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Topic: Role of Women in Kalari in Medieval Malabar (12th - 17th Century AD)

Summary of the findings:

As the central issue addressed here is the changing history of the role of women in the medieval period, each chapter deals with a set of specific issues dealing with the polity and society of the period. The Kalari system had influenced the entire society of the period. Prior to the establishment of the East India company rule, men mainly from the nair taravadus as well as from the ezhava homes formed the militia of the land and they were engaged in military practises sometimes for away from their homes. This made a number of Malabar households a matrilineal perforce, since the men were absent. And because nair men were the main part of the militia, matrilineal inheritance and descent became institutionalised within the Nair households. An analysis of family and the space of women is premised on an existence of Kalari. The researcher has sought to explore the transformation of relationship of sexes within the household, due to the influence of Kalari.

Unlike other contemporary societies, women after attaining puberty learnt the physical exercise of Kalari. They participated in practices along with men. Women went unaccompanied to public places. They planned and intrigued in fights and conspired to make their side win.

Each caste group had their own Kalari and nairs and ezhavas excelled in the art. The houses involved in Kalari practises were the most prosperous homes of the period. Women who excelled in Kalari were admired and adored. They were preferred by men of aristocratic families.

However the polygamy that existed among men gave a secondary status to women. Hatred developed among women in the attempt to possess their men. Spites between women had led to conspiracies and death.

My attempt is to analyse the premise of polyandry which might have developed in the late medieval period. The local chiefs who were engaged in petty skirmishes grew into chiefdoms which actually fought wars against the kings for expansion. The Kalari trained militia now began to fight wars in places positioned far away from their homes. This situation gave the women more power and freedom to manage their homes. The absence of men led these households to become matrilineal perforce.

It can be seen that women actually did not possess any distinct rights to the property. Though gender differences in property relations were not institutionalised, such differences is more explicit in the political sphere. Administrative functionaries were mainly men. Titles and dignities were granted by the rulers to men along lines of seniority in age. These could have later become status categories with access to power. Women denied of political power and titles could not expect to possess undisputed power in their households. Large tarawads had adjoining buildings exclusively meant for the younger men to meet friends and come back home at late hours without disturbing the family members. The 'Karanavan' or maternal uncle usually stayed adjoining the granary a place revered most.

The freedom women enjoyed was premised in the Kalari practises and in visiting the temples or fairs. The power and authority was wielded by the male figures and he represented the house in the political and social sphere.

The colonial legal system's intervention in martial households resulted in several changes in family ideologies. The legal separation of wifehood from concubinage contributed to this transformation. The colonial law recognised the senior male of the family for legal transaction and he was recognised as the man of right to talk and make decisions on behalf of the family.

The native militia waned with the colonial discourse. The Victorian legacy imbibed by the newly educated middle class brought structural changes in house hold organisation and positioned women to a dependent status.