



Kalari And Gender : Negotiating Purity In Kerala's Martial Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Medieval Malabar was a caste based hierarchical society and women were subjected to strict pollution taboos. They were double burdened by gender and caste bound practices. While the Kalari culture offered a unique space for women to attain physical training, respect and status, pollution practices affected the females restricting their mobility and making them defenseless. Women experienced sexual exclusion and sexual exploitation under the guise of caste hierarchy. In spite of all the heroic deeds of women warriors, the caste based society of medieval Malabar inflicted customary laws to control the females of the land. While matriliney gave enormous freedom to the women in Malabar, the customary restrictions especially on their mobility was a defensive male measure to check their liberties.

KEY WORDS kalari, vadakkanpattukal, chekavar , angam, vazhunor, bhagavathi, vanian, kusava, kamala, mukkuva, mannan, pazhukayeru, pulaya, jonaka, vannathi, pancheradyam.

INTRODUCTION

Caste hierarchical societies determined social interactions and shaped gender roles and practises of the women of Medieval Malabar. The idea of ritual purity has historically functioned as a control mechanism over female sexuality and her mobility. Women were expected to hold the honour and purity of the family. Their bodies were considered polluting and so their purity was upheld by the society. These beliefs restricted women to a set of rules that controlled their domestic and public life and their mobility and ritual practises.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine the concept of ritual purity and pollution as defined within caste hierarchies.
- To explore the intersection of gender and caste in regulating women's social status, mobility and participation in cultural or religious practises.
- To analyze how women's bodies were perceived in relation to the notions of pollution and purity
- To study how women were victimized on caste based pollution practices within family, kinship and community structures.

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 The primary sources include unpublished archival records and the secondary sources include books and journals.

Caste Narratives in Northern Ballads

According to Herman Gundert, chekavar in Vadakkan Pattukal denotes militia men who belonged to the Ezhava caste¹. But C. Achutha Menon stated that the word chekavar came to be used to signify all the activities connected with services to the king, palace or the person employed in the services of the King. The pattukal also mentioned Chekavar as Chovar, tandan etc.² But it was stated that all of them belonged to the same caste.

The Chekavar occupied important position in the caste structure. According to the traditionally accepted code of behaviour in social relation in Kerala an Ezhava polluted a Nambuthiri from a distance of 32 feet. He had no access to the house of a Nair or Nambuthiri, the temple tanks and wells and roads or footpaths when Nair and Nambuthiri wear near by. But this picture drawn in Vadakkan Pattukal is a different one. Chekavars were given special dress, titles and lands in perpetuity by the rulers of Malabar. They were allowed to have special uniform indicating their status, palanquin, pancheradyam, umbrella, copper pitcher, and few other ceremonial articles. All these prove that chekavar, though belonged to the caste of Ezhava, occupied a higher position.

It follows that chekavar was a title given to a member of Ezhava caste who conducted ankam. The pattukal of Aromal Chekavar explicitly states that one becomes chekavar only by conducting ankam. Ankam played an important role in chekavar's life and this every chekavar considered it was his duty to conduct ankam.³ In the words of Aromal Chekavar "the livelihood of a chekavar is at the edge of the sword". If anybody came to chekavar asking his help to conduct ankam it was considered an obligation on his part to comply with the request. Some senior and expert chekavars conducted Kalari to impart training to the young aspirants.

The Chekavar performed certain religious rites before beginning as Ankam. The chekavar had a ceremonial bath with all the rituals before he set out for the Ankam. The chekavar had their own kavu where Bhavagathi was adored. Thus in the religious and ritual status the chekavars were considered a little inferior to the Nairs and Brahmins where as in the social life they had respectable position.⁴ This strongly suggests the importance of military functions of the chekavars in the feudal society of Malabar during this period.

Another group that occupied an important position during this period were the Nairs. They occupied position which does not appear to be similar to that of chekavar. They acted as body guards of the chieftains, conducted poittu and imparted military service.

The Nairs occupied the position of Vazhunnor during the period of Puthuram and Tacholi Pattukal. Because of his administrative position he was held in great esteem. However he was supposed to get up and salute the Chekavar. This was because of the military position held by Chekavars at that time. The Nayars are described as carriers of swords and lances as bodyguards of some rulers of chieftains. The songs also give the names of several sub-castes of Nairs in general namely Vanian, Uttis, Menon, Nambiar, Kusava etc. However the Northern Pattukal deals mainly with two castes. There are references to other castes like Brahmins, Warriors, Kusavas, Panas, Kammalar, Mukkuvas, Mannans, Pulays, Jonakas etc⁵

Though the Brahmins were mentioned in the Pattukal we have only few references. Scholars suggest that this could be because the Pattukal give more importance to the martial and merchant class. Three divisions of Brahmins – Namboothiri, Pattars and Embrantiris were mentioned. The Warriors who were astrologers was another caste group mentioned in the Northern Pattukal.⁶

Kaniyan was yet another polluted caste. They were the diviners or astrologers.⁷ Panar is another polluting group who went from house - begging and received whatever the people gave. Sometimes panas were also employed as messengers by the members of the high caste.

Another polluting group mentioned in the Pattukal are Kammalans which include Kollan, Tattan and Viswakarmmas or Thachan etc. It is clear from the Pattukal that they were people belonging to the artisan groups who conducted the specialized and skilled jobs for each village. Mukkuvans or fisherman constitute another polluting group mentioned in the Pattukal. Their traditional profession was fishing. They were also called Arayan or Mukkuvan.⁸ Mannans or Vannans were another polluting caste who were washer-men. People of higher castes believed that only by using the cloth washed and presented by a vannathy, pollution caused by menstruation, birth and death could be removed.

In the caste structure of Malabar revealed in the Vadakkan pattukal we have another section of people called Pulayas.⁹ They were considered as untouchables and the notion of untouchability had a strong hold in the society during the period of the pattukal.

Jonakas and Nazranis are another two groups mentioned in the Vadakkan Pattukal. The Jonakas are referred to in the Pattukal in more than one place. They were the Muslim people also now called as mappilas. The Nazranis the next group mentioned in the Pattukal were the Christians engaged in trade and commerce¹⁰

PAZHUKKAYERU

Pazhukayeru is a custom which is similar to pulappedi, parappedi and mannappedi. Once in a year the Naduvazhi had given the right to lower caste people like Pulaya, Paraya and Mannan to bathe in the tanks of the upper castes, to enter their Kavu, to touch upper caste women on certain days. If a stone or stick is thrown on an upper caste woman by a lower caste man, she immediately becomes an outcaste and she will have no other choice but to go with the man. So it is said in those days upper caste women were scared to go outside their house for fear of the lower caste men who may throw Pazhuka on them. The first mention of this practice is recorded by Barbosa. He says that these low caste men threw pazhuka on the women of their masters purposefully out of revenge¹¹. There is an opinion that the custom of Manappedi was allowed to be practised in Travancore by the ruler because the ruler got a number of services from these people. Historians are of the opinion that the customs like Pulappedi and Parappedi were practiced with the consent of the Naduvazhi¹². These customs were banned by Kerala Varma in 1696 by a Proclamation.¹³

There is difference of opinion about the period of Pulappedi. According to Dr. Gundert the custom was practised in the month of Karkadaka.¹⁴ Some are of the opinion that the custom was practiced between Makaram 28 and Vishu.¹⁵ Some historians believe that these customs were practiced during the time of temple festivals like 'Pooravum Velayum'.¹⁶

'Pazhukayeru' was practiced against upper caste women irrespective of their social status. Pulayas did not hesitate to practise the custom even against the wife of the Thampuran of Chirakkal. It is known that the ruler did not oppose or took measures to revenge the Pulayas.

Mappilas (Muslims) also were involved in the practice of 'Pazhukayeru'. The Vadakkan Pattukal about Kanakathu Kunkichi and Kalankathu Veetil Cheriya-kutti mentions pazhukayeru by the Mappilas.

Though the women scared of Pazhukayeru did not come out of the house, they were forced out by throwing itching powder and the like into the house. The women unable to withstand were forced to run out of their house and stones were thrown on them. If the first throw did not hit them, they could attempt seven times according to custom.

ADULTRY AND PUNISHMENT

Severe laws and punishments existed against women who were engaged in illicit relations. Women were forced to swim in tanks full of crocodiles, dip the hand in a pot with a snake, jump in a fired pit were some of the punishments that were practised during the period. Women taken to the rocks and hammered to death was another fearsome punishment that existed. But in most cases these women escaped from such punishments and we hear very rare instances of these punishments being implemented. There are several instances of elderly feudal lords quoting very young girls. They attempted several tactics to marry young girls. There are also instances of these lords sponsoring the family of these girls even when they were kids. The mothers of these girls in many instances supported such practices of the feudal lords.

It was usual women showed greed for gold and clothes. They involved in treacherous conspiracies to attain the same. There are a large number of instances of women cheating or discarding their husbands for the same of wealth.

Secret relations and extra-marital relations were not unusual in the medieval Malabar society. Men had permanent or temporary relations with other women. Such heroes like Tacholi Udayanann, Kodumala Kunjikannan, Kavilambadi are mentioned to have relation with a large number of women.

Women also had extra-marital relations with men of both higher and lower status. Men from Mappila and even pulaya community tried to attract the upper caste women and many of these women were not reluctant to establish secret relations with these men. Though there was no restriction to such extra marital relations of women with men of the same or upper caste, there was severe restriction in establishing such relation with men of lower castes.

Women adored to establishing sexual relation with heroes. Here we have to consider that such activities of heroes had paved the way to sexual anarchy and moral degeneration in medieval Malabar society. The physical beauty gained through the training in Kalari, the regular diet with selective and nutritious food, the enormous respect they enjoyed from the administrators and the people, their courage and fearlessness etc were favourable factors which led these heroes to immoral ways.

The practice of marumakkathayam gave enormous freedom for women especially Mair women. Women enjoyed more freedom and power in the family. Men were generally

not present at home in the day time and come home only in the night. Thus there was no men to control the women in their home and this led them to exercise enormous freedom and independence. All the brothers in the family leaving in the night to the residences of their wives and Unniamma sleeping with Palattukoman is mentioned in a Vadakkanpattu. Such instances were not rare in the Malabar society during the period. This was one of the most important factor which paved the way to sexual freedom among women especially Nair women.

WOMEN RESISTANCE

It is not necessary the women who were made outcastes should go with the man who threw pzhukka on her. If the women was accompanied by a male or atleast a boy in her travels she will not be ostracised for being a victim of pzhukayeru. She will manage to escape if she was pregnant and could go to her home until delivery . She will be fortunate if she delivered a boy baby but if the baby was a girl the unfortunate victim has to go with the lower caste man who threw stone on her. Pulayas usually acted as agents of the rich lower castes or Mappilas. The pattukal however make it clear that the women preferred to go to rich muslim families like the Arakkal family.

The Janmis who were mostly Namboothiri Brahmains and Nairs owned vast tracts of land. We get many instances of the immoral ways the feudal lords lived. Women of the lower castes were sexually exploited by the jenmis and the warriors without any possibility of complaint by the victims. However there are references of these women who avenged these injustices. Several northern ballads make references of women taking revenge on these upper caste men who devalued their honour and dignity. There were some heroines like Thiyathi Archa, Palur madathi kunjikanni, Pazhakulothe kunjikanni, Kodumala kunjikanni who ably resisted the Naduvazhis and Desavazhis.

There are a number of instances of women especially low caste women being looked upon as sexual objects and exploited sexually. Because of the low social status they had limitations to resist. Though it was almost impossible to oppose the ruling elite, the lower caste women were conscious of the necessity to resist. We could see that they did this through the songs viz., Inattupattu (while planting in fields), Poripattu (while removing weeds), Koithupattu (while harvesting) and Aravupattu (cooking for wedding).

In fact some women dramatically resisted the exploitation of the upper caste men. Such women like Karumparambil Kannan's wife Archa, Pumathai Ponnamma are examples. Archa who was sexually exploited by the naduvazhi revenged by raping the naduvazhi's wife by her husband Kannan. Meanwhile Pumathai who refused to oblige to the naduvazhi, had to lose her life. Though Pumathai Ponnamma had a tragic end she was idolised after death and worshipped as 'Theyyakolam'. The people believe nature revenged the naduvazhi when his kovilakam (home) was burnt to ashes.

Thus we find women of all class were conscious of their rights, women ably resisted the injustices done to them by men and played a significant role in shaping socio-political system of Medieval Malabar.

We find instances of not only heroes but heroines who fought with dangerous animals like tiger, snakes, elephants, crocodile and got rid of these animals that caused misery to the people. Poomathai Ponnamma belonged to a royal Pulaya family. She was chaste and hard working. The place mentioned in the Vadakkanpattu is Kozhikode district. She is an adivasi girl who survived by working in the fields of the Thampuran of

the land. The Thampuran happened to see her and had an urge for her. She did not fall to his tactics or persuasions. The Thampuran rose in anger and decided to punish her for her arrogance. She was falsely charged for adultery and the muppan, the head of the adivasis decided to implement the punishment announced by the thampuran to burn her head and breast. Thus in the presence of hundreds of people, she was chained and her head and breasts were burnt. Her pleas of innocence went unheeded. But soon it was realised that Ponnamma was innocent and the angry pulayas set ablaze the thampuran's house. She was revered and now is worshipped as a goddess of the land.

This is not a story of bravery or resistance but how a low caste woman was cruelly tortured and her final veneration as Goddess. The local goddesses popular among the lower castes were women who heroically opposed oppression and sexual assault and sacrificed their lives in the action of defending their morality.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis brings out the caste structure in Malabar during the medieval period. Though caste division and caste occupations were very well defined, the caste structure was undergoing certain changes. However it should be seen that caste rules were no longer rigid in Malabar during the period. The instances of resistance of commoner women against gender oppression.

ENDNOTES

1. Herman Gunder Op. cit., p.388
2. P.K.Gopalakrishnan, Keralatrithi Samskarika Charitram p.290
3. Moorkoth Kunhappa, "Thiyyas of Kerala" in M.G.S Narayanan(ed), Malabar Souvenir p.158
4. K.S.Mathew, Op.cit.p.32
5. Ibid p.38
6. A Sreedhara Menon, Op.cit.267
7. M. R. Raghava Warier, Vadakkan Pattukalude Paniyala, p.53
8. M.V.Vishnu Namboothiri, Op.cit p.347
9. K.S.Mathew Op.cit.347
10. Ibid
11. P.K.Balakrishnan, Jativivasthyum Kerala Chritravum pg154
12. Madassery, Keralathile Ananthiravakasikal pg92
13. The Royal Order banning Pulappedi by Vira Varma is written in a Tamil mixed Malayalam.
14. Dr.Gundart, Malayalam & English Dictionary p. 682
15. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, Annathe Keralam p 10 Dr. Achutha Menon, "Keralathile Kaliseva', p 43
16. M.C. Appunni Nambiar, Vadakkan Pattukal, p 173-181