



The Decline Of Kalari : Fading Traditions Of Martial Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Kerala, though separated from the rest of the country on account of her geographical features, is exposed to the continent through the southern and northern plains and a number of gaps in the western ghats. The land is further segmented by deep and wide rivers, forests and valleys. These territorial divisions formed Nadus, which were administered by a ruling chieftain or Naduvazhi. The Naduvazhis ruled under their respective kings. Each Nadu, under their respective chieftain, maintained its peculiar customs, manners and local traditions. The article discusses about the role of Kalari in shaping the gender identities and cultural discourses in Medieval Malabar. The decline of Kalari due to the colonial impact is also discussed in the article.

KEY WORDS Kalari, Vazhunnor, tharawad, karanavar, Desavazhi, tara, vadakkan pattukal, chekava, undattu, villava.

INTRODUCTION

The political structure of Malabar was feudal in character. The status and functions of this feudal apparatus provided the nature of political organization of this period. In the medieval period Malabar was divided into many small principalities without coming under central authority. There are references to certain principalities such as Kolathunadu, Kottayam and that of the Zamorins.¹ Petty authorities like Vazhunor, Naduvazhi, Desavazhi etc existed and formed the feudal apparatus. Apart from the Raja the country was split up into a number of Nadus each under the Naduvazhi. The Nadus consisted of Desams each under a Desavazhi. Their power was limited by the local tara organisation. The tara was the local territorial unit of the Nairs organized for civil purposes and it was governed by representatives of the caste². There is sufficient evidence to show that these rulers did not have absolute power over the activities of the people under them. They sought the help of chieftains or any powerful military leader to enforce their authority.

Vazhanoor was not merely a karanavar of the family. In fact, he enjoyed considerable authority in the locality and commanded respect from the people. Being the head of the taravad he enjoyed recognition on such important occasions as Onam.³ Apparently, members of other castes were entitled to be Vazhunnor as he was the headman of tara, a group of Nair family and the chief of the tarakootam.⁴

During the period under discussion great care was taken to impart military training to everyone irrespective of sex.⁵ All the heroes and heroines mentioned in vadakkan pattukal had undergone training in Kalaries.

The historical writing has been subjected to far reaching changes in modern period. Most of the official sources of early period deal only with the ruling classes and had completely neglected the history of common man. Therefore, it has become a tedious task for the historian of the earlier society for want of enough authentic sources. Two new

type of sources that came into the hands of the historians in the modern period are folk traditions and place names. They reflect the consciousness of the people in a given period. Kerala is not an exception to this.

The heroes of kalari were called Chekavas. The word meaning of chekavar or chekon is warrior. As per the English-Malayalam Dictionary of Herman Gundert, the word meaning of Chekavar is servant, militia man and warrior. Some argue that this word might have derived from the Sanskrit word sevaka. ⁶ Another theory states that it might have been derived from local Malayalam word 'Chavuka ' means ready to die. First reference of the word chekava was found from inscriptions found in Karapuram near Cherthala which talks about an Ayurvedic physician Itty Achuthan. Another inscription dated on 14th century talks about a Chekava Perumal (Chekava King) which is recorded in Madras Epigraphy Report.⁷

Elamkulam P.N.Kunjan Pillai's Studies in Kerala History says that they were descendants of villors or villavar of Billavars who were warrior and bravors. Vadakkan Pattukal, collection of Malayalam ballads of medieval origin present a saga of Chekava heroes.⁸ There is another tradition that they came originally from Ceylon where they belonged to military caste.

In the army of Purakkad Raja, there were more chekavars than Nairs.⁹ Friar Berthalomeo mentions that there were a large number of chekavars in the army of Maharaja Ramavarma.¹⁰

We find mention of the chavers from the sangam period. 'Undattu' was a custom in which the ruler gave liquor in a golden cup to the warrior. He drank it and declared that he will live his life for the ruler. This was a custom that existed in the sangam period.¹¹ Thus we find the political and social life of medieval Malabar was closely linked to the Kalari culture of the time.

OBJECTIVES

- To trace the role of Kalari in the social experiences of the period.
- To identify the factors that led to the decline of Kalari institution
- To analyse the influence of Kalari in the life of the people.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in the present study is analytical, descriptive and interpretative. Both primary and secondary sources are utilized for the study. The primary sources include unpublished archival records and the secondary sources include books and journals.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The organisation and management of Kalari as an institution is the result of evolution of a complex set of Ideas. It involves knowledge of anatomy, techniques of iron smelting to produce versatile weapons like urumi ,manufacture of costumes and conduct of specific rituals. Over and above this, it is possible for a historian to speak about the craftsman, priests, rulers and the commons whose belief systems justified all these as rituals or customs of fidelity. All these elements are enveloped by the social setup that was evolved through different hierarchies. The songs have become the imprints of the period in the life of the continuing generations. The style and contents of the narrations have become

stable and are circulated without many contradictions. This maturity also could speak about the entire socio-political system which also had become conditioned by this time.

Our study underlines this aspect of the contemporary polity and society. This is done by the application of the term 'feudalism'. The European theory of feudalism is generally understood to be an expression of the weakness of the central administrative system. Many types of contractual relationship between man and man, negotiations between groups with social approval and the duties and liability various classes were involved in the system. The picture of society depicted in the songs attests the earlier studies on feudal formations of medieval Kerala based on native records.

The political organisation, social and economic conditions of the contemporary period do not present a true version of the similar European conditions. However, given the nature of social relations, distribution of resources, situation of power centre, presence of classes and groups, division of labour and the entire ideological basis for all these operations etc confirm the existence of feudal pattern of life though slightly in different parameters.

From the instance of the sources received the role of women during the period was recognised. We have mention of a large number of women playing different roles in the society. Women had occupied an enviable space in the social set up. Women were trained in the martial arts and we see a number of instances where women fought angam and other fights. However we find the social disabilities women suffered during the period. During the period women of Nair and Ezhava castes enjoyed a better position. They were opened to education and other cultural activities. The social dignity of these women was respected. On the other hand the lower caste women suffered the usual humiliation of a patriarchal society. Though they were expected to maintain a high moral virtue for themselves, they were humiliated or cheated or molested or assaulted by men of their own castes or upper castes. Polygamy was normally practiced in society. Women had extra marital relations. They conspired and torpeded even the state. Women could choose their husbands, discard them, replace with another man. There are numerous instances of women being revengeful.

Thus we find a society where women occupied different spaces. Women who lived a very chaste life, polyandrous life, those who wear denied education and others who got military training women who fought battles and women who were tied up in their homes, treacherous, revengeful, jealous women and virtuous, courageous and spirited women. The feudal structure and Kalari were the significant factors that endowed such positions for women. All these features help us to argue the significance of Kalari in shaping the position of women in medieval Malabar society.

COLONIAL POLICIES AND THE DECLINE OF KALARI

Kalari which has served as the backbone of the militia of traditional Kerala was duly appreciated by most of the European travellers and writers. The colonial powers, whose aim was trade monopoly and establishment of political power, had either to destroy the power of militia or utilise it for their own advantage. As such Kalari began to face challenges with the establishment of political power of the Europeans in this part of the country.

The history of Kerala from 16th to 19th century show that the militia of the land confronted four stages of challenges. The culmination of these challenges resulted in the ruin of not only the martial institution but also the vigour of the people. It seems that the Europeans understood the power and status is of the militia and their control over the

administrative and political systems. The fear of political control, independence and vigour of the local militia, compelled them to take drastic actions. The English East India Company was also particular in destroying the traditional military character of the community of Malabar and Major Dow, one of the commissioners of Malabar took steps for the same. He wrote " It would be stipulated by the terms of agreement with different rajas and chiefs that they on no account, retain above certain number of armed followers than those necessary to merely support their ideas of dignity... by these means, the civil and military fabric, of the feudal system, which is injurious to the prosperity of a country would be gradually subverted and in the end annihilated".¹²

This policy which was carried on vigorously in course of time marked the end of the traditional institution of Kalari.

The Portuguese, the first European colonists who set foot on the land brought with them not only new weapons but also new war culture. When the natives depended on lances, swords, bows and arrows and individual calibre of the combatants, the Portuguese' regiments mainly depended on fire arms. Their techniques of power politics and war ethics brought considerable changes in the existing socio-political systems of Kerala. They assisted smaller chieftains with men and material against their political systems of Kerala. They assisted smaller chieftains with men and material against their political rivals. The people of Kerala had always restricted their warfare to the level of a tournament for the assessment of strength and expertise of the soldiers in the art of Kalari. All the local rulers depended completely on such trained militia and in their war against the Portuguese with fire - power proved to be disastrous. Moreover, the Portuguese even attacked the common man, women and children and destroyed their houses and properties. They had even carried away women from coastal villages and the people had to organise and struggle for their release. Introduction of fire-arms, cavalry and sophisticated weapons undermined the importance of physical power, training and the mastery of traditional weapons imparted by the Kalari institution.

The second challenge Kalari faced was from the Mysorean invaders. These invasions invariably destroyed the feudal set up, traditional institutions, land holding patterns and the supremacy of the local rulers along with the power and prestige of the militia of Malabar. The disruption and disappearance of the Naduvazhis and the Nair gentry from the reign, enabled the Mysore rulers to set up a centralised system of administration in the territories, under their authority. The disappearance of the feudal set up, disrupted the social and political pattern, leading to the decline of the Kalari institution.

The death blow to the Kerala military system and Kalari was dealt by the British. When the Malabar province was ceded in favour of the British by the treaty of Seringapattam in 1792, there were a series of revolts in Malabar. The revolt led by Pazhassi Raja was well supported by the Nair soldiers and Kurichya tribals of Wayand. The British resorted to attack with all available weapons, using all methods and tactics, in suppressing it. They dreaded the widespread Kalari training and the traditional system of carrying arms by the Nairs. Thus the Malabar commissioners found it essential to unarm the entire region to establish tranquillity. Major Dow's direction in this regard is not worthy. On 20th February 1804, Robert Richards, the Principal Collector of Malabar wrote to Lord William Bentinck, President and General - in -council, Fort St George, asking permission to take action against penalty or deportation for life. Lord Bentinck issued an order on 22nd April 1804 that those who concealed weapons or disobeyed the order of the British against carrying arms, would be condemned to deportation for life. At the time

of the Pazhassi rebellion, British soldiers raided each and every house of the rebels to confiscate their arms. These developments finally eliminated the Kalari institution from the military and political history of Kerala.

This not only ended the military training system but also marked the end of a system of physical culture that emerged through centuries. Even the display of armed sports were to be conducted by securing permission from the Commissioner of Police in the presidency town and by the magistrate of the district outside these towns. In short, the British policies sounded the death - knell of an indigenous martial system which had been transmitted from one generation to the other, for centuries. The thatched Kalaries began to crumble in course of time, for lack of regular maintenance.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND TRANSITION OF KALARI

Some traditional families or high spirited individuals, carried on the Kalari practice in secret and preserved the art for posterity at least in the form of a physical training system. Some great teachers felt the need for compiling the traditional knowledge inherited by them from their predecessors. The available knowledge of Kalaripayat and the allied treatment system were recorded for preservation during the period. Most of the manuscripts available on the subject like Rangabhashyam, Ayudhabhyasam, Kalari Vidhya, Marma Chikitsa and Kalariyil Kuruthi Tarpanam were compiled during the dawn of the 19th century. The seeds of the system had thus been preserved to be germinated by posterity.

It is seen that a number of family - Kalaries or village Kalaries were converted into Kalari temples. This is clear from the structural peculiarities of the Kalari temple and its rituals of worship. Every feature of a Kalari including Poothara and Guruthara are preserved in the temples. There are number of such Kalari temples scattered all over North and Central Kerala. Such Kalari temples had been converted into Bhagavati or Siva temples too.

The administration and military structure of North Malabar got a rude shock for the first time by the Mysore invasion. Then with the advent of the Europeans and the influence of their culture the traditions of Kalari slowly began to disappear from the social traits of Malabar. Society became wholly patriarchal and women began to feel all burdens of a patriarchal society. Though feudalism began to disappear, Kerala imbibed only the technical modernity of the Europeans. Most of the traditional cultures survived and this along with the disappearance of Kalari restricted women to a subordinate position in the social fabric of Malabar.

CONCLUSION

Though Kalari faced decline under social change and colonial suppression, it has not vanished from Kerala's cultural landscape. Instead, it has adapted to modern times by taking on new forms — as a discipline for physical fitness, self- defense, mental focus, and even as a performance art showcased to the world. Its techniques now influence yoga, dance, and cinema, proving that while the battlegrounds have changed, the spirit of Kalari endures. The transformation of Kalari reflects not its end, but its remarkable ability to survive through reinvention — keeping alive the ancient essence of Kerala's warrior tradition in a changing world.

ENDNOTES

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