

Dress Reform In Kerala : Question Of Caste, Community And Women

□ Sreebitha P V*

ABSTRACT

In the 19th century Kerala, clothing and jewelry were the most visible signs/makers of the caste on body. The Channar women of south Thiruvithamkoor who had converted to Christianity in the 1850s began wearing *melmundu* (a cloth used to cover torso) which was permissible only for the upper caste Hindus then. This resulted in the Breast cloth struggle which is known as *Channarlahala, MelmunduKalapam* etc. of 1859. Ezhavas, another lower caste community in Kerala were also in the forefront of dress reform. With an examination of the discourse on dress reform, the paper argues that uncovering of breast was a caste practice and the reform of the same meant to bring equality between castes rather than the respect for women. The paper also examines the educated Ezhava male and female reformers' position on dress reform. This is to point out the different ways in which they perceive the dress reform and the questions surrounding it. Thus, the paper addresses the question of relation between caste, community and women in the available discourse on dress reform and body.

Keywords : Reform, Ezhava Community, Women, Caste

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The scholars who address the question of dress reform and body in Kerala mostly refer to C. Kesavan, an Ezhava Social Reformer's autobiographical account. Udaya Kumar, J Devika and Rajeevan quote the same anecdote in which C Kesavan recounts the story of his mother-in-law wearing a *ravuakka* (blouse) for the first time. This particular incident dates back to the late 19th century.

My sister-in-law used to live in Trivandrum. Women used to wear blouses there, and she also began wearing them. My misfortune, when she came home, she brought me a couple of blouses. Two glittering blouses. How the blouse suited her! I also liked the blouses, and wore one at once. It looked good, but I felt ticklish wearing it. I took it off, folded it carefully, and brimming with enthusiasm, showed it to my mother. She gave me a stern look and said, 'Where are you going to gallivant in this? Fold it and keep it in the box.' She did not look cheerful in the least. I was scared of my mother. She could kill me. At night I wore the blouse and showed it to my

*Sreebitha P V, Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities and Languages, CenralUniveristy of Karnatak

husband. He said it looked good, and told me that I could wear it... He left in the morning. In my innocence, I came out wearing the blouse. Twisting and turning. I looked at myself; how lovely it looked... I stood there immersed in a daydream. I didn't notice my mother coming. Suddenly I heard her break a piece from a coconut branch. 'Take it off, you slut!' she said, 'you want to walk around in shirts like Muslim women? And, my God, she started beating me... Scared of her bows, I took off my blouse that day. But I was determined as well. If my mother did not like it, my husband liked it. During the day, I did not wear the blouse, but the night was mine. When I knew that my mother had slept, I used to take out the blouse and wear it. My husband used to come only very late, like a *gandharva*... (Kumar 247-248)

As we see in the beginning of the quote, although it was not common for women to wear blouse during that period, women in Trivandrum used to wear it. According to Devika, wearing *ravukka* is an act of rebellion against the established authority (*Amma*) who saw the *rauvukka* as a sign of the 'dancing-girl' (*attakkari*) [Udayakumar uses the word 'slut' for *attakkari*] or worried that by doing so her daughter will be seen as a muslim. Devika also adds that, the wearer of the blouse, however, wears it in defiance, seeing in it a way to make herself attractive to her husband. Though Devika says it involved not only the issue of feminine modesty but also the struggle around *jati* (caste), the question of feminine modesty takes central place in her analysis. She examines the meaning of bare-breastedness in detail and argues that historians of 20th century considered nakedness of female torso as the articulation of sexual submissiveness of Sudra women to upper caste dominance (here Nambutiri Brahmins) in Kerala. This interpretation leads to the assumption that in the past, women commonly used a *mulakkacha* (garment covering the breast) and a light upper cloth irrespective of caste, a convention Brahmin dominance seems to have ended (Devika, *En-gendering* 263). She draws examples from Robin Jefferey where a Nair girl was represented as the sexually exploited victim. However, with another example she points out how both women and men from the lower castes (she uses the term 'lower *janamabhedam*') were expected to display their submission by removing their upper-cloth.

Drawing from Fawcett and others, she points out that reading of uncovered breasts as signifying immodesty seems to be a recent origin. She emphasizes that extraordinary attention was given to female bare-breastedness, linking it, not just an articulation of hierarchy of status, but also to the Nair woman's obligation to provide sexual pleasure to the upper caste man. For her, the uncovered female bosom did not always signify the sexually available female in traditional order rather it could signify a particular position in *janamabhedham* order (Devika 268). She also notes, how covering of the breasts has become a seducing technique and how by covering of breasts, body becomes a desirable object. However, what seems puzzling is the way she equalises the experiences of women in the lower position of *janamabhedham* order. According to her, its the Brahmins who forced women to uncover their breasts, even while she is aware of the Channar revolt where the Nairs were the culprits. Her account of breast cloth struggle seems to give a victim status to the Nair women and Nair women are put into the category of lower caste women.

In Udaya Kumar's analysis, the 'blouse' ceases to be a caste marker, and becomes an object of personalized enjoyment. He sees the woman who wears blouse as a desiring subject. Rajeevan while pointing out how the woman wears blouse only in front of her husband in the bedroom, argues that this shows the emergence of the new sense of nudity and the sexualisation of women's breasts. Here female breasts become an object of sexuality. He sees this as a major transformation in the concept of women's body, sexuality and subjectifications in modern Kerala (Rajeevan 56). As we see in the above discourses, the struggle of lower castes to gain access to the clothing of upper castes has been side-lined here. Though Kesavan's mother-in law is a lower caste woman, caste question did not come as the focus in the above mentioned scholars' analysis.

In Kesavan analysis, we see the different dress code of Ezhava and Nair women. While Ezhava women were not allowed to cover their knees with mundu and Nair women had the right to cover their knees. And he mentions that except Nair women other women were not allowed to use *melmundu* too. He cites a dispute under the

leadership of Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkar against the agitated Nairs who removed an Ezhava woman's *mundu* which covered the knee. This strict code of dress which do not allow the lower caste women to cover their breasts and knee was a caste practice to distinguish women of lower castes and higher castes.

Although the Nair women had the right to cover their breasts and knees, Kesavan states that it was compulsory that Nair women should remove *rauvukka* in the presence of *Thampurattimar* (Brahmin women). Here, Nair women had to show respect to the Brahmin women by removing their breast cloth. Thus Brahmin women also figures as the oppressor of other women. This instance proves that uncovering breast was not only a woman's question it was a caste practice. Uncovering the breasts and knees was a considered as sign of respect shown by the lower castes towards the castes above in the hierarchy regardless of gender.

Educated “modern” women from the Ezhava community articulated the question of dress reform differently. Kayyalakkal Saradammain her article “Ezhava Sthreekalute Avastha” (“The Condition of Ezhava Women”) describes Ezhava women's condition in the matrilineal system (*Sanghamitra* 1922). She notes that women live according to the strict law made by *karanavars*. She writes:

Daughter in-law (*Anandirathikal*) of some *karanavars* are not supposed to cover breast with *mundu*. It is considered arrogance (*ahankaram*) if they do so. Even if they use *melmundu* (*mulakkacha*), they should remove it and keep it on their shoulders when they see *karanavars* from long distance. How pathetic and shameful a situation is this! Still it is practiced in some places, and women stand half naked in front of uncles. Long back it was common in many places. This bad habit (*durgunam*) is shown by our men in front of those who are known as upper caste.

This further adds to our understanding that women in the matrilineal Ezhava community had to uncover their breasts in front of the *Karanavar* of the community and these *Karanavars* were supposed to stand bare breast in front of the upper castes.

Both female and male reformers from the community considered uncovering of breasts as shameful activity. Vallimavungallikkavamma, the first midwife among Ezhava women was in the forefront to reform clothing (*veshvidhanam*) and to standardize it (Kesavan vol 1: 79).

We see that women reformers who discuss women's issues within the community compared it with their men's condition in a caste ridden society. Uncovering of breast is considered as shameful activity for community as well as women. Sexual subjectification or the desired objectivity of women was not of much importance. Rather, focus was upon the desirability of community. A community's move towards modernity and self-respectability is the ground for such articulation. This is not to avoid the fact that even for the upper-caste men, it was a shame for the community when women were bare breasted, uneducated and that there were widows and sati being practiced. But it was different for lower castes since they had to confront both upper-castes and colonizers. It was a matter of gaining respect and equality for which they needed to challenge the upper castes. The question of women and community was at stake here.

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