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FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY: CHANGING MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG THE KANI COMMUNITY OF KANNIYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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Introduction

The Kani, also referred Kanikkar or Kanikkaran, are an indigenous community associated with the forest and hill regions of the southern Western Ghats. In Kanniyakumari District, Kani settlements are particularly associated with the Agasthyamalai region. Their traditional social organisation included institutions such as the Mootukkaani and Pilathikaani, who had different responsibilities within community life. Traditionally, marriage was closely associated with the Kani system of illam, kinship obligations, customary practices and the authority of community elders. It played an important role in maintaining social relationships, regulating marriage alliances and strengthening mutual cooperation within the community. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, education, transportation, government welfare programmes, have gradually modified these practices. The present marriage system therefore represents an interaction between traditional customs and contemporary social influences.

Marriage as a Social Institution

Traditionally, marriage served several social functions in Kani society. It established a recognised relationship between the bride and groom and simultaneously created a wider network of relationships between their families and relatives. After marriage, the couple became part of a larger kinship network in which relatives continued to have social responsibilities towards them. The importance of marriage was particularly significant because Kani communities traditionally lived in relatively small settlements in forested and hilly areas. Cooperation among households was necessary for everyday life, and marriage helped strengthen these relationships. The institution also contributed to the continuity of the community by establishing new family units and maintaining kinship connections.

Illam, Kinship and Marriage Rules

The illam system is important for understanding traditional Kani marriage. The illam represented social and kinship divisions within the community and influenced the selection of marriage partners. Historical ethnographic accounts refer to divisions within Kani society and describe rules governing marriage between different groups. Such regulations helped prevent marriages that were considered unacceptable according to customary traditions. However, these rules should not be treated as identical throughout the Kani community. Differences existed between settlements, and

customs changed over time. Geographical boundaries could also influence marriage relationships. Some accounts refer to the Kodayar River as a traditional marital boundary, with Kani groups living on opposite sides of the river being subject to restrictions on marriage. This indicates that geography, settlement organisation and kinship could operate together in regulating marriage alliances. Thus, the traditional Kani marriage system demonstrates that marriage was closely connected with the organisation of the community. Kinship, locality and customary authority together influenced the choice of a marriage partner.

Forms of Marriage

Monogamy has traditionally been the most widely accepted form of marriage among the Kanis. Historical accounts also mention the occasional existence of polygamous relationships, although such practices appear to have been uncommon and are not characteristic of contemporary Kani marriage. Earlier ethnographic accounts also refer to marriage at relatively young ages. Such practices should be understood within their historical context and should not be interpreted as representing present-day norms. Increased education, awareness of legal provisions and social change have contributed to the decline of early marriage. Inter-community or inter-caste marriages were historically uncommon. When such relationships occurred without the approval of parents or community elders, they could result in social tension or separation from the settlement. Greater interaction with the surrounding population has gradually reduced the social isolation of Kani settlements, and marriage relationships outside the traditional community boundaries have become more visible.

Marriage Negotiations and Economic Exchanges

Marriage negotiations were traditionally conducted between families with the participation of relatives and elders. The process was generally less elaborate than the marriage negotiations commonly found in urban and economically prosperous communities. Historical accounts mention different forms of exchange associated with marriage. These included gifts, customary payments and contributions made by the families of the bride and groom. One practice mentioned in earlier accounts is Thalapattam, an annual contribution made by the husband to his wife's parents during the festival known as Uchal. The continuation and exact form of such a practice, however, cannot be assumed to be uniform among all Kani settlements. Some accounts also refer to dowry in the form of money, ornaments, household articles, agricultural produce and other goods. At the same time, other descriptions emphasise bride-price or gifts from the groom's family. These differences indicate that marriage exchanges varied according to locality, period and family circumstances. It is therefore more appropriate to understand Kani marriage exchanges as a changing system of gifts and customary obligations rather than applying a single uniform definition of dowry to all historical Kani marriages.

Traditional Marriage Ceremony

The traditional Kani marriage ceremony was generally a community-centred event. The bride's house commonly served as the venue, and members of the two families, relatives and community elders participated in the proceedings. After the marriage had been approved, the families informed the appropriate community authorities. The Mootukkaani and other elders participated in the social

recognition of the marriage. In some traditions, the Pilathikaani announced the date and time of the ceremony after performing the required ritual practices. The thali was an important symbol of marriage in several Kani communities. In traditional practice, the marriage thread could be coloured with turmeric. In some accounts, the groom entrusted the thali to his sister, who then tied it around the bride's neck. The precise form of this ceremony has varied among settlements and has also changed under the influence of surrounding cultural practices. Blessings from parents and elders formed an important part of the ceremony. Food was prepared and shared with relatives and members of the settlement. Ritual offerings were also made to family or community deities. In some accounts, food was arranged on seven banana leaves, while rice and other prepared foods were formed into seven portions as part of the marriage ritual. These practices demonstrate the collective character of Kani marriage. The ceremony publicly recognised the union and brought together the families and community.

Selection of the Marriage Partner

Traditionally, the selection of a marriage partner was primarily a family and community matter. Parents and close relatives played an important role in identifying a suitable partner. The character of the individual, family background, kinship relationship and acceptance within the community were among the considerations in arranging a marriage. In some traditional accounts, the practice of muraipen marriage is mentioned. This refers to marriage with certain close cross-cousin relationships, such as the father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Such practices illustrate the importance of kinship rules in traditional Kani society. After the parents reached a decision, the proposed marriage could be communicated to community leaders. The Mootukkaani and other recognised elders participated in determining whether the proposed alliance was consistent with customary rules. The Pilathikaani could also have a role in ritual matters connected with important community events. The traditional system therefore gave greater importance to collective decision-making than to independent individual choice. However, this pattern has gradually changed. Education and increased interaction with the wider society have enabled young Kani men and women to participate more actively in decisions concerning marriage.

Arranged Marriage and Individual Choice

Arranged marriage was traditionally the most common form of marriage among the Kanis. Parents and elders were expected to identify and approve suitable alliances. Marriage was viewed as an agreement between families as much as a relationship between two individuals. Love and affection were nevertheless recognised as important aspects of family life. Traditional community norms generally discouraged young people from independently establishing marriage relationships without the knowledge or approval of their families and elders. Marriage outside accepted community relationships could lead to serious social disagreement. In contemporary Kani society, however, individual participation has increased. Young people have greater opportunities to meet people outside their settlements through education, employment and improved transportation. As a result, contemporary marriages may involve both family participation and the personal choice of the bride and groom. This represents a gradual movement from predominantly collective decision-making towards a combination of family approval and individual choice.

Role of the Mootukkaani and Pilathikaani

The Mootukkaani traditionally occupied an important position in Kani social organisation. As a community leader or headman, the Mootukkaani participated in matters relating to customary rules, social discipline and dispute settlement. Marriage was one of the occasions in which the authority of the elders became visible. The Mootukkaani could be consulted when a marriage was proposed and could participate in resolving disagreements between families. The acceptance of the community leader gave social legitimacy to the marriage. The Pilathikaani had a different but related role as a ritual specialist associated with traditional religious practices. Ritual knowledge and customary beliefs were important elements of Kani community life. Consequently, marriage ceremonies could involve the Pilathikaani in accordance with the customs of particular settlements. The roles of these traditional institutions have changed over time. Their importance continues in some settlements, while in others their functions have been reduced or modified because of education, religious change, government administration and interaction with the wider society.

Marriage and Kinship Relations

Marriage strengthened the kinship network of the Kani community. Relatives who participated in a marriage continued to maintain relationships with the newly formed family. These relationships were important for mutual assistance during family and community events. Marriage also linked different households and, in some cases, neighbouring settlements. Through marriage, individuals acquired new relationships and responsibilities. Thus, marriage helped maintain social cooperation within the settlement. The illam system further strengthened this relationship between marriage and kinship. Rules concerning acceptable marriage partners helped regulate social relationships and maintain the customary organisation of the community.

Changes in the Kani Marriage System

The Kani marriage system has undergone significant changes during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These changes are closely related to the transformation of Kani society itself. Education has been one of the major influences. Educated young people have greater awareness of individual rights and greater interaction with people outside their settlements. This has increased their participation in decisions concerning marriage. Improved transportation and communication have reduced the geographical isolation of Kani settlements. Roads, mobile communication and access to nearby towns have created wider social networks. Economic change has also influenced marriage. Traditional dependence on forest-based activities has been supplemented by wage employment, agriculture, education and other occupations. Economic considerations have therefore become increasingly important in selecting a marriage partner. Government welfare programmes have contributed to changes in settlement conditions. Improvements in roads, electricity, housing, education and other basic facilities have connected Kani settlements more closely with the wider administrative system. Religious and cultural interaction has also influenced marriage ceremonies. The use of the thali, jewellery, ceremonial clothing and other practices reflects interaction with surrounding Tamil and Kerala cultural traditions. Such changes should be understood as cultural adaptation rather than as the complete disappearance of Kani identity.

From Community-Controlled Marriage to Greater Individual Participation

One of the most significant changes in the Kani marriage system is the increasing participation of individuals in choosing their partners. Traditionally, parents and elders exercised considerable influence over marriage decisions. Today, young people have greater opportunities to express their preferences. This transformation does not mean that family involvement has disappeared. In many cases, marriage continues to involve consultation with parents and relatives. The contemporary system can therefore be described as a combination of traditional and modern elements. The change is especially important because it demonstrates the relationship between social development and cultural transformation. Education, employment, transportation and communication have expanded the social world of Kani youth. Marriage decisions are consequently no longer determined solely by the boundaries of the traditional settlement.

Marriage and Cultural Identity

Marriage continues to be an important means of expressing Kani cultural identity. Although some ceremonies have adopted practices from neighbouring communities, elements of traditional kinship, community participation and elder involvement continue to survive. The persistence of these practices demonstrates that cultural change does not necessarily mean cultural disappearance. Communities often adapt their traditions to new social circumstances while retaining practices that remain meaningful to them. The Kani marriage system therefore provides an important example of the interaction between tradition and modernity. Traditional institutions such as kinship, illam and community leadership continue to influence social life, while education, economic development and wider social interaction have introduced new ideas concerning marriage and family relationships.

Conclusion

The marriage system of the Kani community of Kanniyakumari District is an important component of its social and cultural organisation. Traditionally, marriage was understood as a relationship between families and kin groups rather than simply as a personal union between two individuals. Kinship, illam divisions, customary rules and the authority of parents and elders played important roles in regulating marriage. The Mootukkaani and Pilathikaani were associated with important social and ritual dimensions of community life. Marriage ceremonies were generally community-oriented and included the participation of relatives, elders, ritual specialists and members of the settlement. The exchange of gifts and other customary obligations also formed part of marriage relationships, although these practices varied according to locality and period. The Kani marriage system has undergone considerable transformation. Education, improved transport and communication, economic change, government welfare programmes and increased interaction with neighbouring communities have widened the social environment in which Kani families live. Individual participation in partner selection has increased, while traditional family and community involvement continues in many cases. The contemporary Kani marriage system should therefore not be viewed simply as either traditional or modern. It represents a process of adaptation in which customary practices coexist with new social and legal influences. The study of marriage consequently provides valuable insight into the broader transformation of Kani society in

Kanniyakumari District. It demonstrates how an indigenous community can preserve important aspects of its social identity while adapting its institutions to changing economic, educational and cultural conditions.

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