



Matriliny in Practice: Rethinking Kinship Through Lived Realities

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Abstract— Sociological, historical, and anthropological studies have examined the distinctive kinship practice, the matrilineal system in Kerala, mainly from an upper-caste, Nayar-centric perspective. While diverse communities, including Thiyas, Muslims, Kurichiyas, and even the Brahmins in the Payyanur region of northern Malabar, historically followed a matrilineal system in Kerala, the kinship system was studied and understood mainly from an elite Nayar perspective. This paper, based on secondary sources, seeks to challenge the notion of an upper-caste-centric matrilineal kinship narrative by foregrounding the varied ways in which communities practiced and interpreted matriliney. Argues that the functioning and the reforms of the matrilineal kinship system were deeply shaped by caste positions, social context and economic roles. Moreover, the gendered experiences and women's position were not uniform across communities. Thus, this paper highlights that understanding of the matrilineal kinship system should be based on the plurality of social realities that constitute it.



Keywords— Kinship praxis, Malabar region, Matriliny, Matrilineal Thiyas, Upper-caste bias.

I. INTRODUCTION

Family is widely recognised as one of the most enduring and pervasive social institutions. In their work, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, Burgess and Locke (1945) define the Family as a group of persons united by ties of blood, marriage, or adoption, constituting a single household that interacts and communicates with each other in their respective roles. In the Indian context, sociological and anthropological works have long demonstrated that the forms and functions of family and kinship vary significantly across cultural contexts. The regional variations in the kinship system across India were examined by Iravati Karve (1968), and by distinguishing between the northern patrilineal and southern bilateral and matrilineal systems, she underscores that family and kinship institutions are not static but are shaped by linguistic traditions, regional specificities, historical trajectories, and broader socio-

cultural processes. Karve (1993) elaborates on the complex kinship pattern in the southern region of India, arguing that although the patrilineal and patrilocal family system predominated, a significant section of the population followed the matrilineal and matrilocal pattern. By highlighting the preferential marriage practices in the southern region, such as cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriages, Karve (1993) argues that there is a clear preference for alliance within a small kin group structured by clan exogamy and caste endogamy, in contrast to the more expansive alliance pattern observed in the Northern region. These unique marriage preferences, along with the matrilineal system and the matrilocal residence pattern, have been the subject of study across various disciplines, focusing on the informal marital alliance, the sexual freedom it offers, women's autonomy over property, and the

tracing of descent through the female line in an otherwise patriarchal society.

There are many theories about the evolution of Matriliny in Kerala; the most prominent is that attributed to the advent of Brahmins. Sates that the Brahmins introduced the matrilineal kinship system so that younger Brahmin men could have sambandham with Nayar women, as only the eldest could have formal marriage with a Brahmin woman. This led to the evolution of Matriliny among the Nayars, which was later adopted by other caste groups, such as the Thiyyas and Muslims (Panikkar, 1918; Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, 1953). And this has led to a more upper-caste-centric notion of the kinship system, with lower castes simply copying it. Here, it's important to note that Kerala, which was historically part of Tamilakam during the Sangam period, has a strong history of matrilineal independent women. Segran (2011) notes that during the Sangam period, marriage-oriented, domesticated women termed *talaivi* co-existed with *parattai*, who enjoyed sexual freedom, independent property, and lived in a matrilineal house headed by the mother, signifying the plurality of female social positions in a morally driven landscape or a matrilineal, matrilineal system during the Sangam age. Nonetheless, a considerable works that later developed, looked into the features and the disintegration of Matrilineal system, in Kerala, particularly the works of Arunima (2003), Gough and Schneider (1961), Panikkar (1918), Saradmoni (1999) etc., focused on the Nayars of Kerala, especially in the southern Malabar and Travancore region, with limited attention to communities like Thiyyas.

This research paper thus focuses on how the matrilineal kinship system, widely practiced across diverse communities in Kerala, was often associated with the upper-caste Nayars. Communities in North Malabar, including Payyanur Brahmins, Thiyyas, and Muslims, and Kurichiyas, followed the matrilineal system, indicating that matriliny was a wider kinship system rather than a narrowly bounded caste practice (Gough, 1961; Arunima, 2003; Varma, 2022). Nonetheless, popular narratives discussing the features, historicity, and disintegration of Matriliny focused on the Nayar castes, their legal reforms, and codification grounded in Brahmanical-Colonial norms, with limited attention to how matriliny was practiced amongst other caste groups and to the gradual shift in the kinship system.

II. METHODOLOGY

Drawing on secondary sources from the author's doctoral research, this paper looks into the diverse ways in which Matriliny has been practiced in the Malabar region, with particular focus on the Thiyyas and Nayars, within the

Malabar region of Kerala. The study analyses the transformation of kinship practices due to social reforms, and the variations in practice, transformations of matrilineal attributes. By foregrounding these research questions, the paper urges a contextualised understanding of how matrilineal kinship and family are defined within specific caste settings. A historically grounded analysis of the existing literature highlights that the matrilineal kinship system in Kerala cannot be understood as a homogeneous system, but rather as a diverse practice grounded in its own social realities. in different communities.

III. THIYYA MATRILINY AND THE LIMITS OF THE NAYAR MODEL

Although matriliny in Kerala was practiced across the state amongst various communities, its form and the meanings attached to it were shaped by caste position and hierarchical status. The definitional aspect of Matriliny is structured around descent, inheritance, and residence through the female line; however, its practice varies depending on the economic positions, political authority, and land ownership. Thus, matriliny functioned within and was conditioned by the stratified order of caste society. Nayars controlled substantial landholdings, and the matrilineal Nayar *taravadu* served as a unit for adjudicating disputes (Arunima, 2003). The Nayar *taravadu* was typically a large ancestral household situated within an expansive compound containing agricultural land, a bathing tank, wells, shrines, and sacred groves (*kava*), reflecting both material prosperity and ritual significance (Rao, 1957; Mencher, 1966). The Nayar *taravadu* functioned as a corporate property-holding unit in which members were entitled to maintenance, but individual shares of property were not allowed. Despite this formal notion of impartibility, the internal organisation of matrilineal households was flexible. Scholars have noted informal divisions of property, the formation of smaller lineage segments (*tavazhi*), and negotiated arrangements for cultivation and residence among lineage members (Gough, 1952; Arunima, 2003; Saradmoni, 1999). The notable feature of Nayar matriliny was sambandham, which offered considerable freedom to Nayar women in choosing a partner, provided it was within the same caste or an upper caste, particularly the Brahmins. This suggests exogamous practice, whereas they practiced strict caste endogamy if the man was of a lower caste or Nayars of lower rank, termed Nayar commoners (Gough, 1959).

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the British courts redefined the *taravadu* as a juridical property unit, subject to legal codification (Arunima, 2003). This legal reinterpretation altered the internal dynamics of

the Nayar matrilineal households. The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 regulated marital relations among matrilineal communities, thereby formalising *Sambandham* (an informal union between Nayar women and a man belonging to the same or an upper caste) by allowing the registration of marriages and defining legal rights for spouses and children. With the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933, the corporate structure of *taravadu* was significantly challenged, allowing the partition of property; the Act legally recognised marriage and adoption, and strengthened conjugal ties over lineage-based authority. By granting rights to divide previously joint property, the legislation weakened the collective character of matrilineal households and accelerated the fragmentation of large *taravadu* (Saradmoni, 1999). Ultimately, the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act of 1975, enacted in 1976, formally abolished the legal recognition of matrilineal joint families in the state. This legislation dissolved the remaining legal foundations of Matriliny, transforming lineage-based property regimes into individualised ownership and effectively marking the end of matriliny as a legally recognised kinship system in Kerala (Devika, 2007; Arunima, 2003). Amongst Nayars, Matriliny was seen as inextricably linked to the ownership of corporate property, the power of the *karanavan*, and the maintenance of caste status.

The Thiyyas in North Malabar were the numerically dominant communities in the region (Shyamalan, 2014). Despite being historically linked to the Ezhavas of southern Kerala, the Thiyyas formed a unique regional identity based on kinship customs, occupational patterns, and territorial organisation. According to colonial sources, they are among the largest Hindu communities in Malabar and have historically worked in agriculture, toddy tapping, and the cultivation of garden crops such as coconut and pepper (Buchanan, 1807; Thurston, 1909; Innes, 1951). The Thiyyas of North Malabar were distinguished by their adherence to *Marumakkathayam*, a matrilineal system in which property usually passed from the maternal uncle to the nephew, and residence was frequently arranged around the woman's natal household (Gough, 1955). This pattern differed significantly from the kinship organisation of the Thiyyas in South Malabar and the Ezhavas of southern Kerala, where Makkathayam, or patrilineal inheritance, was more common (Innes, 1951). Thiyya matriliny was interpreted as something adopted through the cultural contact with the matrilineal Nayars (Thurston, 1909). Nonetheless, if Nayar matriliny is considered the classical model of matriliny, the practice of matriliny among the Thiyyas, despite limited landholdings and a lower caste position, challenges the notion that matriliny is primarily

sustained by landed wealth and the impartible *taravadu* unit.

There were considerable differences in how Matriliny was practiced among the Thiyyas. Unlike the Nayar *sambandham*, largely a visiting relationship, where husbands visited wives who remained in her *taravadu*, and children belonged to the mother's lineage under the *karanavan* (Gough, 1961), Thiyyas in North Malabar had more binding obligations, and they followed avunculocal residence (Varma, 2022; Gough, 1955, 1961). Those Thiyyas with ancestral property lived together as a joint family, including men related through the mother, children, wives, etc. But the number of such *taravadu* was fewer (Varma, 2022). Unlike the Nayars, the Thiyyas worked the land themselves, both men and women, and generally lacked ownership of large estates or household structures, which favoured a nuclear family system even before the legal partition of the *taravadu* unit (Gough, 1961). Thus, when Thiyyas with property often lived together, those with less property tend to settle as different units after two or three generations. Thus, for the Thiyyas, matrilineage was not about *taravadu*, or the joint family system, but about death and birth pollution, and the ancestral god that brought them together (Varma, 2022). The wives and children of those who acquired individual property often separate from their *taravadu* and establish a new lineage. This raises important questions about what the disintegration of the *taravadu* meant for a caste that never possessed it in its classical Nayar form.

Nonetheless, the legal framework governing other Hindu matrilineal communities in the Malabar region was rendered responsible for the dismantling of matriliny among the Thiyyas of North Malabar, thereby negating the community's socio-economic and cultural complexities. The variations in the expression of matriliny in different communities in Kerala thus indicate that the institution of matriliny in the state cannot be explained by the Nayar experience. This is because, in fact, it was a regional kinship system that was flexible enough to respond to different socio-economic conditions in the stratified caste hierarchy.

IV. REFORMS AND MATRILINITY

The decline of matriliny in Kerala is not just a product of colonial legal interventions; internal social reform movements among matrilineal groups, such as the Nayars and, to some extent, the Thiyyas in North Malabar, also played a role. *Kerala Navodhanam* (Kerala Renaissance) emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, aiming to foster a socio-cultural shift in response to changing socio-economic conditions, western education, and the notion of the male-headed family. This catalysed

reforms within matrilineal groups in Kerala. Among the Nayers, during the colonial period, the challenge to matriliney was led by the educated Nayar elite men, who increasingly came to see the Matrilineal system as incompatible with the emerging ideals of modern domestic life (Arunima, 2003). The *taravadu*, the matrilineal family, was owned by all the female members, with control held by the *karanavan*. This did not allow individual men to exert control over property or their nuclear family. The existing kinship system was also criticised, especially regarding the institution of *sambandham*. This was criticised as an unstable form of marriage, which lacked the permanence of monogamy based on Victorian morality and Brahmanical patriarchy (Arunima, 2003). This was also influenced by the educated male's desire to exert greater control over property held by the *taravadu*, to establish control over female sexuality, and to be the head of the household (*Ibid*, 2003). The novel *Indulekha* by O. Chandu Menon is a clear depiction of the challenges and shifts within the Nayar taravadu. By depicting the lead protagonist, Madhavan, as an English-educated, reform-oriented man who aspires for a life beyond the matrilineal joint family, the novel reflects the influence of colonial modernity within Nayar households. And by challenging the *karanavan*, whose control over property and decision-making is called into question, the novel captures the transition in the stability of the matrilineal *taravadu*. The larger push for legal reform, mobilising public opinion to divide taravadu property, legalise sambandham, and unify the Nayar caste groups in the state of Kerala, was led by the Nair Service Society (NSS), founded by Mannathu Padmanabhan, which emerged as part of Kerala Navodhanam (Kerala Renaissance) (Jeffrey, 1976).

With respect to the Thiyyas, the transition from matriliney was different. This was because, as a community placed in a relatively lower position in the caste hierarchy, with relatively lesser landholdings, the Thiyyas did not witness reform movements in the same manner as the Nayers. However, with respect to the Thiyyas as well, it can be noted that the impact of expanding educational opportunities, the activities of the missionaries like the Basel Mission, and the expansion of employment opportunities in the colonial period (Janaki, 2017; Madhavan, 2013) did lay the foundation for the gradual development of nuclear families and the rise of new aspirations with respect to property. It has also been argued that the matrilineal system provided Thiyya women the autonomy to have relationships with European men, which turned out to be an opportunity for their children to have better educational access and social mobility (Chekkutty, 2019). While colonial interventions may have facilitated upward mobility for select individuals, particularly through

government service or commercial engagement, this perspective risks overlooking pre-colonial socio-economic practices and regional variations within the Thiyya community itself. In North Malabar, for instance, Thiyyas were often treated on par with Nayers in terms of ritual status and local influence, unlike their counterparts in South Malabar or the Ezhavas of Travancore, who were firmly within the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy (Sreebitha, 2023).

Nonetheless, English education and the advent of print have initiated reform movements amongst the Thiyyas as well. When colonial education acted as a catalyst for reforming the matrilineal system among the Nayers, for the Thiyyas it was more about moving toward modernity, gaining access to education and opportunities that had been denied. When the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) movement in Travancore, led by Sree Narayana Guru, promoted reforms such as monogamy, ritual practices like *talikettukalyanam* (pre-puberty ritual) and toddy tapping (Rao, 1987), its influence in Malabar, however, was relatively limited. Social Reforms in Malabar were mainly based on rationalist ideas and spiritual self-reflection, led by Vagbhatananda and Swami Ananda Theerthan, alongside social reforms among marginalised communities carried forward by leaders like Murkoth Kumaran, Kottiyath Krishnan, Cheruvari, Govindan, etc. (Madhavan, 2013; Bijina, 2021). Thus, while social reform movements among the Nayar specifically sought to restructure their matrilineal social systems, changes in matriliney among the Thiyya were part of a broader process of social and economic change

V. PATRIARCHAL RESTRUCTURING OF KINSHIP

The abolition of matriliney in Kerala is often seen as a progressive reform connected to modernisation and the growth of the conjugal family. A feminist analysis complicates this view by emphasising the suppression of women's voices and the neglect of caste-specific experiences. Reform debates were influenced by male elites, colonial administrators, and upper-caste interests, creating a discourse that standardised women's conditions and overlooked their diverse realities. Upper-caste Nayar women, often depicted in reformist literature, were portrayed as confined within matrilineal households under the authority of the *karanavan* and as lacking stable conjugal relationships. This selective portrayal justified reform efforts. Conversely, women from communities such as the Thiyyas, who engaged in economic activities, might have experienced matriliney as a system that offered residential stability, kin-based support, and some economic security. The implementation of a uniform, patrilineal,

nuclear-family model, through the abolition of matriliney, imposed a single patriarchal framework that disregarded these differences. This process reformed kinship systems and erased diverse female experiences, illustrating how caste and gender interacted to influence the reform and its results. Thus, the abolition of matriliney had a gender paradox. Although matriliney had been stigmatised in reformist discourse, adopting patrilineal inheritance did not necessarily empower women. Women had enjoyed a stable position in the matrilineal family, and the transition to the conjugal family had often undermined women's family security (Saradmoni, 1999).

VI. CONCLUSION

The disintegration of matriliney in Kerala cannot be understood as the end of a kinship system, but rather as part of wider transformations in familial relations and property relations in the late colonial and postcolonial periods. Through a series of legislative enactments that regulated Matriliney, the modern state sought to standardise diverse customary practices and transform lineage-based property relations into individualised property relations governed by uniform principles (Arunima, 2003; Saradmoni, 1999). In this process, the corporate form of the *taravadu*, which had organised inheritance, residence, and social relations in matrilineal societies, was dismantled. These transformations were closely related to changes in caste identities in twentieth-century Kerala. Among the Nayars, social mobility was associated with the adoption of monogamy, a nuclear family, and patrilineality in the reformist discourse. Among the Thiyyas, though the reformist discourse was not directly associated with matriliney, the spread of education, out-migration, and economic opportunities promoted a transition to smaller family sizes and individual property ownership. At the same time, many of the cultural features of matriliney have been transformed rather than eliminated. Among Nayars and Thiyyas, recollections of the *taravadu*, lineage identity, and ritual associations connected to maternal kin ties frequently shape social relations. Ancestral homes may also act as symbolic centers of family identity even when the institution of matriliney was formally dissolved. This implies that matriliney as an institution may have been disintegrated, but it has been accommodated within new forms of kinship relations in contemporary caste communities in Kerala.

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