

POSITION OF WOMEN UNDER THE NAYAKS PERIOD IN THE SOCIETY OF THANJAVUR - A STUDY

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The position of women in the Thanjavur society has been a very complicated one. The Woman being a unit of the family, a wife or mother had entered society as an individual. The inferior conditions of women as a sequel to the male chauvinism continued even in the period of the Nayaks. They were still ill-treated. In the seventeenth century, the women, irrespective of their age were under the control of their husbands and sons, Religious freedom, along with property rights were forbidden to them. A Jesuit record reveals that a woman from shepherd caste was not permitted by her son to follow the Christian principles. Even a woman of higher caste was not permitted to follow her own policy on religion. The influencing character of the western education and the spread of Christianity initiated improvements in the status of women in Thanjavur in the second half of the eighteenth century. The attitudinal change in the society is noticed by the fact that at least in a few cases the women had a say to decide their marriages. In fact a marriage against her will was considered an offence. This paper deals about the marriage system, sati system and system of widowhood during the time of Thanjavur Nayaks in Tamilnadu.

Marriage System

In the traditional Hindu society marriage is an in the dissolute and sacred bond for a happy and conjugal life. According to Manu, marriage is an obligation for the birth of a son which would lead him to attain *moksha*. It should evaluate the spirit of culture and civilization of the society. As such, marriage was considered an important social institution.¹

The Jesuit letters and Meckenzie manuscripts throw more light on the institution of marriage in the Thanjavur region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to them generally arranged marriages were popular. The parents of the bride and groom considered that it was their prime duty to arrange marriages of their sons and daughters. The dominance of caste system had its impact on the parents of brides and grooms, in Thanjavur society as elsewhere in India. The parents were very particular about their caste while tracing the brides and bride grooms. Beauty and personal attraction were considered secondary with real sense. In general, marriages were endogamous.

Generally it was considered that the proper match for a man was the daughter of his maternal uncle or paternal aunt or daughter of his sister. This type of consanguineous marriages was in vogue among the people of Kallar caste. Generally the close kinship overrode this other considerations in the choice of the bride and groom. This domination of consanguinity was noticed even among the Muslim community. Wealth and education were considered secondary.²

Generally monogamy was the order of the day among the people of middle and lower middle classes. On the other hand, the polygamy of the society was the privilege of the kings, nobles and wealthy people. Bonsle Vamsa Charitham attests to the practice of polygamy among the royal men.³ Jesuit letters record the practices of remarriage among the middle class people and it also mentions that the way was made clear for the second marriage by making null and void the first one by grants of money to the first wife. The Muslims in Thanjavur region, though their religion permitted a maximum number of four wives, mostly followed monogamy. Generally they got a second marriage only after the demise of the first wife.⁴

The custom of 'bride price' was universally practiced by all sections of the people. A seventeenth century inscription reveals the practice of bride price among the Brahmins. Fr.Da.Coasta also mentions the custom of bride price in the region in the seventeenth century. Abbe Dubois states that the practice of bride price by all to marry and to buy a wife is a synonymous expression in India.⁵

The wife is never given to her husband until she was paid the whole of the sum agreed upon. Meckenzie also attested this practice of bride price among the Kallars. A Modi record also indicates the prevalence of such practice in Vellala caste. The detailed account of child marriage is known from various records. Fr.Em.Martin states that the girls got married even at an early age of seven. Corroborating this evidence, Abbe Dubois records that the girls usually married at five, seven or at the most nine. The ancient law giver Manu had suggested that a girl should be given in marriage before she was eight years old even if she had not attained puberty. Such type of practice was common among the Brahmins and other high castes in Thanjavur area. Among the Brahmins the usual age of marriage was between seven and ten. It was also performed even in the royal family. It was very much prevalent even among the Kallars.⁶

The first hand information about the prevalence of child marriage, even in the eighteenth century in the Thanjavur region was known through a Modi record. At Thiruvedu near Thanjavur town, a Kallar by name Perianayagam gave his seven year old daughter in marriage to Sabapathy Pillai. But the married child was under the care of her father till she attained puberty. There is no evidence of such practice among the Muslims. The victims of child marriage at times became widows even before their puberty. Instances of children married to sixty years old widowers are recorded by Abbe Dubois.

Though the rigid caste culture did not permit inter caste marriages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries instances of such cases are not wanting, particularly among the low castes. Rarely did the high caste people perform inter-caste marriages. In fact the wives of Tukkoji belonged to different castes. In another case, Kokila, a Brahmin lady after the death of her husband married a European military officer and re-christened herself as Clarinda. The inter-caste marriage was totally banned among the Kallars. One of the Meckenzie's manuscripts envisaged excommunications for a Kallar woman indulging in inter caste marriage. Also the non-Tamil Brahmins, particularly the Marathas, the Konkanese and

Gujarati Brahmins married only within their group. The Muslims want their children to intermarry and give the demonstration of sibling solidarity.⁷

The prevalence of divorce and remarriage among the people of Kallar caste is noticed from a Meckenzie record, which mentions that if the girl of Kallar caste did not like her husband, she would pay him his marriage expenses. Also a woman with her children was permitted to divorce her husband on a condition that the children were left in the husband's house. At the same time, a husband could divorce his wife by giving her half of his property. About its prevalence among the other castes. FT. Da. Coasta expresses that the dissatisfied husband could divorce his wife by giving her some amount of money and called her 'sister'. After that their marriage became null and void.⁸

The people from lower castes, particularly the Mutharayas, Maravas, Tottiyans, Uralis, Uppilians were permitted to divorce for material advantages. The marriage bond was loose among the people of the servile castes. With regard to the Islamic community, if a divorcee had any child, it should be under the care of the mother. It was obligatory for the husband to pay alimony for the maintenance of the divorced wife and children.⁹

The Custom of Sati System

One of the worst ordeals which the Hindu women were forced to undergo was Sati. The practice of Sati caused irrecoverable loss of many valuable human lives. This practice was prevalent widely in the regions of Thanjavur and Tiruchirapalli and a few cases were witnessed in other parts of the Tamil country. The term Sati is a familiar noun derived from the valuable root sat, which means truth. Therefore Sati was a widow who was deemed virtuous as she took to burning herself voluntarily on the pyre of her husband. But the term has different meanings. Edward Thompson thinks that the term sati was used to denote the women, who performed this rite and the rite itself and that its application in the latter sense was modern. A.L. Basham points out that the term Sati was erroneously applied by early British officials and the missionaries to the act of immolation.¹⁰

The custom of Sati did not apply to widows who had young children. The origin of Sati could be traced back to the remote past in India. It was prevalent in the Vedic period. The Atharva Veda mentions the practice of Sati. There was no trace of it whatsoever in the post-Vedic period down to 400 B.C. The reason for this discontinuation was probably the finer cultural outlook that the Vedic Aryans had developed which by this time had convinced them that the custom was a barbarous one.¹¹

The Brahmanical literature (1500 B.C. to 700 B.C.) is silent about it. The Buddhist literature was also unaware of the custom of Sati. Both Kautilya and Megasthenese were silent. In north India this practice again surfaced to limelight and became very popular from 400 A.D. It was very popular among the Rajputs in the medieval period, who considered that Sati was a religious institution inherited from there. The Sati was a rare practice among the Tamils of the Sangam period. Purananuru, a sangam text mentions the attempt of Sati by Perungoppendu. In the post Sangam period the performance of Sati by Adhirai, after the death of her husband, was known from Manimekalai. There are a few evidences of Sati

among royal women during the Chola period. Ganga Madevi committed Sati after the death of her husband Virachola Ilangovelan. Vanavan -madevi committed sati after the death of Sundara Chola. Thanjavur, being the centre of Brahmanical influence cases of Sati was seen then and there. The Nayak royal ladies committed Sati as they considered it a compulsory social ceremony in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When Achyutappa died in 1600 A.D. three hundred and seventy women of his harem committed ritual suicide.¹²

When Vijayaraghava Nayak was defeated by the Chokkanatha Nayak of Madurai, he ordered to set fire on the mine, where the royal harem placed, which reflect their intention of Sati. After them, the Marathas of Thanjavur continued the practice of Sati. Modi records supply information in detail about the occurrences of Sati committed by the royal ladies. The Bhonsle vamsa Charitham is also explicit on this fact.¹³

Besides the members of royal families the members of high castes also practised it; but rarely. Evidences are silent about the practice of Sati among the lower castes. One of the causative factors which could be attributed to this system among the people of the Thanjavur region was superstition. The poor widow believed that she would attain a high degree of happiness after death. Secondly, there was the fear of being despised by her relations. In 1800 A.D. a Brahmin woman at Tiruvedi performed Sati, immediately after the death of her husband, a paradesi Brahmin, namely Venkappaiair. Another incident of a Brahmin woman at Kumbakonam burning herself with her husband is also known. Yet another instance of Sati at Tiruvedi took place in Panchanatha Sastri's house where his mother committed Sati.¹⁴

The evidences of more number of cases of Sati were noticed in Kumbakonam, a predominantly Brahmin centre. The reports of Magistrate of Tanjore (1806-13) to the secretary, judicial department, Madras Secretariat mentioned hundred cases of Sati that took place. Apart from Brahmin community, a woman from the Komatty caste (Vaishyas) at Pudupettai in Thanjavur region, performed the Sati.¹⁵ In 1808 another lady, who was a wife of rich man by name Veerappa entered fire. There were two cases of Sati, performed by non-Brahmin high caste people in Thanjavur region. In 1772 when Sivaram Annagi expired, immediately his wife committed Sati. In 1779 another case occurred in the same region. The wife of, Govinda Rao entered the fire with her deceased husband.¹⁶

Thus, it was the period of the Marathas which witnessed a series of cases of Sati more than the Nayak period. This increasing trend could be due to the growth of northern influence in the region at the end of seventeenth, eighteenth centuries, when Thanjavur was subjected to more of Sanskrit and northern influence. Numerous sati stones of this period are witnessed in different parts of India. The state's attempt at preventing the Sati was totally nil. However, it was initiated only in the century next to our period of study that too by the British East India Company's government. The Madras Regulation Act of 1830 (Feb.2) declared Sati illegal and punishable by the criminal code.¹⁷

Widowhood System

Thanjavur, being the centre of orthodoxy, the people considered the widow remarriage an act of great sin. As pointed out earlier the system of Sati was widely prevalent in the royal families and rarely among the higher castes. However, many women who lost their husbands both in higher castes and low castes took to widowhood. An understanding of the position and status of widows in Tamil country right from the age of the Sangam will give contextual background for the study of this institution. The Sangam literature which mentions that "*Kanavanai izhanthorkukattuathi*" which means there is no necessity for a woman to live after the death of her husband. They were popularly called *kaimpen* and their life was called *kaimai* life, which institution continues even today. The *kaimai* life of a widow in the Thanjavur region under the period of study is clearly observed by the Jesuit fathers. Modi records also detail them.

It was the custom in Thanjavur region, like the other parts of Tamil country that immediately after the death of her husband, the woman who became a widow should lead an austere life and forgo pleasures of life. At the outset, they removed the hair on her head. She was denied of her beautiful hair and colourful dress along with the ornaments including tali and bangles. Many food restrictions were imposed on her. Probably the cause for tonsure was that it would make the widow unattractive, which safeguarded her against any temptation from others for sexual relation. They should not appear publically for attending the family function as well as for any other case. The reason for it was that a widow, herself was regarded as an ill omen.¹⁸

A few Jesuit letters inform that the widows in the Nayak period (1532-1675) were generally under the guardianship of their sons and the widows were not able to act independently. The advent of Christianity resulted in the emancipation of the widows to some extent. Under the impression and the activities of the missionaries a large number of widows belonging to both higher and lower castes were pressed into religious service. Many of them regularly attended the daily and weekly mass. The young pious widows never cared for the objection of their Hindu guardians and relatives.

Though the institution of widowhood was widely prevalent in the region, the concept of widow remarriage was not uncommon. The cases of remarriage not only among Brahmin widows; but also among non-Brahmin widows evidenced in many cases. In the eighteenth century, the attitudinal change made even some Brahmin widows to remarry. But for remarriage, their position would have deteriorated to the extent of some of them turning prostitutes to eke out their living. However, Da costa observes that many Brahmin widows considered remarriage worse than the position of prostitutes.¹⁹

Probably ill treatment meted out to them had made them not to prefer remarriage. Among the non-Brahmin communities the Kallars were permitted to remarry. Kallar Jati Vilakkam attests to the above fact. The Tamil proverb "the neck of a Kallar woman would always be found with a thread, whether there is no thread or not in the loom", would indicate that a Kallar woman was always found with *tali* thread. Hence it is implied that

Kalla woman of a deceased husband was entitled to remarry. It is of interest to note that today not all Kallar widows of Thanjavur remarry except the ones of southern Thanjavur region, such as Thennamanadu in Orathanad taluk. It can be surmised that the Kallars of Thanjavur, particularly of deltaic areas were sanskritised and hence gradually gave up the concept of remarriage. On the other, the Kallars of southern region mentioned above, who were not mainly land holders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were confined to their caste practices devoid of any sanskritisation. Even among other communities; the case of remarriage of Naiker women is evidenced by a Modi record.²⁰

The policy of rigidity against the remarriage was let loose in the latter half of the eighteenth century in Thanjavur region. It was a sequel to the impact of western ideas. Even the Brahmins also gradually changed. The Clarinda episode stands testimony to it. Kokila, formerly a Hindu Brahmin who avoided a forcible sati imposed on her, married a Christian military officer who helped her from the flames of the funeral pyre. She was Christened Clarinda after her remarriage. Thus the western liberal ideas and Christianity caused a prime factor for such changing attitude.²¹

Though the royal women enjoyed their full freedom, generally the position of women was deteriorated, especially of the lower castes. The factors like Sati, early marriage and widowhood were the causative factors for the deterioration of women in Thanjavur Society. The custom of divorce and remarriage was not practised very strictly. Despite the Sanskritization, the marriage bond was very loose even among the Kallar caste including other lower castes in the social structure. Generally the people of Thanjavur considered the widow remarriage as an act of sin. The condition of the widow was pitiable. But the advent of Christianity and the western contacts, resulted in the emancipation of the widows in a limited way. Though the institution of widowhood was widely prevalent in the region, the concept of widow remarriage was not unknown. Interestingly enough, the institutions of courtesans and harems and their popularity in Thanjavur were the outcome of the feudalistic character of the society.

End Notes

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