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Category : [February 1996](#)

Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 1996

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Kerala's Dissolving Matriarchies Leave a Rich Legacy of Compassionate Family Culture

Choodie Shivaram, on assignment in Kerala

Matriarchy in India? Really? Oh, must be some foreign practice that invaders smuggled in long ago on ships or camel caravans. No, actually not. India's many pockets of matriarchal lifestyle are indigenously Indian, Hindu and as old as the sacred cow, Mother Ganga and worship of God as "She." Nowhere did this system flourish on such a grand and finely tuned scale as in the southeastern seaboard state of Kerala.

In fact, travellers of yore nicknamed Kerala Penn Malayalam, "the Malayala land of women." It was an unusual place. Here, mostly within the large and powerful Nair caste (and some smaller ones), women ruled. Not on royal thrones with giant armies but as heads of giant households--positions often more powerful. Here, women were educated, respected, moved about without fear or censure, participated occupationally wherever they wished, and were the major force leading Kerala to become India's first near-100% literate state.

The Nairs defied the rest of India, where patriarchal patterns

have remained entrenched since Manu and other post-Vedic lawgivers reassigned women to the status of sudras, low caste. Over the years, I had heard much talk about the matriarchal system, but it was never clear to me how much of this old way of life was still practiced. So I went to Kerala--actually my birthplace--returning several times to research and finally sketch this portrait.

First I learned how it works. After marriage, a bride does not move into her husband's home, as is the common practice among Hindus. The opposite occurs. He comes and lives with her and her family. In fact, only on very special occasions would she ever visit his family's house.

The senior female member is the uncontested head of this tarwad, a sprawling matriarchic residential complex with several buildings, its own temple, granary, water-well, orchards, gardens and large land holdings. The senior male member, called karanavan (the senior lady's brother), looked after the basic affairs of the house and implemented decisions made in consultation with the senior lady. "Because of the financial advantage they enjoyed, women were able to keep the men under their thumbs," Mr. Narasimhan, a Trivandrum lawyer, explained to me. "And because the husband came to his wife's house, he dared not ill-treat her or misbehave, else he would be sent out. In his own tarawad, a husband lived with his sisters and aunts. Similarly, if he tried to rebel or show dissension there, he would be thrown out by the karanavan and not entitled to his share of the property. So, he was forced to keep a low profile for a peaceful existence."

But the idea that these warrior-class men were reduced to spineless housewhimps is totally false. They just weren't allowed to be tough warriors inside the house. "Men were not made submissive," confirms Prof. Venugopala Panickar of Calicut University. "They were treated equally and respected. At no time was the man put down in an inferior position."

The husband/wife relationship was not as we know it today. "In this system, both husband and wife retained their premarital individual identities, maintaining a very congenial relationship," Princess Gowri Parvathi Bayi of the Travancore Royal Family shared with me. She should know--her ancestors have followed matrilineal successorship for 700 years.

Preserving a Woman's Sanctity

Everyone I talked to--men, women, royalty and rural folk--proudly told me how this system really protected women, insured their welfare and nurtured their happiness as being central to society's well-being. "Instances of husbands beating the wife were unheard of!" Princess Bayi emphatically exclaimed. "In fact, if the husband ill-treated his wife, he would be shown the door by the karanavan. In that instance, the marriage would be called off. You see, it is always easier for the daughter to get along with the mother than three daughters-in-law from different families getting along with the mother-in-law, all in the same kitchen!"

The birth of a girl was a cause for jubilation, not disappointment, as is tragically the case elsewhere in India. "When my sister delivered a daughter, her husband's grandmother came to see her," Dr. Panickar, a professor at

Calicut University, told me. "She did not come when my sister had a son. Yes, it gave me the feeling that I was not important." I had never heard this lament--so common among women in the rest of India--come from a man's lips.

Support of Royalty--and Men!

To my surprise, it was the men I talked to who were matriarchy's most articulate advocates. Dr. R.P. Raja, retired deputy director of Health Services and author of many books on Kerala, told me, "My children do not belong to me but belong to my wife and her mother's family." I think he was trying to shock me a bit the way he said he it, which he did. But as he smiled, I could see he was trying to impress me with how strong the woman's side of the family is. Daughters of a family would get equal shares of wealth and property, and equal shares for their children, but sons would only get a small share and nothing for their children.

A great part of the strength of the system evolved because royalty practiced and condoned it. The royal family of Travancore has, in fact, had eight girl adoptions since 1,300ce for the sole reason of keeping the lineage going on the woman's side. The Travancore queens were very famous for spearheading major social and intellectual freedoms for women. In 1811, the daughter of a musician, Swathi Thirunal, was adopted and became queen at age 20. Overnight, she made sweeping changes, abolished all forms of slavery, banned the existing heartless overtaxation of the poor and totally overhauled the justice system to protect those too poor to "buy" justice. In 1817, by royal proclamation, she made education open to all classes. The rest of India looked on in amazement. In 1868, Queen Gowri Lakshmi Bayi began

vaccination campaigns, first vaccinating herself and the royal family to prove to orthodox opponents that the animal vaccine was neither sinful nor deadly. In 1925, Queen Regent Setu Lakshmi abolished animal sacrifice at Hindu rites and outlawed the local Devadasi temple dancer custom that had degenerated into little more than temple-sanctioned prostitution.

These Queens deserved and earned all their accolades. They were true nobility. "Our women of yesteryears were highly knowledgeable, well-versed in Sanskrit and could correspond intellectually with scholars," Princess Bayi said. "Our grandmothers even spoke fluent English." Dr. Raja concurs, "The women of matriarchal Kerala were voracious readers, adept at music and arts and never wasted their time. Even those that stayed home had the zeal to acquire knowledge."

The Matriarchal Marriage

The typical Nair marriage ceremony, called sambandam, was simple. The bridegroom would give a piece of cloth, mundu, to the bride in front of a lamp in the presence of the seniormost lady of the family. The husband would spend a few days at the bride's house and then return to his own tarawad. This marriage was based on mutual consent and was dissoluble at will. Frivolous divorces were said to be rare, discouraged by public opinion and by the karanavan.

"The husband/wife relationship was not considered sacred, and each was free to leave by choice," comments Dr. Panickar. "The wife was free to have another husband. Even in the 1960's my car driver was one of other husbands to his

brother's wife. We in the 20th century feel disturbed about the fact that a woman can have as many husbands as she wills, but what is moral or immoral is purely subjective. This system gave a chance for the lower castes to get high-class progeny, and existed for the past 1,000 to 1,500 years." Dr. Raja related.

Clearly, the big, bustling joint-family atmosphere was one of matriarchy's basic attractions. Sixty-year-old Velayudhan Kutty confirmed this. He is a karanavan who still lives in his 200-year-old tarawad near Calicut with his sisters, nieces and nephews. His wife lives with him now, although in earlier years, that was not the case. She lived at her own matriarchic ancestral home, and he would go to live with her at her tarawad. "All the children who grew up in these homes learned how to adjust to and cope with any situation," he shared. "Today's kids want to be independent, on their own, and are becoming very selfish." Dr. Raja added, "I feel sorry that my children did not have the privilege of growing up in a tarawad. We had such religious and spiritual discipline. It was a commune where all were equal, no one got an extra share of attention. Children learned a simple life. When someone fell sick, the entire family was at their side. City life has robbed children of these benefits of selfless caring and sacrifice."

Elders in these matriarchal families took care of the children irrespective of whose children they were, and children in turn cared for them in their old age. "Irrespective of whether one was married or not, whether they had children of their own or not, everyone took care of the young and old," Princess Gowri Parvati Bayi said. "There was a tremendous feeling of oneness."

How It All Got Started

Views differ. "Historians date it way back to the warring days between the Cholas and the Cheras," says Prof. Venugopala Panickar. "But I personally don't believe that. For me, matriarchy just seems the natural way, that the children take after their mother's name. Why should we assume patrilineal is normal rather than matrilineal?" Princess Bayi dates it to 1299ce, when King Sangramadheera Ravi Varma, having no successors from his mother's side, adopted two princesses to continue the lineage. "From then on, matriliney came to be followed by the kshatriyas and then spread to other communities," she related.

Whatever or however the genesis, over time it came to be that Nair men were prohibited from marrying. "This strange law was established to prevent them from fixing their love and attachment on their wife and children. Being free from all family cares, they might be more willing to devote themselves to warlike services," wrote Wingram in 1900 in his book *Malabar Law and Custom*.

Eventually the British came with their ethical concepts regarding marriage and introduced a series of legal enactments that required monogamous marriage arrangements.

Nuclear Family Wins Out

Around the turn of the century, the nuclear family emerged, hailed as the "modern way." Matriarchy was deemed "backward," "medieval." Most matriarchal homes started breaking up, losing lands and loyalty. Suddenly, Kerala saw a

wave of homeless people, a bewildering phenomenon unknown under the a-home-for-everyone joint-family system.

According to Leela Damodar Menon, an expert on the Kerala matriarchal system, it collapsed for a mix of reasons. "The period of wars was over [so husbands were not needed to go off and leave their wives]. Land ceiling laws reduced the extent of land under the tarawad. Men became more educated and left the household to take up jobs outside Kerala. They took their families with them. This created differences between those who went away and those who remained at home. The unitary family appeared more suited to modern conditions than the big tarawads. Dwindling resources created dissensions among the male members, who started questioning the authority of the karanavan. Many asked for individual partitions. It was difficult to manage the huge household without proper income. The marumakkathayum households gradually dwindled in size and wealth. Nair families were becoming unitary, with the husband as the dominant factor and the wife and children under his supposed protection."

Though the matriarchal home is now nearly extinct, replaced by the fiercely nuclear family, the elevation of womanhood, its most unique feature, remains. Keralites, men and women, are proud of this. To this day, it amazes visitors from other states how high Kerala women hold their heads--in the home and workplace--and that they travel virtually anywhere unafraid of harassment.

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Princess Bharani

For Lekha, a 21-year-old Home Science graduate, fairytale became reality when she was adopted by the Royal Family of Travancore and became Princess Bharani Thirunal Parvathi Bayi. When I met her recently, she was not in silk gowns, nor were her fingers bulging with ruby rings. When she opened the big doors of her beautiful palace, she was dressed in a modest cotton churidhar and took me inside where a movie-like interior awed me--priceless antiques and full-size paintings of ancestral rulers. I learned that she was adopted because the heiress-in-line, Princess Lakshmi, had married a journalist (son of famous poet/novelist Kamala Das) and decided not to have children. "We cannot stop temple customs which we are required to perform, and an heiress is a must for these duties," her mother Princess Gowri Parvathi Bayi told me." Lekha's parents were informed of the adoption only one month before, but were fully agreeable. "We were not really giving away our daughter. In fact, she continues to stay with us," Lekha's mother says. But Lekha did not like the word "adoption." "The word upset me. I couldn't imagine living with new parents and leaving my parents. But the palace did not insist that I actually leave my parents, so I agreed. Nothing has really changed. I just have a long royal name now!" But her ambition of becoming an interior designer is now on hold as she spends more time singing classical music and learning Sanskrit, which she loves. She sings Lalitha Sahasranama and Shiva Panchakshari everyday. So who is Mr. Prince Charming? "A simple, broad-minded, goodhearted man who is smart and educated--and handsome of course," the Princess said with a smile.

Respect and Education for Kerala's Women

Interview with famous palmist and healer Prof. Sashi Velupillai
Sashi Velupillai is a warrior, but not with swords and sabers.

The men of his kshatriya Nair caste gave up occupational warring long ago. Today, as a 7th generation palmist and healer, Sashi rather fights to awaken others to a deeper and more spiritual self-identity. He grew up in a big matriarchal home where women and education were idolized as the backbone of a civilized society. At his father's side, he learned the palmist's akashic art, later adding some more earthly degrees--physics, chemistry, business management, communications and naturopathy.

Hinduism Today: You grew up in a matriarchal home?

Sashi Velupillai: Yes, I belonged to quite a big family--18 aunts and uncles! It was my mother, the family "president," who inherited the premier position of wealth, power, status and the continuation of the family. She had say over all male members of the family. Although property, etc., was, and is, in her name, it is one of her brothers who manages the various affairs of the house. Under this matriarchal system, most of the family wealth goes from the mother to the daughter, not to the son. For example, in my situation, it is my sister who gets more than me and my brothers, about 90%.

HT: How would this compare with patriarchy?

SV: One of the most beautiful characteristics of our matriarchal lifestyle is that the husband is more attentive to his wife, her happiness and well being. He knows that in any decision she will have to agree so he is more vigilant about keeping a good relationship with her. In contrast, in a patriarchal home, where

there is not this unique incentive, protective mechanism if you will, you find various degrees of wife abuse--emotional, mental and physical. Also, I feel a Nair husband definitely gives more care and attention to his children than in a typical patriarchal home where men tend to leave all the raising of their children to the womenfolk of the house.

HT:How did this system get started?

SV:Marriages were once quite loose. It used to be that when a woman married somebody, her husband would become sort of a guest in her big extended family household, not really a husband in the sense we know it today. That allowed a situation where wives could change their husbands, but usually keeping only one at a time. To divorce a husband, a wife would simply take the man's slippers or his umbrella and put it outside the house. It was very common for a woman to have children fathered by several husbands.

The initial rationale behind these loose-fitting relationships was that very often the men of this caste would leave his home to war elsewhere. The wife never knew if her husband would return, so she would take a new husband in his extended absence. Over the centuries, all the harsh restrictions for women, formulated by social lawmakers, who were men, were abandoned by the Nair communities. Most notably, in education. In Kerala, girls are educated in equal percentage to boys and 90% of the girls go on to get jobs, mostly as teachers and nurses. Women are socially free and can travel alone anywhere safely. Because women are respected and participate fully in decision-making in all spheres--home,

society and government--things work very well. We have 99% literacy and our state is very well managed. I attribute this to the fact that our women are respected, educated and not treated as second-class citizens.