

Disciplining Women in Medieval Kerala: A Study of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi

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Abstract

Caste and gender were the two factors that regulated the everyday life of people in medieval Kerala. There were so many regressive customs in medieval Kerala related to caste. The accounts of foreign travellers provide references to a few such customs. It is reported that as a part of the established custom the Nāyar ladies were forced to practice Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi. Thus, the low caste or outcaste men were able to kidnap the Nāyar women in a stipulated period. However, the custom called Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi practiced during a period when pollution to any high caste person by outcastes was met with severe punishment makes it a problem to be revisited. The low caste or outcaste men are not gaining any social privilege or prestige by such abduction makes it problematic. This paper attempts to examine the context and social utility of such a custom. Who is benefited by the fear psychosis created in the name of Maṅṅān, Pulayan and Paṛayan to the Nāyar women? According to medieval custom, chastity was the sole responsibility of women. Whether this social regulation restricted the free movement of low caste and outcaste people and upper caste women of society? Whether this custom is used as a tool to isolate the outcastes from the rest of the society is a problem worthy to examine. Thus, the present paper reappraises Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi as a ploy of elite men against both the low caste people and aristocratic women.

Keywords: Maṅṅāppēṭi, Pulappēṭi, Nāyar, Maṅṅān, Pulayan, Sambandham, caste, gender, Taṛavāṭu, Disciplining women, outcaste, low caste, Medieval Kerala.

Introduction

The society in medieval Kerala was stratified, held its own tradi-

tion, culture and rituals. The indigenous practices like Mārgam (old custom), Maryāda (obligation) and Ācāram (established custom) have taken care of the rule of law. The absolute subjection of people to their age-old customs and traditions resulted in the recognition of customs as laws. Thus, customs were institutionalized by continuous observances. The people of medieval Kerala followed Chāturvarṇya (four varṇas i.e. Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra) ideals of the medieval Indian social system. The social status and hierarchy of every caste was specifically delineated which were bound on them.

Peculiar customs and practices observed in medieval Kerala, particularly related to high caste groups to maintain moral code. Smārttavicāram, Maṅṅappēṭi, Pulappēṭi and Parappēṭi are the foremost regulatory mechanisms for women based on the concept of chastity. These regulatory measures are directly related to the caste and gender principles of medieval Kerala. Earlier scholars such as Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai argues Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi as customs in favour of low castes against high castes (Pillai, 1970:114). This paper attempts to make a re-appraisal of these customs, which in fact acted against the outcastes in medieval Kerala. The process of disciplining the Nāyar women through Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi was also taken up in this paper. How the concept of chastity was utilized in the medieval period to curtail the freedom of Nāyar women also is an important aspect of the study.

Foreign and Indigenous Accounts

According to indigenous tradition of Kerala, the womanhood represented as to be gentle, polite, self sacrificing, sexually passive and monogamous. There was a belief that the status and position of a woman enhances basically with the proper maintenance of chastity. Chastity is not depended upon class, caste and social status. It was the sole responsibility of women to maintain chastity (Gauri Amma, 1934:146). Smārttavicāram was a trial of Nampūtiri women for adultery from late medieval period to the early 20th century (Moosath, 2017:132-37; Bhaskaranunni, 2000:148-209). The punishment for such an offence was excommunication. The women thus punished became outcastes in that particular social system.

Nāyar women were forced to practice customs like Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi. However, it was not based on any Brahmanical texts such customs were practiced. In fact, values prescribed by Brahmin tradition are amended in the case of sexual relation between Brahmin men and Nāyar women. The practice of Sambandham (a form of marriage among matrilineal castes) was prominent feature of Nā-

yar society. The Nāyar women had concubinage relation with many Nāyar, Nampūtiri and other high caste men. Thus, the application of the concept of chastity in the case of Nāyar women is intriguing.

The foreign travellers visited Kerala in medieval period, refer about Maṅṅāpēṭi and Pulappēṭi. Duarte Barbosa, the Portuguese traveller who visited Malabar in 16th century, is the first to mention Maṅṅāppēṭi (Dames, 1989:68-69). Sheik Zainuddin, the indigenous scholar who wrote in Arabic, also refer this practice (Nainar, 2009: 43-44). The foreigners mention this as the most abominable and unbelievable custom of the Kerala Hindus. This custom had varied names in different places. In South Travancore it was called as Pulappēṭi or Parappēṭi (Achythawarrier, 2000:139). The details of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi are also varied in the foreign accounts.

Barbosa elaborated that on certain days of a year, an outcaste man can throw a stone or twig at a woman or touch her. In most of the cases there was no witness. But the women herself revealed the truth and ran away with the outcaste who polluted her. If she refuses to run away with that man, her relatives will kill her to save their honour. In certain cases, she requested the help of the outcaste man to sell her to foreigners (Dames, 1989: 68-69). This description shows that there was no need of a touch by an out-caste man for pollution. At the same time Sheik Zainuddin says that, every year there is a certain day, when an out-caste person would enter the sleeping room of a high caste lady or would dare to touch her, becomes polluted and is forced to run away with him. If not, she would be sold as a slave by the Nāṭuvāḷi, or she gets converted to Muslim or Christian sects (Nainar, 2009:43-44). Herman Gundert says that the period of Pulappēṭi is in the Malayalam month of Karkkīṭakam corresponding to July-August (Gundert, 2013:632). M.G.S. Narayanan, M.R. Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal use the term Maṅṅāppiṭi (grasp by Maṅṅān) and Pulappiṭi (grasp by Pulayan) to label the custom (Narayanan, 1972:3; Varier and Gurukkal, 2012:155). It is argued that it was a type of abduction of high caste women by outcaste men (Varier and Gurukkal, 2012:155). The description shows that the outcaste men entered into the room of high caste lady. No accounts mention molestation in the case of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi. Thus, high handedness from the part of outcaste men did not seem to be the reason for the practice. In fact, the origin and development of such a custom seems to be more complex.

Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai made a detailed study of the practice of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi. According to him, this practice originated after 11th century CE as a result of the Cēra-Cōḷa war (Pillai, 1970:123). To him, prior to seventh century CE or before the coming of Brahmins to

Kerala, the society was egalitarian. The Brahmin ideology created a stratified society of castes. He thinks that Pulappēṭi was a privilege granted to low castes after the origin of caste system and it was a way to increase the number of slaves in Kerala (Pillai, 1970:116-17). No evidences related to the origin and development of this custom in medieval Kerala is found. Elamkulam explains about a pleasant atmosphere of Pulappēṭi practiced in medieval Kerala. The Nāṭuvāli declared a particular date of Pēṭi. That day may be related to the festivals or other rituals of out-castes. During that time the outcastes like Maṅṅān, Pulayan and Paṛayan attain supernatural power and kidnap the ladies of high castes (Pillai, 1970:113). It is probable that the oral tradition on this custom may have created fear among Nāyar women. It is argued that Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi were not actually practiced as a custom in medieval Kerala (Sudhakaran, 1994:485). But this argument does not hold water as we have evidence to it in the account of Duarte Barbosa, in Tuhafat-ul-Mujahiddin and also in the inscription of Vīra Kēraḷa Varma abolishing this practice in Travancore. It is also argued that it was only an attempt to create an atmosphere of fear among Nāyar women. He considers it a ploy by the eldest members of Taṛavāṭu (the matrilineal joint family of the Nāyars) making use of the outcaste servants, and also a strategy to punish particular outcaste men who incurred their displeasure (Sudhakaran, 1994:485).

Disciplining the women

Nāyar society practiced matrilineal form of inheritance in Kerala. However, in practice the society was not matriarchal. Nāyar women had no right to partition the property, exchange the land, sale the profits from the property and so on. This type of economic transactions was controlled by Kāraṇavar (senior most male member of the Taṛavāṭu in the maternal line). The young ladies were under the strict control of Kāraṇavar and Kāraṇavatti (senior most female member of the Taṛavāṭu). They were the kingpins of Taṛavāṭu, especially in matters of young ladies including their Sambandham, child birth, divorce etc. Kāraṇavar and Kāraṇavatti decide the Sambandham of their female family members with appropriate Nāyar or high caste men. They decide the number of Sambandham, its time and continuance of the relationship (Sudhakaran, 1994:508). The senior members of the Nāyar family made use of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi as a disciplinary mechanism to suppress the daring Nāyar ladies on the pretext of custom. So, the atmosphere of obedience was maintained in the Nāyar family by these customs.

The tradition related to Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi may have created

a fear psychosis among the Nāyar women in medieval period. They have enjoyed the right to visit temples and attend festivals in that time. But when a woman travels outside, should be accompanied by a man like Nāyar soldier, or at least a boy above three-year-old, depending on the financial position of each Taravāṭu (Ayyar, 1930:26-28). In fact, the social system, in multiple ways, restricted the movements of women. Elamkulam argues that the Nāṭuvāḷi announced a particular date for Pēṭi in every year (Pillai, 1970:113). However, this view is at best a hypothesis as there is no evidence for such a declaration by any Nāṭuvāḷi in Kerala (Haridas, 2016:24-25). Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi gained wide popularity as oral tradition. The fear psychosis of such a social ostracism has sinister effects on Nāyar women of productive ages. Thus, their space restricted within the compound of Taravāṭu itself. The punishments related to this pēṭi are of unalterable in nature in the medieval period. A Nāyar woman excommunicated without trial from the community in case a Pulaya or Maṅṅān touches. The only option remains to her was to run away with that outcaste man or convert to Islam, Christianity or lead an ascetic life (Nainar, 2009:43-44). The relatives generally opt the honour killing if she prefers not to leave the family after such pollution (Sudhakaran, 1994:509). The fear of execution or a life of outcaste compelled the Nāyar women to be concerned of purity.

The women were vulnerable to pēṭi only after evening. The companionship of at least a three-year-old boy protected her from pēṭi, and safe guarded her purity (Pillai, 1970:113). This custom openly announces that if a woman was accompanied by a male 'representative', she would be immune from any sort of 'pollution'. This upholds men as protector of women from all sorts of hazards. The social regulations restricted the free movement of low caste people in medieval Kerala. They were even prohibited to see, approach and touch an upper caste man. The custom called Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi were practiced during a period when pollution to any high caste person by low castes or out castes was met with severe punishment. Thus, the possibility of any such act voluntarily from the side of an outcaste man was generally truncated (Pillai, 1970:123). On the other hand, aristocratic family head or chieftain occasionally would have instigated his outcaste servant to touch the disobedient woman of his Taravāṭu. Hence the woman was punished in the pretext of custom itself.

Seclusion of outcastes

According to tradition all outcaste men have the right to pollute Nāyar ladies by this medieval custom. But a few outcastes like Maṅṅān, Pulayan and Paṛayan had particularly created fear psychosis to the Nāyar women. The Brahminic ideology of seclusion of outcastes from the Varṇa society

seems to be detrimental in such practices. The outcastes were identified with sorcery and witchcraft, such as *Oṭividya*, *Kūṭōtram* and *Mantravādam*. A social stigma may have formed upon particular outcastes by such practices (Sudhakaran, 1994: 509). The elite class would have taken advantage of the situation by utilising the service of the outcastes as practitioners of sorcery to settle their scores with the opponents. In fact, such practices would have enabled the outcastes to take advantage of the situation against their immediate oppressor and even the estranged masters. Fear is considered as a major regulatory mechanism in the entire period of Kerala history. The practice of sorcery and witchcraft by the outcastes created fear among the high castes which would have exploited to control their women.

The account of Barbosa show that even in the absence of any witness to the incident woman voluntarily informs it and ran away with the outcaste man (Dames, 1989: 68-69). It may be either due to the fear of the custom or in a bid to save the life from execution. The woman considered it as her responsibility to ensure the caste purity of her *Taravāṭu* and so in silence suffered the pain of excommunication. Another possibility is the elopement of woman with her outcaste lover taking advantage of the custom. Thus, it may be either a sacrifice of her life for the honour of her family or a selfish act to fulfill her desire. But evidence is scanty to ascertain the reason behind the actual practice of this custom. Some ballads mention the marriage of upper caste women by low caste men, but of course not in the context of *Maṅṅappēṭi* and *Pulappēṭi* (Varier and Gurukkal, 2012:158). The caste rules prescribed and practiced in medieval Kerala denies any possibility of lower or outcaste men marrying upper caste women. Thus, the reappraisal of the custom of *Maṅṅappēṭi* and *Pulappēṭi* will throw light on the implications of this practice.

Elamkulam suggested another possibility that the *Nāyar* woman herself created the circumstances for this custom to live with her outcaste lover (Pillai, 1970:113). To him, during that time, it was tough to touch a *Nāyar* woman by a *Pulayan* or *Maṅṅān*, as she was under strict vigilance of *Nāyar* militia (Pillai,1970:123). But this argument holds no water, as all upper castes were not in highest glory during that period. So, unlike the aristocratic women, the ladies belong to poor families were not protected by militia, but were only accompanied by a small boy or maid. The social status of *Nāyars* and outcastes were in the extremes. Thus, it is argued that the possibility of love relation between upper caste women and lower caste men seems to be unusual if not improbable in those social circumstances (Sudhakaran, 1994:507). According to Hindu law, the exogamous marriage was strictly prohibited. The medieval texts on caste rules and customs

like Śānkarasmṛiti (Unni, 2003:192) and Vyavahāramāla (Vyavahāramāla, 15-63) preach against inter caste marriage. But the prescription against such Varṇasankara itself implies such occurrences in medieval Kerala.

In medieval Kerala, the jāti regulations were not the creation of rulers like Nāṭuvāli. The formal order for conducting Smārttavicāram was announced by the ruler, but the outcome of the trial was nothing to do with the ruler as it was entirely managed by the community leaders (Unni, 2003:192). We have already pointed out that there was no evidence regarding the royal proclamation of a particular date for the practice of Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi.

Elamkulam argues that the freedom of adultery was permitted once in a year (Pillai, 1970:115). But this argument is in contravention to the social system of that period. During that time adultery was considered as a serious offence which resulted in severe punishment. It seems that the custom called Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi existed not to promote adultery, but to prohibit adultery and ensure the chastity of Nāyar women. However, it is relevant in this context to reappraise the concept of chastity among Nāyar women. The practice of Sambandham made polygamy an accepted norm in the Nāyar community. Thus, monogamy is not a necessary norm of chastity in the case of Nāyar woman. Here the concept of pollution and purity gained more emphasis. The male dominated ideology of caste always forbade and condemns the pratilōma type of marriage, which may be true in the case of medieval Kerala as well. In a matrilineal inheritance system, the elder male members ensured the purity of their successors. They were proud of begetting progeny from upper caste men, but frightened on any possibility of adulteration by lower or outcaste men. Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi seem to be the institutionalisation of the fear of Varṇasankara by the elite males.

The heinous part of Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi was the award of punishment without trial. Thus, at the very moment of such occurrence the Nāyar woman ran away from the dēśam due to the fear of execution. The woman involved in this solely bore the brunt of social ostracism. In most of the cases external agency need not to implement the punishment but the victims accepted by themselves.

K.N. Ganesh analyses Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi based on the class theory of Marx. To him, the Nāyars and Pulayars were two distinct classes and exists the possibility of class struggle between these two groups. He says that, in a traditional society, the class struggle is visible through the customs and beliefs and the violation of traditional Maryādas. He says that the low castes expressed their discontent against high castes through the cus-

toms of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi (Ganesh, 2011:169). But in medieval Kerala, we have no evidences of any direct conflict between outcastes and upper castes. Purity and pollution practice seem to be generally abided by the people of Kerala. The outcastes did not dare to challenge their impurity and kept away from the public sphere. They perceived untouchability and unapproachability as a result of their actions in previous life. In that social context class struggle seems to be a distant dream. M.G.S. Narayanan refutes the view of K.N. Ganesh. To him, during medieval period no one impose customs and traditions on people, but themselves accepted it (Narayanan, 1972:3). However, this argument of people voluntarily following customs and traditions in medieval period is contentious. The circumstances in which people became so subservient are only a matter of conjecture. They were not conscious of class exploitation and simply considered it as their fate. It is argued that they were not bothered about the freedom from that social system (Narayanan, 1972:3). However, such over simplification of customs and practices in medieval period can be challenged. Brahminic ideology works in a social and political system, where power is used in visible or invisible manner upon the common people by the elite.

Re-appraisal of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi

In the case of Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi, adultery was not practiced like Aṭukkaḷadōṣam. According to medieval travel accounts even pollution by personal contact was not required for excommunication in the case of these customs. In some cases, Pulayan or Maṅṅān had seen the Nāyar women from a distance and howled out 'Seen! Seen!' which resulted in the excommunication of the latter (Dames, 1989:68-69). A native account of 16th century mentions that in some cases, a Pulayan or Maṅṅān thrown a stone or twigs at a woman of higher caste or touched her (Nainar, 2009:43-44). In any of these cases women were not allowed to stay back in her house. So, it was a case beyond chastity. It seems that it was a toll of gender discrimination devised by the aristocratic class to restrict the freedom of their women. The concept of purity and pollution is utilized for this.

The social structure of medieval Kerala places the Maṅṅān, Pulayan and Paṛayan as servile group of outcastes far below the upper castes. They never challenged their masters and generally remained loyal. In such a social condition how far, the outcastes might have enjoyed such a custom to touch the Nāyar women is highly debatable as the existing social system deprived the outcastes any social space. It may be due to external compulsion if it all they practiced it. It is argued that the Kāraṇavar of Nāyar Taravāṭu compelled his outcaste servants to do that. In fact, the Kāraṇavar would have made use of this custom to discipline the auda-

cious ladies in his family, who disobeyed him. Here the outcaste men and high caste women became the victims of existing social customs. Caste differences and gender inequality acted as a weapon to regulate certain groups of society. The power of patriarchy and caste system acted as a tool against the outcastes and women in medieval Kerala society.

Even in a matrilineal Nāyar Taravāṭu, males dominated the family structure. The mobility of women was regulated by the elder male member of the family. The space of women confined within the wall of Taravāṭu. But a few references related to Maṅṅappēṭi shows that she was threatened within this limited space itself (Panikkassery, 1970: 79). If any outcaste man touches high caste woman by entering the house, the family members of the latter supported the former. In fact, it is evident that Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi were not accidental incidents, but a well-planned conspiracy to discipline the women.

The daring attempt to abolish Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi was made by Vīra Kēraḷa Varma in 1696 CE. In Kalkulam inscription the King orders that Pulappēṭi and Maṅṅappēṭi shall not be practiced in the territory lying from the west of Tovāḷa, to the east of Kannēṛri and between the mountain range and the sea. If, in transgression of this order, Pulappēṭi and Maṅṅappēṭi practiced, the very embryo in the womb of the Pulayan and Maṅṅān shall be extracted and slain. It is also ordered that if the Pulappēṭi and Maṅṅappēṭi occurred to the woman, the pollution shall be considered as removed if the women bathe in a tank (Ayyar, 1930:28-29). This stone inscription was placed at the northern entrance of Keṅṅapaṭaivīṭu. But most of the Nāyar Taravāṭus were not ready to accept the order, as they were bound to traditional customs and rituals, which they considered more sacrosanct than the royal proclamation. This royal order protects the upper castes. Here cruel punishments are prescribed to Maṅṅān, Pulayan and Paṛayan who violates the order. The entire family of the outcaste would be killed if anyone practiced Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi. This punishment itself is directed against women. Here the victim was outcaste woman, who had no direct involvement in this practice. It indicates that the proclamation of Kēraḷa Varma protects only the interests of upper caste people in the society. (Varier and Gurukkal, 2012: 157)

Even after the royal proclamation Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi practiced in Kerala by Nāyar families. *Putuvapāṭṭu* depicts the story of the courageous ruler of Kottayam called Kēraḷa Varma who stopped the custom Maṅṅappēṭi and Pulappēṭi on Kollam Era 871 Makaram 25 (23 January, 1696) (Varier, 2016:38). But his daring attitude led to his assassination by nobles with the consent of Umayamma Rani (Varier, 2016:36).

Conclusion

The present study makes it evident that Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi was one of the regulatory mechanisms to discipline the women of Nāyar community by the patriarchal society. They tried to ensure the purity of their women by restricting their mobility and free will with this custom. The public space was fully restricted to Nāyar women by this custom. Their free movements and independent actions were controlled by a fear psychosis of social ostracism. Thus, Maṅṅāppēṭi and Pulappēṭi can be considered as a disciplinary mechanism, to curtail the freedom of Nāyar women with in a matrilineal community. This custom also used as a tool to alienate the outcastes from the rest of the society. The low castes and out castes were compelled to practice a custom which in no way benefited them. If at all it placed them as the enemies of high caste people and a dreaded community in medieval Kerala.

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