

System Of Marriage Among The Nayars In Travancore - A Study

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In the Nayars had three major marriages of ceremonies. The *thaali* tying rite took place before the onset of puberty. During this ceremony the girl was married to a man, preferably a Namboothiri Brahman. The ritual husband had no further duties to the girl after the completion of this ritual, although she had to observe a period of death impurity upon the death of her ritual husband. The *thaali* ceremony was a female centered ritual which emphasized fertility and household prosperity.¹ This ceremony had to be performed on pain of excommunication.

The Thirandukalyanam ceremony was the puberty ceremony, during which femininity is celebrated as women occupy the parts of the household typically inhabited by men.² The Sambandham ritual is less auspicious than the *thaali* and puberty rites, and literally means "alliance" or "relationship". It was the customary institution that framed casual marriage alliances between men and women following *manimakkathayam*. This ritual marks the union of the bride and groom and was not necessarily a permanent arrangement. However it was this innate weakness of *sambandham* that helped maintaining the integrity of the matrilineal

tharavadu. Sambandham denoted hypergamy between Nayar women and Namboothiri men as well as reciprocal marriage among Nayars. However such an alliance was not recognized as constituting marriage by Namboothiri Brahmins as well as by colonial courts but was seen as comparable to concubinage.³

Two reasons cited for this were that dissolution of sambandham was fairly easy and that it did not give rise to property relations. Though viewed by Namboothiri Brahmins and European commentators as immoral, allied with polyandry, or even prostitution, sambandham was nothing of that sort for the Nayar women. Sambandham essentially gave a Nayar woman the liberty to initiate, consent to, or terminate a sexual relationship with any man and thereby formed one of the foundations of matrilineality.

In case of sambandham with Namboothiri men, the system benefited both the Namboothiri Brahmins as well as matrilineal castes like the Nayars for two reasons. First, Namboothiri brahmins had institutionalized primogeniture, permitting only the eldest son to marry within the caste. Younger sons in Namboothiri families were expected to establish sambandham with Nayar and Ambalavasi (temple service castes) women. Secondly, Nayar families encouraged the sambandham

arrangement with Namboothiri men, thereby increasing their tharavadu and caste status.⁴ Such alliances between Nayar women and Namboothiri men came to an end after the efforts of V.T Bhattathirippad in 1933.

Marriage and morals generally go together. Kanyakumari district has evolved through the ages of its own marriage customs and code of morals.⁵ The Aryanization brought about some changes in the institution of marriage and code of morals.⁶ The Chola-Chera war which brought about significant social and economic changes also had its effect on marriage customs and code of morals. Nayar marriage system had been undergoing many changes in both its internal and external functions with regard to the family and its functions.⁷ Marriage is a socially recognized cohabitation. The system of marriage among the Nayar witnessed a multitude of trials and tribulations in the course of last centuries. They became the victims of the fossilized customs and worn out practice, which ultimately undermined the vitals of the sacred system.⁸

In the past, there were two institutionalized forms of marriage; one was between a pre-pubescent girl and a man which was known as talikettukalyanam. The second was between a mature woman and a mature man of status equal or superior to her own, which was known as sambhandham. According to L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer, there were two

form; of marriage in vogue among the Nayars, namely, the talikettu kalyanam and the sambhandam (the customary nuptial union of man and woman). The first of which is performed for every girl before puberty and the second, the real adult marriage is celebrated after she comes of age.⁹

Sreedhara Menon writes : "While considering the institution of marriage, it may be appropriate to considering the custom of talikettu kalyanam which prevailed even in the early part of this century among such non-Brahmin castes as the Nayars, Ezhavas and kammalas. It has been prevalent among Nayars till recently in the name of kettukalyanam.¹⁰ The term talikettu kalyanam is a compound of three words, viz., tali (a badge) kettu (tying) and kalyanam (marriage)".¹¹ Tali is a leaf shaped emblem made of gold or silver, which was worn on a string around the neck. It indicated the marital status of a woman. But among the early Nayars tali was tied to the girl before puberty. If she reached maturity before the talikettu she would have been expelled from her family as an outsider.

Tali tying was performed on a girl or on a group of girls between the age of 11 and 13. The tier belonged either to the same or to a superior caste. In Southern Travancore, the 'tali tier' can also be relatives of either male line or female line irrespective of their age. One condition was that the tier should be older than the girl. Logan writes that the strange thing

about it all was that the girl was not really married to the man who performed the tali tying ceremony. In the case of good families, the man selected for this duty is usually either an Illathu or an East Coast Brahmin and in the case of others a man of their own kindred. He continues to write that after the ceremony he received a suitable present and departed.¹² When the girl comes of age he cannot claim her as his wife or should solicit her favours in after life. The tali tier had no claim to matrimony with the girl.¹³

The practice is said to be the result of the belief that the human of a virgin is protected by the God of marriage. The ceremonies associated with talikettu were different in different parts of the district. Faweett wrote "the details of this ceremony vary in different parts of Malabar. But the ceremony itself, in some form is essential and must be performed for every Nayar girl before she attains puberty. Talikettu kalyanam means marriage by tying the tali or ceremony of tying the tali, a small gold ornament, worn on the neck, the ordinary badge of marriage amongst the Dravidians"¹⁴. Talikketu kalayanam was a social custom which proclaimed to the world at large the fact that a girl in a taravad had attained marriageable status.¹⁵

One important factor is that the tali tied to the neck of the girl is made by the family of the girl and not by the family of the tier. Today the

custom of tali tying as a special ceremony before marriage among Nayars is no more¹⁶. Under the stress of modern civilization and as a result of social action taken by social reformers, the Nayars and Ezhavas have practically given up the tali kettu kalyanam. Its gradual dying out is a land mark in the history of social change.

END NOTES

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3. Puthenkalam, J., **Marriage and the family in Kerala**, New Delhi, 1977, p. 213.
4. **Ibid.**
5. William Logan, **Malabar Manual**, Vol. 1, Trivandrum, 1981, p. 159.
6. Sreedhara Menon, A., **Social and Cultural History of India**, Trivandrum, 1979, p. 53.
7. **Ibid.**, p. 93.
8. Desiga Vinayagam Pillai, S., **Marumakkal Vazhi Manmiyam**, (Tamil), Madras, 1991, p. 72.
9. Velupillai, T.K., **Travancore State Manual**, Vol. I, Trivandrum, 1940, p. 858.
10. **Ibid.**, p.96
11. Fuller, **C.J.**, **op.cit**, p. 110.
12. Sreedhara Menon, A., **Social and Cultural History of Kerala, Trivandram, 1969**, p. 87.
13. William Logan, **op.cit**, pp. 160 - 161.
14. Fuller, C.J., **op.cit**, p. 101.
15. Faw Cett, F., **Nayars of Malabar**, New Delhi, 1985, p. 185.
16. **Ibid.**, p. 91