COLONIALISM AND MARRIAGE RITUALS IN MALABAR

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ABSTRACT: The concept of marriage, a sort of man-woman relationship as a responsible one-to-one unit of society, evolved a unique human family system. To live in society, every human being follows customs, rites, rituals and ceremonies. Rituals are socially significant because they do not just present abstract ideas but they actually influence the world or the way that participants view the world. The British Malabar was a district under the Madras presidency with headquarters at Calicut. There are different kinds of marriage rituals existed among various communities in Malabar. The marriage rituals are more complex and rigid in the pre colonial Malabar. The marriage customs were strictly followed by people because of the caste system. But in later period British sowed the seeds of changes in the socio economic and cultural topography of Malabar. They changed some of the ritualistic patterns in Malabar region.

Key Words: marriage, unique family system, rituals, socially significant, British, Malabar.

Introduction

The history of human society is nothing but the description of the evolution and diffusion of various institutions designed toward continuation, preservation and survival of society. Rituals play a significant role in all societies and the institution of marriage occupies a unique place in all social institutions. Rituals are socially significant because they do not just present abstract ideas but they actually influence the world or the way that participants view the world. To live in society, every human being follows customs, rites, rituals and ceremonies. These are formal, ceremonial act or procedure prescribed in religious or other solemn use which has the force of law. The term rites are used for a social custom or ceremony generally associated with passage from one important stage to another in someone's life like birth, initiations, marriage and death. Marriage constituted the most engrossing event of the life. For the several reasons marriage as an institution was held in high esteem by the society. It was considered as a sacrament union. Malabar which is now the Northern region of present Kerala state as given the name by the Arabs to denote the entire Kerala coast. The British Malabar was a district under the Madras presidency with headquarters at Calicut. There are different kinds of marriage rituals existed among various communities in Malabar. This article mainly focused on the changes occurred in marriage rituals among various communities like Muslim, Hindu and Christians with the arrival of British in Malabar.

The marriage rituals are more complex and rigid in the pre colonial Malabar. The marriage customs were strictly followed by people because of the caste system. But in later period British sowed the seeds of changes in the socio economic and cultural topography of Malabar. They changed some of the ritualistic patterns in Malabar region. The social complicities or rigidity of marriage rituals are decreased during the post colonial period. There are many changes occurred in marriage rituals by the British such as the changes in the aims of marriage, the process of mate selection, the age of marriage and also changes in the stability of marriage. The Western ideas were greatly influenced by the people of Malabar. It also reflected in the socio-cultural realm of the region. These gave some kind of women empowerment within the society. Through the introduction of Western education in Malabar, Women got the right to access education and they also got legal security as well. All these social changes were made influence in the institution of marriage. Women got some kind of freedom in their own marriage especially in the case of male selection.

Communities in Malabar

Various types of religions and their orthodox rituals ruled in the society of Malabar till the invasion of British. It even consisted of the various caste systems that existed the various religions. The majority of the populations were of Hindus, the census taken on the year 1931 they were of 65.18%, rest of the 32.92 % was Muslim population. The caste systems were more prominent among Hindus, which was more rigid and compact. It consisted of Brahmans known as Namboothiris and Nairs who were considered as the upper caste and held high status in the society. Thiyas or ezhavas were form a very important caste in north Malabar. The other castes like parayas,pulayas cheruma,kammalans were also existed. They were
considered as lower caste people. The social evolution of Malabar was a slow process. The next categories were the Muslims who were generally called as Mappilas of Malabar. They were the descendants of Arab traders who came to the west coast. The religion spread in Malabar as a result of flourishing trade between Arabia and Malabar. It is definite that these traders might have gradually settled in Malabar. Incidentally they came to have union with the women’s of these parts. These women had converted to Islam and this gave the rise of the community known as mappilas. They also had caste divisions such as the sunnis , mujahids and very small minority of shias. Another important category were the Christians. They are Latin catholics, Syrian catholics and Jacobite Christians. The Syrian Christians were the largest group among them. The old Christians in Malabar was ‘Nazrani mappilas’. The Christian community in malabar were mostly traders and cultivators.

Malabar under Colonialism

Malabar had come into the hands of the English East India Company under the terms of the treaties signed with Tippu Sultan at Seringapattanam in 1792. On the north it was bounded by the South Canara District, on the south by the Princely state of Cochin, and on the east by the Western Ghats. The area was at first administered by the commissioners and supervisors of the Bombay Presidency. In 1800 Malabar was handed over to the Madras Presidency. The Malabar district of the Madras Presidency covers an area of 5794 square miles. Malabar in this study means the British Malabar, one of the districts in the Madras Presidency, directly under the rule of the British. Under colonial rule Malabar society slowly and steadily underwent a transformation parallel to that of the Indian Society. The economic, political and ideological interventions of the colonial agent radically altered the caste based social ensemble of Malabar from early 19th century onwards.

The British rule largely responsible for the introduction and diffusion of a western style of education in Kerala, which penetrated into and transformed all the communities. The one community, which most profoundly benefited out of this new educational system, was the Nair community. Towards the end of the 19th century the Nairs began to question the existing social institutions. They considered marumakkathayam as a primitive way of life. The Nair regulation act was passed which abolished marumakkathayam system. Similar legislation was passed for the benefits of the christian and Ezhava communities.

During the British administration in Malabar, both patrilineal and matrilineal system of inheritance had existed but matrilineal system was the predominant form of inheritance. The Malabar region includes the present districts of Kerala, namely parts of Kasaragod, Kozhikkode, Malappuram, Palakkad and some areas of Thrissur district. In 1800, these territories formed into an administrative area called Malabar district. It was a district in Madras Presidency, and till 1947, Malabar remained under the British administration. The matrilineal (marumakkathayam) system existed in Kerala have been mainly studied by Gough, Schneider and Fuller. Marumakkathayam was followed by Nairs and several other Non-Brahmin Hindu Castes in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. The Thiyas and other cognate Castes of north Malabar and South Canara were also governed by the system. The system has changed due to various reasons, and patrilineal has emerged as a new system of inheritance, which has made great impact on the communities of Kerala, especially in north Malabar.

The Malabar marriage was passes in 1896, the government of Madras passed the Malabar marriage act in response to the recommendation of the Malabar marriage commission of 1891. This allowed members of any caste practicing marumakkathayam in Malabar to register a sambandham as a marriage. It was permissive rather than restrictive law. Whether or not a relationship was registered was entirely the decision of the people involved in that relationship. The Madras marumakkathayam act of 1933 and the Madras Namboothiri Act of 1933, Nair Regulation Act were another important Acts regarding Hindu marriage. The Hindu marriage act of 1956 makes monogamy obligatory for all classes of Hindus.

Mappila succession Muslim personal law of 1937, Shariat Act, the Mappila Marumakkathayam Act 1939 were some of the administrative interventions which influenced the Mappila community in Malabar. Similar legislations was passed for the benefit of the Christians and ezhava communities. In the Malabar region the Indian Christian marriage act of 1872 had great influence ,which is more applicable in this region. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 (amended in 1978,dealing with age at marriage),The special marriage act,1954(dealing with age at marriage freedom to children to marry without parental consent, bigamy, and dissolving marriage),the widow remarriage act 1856 was also made great influence in Malabar society.
According to Roland E. Miller, Islam grew (in Malabar) as it began, peacefully, and ii grew steadily. The conditions of that growth were ideal. The two important factors of mutual economic interest and religious tolerance were interacting in a balanced and positive manner. Political and religious imperialism was absent or next to absent. Islam was making headway quite peacefully and without adopting jingoistic methods. Specific factors involved in the growth of the Muslim community up to the time of the European encroachment included: immigration, intermarriage, missionary activity, the support of the Zamorin, and personal advantage. The colonial domination spread of English education and western rationalism brought changes in the nineteenth century Kerala society. The newly emerged educated middle class followed a critical attitude towards the traditional institutions, beliefs and social relations.

Britishers brought many changes in socio-economic political and cultural sector. The changes they made in the rituals and customs paved new path in the social system of Malabar. These changes were not made in a particular religion or caste but as a whole. It simplified the system of marriage in Malabar. Some of the important changes that they brought in the age of marriage. Till then pre-puberty marriage was prevalent among all the communities except perhaps the namboothiris. Till the early decades it was normal that a majority of muslim girls were married before they were twelve years old. The nairs, the thiyyas etc.also used to marry away their girls at a very early age. After the coming of british all the communities have changed their old view in regard to marital age. The spread of education have taught the people the advantages of late marriage. British legislative reforms have significant role in bringing about this change.

The next change was seen in the field of mate selection. In early Malabar society women were deprived to choose a mate for marriage. Almost same as the condition of males. In most cases the marriage was decided by the elders of the families, when the children were of tender age. It is almost like child marriages were children are hardly eight or ten years. They had to marry these already said ‘bride’ or ‘groom’, when they are of the age to get married. Even in the muslim communities also the girls or the bride’s were married off to Arab traders or any other native man, according to the elders wish. The man who marries her may be an elderly person even twenty to fifty years older than her. All these are done without the consent of the girl. With the coming of Britichers, they brought changes in this process. They made laws that would give the person of marriage age and their right to choose a partner. Forceful marriages and child marriage drastically decreased. The change in the number of spouses in marriage is another feather in the crown of Britishers. The marriage culture of Malabar before britishers were polygamy.

Among the namboothiries the eldest son could marry three wives. The namboothiri youngsters used to have sambandham marriage with nair women. It may be pointed out that the same person could form sambandham marriage with more than one woman. Polyandry existed mostly among the marumakkathayam communities like the nairs. This is justified to by barbosa and other European travelers who have written about Malabar. Among the kammalas and some of the hill tribes also polyandry was widely prevalent. The thiyyas and the kanisans formerly used to have one wife in common among several brothers. The Muslim community also practiced polygamy in Malabar. Most of the polygamous communities have adopted monogamy mainly as a result of the spread of English education and adoption of western modes of life by the people. Legislative enactments of the government have also played a prominent part in encouraging the shift towards monogamy. The madras marriage act of 1896, the madras marumakkathayam act of 1933 and the madras namboothiri act of 1933 may be mentioned in this connection. These acts imposed on the husbands the legal responsibility for the maintenance of the wife and children. Besides the Hindu marriage act which came into force in 1956 has modified the law relating to Hindu marriage and it has made monogamy compulsory among all classes of Hindus.

Remarriage was not a usual process in the early Malabar society. The process of sati and shunning of women’s from enjoying from daily life and environment was a usual thing in the early society. The widowed women is seen as evil omen. They were either forced to perform sati or shunt from the outside world by shaving their head, making them to wear white saree and abolishing them from auspicious ceremonies. All these practices were removed with the coming of British. They encouraged widow remarriage after the death of the spouse.

With the interaction of Britishers the objective of marriage was also changed from dharma to companionship. As a result of all these there is also drastic change in marriage rituals. The marriage rituals were more simplified after the coming of Britishers.

**CONCLUSION**

The institution of marriage is considered as a pivotal institution in the social functioning of all customs. The institution of Marriage has been changing its shape in different societies in different epochs. But the core concept of marriage remains the same. Marriage is a physical as well as a moral union is
recognized by society as the basis of a family. As a social, legal, and religious institution, marriage has undergone many changes and modification due to colonization process in Malabar. Nevertheless its basic realities remain the same. Therefore Marriage is considered as an essential part of human life.

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