

ATTIRE AS A REFLECTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN ERST WHILE STATE OF TRAVANCORE

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ABSTRACT

Today Women Empowerment is a controversial issue in allover world. We check in past we could understand that the empowerment were getting through series of struggles. In India women getting equal status with men. For that they had faced so many difficulties and problems. The status of women were fluctuating one. Sometimes it become high or low. Today we can see respectable positions in all walks of the fields. But yet they have not complete change. Some discriminations and harassments also saw in the society. The present study “Attire as a Reflection of Women Empowerment in Erstwhile state of Travancore” highlights the problems and consequences faced by women empowerment through their attire issue.

Key words: -Empowerment, Attire, Travancore.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment must build the ability of women to think critically about oppressive ideology and practices and encourage them to firmly resist the forces that desire to isolate and silence them.¹ Women studies are basically an area of study about women in society, their problems and suggesting strategies for their development. It is concerned with marginalization of socially disadvantaged women like lower caste women, Tribal women etc. It reveals the existence of a diverse tradition of women of oppressed communities and sections. It explores the status of women in public and private lives respectively as well as gender bias.² Thus there is a shift, in the approach and analysis of women issues. The Present Study “**Attire as a Reflection of Women Empowerment in Erstwhile state of Travancore**” is a new approach which highlights the women dress code problem in erstwhile State of Travancore. A historical account is presented here. It is the modest attempt to connect women empowerment and dressing pattern of women in erstwhile State of Travancore.

OBJECTIVES

- To identify the problems and prospects of Women Dress code problems in erstwhile State of Travancore.
- To bring out the details about revolts, reforms, transformation and changes in the dressing patterns of Travancore women.
- To connect women empowerment and dress code of women in Travancore.

HYPOTHESES

- ❖ It is hypothesized that Travancore society is unique in the dressing pattern of women.
- ❖ However, in due course, changes began to take place in the pattern of dress due to heroic strategies and variety of other factors.
- ❖ As a result, the women of Travancore acquired some modesty in their dressing.

METHODOLOGY

The Methodology adopted in the present study is an analytical, descriptive and interpretative reflection. Both primary and secondary sources utilized for the present study. The primary sources includes, unpublished sources such as *Mathilakam records*, *Neettu records* and Show Case Records can be examined carefully for the present study. The secondary sources includes books, Journals etc., also utilized for the study.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The Erstwhile state of Travancore was lies in the southernmost part of Indian Sub Continent. The history of Travancore is the history of the larger unit of Kerala.³The social life of Travancore was dominated by old traditions. The society was superstitious and caste-ridden, upholding social status and values. In Travancore society we can see basic class demarcation in the dressing patterns. A dress can tell the person, who belongs which caste. Caste and communities differentiated themselves by the peculiar dress they wore. This was meant to keep the polluting distance and to reflect the symbolic power relations. This was more explicit in the case of women. In Travancore, each caste has its own distinctive styles of dress, forbidden by law and custom to others, the infringement of which prohibition has sometimes led to riots, law suits and social legislation and varying in shape, pattern and mode of wearing.

The ultimate aim of wearing any dress is to cover ones nakedness. For this purpose it is enough to cover a small part of the human body and hence in the past in Travancore ‘Pulayas, Parayas’ etc., tied a string round their waist with grass attached to it to cover their nakedness. They were satisfied with this type of dress. Those who were somewhat higher used a piece of cloth like a loin cloth. It was a convenient type of dress for them while working. Even in the early decades of the 20th century ‘Chettis’ used to sell clothes like ‘*torthu*’ and *mundu* throughout Travancore. This merchandise included loin-clothes called ‘*kowpeenam*’, which were available in markets also. Each person could choose the covering cloth pieces suitable to his size. When readymade undergarments and under wears appeared in the market these under loin clothes became unfashionable. Till recently in mid Travancore and other areas children used to wear silk ‘*kowpeenams*’ and also ‘*koompalas*’ made of ‘areca palm spathes’ and plantain stem soft layers. In the early 19th century low caste women covered their nakedness with a simple piece of cloth or spathe in a very simple manner.⁴

The word dress did not have high significance in those days. The long and broad cloth worn by Nampoothiris during rituals and worship was known as “*vasthram*”.the cloth having “kasavu” or golden thread work called *Pudava*. Marriage was known as *PudavaKoda* because the bride groom have a *Pudava* to the bride. The general style of household dress was known as

Veettuduppu. The people of all religions followed this style generally on all occasions. The Nambudiri adopted a different style on special occasions. On common occasions even the highest Nambudiri and the biggest land lords were dressed alike in a simple manner. “The Thampuratty of Kollam, Uma Devi Kulasekhara was dressed in the waist. She had put loosely another cloth on her shoulders. Her ears were pierced and head was covered with a piece of white cloth”. The king’s dress was also not different. The head dress of the king was red in color. The dress of the Nambudiri consisted of a single cloth. On special occasions an additional cloth was used to cover the upper part of the body. to show the superiority ones caste marks of sandal paste and white ashes were used. in the domestic surroundings generally the Nambudiri wore only a *Thorthu* Cloth. Even among the biggest land lords those wearing long and broad clothes were very rare. Wearing an upper cloth was a must when one went to distant place, away from their home village. Generally those who travelled far wore large clothes. Common men, in short, managed with a single *thorthu* cloth. Land lords and prominent people wore an upper cloth, particularly when they travelled far. The upper cloth could be a ‘*chuttythorthu*’, a *Neriyath* or nice cloth, with or without *kasavuor* golden thread work. it was the sum total of the dress pattern of the men of Travancore.⁵

How to know the caste and Social Position from the Dress.

In those days it was important that one should be able to know from another person’s dress to what caste and social position he belongs. One’s dress style and upper cloth should show it. There was an accepted norm about each caste’s length of cloth used as dress. Different castes used different length of dress such as above the knees, up to the knee, reaching the ankles, up to the heels etc. This social norm was an altered and unchallenged. The lower among the high caste who could wear the upper covering had to tie it to the waist or hide it under the arm pit when they were in front of their superiors. The Nambudiri had to dress in the traditional ‘*thattu*’ style while they attended prayers or were doing rituals. For this style of dress they used a long cloth of about six or seven elbow length. Kings and rulers of the land generally used clothes of higher quality and quantity. Even they seldom altered the peculiar Travancore people style in the pattern of dress. On ceremonial occasions the style of dress of kings was different. it is clear from the list of cloth items required for royal make up or “*ThirumeniCharthu*”(as mentioned by Raman Menon in his book on SakthanThampuram)”set of six mundu-12 folds, head covering scarfs-4, thorthu to tie the royal hair-64, u charthu-50, waist strings-20, etc.”. A kind of scarf called ‘*urumal*’ was used Muslims, Nairs and Thiyya Lords on special occasions. The typical feature of Travancore women dress is that they loved clean, white clothes. Tailored dress items were totally absent. Though there were tailors such as ‘Panas’ and Mannans, Their services were limited to the making of money bags, pillow covers or the cut-ends of the dressing clothes. as or the cut-ends of the dressing clothes. as K.P. Kesava Menon says, “in those days, these were no pensions without head tuft and caste mark.”⁶

Women were foremost in Caste Pride

The prestige of caste and social prominence was more powerful among women. Men whose attention were diverted in different views did not show their importance in dress. The dress of women had many features. They expressed their social prominence by the caste mark on their fore heads, the ornaments they wore, and the style of tying their hair. Muslim women wore hand *katcha* cloth and sleeved jackets. Christian women wore long clothes with pleats on the back. Nair women were dressed in *onnara and mundu*. Which was about four meters long, one end of this white cloth was wound round the waist and the rest was pleated and tucked on the right side. It was the special feature of the 'onnara' style of dress. This dress style which showed caste prominence, reached down the knees and was known as "*Achipudava*". Only Nair women followed this type of dress pattern. It was the Ezhavas who made and sold the "*Achipudava*", but the Ezhava women were not allowed to wear this long cloth. The Ezhavas and other lower caste women had to wear only clothes that did not reach the knees. While in front of the temple and at prayer Nair women wore "*KuthiThattu*" style of dress.⁷

Nambudiri women dressed differently from the Nair women. Even among the Nambudiris Women, the dress styles of the highest and the high sections were different. The *Adya* Nambudiri women dressed in the *Koluthy Style* while the *Asya* Nambudiri women followed the *Okku* Pattern. The clothes they wore were seven or eight elbow measure long and two and a half elbow long broad. The *Adya* sections were highly orthodox and were socially more prominent. During the common occasions the *Asya* Nambudiri women dressed in their ordinary style. On the other hand the *Adya* Women used *EduthuKuthiyuduppu* and *PoovaVachudukkal* styles. When they went out of their houses it was more complex. More over they went out of their houses it was more complex. More even they had to cover their body and face with a palm leaf umbrella. They also used a nice long cloth called *chela puthappu* to cover their body from neck to feet. Caste was made explicit by means of forehead markings and ornaments also. The *Aadya* women used brass bangles. On the right arm they put on fifteen bangles and on the left they wore only fourteen bangles. This number was to be observed strictly. The *Aadya* women marked their fore heads with three crescent shaped lines one above the other using sandal paste, it was known as *Kolkkuri*. Their marriage pendant or *thali* was a special type called *Kamuthi Thali*. In direct contrast like *Aasya* Women of the Nambudiri caste wore bronze bangles. On the right arm they wore ten bangles and on the left only nine bangles. The number was to be observed strictly. Their fore head marking was three lines of sandal paste from left to right called *VarachuKuri*. Their *Thali* was known as *Malathi Thali*. Widows of both categories did not wear ornaments or clothes beautified with golden thread called *kasavu*. At the most they were allowed to wear a garland of *thulasileaves* or a chain of *Rudrakasha* Beads⁸.

The high caste women wore various ornaments depending on their wealth and position. It includes waist ornaments of gold, *Palakka Rings*, *Thandu Rings*, *Kuzhal Rings*, *NagaPadaThali*, *PappadaThali*, *AamaThali*, *Poothal*, carved bangles, polished bangles and ear ornaments like *Kaathila*, *Thakka* and *thoda*. The poor had to be satisfied with black string round the waist and necklaces of colored stones. The lower caste and the downtrodden were the poorest. Both men and women wore ornaments of the ear. Women made the hole on their ear lobes larger and larger

till ornaments like the *Thakka and Thoda* reached their shoulders. This extended ear lobes were considered a sign of feminine beauty.⁹

Restrictions, Challenges and Changes

In Travancore ordinary costume of women were simple. Even the better classes ordinarily wear very light clothing. The Caste Hindus¹⁰ only had the right to wear neat and tidy dress. They had the right to cover all parts of their body. Only the women of Brahmin community were allowed to cover their bosoms when they went out of their houses.⁵The Ambalavasi women and women of Royal Family¹¹ had the right to cover all parts of the body. The Royal family women used an "upper-cloth"¹² to cover their bosoms. The Nair women used to put an "upper cloth" When they went out, but they considered it as indecent to cover their bosom in front of higher caste people. It was formerly the custom that a Nair women 'as a mark of respect' to remove their upper cloth in the presence of the royal family or persons of high rank and in the religious processions or before the temple idols.¹³

The women of the Non Caste Hindus completely forbidden to cover their bosoms. For many centuries the caste Hindus considered it as an insult if a Non Caste woman did not expose her bosom.¹⁴ The non caste woman's dressing consisted of a single wares textures to be worn alike both male and female members of the community which was no lower than the knee and no higher than the waist.¹⁵ Then the Hindu women also had the right to cover all parts of their body.

Gradually, with the advent of the Europeans in general and the establishment of the British Paramountacy in particular drastic changes began to take place in the matter of dress of women in Travancore. The traditional style of dress and practices changed further with the contact and influence of Christian Missionaries. Towards the middle of the 19th century the Christian converts of the Southern and Central Travancore became increasingly conscious of their socio-religious right. In the South Travancore Missionaries of L.M. S were worked. In addition to the work of the Christian Missionaries to abolish slavery they also established several schools to educate Non Caste Hindus and others. Unlike the Other Missionaries to abolish slavery, they also established several schools to educate Non Caste Hindus and others. Unlike the other Missionary societies that labored in Travancore, the LMS was revolutionary to the extent that it was mainly responsible for a good deal of religious and social changes in Travancore in the 19th century. "The seeds of protestant Christianity sown by the LMS fell on a soil made fertile through the decay of traditional institutions".¹⁶

The efforts of the Missionaries for education of girls were to improve the social position of girls and provide them with remarkable skills and Christianize them. It was the first step to upliftment of women in Travancore. In this sense the effort of women empowerment was also seen here. The Christian Missionary gives education to women in Travancore. With the spread of Missionary education the pitiable situation of women in Travancore witnessed changes and the winds of equality in terms of sex started blowing in Travancore society. The contribution of Missionaries especially their activities against the social disabilities appears to have put the

women folk of Travancore on the road to progress. The importance of education to accelerate socio economic advancement of the state was realized. Education helped the people to develop a sense of decency in everything including dress.

The struggle of shannars (Nadras) of south Travancore to secure for their women for the same rights in regard to dress as were enjoyed by the upper castes among the Hindus assumes special significance in the above context.¹⁷ Already mentioned freedom of dress depended on the caste to which one belonged. Most of the converts in Travancore had been denied the freedom to cover the upper parts of the bodies. The women missionaries awakened the people to a sense of social justice.

Though the influence of col. Munro, in the Political Resident of Travancore, Rani Parvathi Bai (AD 1815-1829) issued an order granting permission to the converted to the women to cover their bosom like the Christians in other parts of the country.¹⁸ But the cause of the Hindu women was ignored. The Lady Missionaries advised a loose jacket with short sleeves for the Christians women added a cloth or a scarf over the shoulder, called the “Upper cloth” as worn by the Sudra Women. The Caste Hindus could not tolerate this violation of standing customs.¹⁹ This was strongly opposed by the higher castes and in turn this led to communal riots. In this critical juncture, it was at the instance of socio-religious reformers and L.M.S Missionaries that the Royal proclamation of UthrdamThirunal Maharaja was issued on 26 July 1859 abolishing all restrictions in regard to the covering of the upper part of the Nadar women.²⁰ But there was still the stipulation that they should not imitate the dress of the women of the Caste Hindus. The LMS Missionaries and British authorities continued to express their desire to the Maharaja, with regard to the need of better legislation granting perfect freedom to the Non Castes in the matter of dress. This pressure made the Travancore Government undertake fresh legislation in 1865. Revolution changes had taken place in the position of Non Caste, with the proclamation of AyilyamThirunal Maharaja on 19 Mithunam, 1040 ME (1865), permitting the women of all the backward classes to cover their bosoms by wearing the so called an “Upper cloth”.²¹

The traditional custom of not allowing lower caste women to cover their breasts continued. The law was breached almost by everyone; the Government turned a blind eye on in the early 20th century, with further agitations and with stimulus from some British Officials, Dewans and popular Press, and the legislation could be implemented to a great degree. It is interesting that women liberation movement people were telling the women to return the natural state of removing upper-cloth and let the breast to be exposed to their own liking. At last various social reformers took place in the matter of dress. All classes of women got equal rights and privileges for wearing dress of their own wish. The legislation also support to this.

CONCLUSION

To conclude that the above mentioned dress code problems were resulted in the women empowerment in Travancore. Because it was the first step for their dignity and status Dressing of women was one of their identical issues in Travancore. It can be said that the awareness created

by the women missionaries through education was the fundamental factor which restyled and modernized the women in Travancore. The activities carried out by the missionaries of the LMS and CMS brought about revolutionary changes in the dress code of women in Travancore. The upper cloth rebellion was a historic incident for securing their rights for decency in dressing. The victory of dress code rebellion of women in Travancore was the first step to this context. As a result, the woman of Travancore witnesses a new social change in this scenario.

ENDNOTE

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- 11 But in some records states that Brahmin women remove the cloth above their bosoms in front – of temple idols. See, Suresh C. V, *Neyyattinkarude Samskarika Charithram*, (Mal.) Puzhikkunnu Raveendran Smaraka Patana Gaveshana Kendram, Thiruvananthapuram, 2012, p. 155
- 12 *Op.cit*.
- 13 Upper Cloth – A nice cotton cloth loosely across the breast and over one shoulder. This is called the Upper- cloth.
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