

## **Evolution of Clothes of Kerala and the Social Struggles**

*Srikanth Gella,  
Ph.D Scholar,  
School of Performing and Visual Arts,  
Indira Gandhi National Open University,  
Maidan Garhi, New Delhi.*

### **Abstract:**

Saree is basically known as the traditional dress for women hailing from Kerala. But the blouse and skirt worn along with that need to be stitched. The current stitching needle is been manufactured only with the industrial revolution. The Evolution of clothing and textiles from the animal's skin and plant materials are vast and colourful. Along with different cultures, different varieties of clothes appeared. Different types of fibres have their history. Clothes or clothing are the collective terms used to describe the different types of materials worn on the body, individually human characteristics to protect our bodies from cold, rain and other climate change or weather conditions. This paper is mainly highlights for Early Clothing and Modesty, Social Classes, Struggle of Social Classes and so on.

### **Keywords:**

Kerala, Clothing, Social Classes, Blurring of Social Hierarchies.

### **1. Introduction:**

Clothing in most cultures is a significant interpretation of the self. It says something about who we are or at least how we choose to be seen. Clothes carry meaning, which is why we wear certain outfits in some contexts and not in others. Hierarchies and identities are created by religious caste, age, sex, economics, subculture, and region. Since the beginning of the period of British rule in India, Western influence has introduced another layer of stratification. It was often a means for upper-class Indians to disassociate themselves from the lower, uneducated classes.

The different patterns, colors, and materials of various clothes reflect sub-caste regulations, family traditions, or other rules of divisions<sup>4</sup>. The kind of clothing we get see had gone through twists and turns of social struggles which we don't get to understand in the present times. There is a story behind the shape, drape and the form which we get to appreciate. This paper traverses through the history to reflect upon those aspects of the evolution of clothing in Kerala.

### **2. Early Clothing and Modesty:**

Sculptures from Mouryan and Sunga periods refer to women in rectangular pieces on lower and upper part of the body. In 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century Gupta period sculpture were shown with stitched upper and lower garment along with a breast band. In different regions and community modesty has had difference definitions. In many ways it is not just about covering your body but keeping yourself protected from the climate<sup>3</sup>. The documentary evidence indicates that India was the only source for textiles given its long-established cotton industry. In as back as 425 BC Herodotus mentioned on cotton and cotton clothing in India, later almost a century later observer of those times referred to intensive cultivation on

Alexander's expedition to North-West India. It was later confirmed by the Greek envoy Megasthenes resident at Pataliputra on the Ganges and by contemporary Indian regulations recorded in the *Arthasastra*<sup>11</sup>.

There had always been very interesting regional variations in the southern part of India. Some covered the upper part of their body and some did not feel the need. With lot of influences coming from different directions like the Greek, Roman, Arab and Chinese, fashion and ideas were always changing. Hindus and Muslim women wore different outfits in the 15<sup>th</sup> century due to the influence of Mughal Empire. Muslim women normally wore parted garments which later gave birth to garments like the Salwar Kameez – which later spread across the country and became equivalent to a national dress. In Bengal and in many other place's women did not wear blouses under their saris- they went bare breasted. Victorian society during that time did not find it suitable as they had their own ideas of propriety, hence blouses slowly intruded into the Indian society and blouses and petticoat became part of the Indian fashion vocabulary. British had a strong influence for a long time which led to various garments with various sleeve structure and necklines<sup>3</sup>.

### **3. Social Classes and Clothing:**

Till the 19<sup>th</sup> century, minimum amount of clothing was the norm across India. In Kerala as well, people wore just a piece of cloth "*Thortu*", which is wrapped around the waist. Over the years '*Thortu*' had got elevated as people started using it as something to wear over their shoulders to cover their upper body which was termed as *Melundu*. During special occasions, men used to wear turban-like headgear with elaborate headscarves covering the whole head<sup>2</sup>.

*Mundu* is normally in white or cream which depends on whether the cotton is bleached or unbleached. The unbleached *mundu* is called '*neriyathu*'. Before use *mundu* is usually starched. It carries a border on both the edges which is called '*kara*' (a strip of color). Sometimes it can be double colored and also ornamental. For ceremonial and festive occasions, the colored '*kara*' is replaced with '*kasavu*' (golden zari) border. Going by the general rules of etiquette the wearer by carefully folding the end of the *mundu* in paper fan pattern highlights the '*kara*' or the '*kasavu*'. Earlier it was only made on handlooms, now it is predominantly produced on power looms in parts of Tamilnadu and Kerala<sup>8</sup>. Hindu women used to wear an ancient form of saree, *Onnara*. It had two pieces of cloth which were draped around the body. It had a length of about six cubits i.e., about 1.75 mts, which was folded into pleats and tucked in. Also, they used to have an upper garment '*Melundu*' which was used simply to cover the body or as a firm breast bandage. If a person of a lower caste community stumbled across a member who belongs to a higher caste, he was supposed to show reverence by draping his *Melundu* around his waist or hide it under the armpit. Women later started wearing '*Roukka*' which essentially was the earlier version of today's blouse which probably was the influence of the westerners who came to establish trade. Normally, women preferred to wear white '*Roukka*' when they went out. They often wore a 'random mundu' above *roukka*. Women especially from financially weaker sections and labourers started wearing *Kaili* or colored *mundu* only after the formation of the state. One of the ancient costumes though was *Neriyathu* which is still worn by Hindu women and is similar to a shawl which is worn like *melundu*. *Mundu* often was worn in many different ways which was to indicate the caste of a particular person. On special occasions brahmins often used to wear long *Uthareeyam* along with *melundu*. Women from the aristocratic families wore a fitted white bodice or *Mulakkacha* to cover their breasts with a knot behind<sup>2</sup>.

Namboodiri women wore *Pudava*, that was very similar to what their men wore and draped around the same way as *Tattudukkuka*, a long of six to seven feet long tied around the waist, passed between the thighs and tucked in at the front and the back, with the front portion arranged in pleats. This *mundu* of Namboodiris always was in white color, accompanied however with a golden border which apparently differentiated from others. Along with they also wore wooden slippers called *Methiyyadi*<sup>7</sup>. They used to cover their upper body and carried an *Olakkuda* or *Marakkuda* to cover the face and body<sup>6</sup>. Different groups with a common network had different styles of dressing. The style of wearing the waistcloth differentiated different sub-groups of Malayala Brahmin women (*Anjarjanams*)<sup>10</sup>.

Men however, usually wore a *mundu* to cover their lower body and a *melmundu* over the upper body. A *Kaupinam*, which is strip of cloth worn passed between the thighs and tucked into the front and back of a waist thread as innerwear<sup>6</sup>. Men from the muslim community used to wear *Kallithuni* which was more like a present-day lungi. It is draped around the waist and is dropped till the ankle length. Usually a belt was also worn above the ends that tucked in at the waist to secure it with a knot. While going out they used to wear *Neelakuppayam* which is a kind of *jubba*. Also, a *melmundu* was worn over the shoulder<sup>2</sup>.

Muslim women used to wear something similar to what their men wore, which was called Kuppayam. It is a kind of a long-sleeved blouse which even Christian ladies preferred to wear. A similar fitted version of the same was very popular among the people of south Malabar. Women wore long *thunis* along with white loose tunics called '*penkuppayam*', usually made of fine muslin. *Thunis* muslims wear would have bright colored borders unlike the *thunis* of the rest<sup>11</sup>. Women also wore a long scarf covering the head and shoulders, which is called *Tattam* and is still very much in use. It is usually about four feet in length and made of fine breathable fabric<sup>2</sup>. Around the waist they tied a silver belt. Now, however its fashion for women wear *hijabs* much like they wear in middle eastern countries. Certainly, there is a lot of influence in the region<sup>11</sup>.

The preferred dress of young girls however, wear the half saree, a coloured piece of cloth which is worn over the upper portion of the body with *pavada* and blouse along with. Saree though made a grand entry in Kerala women's wardrobe only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however it soon became a favourite attire for the ladies. Its popularity to certain extent could be attributed to the beautiful paintings by Raja Ravi Varma<sup>2</sup>. The traditional dress of Nayar, Kshtriya and Ambalavasi consisted of *Mundu*, *Kaupinam* and a random *mundu* or *Neriyatu* (an upper cloth). The women belonging to these communities used to wear a *Pudava* or *Onnaramundu* in *Tattudulla* style. The *Avarnas* or the 'lower' caste people had a very modest dress culture. Children, girls and boys, of *Ezhavas*, *Pulayas* and *Parayans* used to wear only an innerwear called *Konakam*. And much earlier, they just wore leafy garments.

Women of Palghat especially who belonged to *Izhavan*, *Tiyattis* and *Mukkuvas* of North Malabar sometimes wore dark blue coloured attires. Expensive dresses made of silk were never worn by them. Mostly clothes made of very fine semi-transparent cotton and silk were only worn by the people from the higher classes to distinguish themselves from the lower classes<sup>6</sup>. In the hierarchical system certain groups were not allowed to use finer clothing, the umbrellas and the gold jewellery. Breach of dress was tantamount to inviting inauspiciousness<sup>10</sup>. *Mukkuva* women of those times had a practice to wear a black silk cloth similarly tied but now this system has hence vanished. Later on, in the Malabar region a change slowly became visible and women started to wear the upper cloth called. '*Torttumundu*' or a short bodice that covered their breasts<sup>6</sup>. The Tulu speaking folk and Beary community of Karnataka also wear *mundu*.

Mostly what people should wear was decided based on the social hierarchy. People at the bottom of the hierarchy were supposed to only cover their lower body by *Ottamundu*. Very rarely they wore a *Melmundu*, moreover, they did not have the right to go to public places wearing it<sup>2</sup>. It is generally considered disrespectful, especially before women and the superiors to fold the *mundu* up and leave the legs revealing down the knee. And faced by such a situation, the fold is quickly loosened with undiscernible flick to flutter it down to cover the legs completely.

Notwithstanding the continuous western dressing influences, Hindu traditional ceremonies in Kerala, it is always important and binding to wear *mundu* by and *kasavu* sari in case of women. For Hindu marriages men and especially groom will wear *Mundu* along with either shirt or a '*Mel mundu*'. Also during religious festivals, temple visits men mostly prefer to wear *mundu*. In most of the temples in Kerala it is mandatory for people to wear *mundu* to enter the temple premises<sup>9</sup>. The Mappilla muslim men wear *mundus* having borders of purple, orange, or green border, The however tie it on the left and the hindus tie it on the right. They wear a small cap, either white or black which completes their attire.

Christian women wore *Chatta*, which is usually spotless white was pleated like a fan at the back coupled with a floral blouse. The *Chatta* covers the women's body in entirety, neck down only barring the arms and hands. When stepping out they commonly drape a *kavani* which essentially an embroidered polyester piece of fabric. The Anglo- Indians of Cochin used to wear *Kavaya*, derived from Malasian word *Kebaya*, a full-sleeved knee length close fitting jacket with a double layered *thuni* wrapped around it<sup>11</sup>.

#### **4. Struggle of Social Classes and Clothing:**

The social hierarchy was defined based on the supposed belonging to the Aryan, Dravidian or pre-Dravidian groups. The non-Hindus were on the periphery of the hierarchical system. Although they were mainly attached to the system for their activities, which were mainly economic in nature, and many among like the Syrian Christians had become farmers. The very origin of those people is more or less forgotten, however the colour of the skin and other physical characteristics were important elements which determine the social standing. In the cascade type of social system, each of the groups performed a dominant role in relation to the next down the line. It was necessary given the subjective character of the relations of production. However, after the British colonization the structures slowly broke down, first because of its economic and second its ideological aspect.

The primary basis of the division was on the two main categories of *savarnas* and *avarnas*. The first group had the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Nayars* and other intermediate groups such as the *Ambalavasis*. The second group were the *Izhavas*, *Pulayas*, and *Parayas* and others. The distances between these groups were literally laid out, as in the case of usage of roads leading to a temple, the costumes to be worn, baring of the breast in case of women and so on. These morally defying rules were legally enforced with various penalties, which in some cases may even be death. The superior *savarnas* mainly possessed land and the *avarnas* were involved in agricultural labour, handicrafts or fishing<sup>5</sup>. The connection between the groups through the feudal-type relations of dependence, through the matrimonial systems and the whole symbolic code of social distances. It was only when contractual relations were introduced by British colonization that the two systems began to diverge slightly and the appearance of the first poor Brahmins and rich *Izhavas* dates from this time.

As a *dewan*-Resident in 1813, Colonel Munro granted Christian women the right to cover their breasts, as it was for Christians in other countries. However, they were urged to do it the way the Syrian Christian women did. In 1850 a Royal Proclamation pronounced that, the *Shannars* (*Nadars*) who had converted to Roman Catholicism could wear a blouse, as long as the style isn't the same as that of the high castes. However, the Church was particular that the difference between the faithful and the others be crisply expressed through dress and ornamentation<sup>10</sup>. The transformation of the feudal relationship into contractual relationship was the source of the revolt of the Moplahs, Muslim peasants of the Malabar. In 1903, Sri Narayana Guru, a shepherd from Chempazhanthi, near Trivandrum, founded the SNDP (*Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham*). A deeply religious man, who vowed celibacy was profoundly influenced with the *Advaita* philosophy of Sankara. He widely travelled across the southern part of India. Being a person from what was considered lower caste, consecrated the first Siva temple at Aruvippuram defying the existing religious norms and went on to do so for 64 more of them over the years.

The temples of Sri Narayana Guru were intended to enable not only the *Izhavas* but also the other lower castes to perform their devotions. The offerings in the temples were flowers and fruit which clearly were identical to the rituals in the temples those of the higher castes.

The opening of the temple of the Maharajah to individuals of the lower castes signified a social rather than a religious victory. In 1918 K. Aiyappan of SNDP organized an enormous lunch attended by more than 5000 persons of various castes with the object of breaking the taboo of non-commensality. The social churning continued as *Izhavas* chose to realize the twin objectives of overcoming the caste structure which prevented their progress and to obtain access to the high gods for the low castes and the outcastes. Parallely, the fight against the ancient social customs, like the *Thirandukuli* (ceremony on attaining puberty), the *talikettu* (or engagement) and *pulikudi* (or ceremony during the seventh month of a woman's first pregnancy).

The Brahmananda Swami Siva Jogi, too condemned the practices of dominant Hinduism: the rigid caste system, the Brahmin priesthood holding society in chains, the servitude of women, and also animal sacrifice, meat eating and the use of fermented drinks<sup>5</sup>. The sages whether Sri Narayana Guru or Brahmananda Swami Siva Jogi, it was felt necessary to undermine the religious codes which were the reason for the resulting social distances. Practicing religion at the level of Brahmins was symbolic way of conquering caste relationship, which otherwise was not possible in the usual. In this struggle, education made it possible to overcome *avidya* (ignorance) to attain *advaita* and *ananda*.

Ayyankali the foremost leaders of Pulayas made enormous efforts to restore the pride by urging Pulaya women to cover their breasts and the men to wear sandals and to carry umbrellas. He later started a newspaper as a medium for promoting the new ideas among those who were able to read Malayalam<sup>5</sup>.

## **5. Blurring of Social Hierarchies:**

If the dressing earlier was meant to mark social hierarchies, the modern dressing can't be considered neutral practice only determined by 'taste' as it was created to political concerns and to signify the 'inner qualities' found necessary to constitute the new Individual. In Kerala, the introduction of new dress codes for women meant many more things, besides sanitization/aestheticization.



It is also meant to achieve greater conformity to what can be considered the emergent 'national look' with the sari, and its local variant, the mundu-vesti; implied the membership in the emerging social elite in Malayalee society, setting off the wearer from working people and those who are still 'traditional'.

In 1863 when the Public Works Department was set, clothing upper parts of the person was made a pre-condition for women-laborers for availing employment. During the same time, reading the persons dress qualities as modest, decent or civilized had slowly gained the ground. Wearing upper cloth signified equality of Channars with the upper-caste Nairs hence the government of Tiruvitamloor government refused to allow it, though conceded the demands for 'modesty'. The Proclamation that followed in 1865 allowed all classes to use the blouse but not the upper-cloth.

## **6. Conclusion:**

Clothing as we see it is not a mere a piece of fabric stitched into a shape. It reflects the struggles of people in fulfilling their aspirations. It sure is primarily to cover the body but it had been designed to differentiate among individuals, communities and social classes. It can't be ignored that, it became time to time the medium to express the frustrations, represent struggles and symbolize triumphs.

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