

ECONOMY AND GENDER RELATIONS AMONG A TRADITIONAL POTTERY CASTE OF KERALA

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Abstract : This article examines the economic organization and gender relations existing among a pottery caste group, the Anthur Nairs of Kerala. The Anthur Nairs are the traditional pot makers and majority of them are still depending upon their traditional technology for the production process. At present also the life and culture of the people revolve around their traditional occupation i.e., pot making. Thus, the dichotomization of the economic activities and the institutional frameworks among them were framed in accordance with the socio-cultural milieu of the community. The dichotomization and marginalization of women in a community is conditioned by a lot of factors. An attempt has been made in this paper to identify the factors that have contributed for the marginalization of women.

Keywords : Dichotomization, Gender differentiation, Patriliney

Introduction: Most communities in rural India are resource based communities and their habitats determine their socio-economic life to a great extent. The Indian social system has traditionally been characterized by caste system, which strongly influenced the social, economic and occupational life of the people (Gill 1991:1-30). Under this, each caste groups have its own entity and organization and these are socially carried over to generations. Hence in order to understand the gender relations an understanding about the social structure of the community is essential.

The Anthur Nairs are the traditional pot makers of Kerala. The name Anthur Nair is derived from Andoor, a place which was once a fiefdom under the zamorin of Calicut (Thurston 1975: 47). In Kerala, the traditional pot makers are known in different names in different districts. In Kannur and Kozhikode districts they are called as Anthur Nairs. In Palakkad they are known as Kumbaran and as Velan in Thiruvananthapuram district. Odan, Kulalan, Andra Nair, Mannu Nair, Velar etc., are the other names. Generally, the terms Kusavan and Kulalan are used by the villagers to denote the pot makers of Kerala. The Anthur Nairs were believed to be arrived from Karnataka to Kerala about 800 years back as the assistants of the Brahmins and were engaged in pot making and rearing the cows of Brahmins. They follow patrilineal inheritance and are believed to be as a result of this affinity.

In the past, the dwellings of the Kusavar are thatched huts, with mud walls and conical or trapezoidal shaped roofs. They live in villages or in the outskirts of towns, as they need to dig the clay for their pottery activities (Singh 1998: 1946-47). The settlements of the Anthur Nairs can be distinguished very easily. Traditional type of furnace (choola) is a characteristic of almost all the houses. This is used for baking the mud pots ready to use by keeping in high temperature.

Presence of squared or conical pits for collecting clay and a work-shed near the residence or extended with the house are also common features of the Anthur Nair houses.

In the past, vertically extended joint families were common among the Anthur Nairs, but now it is replaced by nuclear families as in any other communities of Kerala. Nuclear family is the basic social and economic unit. Regarding the inheritance of ancestral property, usually sons have the maximum right and daughters were forbidden to claim. The patrilineal law of inheritance is the reason behind this practice. However, the passing of different laws by the Government in this regard diluted the earlier cultural notions.

British sociologist Anthony Giddens defines sex as biological or anatomical differences between men and women, where as gender 'concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females' (<http://www.polity.co.uk/giddens2006>). The dichotomization of the livelihood activities and the pattern of the culturally established division of work create space for both men and women. This also creates a gender asymmetric society. Gender inequality exists in most of the communities but its form varies from community to community. Generally, male centered fiscal contribution and female centered domestic dealings paved way for disparity in gender relations at household level. Feminist writers like Ortner (1974) and Rosaldo (1974) linked the universal subordination of women to their association with the domestic sphere which is in turn linked to the reproductive role of women as mothers and child-rearers (in Channa 1992: 321-340).

It is difficult to conceive all gender relations in a straight way as the interaction between women and men. The differences in gender relations can be identified in aspects such as participation in the fiscal

activities by men and women, freedom for mobility within and outside the household, right to inherit the properties and involvement in decision making. These aspects also vary from society to society. The indicators and parameters defining different perspectives can be taken into consideration while attempting to make an in depth study. The gender relations may be indirect or mediated by technologies (Connell, 2002). Mitchell (1971) argued that women's oppression involves not one, but four structures: production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality. In Kerala context, only few anthropological studies have been conducted pertaining to economy and gender relations and its varying socio-economic and cultural aspects. The present paper is an attempt to explore the gender relations and economic organization among the Anthur Nairs of Kannur district in Kerala in par with direct, indirect and technologically mediated aspects.

Materials And Methods

In Kannur district, the Anthur Nairs are mainly distributed in twenty nine different settlements. The largest number of the population is found in Mottammal (Kannapuram) and Taliparamba settlements (Sini 2004: 101). For the present study, the data have been collected from Mottammal village of Kannur district in Kerala. This village comprises 163 households of Anthur Nairs. Fifty individuals from the community were selected as sample on random basis and key informants were identified from the sample group. Personal interview and Observation were mainly employed for collecting information and data thus collected were cross checked with older generation of the community.

Economy and Gender Relations

According to Ezeh and Gage (1998), cross-cultural studies indicate that at the societal level, discrimination of women is traceable to male authority and decision making in the home, rigid gender roles, definitions of masculinity that are linked to dominance or male honor, economic inequality between men and women, and the use of physical force for conflict resolution.

The disparity in fiscal relationship is a common feature found among the traditional Caste groups of Kerala and this would also reflect in other spheres of their life also. Pot making with the help of wheel technology was the traditional occupation of Anthur Nairs. They are very much used to make pottery with wheel technology. Earlier both men and women were actively participated in this economic activity. There is a clear cut division of labour that exists in the society. Some of the activities are confined to men and some to women. At the same time women also help their male counter parts in many activities related to pot making. Men take integral part of moulding the clay into pots, finishing the pots,

placing pots in Kiln, baking the products and collecting the clay. Women are mostly confined to bring clay, firewood, water etc., and marketing the products, rotating the wheel and also in domestic work, i.e., women assist their men folk in their profession, thus indirectly supplement the family income. Collection of fuel wood is also the duty of women. Women's participation in the marketing is also remarkable. Men have total control over the income generated out of pot making. Excluding production work and baking the products, the rest of the activities are performed by female members and children. That is men mainly engaged in production processes.

Among the Anthur Nairs the adolescent girls assist their mothers in the household work while sons help their fathers in different activities related to pot making. The adolescent girls are not allowed to go to fields to bring clay and other required materials for pot making. Anthur Nairs would like to get their daughters married as early as possible. During marriage no dowry or bride price is paid. Traditionally, most of the marriages took place between the members who are residing in the same locality.

The differentiation in perspective starts from the very birth of the child. Patrilineal system demonstrates male's superiority over females. The Anthur Nair considers the female child as a temporary member of the family and male as a permanent member. The birth of a son is a pleasant moment and an Anthur Nair household cannot simply be run without a son. Patrilineal law of inheritance and patrilocal residence were the norm among the Anthur Nairs in the past. After marriage, the women's right in her house dissolves. Generally the daughters had no rights over it. Men are the owner of all household property belonging to the family. Due to the consequence of patriliney generally sons are preferred. According to Amartya Sen (2001), in many societies the ownership of property can also be very unequal even basic assets such as homes and land may be very asymmetrically shared. The absence of claims to property cannot only reduce the voice of women, but also make it harder for women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and even some social activities.

Based on the type of technology used for production, it can be divided into three periods. During the earlier period of production, the community members used the most traditional type of wheel which requires more man power and while moulding of the product by a man, the assistance of a woman is required for rotating the wheel. The main drawback of this wheel was that, by using this only pottery items can be made. During 1960's, a slightly advanced wheel termed Double bar bearing wheel, generally

regarded as the "Potter's Wheel" came into being. The main advantage of this wheel is that, one person is necessary for both rotating and moulding. With the introduction of this wheel, even the subsidiary roles of the female folk in the production stage get vanished. This wheel is comparatively advanced than the earlier category, mainly in the making of diversified products. The modern electrically operated wheel came into practice about thirty years back and which also requires only single person's service. The advantage of this wheel is that, production/ day has been increased and the utilization of manpower gets reduced and thus eliminated the role of women. In addition to this, by using this wheel, almost all the decorative clay products and flower pots can be shaped easily.

From these, it can be stated that the introduction of new and advanced technology, has adversely affected and marginalized the womenfolk from the main vicinity of production. According to Sahu (1996), Women in general are attributed as second sex in global society. They as a part and parcel of the community could not remain passive in social transition. It is proved from innumerable studies that women are the object of utmost victimization in any point of transition. No one society can demand any achievement without acceptance of women's share in it. Women are in fact, the base stone of every family and every society.

In matters of marriage alliances among the Anthur Nairs, man initiates and decides. The children in all terms belong to their father's group. After marriage, the pollution observed related to birth and death ceremonies was not of the girl's family but husband's family's pollution matters affect her. Traditionally the marriages are conducted without any dowry. Marriages are always negotiated by the elders of the family, especially male members of the taravad and community. The Anthur Nairs are an endogamous group who are subdivided into exogamous taravadus. Taravad is the minimum lineage division and there were twelve taravadus in the settlement. But now there are eleven taravadus, one became extinct, because of lack of sons. The taravadu names of Anthur Nair households are pallen, palangadan, puthan veedu, aalakeel, kandathil valappu, thazhathu veedu, kundannira veedu and meethale veedu. Among these pallen, palangadan and kandathil valappu are of two categories. The taravadu regulates the marriage alliances. In North Malabar, the use of taravadu name along with a person's given name is common. It indicates the family to which the person belongs or it was used to identify the members who are related by blood i.e., consanguine relationship. Every society has its own rules and conventions regarding the use of family name or taravadu name or last name. In most of the societies the family name is

typically the last part of a person's name or the last name is generally used for denoting the family or taravadu. Among the Anthur Nairs of Kerala, a person's last name or surname is most commonly a patronymic, i.e., derived from the father's taravadu name. Father is the head of the family and his power after death passed on to the eldest son, i.e., primogeniture. After marriage, the female member scarcely stays in her parental house. According to Channa (1992), the way in which male-female relations are shaped in a community is conditioned, if not determined, by the nexus of subordination and super ordination a community has with the wider world.

In the past, when a girl attains puberty, a small hut is built, where the menstruating and post natal mothers live, and was considered as pollution area. Separate vessels were used for serving the menstruating girl and are kept apart. The broken pieces of pots collected from the choola were mainly used for serving. The pollution period lasts with the consumption of cow dung water. The menstruating women are not allowed to enter into the house and the choola.

The service of women during the important phases (Production phases) such as mannine vilayikkuka (means converting the soil rich for the concerned purpose), menanjedukkal (moulding the material) and baking the pots in the choola are strictly prohibited. The Anthur Nairs consider choola as a symbol of fortune and are kept sacred. The female members were not allowed to enter in to this sacred place. Male members authority over production processes and resources is significant than womenfolk.

Most of the Anthur Nair settlements have a sacred groove, which is also the temple termed as Neeliyar Kottam. All the taravadu members have their own role in the temple during the festival period. The taravadu members generally include male members only. Earlier the married daughters were not been invited to participate in the temple festival. The taravadu members of the community especially male members pay an amount of twenty five rupees/year in this temple till seventy years of age. In all the taravads, male members are considered to be the uralans of the temple. The people who are above eighteen years have to pay the amount. The rituals connected with sankramam (last day of the Malayalam month) are also conducted by all the taravadu members jointly. In case, if any taravadu lacks male members, then the position of the uralan in the temple simultaneously gets dissolve. Now there are eleven taravadus and in every month special ceremonies are conducting in the temple. In every month of the year different taravadus conducting the ceremonies and due to the extinct of the twelfth

taravadu, they jointly conduct the ceremonies of the twelfth month.

The eleven taravadus of Anthur Nairs in the settlement forms the uralanmar (Temple committee) and they are jointly conducting the festival. In conducting theyyams, community members do not depend or accept any collection from other community members. The temple Committee does not include the female members of the community i.e., the women are not considered as part of their religious festivals. The Anthur Nairs have traditional right to bring pots to various temples. Usually only male members do this activity.

Regarding political affairs, the Anthur Nair men form the traditional caste council, called kurisangham, in which women were not allowed to participate in the council meetings. The decision making related to community affairs were done in the meetings. Women are never taken before the kurisangham.

The Anthur Nair women's position in their social life is also clearly reflected in the division of space in the settlement. In all the huts, the front portion has been occupied by the male members. In the choola the female members were not permitted to enter. The innate patterns and cultural norms thus fashioned the community behaviour. The distinction between female and male spheres operates in the family, the economy, religion, political systems, educational institutions, and culture..... Dichotomizing gendered natures justifies differential social roles and legitimates a division of labour and social spheres designated for women and men (Kuumba, 2003). In general, the gender relations are shaped by means of an array of factors and reflect in the societal norms and traditions of the society.

Conclusion

The Anthur Nair economy even today mainly revolves around pot making. They have traditionally been dependent on pot making for their livelihood, and it is absolutely controlled by the men, provided inherently favourable condition for patrilineal and patriarchal system. In the present situation, exposed

nature of their culture provides them scope to enjoy more freedom than the past. But always women are not relieved from their work. Among the Anthur Nair families, men are the household head. Patrilocality and Patriliney were the rule of residence and descent. Due to this, generally sons are preferred. The traditional order of taking food in the family is that the men take first followed by mother and matured daughters. Men hold virtual control over marketing and religious spheres of the society. In the past all the social and cultural institutions operate with patriarchal bias. In the rapidly changing situation also men enjoy greater opportunities. However, at present modernization has led to modest transformation in the relationship of males and females. Now the female members also have privileges over property, and residence pattern is adopted according to the convenience and security of the family members.

In addition, the introduction of innovative technologies gradually marginalized the involvement of the womenfolk in the area of production. It has been observed that the traditional behaviour pattern of Anthur Nairs have been most persuasively affected by education and by urbanization and industrialization. Finally it can be concluded that gender differentiation starts from the very birth of the child and the differentiation is seen maximum during the adolescent period in majority of the communities and they consider son as asset of the family. Alavi (1982) mentions that every society builds on inherited, social, institutional and cultural products of the past. Capitalism does not erase them totally and substitute new social institutions brought out of nowhere. It takes the legacies from the past as the raw materials for building its society of the future, combining them into new social and cultural realities it does also create. In short, the traditional dogma of the community stands as impediment in changing the old sphere of interaction and dichotomization existing within the community.

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