



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Historical Perspectives of Gender, Power, And Matriliney: The Nair Tharavad System in the Malabar Region

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Abstract: This research paper explores the historical institution of matriliney among the Nairs of the Malabar region in Kerala, India. The Nair Tharavad (matrilineal joint family) system stands as a unique socio-cultural structure that redefined gender roles, property rights, and power dynamics within a patriarchal Indian context. This study examines the origins, development, and eventual decline of the system, offering insights into how gender and power were negotiated and performed in a matrilineal framework. Through archival sources, colonial records, and oral histories, the paper critically analyses the intersection of gender and kinship and its implications for contemporary debates on family, inheritance, and women's agency.

Introduction:

The Nair community of Kerala has long fascinated historians and anthropologists due to their distinct kinship system based on matriliney. The Tharavad functioned as the fundamental social and economic unit in which property and lineage were traced through the female line. Unlike the patrilineal systems that dominate most parts of India, the Nair tharavad offered a different model of gendered power, particularly in terms of inheritance, authority, and domestic space. This paper seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the historical trajectories of the tharavad system, its socio-political significance, and the transformations it underwent in the face of colonial and postcolonial pressures.

In contemporary Kerala, although the matrilineal system no longer exists in practice, the cultural memory of the Tharavad endures. It is evoked in literature, cinema, and public discourse as a symbol of heritage and rootedness. For feminist historians and social theorists, the Tharavad offers a valuable site for

interrogating assumptions about gender, kinship, and power. It compels us to rethink normative models of family and explore alternative genealogies that affirm the complexity and diversity of human social arrangements.

Keywords: Nair, Tharavad, Matriliney, Gender, Power, Malabar, Kinship, Inheritance, Colonialism, Marumakkathayam

Objectives

- To study the origins and structure of the Tharavad system among the Nairs of Malabar.
- To examine the gender dynamics and power relations within matrilineal households.
- To analyse the colonial state's response to matriliney and its role in altering kinship and inheritance patterns.
- To understand the socio-political consequences of the decline of matriliney in the 20th century.

Historical Origins of the Tharavad

The concept of the Tharavad evolved within the framework of matrilineal kinship, known in Kerala as the Marumakkathayam system. In this system, inheritance and descent were traced through the female line. Unlike the patrilineal family structures predominant in most parts of India, the Marumakkathayam system placed the mother at the center of lineage continuity. This practice is believed to have ancient roots, possibly originating during the Sangam period (circa 300 BCE – 300 CE), when proto-matrilineal customs began to emerge among warrior and trading communities.

By the medieval period, matrilineal family units had solidified into institutional structures known as Tharavads. These served not only as residential spaces but also as economic and ritual units. The influence of Dravidian social traditions, coupled with local adaptations of Brahmanical norms, contributed to the development of the Tharavad as a unique family institution. The arrival of colonial powers, especially the British, led to formal documentation and attempts to regulate these structures through legal reforms, such as the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, which aimed to clarify marital and inheritance rights under the matrilineal system.

Structure of Tharavad

The Tharavad functioned as an extended joint family system dwelling in a single ancestral home. The membership in a Tharavad was determined by matrilineal descent. All children born to the women of the family automatically became members of the Tharavad, while men remained in their natal homes throughout their lives. Importantly, while descent was traced through the mother, authority within the Tharavad was typically vested in a male figure—the Karanavar.

The Karanavar is considered as the eldest male member of the Tharavad, usually the maternal uncle of the younger generation. He served as the administrative head, overseeing property management, conducting rituals, and making decisions on behalf of the family. While women held symbolic and

reproductive importance, it was the Karanavar who exercised functional power, revealing a nuanced balance of matrilineal ideology and patriarchal control. It also a unit of joint property ownership. Land, wealth, and other resources were collectively owned, with no individual having the right to alienate property for personal gain. This ensured the economic stability and continuity of the family line. Marriage customs reflected this structure: men married outside their Tharavad, and their children belonged to the wife's Tharavad, thereby reinforcing the matrilineal principle.

Architecturally, Tharavad homes were often large and built in the traditional nalukettu style, featuring a central open courtyard surrounded by living quarters on all four sides. These structures reflected the communal living arrangement and were often adorned with woodwork and intricately carved pillars. The layout of the Tharavad was not only functional but also symbolized harmony with nature, aligning with Vastu Shastra principles. Religiously and ritually, each Tharavad had its own family deity (kuladevata) and conducted regular ceremonies to honor ancestors. These rituals reinforced the spiritual unity of the family and connected the living members to their lineage. In many ways, the Tharavad was both a social unit and a sacred space.

Gender and Power within the Tharavad:

The matrilineal system positioned women in a unique social location. While formal authority was held by the male karanavar, women's positions were empowered through their centrality in lineage and property transmission. The eldest women in the tharavad, often referred to with reverence, exerted considerable influence in domestic management, religious rituals, and conflict resolution. Their roles extended beyond passive kinship to active participation in the shaping of social norms.

The marriage system among the Nairs was traditionally sambandham, a form of relationship that did not entail cohabitation or lifelong commitment. Women could have multiple sambandham relationships, which ensured flexibility and reinforced their independence. Children born from these unions belonged to the mother's tharavad, and maternal uncles assumed fatherly roles. While this provided women with a degree of autonomy, it also meant that male roles were complex and negotiated within the bounds of matriliney.

Impact of Colonialism and Legal Reforms:

The Colonial intervention drastically altered the social fabric of matriliney. British administrators, missionaries, and legal experts perceived the tharavad system as chaotic and immoral, primarily because it did not conform to Victorian ideals of family and morality. Colonial ethnographers and census officers categorized matriliney as a deviation from the 'normal' patriarchal household, leading to efforts to codify and control Nair customs.

Another notable thing is the introduction of English education, the growth of legal institutions, and the colonial state's focus on individual property rights undermined the communal and matrilineal basis of the tharavad. The Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 institutionalized the transition from joint family to individual ownership, thus hastening the decline of matriliney. These reforms, while couched in the language of progress and modernization, had gendered implications that curtailed women's customary rights and reinforced patrilineal norms.

Transformation and Decline

The onset of modernity, legal reforms, and economic changes, the Tharavad system began to decline. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which introduced equal inheritance rights for women and codified property laws, marked a significant departure from the Marumakkathayam system. Urbanization, individual aspirations, and the breakdown of agricultural economies further contributed to the fragmentation of Tharavads. Today, while the physical structures of Tharavads may still exist, many have been abandoned, sold, or repurposed. However, the idea of the Tharavad continues to hold cultural resonance among Malayalis, symbolizing ancestral pride, heritage, and identity.

Conclusion:

The Nair tharavad system presents a compelling case of how kinship and gender roles can vary across cultures and historical periods. It offers a nuanced understanding of matriliney—not as a mirror image of patriarchy but as a dynamic system with its own logics of power, authority, and social organization. The study of the tharavad challenges binary frameworks and opens up possibilities for reimagining family, gender justice, and community in both historical and contemporary settings. The transformation of the Tharavad under colonial and postcolonial modernity reveals the impact of legal and administrative interventions on indigenous social structures. The colonial state's attempts to 'correct' matriliney by aligning it with Western norms of family and inheritance underscores the broader imperial project of restructuring native societies

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