

The Women and Socio-Cultural Changes in Kerala During the Sixteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

The present article is an attempt to portray the position of women in Kerala during the Sixteenth century depicting the socio-cultural traits of the women of this period. The Kerala society of Sixteenth century was organized on the basis of religion and caste. The socio-cultural trait of each caste and religion varied and so also the customs. The life of women of this period is reconstructed on the basis of the Portuguese contemporary documents. Though patriarchy was prevalent among various castes of Kerala matrilineal system also existed among some castes of Kerala. Among the Nairs and Tiyas matrilineal system existed, whereas among the Nazranis patriarchy prevailed. With the coming of the Portuguese and their interaction through various synods and councils, lot of changes occurred in the life of women in Malabar. The present article tries to throw more light on the socio-cultural traits of the women of Kerala and the changes that happened due to Portuguese interaction during sixteenth century.

The Portuguese maritime endeavour to India during the Sixteenth century "in search of the Christians and the spices" had a lot of impact on the Malabar society. The Portuguese travelers, chroniclers and writers have given a pen-picture of the Malabar society of the Sixteenth century. On the basis of their interactions in Malabar with different sections of the society, they give an account of the society which was organized on the basis of religion and caste. There were certain sections with whom they had more interactions. For example, they had more interactions with the people of the coastal societies, trading communities, warrior castes, St. Thomas Christians etc.

The present paper is attempt to portray the position of women in Malabar during the Sixteenth century and the changes that happened in the position and socio-cultural life of the women due to the Portuguese interaction. Though men and women are complementary to each other, the position of men and women varied in almost all civilizations. In most of the civilizations the women were considered inferior to men. The position of the women in Malabar varied according to religion and caste and therefore we cannot generalise the position of women in the Malabar society during 16th and 17th centuries.

The St. Thomas Christian family of the 16th century was Patriarchal whereas among various other sections of Malabar family was matrilineal. Matrilineal system of inheritance existed among the *Nairs* and *Tiyas* of Malabar and Joseph the Indian attributes its cause to the birth of children from illegal relationsⁱ. Among the St. Thomas Christians the father was the supreme head of the family. Wives would never address their husbands by name. Even in the family itself there were separate quarters for the women. Grown up boys and girls would not mingle with each otherⁱⁱ.

As the St. Thomas Christians were considered a noble category in Malabar, their women had a special respect in Malabar. Though they were sharing the common socio-cultural life, some distinguishing marks were there in their life style. The *nazrani* women generally confined herself to the houses

and they seldom went out of their houses except to participate in the Divine Liturgy in the Church or to assist in some funerals or to participate in some marriage celebrations of their kith and kin. Even inside the houses, they used to keep away from the male members. They would not eat with men not even with their husbands or sonsⁱⁱⁱ.

Women in general were quite modest in dressing. The women combed their hair beautifully and adorned it with gems and pearls. And they appeared beautifully in public^{iv}. The Nazrani women generally wore dress in white colour or dipped in indigo in such a way that they always covered the whole body except the head. While going to the Church or visiting a *Cathanar*, they would cover themselves with a big veil that left only their faces open. They also used all kinds of ornaments for ears, arms, necks and feet but they would not use ornaments on the nose^v. The women were extremely honest, both in life and in their dress. They wore some white veils, or dyed like anil, with which they turn blueish, which cover their entire body, and they throw it around the face, like a veil under the chin, in turns which cover their heads, and flows down until it covers the feet, which represents high honesty, and are ordinarily good looking, and whiter than many people in the East^{vi}.

The women of nobility had special dress pattern and ornaments. At the time of the visit of Dom Menesis, the queen of Thekkenkur was a young lady. She had fair colour and her ears which came down on her shoulders was full of gold. She had also adorned herself with precious stones. It has been said that it was the custom of the people of Malabar both men and women to bore ear lobes and use ornaments adorned with gold and precious stones. It was the reason why their ears were quite long. Those who did not have means to buy gold used to make ear rings with silver or other metals^{vii}.

In connection with childbirth, there was high rate of mortality of women in Malabar. The synod of Diamper admonished the Christian women to go for confessions and reception of Holy Communion, especially before the first

delivery, as there were more chances of risk of life of the mother^{viii}.

In Malabar, pagan midwives generally used to assist the delivery of Christian mothers. But the Synod of Diamper insisted that during delivery Christian mothers should be assisted by Christian midwives if there is one. The reason was that if it was a Christian midwife, she could administer baptism in case of dangers^{ix}.

The women were considered impure after childbirth. Therefore the women were allowed to go to the Church only after 40 days if it was a baby boy and after 80 days if it was a baby girl. This was a Jewish as well as Hindu custom. On the eightieth day or fortieth, depending on the sex of the child, both mother and child were taken to the Church for dedication. This was condemned as a heathen practice and women were asked by the Synod to go to the Church sooner the mother became healthy.^x

In Malabar boys and girls used to get married when they were quite young. It was true in the case of non-Christians as well. Among the Brahmins the marriageable age for men and women were seven and nine respectively but they came together only when the women became mature enough to bear children^{xi}. In the case of St. Thomas Christians, the synod fixed the marriageable age as fourteen for boys and twelve for girls^{xii}. The essence of the marriage, before the Synod of Diamper, was considered as the tying of the *Tali*. The St. Thomas Christians were following the custom of the land. *Tali* was a small gold ornament in the form of a leaf. It was ornamented with a cross of 21 beads to distinguish it from a Brahmin *Tali*. The bride groom tied the *tali* around the neck of the bride using a thread drawn out from the *Manthrakodi* or bridal Saree. A married woman always wore this *Tali* until her death. At the death of the bride it was either buried with them or was deposited in the Church offering box^{xiii}. The marriage celebrations were conducted in the Church of the bridegroom and if it was a remote area it was conducted in far-away places in their own houses. The presence of priest and witnesses was not mandatory.^{xiv}

Among the St. Thomas Christians the women did not have right over the property of her parents. The inheritance was through the male offspring. If there was only one daughter, the property was not handed over to that daughter. In such case, the property was given to the immediate close relative, even though the daughter was in extreme poverty. Sometimes it was gifted to the adopted sons. Though the daughters did not have the right to inherit property of their father, on the occasion of her marriage, dowry was given to the family of the groom^{xv}. The amount of the dowry was given on the previous Sunday of the marriage and it was to be handed over in odd numbers tied up in a cloth. One tenth of the dowry was given to the Church as well^{xvi}.

On the eve of the marriage, there were special celebrations in the house of the bride and groom. In the house of the bride there was *mylanchiyidel* or the application of henna on the palms of the bride. Besides, bride was ceremoniously fed with sweets after securing the consent of the community.^{xvii}

Marriage was considered as an indissoluble bond. Conjugal relation was considered perennial among the Christians. As reported by Joseph the Indian, divorce was unheard of among the St. Thomas Christians. The couples were separated only by death.^{xviii} But at the same time Synod of Diamper laments over the existence of polygamy among the St. Thomas Christians. It might have been concubinage which was widely practised in Malabar.^{xix} Among the nobility there was polygamy as reported by Joseph the Indian.^{xx}

The kings of Malabar practised polygamy. After marriage such wives were given to the important people which was a custom of the land. They do not inherit anything. They are sometimes married for the sake of dowry. Sometimes they are kept with them until death. If a king wanted the wife of any of the honourable men of his kingdom like *Caimals*, she went willingly and it was an honour for the *Caimal*. Sometimes money is offered to *Patamares* to deflower their wives^{xxi}.

The *nairs* did not get married. A *Nair* woman would chose a *nair* to marry her daughter when she was a virgin. The deflowering ceremony was very solemn and the *nair* paid for it. He stayed with her almost 4 days. As a token of her deflowering there was *quete* (marriage) which was actually the tying of *tali* and the *nair* paid a sum according to his capacity. When he left other *nairs* would come and sleep with her. Her prestige grew according to the number of lovers who frequented her. But none of them would stay with her. For this reason, it was said that the *nair* neither had father nor children^{xxii}.

At the same time *Nair* women was not allowed to have any contact with people of lower castes. If any lower caste people touched her while she went out, such people would be either sold or killed. It is said that *Nair* woman would not work instead she would eat and engage in merry making^{xxiii}.

All brahmins got married. Their sons inherited their property. Brahmin women were chaste and they would not lie with any man other than her husband. The Brahmin woman remained a Brahmin always and her children were of unmixed race. A Brahmin woman would not sleep with a *Nair* but a *Nair* woman would sleep with a Brahmin^{xxiv}.

At the same time, among the lower castes, monogamy and patriarchy was practised in Malabar^{xxv}. For example, the Malayarayas had generally only one wife. It was different from the customs of the other people of Malabar and this only wife used to accompany the husband even when they went for hunting^{xxvi}.

There were instances where the husbands suspected the chastity of their wives. On such occasion one Christian wife from Alengadu wanted to prove her chastity before the husband and the king. She held that as a Christian woman she never committed adultery. She went to the king and expressed her willingness to prove her honesty and chastity before the king by taking hot iron in her hand. On hearing this the husband admitted her innocence, but she wanted to prove her innocence and therefore she fasted in the Church for 40 days and then in the presence of the king and the nobles proved her

innocence by taking a hot iron in the hand as was the custom in Malabar. She was proved innocent and Archbishop commented that they were leading an ideal conjugal life^{xxvii}.

There was widow remarriage among the St. Thomas Christians. In the case of Christians if the husbands died the women had to go back to her ancestral house taking with her the dowry. She was not permitted to marry for a year after the death of her husband^{xxviii}.

It is reported by Joseph the Indian that there was *Sati* among certain sections in Malabar. The Hindu women in Malabar thought that there was no better honour than dying with her husbands. They wanted to be cremated along with the dead-body of their husbands. They considered it as means to attain immortality^{xxix}.

Among the Hindus there were separate temples for men and women where the opposite sexes did not have entry. In certain areas women had temples of their own where men did not have entry. In other temples there was entry for both men and women^{xxx}.

Women were quite active in the Church. They always respected the spiritual authorities like priests and bishops. All of them, as the bishop entered the church, went one by one to kiss the hand with such a composure, first on their knees and then placing the head on the ground, and raising with great reverence they receive the blessing, so that they all seem to be very religious with a great composure, and the same they did to the children, even to those whom they bring in their laps, placing them before the Prelate^{xxxi}.

In Malabar, there was married clergy. The priests were generally married. The wives of priests were generally called *Catariaras* or *Cassaneiras* and they were respected by all as the wives of priests. They had, as a distinguishing mark a cross of gold or some other metal hanging from their necks^{xxxii}. In Malabar, the priests used to marry even after receiving the Holy Orders. Some of the Priests used to marry widows three or four times after the holy orders. After the synod of Diamper such priests were forbidden from exercising priestly ministry. Such priests were suspended from exercising priestly ministry^{xxxiii}.

Through the decrees of the synod of Diamper the married clergy were asked to leave their wives in accordance with the tradition of the Roman Church. But it had its repercussions in the Church. Many *Catatiaras* were not ready to leave their husbands. Therefore it was decided by the synod that those *catatiaras* who refused to leave their husbands would be degraded in the Church.

"Whereas the wives of priests who are called *catatiaras* or *cattaneiras*, have not only the most honourable place in the church for their being such, and are the more revered, but do partake of the profits of the churches wherein their husbands ministered equally with the surviving priests, and have sometimes a greater share of them than any of the priests, by reason of the seniority and pre-eminence that their husbands had in their church; therefore the Synod doth ordain,

that such of them as do not from henceforward depart from their husbands, shall receive no such benefit: but if obeying the admonition of the Synod they shall leave their husbands, they shall then immediately receive their proportion as an alms to help to sustain them and their families, and shall enjoy the same place and honour in the church, and everywhere else which they did before."^{xxxiv}

The Portuguese brought about a lot of changes in the Socio-cultural life of the people of Malabar through their interventions. One of the main means that they employed in Malabar was to interfere in the socio-cultural life of the St. Thomas Christians was religious legislations. Through the decrees of the Provincial Councils of Goa and the Synod of Diamper, a lot of changes were brought about among the *Nazrani* women of Malabar. Besides, through ecclesiastical legislations, intermingling among various sections of the society was also forbidden.

There were intermingling among the various sections of the society. For example the people used to pay mutual visits to the houses of others irrespective of religion. The First Provincial Council of Goa, convened in Goa in 1567, through its decree admonished the women and children to refrain from visiting the houses of the Muslims except accompanied by their parents or masters.^{xxxv}

The synod declared all the marriages conducted before the synod of Diamper as void as the marriage was not conducted in the presence of the priests and two witnesses. The synod admonished all the married Christian faithful to marry again in the presence of priest and two witnesses.^{xxxvi}

At the same time many women from the Muslim and Hindu stocks came forward for conversions especially for marrying Portuguese men. There were no Portuguese women sufficient for the Lusitanian men. Albuquerque did not allow the Portuguese men to marry non-Christian women. Therefore, for the purpose of marrying Portuguese men many women got converted to Christianity. Thus we see the Portuguese men marrying Muslim women^{xxxvii}.

The dressing pattern the Christians followed was similar to that of the non-Christians. Therefore, it was very difficult to distinguish them from other people. So, the Provincial council asked the native Christians as well as the Christian women to adopt a distinguishing dress.^{xxxviii} In the Churches and Chapels of the religious, both men and women were asked to have separate places according to the decision of the prelate. It was with a view to participating in the divine worship more honestly.^{xxxix}

One of the new issues that was dealt with in the second Provincial council was the improvement of the fate of the widows, especially non-Christian women. The widows used to shave off their hairs to show that they were widows and they could never get married again. The Council ordered to see that no widow shaved off her head. It also declared that the widows could remarry. The confiscation of the property of those hindered it was also ordered by the Council.^{xl}

As is evident from this study, the *Nazrani* women in Malabar were following Christian faith in worship and Indian socio-cultural life during the sixteenth century. But the Portuguese in their attempt to homogenize the *Nazrani* Christians with those of the Western Church intervened in the socio-cultural and religious life through the influence that they had in Malabar, especially in Cochin and surrounding areas.

The most important means that they adopted to bring about changes in the life of the *Nazrani* women was the use of ecclesiastical legislations. They convened a number of Provincial Councils and the Synod of Diamper through the canons of which they intervened in the socio-cultural life of the people. Accordingly, many of their customs were modified and many social evils that were prevalent among the women of the St. Thomas Christians were forbidden and a new set of life style was introduced in Malabar

Conclusion

The position and the socio-cultural life of the women in Malabar differed from caste to caste and religion to religion. There were patriarchy, matrilineal system, polygamy, prostitution, divorce, polyandry, sati etc among various sections of the society. The customs related to birth, marriage, death and other socio-cultural life varied from caste to caste and religion to religion. Accordingly, the social position of women also varied. Due to the interaction with the Portuguese lot of socio-cultural changes occurred in the life of the women of Malabar by the implementation of the canons of various councils and synods. The canons of synods and councils which were held in India during the second half of the sixteenth century acted as the basis of transformation in the socio-cultural life of the women of Malabar.

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End Notes

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ⁱⁱ George Mark Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India*, Bombay, 1964, p. 176

ⁱⁱⁱ Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, *Fundo Geral, Reservados Cod. N.º 36*, "Noticias do Reino do Malabar", fl. 3

^{iv} Antony Vallavanthara, *op.cit.*, p. 165

^v Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, *Fundo Geral, Reservados Cod. N.º 36*, "Noticias do Reino do Malabar", fl. 3

^{vi} Pius Malekandathil, ed., *Jornada of Dom Alexis de Menezes: A Portuguese Account of the Sixteenth Century Malabar*, Kochi, 2003, pp. 258,259.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 316

^{viii} Scaria Zacharia, ed., *Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1599*, Edamattam, 1994, (Hereafter *ADSD*) p. 128

^{ix} *ADSD*, p.115

^x *ADSD*, p.204

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^{xxxix} *Ibid.*, p. 41.

^{xl} *Ibid.*, p. 97.