



Leela Damodara Menon

From Mothers to Daughters

Matrilineal Families in Kerala

Leela Damodara Menon

In old travelogues Kerala is often described as Penn Malayalam — the Malayala land of women—because of the prevalence of the matrilineal family system right up to the early 20th century. In this article, Leela Damodara Menon, who herself comes from such a family, describes the special features of this system and the advantages it offered to women.

Marumakkathayam, the unique matrilineal system of Kerala, is believed to be a thousand years old. Women in that society had liberty, property and, above all, importance. Lineage was through them and children belonged to the mother's family. The *Marumakkathayam* family lived together in a *Tarawad*. In its simplest form, the family consisted of a mother, her brothers and younger sisters and her children. They would live together with the eldest brother as *Karnavar*, the head of the household, who managed the estate. In one of its more complex forms, it would consist of a mother, her sons and daughters, the children of her daughters and their descendants in the female line however, distant, all living together under control of their common *Karnavar* who is senior in age to all the males in the family. Each group of mother and children and their descendants formed the *Tavazhi* (meaning 'belonging to the same mother').

Ownership and Management

Property is owned jointly. Women have equal rights as men and can claim maintenance by the family.

Handicapped or disabled persons also had rights. No one could claim that any portion of the family properly belonged to him or her as an individual. There was common ownership and the family property was, under normal circumstances, indissoluble without the consent of all the members of the family. The *Karnavar* had no right to alienate or sell property unless it was for the welfare of the family. Kinship as well as inheritance were traced through females. When partition of the family property was effected, the children's shares were clubbed with the mother and not with the father.

The *Karnavar* had only one share. He could not give any portion of the joint family property to his children, but could give them any wealth earned by him or any private property acquired through his personal effort. It used to be lightly commented that the *Karnavar* threw plantain fruits at his son and a bunch of keys at his nephew. Often, the men left their share to the *Tarawad*.

The Residential Pattern

The family lived in a large house. The average number in a family could easily be 70 - 80 including children. The

house would have large halls, closed or open verandahs, one or more inner courtyards called *Nadumittom*, a prayer room and many single rooms, usually on the first and second floor, for the married women. These rooms were self-contained and often had attached toilets—not of the modern type but in some cases astonishingly similar. There would be a large common kitchen, with a drinking water well in the ante-room. Additional comforts depended on the status of each family.

The front of the house—the *Poomukham*—had a large verandah running through the length of the main house with a slightly raised platform at one end where the *Karnavar* could sit and keep control of household movements.

There would be another building close to the main house called *Paltiyayapura*. Its ground floor was a granary to stock paddy and rice for the whole year for the family and store the big vessels of copper and brass used for festive occasions. When the *Karnavar's* wife visited, he and his family lived in the quarters upstairs. The gate house was usually large, with a first floor where the young boys

relaxed. There were cowsheds, wood-sheds and other out-houses as required. A large tank for bathing was a must. The extensive compound had coco-nut, jack, mango and other fruit trees. Herbal and vegetable gardens were tended with care. There would be workers attached to the family for generations who had enough work in the household throughout the year. A place of worship for the family deity was also part of the house and was often used by devotees from outside the *Tarawad*.

The men used to be warriors whose training or duties took the able bodied among them away from home. They were landlords as well. Their family system may have arisen from a need to protect the women from physical harm and exploitation and to save the family and property from disintegration and destruction while the men were away.

A girl could take up any study available to the boys of the family. On the Vijayadasami, both boys and girls were initiated to letters in a formal ceremony before they were five years old. Many women were well versed in Sanskrit, astrology, music and even martial arts. Unniarcha was famous for her dexterity in sword fighting and

could hold her own with any champion of her day. When Swami Vivekananda came to Kerala 100 years ago, he was astonished when a lady from Kodungalloor conversed with him in excellent Sanskrit. However, not all girls were educated.

Girls had equal property rights with boys. No one cried when a girl was born. It was felt that without a girl, the line would end in a *Tavazhi*. Girls were adopted if there were none in the family, even though as per the *Sastras* the sons or nephews and not daughters, performed the last rites for the elders.

The Brahmins, especially the Namboodiri Brahmins who had settled down in Kerala, were religious leaders and connoisseurs of art, culture and literature. They were also landlords. The eldest Namboodiri male alone could marry women from the own community. He could take more than one wife. But the junior Namboodiris, until they became senior, would marry Nair girls. Then they would also marry Namboodiri women. That they did not have to maintain their Nair wives was advantageous to them. For Nair girls, marriage into a higher caste — *Anuloma* marriage — was for better progeny; otherwise they married Nair

cousins who were their ‘intended’, called *Muracherukkan*.

The Namboodiri husband came to the wife’s house as often as he wished. He could give the children *Ishtadana* if he so desired, from his personal property. Usually, the Namboodiri father found it advantageous to keep his property in his Namboodiri family and not allow his Nair children any claim on it. Nair sons observed all the death rites of their father whether Nair or Namboodiri, but had no desire for the *Brahmaswam* gifts from a Brahmin father.

The *Karnavar* made decisions for the whole family and maintained discipline. The code of conduct was strict. Girls were well protected and chaperoned. A girl’s first public appearance was when she participated in the ceremony of the *Thalickettu* with other girls of her ownage, seven to nine. Usually, Brahmin priests or cousins tied the *Thali* at a public function. Because *Thali* is a symbol of Hindu marriage in other parts of India, this was mistaken for a mini marriage. But it was not so. The girl had nothing more to do with the person who tied the *Thali*.

The second time attention was focused on her was when she attained



Leela Damodara Menon's Family

puberty. To celebrate the occasion she was assigned to a decorated corner in the women's section of the house. Women, relations and friends came to see her there. On the fourth day she was bathed and bedecked in a lace dress and ornaments, the typical dress of the elders, and taken in procession outside the *Tarawad* house. She could also put in an appearance in the inner courtyard and join the *Kaikottukali* dance by young and old women during the Onam and Thiruvathira festivals. All these functions actually declared to the community that she was a girl growing up with a rightful place in that household.

When the girl was thirteen or fourteen, the family would entertain marriage proposals. The uncle would formally receive the horoscope of the boy. Once the negotiations started, the horoscopes were matched. The girl often got a chance to express her willingness or otherwise after the boy with some elders came formally to see her. There was hardly any pressure used. Often the girl refused proposals as described in the first Malayalam novel *Indulekha*. For the girl, if she did not marry a Namboodiri Brahmin, her husband would be from within the community, father's sister's son or mother's brother's son. They would have known each other since childhood.

The traditional marriage was arranged with elaborate preparations. Invitations would be sent out, personal invitations extended to close relations and friends and representatives from 'four villages around' would be invited.

Wedding Ceremony

The Nair marriage ceremony was simple. The *mullapandal* was especially hung with flower garlands. Two

big brass lamps were lit and a big grain measure filled with paddy and decorated with a bunch of unopened coconut flowers would be kept in the

mullapandal. A dozen women, to the accompaniment of music, went to the entrance of the hall to receive the bridegroom's party with trays of flowers and lit wicks. The bride's younger brother bathed the feet of the bridegroom. The party is then seated prominently. The bridegroom accompanied by a couple of senior members of his family is led to the *mullapandal* and seated. Then, the bride is brought by her aunts and mother, accompanied by girls carrying the tray of flowers and lamps. The bride and the bridegroom stood up facing each other and the bridegroom gives the *podava*—a gift of the traditional bridal dress to the bride. The bride's acceptance of the gift declares them truly wed. The marriage ceremony is called *podavakoda* — the giving of cloth. The Nair wedding was not a private function nor a secret one, as is sometimes alleged, but was celebrated in the presence of representatives of four villages, the four *Karas*.

There is an interesting event which shows how important the cloth gift was. Centuries ago, two princesses of the Chirakkal palace who were heirs to the throne were playing hide and seek with their friends in the river. The eldest princess was twelve. She hid where she could not be caught and the others returned to the palace thinking she had gone back. In the meanwhile, the tide washed away the princess' clothes. A boy coming upstream saw the clothes being swept off in the current and then spotted the girl standing neck deep in the water. So he threw his *angavastra*, the upper cloth, to her turning his face away to save her from embarrassment. A huge and cry was raised about the princess' absence. As

she appeared wrapped up in a strange apparel, she had to explain all that had happened. The princess did receive a cloth from a stranger! It was discovered that the boy was the son

of the king's Muslim commander-in-chief. There was a great uproar.

The king summoned his court. Everyone thought there was going to be heavy punishment for breaking the conventions. But the king solemnly declared that since the commander-in-chief's son had already given the gift of cloth to the princess and she had accepted it, the marriage had to be acknowledged. The kingdom would be divided into two. The couple got half of it, thereafter, known as Arakkal.

Changing Patterns

Many changes took place in *Mammakkathayam* in the course of centuries. The *Thalikettu* ceremony was dropped because in later years no one thought of presenting a girl as debutante when she was still a child. The age of marriage was advanced.

Today, the bridegroom ties the *Thali* on the bride and the couple exchange rings and garlands, as is done in Hindu marriages. After the ceremony, the bridegroom holds the hand of the bride and they walk around the lamp thrice in the *mullapandal* and retire duly accompanied by the bride's relatives to a room where the mother of the bride and other women relatives give them milk and plantains. That night, the bridegroom stays in the bride's house for the first time and, thereafter, goes there from his house every night. The only religious part of the ceremony was walking around *agni*, the lord of fire. Earlier, on behalf of the couple, *pooja* to Lord Ganapathy was done. But the Nair wedding used to be more customary and in the nature of a social contract.

It was considered normal for the Brahmin husband to marry in his community when he attained seniority. That was polygamous. Nair women were generally monogamous. But polygamy among Nair men was not unknown. Divorce was easy. If the husband died or there was a divorce, the women could marry again.

In 1686, the *Marumakkathayam* marriage laws were enacted by the state governments and new marriages had to be registered. It also gave a legal status to marriage and regularised Nair divorce customs. The wife or the husband could unilaterally repudiate the union at will. If the wife wished, she could marry again. That was usually arranged by the *Karnavar*. The decision to divorce did not economically effect the wife or children though it must have hit the wife emotionally.

The property rights of Nair women, her right to divorce at will and her social independence, kept her from being oppressed. The wife did not demand maintenance or money or property from the husband and the husband could not claim from the wife or her family any share of the wife's property in the name of care for their family unit. The wife who had the family's protection could not be harassed by the husband or his family.

This idea was accepted with difficulty by a male-dominated society. No Nair woman could be killed or harassed for dowry, nor denigrated for bearing girl children. She might be educated and trained in skills according to her ability and taste depending on the status of her family. That is true even today.

From all accounts, these marriages were relatively happy and free from tensions. There was hardly any wife beating or torture. No husband dared to batter his wife in her house. If any husband tried that, the relationship would be ended forthwith. Generally, wives were tolerant. Grandmothers would advise the girls that no man was perfect and they had to treat their husbands with respect and consideration. In the early 20th century, steps were taken to have a common divorce law in the Malabar and Cochin areas of Kerala. There was a great deal of protest claiming that such a law

would encourage lax morals and promiscuity. The existence of such a law did not promote divorce. Later, the laws were changed again to be in line with the Hindu marriage and divorce Act common to all Hindus, which was enacted by the Parliament of India.

Collapse of the System

The *Marumakkathayam* system collapsed as the times and the social order changed. The period of wars was over. Land ceiling laws reduced the extent of land under the *Tarawad*. The socio-economic conditions were changing fast. Men became more educated and left the household to take up jobs outside Kerala. They took their families with them to their places of work. This created differences between those who went away and those who remained at home. The unitary family appeared more suited to modern conditions than the big *Tarawad*. Dwindling resources created dissensions among the male members who started questioning the authority of the *Karnavar* and accused him of mismanagement. They asked for individual partition. It was difficult to manage the huge household without proper income. The low price of paddy further brought down their income.

Tenant-landlord relationships also became strained.

The *Marumakkathayam* households gradually dwindled in size and wealth.

When there was an attempt to codify Hindu inheritance law in free India, *Marumakkathayam* and *Aliyasthanam* laws were modified to suit these new social and economic changes. There was not much opposition to such a universal common code. So in Parliament, the only plea raised was to see that the notion of equality should not be made to disappear. Nair families were becoming unitary with the husband as the dominant factor and with the wife and children under his supposed protection.

In the first Parliament, when the bill was discussed, no one really protested strongly. What was the use of keeping the shell when the contents had gone? There was not enough property for the system to survive in the old style. Protests could not get them more land or money. There were too many persons to share what was left over and it was not worth the effort to check the downward trend. But in the family property, the equal share for women was maintained for the property of the



A Nair Ancestral Home

mother and father. The wife got a share of her husband's property. In 1976, the joint *Mammakkathayam* family was abolished. No one shed tears. It was a death unnoticed even by those to whom it once mattered.

Meanwhile, more social changes were taking place. Nair-Namboodiri marriages were becoming rare. There had been a demand for Namboodiri reformists that all Namboodiris should have the right to marry in their own community since the number of Namboodiri unmarried women was increasing and too many young

Namboodiri women were getting married to old Namboodiris.

Nair men from distant places were seeking Nair girls far away from their homes which made daily visits to the wife's house impossible. After marriage they took the wives away to their places of work. Nair men had stopped being warriors. Most of them did not stay in their own Tarawad, but had started taking jobs outside. The big houses were being neglected. For the few left behind, it was difficult to maintain them in keeping with the old ways. The granaries were empty and

even the *Karnavar* could not continue to exercise the same powers and to stay and discharge his duties as before. The whole system gave place to a new order. No one could fight for just a dream.

The Manimakkathayam had given the basic structure for the high literacy rate in Kerala and the background for higher education for girls. Many of the honourable traditions are still maintained by the surviving members of the old families and women do hold their heads high.

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermillion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

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