

# Amoralities Give Rise To Social Reform Movements Of Kerala – A Study Of Nambuthiri, Nair And Ezhava Women Analogous Vows

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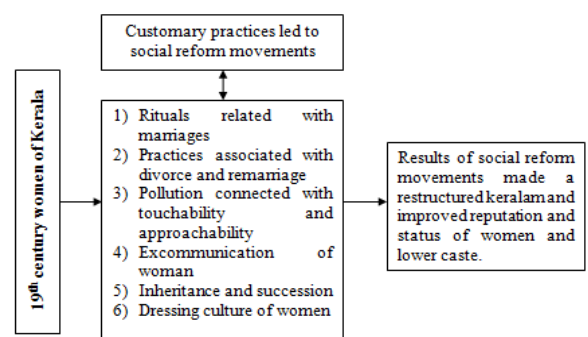
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**Abstract:** Nambuthiri, Nair and Ezhava women in Kerala were subjected to many evil social customs or Acharam and Anushtanam related to marriage, remarriage, divorce, dressing, chastity, property rights and pollution associated with touchability and approachability, etc. The status of women belonging to all religions, castes and sub-castes was pitiable. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala witnessed revolutionary reform movements. These revolutionary reform movements freed woman belonging to different religions, castes and sub-castes from the rites and customs made by masculine egotism. This paper focuses its attention on the position of Nambuthiri, Nair, and Ezhava or Tiyya women of nineteenth century that strengthened the social reform movements of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Jathi, Acharam, Anushtanam, Sapathni, fidelity, chastity, glorified prostitution, co-habit, Makkathayam, Marumakkatayam, Misradhayam, seclusion, servitude, infant marriage, polygamy, polyandry, dowry and Sambadam.

## I. INTRODUCTION

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala witnessed several reform movements. Before the reform movements, Nambuthiri, Nair and Ezhava women were subjected to various types of social evils. Women were cooped in the dark alcoves of their dwell without knowing their rights and expressing views as a subject of incapability by masculine vanity. Compared to other states the jahti (caste) inspirations were at its worst protuberance in Kerala. And these caste-based shameful customs had a dominant role in determining the social status and hierarchical structure of women in the state. The reform movements helped to change the social status and hierarchical structure of all categories of women. Many of the Acharams connected with women were mainly associated with wedding, re-marriage, divorce, excommunication, dress culture, inheritance, pollution etc.



Source – Beena Dominic “women’s education a tool of social transformation- A historic study based on Kerala society” (modified)

Figure 1: Customs that led to social reform movements

## A. MARRIAGE

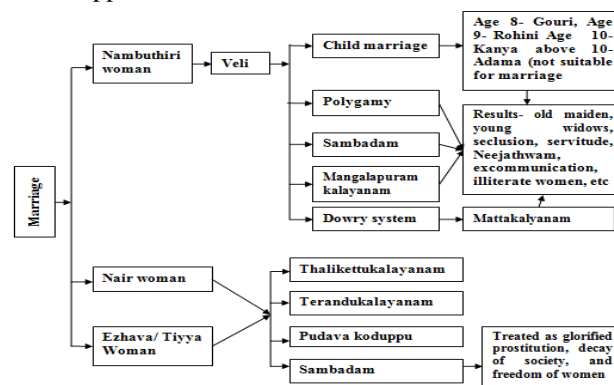
Brahmin community’s praxis primogenity only revived elder son (*Moose*) to wedlock from the similar community to produce obligatory male successor and to avoid disarray of the family (*Illam*) via division of wealth. Whereas the younger

sons of the families were only vouchsafed to have co-habit (*Sambadam*) with matrilineal castes like Nair or Ambalavasies. Even after *Adhivedam* (marrying more than one) elder son could not produce male heir (spiritual benefactor) then scarcely younger brother get approbation for marrying from the same class. The suitable age for girl's marriage was before puberty nay at-least in the age of ten. Even at the death bed, rites allowed Nambuthiri men to have nuptials with small girls. Marriage involved dowry system and the amount of dowry used to be fixed by bride's parents. There was a practice called *Mattakalyanam* means the Nambuthiri men marry the sister or daughter of his daughter's or sister's groom to avoid dowry. There had had been horrendous seclusion and pique between wives of Nambuthiri men (*sapathnis*). A custom called *Mangalapuram kalayanam* was also prevailed in Nambuthiri community. In such marriages Nambuthiri families simply eschew and sell their daughters at Mangalapuram (Mangalore) in the name of marriage owing to difficulties of arranging grooms for their daughters due to financial difficulties. As per the rituals Nambuthiri community was not allowed to sell women. But many incidents were delineated regarding *Mangalapuram kalayanam*. The ridiculous farce mores barred *Antharjanam* (inside lady) from looking at the face of any male gender excluding her spouse. If any Nambuthiri lady perpetrates sexual norms (*Adukkaladosham*) of the Brahmin aristocracy she will be subjected to a ceremonious trial *Smarthavijaram* and excommunication from the society. During travel the Nambuthiri lady must take a *gosha* (the assistance of a Nair lady) with a big palm umbrella (*marakkuda*) to cover the face of the Nambuthiri lady. The outcomes of the Brahmin feign customs produced old maidens, solitary wives, and young widows and excommunicated slattern.

*Thalikettu kalayanam* or girl's marriage before puberty was a consuetude for Nair and Ezhava parentage. Under this system in the Nair community the person who ties the *tali may not* be the real groom. In Ezhava community *thalikettu kalayanam* used to be conducted with (*Murachekkan*) or without the real groom of the girl. In certain cases it used to be a fictitious marriage to comply with the rituals. The vainly amoral functions culmination day, Nair groom dissociates the relation by simply washing his hands or breaking a tread or a paddy seed. An evil custom associated with the *thalikettu kalayanam* of Ezhava or Tiyya community was *madhuram koduppu*. The girl's mother has to serve sweets to the groom. In case the mother serves sweets to the groom as well as his brothers, then the girl becomes wives to those men as well. In those days Ezhavas were proud to have one wife to the whole brothers. Other defamatory rite performed was *Terandu kalayanam* or celebration connected with first menstruation. The first bath after the first menstruation used to be an expensive constraint for the family as it was expected to be celebrated like an *éclat* with impressive feast to the society. All these resulted in waste of money and in several cases the families conducting such feasts were forced to fall in debt trap. The real marriage of a Nair lady used to be performed only after attainment of puberty. Nair ladies had absolute liberty to choose their fiancé. The marriage function *pudamuri/pudavakoduppu* used to be a diminutive precedent in front of a standing lamp by offering a cloth (*pudava*) to the

bride. Both polyandry and polygamy were permitted in Nair society and wench had term based sexual intercourse with men of her propinquity. This was really a blot on the society as it was nothing but glorified prostitution. This manifested the highest of freedom from servitude and worship of husband or a quittance of ladies from the mores of Kulinisam and chastity.

The real wedding rituals of the Tiyya or Ezhava community (*mangalam or mudukoduppu*) were similar to Nair *pudamuri*. But dowry was essential for Ezhava wedding. Monogamy was performed by Tiyya community but at the same time many Ezhavas were found performing polygamy and polyandry with proud. Just like the Nair community Ezhava or Thiyya community were also performing *Tirandukalyanam* and *kettulayanam* along with *Mudukoduppu*.



Source: Pathonpatham noottandile keralam- Bhaskaranunni (modified)

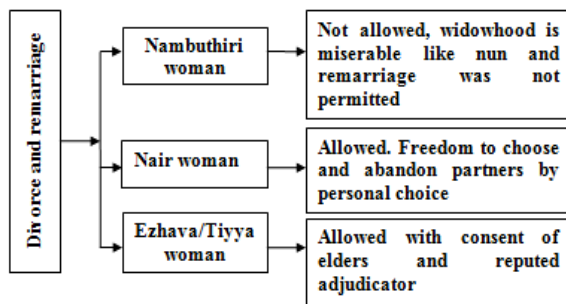
Figure 2: shows the different customs related to marriage of different castes

## B. REMARRIAGE AND WIDOWHOOD

Nambuthiri and Brahmin families never tend the practice 'Sahagamanam' (another name of sati) a custom of sacrificing the widow of the deceased to the pyre of the deceased with or without the willingness to follow the soul of the deceased. Kerala's Brahmin community had many acerbic social practices incoherent with other upper castes of India. *Akathalamma* or *Antharjanam* (inside woman) were safe from *Sahagamanam* but as per the custom and norms existed in Nambuthiri families the second marriage or remarriage of widow was a defamation. The ladies after their husband's death need to live rest of their lives as like a nun. Again, the widow shall never exceed one meal a day or sleep on bed. The Nambuthiri customs permitted men to have many wives (as per law three) other than 'Sambadam' and amour with matrilineal castes along with different kinds of oppressive sexual severity towards working class ladies. The custom also permitted Nambuthiri men marry another lady forthwith after the death of his wife. Another vicious ceremony associated with the death of *Antharjanam* was *Neejathwam*. The dead body of the woman is adorned like a bride and places at the disposal of a selected lower caste man to have eroticism with the dead body. These kinds of evil customs and practices were for just to eschew imprecation of the maiden lady's soul.

In Nair society, women celebrated glance of emancipation in marital relationships. They deflected the rules of chastity,

kulinisam and motherly hood. Women were not reliant on their husbands at all. If they like they can have more than one husband at a time. They had also the right to abandon their husbands' while ennui in their relationship. To declare the separation from a relationship they need just to keep the Weapon or sabots (*Methiyadi*) of the man outside the master room. Similarly, if one of the husbands of the Nair lady dies, custom allowed her to remarry another person and the number of Sambadams made her position more respectable in the society. In Ezhava or Tiyya community remarriage and divorce had special traditions. They followed customary practices related to divorce. Either party informs his or her intention to the relatives or elders. The relatives or elders may make some reconciliation attempt and if reconciliation was not effected then final settlement of divorce will be granted by receiving *Ozhivu pudava* (a piece of cloth) by the lady and *Azhivu* (compensation for damaging the youthfulness and health of women) and *Chelavu* (cost of marriage) by the husband to end the relation. In the case of mutual divorce husband has to pay only 101 *panam* (money) to woman.



Source: Pathonpatham noottandile keralam- Bhaskaranunni (modified)

Figure 3: Woman's Status with respect to divorce and remarriage

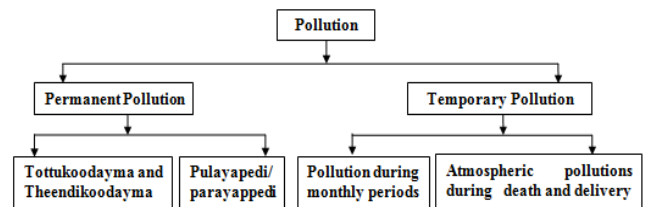
### C. POLLUTION RELATED WITH UNTOUCHABILITY AND UNAPPROACHABILITY

Touchability or approachability of women was governed by the premises of permanent and temporary pollutions. *Tottukoodayma* (Un-touchability) and *Theendikoodayma* (Un-approachability) were practiced as per the covenants of patriarchy. A touch or an approach of a lower caste woman was expected to pollute the upper caste man. But this un-touchability is practiced only during day time. After sun set there was no question of un-touchability. The lower caste persons were expected to keep measured distance from the higher caste persons based on *Tottukoodayma* and *Theendikoodayma*.

Temporary un-touchability of woman was mainly associated with menstruation, death and delivery. During the first four days of menstruation women were not allowed to touch anyone except their kids for breast feeding. They have to stay themselves in a separate room. Traditional *Malayalee* society curtailed the liberty and privileges of woman. The ceremonial pollution is a sort of atmospheric pollution applicable for the whole family members irrespective of age, background or gender. In the case of delivery, the lady who delivered and her family will be considered as polluted for ten

days. During those ten days the infected family was not allowed to enter into any temple. In the same way, death in a family could pollute the members of the family. Temple visits or visiting relative's houses were prohibited to the polluted family during the period of pollution. The widows, daughters or sisters of the dead are forced to sit on a mat (*payil erikkuka*) inside the house in front of a lamp during the pollution period. Ladies of the family were forced to cover their head with a white cloth even when they go out for meeting nature's call. The period of pollution in case of death was 16 days and this is to be terminated by performing a ceremony (*Santhi karmam*) by a priest. Even today many Malayalee families are following these kinds of custom dictated practices.

*Pulayapedi* or *Parayapedi* was two custom based pollution practices imposed on upper caste ladies. As per this tradition, on a particular day with permission of the feudal caste, lower caste men could touch ladies belonging to the upper caste, use ponds of Brahmin's for taking bath, participate in festivals of temples. Based on this practice, if a lower caste man touches an upper caste (Savarna) girl she will be treated as polluted and she was forced to go with the person who touched her and spend her life with him till death. But irony of these kinds of customs was that all these kinds of customs were applicable for woman only.



Source: Pathonpatham noottandile keralam- Bhaskaranunni (modified)

Figure 4: Types of pollution and women

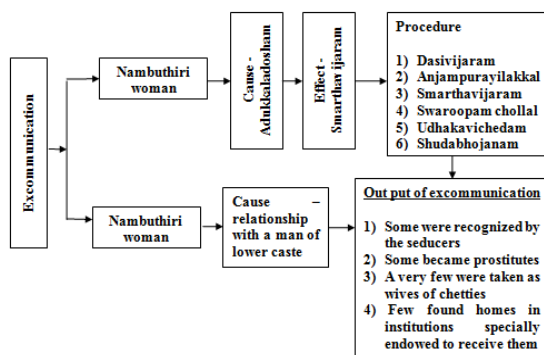
### D. DRESSING CULTURE

The dressing culture of Antharjanams were quite neater compared with other Hindu ladies' dressing. The Antharjanams enfold an under cloth rounded to haunch and position it between the legs. They were using corsage by simply wrapping a cloth around the breasts under the armpits and sheer to cover the breast wholly. They used fine expensive cloths and they had the freedom to cover the upper part of the body. The general dress of Nair ladies was exceedingly scanty. They used to wear only a single white cloth of excellent quality reaching from waist to the knees. Occasionally while going abroad they don another piece of white cloth over the shoulders to cover bosom. The working class ladies were not permitted to cover upper part of their body whether they are in or outside their homes. This means that they must remain topless. They were baits of feudalistic haughtiness and conceit. The lower caste women were not permitted to cover their upper part even when they go abroad. In case the lower caste women want to cover their upper part of their body they have to pay a tax called *mulakkaram*. One of the major reform movements of Kerala was related to freedom of women to cover the upper parts of their body. The Victorian morality terms in connection with not covering breast as a code of

sexuality and shameful activity and as a part of Anglicize the culture of colonies Christian missionaries put efforts on converted women for covering upper part of their body and as a part of renaissance movements reformists of Kerala fought to secure woman's right to cover their breast.

#### E. EXCOMMUNICATION

*Smarthavijaram* was a social evil which existed particularly among Nambuthiri and Nair families. This was enough to engender high caste women and reducing them to slavery. When a Brahmin woman was suspected *Adukkaladosham* by her relatives or neighbors with an illegal connection any man, the suspected woman had to face a severe process of trails known as *smartha* before her excommunication from her caste. The process starts with interrogation of the *antharjanam's* servant (*dasivijaram*) and after that the suspected lady will be shifted to another place (*anjamprrayilakkukail*) and from that day onwards the suspected lady will be called as *sadhanam* (thing/article or subject). The process of trail has to be by an authorized person *smarthan* and all will assemble at a place where the accused is kept. The questioning of *sadhanam* by *smarthan* (authorized person) will be through the medium of a maid. Once the accused make confession and then the sentence of excommunication is passed by *smartha* and thereupon the accuser's *marakkuda* will be taken off formally as a part of pollution removal of the *desam* (locality). Then her kinsman performs certain rites and formally cut their relationship from her. The woman is then permitted to go where she likes. Some recognize their seducers and go with them, some become prostitutes. If the tribunal fails to prove the blame of the accused, the lady can live with her caste followers. Nair ladies had extremely liberal life vis-à-vis *Akathalamma*. In every caste it was ordinary to have polygamy. The same way Nair and some Ezhava community allowed their women to have polyandry. Relationship with men was purely the choice of the lady. This encouraged Nair ladies to have more lovers or husbands for getting more respect from the community. A Nair lady's freedom to have sexual relationship was restricted to an upper or of the same caste men. The community promoted hyper gamy and endogamy and if she made any sexual relationship with men from a lower caste the same excommunication was the punishment for her blustering.



Source: Pathonpatham noottandile keralam- Bhaskaranunni (modified)

Figure 5: Rites at the time of Smarthavijaram and excommunication

#### F. DISPARITY BETWEEN GIRL AND BOY CHILD

Another degrading custom which even still continues in the society is dowry system. The dowry rates went up according to the academic and economic position of groom and his family status. Economic considerations were dominant in arranging marriages. One might almost say that their main concern was to get the largest possible dowry. This disparity made birth of a girl child encumbrance to the family and birth of a boy child a yield to the family. As per the belief of the community, for salvation of the antecedents of the family the spiritual benefactor should be the boy child of the family. Primogenity and co-habitation system saved families from dividing their wealth. Thus it was easy for the Nambuthiri families to maintain their position as a landlord. Here the problem of having a girl child was the payment of heavy dowry. This could be a cause of reduction of illam property and which may affect their landed aristocracy. As riddance many families followed *Mattakalyanam*, in which one bride was given and another was taken from the same family. In such cases there was neither profit nor loss as such. The exact reasons of such marriages were just to avoid criticism regarding keeping unmarried daughters within the home. In the case of the girl it was like marrying a man of her father's age. For younger widows remarriage and divorce from an unsatisfied relation was really a phantasm. At the same time they have to consummate their lives inside the opaque aisle of their husband's illam with extreme seclusion. Dowry system was strong with Ezhava community as well.

#### G. INHERITANCE

Nambuthiri community's inheritance, more often than not was Makkathayam (son's inheritance). As per the custom, Nambuthiries allowed only their elder son to wed from their own society. *Appan* (younger son) and daughters of the family could not claim for the property of their father. Dowry is the only property a lady could earn from the family and that were also as per the choice of her father. Same way systems made woman not to claim for the property of her husband. Nair community followed Marumakkatayam (sister's son inheritance). They outlined their decent in the feminine line only, every member even male or female or aged or child had the same interest in the widespread stock of Taravadu. At the same time none of the family member could claim any share of the stock. Traditionally sisters were with their brothers and at own taravadu and the Karanavar (elder male member) of the family had to take care of their sisters and their children. Husbands or men whom have sexual relationship with the Nair lady pay a lump-sum amount to the lady and her kids Chelavu (expenses). Woman had claim on properties of the taravadu but the rights of using the family were vested with the male members of the family. Another arrangement that existed with Nair families was Thaavazhi system. The female member leaves the taravadu residence to live with the companion of her choice in a separate home generally conveyed to her in free gift by her spouse and there she settles down to rear her family. According to this system the right of the property was for sisters and their kids but the actual usage and decision making power were vested with the Karanavar of the family.



The Ezhava or Tiyya community followed both Makkathayam and Marumakkatayam. In many places they followed even Misradhayam (equal property right for son and sister's son). Every where the story of property right was the same: that the successors of the family properties were son whether it was own or sister's. None of these three castes were thought about the daughter's right to have property.

## II. CONCLUSION

In the nineteenth century society, women's position in each religion was really pathetic. The social transformation movements of Kerala were purely based on the amoralities prevailed in different castes. The results of those movements were definitely improved positions of women and impure castes of Kerala. Restructured Kerala provided more status and reputation to lower castes and women to a great extend. Still Jathi consciousness is there with malayalies and many unscientific customs are performed by malayalies with the label custom even in the twenty-first century.

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