



Women and Marriage in Marumakkathayam

Moothedath Mayadevi

Department of History, Zamorins Guruvayurappan College, Calicut, Kerala, INDIA

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Abstract

Malabar was known throughout the world for its exotic system of marriage and family relations. Matriliney of Malabar was known by the name of marumakkathayam. This was a system in which women were central to all family relations and property rights vested on women. Women and her children were the inheritors of the property. Nair households were known as tarawad and Nair marriages as sambandham. This was a unique system of marriage in which the male partner was devoid of any responsibility in a marital relationship. Usually nair women received husbands from upper castes, like the namboothiris- the Brahmin caste of Kerala. This article attempts to analyze the status of nair women and their so called "celebrated" freedom they enjoyed in their tarawads. There was a notion regarding nair women that, they unlike their counterparts in other castes, were free to take decisions on various issues including their marriage. In a patriarchal Indian society this was inconceivable. But this notion seems to be dwindling in the light of certain other sources. Status of women in the family and their rights were under the strict control of the eldest male member of the family, the karnavan. More studies are to be made in this respect to reveal the condition of nair women.

Keywords: Matriliney, Malabar, women, Nairs.

Introduction

Family and marriage always played significant roles in determining the life and status of women throughout the world. Kinship rules, marriage laws and descent patterns are important criterion in the creation of women's life. When female sex is the distinguishing criterion, the descent principle is called matrilineal. In this the individual's relationship is to his mother and through her to other kinsmen, both male and female, but continuing only through females.

Bachofen argued that human society began in a state of primitive promiscuity in which there was really no social organization and no regulation of behavior or sex. Matriliney, the second stage of cultural evolution was associated with the invention of agriculture by women¹. Matrilineal descent reflected the cult of a female deity and depended directly on the religious mentality of women.

Matrilineal system existed in Kerala even during the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the major matrilineal castes that had existed in Kerala was the *Nayars*. *Nayars* of Kerala have certainly been almost universally regarded as exotic and extraordinary by those who have visited them due to existence of a peculiar system of inheritance, i.e., the *Marumakkattayam*. *Nayars* had a peculiar system of marriage within the format of *marumakkathayam* and was structured by the then existing land relations.

In this study the marriage system of *Nayars* has been subjected to a re-analysis to find out 'women' in *Nayar* marriage – her

status, her roles, her sexual freedom, and her responsibilities. Women's roles, status, images and symbols are important while dealing with the matrilineal system of Kerala, because women were central to this system. This pre requires an overview of the existing knowledge regarding nayar marriage. *Marumakkathayam* cut across the boundaries of different disciplines like History, Sociology, Anthropology, Gender studies, Agrarian studies, Legal studies etc. Scholars belonging to these disciplines have analyzed *Marumakkathayam* and the *Nair* system of marriage. Europeans travelers and administrators were the first to study about this exotic system. Friar Jordanus of 14th century was the first European traveler to mention the existence of a peculiar system of inheritance in Kerala. Later on Francis Buchanan, Durate Barbosa, William Logan etc. looked into this system and expressed their curiosity.

Among the historians K.P.Padmanabha Menon in 'History of Kerala' was the first to deal with the system and he tried to trace its origin. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai in 'Studies in Kerala History' argued that during the *Chera-Chola* war the members of the military squad could not form permanent marriage unions or attend the management of households and thus it was entrusted upon women². Historians never indulged into the condition of women involved. Anthropologists like Kathleen Gough, Dumont, C.J.Fuller and others always searched for parallels in Kerala that would fit into the theoretical framework of matriliney. Even while discussing the marriage they concentrated on the concepts of 'group marriage', primary marriage, secondary marriage and so on, but failed to recognize women.

A major addition to *marumakkathayam* studies can come from a group of scholars like Saradhamoni, Praveena Kodoth, J.Devika and others. Saradhamoni argued that the central feature of matriliney is that it confers on women permanent right to maintenance by and residence in their natal home³. This gives them a degree of autonomy which is not possible in the patrilineal system. These scholars dealt with the various gender issues and were the first to reckon that women were central to this whole process. They analyzed *tarawad*, its management and concluded that women enjoyed freedom in this system.

This paper has one objective to systematically analyze the actual 'condition' of women in the *Nair* system of marriage and to determine that whether they really enjoyed the so called 'freedom' of *Nair* women. The geographical area of the study has been confined to British Malabar. *Marumakkattayam* is a conglomeration of various concepts and rituals. Hence a multidisciplinary approach is inevitable. Official records, diaries, private papers, literary works, field study, personal interviews, case study are all used in the course of this study. To analyze the objective a field work is done in the districts of Kozhikode, and Palakkad. Twenty *Nair tarawads* in these regions are visited during this study and from these a case of five *Nair tarawads* are chosen for detailed examination.

Marumakkathayam-Matrilineal System of Kerala

Matriliney of Kerala was known by the name *Marumakkattayam*. The term came from *marumakkal* – nephews and nieces. The word has been coined due to the unusual relationship between uncle and his nephews and nieces. This peculiar system is built upon women. It gave protection to women compared to their counterparts in patrilineal families. Women were the stock of the land title and it was through her that the *tarawad* name was transmitted from one generation to another. She had a birth right over *tarawad* property and this lasted throughout her life. The *Nair* women and their children lived in the *tarawad* – matrilineal household – itself.

A big *tarawad* was composed of several numbers of residences and vast landed property. Some *tarawads* enjoyed quasi judicial privileges which kept the cultivating population in its thrall⁴. The property of the *tarawad* was held in common and partition was not allowed. The head and manager of the *tarawad* was the senior male member or *karnavan*. The literal meaning of the term is one who is accountable and responsible. He was an agent who represented the *tarawad* but, not its owner. British interpretation of *marumakkathayam* law vested in him exclusive right and duty to manage the *tarawad* property⁵. The Colonial patriarchal system was confused to see that women were the property owners and they searched for a male figure with whom they could make all the settlements. Regarding the management of *Tarawad* Praveena Kodoth says that the general presumption in favor of management by the senior male was all too often turned into an exclusion of women from managerial roles or used to exhaust women's claims⁶.

Nair-Marriage

The study of family and marriage largely focused on the institution of marriage. One such marriage that found worldwide attention was that found among the *Nairs* of Kerala. There were two types of marriage for a *Nair* girl – *talikettukalyanam* and *sambandham*. *Talikettukalyanam* was performed before attaining puberty and when she attained maturity she entered into a *sambandham* union. The marriage system of Malabar was definitely related to the then existing land relations. To conceive the significance of *Nair* marriage, first of all we should have a picture of the system of marriage that had existed in the *Nambuthiri* community.

Nambuthiris were the *Janmis* and *Nairs* were the *Kanamdars* (*Janmi* was the holder of *Janmam* right and was a dignity with a fixed share of the produce of land. In Kerala *Nambuthiris* were the predominant group of *Janmis*. *Kanamdar* was the holder of *Kanam* tenure and it was the right to supervise all inhabitants of the particular land. *Kanamdar* was lower in status to *Janmi*).

Nambuthiris in Kerala followed primogeniture, i.e. only the eldest son was permitted to marry *Nambuthiri* women and younger sons had liaisons with women of other castes. This system facilitated the *Nambuthiris* to claim sexual access to *Nair* women⁷. Through this *Nambuthiris* controlled the sexuality on *Nair* women. On the other hand they wanted their women to maintain chastity, in order to preserve the purity of caste. The women except the *Nambuthiris* were available for sexual relations by men higher than them in their caste, *Nambuthiri* men were the prominent benefactors in this regard⁸.

A *Nair* girl had to undergo two types of marriages- *Talikettukalyanam* and *sambandham*. A.K.B. pillai argues that the military occupation was the reason for this bifurcation⁹. *Talikettukalyanam* was a pre-puberty marriage and *sambandham* was a union that she could make after attaining maturity with a man of her own caste or higher than her.

Talikettukalyanam

When a female child grew up and was to attain puberty it was the concern of the mother to conduct her *talikettukalyanam*. The *Nairs* of one village or two adjacent villages formed a neighborhood group of six to ten lineages. Each lineage was linked by hereditary ties of ceremonial co-operation with two or three lineages in the neighbourhood¹⁰. These linked lineages were called *enganan*. Every ten or twelve years each lineage held a grand ceremony of *talikettukalyanam* during which immature girls of one generation was ritually married by men drawn from their *enganan* lineages.

It was an elaborate ceremony for four days. The *enganan* tied a *tali* around the neck of the girl. After this each couple was secluded in private for three days and here sexual relation might take place (regional variation existed). A 'girl' who belonged to

an age group of 5-10 or even less than that was expected to have sexual relation. This was a highly ridiculous ceremony. On the fourth day the *enangan* left the house and had no further obligations to the girl. *Talikettukalyanam* was essential for a girl. It marked various changes in the social position of a girl; she was given the status of a woman. After the tali-rite she should observe all the rituals of a Nayar woman and was to be addressed only as *amma*, in public. It was an occasion to display the pomp and glory of the *tarawad*. It was an expensive ceremony that lasted for four days. *Tarawads* had to sell or mortgage property to meet the expenses of the ceremony and *tarawads* plunged into huge debts¹¹.

Sambandham

Bound up with the system of *marumakkattayam* was the institution known as 'sambandham', the loose form of marriage which entails no responsibility or legal obligation on the part, of 'husband' towards his 'wife and children'¹². Whoever studied about *Nairs* criticized the *sambandham* relations as it created no perpetual relationships between man and woman. Durate Barbosa wrote that, 'these men are not married their nephews are their heirs'¹³. After attaining maturity a girl received 'visiting husbands' from her own sub-caste or caste higher than her. But she could never have any relation with a man of a caste lower than her's.

Sambandham ceremony was very simple- a *pudava* was given to the woman as gift by the bridegroom. Neither party to a *sambandham* union thereby a member of the other's family and the offspring of the union belong to their mother's *tarawad* and have no sort of claim to the share of father's property. If a *Nambuthiri Janmi* begins a *sambandham* with a *Nair* woman, it was not possible for his to take her to his *illam*. Hence women and her children remained in their own *tarawads*, where they had right on *tarawad* property. Due to this reason some of the scholars have considered *marumakkattayam* system as a matrilineal system (matrilineal means the couple lived with the bride's matrilineal kinsmen).

One of the major concerns of the scholars who dealt with *Nair* marriage was that of polyandry. During sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was a practice among *nair* women to have three or four husbands at the same time. It is said that woman could have visiting husbands as well as regular husbands. However if a woman became pregnant one or men of appropriate caste should acknowledge the paternity of the offspring unless a child could never enter his/her caste or lineage at all. Another significant aspect of *sambandham* was that it was easily dissoluble, no formality was needed.

One of the main points projected by the scholars was that in the case of *sambandham* relations women had the right to decide their partner. But in practice it can be seen that it was the decision of the *karanavan*. 'Women' could give her opinion but it was not the girl who was getting married but her mother. If

the *karnavan* desired to have a relation with a *Nambuthiri*, women were forced to enter into a *sambandham* union regardless of his age, physique, etc. Here there was no option for a woman other than being obedient to the *karanavan*. In the same manner if *karnavan* had some misunderstanding with a woman's husband, she was forced to end the relation. Here also woman's choice never turned up.

Foreign travelers had continuously argued that *Nair* women had sexual promiscuity. This argument cannot be accepted as such because plural unions were customary, but relations were forbidden with members of the same lineage on pain of death. Even more relations with men of any lower caste were not entertained. If a woman was found guilty her *tarawad* was excommunicated until the woman was expelled from the *tarawad*.

Marriage and Women: Insights from Case Study

Women and their experiences are never found expression in historical works or literary texts. This necessitates the use of ethnographic research methods in revealing the issues related with women. The field study was conducted in the districts of Kozhikode, and Palakkad. In this study several women and men belonging to different socio-economic status were interviewed. This interaction was highly fruitful as it gave an insight into the real conditions in which the *Nair* women lived. Several *tarawads* were visited for this analysis and from these five *tarawads* are selected and an in-depth study is made. Many of the respondents were of the opinion that they had no freedom in their *tarawads*. During interaction they recollect what they have been told by their mothers, aunts and grandmothers.

At first the case of Parol *tarawad* of Kozhikode can be seen. It is one of the upper class *tarawad* of Kozhikode region. This was a large *tarawad* with numerous members and was divided into several *thavazhi*. Women of the *tarawad* were ready to share their memory regarding their grandmothers. They referred to the instance of a woman, Parol Janaki Amma, who got married in 1945 at the age of seventeen. According to the informants she was the most beautiful women in her *tarawad*, but she was forced to marry against her will. She had four sisters and a brother, her eldest sister died during her second delivery. Unfortunately the *karanavan* of the *tarawad* wanted Janaki Amma to be married to her deceased sister's husband. She was not at all interested in this relation but succumbed, before the pressure of the *karanavan*

Kottayil is another *tarawad* in Kozhikode, within the corporation region. This was a lower class *nayar tarawad*, with very limited landed property and other resources and was divided into two *thavazhi*. As per the respondent, Kottayil Ammalukuty, a member of this *tarawad* was married at the age of 16, in 1941-42 (respondent has forgotten the exact year). The bridegroom was almost twenty two years elder than the bride. Ammalukuty Amma and her mother was against this marriage,

but the *karanavan* and the girl's brother were adamant, because the bridegroom was a *Namboothiri* of a well to do *illom*.

Palakkad is usually considered as a place where *marumakkathayam* was seen in its pristine purity. Moothedath is an upper class Nayar *tarawad* in Palakkad. The *tarawad* had large number of women, divided into six *thavazhi* and with vast resources as landed property. Though the women were educated even during the early twentieth century, the administration was done by males – *karanavan*. Respondents enthusiastically shared their memories about *thalikettukalyanam* that was conducted in the *tarawad*. One of the informant pointed out the instance of Moothedath Karthyayani Amma. She was married at the age of thirteen, in 1923, to Kurupath Ponukutty Nair, who had three wives at the time of marriage. Hence the family members resisted this marriage and asked the *karnavan* to change the decision but he was not at all ready and the marriage took place. Karthyayani Amma's father was an educated person and was a government servant, he too was against this marriage, but he had no role in his daughter's marriage.

Kumarankandath was a famous and wealthy *tarawad* of Palakkad. It was divided into five *thavazhi*. Informants of this *tarawad* remember a marriage which they came to know from their grandparents. This was the marriage of Kumarankandath Kalikutty Amma, married at the age of 16 in 1897, to Chatarathu Veetil Unni Menon. All the family members were against this alliance because the horoscopes of bride and bridegroom were not matching. Kallikutty Amma's father, a famous advocate, resisted this marriage in vain as the girl's marriage was the concern and privilege of the *karanavan*. Unfortunately as the horoscope said she died during her first delivery.

Polpulli was a middle class *tarawad* in Palakkad; with four *thavazhi* and numerous people. Informants from this *tarawad* memorized the instance of Polpulli Yasodha who was married, at the age of fourteen in 1913, to Padmanabha Menon. In this case also the horoscope was not matching, *tarawad* members were against this relation; but the *karanavan* was firm in his decision and the marriage took place.

Information from the case studies is astonishing as it provides unexpected insights into the issue. They remember the stories and events as told by their family members. Women of Nair *tarawads* were under the control of the male folk, hence the widely popularized concept that the sexuality of Nair women were out of the control of the male members has to be discredited. This is quite clear from the experiences of the informants. A marriage was always a prestigious issue for a *tarawad* so it was arranged as per the interest of the *karanavan*. Hence the interest of the bride or her mother was never considered and it was a monotonous decision of the *karanavan*. The field study has made it clear that the celebrated freedom of *Nair women* does not exist.

Conclusion

Status of women and the nature of marriage are closely related. Usually it is the pattern of marriage that determines the nature of family and the role of women in it. Women were central to *marumakkattayam* and the system entrusted several responsibilities on her. Women were responsible for rearing their children as the partner had no such legal obligation. There was no room for the recognition of the relationship of husband and wife and of father and child.

Women of *marumakkathayam* families differed from their counterparts in patrilineal families because even after her marriage right and claim to property of *tarawad* was not altered. Moreover her children irrespective of their sex belonged to her own *tarawad*. In a matrilineal system women's sexuality is not under the oppressive control of either her matrikin or her husband and his group. Among *Nairs* because of the concern with boundary maintenance – an essential feature of the caste there were definite mechanism to ensure that women chose their males only from among accepted levels of caste. As a general presumption it seems to be true that women in matrilineal societies are not under any intensive and oppressive control.

On the other hand that woman, the owners of *tarawad* property, was strictly under the control of the eldest male member of the *tarawad*. The concept of freedom was largely limited by the boundaries created by males. Even the sexuality of *Nair* women were under the hegemonic control of *Nambuthiri* men. The hegemonic ideology of that period was that of the patriarchal *Nambuthiris*. In such an ideological framework women would not be given indefinite freedom or rights.

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