

## POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MIGRATION IN MUSLIM MATRILINEAL FAMILIES OF KERALA

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**Abstract :** The study tries to explore the role of migration of male members in Muslim matrilineal families and its effect on shaping the matrilineal kinship system in among Muslims of Kerala. There is an important role for migration in the Muslim matrilineal families in Kerala, as the family kinship traces its origin from traders Arabian Peninsula. The continuation of matrilineal residence pattern in the matrilineal families is positively correlated with the occupation of male members and impact of gulf boom on migration. It is interesting to note that matrilineal families was almost out of the ambit of ideal kinship system in Islam as patrilineal system is considered as the ideal system in Muslim tradition. A brief evolutionary history of inheritance practice in the matrilineal families of Malabar Coast reveals that inclusion of Muslim laws which is in fact an outcome of overseas influence and Islamic reformism from approximately 1970s changed the matrilineal inheritance to Sharia based inheritance. The impact of male migration on the family economy is highly visible in most of the matters. The decision making powers to run family economy is vested with women, which is under the supervision of senior most male and female member of the matrilineal family. The study also brings out how power of absentee works in matrilineal families through different bodies.

**Keywords :** Ara, Matrilocal residence, Matrilineal, patrilineal,

**Introduction:** Matrilineality in Islam is the area of study of this particular research. Matrilineality is not a usual practice as Islam considers patrilineality as ideal kinship. All the rules and regulations with respect to Islam are framed with the assumption of a patrilineal family in each household. In Kerala, matrilineal Muslim families were however seen only in pockets of Northern Kerala and in Edava of Varkala. During the evolutionary process matrilineal practices and repeal of matrilineal system in the Southern Kerala (Edava) lost its nature and gradually got transformed to patrilineal families and the Northern parts of Kerala is left with only few features of matrilineality. The practices and customs related with matrilineal system are losing its pure sense by intervention of various reforms and religious norms. Matrilocal residence pattern is one of the practices associated with matrilineality which is still practiced without any dilution. Given the evolutionary nature of the kinship system, the objectives of the study are; (i) to identify the role of migration in the matrilineal kinship system (ii) to examine the relationship between occupation pattern and matrilineal residence, and (iii) to see how patriarchy works in absence. Muslim matrilineality had undergone drastic changes from its original form due to religious reformism and rules and regulations regarding the matrilineal kinship. The role of karanavar had undergone changes on shifting to father from maternal uncle. The nature of power changed as it lost its decentralized nature and was left a single person. The role of karanavatti also had undergone significant changes as the nature of kinship changed. Karanavatti was a source of power and had actively involved in the economic activities of the Tharavad. At present the nature of role of

female head is to organize the domestic affairs and it through this female body the patriarchal norms get implemented in the family. The study is based on the case study conducted among ten families from three different areas in Malabar. Personal interviews and focus group discussion were deployed to amass knowledge regarding the practice. Mahe of Union Territory Pondicherry, Dharmadam of Thalassery Block Panchayat and Chervathur of Nileschwaram Block Panchayat in Kasargod are the areas selected for the study. The areas were carefully selected as Thalassery is famous for its trade relations with foreign countries especially Arab countries and Chervathur represent the landed aristocracy as well as the changing political economy due to Gulf migration and Mahe is historically known for its uniqueness in social and familial kinship. The paper is divided into two parts followed by a conclusion. Section I review the literature and studies on the Muslim matrilineality and its practices. Section II narrates the present scenario of Muslim matrilineality.

**Muslim Matrilineality in Kerala:** The Mappila Muslims of Malabar are followers of Sunni Faith and it was considered to have originated in 8<sup>th</sup> Century. They settled down in port towns of North and Central Kerala such as Kodungallur, Kozhikode, Kannur, Panthalayani Kollam and Ponnani. Islam laid its foundation in India by establishing its roots in Kerala, and Mappila Muslims are the successors of the original group. It could be noticed that despite same origin and evolution, there are huge variations among Mappilas. 'Originally formed through inter-marriage between maritime Arab traders and local women, the Moplahs are today a heterogeneous community characterized by ethnic, regional and social

diversities' (D'Souza 1976). There are actually two endogamous groups. 'The higher ranking caste is believed to comprise of the descendants of converts from Brahmins and Nairs' (Schneider 1961). The lower stratum consist mostly converts from fishermen and other lower caste groups. Hence the Mappila Muslims consists of descendants of Arabs through local women and converts from the local people. Muslims of Kerala practice both patrilineal and matrilineal system of kinship. Matriliney/ matrilocality are not common among Mappila Muslims as it is not properly supported by Islam. Patrilineals are more in number than matrilineals. However, townships of Kozhikode, Vadakara, Mahe, Quilandy, Thalassery, Kannur and Kasargode followed marumakthayam and they dominate the society and outnumber the patrilineals in these areas. There are various theories behind the Mappila Muslim matriliney. One possible theory is that it could have been an adoption from the Nairs. But it could be negated with the fact that it is not only the Mappila muslims of Kerala, but also Labbais of Tamil Nadu, the coastal pocket of Gujarat, the Navayats of Kanara and the Islanders of Lakshadweep follow matriliney and they are not converts from Hindu matrilineal groups. There is a common link between all these groups which is that they all had connection with Arab traders. Another argument is that Arab traders' engagement in trade extended to an ambit of entering to marriage alliances with native women. And the children born out of it lived as Muslims. But many customs of the Hindu religion like anniversaries, nerchas, talikettukalyanam and practice of matriliney was imprinted in the first generation of the Islam and it continued. Koyas of Kozhikode consists of indigenous Nair families and Brahmins (Lakshmi 2012). Koyas of Kozhikode strictly followed the norms of Islam while promoting the practice of matriliney. A typical example given by Lakshmi is that of Karuthedathu Illam which was formerly name of a Brahmin household. And it is justified that even after conversion the converts were able to sustain their indigenous practices and matriliney was one of them. Historical texts show that the system of matriliney and matrilocality is common among the Arab sailor communities of South Arabia including Yemen. And this was a generally accepted and prevalent system in ancient Arabia. And the spread of the family system from Arabia could be corroborated with the fact that it was from these regions of Arabian Peninsula that sailors and traders flocked to Ceylon, India and Sumatra. The system was very much suited to the needs of employment nature of Arabs as they lived in ports for short duration. And they had introduced this system to local people with whom they had association. The continuity of the system among the Mappila Muslims was also in dependence to the

nature of occupation of the Mappila Muslim men. They were involved in jobs which had taken them away from home for a considerable period of time like business or trade. Trading being the job of most of the Mappila Muslim men, it had taken them away on cruises to different coasts of the world. Natal house headed and protected by maternal uncle made it convenient for the men involved in occupations which took them away for long as they could leave their wife and children in the natal home. For some strange reasons it is found that men of these regions always take their wife from very adjacent or nearby localities. This facilitated the system of matrilocality. Men would leave the natal home after supper to visit wife and children and would leave them immediately after breakfast.

**Evolution of Muslim Matriliney:** Matrilineal kinship essentially supports few institutions. Polyandry and matriliney are considered to be associated institutions. Nair matriliney was often an outcome of the polyandrous relationship of the women with Namboothiris known as Sambandham. Matriliney was a remedy as the fatherhood of child was unidentifiable and as such children were identified through mother's lineage. But this generalization cannot be brought to all communities as Malabar Muslims are an example. It is a group practicing matriliney without promoting polyandry unlike Nair matriliney. It could be noted that the change in technicalities and reasons did not really affected the matriliney in Islam, but it did continue with almost same practices till 1970s. Other than tracing relationships through mother's line, Muslim matriliney in Malabar had two other traits. Equal access to ancestral property or equal inheritance for all members and matrilocality are the two traits of the matrilineal family in Malabar. Matrilocality is characterized by the system of residing at natal home after marriage and the husband would visit the spouse at night. Visiting husband is the name given for such practice as men leave wife's home as soon as daylight spreads. The continuance of the matrilocality is very much related to occupational pattern of the men of the families. In olden days men of the Muslim matrilineal families were involved in business and trade in far off places, which made them to stay away from the houses for considerably longer time period. With such occasion occurring frequently, men felt that wife and children would be safe and secure in their natal home. Gulf migration is another add on reason which had accelerated the disappearance of men from the family. Another reason for sustenance of this system of residence is that the marriage relations were always knot between relatives and within a specific geographical area so that men could look after the need of his own family and that of the wife's needs. It is quite interesting to

note that the features of matrilineal families of Malabar is closely associated with occupation pattern and the kinship is maintained due to migration and its effects. Muslim matrilineality in Malabar had undergone different stages right from its formation and establishment as a kinship system. Around eighty years ago, matrilineal tharavadu consisted of production and consumption unit governed by senior most uncle of mother (karanavar). It was the maternal uncle who looked after her grandparents, all sisters in the household and their children. Karanavar was involved in the production activities and took extreme care to maintain the agricultural lands, manage buildings, collect rent from each shop that has been lend and to decide on what to be cultivated and how much land should be cultivated each year. Karanavar was also the head of the family who represented the family household in various organizations and religious assemblies. The Karanavar position when held by maternal uncle had a nature of decentralized power. Though the maternal uncle was the source of power in the family, consultation with the senior most female member was imperative need. And her opinion had an unequivocal importance. Maternal uncle was one of the sources of power in the tharavadu along with the senior most female members (mother/eldest sister for the karanavar). One of the advantages of matrilineal family in comparison to patrilineal families is the decentralization of power and authority which enhances the accessibility and better utilization of freedom. In patrilineal families the power and authority is resting with single male member of the family, the father. This practice often inhibits the availability of choices to the members As time changed and with the repulsion of matrilineality by enacting Mappila Marumakthayam Act of 1939, the entire structure of the family changed. The role of maternal uncle identified as the karanavar of the family had undergone a drastic decline. The maternal uncle and his duties as karanavar gradually transferred to the visiting husbands. This change is evident in almost all the matrilineal family of Malabar.

**Changing Role of Visiting Husbands:** Another feature of the family system was that visiting husbands were the source to establish the paternity of the child, he was also ruled as per the discretion of maternal uncle and had no much say in the life and activities of wife and children. All the decisions in the tharavadu were taken by the maternal uncle in consultation with the female head and when the decisions affect the children, mothers are also consulted. Even though the presence of the father is very important at the time of birth, circumcision and marriage, the visiting husband was not obliged to bring money for maintenance of wife and children.

Only a token amount was contributed to the family by visiting husbands for maintenance of the wife. This was done to fulfill the religious duty of maintenance of wife by husband. The absence of dependence of women on men for financial and economic needs enhanced the status of women. Women were not compulsorily tamed to behave as per the norms of patriarchal system involved in marriage. Obeying the commands of husband without questions and rendering personal service and needs of husband were all out of the ambit of marriage. Even the question of satisfying sexual desires of husband was at the discretion of wife and she could very well ignore it by not sleeping in her room. The usual status of women as a provider of services was not fulfilled by women and was not complained by husband as he do not give maintenance and there exist a non-dependence of women for monetary as well as other needs. Minimal relationship with children also helped positively to overcome the effects of divorce of parents, as the children are already attached to the mother and her family members more than father. The situation changed dramatically few years back and now the family economy is managed, supervised and controlled by husband or father. And no longer there exists a non-dependent relationship between visiting husband and wife. All the need of wife and children are met by husband through his earnings. A significant change in the political economy of a Muslim matrilineal tharavadu was the changing role of karanavar. The position of visiting husband and its evolution could be understood with the change in the surnames of the children from maternal uncle to father. A significant change which has taken place with regard to the names of children is noteworthy. Child of the family irrespective of gender carried the name of mother as surname. This gave way to name of maternal uncle (karanavar) as surname for nieces and nephews. And with the decline in the power of karanavar, the surname of the children contained name of father. A usual practice in patrilineal families throughout Kerala has found its place in the matrilineal families too. But the use of family name of the female ancestress is still in practice throughout all the matrilineal families of Malabar.

**Power of Absentee and its working:** Another factor which contributed to the accumulation of power within one hand was the Gulf Boom of early 1970s. Immediate effect of the phenomenon was the absence of male bodies in the family, which was not new for matrilineal families. Often this absence is balanced with the help of senior most male member (father) if not engaged in labour force abroad or by the senior most female member. An individual receives his group identity through his mother, rights to resources, shelter, nurturing and training through

his mother and the entity called tharavadu .Women enjoy a special status as they are identified as the originator of tharavadu or thavazhis. The oldest women in the household held a position of honour and authority and an unequivocal voice in decision making. Their power in decision making regarding marriage is incontestable. The importance of female members could be for instance gauged with the tradition that the family name, address and lineage of an individual are traced through mother. The power of absentee works in its all glory through the senior most female member of the family (Karanavatthi) as the so called male member excluded from the labour force is not usually present in full swing. Karanavatthi perform various functions important for the family and well-being. It ranges from giving lessons of morality for being a good homemaker. The lessons of being a good women are often passed to the grandchildren by the senior most female member of the family (grandmother). Lessons of dressing, morality, household chores, cooking and hospitality are the main thrust areas. The other female members of the large household are involved in the process of producing, rearing and feeding of children, and cooking. Strict guidelines on how to look after children especially girls are given by mothers and grandmothers of the family. When the children's action account for any deviation from traditional practice it is often questioned and corrected by the senior most female of the family (grandmother). The roles of women are strictly defined in a matrilineal family. Another interesting feature is that shopping is a gendered practice in these families, where shopping is duty destined for women only. Khadeeja speaks about some gendered practices through ages, " In olden times we (all the young married and unmarried women) of the tharavadu will leave after dinner on the day of Eid, maids will be holding the lights (a bundle of lighted palm leaves) to show our way to the beach. It was one of the few occasions when we (women) were let out of the house. Today girls of our house often go in groups to Thalassery and Mangalore for buying clothes, jewellery, lipsticks and creams" (Khadeeja, Personal Interview, 10/08/2015). The mobility of a young unmarried girl is highly restricted in the tharavadu as they are allowed to do so only with some elder women or men. But they do travel outside the house in order to fulfill their educational requirement. Education in this group is an essential element or aspect analyzed when marriage alliances are sought. All of them want a graduated woman not because education gives knowledge, ideas, empowerment or liberation but it signifies the status and wealth of the family and is an added advantage in the 'marriage market'. So the family let the women to travel alone to areas like Mangalore, Chennai or Ernakulam to get graduated.

Matriliney through the senior most member of the family tries to define the roles and spaces for women and which in turn limit the choices available for them. But these definitions of roles do not inhibit their rights and freedoms in the family. They do enjoy considerable amount of freedom in the family among family members. It is the mother who takes decisions on the outfits of daughters and in her absence it is grandmother. Elder female members especially mother or grandmother makes sure that Purdah is a compulsory outfit for young girls when out of the home but not a necessary outfit when among the family members. Purdah is never addressed in the matrilineal society as a religious outfit. If that was the case men would also have to change their clothing styles but is never done or asked to be done. How a female body is presented in an open space is very important. A decent religious looking girl is how everybody wants to see a female body. The excessive interference of Purdah and other female religious outfits could not be seen in early twentieth century, and women of the family used a Kuppayam, Kachi and Thattam. Kuppayam and Kachi are of same type of cloth sometimes or from two different types of cloths in different colours. Kuppayam is a blouse with sleeves reaching beyond elbow and exposing stomach. Kachi is a cloak around waist reaching beyond the knee sometimes till ankle. Thattam is a headscarf in white colour. It is only in the late seventies and early eighties that Purdah started to exert a huge pressure in the society as an ideal outfit for Muslim women. The widespread use of Purdah could be read as an important impact of gulf migration . The puthiyappilara is a peculiar feature of the matrilineal households of Malabar. It is a big room that every daughter of the family gets on marriage. This ara is a fully furnished room with wardrobe, huge cots, dressing table and with other wooden furniture with bath attached to it. The magnificent look of the room could actually superficially hide the actual purpose of the space. Upon getting married every woman's world is these four walls Apart from the room, the entire construction, expansion and restructuring of the house is done in consultation with women as they are the main occupants of the house. It is the space where they receive their husband, they rear and look after the kids (Riyas, Personal Interview, 08/08/2015). Domestic space is not just associated with women but belong to them entirely. The control of family economy rest with women in most of the cases, as they are acquainted in the art of controlling family and its activities. There are even instances when women taking decisions on college admission of children after discussion with father or brothers and convey to the husband as a final decision. Though the role of visiting husband had evolved, they particularly

do not play any significant role in the family affairs especially in cases of children as the major decisions are taken by wife and her family. But visiting husbands of these days do have the power to not to ratify the decision and hence force wife and their family to revoke it. This is an outcome of economic dependence.

**Conclusion:** The notion of freedom in various aspects of life of women in Muslim Matrilineal families is the central theme of the study. The so called glorification of the women empire is not so bright and shiny in most of the aspects of life that is analyzed. The political economy of the Muslim matrilineal household was an outcome of the occupation pattern of the community. And one of the reasons for its continuance is also the occupation and job pattern of the community. Majority of the male members of the family are involved in trade and business which take them away to distant places for quite a long time period. So the matrilineal residence is the best system of residence for the convenience of the men as women are safe with their natal family members. It is the convenience of the men that is being safeguarded rather than the established notion of granting greater freedom and choices to women in her household when among her kinship. To this list of reasons was added another in late 1970s with the Gulf Boom, when men of the households got employed in Gulf countries and resulted in the absence of male bodies from the family. Another reason for the sustenance of this system is that the marriage alliances are sought from a considerable geographical limit which helps men in handling the needs of both houses and the needs of wife. The study brings to limelight on the fact that each matrilineal household behave and manage the system and kinship in such a way that it is never termed as a system against the ideals prescribed by Quran. The very idea of seclusion is so much embedded in the so called 'women empire' that there are large rooms for every married daughter of the household. The rooms is fully furnished and equipped so that woman need not go out of the room for any reason. Another example is seen in the construction and expansion of the house and its rooms. Each and every step taken for construction or renovation of the home is after taking guidelines from the senior most female of the household. The primary reason cited for this is not to be assumed as the power of a female in the household but as a part of considering women as the primary occupant of the domestic space associated with house and in corroboration with Islamic guidelines. Islam clearly states that the primary space of women is her home. The primary space for labour too is identified with house and its premises as the labour of women is obliged to be expended on works like looking after kids, feeding them, looking after the needs of

member of the home and cooking food. So houses are built with large rooms, kitchen and work areas to provide more space for women and her freedom. The construction of house is gender friendly as huge rooms are given to women and small rooms are meant for junior men of the family which symbolizes the fact that women should be inside the room and house. The changing role of head of the household and transfer of the power from maternal uncle to visiting husband or father itself is an attempt to make household and the matrilineal kinship more Islamic than what was existing. This change became particularly evident in the late 1970s with spread of several Islamic reform movements like Jamaat-e-Islami. Later with establishment of organizations like Mujahid movement, Muslim Girls Movement, Tabligh etc the process of legitimization was made complete. In order to accommodate and make the family system more legitimate and Islamic, the transfer of role of head or Karanavar was hastened. Whoever be the head of the household, it was always made sure that the female members of the household obey the orders of the male head. The members of the family, especially women should consult with the head for decision making in all aspects and any change in this hierarchy is never tolerated. Though matrilineal families encouraged decentralization of power by giving few powers to senior most female head, in practice this exercise of power is limited to domestic affairs of the family regarding what to cook, what to buy for kitchen etc. Senior most female member of the family and other female members of the family have full power in giving moral classes to young women and kids of the family. The outfits of young women are strictly monitored to fit the rules of the religion and altered in accordance with the norms of Islam and its culture. The urge by senior men and women to make rules regarding costumes and outfits for younger women in accordance with the prescriptions by Quran is to be viewed as serious flaw in the so called 'women empire'. Girls of the family also get classes on how to walk, sit, talk, eat and behave from the senior most female member, grandmother. Another interesting feature noticed in these families is that the women who have graduated or pursuing graduation are not enlightened enough to liberate from these notions. In most of the families the male head of the family would be absent on account of the occupational pattern, in such cases it is the female bodies which act as source of power and hegemony in moral teachings. The patriarchal rules and discourses are taking place through the power of absentee. The female bodies act as a source of power in the absence of males. Imparting education is one of the primary duties associated with parents as religion has asked to enlighten every individual with knowledge. But till what level education is easily

granted and provided by the parents depends on the marriage market and its conditions. Even the selection of courses is not as per the wish of individual, but on the marriage market demands. Education has in fact helped to gain mobility with respect to females as they were allowed to travel to cities inside the state and in the neighbouring states. Other than that, mobility of females is seriously curtailed in the families especially of the young women. Matriliney in Islam and among Nairs have very few similarities at present. The daughter (preferably youngest) inherits the tharavadu from her parents. The idea behind this practice is to ensure that the daughters of the family take steps to look after the parents in their old age. The notion of care economy and Sewa works behind this action, where women are considered as the source of love, care, compassion and selfless service. Another similarity

with regard to matrilineal households of Nair and Muslim is with regard to change in role of Karanavar from maternal uncle to father or husband. This had in fact helped to reinforce the conjugal ties and the power to control household and its resources in the hands of an individual who was no more from the female line of relationship. Gender relations and roles are specific in Muslim matrilineal families of Malabar. Women are usually awarded the role of home makers. Cooking, rearing and feeding children, keeping the house and premises clean are the major tasks given to them. Men are the ones who go out to make money and look after the family and its needs. The women who are educated and capable of working and earning money are often not let to do so as they have their primary task of managing home and its members left.

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