



MAPPILA MATRILINEAL SYSTEM IN MALABAR

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Muslims constitute the second largest community in Kerala. Malabar, a district during the British rule, is a geographical area of the present five northern district of Kerala. The Muslim community living in Malabar called as Mappilas. ‘Originally formed through inter-marriage between maritime Arab traders and local women, the Mappilas are today a heterogeneous community characterized by ethnic, regional and social diversities.’¹ Over the last century, the Muslim women have undergone innumerable changes at different levels in their sphere of life in spite of various obstacles and obstructions. The changes were visible in both personal and public life and became more prominent after independence. The Muslim community in general and women in particular experienced revolutionary changes by the end of twentieth century.

Matrilineal system or *Marumakathayam* is a distinctive customary law of inheritance and family system practiced by various communities in Malabar.² In this unique system, descent was traced through the female line and the property of the family was inherited by the nephews of the head of the family, not by his children. As it is a wide area of anthropological, sociological and historical research, it is petite attempt to locate the position of Muslim women in the matrilineal system.³ The Mappila matrilineal system has some peculiar features.⁴

Friar Jordanus who lived in Quilon during the 14th century AD, was the first foreign traveler to refer to the system in Kerala. Ibn Batuta (1347), Abdul Razak, (1442) Nicolo Conti (1442) and others also mentioned about this system. Francois Pyrard de Laval, a French man who travelled in Kerala in 17th century wrote about the matrilineal system of Mappilas that “fathers are not succeeded by their children, but by their nephews, the sons of their sisters, this being a more certain line.”⁵ Apart from a small portion of *Mappila* Muslims of Malabar, the Muslims of the Lakshadweep

Islands and the *Minangkabaus*, one of the largest ethnic groups in Sumatra, Indonesia, followed this system of kinship.⁶ According to Mappila Wills Act, 1928;

*"Though the Muhammadans generally follow Makkathayam law (Patriliny) yet in the matter of inheritance the Mappilas of North Malabar and the Southern part of Kasargod taluk in the South Canara district have been following the Marumakkathayam law (Matriliny)."*⁷

Ibn Bathutha noticed the matrilineal system that existed among Hindus of Malabar while narrating about the people of Sudan but not provided any references about the existence of this system among the Mappilas.

*"No one is named after his father, but after his maternal uncle; and the sister's son always succeeds to property in preference to the son: a custom I witnessed nowhere else, except among the infidel Hindoos of Malabar. But these are Mohammedans, who retain their prayers by memory, study theology, and learn the Koran by rote."*⁸

Technically, *Marumakkathayam* is contrary to Islamic *Sharia*. In the Hijra Year 1194, the matrilineal Mappila Muslims has attained a religious sanction through the Queen Beebi of Cannanore from the Sultan of Turkey who was considered as the religious head (Khalif) of Islamic world.⁹ On the other hand, reformers of nineteenth century took up this issue as an un-Islamic system to be eradicated. Now days, a minority among the Muslims continue *Marumakkatayam* (matrilineal) system of inheritance especially in the coastal belts of Calicut and in northern parts of Malabar.

An assesment of gender space in Mappila matriliny is a very complex task. Its features and characteristics vary from region and locality. aboveall, these social institutions are under the religiocity of the members in the *Tharavadu* (ancestral home).¹⁰ There are many differences in the matrilineal systems of other communities and Mappilas. In Mappila matriliny, husband (*Puthiyappila*) lived in his conjugal home permanently. So, the Mappila matriliny can be called *Matrilocal* system instead of Matrilineal system.¹¹

It has been generally assessed that the women relished an unprecedented space in the domestic as well as in the public space under this system as men will not have much role in the household. He may be a visitor to that house or a guest. So women got

more freedom and power in the family. Since women reside at their own homes, they were maintained by the elder member called *Karanavan* out of the *Tarawad* property. Their husbands were not bound to maintain their family.¹² The *karanavarship* went only to the elder male member of the family. The *Karanavar* was the sole authority of the property and had power in decision making. That is why many cases and disputes were registered in various courts during 18th and 19th century in Malabar in connection with property rights.

The Arakkal family, the only Muslim ruling family in Kerala, also followed the matrilineal system. The case of Arakkal family is an exception to other Mappila matrilineal system where the elder member apart from gender discrimination can be the *Karanavar* or *Karanothi* (Female) of the *Tharavadu*. The eldest member, even it is a female, could become the ruler. This elder member called *Karanavar* or *Karanothi* was considered as the sole authority of the family and able to take decision and sign legal and commercial agreements for the sake of the whole family.¹³ The first female ruler of the Arakkal Swaroopam was Harrabichee Kadavoobi Adi Rajah Bebee of 903-7 Hijra era (CE 1728-1732). The succession chart displayed at Arakkal Museum shows a list of nine female rulers in its history.¹⁴

About the matrilineal system among Nayar community in Kerala, As G Arunima pointed out, Nayar women got more power in the system. When the *Tharavadu* was institutionalized in the matrilineal system, women became central in the family system. They had got property rights and role in decision making.¹⁵ In the case of Muslims, Mappila women enjoyed property rights in all times as Islamic Sharea clearly reiterates the share of women during the preparation of ancestral property. But, the '*Karanothi*' or women head of the matrilineal family enjoyed more economical as well as social power in the matrilineal families.

The maternal grand mother has got more importance in the matrilineal system. women were treated as primary member and the elder female members were entertained for decision making. they were entrusted with full right over ancestral property. The day to day affairs of the household was framed and controlled by the women members while they were not considered for discussion on the matters outside the household. Even though, the *Karanavar* was the sole authority of a family, the senior most

women in the *Tharavadu* was treated in a dignified manner and her words are considered seriously.

As female members were not taken into an 'alien house' after marriage, she never faces insecurity of the newly wedded wife of the patrilineal family. As she is living in her own houses even after marriage, she will be comparatively free to face assault or atrocities from her husband or his family members. The domestic subordination of women was much distant from the matrilineal wife. She controls her own life and her children. In case of breakdown of family life, children remain with her.¹⁶

Since the property was inherited through maternal lineage, female members enjoyed a sort of economic stability and fiscal power in the family.¹⁷ They didn't have a complete economic independence but was better to their counterparts in the patrilineal system. Although the lineage is constructed through the women, the power in the matrilineal system rests with the men. As in the case of other Muslim women, they were not get any chances to choose or even to meet their future husbands before marriage. the decision was always made by the *Karanavar* through bilateral discussion with family members.

On the other hand, as the *Karanavar* or male head of the family was holding the management of the *Tarawad* property, the economy of the *Tarawad* would be fully under the control of the elder male member of the family. This underlines the fact, in whichever or whatever kinship system exists, women were not going to get better status unless and until they holds the management of the property.¹⁸ Economic freedom designs social freedom. It is generally noticed that Muslim women got more freedom in matrilineal system and women were not in Purdha in the presence of their matrilineal kinsmen.¹⁹ But these women under matrilineal system were still in seclusion and covered not only their head but their face as well before outsiders and they seldom came outside. They were always behind' the curtain. They were not ready to come forward and talk to anyone.²⁰

The late 19th century witnessed the emergence of new middle class which started agitating for social changes through legislative measures. The new social awakening, urbanization and spread of education created the necessary attitude to dispute the matrilineal system among the Mappilas. The joint family and its socio-economic

structure came to be viewed as an impediment for individual growth and attainments.²¹ There were raised various suites and legal complexities due to the clash between customary laws and Islamic laws in different courts. The colonial government has introduced many legislative measures according to the complications and debates raised during that time. The Mappila Succession Act of 1918, The Mappila wills Act of 1928, the Mappila Marumakkathayam Act of 1939 were the major attempts in this regard.

The gender relations in Malabar also underwent radical transformations during this period. Matriliney was referred to as “un-Islamic” in the discourses of the courts, reform movements, the newly emerged middle class and many of the educated Mappila youngsters. Analyzing how “re-articulation of matriliney” resulted in the loss of power, and authority for Mappila women in first decades of 20th century in the coastal regions of Malabar, Manaf Kottakunnummal observes that, “In response to the emerging debates, they tried to ‘re-articulate’ the matrilineal customs in the idioms of ‘correct’ ways of practicing Islam. This was to retain the basic structure of matrilineal customs. For this purpose, they modified many aspects of gender relations and equally negotiated with religious practices that were in coming to be in vogue those days. They also attempted to read many of their customary practices in new ways to negotiate with idioms of patriarchy and textuality.”²² While the courts, religious experts, and common Mappilas always encountered one another in the case of matrilineal system, there were constant processes of re-articulations of the family, reconstruction of the role of women, and re-conceptualization of religious concepts. The similar sort of Matrilineal system also was existed in the other coastal regions especially in Lakshadweep Islands which were politically and culturally connected to Malabar. Lakshadweep Islands had continuous contacts with Malabar and also were under the political control of Arakkal family of Kannur during the colonial period. But the system prevailed in Lakshadweep and Malabar was different. It is to be noted that Muslim women were never in seclusion in the Lakshadweep islands where matrilineal system existed. They often went outside and did not often cover even their head.²³

While analyzing about the Mappila Matriliney and its discourse with colonial legal system, Benaseer noticed that the matrilineal customs were replaced by the 'correct' versions of Islamic practices in Malabar during 1871-1939 by the continuous debates and administrative interventions of the colonial courts. According to her, this process happened when the Mappilas gained knowledge about 'true' teachings of Islam from religious texts after obtaining modern education. The transformation of matrilineal families into the frame of patriliney, and nuclear family meant empowerment for women from the shackles of tradition. Thus, the social transformations imply social mobility for the Mappila community from backwardness to the progress.²⁴

A wave for transform family systems especially the matrilineal system was experienced by the end of nineteenth century in Kerala. Issues were raised in Nayar Taravadus in various parts of the state. The contemporary literatures of the time including novels like *Indulekha* of O Chandu Menon depicted the internal crisis of matrilineal families and the social changes experienced during this period. Mappila matriliney also underwent transformation during this period. Many cases were raised in the colonial courts in connection with ancestral property ship. The Malabar Marriage Report (1886), The Malabar Act (1898) and the Madras Marumakkathayam Act (1933) paved the way to reforms in matrilineal system in Nayar community. The Mappila Succession Act of 1918 was the first legal intervention by the colonial administration on Mappilas social customs in Malabar. The Mappila Will Act of 1928 and the Mappila Marumakkathayam Act of 1939 followed by the Mappila Succession Act of 1918 initiated to cope with increased number of litigations from some members of the matrilineal families.

The call for social reforms and the moral support extended from some sections of the society in favor of legislation apparently showed the changes in the outlook of educated and political elites of the community in the context of nationalism paved the way to reforms in the Matrilineal system in Malabar. Mappila matriliney was understood as "un-Islamic" by the reformers. Scholars like Makthi Thangal made extensive efforts against the system. The ignorance of colonial administrators and judges to perceive the customs of the land for while they settled the legal disputes and

the subsequent implementation of codified legal measures sometimes made the initiative complicated and confusing.²⁵

In short, the history of matriliney tells us the changes in Mappila daily life in the context of colonial modernity; as indeed, the ways in which Mappilas negotiated with threats on their customary practices by way of incorporation, alteration, and negation. It also tells us how Mappila matrilineal community in Malabar negotiated with colonial legal principles, and Islamic laws, and attempted to retain their matrilineal familial customs. We can assume that while underwent some transformations in customs and gender relations, the directions of the courts failed to impose a drastic transformation in the familial practices.

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- 3 Kathleen Gough observes that matriliney was widely prevalent among Muslims in Malabar irrespective of class difference, though some customs varied in different class stratum. See, Kathleen Gough, " *Mappila* :North Kerala " in *Matrilineal Kinship*, ed. D. Schneider and E.K. Gough (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1961) 415-441. This book deals with the structural and evolutionary problems of matrilineal system in different communities and inquires into the implications of matrilineal descent for the evolution of kinship system.
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- 8 *The Travels of Ibn Bathutha*, Translated by Rev. Samuel Lee, (London: The Oriental Translation Committee, 1829), 234. Ebook
- 9 Kurup K.K.N, *The Ali Rajas of Cannanore*, (Calicut: Publication Division, University of Calicut, 2002) 16.
- 10 *Tharavadu* is the ancestral home or the common house fir the joint families in Kerala. The term is usually used for Nair families, but now it is commonly used for all ancestral houses.
- 11 Gough Kathleen, *Op Cit.*, 421.
- 12 Thurston Edgar and P. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes in South India, vol. I*, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1993, first published in 1899), 492.

- 13 The first agreement of Arakkal Adi Raja with east India Company was signed by Balia Beebi, the then head of the family.
- 14 We can see photos of Arakkal Beevis without veils exhibited at the museum
- 15 G Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney In Malabar*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), 27.
- 16 Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnamurthy, *Women and Society in India*, (New Delhi: Asian Press, 1987), 192-193.
- 17 Actually it is not an exclusive case of Mappila women in Malabar but we can see ownership of huge property by Muslim women and spending of wealth as per their wish in many societies. There were many women, especially from elite class, controlled wealth and spend it as they wished during the Mughal time. Wives, daughters and close relations of the Mughal emperors issued *Farmans* (decrees), with their own seals. They built mosques, tombs, religious buildings etc. they gave stipends to their servants, religious scholars, litteratuers, etc. Ordinary people gave female patrons the same sort of respect which males received. See, Gregory C. Kozlowski, 'Muslim women and the control of property in North India', in Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Ed.), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, Vol II, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 26.
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