

Socio-Economic Life and Institutions in the Traditional Society of Kerala in 18th and 19th Centuries

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Abstract— The society of Kerala in the 18th and 19th centuries was traditional in nature. There were peculiar customs and practices, which separated the society of Kerala from the rest of India. The Marumakkattayam or Matriarchal system of inheritance, the complex and rigid caste system, the residence in a common joint family etc. were some of the peculiar practices in the traditional society of Kerala. The features of a feudal society and the strong foundation of a caste-dominated society differs Kerala from other parts of the world.

Index Terms— Caste System, Makkattayam, Marumakkattayam, Polygamy, polyandry, Sambandam, SmarthaVicharam, Kettukalyanam.

1 INTRODUCTION

THE sum total of a region's history cannot be encompassed by a single theory. However, historians and Sociologists are interested to study the various features of societies of different periods. This article is an attempt to analyse the socio-economic life and institutions existed in the traditional society of Kerala in the 18th and 19th centuries. It had the features of a feudal society. Socially, the caste hierarchy determined one's position in the society. The observance of purity and pollution was one of the major features of the society. Social institutions like Marumakkattayam, Makkattayam, Sambandam, and social practices such as Kettukalyanam, monogamy and polygamy were other notable features of the society of Kerala. Caste system was a deep rooted system in which the status of an individual is decided by his caste.

Marumakkattayam was a peculiar system practiced in different parts of Kerala even in the middle of the 20th century. The term *Marumakkattayam* literally means "descent through sister's children." This particular system created many issues both in families and in society.

Another important practice was Sambandham, an illegal relation between a Nambudiri, an upper class in the caste hierarchy with women from other castes, particularly with Nairs. This article is an attempt to analyse the features, functions, structure and practice of various socio-economic institutions in Kerala in 18th and 19th centuries.

2.1 MARUMAKKATTAYAM

Marumakkattayam, literally means "descend through sister's children was one of the deep rooted social institutions in Kerala. C. A Innes gives a clear picture about the *Marumakkattayam*

system. According to him it was 'a system of inheritance followed by the Kshattriyas, the Samanthans, the Ambalavasis and the Nair in proper, and partially by some other castes, children belong to the same caste and sub caste, and family as their mother, not to that of their father' (C.A.Innes,1908). The Madras Marumakkattayam Act, 1932 defines it as "the system of inheritance in which descent is traced in the female line" (Fort St. George Gazette, Part IV, August, 1, 1933) It is noteworthy that women were allowed to marry only with equal or superior to their caste. This rule of hypergamy was restricted only in the case of women. However, it was not a restriction as far as men are concerned. So the concepts "going with the heir" and "going against the heir" were clear examples of social inequality prevailed in Kerala as far as the human rights are concerned. The former concept was compelled to maintain the purity of the race where as the latter resulted in the origin of many mixed castes in Kerala.

2.2. ORIGIN OF MARUMAKKATTAYAM AND SAMBANDAM

The origin, growth and disintegration of Marumakkattayam in Kerala society is a hot subject of debate. Bound up with Marumakkattayam is the institution known as *Sambandham*.

Sambandham is a loose form of "marriage" which entails no responsibility or obligation on the part of "husband" towards his "wife". Sambandham was not a legal marriage but a loose marriage between Nambudiri man and women belonged to the Ambalavasis (Temple servants), Kshathriyas, Samantans and the Nairs.

There are various theories regarding the origin of the peculiar system, Marumakkattayam. The tradition fostered by the Brahmins to the mandate of Parasurama, which ordained that 'Sudra' woman should put off chastity and devote themselves to satisfy the desires of the Brahmins. (C...A..Innes, 1908). Anyway, the chastity and dignity of Sudra women, degraded to satisfy the need of certain men who themselves claimed superior to others.

Another theory connected with the military organization of

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Nair community in Kerala. Mr. Warden, Collector of Malabar from 1804-1816 had pointed out another reason for the origin of *Sambandham*. He considered that "the profession of arms by birth, subjecting the males of a whole race to military service from the earliest youth to the decline of manhood, was a system of polity utterly incompatible with the existence among them of the marriage state," and that it was "obvious that, from the nature of their professional duties, their sexual intercourse could only have been fugitive and promiscuous, and their progeny could never under such circumstances have depended upon them for support" (Mr. Warden Quoted in Innes, 1908, P-99)

Obviously, the caste rules of the Brahmin Community are considered as one of the important reasons of the genesis of *Sambandham*. For them, the eldest son contracts regular marriage with a woman of his own caste. The other younger brothers had to maintain "marriage" relations with Nair women and other non-polluting castes. Due to these caste constraints, many young Nambudiri males maintained *Sambandham* or loose marriage.

2.3 SAMBANDHAM AND WOMEN

The caste restrictions imposed upon the Nambudiri women were rigid and inhuman. The Nambudiri women enjoyed less freedom though they were at the top of the caste hierarchy. They were called *Antarjanams* means "Living inside". Many of them remained unmarried and died as old maids. At the same time, the male members of the Nambudiri community enjoyed sufficient freedom in the matters of marriage, inheritance and decision making in the family. The denial of freedom of the Nambudiri women did not reach the notice of the public as the former enjoyed less freedom of movement among the public.

The Nair women who maintained *Sambandam* with the Nambudiries faced other social and economic problems. The Brahmin community did not accept *Sambandam* as a regular marriage and prevented them from a family life. Children born out of these relations could not claim anything from their father's property.

2.4 TARAVAD

The large joint families lived in a common residence was called *taravad*. The *Taravad* property was the joint property of all descendents of a common ancestress, in the female line only. (Robin Jeffery, 1976 p-15, C.A.Innes, 1908, P-98). The *Taravad* property was the common property of all the members of that particular *Taravad*. Partition was very rare in such a system where it was possible with a mutual agreement between all the members. The eldest male member called *Karanavan* managed the common property. As the property of the joint family was common, many members did not take individual strain and initiation. This laziness and attitude even from the parts of youngsters severely affected the prosperity and economic development of many *Taravads*. The practical

difficulty in partition was a hindrance to single-family system. (V. Nagam Aiya, The Travancore State Manual, 1906, P-364) Moreover, many *Karanavans* were least interested in the welfare of his niece or nephew. So many of them remained in a pathetic condition. Many social reformers of Kerala addressed this issue when they wanted to bring changes in the traditional society of Kerala. Generally, Nairs were the followers of *Marumakkattayam* or matriarchal system of inheritance and lived in common joint family. Christians, Muslims Brahmins, majority of *Ezhavas* and tribal castes follow *Makkattayam* or patriarchal system of inheritance. The *Arakkal Muslim* family of North Malabar was famous for the practice of *Marumakkattayam* system. Muslims follow *Makkattayam* or patriarchal system of inheritance in other parts of Kerala.

3. SMARTHAVICHARAM, THE CASTE TRIAL

The term *Smarthavicharam* is derived from two terms "*Smarthan*" means Vedic Judge and "*Vicharam*" means and refers to caste trial. Since the caste tribunal was presided over by the *Smarthan* or Vedic Judge, it was called *Smartha Vicharam* (P.R.G.Mathur, 1975) *Smartha Vicharam* is an elaborate ceremony by caste tribunal to trial the Nambudiri women in the cases of sexual deceitfulness. The accused, after an elaborate ceremony, if found guilty, outcaste from the Nambudiri Community. (C.A..Innes, 1908, p-106). Polygamy was a common system among the Nambudiris

T.K Gopala Panicker has given a vivid picture of the practice of *Sambandam*. He says that the Brahmin ingenuity discovered a ready means of getting over the difficulty by a social prohibition of all valid marriages among the Nairs, which would otherwise have prejudicially interfered with their conjugal destinies. (T.K. Gopala Panicker, 1905, p-26)

The caste trial was said to be inhuman as men monopolized the council. The questions to the suspected women, in many occasions, were not judicious. These affected the personality of the accused women.

4. KETTUKALYANAM, A MOCK MARRIAGE

The traditional society of Kerala practiced another peculiar system called, *Kettukalyanam*. It was a type of mock marriage in which a man ties a *Tali* (*Tali* is a small piece of gold or other metal, like a locket on a string) on girl's neck. This is done before the girl attaining puberty. The *Tali-tier* or 'bride groom' was allowed to cohabit with the girl for a prescribed period. By this ceremony, the girl was made eligible for *Sambandam*. In other words, a "mock marriage" is performed to prepare the girl for a "loose marriage" This evil practice was performed by many of the castes belonged to Hinduism.

5. CASTE SYSTEM

Caste system or system of castes was one of the peculiar customs in the traditional society of Kerala. The major religions were Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. The Hindu community was divided in to castes and sub castes, which

decided the status of an individual in the society. The Hindu community was divided into the following broad divisions. The Brahmins or the Nambudiries occupied the prime position in the caste hierarchy. The second constitute the intermediate castes, including Kshatriyas, Samantans and Ambalavasis or temple servants. The Sudras including the Nairs were in the next stage of precedence in the caste hierarchy. Ezhavas and other polluting castes were placed in the next level. The depressed aboriginal castes were the most down trodden people in the caste system. There were strict theories and laws to maintain the purity of each caste. Intermingling and inter dining were not encouraged by tradition and caste laws.

6. LAND RELATIONS

6.1. FEUDALISM IN KERALA

Kerala had peculiar system with regard to land relations. There were three types of land in Kerala: the land possessed by the king and feudatories, land granted to Brahmins for their service in religious matters and the land possessed by temples. All the chieftains from the ruler to the local chieftains possessed their own landed properties. These lands were either cultivated by them or leased to tenants. (A.Sreedhara Menon, 1978, pp- 206-207) It was a type of feudalism developed and existed in Kerala. It had similarity with the feudalism existed in Europe in the medieval period. The king occupied the top position in the feudal structure of Kerala. The Naduvazhis were in the next hierarchy. "Nadu" means a district. The "Desavazhis" or local chieftains were in the next order in the hierarchy. They were supposed to manage a territorial division or locality. The "Janmi" or landlords constituted a group between the local chieftains and tenants. The tenants or farmers were at the bottom of the order. They were called as "agricultural serfs". (Adrian C. Mayer, 1952, P- 96). When the social reform movements gained momentum, they agitated for the emancipation of the tenants.

7. CONCLUSION

The traditional society of Kerala had undergone continuous changes through ages, which brought fundamental reforms in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres in the state. The activities of social reformers to put an end the social evils such as Caste system, untouchability, Marumakkattayam, Sambandam etc. resulted in legislative initiations, which ensure equality of opportunities in all areas of life. The efforts of the social reform leaders to put an end the evil customs, practices and superstitions prevailed in the society of Kerala enabled to bring radical changes in the basic nature of the traditional society. The attitude of the society towards the freedom of women also has changed positively due to various changes in the society. However, the weaker sections of the society need more effective actions to improve their pathetic conditions.

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