

NAIR SERVICE SOCIETY AND THE UPLIFTMENT OF TARAVAD WOMEN

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Abstract:

All caste and communities had many problems on their way to progress. To reform their caste they organised movements under their caste. As an organisation Nair Service Society was formed on 31st October 1914 under its headquarters at Perunna in Kottayam district. Before as an organisation a group of leaders in Nair community worked hardly for the reforms of the Nairs. The main contribution of Nair Service Society was the empowerment of women especially in taravads. Taravad is a matrilineal joint family system followed by people in Kerala especially Nairs, consisting of above 50 members. Taravad was under the strict control of karanavar and the women and the junior members have no power. The condition of women in taravads was like slaves. Nair Service Society and its leader Mannathu Padmanabhan worked against the autocratic power of karanavar and influenced the women in taravads. Under the influence of Nair Service Society a number of laws were passed to protect the Nair women.

Key Words: Marumakkathayam, Sambandham & Thalikkettukalyanam

The Nairs of Kerala are different from other castes because of their female line and marriage system in which women were allowed to have several husband. The Nairs are of Dravidians. The earliest reference to the Nairs comes from the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, he refers them in his account the Nairs of Malabar. There were various theories about the origin of the Nairs. Some sociologists argue that the Nairs are not indigenous to Kerala, their customs and traditions distinguish them from other Keralites. One theory states that the term Nair is derived from nayaka meaning leader of the people. Others believed in the Nairs association with the Naga cult of serpent worship. The original Nairs were undoubtedly a military body, holding land and serving as warriors.¹ They enjoyed special power and privileges. They were one of the dominant castes in Kerala. The Nairs are one among the major division of Hindu population. In society they occupied high position. They have different titles like Nayar, Pillai, Panicker, Kurup, Kaimal, Unnithan, Valiyathan, and Menon. The Nairs living together in one big house known as Taravads.

Taravad is a matrilineal joint family system followed by the people in Kerala especially the Nairs. Taravad is derived from the word *tara* which means mount i.e., the raised foundation on which a Nayar house was built.² A Taravad might have consisted of a set of sisters, their brothers, their children, and their daughters' children. Taravad consisting of above 50 members. Taravad membership arises by birth in the family. Its members collectively owned property and as an independent economic unit. If any member dies his or her share got developed upon the other members of the taravad. Many leaders like C.V Raman Pillai who believed that the glories of the Nair past was due to its joint family system were against radical social changes.³

In Kerala there were number of taravads. The important Taravads in Kerala were Kannambra, Manikoth, Parappil, Cherukunnu, Kayarat, Puthenveedu, Kunnath, Manghat, Puliassery, Ambat, Madathil, Vadassery etc. The taravads followed traditional *vasthu* and they were very special in their style of architecture. Taravads were typically a rectangular structure. Nalukettu, Ettukettu, Pathinarukettu, etc. were important taravad structures in Kerala. Every structure faces the sunlight and have excellent ventilation.

Family Life:

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi in their book '*Daughters of Independence*' remarks that the Nairs represent a form of family organisation in opposition to the patriarchal structure of the North Indian Brahmin family. In the Nair family property is owned in common by men and women.⁴ The senior woman enjoyed special rights and privileges in taravads. But the conditions of the others were very difficult. The Nair youth received different training in cultivation technique, keeping of account, the construction of houses etc. were directly from his Karanavar or from the brother of his own mother. Karanavar was the senior most male member of the taravads.⁵ He had to control all junior members in his taravad. He had the right to expel members from the house. That who disobeyed him. In case of disobedience he inflicted punishments on women and children. It is clear that the karanavar's authority was greater than junior male members over women and children. Women's condition was more or less like slaves under the strict control of the Karanavar. In taravads young men and women about the same age were not allowed to talk to each other.

Maniyara Unnanga, Kadathanattu Makkom, Manayile Kanyaka etc. Were the Theyyams explains the life of women in taravads under the karanavar system. Makkom, Kappalathi, Kanyaka, they were the main characters in Theyyam and they were killed by their brothers in taravads. In taravads, karanavar sometimes hearing the advice of their wives and take cruel actions against their sisters.⁶ In Nair families the members followed various luxurious customs and blind beliefs like *Thalikkettu kalyanam*, *Thirandukuli*, *Pulapedi* and *Mannapedi* etc. These systems highly affect the life of women in taravads.

Marriage:

There are two types of marriage existed in Nair families *Kettukalyanam* and *Sambandham*⁷. In Barbosa's account he explains the tali-tying ceremony or *thalikettukalyanam*. The tali was tied before a Nair girl reached puberty⁸. It was not a real marriage, tali was tying by a Brahmin or one of her relatives. The tali tier was not intended to be the girl's future husband. Eleven was the ideal age. In every taravads this ceremony was performed once in ten or twelve years⁹. Then after *Sambandham* or *Pudavakodu* was arranged for Nair women. The women have no right to raise the voice against this. The family's advantage was the main motive than the personal interest of the girl. If she chose her lover rather than break her *Sambandham* at the behest of her family, the tarawad applied such sanctions as to make her comply or be left without support from the tarawad. In *Sambandham* marriage there was no legal validity. After the marriage husband visited the tarawad at night and he left the following morning. He had no legal right to his children. These children and the girl were live under the control of karanavan¹⁰. The Nair taravads encouraged the *Sambandham* with Nambootiri men because it increased their caste status.

Education:

When compared to other caste the Nairs were among the few castes who gave education to girls. Boys and girls in Nair community were given education in the nearby schools known as kalaris. Their education was in Sanskrit and Malayalam. But they were under the strict control of the karanavan; the girls were not allowed to go out of the taravads. Before the age of puberty the girl were permitted to attend schools. But after the

Thalikettukalyanam they were not allowed to go to school.¹¹

Towards the end of 19th century there witnessed a tremendous change in the social order, after this period Kerala under the impact of social, economic and cultural influences. The old customs and feudal character of the society to be modified or wiped out, with the spread of western education and liberal ideas influenced the thought of people in Kerala also. They raised their voice for their rights. Much more than the caste system the Hindu society also suffered economic backwardness because of wasteful expenditure connected with the irrational social customs like *talikettukalyanam*, *thirandukuli*, *pulikudi* etc.¹². The *Marumakkathayam* system also caused dissatisfaction among the Nairs and Ezhavas. It created family tension among these communities. Social awakening made them to think about the weak points their family and marriage systems. Many social reformers came forward for the awakening of society. The ideas of Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekanandha etc., in addition to the influence of western education and scientific ideas were chiefly responsible for the creation of new spirit.

How Nair Service Society Influenced the Life of Taravads?:

All caste and communities had many problems on their way to progress. To reform their caste they organised movements under their caste. As an organisation Nair Service Society was formed on 31st October 1914 under its headquarters at Perunna in Kottayam district. Before as an organisation a group of leaders in Nair community like Mannathu Padmanabhan, Changanasseri Paramesvaran Pillai etc., worked hardly for the reforms of the Nairs. In 1890, a Bill was introduced in the Madras Legislative Council to permit Nairs in the British India to register *Sambandham*.¹³ This Bill was strongly opposed by a section of conservative Nairs. The Government appointed a Commission; the Commission made enquiries and submitted its report. In 1896 the Malabar Marriage Bill became law. By this law people belonging to any caste in Malabar, following *Marumakkathayam* could register their *Sambandham*. This law made *Sambandham* a legally valid marriage.

The Nair Service Society was also in favour of changes in the existing laws. The Nair Service Society was against the autocratic nature of karanavar. Based on the strong feeling of the people among the Nair community the Government introduced a Bill, providing for partition of property on the basis of *thaivazhi* in the Legislature in 1910. The anticipated *Marumakkathayam* Regulation took the form of First Nair Regulation of

1912. This was the first regulation affecting the Nairs of Travancore.¹⁴ Rules were framed for sharing the self acquired property if individual members. The Nair Service Society was not satisfied with the Act. A notable work of Nair Service Society was the creation of public opinion in favour of individual partition of the Taravad property. The Nair Service Society exerted great pressure on the Government for the registration of the marriage and the per capita division of all personal property among the wives and children. Thus the Government passed the Travancore Nair (Amendment) Regulation of 1925. The Regulation allowed the individuals to inherit and transfer the landed properties of joint families.

The Cochin Nair Regulation of 1912-20, the Cochin Nair Act of 1937 to 1938 imposed certain restrictions on the power of karanavar and the polygamy was prohibited. With the passing of the Hindu Succession Act which came into force in 1956, Hindu men and women have been given equal right to property and monogamy was compulsory for all Hindus. Gradually nuclear family system emerged among the Nairs. Above these achievements NSS influenced the Nair people to come forefront of the society and to participate all social movements. Nair Service Society encouraged women to come out from taravads and to expose their abilities in all fields. With the influence of Nair Service Society number of women participated in many social movements in Kerala like Vaikom sathyagraha, Temple Entry Movement etc., NSS tried to raise the status of women in Kerala especially Nair women.

The women of Nair community enjoyed comparatively high freedom but they did not attend public meetings. There occurred a change through the effort of Mannathu Padmanabhan and the Nair Service Society. The first annual conference of Nair Service Society was organised at Karuvatta in 1929. The most important event of this conference was the exclusive session for women. The president of this session was Thottakkattu Madhavi Amma.¹⁵ Number of women participated in this session and the majority of the speakers were women. This conference considered as the milestone in the history of women empowerment in Nair community.

These caste movements finally led to the freedom movement for India and also for women. Women were the foundations in our society. So the empowerment of women is very essential because they faced very serious challenges from very early time to now

also. The social reform movements introduced change in the position of women in society. A modern outlook emerged among the women in Kerala. A number of factors helped them for this like education, caste organisations, reformer's ideas etc. In this way Mannathu Padmanabhan and his Nair Service Society greatly influenced women in Kerala especially the Nair women. The main objective of NSS was the eradication of caste barriers and abolition of old and wasteful practices. Now the NSS became an important organisation for promoting welfare of Nair community. It started number of schools and colleges for men and women. Through Karayogam, and Vanitha samajams NSS provided self employment opportunities for Nair women. In this way the contribution of NSS for the upliftment of women is appreciable.

Conclusion

Nair marriage system was a unique and familiar in many ways. Talikettu Kalyanam, Sambandam are the varieties of the system of marriage. Sambandam was a form of marriage practice among early Nair in Kerala. Sambandam was a social contract by which a man and a woman surrender their sexual rights to each other. It was a term most widely used for the marital relationship of a Nair woman. Sambandam is the marriage proper. Another type of marriage is Talikettu Kalyanam. It has been prevalent among Nair till recently in the name of Kettu Kalyanam. The term Talikettu Kalyanam is a compound of three words viz., Tali(a badge) kettu (tying) and Kalyanam (marriage). Tell is a leaf shaped emblem made of gold or silver, which was worn on a string around the neck.

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