

The Liberation of Women of South Travancore from the Systems of Pulapedi, Parapedi and Manapedi

Raichel C. Raj

Ph.D (Research Scholar), Department of History, PG and Research Centre, Nesamony
Memorial Christian College, Marthandam- 629165.

Email.Id: raichelmaya81@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article is intended to highlight “THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN OF SOUTH TRAVANCORE FROM THE SYSTEMS OF PULAPEDI, PARAPEDI AND MANNAPEDI”. There were certain customs prevalent in South Travancore among the unprivileged classes. The term Pulapedi means the fear of Pulayars, Parayars and Mannan. On a few days of the year, the avarnas (pulayas and parayas) were granted the right to frighten and to pollute high caste women. The 1696 proclamation is an important document in the social history of South Travancore.

INTRODUCTION

In South Travancore, women's of privileged classes entertained a certain injustice towards the unprivileged classes, known variously as *Pulapedi*, *Parapedi* and *Mannapedi*. The custom was first referred by Duarte Barbosa, he says “during certain months of the year, low caste people try to touch some of the Nair women as best they may be able to manage

it and secretly by night, to do they harm. So they go by night amongst the houses of the Nairs to touch women. And if they touch any woman, even though no one sees it and though there shall be no witnesses, she the Nair woman herself publishes it immediately, crying out and leaves her house without choosing to enter it again,-so as not to damage her lineage”.¹

The term *Pulapedi* was known as capture by Pulayas.² The custom was that during certain months of the year, if a person belonging to a low caste like Pulaya touch or threw a stone or a stick at a woman of the higher caste found alone after dusk, she would lose her caste and would have to accompany him, never to return. Even if shouted from the top of a Palmyra tree, she has to follow him. She will follow the persons who saw her to hide herself in the house of some low caste people to save herself from her relatives. Barbosa says “what she most thinks of doing is to run to the house of

some low people to hide herself, that her relations may not kill her as a remedy for what has happened, or sell her to some strangers as they are accustomed to do".⁴ In South Travancore Parayyas practiced a custom of kidnapping the women of higher castes like Brahmins and Nairs and treated in a brutal manner.⁵

Women who remained at home or those who ventured out accompanied by a male child at least three years old were never troubled by the Pulayas.⁶ If a pregnant woman, who was captured by a Pulaya was kept in isolation by them till the time of her delivery and she was retained by them or set at liberty, according to her giving birth to a female or male child. She could go back to her home if the child is boy and her relatives gladly receive her.⁸ These custom clearly show the humane principles maintained by the lower castes during that dark period.

Pulapedi is also known as *Parapedi* in other parts with reference to the Parayars who exercise it. The custom turns themselves into robbers. *Mannapedi* was also vogue during the month *Pulapedi* and *Parappedi*.¹⁰ They were considered as polluting caste, who enjoyed the same

rights of the Pulaya and the Paraya to seize higher caste women.¹¹ Desikavinayakam Pillai says that this period began after the month of *Kumbham* harvest and continued up to about 10th of Medam.¹² In this season, the higher caste women took many precautions against this injury.¹³ The never went out of their houses after dusk without Shannar (Nadar Boy).¹⁴ Also the fear of pollution by the Mannan, the horrors of excommunication were all removed.

It was abolished in Travancore by an edict in 1696, issued by the Venad King Unni Kerala Varma, known as Kottayam Kerala Varma. The edict of 1696 inflicted severe punishments on those who violated the edict. Accordingly any Pulaya who was caught in the act of practicing the custom would be killed. Their family members, including the children in the wombs of women, were to be cut into pieces. They ordered that the women so polluted could cleanse themselves by bathing in a tank.¹⁵ Threatened punishment put a stop to this custom within a short time. Kerala Varma thus abolished out a long established custom prevailed in the region.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Hence the period was a nightmare

to the high caste ladies, There are references to this custom in the description of Barbosa and in the inscription of Unni Kerala Varm dated *Thai masam* 25, 871 K.E at Kalkulam and this curious custom had added to the number of the enslaved. It was the Proclamation of the Venad Raja Unni Kerala Varma dated February 7, 1696 that was erected at the Tiruvithancode highway that abolished this abominable custom. Thus the existence of this custom was a source of threat to the prestige of the privileged classes. It is an important document in the history of South Travancore and a cruel but long established social custom to frighten and to pollute high caste women who were moving around alone was wiped out.

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