

Dress code repression: Kerala's history of breast tax for Avarna women

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Repression

The CBSE has removed a section in its social science textbook chronicling this crucial episode in Kerala's caste history.



Over three hundred years ago, the southern state of Kerala had a system of taxation, whereby women belonging to backward castes and Dalits had to pay a tax, if they wanted to cover their breasts. Standing bare chested was taken as a sign of respect towards those castes supposedly "superior" to them - for both men and women.

The tax however, was levied only on Avarna (lower caste) women who wanted to cover their chest. It goes without saying that some of these "superiors" would have also got their voyeuristic kicks out of this system as well.

Royal officials would travel door to door, collecting this heinous "Mulakkaram" - literally Breast Tax- from Avarna women who had passed puberty. Sickeningly, the amount would depend on the size of the breasts.

Legend has it that a young Ezhava woman from Cherthala in Alappuzha, humiliated and frustrated by this indignity, decided she had enough of being insulted. Nangeli was said to have been attractive and feisty.



(Do not reproduce pictures without permission)

When the pravarthiyar, or village collector came asking for her share, she lit a lamp and laid down a plantain leaf as per the custom, but instead of money, she cut off her breasts and placed them on the leaf, shocking the officials.

Nangeli bled to death, but her defiance has now come to be a symbol of the resistance against this practice. Her husband, who was away at the time, came home to find his wife being cremated, and is said to have jumped into the pyre himself - either heartbroken, or mortified at what the authorities may do to him.



The area where she sacrificed herself was dismissively called "Mulachiparambu" (the breast woman's plot). Her kith and kin are said to have been forced to leave the area.

History has no official record of her, though this story is well known across Kerala. Academia is largely conflicted about the incident, and today Nangeli has become just another local legend.

Chitrakaran T Murali, who painted a whole series based on her tale, went in search of her family in Cherthala. "They say she had no children. There are relatives in Cherthala who are the descendants of her siblings, but they know just as much as the next person about their heroic ancestor," he says.



"In those days she was just another poor woman who protested and died. There is no record of her at all. Sadly, even today, she is not given due credit for what she did," he adds.

Nangeli wasn't the first one to protest against this barbaric social norm. Between 1813 and 1859, women belonging to the Panayeri (Palm-climber) Nadar community fought tooth and nail to be able to cover their breasts like Savarana women, in what came to be known as the Channar revolt.

(Nangeli's great great grand niece Leela, with her family).

In 1813, the Travancore court Dewan Colonel John Munro threw them a carrot and issued an order saying Nadar women who converted to Christianity could cover their chests with an "upper cloth". The royal court opposed this and the women were only allowed to wear a long blouse that the Muslims and Syrian Christians of the time wore.

The Nadar women were not satisfied demanding that they be treated on par with the Nair women. In the ensuing civil unrest, countless women were manhandled and molested.





Missionaries of the time got involved in the issue and many Nadars converted into Christianity. The Raja issued a proclamation again in 1859 reiterating that Nadar women could not dress like their Savarana counterparts.

"This issue went on well into the 20th century," explains Dr K Gopalankutty, president of the South Indian History Congress. "Clothing is a marker of one's social identity, and the blouse took on a symbolic role."

Breast tax was just one of the abhorrent measures in Kerala used to fill up the royal coffers. Many strange and repressive taxes, such as "meniponnu" or cess on ornaments worn, and "meesha kazhcha" or cess to grow a moustache were levied, especially on the backward and Dalit communities.

"Taxes and cess of extortionary nature ran into more than 120...of which 110 were levied exclusively on poor communities," notes Dr S N Sadasivan, in his book, "A Social History of India".

It must be noted however that despite what history tells us, the situation wasn't all that peachy for the so-called upper caste women either. Namboothiri women- antharjanam (women who lived indoors) were allowed to cover their chest, but could move only within the inner rooms of their own homes.

They were allowed speak only to their husband, immediate family and the "thozhi" assigned to them. They had to cover their face with an "olakkuda" or palm umbrella on the rare occasion when their husbands gave them permission to go outside the home.

Nair women were allowed to cover their chest - unless they were in the presence of Brahmins, royalty or in a temple. "The proper salutations from a female to persons of rank was to uncover the bosom. On one occasion, a Nair woman appeared before the Zamorin of Calicut's lady (sic); with her breasts concealed, and they were cut off, as wearing of a bodice before one belonging to such a higher group was considered immodesty," explains R Raman Nair and L Sulochana Devi, in their work "Chattambi Swami: An Intellectual Biography".

The irony is that traditionally, being bare-chested was neither a mark of shame nor a forced show of respect, for men and women staying in the west coast of South India. They wore sparse lower body garments because of the weather conditions - such attire would aid evaporation of sweat, and prevent overheating in sultry humid climates. Hygiene and common sense dictated what they wore, not social norms.

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Human Interest

Devoid of glitz, drama, this TN photographer's wedding pics are a breath of fresh air

A Physics graduate, Pon Prabhakaran took to photography in 2012 and won the Better Photography magazine's Wedding Photographer of the Year award 2018.

Pon Prabhakaran

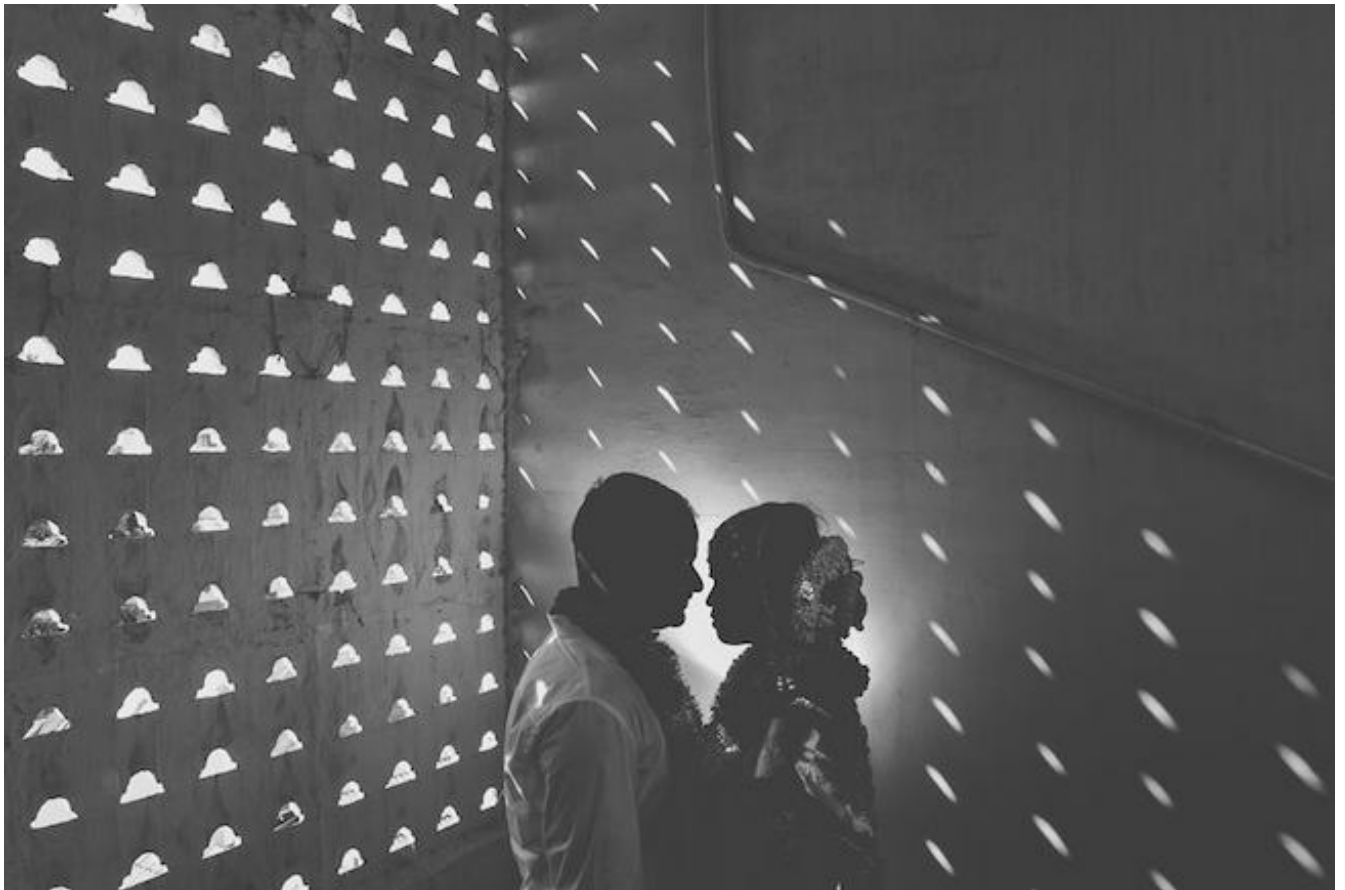


Against a wall speckled with light spots, a newly married couple, still wearing their garlands, stand facing each other, their faces blending in with the shadows. This picture, a wedding portrait, is in monochrome.

In another, the couple is seen seated in the dining hall, the steel tables in a disarray behind them - a photograph that was taken at a moment when no one was ready for the camera. A procession of women carrying trays of fruits, flowers and clothes on their head and a photograph of a wall bearing a few family photo frames and garlands, old and new, hung on either side.

In stark contrast to the regular trope of wedding photos aplenty on social media, photographer Pon Prabakaran's body of work reminds us of simpler times, with not one self-conscious element in the frame.

While Prabakaran himself shies away from the spotlight, his photographs don't. These photos, shot at a wedding in Musiri in Tiruchirappalli district, won him Better Photography magazine's Wedding Photographer of the Year award under the 'Photo series on a single wedding' category for the year 2018.





A Physics graduate, Pon Prabakaran did not intend to pick up the camera initially. But when he eventually did, in 2012, vague memories of his father, also a photographer whom he lost at a young age of 10, made photography seem like an old acquaintance.

He speaks of tougher times in passing and shares with TNM his admiration for his mother, who worked 12 hours a day to put food on the table. "We also had kind people around, my father's friends, who helped us get by," he shares.



Pon Prabakaran

When Prabakaran shared the news of his award on Facebook, he did so with a small anecdote. "Appa used to take a lot of pictures at home from the remaining films in a roll after the shoot. A blue striped curtain, which is a partition between our living room and the kitchen, was the backdrop for most of the pictures. The home, where we lived for more than 24 years, has seen my father becoming a photographer after running a petti kadai for few years, while I worked (learnt) in a studio near home and took it as a profession. After losing Appa, Amma faced a lot of hardships while raising me and my sister, and trusting in me to take photography as a profession was really a difficult decision to make. Hope I made her proud and happy," he wrote.

Prabhakaran began working at a photo studio in Triplicane when he was 19, taking passport size photographs and dabbling a bit in Photoshop while he could. Having started with traditional wedding photography, Pon Prabakaran says his style refined after attending a workshop conducted by photographers Selvaprakash and Senthil Kumaran in 2012.

Prabhakaran shares he got his first break as a candid wedding photographer in 2016 when a bride named Vanitha invited him to her hometown in Thoothukudi for her wedding. "She introduced me as a candid wedding photographer from Chennai. Until then, I had been shooting weddings for friends and family and even did birthdays and baby showers. I remember wondering how it was going to turn out," he chuckles.

But the wedding turned out to be more memorable to Prabakaran than anything else and remains close to his heart even today. "I remember her aunt ordering everyone around, creating the perfect wedding atmosphere. It was a fun shoot for me," he says.







Prodding him further on what he thinks best captures the life at a wedding, Prabakaran is quick to say that the magic lies in their houses. "People are more natural in their own houses and the details there are aplenty. I mostly try and visit their house first. My favourite shots

are from there. When we had gone to shoot a wedding in a village in Ooty, we had no place to stay but the brides' house. It created a beautiful environment for us to shoot and it felt like I had known the family for a long time," he adds.

While he admits lack of recognition can be frustrating at times, Prabakaran is firm on capturing the little things from weddings that will invoke the strongest of memories from couples even decades later.

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