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Kurichiya Women of Kerala - Tradition, and Modernity

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Volume: 7

Issue: 4

Month: April

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 24.01.2020

Accepted: 27.02.2020

Published: 01.04.2020

Citation:

KP, Sany. "Kurichiya Women of Kerala - Tradition, and Modernity." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2020, pp. 59–65.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v7i4.2302>



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Abstract

The status of tribal women has been like a moving equilibrium at various times and in various parts of the globe. It has sometimes been liberal and other times of constraint and subordination. With regard to India, gradual variations are marked in the works of vedic, puranic medieval and modern age writers. The (constitution of India guarantees several rights to Scheduled Tribes including women. Various studies on the South Indian tribals have always been ignored tribal women though they continue to constitute half of the tribal population. Predominantly, the male bias remained largely unrestricted as such studies were by a large, carried out by the males. The latter extracted information from male respondents, as the women were comparatively difficult to approach due to their inherent reluctance for the purpose.¹ Hence, the world's view of tribal women, regarding their own position in society, could not be put forth. Women have been playing a significant role in the society and culture and will continue to do the same in future. Even when the intimate relation of man and women is accepted and women have been occupying a very prominent status in the social milieu, the treatment of men and women has been differentiated in social structure as well as social organization.

Keywords: Kurichiya Women, Tradition, Modernity customs, Scheduled Tribes, Tribal women, Manu and Wayanad

Different parameters govern the status and role of men and women. The segregation and synthesis are regulated by the ideas, expectations, rights, duties, privileges, taboos, roles, and activities having born in certain universal traits of human thinking. Moreover, they are compartmentalized as per convenience, requirement, and suitability of different societies.² To be precise, the formation of men and women, in totality and the ways of life, are well delineated. They are equally important and obsolete. If one formation is weak, it is bound to reflect on the other. The balance of the entire infrastructure of life and the culture of a group of people would thus, be better maintained in the world of men. To obtain a strong infrastructure, none of the balancing forces should suffer from a lack of strength.

The tribe itself is the basic social unit for the community. India has the second-largest concentration of tribal population after that of the African continent. The population of tribals in India, according to the 1991 census, constitutes 6.78 crores.

According to Manu, an ancient law giver of India, Hindu code does not spare women. Women's fathers protect them in childhood, their husbands protect them in youth, their sons in old age, and a woman is never fit for independence.³

- 1 D. Janaki, *Socio Economic conditions of tribal Women in South India*, 2000, p.1.
- 2 Ibid., p.2.
- 3 Gones William, *Manu Dharma Sastra or Institute of Manu*, Madras, 1880, p.23.

Like Manusmriti, the code of Manu other ancient Hindu literature gives a pale picture of women folk. They state women are full of falsehood and have cruelty, bewitchment folly, cowardliness, impurity, and unmercifulness. Women's sin is greater than that of men and could not be repented by the atonements. Women have hunger two-fold, violence six-fold, and evil desire eight fold.

Their evil desires, their want of settled affection, and their perverse nature let them be guarded in their world. So well, that they soon became alienated from their husbands.⁴

The code of Manu summed up the women's status indicates that though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife. Speaking on the status of women, the late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the former prime minister of India, stated that to awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened once she is on the move the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves.

Kurichiya Women

Women in tribal communities of Kerala, especially in Waynad, enjoyed an enviable position in their social activities. The reason for this special cult oral trait is the economic and social equality of tribal women from their childhood. The women-folk are the most useful persons in the family since teenaged girls are capable of house-keeping and taking care of the children and the elders. Women among most of the tribals in Kerala do not enjoy pre-marital freedom. They are partners throughout their life, and sexual relations are usually happy. The inherent modesty of Hindu women is also found among the tribal women of Kerala; they could have shouldered heavier responsibilities in rural life if they were freed from the heavy burden of the home, cattle, yard, and the farm.⁵

The Kurichiyas of Waynad followed the matrilineal family system over generations. The manifestation of matrilineal life can be seen in

several aspects such as leadership and its succession, property inheritance, management of the family on an egalitarian basis, first name of the family members, and rites- de-passage. However, the matrilineal family system among the Kurichiyas is under great strain today with the impact of the social changes taking around them. The notion of such changes came largely from the patrilineal pattern followed by the Nayars and the Tiars, who were once matrilineal the patrilineal Muslims and the Christian immigrants from the Travancore region.⁶

The joint family system is common among the Kurichiyars where the women have their due share. Society is divided into lineages headed by lineage heads. There are lots of rituals and ceremonies connected with women, especially the Kurichiyas, and an example to this is 'Pandalpattu.' It is an initiation ritual about ear piercing of the Kurichiya. It indicates that the 'pandal pattu,' a female initiation ritual, is performed before the girl's menarche and after the ear boring ceremony.⁷ Girls from all the mittoms of the same lineage are invited by the 'Karanavan,' lineage head to participate in the ceremony. Odd numbers of girls are generally selected based on their availability.⁸

The Kurichiya community, a matrilineal society in which descent, kinship, and other social relations are legally reckoned with through the female. The Kurichiya women have a considerable share in tribal life. They even have an important role in the economic social and ritual activities, a trait that influences all customs of tribal life, including the institution of marriage and kinship. Kurichiyas believe that the mother is solely responsible for the growth of the baby in the womb. These and other beliefs of the Kurichiayan mold their attitude towards kinship.

Women in the Family

Women's status and living experiences in a joint family are determined firstly by their secondary gender status, and secondly, by the fact

4 Wilson John, *History of the suppression of infanticide in western India*, Bombay, 1855, pp.32-33.

5 P.P.G. Mathur, *Tribal Situation in Kerala*, Kerala Historical Society, 1975, p.155.

6 A. Ayyappan, *Ecology, Economy, Matriliney and fertility of Kruichiyar*, Delhi, 1990, p.22.

7 Bindu Ramachandran, *Fertility concept in a ritual on Anthropological explanation of "padalpattu"*, Department of Anthropology, Kannur University, Thalssery, p. 20.

8 Bindu Ramachandran, op.cit., p.23.

that they enter the family as strangers, outsiders, and individuals who must fit in with an already developed functional and cultural unit. Besides these factors, their diverse background is a general strain for them and between them.⁹ But they must conform to survive, though they may find this distasteful and stressful. This could work as a strain on the family, threatening its stability if the conjugal bond is strong, thereby demonstrating the relevance of minimizing it. Mechanisms to reduce this strain include a further division of work among the women, the system of arranged marriage, the absence of the romantic complex, caste endogamy, and early marriage. While caste endogamy facilitates a homogeneous background for the women, early marriage ensures the wife's adaptability. These facilitate the smooth functioning of the family, though women may continue to feel unhappy who develop prejudice towards any relationship.

Apart from the greater security enjoyed by women in matrilineal societies, a comparison of the relative degrees of respect commanded by women in matrilineal societies with those in patrilineal societies of Kerala and Tamil Nadu is likely to show that mothers in Kerala generally possess higher respect.¹⁰

As already mentioned, the head of the family among the Kurichias is called the poopan. He managed the property. He has powers to punish any member of the family who violates the tribal norms.¹¹ Men and women work jointly for the subsistence of the family, but the workload on the sexes is not equal. The Kurichiyan women do not bear the brunt of the drudgery and hard work. Indeed heavier jobs in the paddy fields and plantations are undertaken by men. The guardianship of a Kurichian family rests with the elders. In other words, the powers and functions are vested with the men of each generation, though they have to be transmitted by the women. However, in the observance of taboo and the performance of rituals and ceremonies, the women do not enjoy the same privilege or rank as men. No woman can ever become the head of subdan, and thus, she cannot be chieftains.

9 P.P.G. Mathur, op.cit., p. 156.

10 A. Ayyappan, op.cit., p.28.

11 Personal Interview with Talakkal Chandu Smaraka Secretary, V.Rajendra Prasad, at Wayanad on 20th Aug 2012.

Childbirth and Purificatory Rites

Gender inequality was almost absent among Kurichiyas right from childhood to the old age. This tradition has continued ever since. They believed that only the women are responsible for the growth of the baby in her womb. They prefer the first born to be a female; other wise the mother would die at her third delivery. The delivery is in a confinement hut, erukottupura, about 200-300 meters away from the main house. She stays there for sixty days after delivery under the care of a midwife, pettichi, who rubs her abdomen with oil to ease the pain. If there is delay or difficulty, the pooppaan goes to the Karthalakkaran oracle, who divines the reason.

Purificatory bath, *thalichukuli* is performed on the fourth day if it is a male child, and in the case of a female child, it is conducted on the fifth day. The mother and the baby are confined to the *erakttupura* for about sixty days. After the final purificatory bath, the mother and the baby are moved to the main house. *Melukanjji*, prepared with raw rice, pepper, garlic, and ayamodakam, *Adathoda* spp. Is the special diet given to the woman after delivery?¹² It is given for the first nine days and the next nine days, *pacharikanji*, raw rice gruel. In the past, the child was named, and the first feeding of rice was done by the karanon on occasions like Onam, Vishu, Vellokkal, and Putharie. Nowadays, the children are taken to temples for rice giving and naming.

Muthachi and Ammayi

The Kurichiya elder women are treated with great respect in the family and enjoy all privileges and facilities. The oldest lady member of the matrilineal joint family is called *Muthachi*.¹³ Even if she is aged over 80 years, which is very common among them, she has to perform several social and ritual roles. They include the bringing of the bride to the groom's place and lead other ladies in giving bath during the *therettukalyanam*.¹⁴

12 K.S. Singh, *People of India, Kerala*, Anthropological survey of India, vol. XXVII, New Delhi, 2002, p.715.

13 Personal Interview with Kurichiya girl P.K. Jaya Devi, at Palottu on 22 August 2012.

14 It is puberty rite for girls common among the tribals, see *infra*.

She attends the women who deliver in the family. She gives the first bath to the baby and the mother on the third day and the second bath on a ninth day. During this period, she took care of the baby. She tied the *tali*, chain taken from the temple of Karimpili Bhagavathi, for the *thevettukalyanam* around the neck of the girl as a symbol of celebration of marriage. She does it even if more than one girl is involved in the function. The Muthachi arranges the ear pinning ceremony of young girls with the help of the moonnaman. There is no social stigma, even if the muthachi is a widow. Widows in this community face no discrimination, taboos, etc. They are treated with sympathy and can attend all social and ritual functions. All these factors manifest the high status that the Kurichiya women enjoyed irrespective of marital status and age.¹⁵ The social rites taboos in connection with marriage and puberty of girls are not so elaborately performed in modern times, with the Kurichiya family also mostly becoming nuclear.

The *Ammayi* is the wife of the *Karanavan* of a *mittom*. She has several responsibilities, including processing and monitoring of food items, delegating responsibilities to women, and attending to social and ritual functions. She takes the problems of other womenfolk to the *Karanavan* for appropriate solutions. She is an important, influential, and respected person in *mittom*. She is important as long as the *Karanavan* is alive. When *Karanavan* dies, she ceases to be the main *Ammayi* for fulfilling these roles. Generally, she will be sent to her ancestral home after the death of her husband, preferably two or three years later. At that time she will be given presents of clothes, money, one kindi, a vessel, one knife, etc.

Cooking is the responsibility of the Kunchiya women. The *poopathi* entrusts the job to one or more specific women.¹⁶ It was a convention that the husband of the woman who is in charge of cooking collects the firewood. Drawing water, washing vessels, taking care of the younger ones, sweeping, cleaning the house and surroundings one done by women. Men and women take part in weeding, transplanting, harvesting, winnowing, and husking

the paddy and plucking coffee seeds. They take part in economic activities and contribute to the family income. They have a role in special functions and rituals. Women under childbirth and menstruation are considered impure and not allowed to take part in rituals and religious functions.

Social Control and Kinship

The Kurichiya territory is divided into 'Nadu' territorial sub-divisional, and over each Nadu there is a headman. In feudal times the overall chief, *Nattu pooppaan* was appointed by the overload. Now he is chosen from one of the *pooppaan* of the constituent families. He had several powers and responsibilities. He organizes the community religious observances. If a new Kurichiya settlement is to be established, his sanction is required; a new married bride coming into the jurisdiction has to offer respects to his family.¹⁷

Incest is punishable with excommunication. Mathur reports of a case where one Kurichiya widow fell in love with her diseased husband's parallel cousin. They ran away and embraces Christianity rather than face excommunication. The clan elders conducted the death rites, Uppukanhi of the delinquents.

Two types of incest are differentiated, viz, *mariyadi*, or tolerable because the pair are members of affinal clan and *eriyadi* or intolerable between members of fraternal clans. Those guilty of the former undergo a ritual purification, but the latter entails instant excommunication. In the past, if the Kurichiya woman had sexual relations with a non-Kurichiya man, she was pushed into a deep ravine and shot to ensure that she died. Nowadays, excommunication is sufficed.¹⁸ Sexual relation of a Kurichiya female and a non-Kurichiya male entails excommunication. No circumstance is sufficient to exonerate it from this outcome. The women concerned are known as *pulayadi*. Most excommunicated Kurichiyans convert to Christianity.

Typically matrilineal kinship patterns prevailed. Kurichiya is identified throughout his life with the matrilineage and the *mittom* of his mother's natality. He will be brought home by his maternal uncle

15 A. Ayyappan, op.cit., p.30.

16 Poopathi is the wife of the Karnon. She is a very respectable person in kurichiya clan.

17 Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. IV, Gosmo Publications, Delhi, 1975, p.129.

18 Ibid.

when about five or six years old to grow up along with his cousins and his uncle's children until the latter are respectively taken along by the maternal uncles to their matrilineal *mittoms*. His sisters also remain there until they are married, then they go off to their husband's home where they remain until they are widowed or divorced. This is a combination of patrilocal residence and matriling.

Though the *pooppa*'s wife manages the house keeping, it is the *muthachi* or eldest female of matrilineage who is the ritual head, enjoying many privileges and facilities. Strict avoidance is observed between-group up brothers and sisters. If by accident, a brother happens to touch a sister, a fine has to be paid to the Gods of the *mittom*, and all the women undergo a purificatory bath. A man stands at least eight feet away from his elder brother's wife. But potential mother-in-law, is not subject to taboo, "you may lie in the lap of your ammayi"¹⁹ These are a very few customs, prevailed among the Kurichiyas.

Corresponding to the enangan of the Nayar, there is an institution of an affinal relationship known as *munnaman*, *cengati*. A family belonging to a clean different from that to which a concerned matrilineage belongs will be chosen as its *munnama mittom*; the relationship is reciprocal. Depending on the importance of the functions to be attended to, the *pooppa* or a junior member of the families concerned could officiate.²⁰ His involvement is required at all major rites, and as a witness in important transactions. He also acts as a middle man for the selection of a bride and sometimes, even as a priest.

In a sect whether it is a caste or a tribe, ceremonies and rituals play a significant role in the smooth functioning of political, religious, economic, and social spheres. In the case of tribal societies, ceremonies are expensive about their income. However, they celebrate every ceremony with due consideration and sanctity, as these ceremonies and rituals have certain social values. More over it express group behavior, which includes beliefs and customs of the group concerning life and culture.

According to Radcliffe- Brown, rituals in culture are meaningful activities that are considered valuable

and which are a collective expression of sentiments. Certain rituals also express and sustain the corporate identity of social groups. Ritual actions functions to maintain the dialectical relationship between the individual mind and the communal order through the mediation of collective representations. These collective representations also have a social function.

The Pandal Pattel ceremony, similar to the *thalikettu* ceremony in the rest of Kerala, used to be performed. It was a group ceremony for girls aged five years and above who had not attained puberty, belonging to different *mittoms* of the same clan. For this, Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays are auspicious. The *pooppa*, after consulting the other members and the *munnaman* fixes the date, seeks the blessings of the ancestral *nizhals* and other deities. A *pandal* was specially constructed, and the whole community is invited by sending messages of appropriate status to each. All relatives should have to arrive at least one day before.

On the day, all the girls, relatives, and invitees took a ritual bath. The oil to be applied would have been kept in the temple of the female deity Karimpili Bhagavathi or the room of the *nizhal*. The rituals related to girls were conducted by the *muthachi*, *ammaiyi*, etc. to a nearby stream. Mean while the *munnaman* and other participants dip and returned sprinkling *punyaham* (holy water) fall around.²¹

The songs sung on occasion contain advice to the girls on how they should conduct themselves, particularly as wives. They should have restraint, be careful in domestic chores; if at all, they had to run away from their husbands, they should ensure that they were accompanied by a younger brother-in-law. It was a prayer to all the Gods and the occasion for the *gittans* to announce their willingness to accept particular girls among those presented as future brides for their nephews, after considering clan affiliations. Mathur reported the trial tying would be performed by a ritual husband who retained that status all through her life.²²

Kettukalyanam and Therettukalyanam

The actual marriage among the Kurichiyas takes place in a most simple and non-pompous style

19 Ayyappa, 1990, p.31.

20 K. Panoor, *Keralathile Africa* (Mal.), Kottayam, 2008, p.26.

21 Ibid., p.24.

22 Ibid.

with very little expenditure. On the other hand, they celebrate the puberty ceremony with great style.

The *Talikettu Kalyanam* was performed by the Kurichians of Waynad. A Kurichiya girl must, before puberty, go through the *talikettu Kalyanam*. This ritual was performed by lineage, mittom every five or seven years for all unmarried girls. But the *talikettu kalyanam* was not generally performed for nine girls together belonging to nine different lineages at the same time. The important rite of this ceremony is the tying of a heart-shaped gold ornament, tali with the help of a white silk thread round the neck of the girl by a bridegroom. The groom is paid his fees for the ritual, and he remains as the ritual husband *machunan* of the girl throughout, but he is not entitled to visit her again. Immediately after the *Talijettukalyanam* the girl was given in marriage to a boy who was responsible for looking after her.²³ However, she would not sleep with her husband until she attains puberty.

Puberty rites, known as the *rattukalyanam*, are celebrated with great goy on the onset of the first menstruation. The girl knowing that she has to leave the house and usually hides: noticing the absence at meals, the older women search for her and direct her to the seclusion hut, *erupura* for six days during which she could not touch other people, tools, vessels etc. or enter sacred places. She has to bath everyday, on the 7th day was the purifactory rite. The onset is reported to the *pooppa* by his wife, and she would discuss the celebration with other members. If they could not conduct an immediate ceremony, they can postpone it. But this is hardly necessary because other lineage will come to their assistance with offerings of vegetables, sugarcane, etc. Usually, the ceremony is conducted within thirty days of the monarchy.²⁴ A single celebration was held for several girls.

A semi entailing presence of the oracle, in addition to the customary complements of friends and relatives, made the rite most notable. The meat of the animals hunted for the occasion and fish are essential ingredients. The oracle invokes the *munnaman daivam* God after a coconut has been offered in apology for all mistakes. After the ritual bath, the girls are brought to the verandah decked out in a new waist cloth and cloth across the breasts,

23 MRG Mathur, op.cit., p.158.

24 Nettoor P. Dhamodharan, *Adivasikalude Keralam*, (Mal.), Kottayam, 2000, p.52.

sandal paste on their foreheads, and ornaments. They prayed to Karimbili Bhagavati and sat facing the lamp representing her. These ladies, one by one, bless the girls. A feast is given on occasion made of raw rice, jiggery, and coconut specially prepared, *chakkarachoru* for this occasion.²⁵

Marriage Ceremonies

When the karnan mittom of the boy's lineage felt that it is time for a nephew of his to get married, he thinks of a suitable girl and dispatches a messenger to his counterpart in the girls *mittom*. If the response is encouraging, he or a senior member representing him, the *ammaiyi*, the *muthachi*, *munnaman*, and his wife visit the brides home to be welcomed warmly. The boys party presents cloth to the girl a feast ensiles. The girl wearing the new cloth touches the feet of the members of the party and worship at the room of the nizhal. A separate room is provided for them. There had been a few cases of the boys refusing to accept the girl chosen for them. The elders harangue him, but prudence now necessitates a prior consent from the boy.²⁶ On the eighth day, the bridegroom and a few relatives make a return visit to the bride's *mittom*, where they are treated with feast, song, and jokes. They stay at night and return the next morning.

The Institution of Marriage

Marriage outside the tribe and within the clan is strictly forbidden. They also observe subcaste endogamy and phratry exogamy. Girls one generally 15-20 years old at the time of marriage. The age difference between the boy and girl is no concern- the wife may be older than the husband. Cross-cousin, is preferred if matrilateral cross-cousin is not available the possibility of other alliances is examined. Ayyappa found from a brief survey. Nearly 55 percent of all marriages took place between matrilateral cross-cousin and the rest on a partilateral cross-cousin basis or among non- relatives.²⁷

25 A.A.D. Luiz, *Tribes of Kerala*, Bharathiya Adimjathi Sevak Sangh, New Delhi, 1962, p.9.

26 Census of India, General Report, 1917, Series IX, Part A and B, pp. 40-45.

27 B.K. Royt Barman, "Challenges of development and Tribal Women of India", *Tribal women Development Agenda Papers*, 1986, p. 4.

Levirate is not allowed. Divorce is permitted for adequate reason. Widows and divorced women do not find any problem at all until getting remarried. The new husband is responsible for looking after the children of the women by her previous marriage. According to Ayyappan, neither bride price nor dowry is payable among the Waynad Kurichiya, though the bride may be decked out in ornaments according to the financial status of her family. Premarital sexual relation within permitted categories is excusable.

Modernity

Under the impact of modernity, the Kurichiya Society also has changed to a great extent. They have changed greatly into a modern life style. But the change is confined to a great measure by tradition. The main change is noticed in the construction of their buildings. However, even these modern buildings have maintained the traditional layout of very small rooms and a *Verandah* in the front. Most of the family members wear modern clothes including terry cotton and polyester. The school and college going girls wear dress used by the modern ladies in

Kerala. Only the aged widows wear the traditional dress of *veshtymundu* at the waist and a small piece of cloth on the breast, which leaves the back open. Even the other elderly ladies wear blouses and *vestry* in the place of the piece. Cloth placed on the breast when they leave at their home, they wore a sari.²⁸ The frequent cinema-going in the recent past influenced the ladies to adopt a new dress pattern. They have also changed their hair style like ladies of the plains. Men in general now cut their hair, which was traditionally grown tied and kept at the left side just above the ear. They now dress like any other modern man in Kerala. The modernized Kurichiya family uses electronic equipment, for example, television mixy, telephone and washing machine. The joint family is now mostly converted into the nuclear system. As a result of the ongoing all-round social change in the family, a partition of at least a portion of the family property based on *marumakkathayam*, *matrilineal* system is contemplated.

28 Personal interview with Minister for Welfare of Backward Communities P.K. Jayalakshmi on 15th December 2012.

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