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Letters to The Faithful: Women, Marriage and The Catholic Church in Malabar

Abstract

Kerala through the ages had seen migrations of people, from the ancient period but the causes of these migrations varied. Within Kerala the most important internal migration that took place from Travancore to Malabar which occurred from 1920-1960. In Malabar the migrants were the first to establish the church. Thalassery Diocese of Syrian Catholics of Malabar was established in 1954. The pastoral letters of these Dioceses reflected the patriarchal values of the church and sometimes tried to mould women. The image of 'ideal women' in the context of this migrant community changed according to times. In the early periods of migration, women would be standing shoulder to shoulder with the men to work in the fields and to clear forest to establish themselves in the new environment but by the end of the phase of migration her role was now reversed and in keeping with the pattern of a patriarchal society

Key Words: Syriac, Sthreedhanam, Passaram, Nadavazhakkam, Avakasam, Girideepam, TSA, ISA, Ideal Women

Introduction

Nineteenth century saw the moulding of women in India as part of various reform movements. By the early twentieth centuries women's organisations were formed and by the thirties and forties activism among women were underway.¹

Equality among men and women became a matter of debate and discussion during this period. This paper is an attempt to understand the role of pastoral letters in the moulding of the Catholic women of Malabar according to the norms of patriarchy. Church magazines also

propounded patriarchal values and this paper tries to understand the response of the church to state policies of contemporary India. For the study of this paper Pastoral Letters (1954-1989) from Tellicherry Diocese and the church magazine *Girideepam* (1964-68) published from the Diocese are taken for study. Books and journal articles, legislative archival sources, personal interviews with the inhabitants of migrant villages of Calicut district are used to understand the Syrian Christian practice of marriage, dowry and inheritance rights.

Objectives of the Study

To find out how church became an institution during the late migration period.

To find out how church engender women migrants

Background

Syrian Christian community held an important position in the total population of Kerala. During the 1870's the Syrian Christian population in Malabar was very low when compared to the native states of Cochin and Travancore. It was as follows:

Total Syrian Christian Population 1871-76

Cochin State	1, 40, 265
British Indian District of Malabar	13, 763
Travancore State	295, 770

Total	449, 798
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Source: - Susan Bayly, 'Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community; Religion and Society in Kerala, 1750-1850', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.18, Part 2, p. 179.

Syriac was used by the Syrian Christians as the liturgical language of the church.

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The Christians of Kerala are broadly divided into three and they are Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians. The legend about the origin of Syrian Christians is that they were originally Nampootiri Brahmins, converted by St. Thomas who visited Kerala in 52 A.D. Early Christian sources all state that he was sent to India but what is certain is that there was flourishing trade between across the Arabian Sea.³

K.C. Zachariah in his book 'The Syrian Christians of Kerala Demographic and Socio-Economic Transitions in 20th Century' said that when Vasco Da Gama came here he was surprised by the massive churches in Kerala and all of these churches did not follow the Roman Jurisdiction. In 1595, Alexis De Menezes a Portuguese missionary appointed by the Pope and want to bring the rites and rituals of the community to be in conformity to that of Europe. At that time Deacon George was the Archbishop of Syrians and he refused to have an allegiance with Roman and later he signed a document agreeing the supremacy of Rome over the Syrians of Kerala.

Menezes assembled a council in Udayamperoor near Cochin on 2nd June 1599. Archbishop of Goa, Syrian Arch Deacon, 153 Syrian *Kathanars* and good number of Roman clergy and a few Portuguese citizens attended the council.⁴ The Decrees of the Synod was enacted to so as the community would be in conformity with that of the Roman Catholic Church of Europe achieve this.⁵

Kerala though the ages had seen migrations of people, from the ancient period but the causes of these migrations varied. In the first half of the 20th century large scale migrations happening towards the dense forest lands of Malabar. Within Kerala the most important internal migration that took place from Travancore to Malabar which occurred from 1920 - 1960. Majority of the migrants were Syrian Christians as they were lived in joint families and their practice of

dividing the land among their sons lead to the scarcity of land there. Second World War, Great Depression, poverty, increasing population etc. lead them to migrate to Malabar where land was abundant. These migrants opened up the uplands and highlands for migration.

In Malabar, the migrants were the first to establish the church. At first for four or five years there was not any church in the settlement areas and the Latin Diocese of Calicut and C.M.I. missionaries catered to spiritual needs of the migrants. Thalassery Diocese of the Syrian Catholics of Malabar was established in 1954. The pastoral letters of these dioceses reflected the patriarchal values of the church and sometimes tried to mould women. With independence, the policies like family planning of the Indian state were not in accordance with the policies of the Catholic Church. It is the response of the church to this policy that is highlighted here.

The image of the 'ideal women' in the context of this migrant community changed according to times. In a patriarchal society the norms of men and women were laid down clearly. Man was the head of the household women were the provider of the one who took care (care taker). In the early periods of migration women would be standing shoulder to shoulder with the men to work in the fields and to clear forest to establish themselves in the new environment but by the end of the phase of migration her role was now reversed and in keeping with the pattern of a patriarchal society.

Marriage

For church, marriage was a holy sacrament with its aim being procreation and remedy for uncleanness and not to fall into sin. Marriage was moulded on the lines of marriage as defined by the Council of Trent through the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper.⁶ Over the years dowry too became widespread among the community and became a form of disinheritance for women.⁷ Church magazines like *Girideepam* had thus to say on the issue.

In the Syrian Christian community man inherited the landed property while women were given dowry at the time of marriage and with it she did not have any claims her natal family. In Travancore during the time of marriage women were given only dowry. In the Syrian Christian communities in Kerala the law of inheritance is different in different areas. Among all of the

Christian families father is the head of the family and patrilineal system existed in all of the families.⁸

In Travancore and Cochin the law of succession was both common but in Malabar the Indian Succession Act (ISA) 1925 was in practice. In Travancore, property was divided among the sons in equal shares, and daughters only had the right to claim dowry. If there are no sons then the property will be given to the daughters. In case of those who did not have children, all of their property was to devolve to the church.⁹ But this happened only in case there were no kin to claim the property.

By the 19th century dowry became an issue at the time of marriage irrespective of caste and creed both in north and south. During the 17th century the Portuguese documents of Synod of Diamper speak about practices of dowry among Syrian Christians.¹⁰ The church records and the palm leaf records of 18th and 19th centuries gives evidences of the practice of dowry or *sthreedhanam*¹¹ *passaram*¹² and *nada vazhakkam*.¹³ Dowry also known as *sthreedhanam* was a crucial issue in marriage and its nonpayment lead to the disputes among the family members. Such disputes were common as is seen from the *Kalpanakalum Niyamangalum* of 1879 of the Catholic church where by the receipt written by both *karnavas*¹⁴ of bride and groom were to be given to the priest as record which was to be referred in case of disputes among the families on the issue of dowry.¹⁵ It is seen from these records that roughly 1/10 of the *sthreedhanam* were given as *passaram*. From the ancient period among the Kerala Christian and all most all other communities the birth of a female child is considered as a high burden to her parents as it is very expensive to marry of a daughter. In some cases when the father of the bride did not gave correct amount of money as dowry daughter will be sent back to her natal home to remind the father and brother to about her *sthreedhanam*.¹⁶

In almost all the Syrian Christian families after the death of the father youngest son who stayed in the family home took over power. All the daughters were married off with *sthreedhanam* and the other sons were separated from their natal house after being given their share. Before 1986 the succession rights reformed in Kerala were in accordance with the Travancore Succession Act (TSA) of 1916 and the Cochin Christian Succession Act (CCSA) of 1921. The Travancore Act of 1916 fixed the amount of *sthreedhanam* as one fourth of a son's share or Rs. 5000 whichever less

for the daughter if the father died intestate. Women, on getting their dowry, did not have the right or claim on her parental property.

Goody and Tambiah defined dowry as it is a part of financial fund which passes down from holder to heir. Some others say that *sthreedhanam* may be defined as a woman's share to her father's property or *avakasam*.¹⁷ In the middle class families entire property may be sold or mortgaged for marry off a daughter. Sometimes sons got only lesser amount of property when compared to *sthreedhanam* given to a woman. The 'rate' of *sthreedhanam* is different in different economic class and the rate of it increases year by year.¹⁸

Among the Syrian Christian women *sthreedhanam* or female wealth is the sum of money which women brought at the time of marriage. It is not considered as a gift but as an economic tie of a woman with her natal family.¹⁹ Reference to dowry seen in one of the folk songs is described

*The girl's parents promised a gift of 1100 fanams, a certain weight of gold, along with the ornaments, namely necklace, anklets, bracelets and rings for all fingers as also domestic utensils such as Uruli (a large bell metal vessel), lamps and spittoons.*²⁰

Susan Viswanathan says that dowry is the greatest scourge of this high status community expresses the deep sense of obligation that fathers feel for their daughters. It is love, terror, misery- to give away a daughter, to hope that she falls in the right hands, to consider mortgaging one's property, borrow from relatives, give away a daughter-in-law's *sthreedhanam* so that one may be assured that she marries well and lives well.²¹ John Kattakayam while talking about the Travancore Christian Regulation (Amendment) Bill says that what was given by the parents of the girl was only considered as dowry not even what was given by the grandmother or grandfather of a girl was not to be considered as dowry. He said that dowry is a right of a woman for their survival and it is given for her own needs.²²

Among the Syrian Christian communities, people know the demerits of *varavila*²³ at an early stage. C. Anthappayi, Kocheppan Tharakan etc. community reformers criticized the custom of dowry and rejected those parents who sold their sons for marriage. In 1927 Nidheerikkal Mariyam writes that

*Man who gave money to buy a horse or bull and a father gave money to a son-in law's father to buy his son are both same. But the girl did not have any right on that amount. Her father in law uses it for his own needs. The names of such father's should be published in the newspaper created certain restrictions on them will be good.*²⁴

According to the Christian conception man is placed above women who were created from the body of man. The Christian community also supported the superiority of man over woman who were regarded as the weaker sex who needed protection and support from man. So it is natural that a man should inherit a larger share than women.²⁵ Though in Malabar Fr. Vadakkan tried to establish a system of community marriage in Kuriachira and many priests and people from different communities participated in this marriage, it did not succeed. Group marriages were conducted without any ornaments or dowry but it failed.²⁶ He said that many of the families would not have dowry to give their daughters, if women were not interested in wearing ornaments.²⁷

Thus we see that in the case of migration to Malabar, men and women had to toil for their livelihood equally. They worked shoulder to shoulder to tame the wilds of the Malabar uplands and bring in agriculture. Once the family settled down and was able to acquire more lands, women were relegated to a secondary status. Family and hearth came to be labeled as her domain. Though she had toiled equally to acquire lands no land was there in her name.²⁸ Once the husband died the property was inherited by the sons and she came to be under them.²⁹ Thus we see that even though the situation was very different from Travancore in these cases, Travancorean laws and customs were practiced. Women too abided by this and never asked for their due. The Indian Succession Act (ISA) was never followed.

Procreation is the aim of marriage among the Christian communities. For the church, sexuality was a method of procreation. But sometimes, church regulated or restricted sexuality. During the time of 1960's and 70's states policy of family planning were largely sponsored by the government. In the 1965-2009 period, contraceptive usage had more than tripled and the fertility rate has more than halved, but the national fertility rate is still high enough to cause long-term population growth. Low female literacy levels and the lack of widespread availability of birth-control methods are hampering the use of contraception in India.³⁰

To understand the response of the church to the policy formulated by the Indian state my attempt is to look at the pastoral letters send by Mar Sebastian Valloppilly the first Bishop of Thalassery (1954-1989). Catholic Church has always been against artificial methods of contraception and contraceptives. Even more was their opposition to abortion which was considered as a crime equivalent to murder. The pastoral letters while exhorting the faithful and warning against artificial contraception quoted the ideas of Gandhi. As is seen from the pastoral letter No. 45 titled, *Kudumba Samvidhanam Thettaya Margangal* dated 12/7/1965 Thalassery,

After independence population increased day by day and the government of India has take certain new measures to control the population. They used television, radio and other medias to control the increase in population along with certain new clinics has been opened in different parts of India for birth control. The main aim of marriage is to give birth to babies. Sex is only for procreation. Man and women can control their sexual pleasures and safe methods should be used for the control of birth. If population increased human beings should migrate to a new place.³¹

Pastoral Letter No.59 titled *Prakrithikshobangal* dated 19/7/1960 Thalassery quoted

An ideal mother and wife should not use these contraceptives. The use of contraceptives is a sin that had to confess. Abortion increased day by day and human beings must control their sexual needs and those who control it will win in their life. There are thousands of nuns and priests who are controlling their sexual needs for the Almighty. If they can control themselves why can't others?³²

According to the church the duty of mother is to bring up her children as God fearing Christians. The church's view was that it was God who gave and took away children and hence it should not be tampered with. The church propagated the natural method of control by understanding the fertility cycle of women and by identifying the safe period.³³

The Ideal Women

The concept of ideal women can be further seen from the articles of *Girideepam* of the period. The primary duty of the woman was in preparing delicious food for her family. These articles also encouraged cleanliness of the women in their kitchen and personal self. The women were encouraged to cultivate habits of reading, singing and other engagement so as to be able to be accomplished homemakers.³⁴ Besides this it was the duty of the women to bring up children as good Christians and be a role model by going to church every Sunday.³⁵

What is interesting in this article is how women were being engendered.³⁶ This process of engendering occurs in this period is because, as part of internal migration the women in the initial stages had taken on roles where they had to work equally with men, her role in the kitchen was only minimal. By the 1970's the process of migration had come to an end. The migrants had established themselves in the new surroundings. Initially cooking and cleanliness was not a priority for the migrants. Mostly they lived by eating tapioca that would be dried and stored after harvest. But once the community had established itself, it became necessary to engender the migrant women again so that she takes up her roles of a traditional wife, mother and as one who took care of the 'inner domain' of the family i.e. the home while men went about their duties in the 'outer' public domain. The demarking of these two domains is being done through these articles in these magazines.

Conclusion

Thus we see that migration to Malabar meant that the community had to re establish itself in the new surroundings. Once they established themselves churches were established to cater to their spiritual needs. Church they as we have seen play a major role in engendering women.

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- ¹² *Passaram* or *Patharam* (in English tithe) means the donation given by the bride to the church.

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- ¹³ *Nadavazhakkam* means the amount given by both bride and bridegroom as a gift to the church after marriage.
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