

Women In The Nayar Community Of Venad: A Historical Perspective

Dr. Simi. S^{1*}

^{1*}Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sree Narayana College, Sivagiri, Varkala. Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Email Id: simisncv@gmail.com, Mob. No. 8891166618

Introduction:

Venad was a significant territorial principality that emerged following the disintegration of the Second Chera Empire (800-1102 AD). It was known as Venad until the reign of King Marthanda Varma (1729-1758 AD), after which it became known as Travancore. The position of women in Venad varied greatly from caste to caste, with each caste possessing its own distinctive lifestyle and culture. This study aims to provide an account of the life and culture of women in the Nayar community in Venad.

Analysis and Interpretations:

The Nayars emerged as a caste group after the eighth century AD.¹ Nayar women enjoyed a comparatively high status in society, largely due to their alliances with Brahmins, which afforded them significant power and influence.² They lived in joint family houses called *taravads*, and a female member of the *taravad* did not change her family upon marriage. The eldest male of the *taravad*, known as the *Karanavar*, held the legal right to manage the *taravad*.³

William Logan, in his Malabar Manual, noted that Nayar women had equal freedom with men and participated actively in public affairs.⁴ Unlike Brahmin women, Nayar women were very independent. They could have multiple husbands, making it difficult to determine a particular child's father. Due to the matrilineal system of inheritance, Nayar women were often proud and considered themselves superior to their husbands.⁵ They neither took meals from their husband's family nor allowed their children to associate or eat with their paternal relatives.⁶

I. Santhakumar in his work *Marupuram* quoted a matter from the work *Sancharikal Kanda Keralam*, which describes about the life of Nayar women. That is, "Nayar women were allowed to accept not more than twelve husbands at a time. For that their husbands had no enmity or hatred towards each other. Each observed his turn to visit the common wife at night. The days in which they had the right to live with the wife would be decided in advance. As long as a husband lives with the wife, he would bear the cost of her maintenance. The woman receives what she needs from her different husbands. The man who visits the woman at night would place his sword near the door. Nobody would remove it or try to enter the room. If anybody violates this custom, he would be killed. If the woman becomes pregnant, she would decide who the father of the child is".⁷ In those days of feudal dominance, in the houses of the Brahmin landlords the servant maids who were Nayars had to eat from the leaves used by the Brahmin ladies or *Antharjanam* during lunch.⁸

Nayar women dressed in fine clothes and adorned themselves with attractive ornaments. They typically wore a large waistcloth and a thin muslin upper cloth over the shoulders and chest. Poorer women often went uncovered from the waist upwards.⁹ When going out, women covered their bosoms with a piece of light white cloth, sometimes bordered with gold thread. They wore many ornaments and styled their hair in a chignon on the left side of their heads.¹⁰

One customary form of salutation for a Nayar woman was to uncover her breasts before respectable people. Violating this tradition resulted in severe punishment. Chastity was less valued; its violation was considered a fall rather than a fault.¹¹ Nayar women had to satisfy the wishes of the Nampudiris, whether they wished to or not. Those women who practiced the system of polyandry also got more respect and status mainly among the Nayars.¹²

Nampudiri families employed numerous Nayars for managerial and service roles. Nampudiri women were attended to by Nayar women, who cared for their children. When a Nampudiri woman was tried for suspected sexual immorality (*Smarthavicharam*), her attendant, a Nayar woman, was the first to be examined.¹³ Brahmins did not allow widows or divorced women to participate in auspicious ceremonies, but Nayar women generally faced no such taboos. They could participate in ceremonies and remarry at any time, earning the title of *Nithyamangali* (one who is always married).¹⁴

During Umayamma Rani's regency (1677-1684 AD), the southern portion of Venad was invaded by a Mughal Sirdar. Although he did not attempt to convert the Hindus, he insisted that the Nayars adopt several Mahomedan customs. Men were to cover their heads, and women were to cover their bodies when outdoors. Sudra females had to encircle their bodies with a cloth like the males and abandon the northern mode of dressing. Females also had to have their foreheads, chins, and hands tattooed with designs of spots, plants, leaves, and flowers.¹⁵

Marriage among the Nayars was a loose tie between male and female, dissolvable at any time without risk. It had no legal recognition. There were two forms of marriage: *talikettukalyanam* and *Sambandham*.¹⁶ They also practiced polyandry.¹⁷ *Talikettukalyanam* involved a pre-pubescent girl and a man, while *Sambandham* involved a mature woman and a mature man of equal or superior status.¹⁸ The Mathilakam record states that a man named Thevan Krishnan paid a fine of 18 panams for arranging the *Pudavakoda* wedding of his niece with a Nayar named Kunju Mayitti.¹⁹ This shows the existence of the ritual called *Pudavakoda* among Nayar community and the powers of the *Karanavan* over the members of the family.

Nayar women usually married within their caste, but sometimes married men of higher caste. However, this did not make her a wife unless the man also cohabited with her.²⁰ Women were free to select their partners and divorce them if necessary.²¹ Many times, the Nayar men were in the battle fields, which affected the life of their women. The record of the year 929 ME (1754 AD) mentions that arrows and bow strings were supplied to the Nayars who were living in Vadakkumkur for fighting purposes.²² Similarly, the records of the year 930 ME (1755 AD) states that the Nayars living in Ambalapuzha were supplied arrows and bow settings.²³ This shows that men of the Nayar community often lived away from their families at battle fields. This affected the life of the women of their community. One of the reasons for the extra marital relations of their women was the continuous absence of the men in the family. The records of the year 929 ME (1754 AD) states that Nayars would go far guarding the military camps.²⁴ Thus even in peace time their presence was required in their place of work like military camps and battle fields.

It was the Brahmins who were responsible for losing the sanctity of Nayar *Sambhandham*. The Brahmins did not regard *Sambhandham* union as a true marriage but as a kind of concubinage. Among Nambudiris only the eldest son married a Nambudiri woman which was called Veli. The younger brothers called *Aphans* entered into marital relationship with women of royal, *Ambalavasi* and Nayar lineage. A Nayar woman married to a Kshatriya was called *Kettilamma*. If she was an ordinary girl of a poor family, she was provided with land and housing.²⁵

Polyandry was common among the lower sections of Nayar women.²⁶ Among the Krishnanvagakkaras, a class of Nayars in South Travancore, a widow could marry her deceased husband's brother.²⁷ Shaik Zainuddin noted that each Nayar woman had two to four husbands, who seldom quarrelled, with the woman distributing her time among them like a Muslim man among his wives.²⁸ Nampudiris asserted social control over royal lineages and wealthy Nayars through marital relations with their women. However, they did not give full ritual status to these women as wives to preserve Nampudiri primogeniture and wealth.²⁹

In the Nayar community, women received cloth from a suitable man and consorted with him.³⁰ The children called the man who "married" their mother "*appan*" and the actual father "*achan*".³¹ If a male child was born, they uttered the *kurava* cry; if a female, they beat the ground three times.³² Nayar girls underwent the compulsory *tali* tying ceremony and an important puberty ceremony during their first menstruation.³³ The most widely practiced *vratham* among Nayar women was dedicated to God Siva for obtaining a good husband and marital happiness. Pregnant women were confined to a religious atmosphere, living in the temple for 41 days before the fifth month of pregnancy and observing *bhajanam*. They also underwent the *pumsavanam* ceremony in the seventh month of pregnancy, in which the husband or brother of the woman gave her the mixed juices of many types of ritually significant leaves.³⁴ If a Nayar woman became pregnant, one of her *Sambandham* partners would claim paternity.³⁵ If no one did, it was assumed she had relations with a lower caste or non-Hindu man, leading to excommunication or execution or sale as slaves.³⁶

Daily life for the Nayars was ritualized. Women swept the lawn and rooms before sunrise, sprinkled cow dung water for purification, cooked and served food as permitted by the *karnavan*, and mated with visiting husbands selected by the *karnavan*.³⁷ The Mathilakam record of the year 922 ME (1747 AD) states that, Kochu Mathevan Nayar and his Karanavan were in enmity with each other and had to pay a fine of 18 panams for settling the quarrel, and the complaint was that the Karanavan was not given food by the nephew.³⁸ This shows that quarrels between the Karanavan and his nephews were common and there was no peaceful atmosphere in domestic circles.

Nayar women were respected in their *taravad*, receiving different rooms and a beautiful courtyard. The *taravad* was a matrilineal unit, with children of the women having equal freedom. Male descendants were members of the *taravad*, but their children were not. *Taravad* membership arises by birth in the family.³⁹ The Nayar women were free enough to move elsewhere in the *taravad* except to the room of the *karanavar*.⁴⁰ Ideologically, the women, either sisters or nieces, older than the *karanavar* could assert decision making influence on him. The women younger than the *karanavar* were not allowed to speak to him face to face.⁴¹ Mathilakam records show evidence to prove that the position of the *Karanavan* in the family and his involvement in the domestic issues. In the year 920 ME (1745 AD) a man named Kalachetty Ayyappan Mathikutty of Kunnathur house in Attingal, while punishing his wife Ayyi, her *Karanavan* (Maternal uncle) Ayyan Kaali had intervened and was beaten with sticks of coconut leaf.⁴² In the same document mentioned, a man named Ayyappan Kaali, the *Karanavan* held the hand of his niece Ayyi, while her husband Kunju Maathi punished her by beating.⁴³ Here it can be seen that quarrels usually arose in the relationship between husband and wife. The husband used to punish the wife by beating them and on such occasion the *Karanavan* would interfere. The oldest woman was the central figure of the *taravad*, and the mother governed the house, providing for everyone's needs and ruling even her grown sons, who never in public sit down in her presence, but stand humbly behind her chair.⁴⁴ This shows the position of Nayar women in their own family and their culture.

Conclusion:

This study provides an account of the life and culture of women in the Nayar community in Venad, highlighting their respect within the *taravad* and their adherence to customs. Nayar women lived to please the Nampudiris, with most marriages being temporary associations. The Brahmin supremacy over the Nayars was evident through the *Sambandham* system. The matrilineal inheritance system gave Nayar women a high status, and they had unique features in their life, dress, customs, and ceremonies. The transformation from tradition to modernity brought changes, such as the abolition of *marumakkathayam* and the destruction of Nayar *taravads*, affecting their established customs.

REFERENCES:

1. A.K.B. Pillai, *The culture of social stratification/ sexism- The Nayars*, Copley Publishing Group, New York, 1987, p.39.
- A. Sreedhara Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, S. Viswanathan Publishers, 1978, p. 266.
2. V. Assakumari, "The System of Marriage Among the Nayars: Recent Trends", *Journal of Kerala Studies*, Vol. XXVI, Department of History, University of Kerala, 1999, p. 138.
3. William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Vol. I, Charithram Publication, Trivandrum, 1981, p.53.
4. Sr. Rosamma Mathew, "Polity and Society in Travancore with Special Reference to the Position of Women (1700- 1900 AD)", *PhD Thesis in History*, University of Kerala, March 2001.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Santhakumar, *Marupuram* (Mal.), Daces Resource Centre Publication, Trivandrum, 2013, pp.50-51.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
8. Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1991, p.200.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.
10. Sr. Rosamma Mathew, *op.cit.*
11. Kanipayoor Sankaran Nambudiripad, *Aryanmarude Kudiyettom Keralathil* (Mal.), Vol. I, Panjangam Bookstore, Kunnankulam, 1965, pp.99-100.

- 12.A.K.B. Pillai, *op.cit.*, p.74.
- 13.*Ibid.*, p.148.
- 14.P. Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore from the Earliest Times*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1998, pp.100-103.
- 15.K. Rajasekharan, "Assimilation of Talikettu Kalyanam and Sambandhan", *Journal of Kerala Studies*, Vol. XVIII, Department of History, University of Kerala, March 1991, p.253.
- A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, D.C. Books, Kottayam, 1967, p.219.
- 16.V. Assakumari, *op.cit.*, p.139.
- 17.*Mathilakam* Records, Churuna no. 2206, Ola no. 257, Central Archives, West Fort, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 18.Samuel Mateer, *op.cit.*, pp.172-173.
- 19.V. Assakumari, *op.cit.*, p.139.
- 20.*Mathilakam* Records, Churua no. 1292, Ola no. 1141, Central Archives, West Fort, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 21.*Mathilakam* Records, Churuna no. 645, Ola no. 1673, 1678, Central Archives, West Fort, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 22.*Mathilakam* Records, Churuna no. 1292, Ola no. 1164, 1167, Central Archives, West Fort, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 23.V. Assakumari, *op.cit.*, p.144.
- 24.Pattom G. Ramachandran Nair, *Nayar Samudayathinte Ithihasam* (Mal.), Sahithyavedi, Thiruvananthapuram, 1987, p.37.
- 25.V. Nagam, Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989, pp.370-372.
- A. Sreedhara Menon, *op.cit.*, p.220.
- 26.A.K.B. Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp.13-16.
- 27.Gopalan Keralavarman Thirumulpad, *Keralavakasakramam* (Mal.), Keralodaya Printing Press, Thiruvananthapuram, 1882, p.69.
- 28.Samuel Mateer, *op.cit.*, pp.172-173.
- 29.*Ibid.*, p.113.
- 30.A.K.B. Pillai, *op.cit.*, p.86.
- 31.*Ibid.*, pp.85-89.
- 32.William Logan, *op.cit.*, pp.164-165.
- 33.A.K.B. Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp. 115-116.
- 34.*Ibid.*
- 35.*Mathilakam* Records, Churuna no. 645, Ola no. 822, Central Archives, West Fort, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 36.V. Assakumari, *op.cit.*, p. 138.
- 37.*Ibid.*
- 38.A.K.B. Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp.114-115.
- 39.*Mathilakam* Records, Churuna no. 2252, Ola no. 352, Central Archives, West Fort, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 40.*Ibid.*
- 41.Samuel Mateer, *op.cit.*, p.210.