

TRIBAL FEMINISM: A CASE STUDY OF VAZHACHAL TRIBAL SOCIETY

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Abstract: Feminism has faced a wide range of changes when it is analysed from its initial stage to the present situation. Though feminist attitudes and perspectives brought changes to the status of women, it has degraded the status of men too. At the same time many valuable contributions are made in solving the problems of women by uplifting them from ill-treatment and atrocities. This is too the case of tribal society. As they are alienated from the outside world and their culture, a large scale deterioration is witnessed especially among tribal women. Thus this study is about the vazhachal tribal society which is in Trissur district of Kerala. This is a very famous tourist spot with all essence of nature. Here the majority of population is woman and they are very active and confident too. In all sectors of vazhachal tribal society active participation of women community is visible. Thus a new form of feminism can be initiated by this women which only stands for the upliftment of status of women without disregarding the position and contributions of men. This study can also create a positive attitude about what has to be learnt from the tribal life than creating stories on their problems and ill-treatments making them again as uncivilized ones. Therefore this work provides relevant answers and interpretations regarding the following queries:-

Whether the modern feminist approaches deteriorate the actual concept of Feminism?

Is there a true feminism exist among Kadar tribes in the midst of their socio-economic conditions?

How can the tribal women in vazhachal can create a new phase for feminism?

Keywords: Community, Feminism, Kadar, Society, Tribe, Women.

Introduction: The present status of tribal society and women in Kerala are facing alienation and discrimination. Though their exist many associations and activists, the problems are solved to some extend only. At this juncture an active participation of women in vazhachal tribal society is witnessed which is a setback to both the situation of tribe and women. This study provides a better understanding of Kadar community of vazhachal and will highlights the positive contributions made by tribal community especially tribal women. As there exists only the studies regarding the issues and problems of tribal society which always depict them as uncivilized ones, this kind of study is needed to bring out their effective contributions. And, thus it deals with the so called two minority and discriminated category of the society, "Women and Tribe".

Feminism: A Theoretical Framework: The status of women is a problem of concern in almost all societies even in the 21st century. Various kinds of discriminations, oppression and ill treatments are faced and still facing by them due to lack of opportunities, societal attitudes and expectations and even poverty. And even today there is a large proportion of domestic violence marital rape and female infanticide and dowry problems are taking place. This actually give rights to the concepts of Women's Liberation of Emancipation and women empowerment. It is difficult to define the term 'Feminism' as it constitutes all the aspects like political, social, economic and even cultural. Feminism involves many theoretical and philosophical approaches that determine the existing gender differences and evolved out in the form of a movement to assure gender equality and also to defend the rights and interests of women.

Feminism is regarded as an ideology for the emancipation of women across the world. It is initiated as a combination and concepts of various traditions and they were in the form of Liberal, Social, Radical, and then the new Feminism and Post Feminism. Liberal feminism advocates the rights and privileges of women by treating them as humans. Socialistic feminism emerged as a reaction of ideas and perspectives of liberal thinkers. They argued that political and legal right are not enough to emancipate women from all sorts of inequalities and it can be only reduced through social revolution for providing equality and freedom on economic basis. Radical feminism have very broader and deeper concept in analysing the status of women. They advocated that equality and status for women is needed not only in political and economic basis but also for her personal and sexual existence. It was a great struck to the concepts and manifestations of Patriarchy. The new feminism is the succession of a different number of school of thoughts. Thus Post-modern feminism, Black feminism, Lesbian Feminism comes under the category of new feminism. This actually explain about the cultural, psychological and intersexual aspects of feminism. Last one that is the post feminism which is an emerging trend of feminism. Post-feminist thinkers stands for restoration of family values with a realization and acceptance of the role of woman in a family. By this these feminist thinkers started compromising with their perspectives regarding patriarchy or anti-men. And this approach is for maintaining social stability and order in society.

Tribal Society: A Theoretical Framework: In India, in the year of 1981, approximately 427 groups are recognized in the category of Scheduled Tribes. And with the report of Ministry of Rural Development in 2003, 533 tribes are scheduled under article 342 with the largest number in the state Orissa. And it is necessary to understand the meaning of the word 'tribe' and its significance as a part of society. The term tribe is derived from the Latin word 'Tribus'. "Early Romans used this term to designate the divisions in the society, later it meant poor people. The present popular meaning of a 'tribe' in India is a category of people, included in the list of the scheduled tribes". These populations are very much isolated with the outside world with their own traditions, culture, and homogenous unit of production. With the British take over in India, a new phase of tribal history is opened as they began to exploit these natural inhabitants and began to intrude in their property, which is the forest or the nature itself. Following Independence, the policy of protection and development for the population identified as tribe has been made into a constitutional obligation. Tribes in India can be classified in a number of ways with their race, language, demography, economic pursuits, and geographical distributions and even with their interactions to other groups or tribes. These features act as their identity and even were the building elements of a new social structure.

Tribes in Kerala: A sociological Profile: Kerala is a homeland of numerous varieties of about 35 colourful tribal communities. Like non- tribal, our tribal brethren too are the bearers of lustrous folklore heritage. Even if folklore of Kerala tribes is rich and fascinating, only a small number of scholarly works with regard to this topic have come to light so far such as the works of Edgar Thurston and Dr. A. Aiyappan. These thirty five different tribal sects are at different levels of socio-economic strata. As per 2001 census, the total population of Kerala is 364189. Nearly 65 per cent of the Kerala tribes resides in the erstwhile Malabar region of Palakkad, Malapuram, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Kannur and Kasargod districts in which Wayanad has the highest followed by Idukki, Palakkad and Kasargod. Among the tribal communities in Kerala, "the Paniya is the largest tribal community with a population of 58,000. According to Government's statistics, 96.51% tribal in Kerala live in rural areas with agriculture as their source of income. Most of the tribal families do not own even small plots of land to cultivate. In this regard they continue to depend upon non- tribal land owners for a livelihood by working as menial labourers in their farms and as maid servants in their homes. In the earlier periods they were food-gatherers. Paniya, Kattunaikka and Adiya tribe in Wayanad, Cholanaiikkans and Aranadans of Nilampur, Malappandarams of central Travancore and Irulas of Attapady had thrived on a food-gathering economy

Vazhachal Tribal Society: A Case Study:

(I) Kadar: The Primitive Tribal Settlers: Kadar, literally meaning the people living in forests, are one of the primitive tribes in the state. The settlements of Kadar community is mainly at the tri-junction of the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu and the Palakkad and Trissur districts of Kerala. Kadar are believed to have been the descendants of a 'Malavedan' and his wife 'Malakuruthi'. Although there are some people by name 'Kadar' on the hill tracks of Wayanad, little similarities in customs and rituals are seen between these people and the Kadar's in Palakkad and Trissur. Kadar's physique is unique as they have flat face with platy Rhine nose and curly hair. Their skin is dark, chest is wide and deep and with short or average height. The history and the origin of Kadar community is not evident and they are known to the outside world through their narratives or oral skills. In that they claim to be the progeny of Mala vedan and Mala Korathy who resided in a cave near Karimalagopuram. Kadar of Cochin in Kerala (had the traces of Negrito race) is the most primitive of the south Indian forest tribe.

The Kadar mainly live in the forests and most of them lead a settled life in pakka houses constructed under tribal development schemes. They mainly engaged in collecting honey, wax and other spices from forests for selling in market but mostly not in a direct manner and there are labourers too. Their dialect and the language is different as it is the combinations of two Dravidian languages like Kannada and Tamil. Their spiritual side constitutes the spirits of jungle and the nature along with some localized form of Hindu deities. Though the marriage rules are strict with endogamy, with the deep cuddling of modernity many changes are evident in the structure of marriage and its ceremonies and thus the concept of social bonding or organization is intimate among them where family is the basic unit for these kind of interactions. The Kadar tribes are endemic to the Annamalai in the western Ghats. They inhabit 24 settlements of which 20 are in Kerala and 4 in neighbouring Tamil Nadu. The majority of them occupy around eight settlements in Vazhachal. Till the last century that were unfamiliar to the outside world. This non-agricultural, seasonally nomadic, tribe live by collecting non-timber forest produce like honey, wild nutmeg etc.

(II) Vazhachal Tribal Society: Vazhachal colony is located by the side of Chalakudy-Sholayar road near the Vazhachal waterfalls which consist of 72 Kadar families residing with a total population of 172 comprising 61 males and 111 females. It is occupied with a Forest Range Office near the waterfalls and also with some tea stalls and a shop with forest products near the tourist spot. It also has a school with hostel facilities for the inhabitants and the major attraction is the botanical garden with many varieties of medicinal plants, herbs, shrubs and trees which is a tourist spot that is a mark of the initiative of Vazhachal women and they were the paid workers there. Kadar, Malayan, Mannan and Muduvan are the major inhabitants of Vazhachal tribal society and among them Kadar is the majority category. The Kadar of this settlement are always engaged in collection of and agricultural work which is the main source of their income and this even makes them to have more interactions with the outside world. They depend on Chalakudy River for water even for drinking and most of the houses are with electricity but yet the buildings procedures of houses and power supply to all of the houses are on delay. Due to tourism and external influence people used to engage in some sorts of anti-social activities with the use of drugs and liquor. And now by restricting it inside the 'Uru' they succeeded in diminishing its rate to some extent. And even tourism started affecting their culture and sensitive beliefs.

(III) Women of Vazhachal: Whether A New Turn on Feminism?: In the case of women of Vazhachal tribal society, there is no issues regarding the safety and protection of women. Women enjoyed more freedom and rights than any other civilized societies. Usually the position of Uru mooppan is adorned by men and mostly through inheritance. But with the involvement and activities of women it had changed to Uru mooppathi and now it is adorned by a very young lady of only 23 years old. Near to every house a Theendaari Chala or a small seclusion shed is located which is for accommodating menstruating women and also most of the deliveries took place here. Even some kind of purity and pollution traditions and customs remained among the people of that community.

A real change to the aspect of feminism can be witnessed among the tribal women of vazhachal. During the early hours in history women stood for their rights and then for a better status in society with equality like that of men. But since decades, a drastic variation can be seen in the aspects of feminist ideologies and their actions. At present some women thinkers failed to understand the real essence of such an association in the modern perspective. Though many feminist thinkers, activists and women commissions are present and active, they succeeded in solving present gender issues to some extent only. And since the social structure is patriarchal in nature, the extreme arrogance and negligence towards male domination, this had made some feminist thinkers to be against their perspectives and motives. Thus the common people began to create a new negative outlook towards feminism. People began to consider feminist 'as a woman who stood against man or his rights' and the one who is against social customs and practices. Thus with the changing society and with the changing attitude of the people, like all other aspects and ideology feminism and feminist concepts also changed from its reason of existence.

But here both women and men acquired education without any kind of discrimination and in this case too women are found to be more smart and active in education. In the case of employment factors and income levels also the participation of women are more noted than men. Most of the male population of vazhachal is addicted in use of liquors or drugs which affect their earnings and health and in those situations women have handled it in more positive manner to compensate their livelihood and to protect the health of male members. In the case of woman, female ratio is found to be more among the Kadar tribe of vazhachal colony. It is also clear from the survey that women are educated and capable of earning their livelihood. It is evident and proved from the survey that women in vazhachal are more active participants in dealing with tribal problems and social issues. Thus a new form of feminism from courage, capability and dedication is visible in vazhachal tribal society. It is noted from the survey that women enjoy freedom and equality in the social status of vazhachal. No crimes, sexual abuses or atrocities against women are reported. It is clear from the study that a strong spirit of feminist views exist among tribal women and it is absolutely in the positive manner in the case of vazhachal women. They actually challenge the present perspective of feminism as it degrades the status of men and stands for the absolute equality which is utopian. Thus it may create a new phase to feminist history which is absolutely apt or needed to tackle the present gender issues and social matters. According to them, Feminism is needed to uplift women and not to degrade the status of men or social fame.

Conclusion: Kadar, one of the primitive tribe of Kerala witnessed a lot of problems both internal and external. There were only a very few studies that revealed the actual conditions of Kadar. Though government that initiated many schemes and welfare programmes for tribal community, a good proportion of development still remains as an enigma. And also there were many reports regarding abuse of tribal women for sex and other purposes where the feminist activists and human rights workers still exist. In this present circumstance, this research work attempts to specially study the conditions of Kadar tribe in Vazhachal and among them more specifically the status and condition of women as it is a very exceptional case of circumstance among the other tribes in Kerala or India. This case study of vazhachal tribal women is more important as they may create a new phase to feminist perspective or they re-generate the actual objective of feminism with the upliftment of women.

In the case of Kadar in vazhachal tribal society, they enjoyed a far better condition than other tribes in any other places in government's vision as there are many policies and schemes for their benefits but the main problem is that when it reaches the grass root level no benefit can be taken due to scarcity. Though the implementation of housing scheme had taken place, corruption is witnessed on large scale and it is observed from the survey that most of the houses are not in a condition to live comfortably even some are left without the basic building structures yet to be completed to reside safely. In spite of all these social and economic conditions too, a kind of

active energy and unity can be seen among the tribal women of vazhachal. And this is important at present because a new stable track is witnessed from the lives and activities of women in vazhachal tribal society. From household sector to the activities of law and order, the presence of active participation and guidance of women is visible here. And a perfect example to this statement can be even seen from the report of Geetha(Uru mooppathi) in the social media recently against the hydroelectric project aimed at these people and their settlement.

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