Disentangling Nair Women: An Exploration of Matrilineal Nair Women’s Experiences In the Late 19th to Early 20th Century in Kerala, India

This thesis analyzes the ways in which Nair women of the Indian state of Kerala experienced the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries during matriliney’s decline. It begins by utilizing the law as a lens to understand how matriliney had changed in the mid-to late-nineteenth century, altering the conditions of matriliney in the home. In particular, these legal changes codified a shift towards masculine power, solidifying the earlier fluidity of matriliney into something which more greatly resembled patriliney, as epitomized in the installation of the male karnavan as manager of the taravad family unit. Such transformations shifted power dynamics within the home, as did the concurrent emergence of modern gender ideologies in an increasingly colonially-controlled Kerala. Nair women’s essentialness as carriers of domesticity was emphasized in social discourse at the time. Nair women responded by molding themselves into active domestic agents rather than passive occupants of the home. They also actively crafted themselves into subjects in the public sphere, particularly through education and salaried positions. In these various realms, Nair women both complied with the gendered expectations placed upon them by colonial and Nair patriarchal forces, and transcended these margins, renegotiating boundaries between the public and private spheres. They also reconfigured these norms and their subjectivity collectively. Through political organizing, they created and actively engaged in consciousness-raising spaces of women’s associations and women’s magazines, fashioning themselves as active, political subjects. Although matriliney augmented Nair women’s mobility, by the turn of the nineteenth century its patriarchal undertones did not do as much to aid women’s agency as it perhaps could have earlier. Still, the changes its transformations triggered brought about women’s engagement in self-building projects in public, private, and political realms.

Sources Include:


