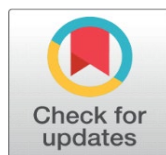


POSITION OF WOMEN AMONG THE MALA ARAYA COMMUNITY IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Community studies in India are essentially a product of colonial ethnography. The ethnographers, colonial administrators cum scholars produced a good number of writings on Indigenous communities; perhaps their writings formed one of the discursive in constituting the people living on the margin as tribal. These writings are ethnographic notes, monographs, administrative reports, census reports, missionary reports, reports of committees and commissions, etc. Their works are produced in different contexts and are primarily meant to produce knowledge about them to enable colonial governance to be effective, as it plays a great role in understanding the studies other than words at face value. A woman is more considered and protected in a tribal society than a modern one. However, the concept that ancient women enjoyed equal status to men was wrong. Every tribal law was developed from the male perspective. The ultimate word is of the man; in many ways, the traditional laws destroy the freedom of the woman's community. The present paper entitled Identity and Position of Mala Araya Tribal Women in Kerala details how the identity of Mala Araya women is analyzed from a new social perspective or circumstances.

Keywords: Colonialism, Tribal Women, Mala Araya, Caste and Tribe, Marriage Ceremony

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the tribal people is much more complex than the conventional assertions in Indian Anthropology. These primitive societies and tribal groups form a fascinating ground for researchers, the social scientists of the world, sociologists, social anthropologists, historians, ethnologists, and human geographers. During the colonial period, the British initiated studies focusing on tribal communities in India. They endeavoured to gather classified data about the tribes for the first time. Despite facing challenging and remote terrain, they carried out census activities in the tribal regions to estimate their population and collect additional data. At present, the term tribe, according to Western writers, generally means an ethnic group, geographically isolated or semi-isolated, identified with one particular territory and having distinct social, economic, and cultural traditions and practices. In the Indian context, the term has undergone further change, particularly in the post-independence period. In the post-independence period, grouping all the tribal communities as the Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution was a significant achievement. It has helped to consolidate their position as a distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural entity.

Generally, the tribal people live in the forest and mountain areas, keeping aloof from the mainstream society and culture. Even then, there are tribal centres in plain areas. They are a community centred under a compressed social structure, a common name and a traditional culture. These things highly influence the relationship between men and

women in these societies. Tribal social structure and modern social structure have considerable differences. Likewise, the man-women relation in these two social structures has two dimensions. The woman who belongs to contemporary society is educated. They are well aware of their rights and duties in the society. They know how they are being kept aloof from society by male dominance. The traditional rituals and beliefs originating from caste and religion remain a stumbling block before the women's community.

The Indian population is mainly formed by the aboriginals or natives of the land and the migrants who came over the mountains and settled in the land. The migrants were primarily the Aryan race, which followed a strict caste system. Their advent and ritualistic system marginalised the natives of the Indian Plain, and they were forced or instead pushed down to forests and hilly regions by the migrants with their man and weapon power. This is one reason the tribal people are still limited in their natural abodes. They cannot shake away the sense of home bolted upon them by the migrants thousands of years back, forcing them to live in the wild in an isolated space. The Indian aboriginals remained unique and different from the Aryan or Hindu way of social or community life. This may have resulted in their scattered settlements in territorial plains, like the Western Ghats of Kerala.

The woman's identity is analyzed from a new social perspective or circumstances. But if we look at it too many years back, we can see a different picture of womanhood. Throughout history, the life of womanhood has been marked in many places, and it is different from the present womanhood or life. The weakness or helplessness of women is abundantly marked in Achi Charitam and folk songs. The women of Vadakkan Pattukal (Northern Ballads) were the representatives of polygamy and polyandry. As per the modern perspective, these are all anti-women practices. Renaissance in the cultural fields, social reformation, and change in feudal society brought about changes in Kerala womanhood. There are similarities between the women of feudal society and modern tribal societies. However, the lifestyle of tribal women was not scattered. The structure and laws of tribes could lead the women's community properly.

More than fifty tribal communities live in Kerala. These communities possess diverse cultural features, seen in their rituals, traditions, beliefs, and art. The tribal tradition must have two different tributaries.

1. The pure way of tribal tradition.
2. The way of those who returned to tribal from feudal tradition.

The consideration that a woman gets from a man is very different for those who follow the natural tradition of the tribe and those who come from the feudal tradition. Thus, in a society, it is impossible to generalise tribal women.

2. MALA ARAYA TRIBE

Etymologically, the tribe's title denotes 'King of Mountain' as the word 'Araya' is a transformed form of the Tamil root word 'Arachan' or 'Arassu' meaning king, and the word 'mala' means mountain. Their abode was termed 'Arayakudi' because they usually inhabited hamlets with fifty to a hundred households. Each hamlet had a headman titled 'Ponamban' or 'Peramban'. The title is so because of the staff the headman bore, an elongated, thick stick made of cane with both ends decorated and coiled in silver, called 'Ponambu.' It symbolises the headman's power and right to rule Hamlet. It was under his discretion to cultivate paddy, pulse, and other profitable cultivatable in the hilly region, which made and maintained his rich status among the tribe.

Among the hill tribes, the Mala Arayans of the Western Ghats are a prominent group. The Western Ghats lie to the South of the Ganges in a triangular shape at a thousand to three thousand feet from sea level. The western range of the Ghats is the "loftiest and distinctly marked," with summits rising between nine thousand and ten thousand feet in height. Most of the Western Ghats run along the Thirunelveli side in Tamil Nadu and the Eastern Travancore in Kerala.

The tribal groups in India were constituted of a clan system, and Mala Aryans were no different. Each clan had kinship among other member clans based on 'territorial division, territorial contiguity, and common residence.' The Mala Araya tribe consisted of five main clans who lived in the Thodupuzha reserve forest area, called by them 'illam.' The five clans or illams were; 'then illam,' 'mala illam,' 'nellipalli illam,' 'vala illam,' and 'modalikadu illam'. The Mala Arayans were forbidden to marry from their clan because the clan members were considered brothers and sisters. Within each clan, even those not connected by blood relations used to observe rituals while dying or other practices due to their belief in a common ancestor. They had a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility and would observe traditional rituals together. The decisions were made or taken after consulting and weighing the suggestions of all clan members, and they never attributed any importance to individual choices.

Each Mala Arayan settlement had a head man called 'kanikkaran' or 'Arayan' elected by the clan or tribe members. His duty was to ensure peace and prosperity among the clan or tribe. They also had a council of elders to decide on various issues within the tribe and outside it, where tribesmen were included. The Mala Arayans gave deep value and honour to respect, which they exhibited without any delay or laziness to their elders, in their family and society. Their headman was considered their spiritual leader in all their matters, whether birth, marriage, housewarming, death, or any other subject. Their strong social structure is evident from what Mr Thomas Whitehouse portrays in his remark: "The Mala Araya chieftain was described as an old man, who could well be trusted and without whom his people would do nothing". At the beginning of the 20th century, a typical Mala Arayan family consisted only of a man, his wife, and a few children. In other words, there was no joint family system in society, nor did it exist before it ceased functioning in the later stages of the century. The father was the chief head of the family, and his authority was supreme. However, his children belonged to the clans of the mother.

3. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RITUALS

The identity of Mala Araya womanhood could be understood only by knowing the family order, the role of women in rituals, and her role in earning livelihood for the family. As per the tribal belief, when a girl child is born, others should be informed of that moment itself. It is a good example of how they represent women. When a child is born, if it is a girl child, the neighbours should be informed by making a sound from a mural (winnowing basket) and koduvaal (sickle). But if it is a boy, the sound should be from a bow-string or the spathe of the areca palm. We can understand how womanhood is represented by these instruments and sounds, which direction a girl and boy go. Here, we can see the competition of beliefs. A suppressed voice is expected from a girl, and a strong voice from a boy. Even though she goes along with men for livelihood, there is discrimination. The sound of identification, which was given at the time of birth, is maintained at the time of death, too, i.e., above the woman's tomb, there kept a lineal, and above the man, a bow.

A Mala Araya girl enters the chain of rituals by the act of kathukuthu kalyanam. Before that there are rituals such as chorunnu and peruvili. But no rituals mark gender differences during this period of her life. Kathukuthu kalyanam is pivotal in creating an urge for ornaments and beauty consciousness in her mind. It is this ritual which separates women from men. There is a tradition of wearing kadukkan among men like womenfolk. That is a form of ritual. Among the Kurichya community of Wayanad, the moopan (head man) used to advise girls about the new way of life after the kathukuthu kalyanam. In the next year, it follows the thalikettu kalyanam. It is a ritual before her puberty. That is, thali is a symbol knots in her neck by a Cousin or by an Uncle, or by the Moopan. This is what is meant by thalikettu kalyanam. But it does not have any connection with real marriage in her life. But among some communities, it is considered as a ritual to fix the future life partner for her.

4. RITHUMATHI KALYANAM (PUBERTY MARRIAGE)

It is through the rithumathi kalyanam marriage that a Mala Araya woman is acknowledged in society. It is a ritual that announces to the society that she is mature. As far as the tribal community is concerned, marriage is possible only after puberty. The term rithumathi means that a girl is having her first menstrual period. From that moment to some days, she is being treated as impure. Thus, she has to leave home for a few days. Then, after the period of impurity, she returns home. This is what is meant by rithumathi kalyanam.

The girl who has her first menses period has to go away from her hut. After a fixed period of time, she returns to home during the traditionally established bath and rituals. For this, a special hut will be made outside the home. This is called ayithapura. When she is in ayithapura, she must not watch any man. If she sees any man, the days of impurity will increase. It is a process that keeps a woman physically and mentally aloof from men. Some psychological aim is there behind this act. This creates a notion in her mind that she must be very careful about men from now on.

5. WOMEN IN THE MARRIAGE DIAS

The most important and valuable moment in the life of a Mala Araya lady is her marriage. There are rituals in the tribal community that show that she is not a burden to the family and parents in the case of women in modern society. Studies show that there is no dowry system among them. They consider women themselves as wealthy. It is the

bridegroom who gives money to the parents. In other words, they are buying the girl. Some people give energy or commodities to possess the girl. This marriage is known as *sevana kalyanam*. Through this, the physical power of man is examined. They do the works of wood and agriculture in the bride's home before the marriage. Only by showing his physical fitness could he marry the girl. It is an opportunity for women to observe and control men. This is considered her right. However, different from this form of marriage, some rituals exist among the tribal communities of Attapadi, such as Irular and Thenkurumar. These rituals show male dominance in some areas and female dominance in others. Marriage based on the woman's character is, to some extent, bad. Even though dowry is absent, marriage by giving money to the bride's family is unfair. The result is that she becomes a commodity in the marriage market. But in general, the Mala Araya women have more control over men than the women of modern society.

All the Mala Araya women had to undergo two marriages, the '*thalikettu kalyanam*' and the original one, and it had to be done as per the directions of the astrologer and the priest. After fixing the marriage date, invitations are sent to relatives and friends who would participate in the sacred marriage custom. As said above, the male was not restricted to single marriage, but the female was. Along with polygamy, some of them had the practice of marrying their cousins, which was not the case with the whole Mala Araya tribe. Widows were not allowed to marry anyone of their choice but either the elder or younger brother of their dead husband. Yet, if a man is not interested in his wife, he can divorce her and find himself a new partner, but the woman will be sent back to her house along with her children and won't be allowed to get married again. Divorce is common among them. When they took enough measures to prevent teenage adultery, they have never taken any measure to ensure the biological needs of widows and divorced wives, who would then be led astray in hidden relationships. This was before the Aryans, whose invasion changed the customs.

Perseverance is something very important for any family. Women were appreciated in every society where she has a role in the family's livelihood. Due to this, it has some merits and demerits for the family. A marriage that requires perseverance from the bride will reduce the share of perseverance of one of the family members, increasing the livelihood of that family. Tribal society looks at it rationally. The money given to the bride's family is a good example. It is equal to the share an employed woman provides for the family in modern society. The rationale behind this notion is that the woman herself is wealthy.

6. FREEDOM IN MAN- WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP

They have their concept about the behaviour of a tribal lady in their society. They have some traditional ideas about morality. The limitation imposed by morality is a good sign that society has carefully obscured and controlled her. They give much importance to chastity and morality. Generally, it is believed that family life in the tribal culture is safe. But divorce, according to community law, is common. Remarriage is possible; a lady becomes free only if she prepays the dowry the bridegroom gave her. If the divorce is the insistence of a male, she doesn't want to repay the amount. The purity of a woman depends upon her chastity. A woman should only have one partner. If widowed, she could accept another man. They give much importance to all these things.

Women are given respect and social positions almost equal to men in the Mala Araya community. No one is a weaker or stronger sex there. The community engaged in their occupation, whether it was cultivation, cattle raising, or hunting, and women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in it all. Women are restricted access to religious shrines, sacred groves, and ceremonies during their menstrual period. At such time, they would have to keep their distance from others to avoid spreading diseases, and their food would be prepared separately. Violation of customs is taken seriously, and they believe it will bring downfall upon the family, especially in practices related to women. Parents train their children in their occupations without any gender partiality. Nuptial intimacy and gender equality were said to have been evident in the feasts the Mala Arayans used to observe and celebrate in the past times.

7. CONCLUSION

A woman is more considered and protected in a tribal society than a modern one. However, the concept that ancient women enjoyed equal status to men was wrong. Every tribal law was developed from the male perspective. The ultimate word is of the man; in many ways, the traditional laws destroy the freedom of the woman's community. A woman has to face rigorous treatment if she breaks the community law. The advice given to the bride at the time of marriage in Kurichya society is a good example. The advice given to the bridegroom echoes his dominance over her. It is equal to the advice

provided by Kannuvan to Sakunthala in Abinjana Sakuntalam. It concludes that a woman should live under the control of a man from childhood.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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