularly Malayala Brahmins was undoubtedly sex.^{xv}

A peculiar feature of Kerala society was the predominance of *Marumakkathayam* System of inheritance or Matrilineal system particularly among the Nairs. Followed Nairs, many other castes, Ezhavas, Nanchinad Vellalas and Kanikkars followed this system of inheritance. This Marumakkathayam or Matriliney was not matriarchy.^{xvi} Though descent was traced through mother's line, the head of the joint family was the eldest male member and women did not rule. The matrilineal kinship in Kerala has the unique status of being the only kinship system in the world to be abolished.^{xvii} This is mainly because of the evils attached to it. In this system, woman lives in her own house and the man who became her life partner visit her in her house. The child born out of this relationship will have right to his or her mother's property only. Actually it is to support the custom of Brahmins. In the Brahmin family, only the eldest male member could marry from his own caste and all others had to establish relation with Nairs and others if they wish. This kind of relation, a Namboothiri had with a Nair woman is not recognized as a formal marriage but only as a *Sambandham*. At the same time no stigma was attached to the number of *Sambandham* a woman can have. This led to moral decline and prevalence of polyandry in Kerala society.^{xviii} Women in general was considered as an object which gave sexual pleasures to the higher castes whether it is Devadasis or Nair women or women of lower castes. There was even a royal proclamation that those women who were not willing to accept male from either her own caste or from upper castes must be killed.^{xix} But Nair women in general had a freedom in society compared to other sections.

Slavery existed in Travancore and it also made the life of low caste slave often miserable. As a result, they have no rights over themselves. They are brutally exploited.

Women were generally exempted from capital punishments and they were given slavery as punishment. In the case of the guilty, in accordance with *Smarthavicharam*, slavery was given as punishment. It is also hereditary, that is a child born to a slave is also a slave. Slave trade was also practiced and the owner can easily sell them to other and often families split due to it. It was also one of the inhuman types of activity that prevailed in Travancore.

Devadasi system was another form of exploitation. The term *Devadasi* means servant of God. *Devadasis* were girls attached to temples and were learnt and efficient dancers. They enjoyed special status in society. Based on this, they were even given seats with royal women.^{xx} But in the later period, their status were declined merely to prostitutes and the higher castes who had the authority of temples exploited and used them. This decline of their moral standards is evident from the Manipravalam literature, particularly from the *Acchi charithams*, especially *Unniyacchi Charitham* and *Unnichiruthevi Charitham*. The erotic poem *Chandrolsavam* composed during 15th and 16th centuries with its theme the moon festival conducted by a *Devadasi Medini Vennilavu* testifies the complete moral degeneracy of the system. At the same time, these kinds of systems were fully supported by the society which is giving prime importance to the chastity of women. This system even converted sacred temples to mere brothels.^{xxi} The Census of 1901 shows that there were 416 *Devadasis* in Travancore alone.

Caste system was in its worst form in Travancore with its untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability. The heyday of the Brahmins or as it is said *Namboothirimaarude Pulappukalam* in society made the life of their women as well as low castes, miserable.^{xxii} The condition of the lower castes was pathetic and women were also subjected to all these caste evils. They were denied access to public roads, wells etc like their male counterparts. They were even restricted from carrying pots on their hips. At the same time they were sexually exploited by the higher castes. Elaborate and expensive marriage ceremonies, puberty rites, especially *Thalikett kalyanam*, *Terandukuli* and *Pulikudi* made their life even more miserable. Thus, caste system also acted as an important factor in worsening the condition of women in Travancore.

To an extent, the women in Travancore led a secluded life particularly in the Brahmin community as they were called *Akathammas* or *Antherjanams*. They had no right to go outside their home on their wish or even don't have the right to sit in the *Pumukhams* or entrance. They must have a *Marakkuda*, umbrella when they go outside. There will be Nairs to announce the arrival of *Antharjanam* so that the lower castes can be kept away from the way. But comparing to this, the Nairs and other lower caste women had some freedom of

movement. The *Marumakkathayam* system made their condition to an extent better compared to their Brahmin counterparts. Though the lower castes were deprived of the right to wear clothes, high caste women were totally controlled and even just confined to the four walls of the *Illams*. Their pathetic condition was clearly depicted in *Kanneerum Kinavum* and *Adukkalayil ninnu Arangathekk* by V. T. Bhattathirippad, *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* by E. M. S. Namuthirippad, *Apphante Makal* by M. Bhavathrathan Nambuthiri, *Marakkudayile Mahanarakam* by M. R. Bhattathirippad etc. But at the same time, socially women were secluded. In short, free movement was controlled and no section of women enjoyed complete liberty.

The condition of Christian and Muslim women in Travancore was also not much different. The plight of Syrian Christian women was more deplorable as their families were patrilineal and patriarchal. But compared to them, the condition of protestant Christians was much better. Islam women in general had a pathetic life due to excessive control by male members. Existing customs and practices in Travancore added fuel to fire.

The condition of Tribal women was also not different. Their life was so miserable. The Kanikars of Travancore, who till recently were in the habit of sending all their women into the seclusion of the jungle on the arrival of a stranger near their settlements.^{xxiii} Among the Kurichiyas also, women were the worst sufferers. They had a lot of superstitions. They believed that if the first child is a girl, then the mother will die at the birth of third child. Hence, they were divorced for marrying other woman. Moreover, if complexities occur at the time of child birth, their belief is that it was because of the lack of chastity which give the full right to the husbands to divorce such wives and remarry.^{xxiv} All these divorces and remarriages were initiated by the mothers of bridegrooms. Thus woman was the main cause for the subjugation of the same sect among tribals. These kinds of superstitious beliefs were common among the tribes of Travancore. They in general considered menstrual girls as polluted. Beliefs mainly rooted in blind faith and superstitions along with the patriarchal nature of society were responsible for the deteriorated life of tribal women.

Women in the pre modern Kerala society suffered a lot of hardships. They were the major victims of social evils. Child marriage, prohibition to widow remarriage, *Smarthavicharam*, *Mannappedi* along with lack of education worsened their condition. This lack of education itself was the main reason for the downtrodden condition of women in Travancore. It also facilitated all the social evils and made the life of women more pathetic. Lack of education made them slaves. They are considered as the most ignorant sections of society.^{xxv} At the same time, they were not at all aware of their pitiable condition and had no

courage to oppose the existing systems. It is evident from the fact that all the social reformers who raised their voice for women in Travancore primarily were men. It includes Ayyankali and Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker.

It is partly true that while comparing the conditions of women in North India, the condition of women in Travancore is much better. Because *Purdah* system was totally unaware in Kerala and such kind of exclusion was absent. The same is the case of *Sati* to a considerable extent. *Sati* as a major social evil as in North India was not like that in Travancore. The *Marumakkathayam* system though had many demerits had given status to women in Kerala society. But the condition is deplorable compared to the counter parts in the true sense.

Conclusion

In short, it can be said that the status of women in Travancore was subjected to numerous changes over the past centuries. Women of Travancore enjoyed a lot of liberty in the early days, when Travancore was the part and parcel of ancient Tamilakam. From the ancient Tamil anthologies, it is clear that though there was patriarchal society, women possessed covetable status in the society. But it began to deteriorate from about 8th century onwards with the Aryanization process. As a result, innumerable taboos had crept in to the society of Travancore primarily in the form of child marriage, *sati*, *devadasi* system, *sambandham* system and *Smarthavicharam*. In general, it can be said that chastity of women was given primary importance and a kind of counterfeit modesty ruled the society particularly among high castes. At the same time, Brahmins led freak out life. The condition was more pathetic to lower castes due to caste disabilities. In short, the dignity of women of almost all castes was not impressive compare to their counterparts despite the fact that the quantum varies from the caste in the hierarchical structure of the society.

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