

CONDITION OF WOMEN IN PRE-MODERN TRAVANCORE

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Abstract: Travancore was the southernmost native state of British India and comprised the present day lands of the southern part of Kerala and Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. It was a land of superstitions, untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability. Pragmatism and atheism were completely unknown there and people were extremely conservatives. It was a caste ridden society with Brahmanical dominance. Naturally, the condition of people belonging to the other castes, particularly lower castes was highly deplorable. But most pathetic was the condition of women. Not even a single section of women occupied a favorable position then. Even their existence was neglected. They were confined to the four walls of their own home. The study aims at the revealing of the condition of women in pre-modern Travancore.

Key words: Travancore, Women, Sambandham, Smarthavicharam, Mannappedi, Pulappedi, Parappedi, Akathamma, Devadasi, Ezhuthupalli, Kalari, Kallumala.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Women studies were a neglected field in the past. Only men were given importance. The word history itself seems to say his story and not her or their story. Most of the ancient books reveal the fact that they are the stories of men. We have Ramante Ayanam- Ramayanam as an example. As the title shows, it is just the journey of Rama – the protagonist and female characters are subsided. The ancient branch of knowledge, astrology also illustrates the point. Here also only men get predominance. In the background of these, women studies have immense significance.

Kerala is often considered as a land of progress and prosperity. It had worldwide reputation for its Kerala Model of Development. The high human development indices with low infant mortality, high institutionalized child births, high female literacy, high female life expectancy make Kerala, to an extent a heaven on Earth for women. But the condition was not so in the pre modern stage. The study on Travancore, which later merged with Cochin and Malabar to form the present day state of Kerala illustrates this.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- To find out the socio-economic condition of women in Travancore
- To find out the various customs and practices existed in Travancore which acted as a hindrance to the progress of women
- To find out the major struggles that happened in Travancore for women

3. METHODOLOGY:

Analytical method of historical research is used to conduct the study. Both primary sources and secondary sources are used. The primary sources include different reports and other documents collected from various repositories and secondary sources are mainly books, journals and websites.

4. DISCUSSION:

Women are the historically oppressed sections of almost all societies. They are marginalized and were considered inferior to men mainly because of their biological differences. The traditional Travancore society was also not different. They also oppressed women in all possible means. Women were not only confined to the four walls of their home, but also all the public places were denied to them. But in the ancient period, when Travancore was a part and parcel of Ancient *Tamilakam*, the Sangam texts or the ancient Tamil Anthologies provides a different picture. It can be understood that women were given much importance and respect in the then society. The Chera Kings used the names of their mothers along with their names [1]. Female education was imparted during this period and the mentioning of the educative role of a Jain woman, Kaundi Adigal by Ilango Adigal in his *Chilappathikaram* illustrates this [2]. There were no reference of Child marriage or Purdah system and it can be assumed that women occupied a considerably good position in the then society [3].

The picture changed with 8th century AD and marked the beginning of Brahmanical dominance in Kerala history. With this, the condition 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 [4]. 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 [5]. Dubois in his work, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies points that the condition of women was hardly better than slaves.

5. MAJOR SOCIAL EVILS:

Child marriage was one of the worst evil practices. It was practiced more by the affluent upper castes than the marginalized lower castes. Visscher in his work noted that, the Brahmins gave their daughters in marriage at the age of eight or nine years, for if they pass their tenth year unmarried, they lose caste and are not allowed to marry [6]. Nairs, Christians and other sections of Travancore also followed this. Samuel Mateer points that child marriages arise from the distrust of female virtue. Small children, below the age of ten are married off and their husbands were probably aged ones. It also led to the increase in the number of child wives which may be resulted in becoming widows in younger period of life. It was one of the most prominent factors which acted as a barrier for the education of girls in Travancore.

Sati or the ending up of the life of a widow in the funeral pyre of her husband which was one of the most notorious practices existed in India, was not common in Travancore. But widow remarriage was prohibited. The condition of widows was more pathetic than that of whom following *Sati*. It forced them to live their entire lives inside their houses without happiness. They were prohibited from wearing ornaments and colored garments, during social gatherings and religious rites and even denied from consuming tasty foods. They had to cut their hairs and must have shaven heads. They are considered as bad omen. Hence they were strictly excluded from functions like marriages. The life of a widow was a worst one particularly among the higher castes.

In Travancore, caste played a vital role in determining the right to wear. Most women had their body uncovered from the waist as the lower caste women and slaves were denied the right to wear cloth above their waist and below the knee. Only the Brahmins and Nairs have the right to cover their upper part of body. As a matter of respect, female members of all communities including Nairs had to uncover their chest before a respectable man, a man of higher position or caste. They looked upon women of any status who refused to expose their breasts before the Brahmins as immoral and immodest [7]. The Attingal Rani had even punished a lower caste lady for covering her breasts using a cloth because the lower castes were not permitted to do so. As a result, her breasts were cut off. The Channar agitation which occurred in Travancore itself shows the existed pathetic condition of women. From this agitation itself it was clear that in order to dress decently women had to start an agitation. Though the Channar agitation occurred mainly because of the influence of Christian missionaries, the condition of the pre agitation period gave a glimpse of the condition of women more clearly that even their body is not their right.

There were also certain taxes to women alone. One of the most notorious taxes was the *Mulakkaram* or breast tax which was collected from women just because they have breasts [8]. These kinds of barbarian taxes itself show the pathetic plight of Kerala. Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkar and other reformers had even worked for the right of lower castes to wear *Mukkuthi* or nose ring as ornaments. The thing is that it was considered as a symbol of high castes and only women of higher castes have the right to do so. The lower castes were allowed to wear ornaments made of stone alone. It even led to one of the most powerful agitations, named *Kallumala* agitation or Perinad agitation. In other words, it had happened in Perinad, which was part of the then Travancore state.

The birth of a baby boy became the necessity and girls were not at all welcome. Men are dejected when they hear of the birth of a daughter. It is evident in the proverb which states that Why do you sit as if a girl had been born at home?[9] One of the main reasons for this aversion to girl child was the existence of dowry system. Dowry was a determining factor in marriages in almost all communities in Travancore. It was in its worst form among the higher castes such as Brahmins and Nairs. The Syrian Christians also maintains a similar view. But the attitude of lower castes toward girl child was not as hostile as that of the higher castes.

In Travancore, women did not have property rights. Women of almost all castes had no right to own or inherent property, even their family property. Among Nairs also, they practiced *Marumakkathayam*, women were not owners of land but they had some sort of economic independence. But at the same time, Nadar women can own land [10]. Not only Nadars, other lower caste women had the right to own land. It was not widely practiced and the societal attitude was against this type of land holdings. Though the higher caste women were confined to their own houses, the lower caste women worked along with men in fields. But they received meager wage compared to their male counterparts. This is clear from the writings of Samuel Mateer and others. They were unskilled workers and the lack of education was a hindrance.

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 [11]. 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 [12]. 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[13].

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 [14]. 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 [15]. This is mainly because of the evils attached to it. In this system, woman live 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[16]. 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. 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 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[17]. 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[18]. 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. 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 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 [19]. 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 [20]. 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.

In general, education was neglected to girls. It is believed that education will not only lead to adultery in women but loose modesty [21]. At the same time the society had a fear that the education will be misused by women. It will make them unfit for obedience and labor. The lack of education itself made their language unrefined and their pronunciation was also worse. Education in Travancore after the Aryanization process was generally a monopoly of the Brahmins. Salas or Mutts were attached to temples which imparted education to Brahmins. The indigenous schools or the *Ezhuthupallis* were also there. They were developed with the influence of Buddhism[22]. These *Ezhuthupallis* are for non Brahmin pupils. Girls were educated together with boys in these indigenous schools but their number seems to be much less. The indigenous schools or the *Ezhuthupallis* were attended by only a few girls of Nair and Ezhava community. They also attended these schools not for the sake of attaining knowledge but to know how to read and write. There were *Kalaris*, attached to each village and they provided martial training to students. These kinds of institutions were much less and the number of girls students attended was far less. Thus, women were not given education and it was not popularized or supported in that period. 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. 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.

6. CONCLUSION:

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. The period also witnessed certain struggles for women such as the Channar revolt, Perinad agitation etc. But in general, women were suppressed and they lived a humble life. Lack of education further worsened the situation. They were aware of their rights. Women began to occupy a position in Travancorean society only after education was popularized.

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