

# Impact of Socio Economic Transition on the Traditional Dress Culture of Middle Kerala

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## Abstract:

Kerala is generally divided into three regional dialects and there is considerable difference can be seen regarding the customs and traditions. In later medieval period, there existed different castes and communities and it decided their dress and ornaments of which, what how and when should wear specific dress and ornaments. The most important religious communities of the mid part of medieval Kerala are the Hindus, Christians and the Muslims. The minor religious communities are the Buddhists, the Jains, the Sikhs and the Jews.

Each caste and community have its traditional form of dress. The common male dress is a piece of white cloth (*Mundu*), two to two and a half yards in length and a yard and a half breadth which is worn round the loins. Most of the communities who wear the *mundu* tuck it inside on the right side of the waist, while Muslims often do on the left. The *mundu* must touch the ground or very nearly to the ground. The men generally wear almost the same kind of dress, irrespective of caste and community, but there are slight variations. Occasionally, men fold up the *mundu* from below up to knees and tucking it up at the front to allow free movements. The traditional undergarment was the *konam* or *koupinam* (vertical strip of cloth passed between the thighs and the ends being attached to a string round the loins both at the back and at the front), when at home, a small upper garment (*torthu*) is also worn. But on special occasions a second cloth of better texture (*pavumundu*) was worn over the upper part of the body. It is somewhat longer and broader. The shirts were worn when going out to public places or to attend festive occasions.

Among the certain community, peculiar modes of dressing were prevalent. *Thattudukkal* is a special type of wearing *mundu* existed among the upper caste people like *Namboothiris*, *Elayads* etc. on religious occasions. It consists of a long piece of cloth tied round the loins with a portion of it passed between the thighs and tucked in at the front and behind with a front portion arranged in a number of duplications.<sup>1</sup>

Among the ordinary classes of Muslims, the men wear round their loins, a white *mundu* with a border and kept in position by a *Nool* or waist string to which are attached some pieces of gold and silver metals containing texts of the Quran or magic *yantrams*. They also wore a small linen skull cap on the head. The Black Jews wore a small cloth with a shirt and a skull cap. The White Jews, while they go to Synagogue, wore a long tunic of rich colour with a waist coat over it buttoned up to the neck, full white trousers, a skull cap and turban. However, most of the white Jews appear in western costumes in public.

The women of this period had their own distinctive forms of dress. The women of Hindu and Christian category, generally preferred white clothes. The upper caste Hindu women used a special type of under cloth called *Onnaramundu*, a large piece of cloth wound tightly round the loins and then round the legs separately and tucked in at the back and on the right side. Over this, they wore an outer garment (*mundu*) which is usually two and a half yards in length and a yard and a half in breadth. The upper part

of the body is usually covered by the bodice and blouse. While going out, a longer cloth of finer texture is worn over the shoulders covering the upper part of the body. *Antharjanam* (One who is inside) ( the orthodox Namboothiri women ) dressed in a peculiar style. A long white cloth is fastened round the loins, a portion of it passing between the legs and reaching well below the knee and also covering the breast. The Tamil Brahmin women used coloured clothes, which consist of blouse and *pudava*. The *pudava* has about nine yards in length and a yard and a half in breadth. Three or four folds of the cloth are held together on the left side of the loins, while the rest of it is passed between the legs to be tucked up behind rather tightly and the remaining portion after passing twice or round the loin is carried over the right shoulder after covering the breast.

The Gowda Saraswatha women used sari reaching the ankles and the blouse. Traditionally, the Christian women wore a white garment and it is worn folded with a number of fringes behind. It is seven yards long. The upper part of the body is covered with a jacket. The dress of the Muslim women is a dark blue cloth reaching from the waist to the ankles and a loose jacket of thick white cloth with long sleeves. They also wore a small cloth over the head falling over the shoulders. The richer classes of this category women also wore the same dress but there are slight differences in materials and colors. The Jewish women use a red-colored loin cloth and a jacket to cover the upper part of their body. Different pattern of hair dressing prevalent among women. Normally they comb hair and tie it behind in a knot. Plaited tails and pony tails also in vogue among young women. Artificial hairs, hairnets and rings also used by them in different styles.

Ornaments of different kinds have been in use among all castes and communities. *Nagapatam* (serpents hood) was one of the oldest ornaments used by the Nair lady. *Thoda*, a double convex disc ear ornament and for wearing it earlobes were dilated. Nose ornament called *Mukkuthi* was also worn. The most important neck ornaments were *Addyal*, *yantram*, *Avil mala*, *poothali*, *pulinakham*. On the wrist, they wore *kappu*. All kinds of rings were worn on the fingers. The Namboothiri women never wore any costly ornaments. Their peculiar kind of necklace was called *cheruthali*, which was worn loose over the breast. The Tamil Brahmin women had ornaments for almost every part of the body – the head, nose, ear, neck, arms, fingers, wrist and feet. They wore *kasumala* , it was a garland of coins worn by them around the neck. The *oddiyanam* (silver or gold girdle) of an inch or an inch and a half in breadth with a hook in front) *Kolusu* ( silver ornament of elaborate workmanship worn round the legs) were also used.<sup>ii</sup>

The Jewish women also used to wear various kinds of gold necklaces some of which were made of venetian sequins. The traditional Christian women bore their ears in several places and wore “a kind of heavy gilt brass ring *Mekka Mothiram* at the top of each ear. Their ear lobes were sufficiently dilated to accommodate a ‘ U ’ shaped ornament at the time of wedding. They had the necklet called *Ottezhapattak*, *kombu*, *Thala*, *Nazhi* etc., rings of various kinds for fingers and anklets.”<sup>iii</sup> The Muslim women had a large number of ornaments of five or six kinds, each on neck and waist. They also wore bracelets, armllets and bangles made of gold. In the ears, they bored ten to fourteen holes.

The short description on dress and ornaments prevailed during the later medieval period in middle part of Kerala still prevalent among some aged or old men and women in all caste and communities. But there is some considerable change among the younger generations of the early period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The educated young women, irrespective of caste and community have given up old ways of dressing and adopted general type of dressing prevalent in other parts of the world. Sari is a common form of dree even now also. When we consider the traditional ornaments, some are using among the various castes and communities. The old *thoda* is replaced by *kammal*. The educated and progressive women are not much

interested in wearing gold jewelry nowadays. Ornaments made of plastic, artificial, gold etc. are becoming increasingly popular in recent times.

The above narration clearly indicates the fact that during that period, each caste and communities had their own traditional form of dress and ornaments. It was their major identification. Even though the men generally wear almost the same kind of dress irrespective of caste and community there were slight variations. But the dress and ornaments of women were very distinct. Now also it is prevalent in some sections of the society, which is more conservative and less literate.

The Economic and social conditions which prevailed in Kerala over the centuries took a drastic change thanks to the socio-religious reform movement in Kerala in the last decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emergence of centralized monarchy in Travancore and Cochin resulted in the disappearance of various feudal chieftains. In the central Kerala Sakthan Thampuram and the other Cochin rulers adopted strong measures to curb the power of the feudal nobility and established centralized administration. The arrival of the Europeans and the introduction of western education made tremendous impact upon the society. The introduction of western English education permitted learning to all classes of the society irrespective of their castes. The educated or learned men of all castes were allowed to work as clerk or accountants in the offices of the Europeans. The lower castes developed a self-confidence of their own because earlier they were not allowed to get education. It was the monopoly of the higher castes. It made a social and economic changes in the society and these changes made reflection in their costumes also.

The arrival of the European powers and the introduction of various reforms helped in the gradual emergence of new economic order. They gave an impetus to foreign trade. Network of roads were constructed and communication system also improved. These progresses brought notable changes in the cultural and social life of the people. The last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the period for powerful social and religious reforms movements among the people of Kerala. These movements aimed for the eradication of certain social injustice, superstitious belief and for the abolition of many costly and wasteful social practices and customs which were prevalent in the society.

The all-India organizations like Brahmosamaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj etc. had its own influence only on a limited scale. But it influenced more from the movements of indigenous individual social reformers and caste organizations. Sree Naraya Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Mannathu Padmanabhan, Ayyankali, Vakkam Abdul Khadar Moulavi, etc. made outstanding efforts to revolt against the existing social order and helped in ushering a new social order. The communal and caste organizations also played a major role in bringing out social change. NSS, SNDP also made its efforts for social upheaval. Land reforms introduced have also played a very important role in ushering a new socio-economic order.

These socio-economic changes made progress and promoted people to think and act practically with farsightedness. The dominated ideas of casteism and feudalism began to swipe off from the society. The people have liberated from the clutches of feudal serfdom and caste domination. The members of the almost all sections of the society that had been following the traditional costumes have now begun to change. The spread of education and liberal ideas have infused a new sense of self-confidence and consciousness of the thoughts. A new dynamic society based on new pragmatic thought and values make changes in their appearance. Thus, the traditional mode of dress and ornaments gradually began to change among all sections of the people of the society. The will of the people expressed through democratic institutions and a new order sprang up and it is reflected in their appearance also. Even though the

traditional style of dress and ornaments made a transmission; it is still prevalent among a few sections of the society and today it is considered as our cultural heritage also.

### End Notes

<sup>iii</sup> Menon, A, Sreedhara (ed.), *Kerala District Gazetteers, Ernakulam*, Government Press, Cochin, 1965. P287-88.

<sup>ii</sup> Menon, K P Padmanabha, Kochi Rajya charithram, Mathrubhumi printing and publishing company , Calicut. 1989 ,P. 58-74

<sup>iii</sup> *Opcit.* P. 290

Tali- A neck ornament tied as a marriage badge

Thoda- A hollow cylindrical ear ring worn by women

Kammal- A kind of ear ring

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