

‘Power’ and ‘Feminism’ in the Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore

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ABSTRACT

Kerala's history is really fascinating. It was a centre of globalisation and a model of peace generations later. It, on the other hand, took casteism to its logical conclusion. A matrilineal structure, a legacy of empowered women, and some tough queens were all part of the deal. Manu S. Pillai's painstakingly researched biography of the royal dynasty of Travancore is one of them. *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore* is a combination of Travancore's history and Sethu Lakshmi Bhai's biography. With the use of Foucault's power theory and Feminism, this article will primarily look at the "power" and "matrilineal system" in Travancore.

KEY WORDS: Power, Matrilineal, Power Theory, Sethu Lakshmi Bhai

INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault, one of the most important figures in the critical theory has been the centre of attraction on the concepts of power, knowledge and discourse. The idea of ‘Power’ and ‘Feminism’ have emerged as two of the most influential and cultural concepts of the late twentieth century. The combination of these two concepts can be seen in Michel Foucault's works, where he makes few references to women or to the issue of gender in his writings. His treatment of relations between power, the body and sexuality has stimulated extensive feminist interest. The book *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore* (2015) by Manu S. Pillai whose debut book (published by Harper Collins) is a nonfiction which explains Kerala's matrilineal system that once accorded a great degree of autonomy to women of the state.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper mainly focuses on the concepts, feminism and power theory of Foucault with the idea of ‘Power’ and ‘Matrilineal system’ that explains in the book *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*. The paper put forward how women in Travancore enjoyed matrilineal system of power comparing to other parts of India. The paper looks at how power theory of Foucault can be used to understand the power works of the matrilineal society of Travancore. The study also gives how the historical character Sethu Lakshmi Bhai represents the matrilineal power or Foucault's idea of power in the book, *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*.

HYPOTHESIS

In *The Ivory Throne*, Manu Pillai retells the history of a unique Indian monarchy: the princely dynasty of Travancore in Southern Kerala. Some anthropologists believed that Kerala's system of matrilineal kinship was the once the continuous practice that existed whole world, while some others asserted that it was envisaged due to some mysterious, forceful circumstances that replaced patriarchy at some point.

“In Kerala women enjoyed a position of singular importance, not least due to its matrilineal system of inheritance. Even their highly abbreviated sense of dress seemed outrageously uninhibited to the

more conservative and culturally judgemental Europeans, for it was unusual for women to cover themselves above the waist. It was as if they all lived in a state of perpetual dishabille but the fact was that being bare-bosomed was considered perfectly respectable. In fact in one instance in the seventeenth century when a local woman appeared before a princess covered in Western style, she was actually *punished* for doing this. Her breast were mutilated by royal order, since covering them were a mark of disrespect to the established manners of country” (Pillai, 13-14).

The book starts with a 20 page introduction of Kerala’s history, which was meticulously researched and followed by a clear chart of family tree of the House of Travancore. Altogether the book has 694 pages which are divided into 20 chapters and 131 pages of author’s epilogue and bibliography is provided at the end of the book. In the book, the author explains the problematic details of the way matrilineal gadget of Travancore laboured in both concept and practice. The fame, strength and freedom that women wielded insidedevice may be awatch opener to all those who have never questioned the certainties and assumptions of modern- day patriarchy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Michel Foucault terms power as a complex set of relations. It’s not just domination but according to Foucault it is the complex network acts of domination, submission and resistance. Power is not just ruthless domination of weaker by strong (Foucault, 27). His main aim is to replace the negative concept of power and attribute a productive nature to power. This idea of ‘Power’ can be seen in the book through the real life character called the Attingal Rani, Sethu Lakshmi Bai who is also known as the last and the forgotten queen of the house of Travancore.

“During 1920s the stormy fortunes of the five million subjects of the state were entrusted into the misleadingly gentle hands of a female monarch destined to go down the history as the penultimate ruler of Travancore and the last queen of Kupaka dynasty and its Ivory Throne. She presided over the state during most critical period, serving people with considerable ability even as she watched her dynasty suffer inevitable strategic attacks outside. She occupied a riveting world of court intrigues and illicit conspiracies, hatched not only by scheming politicians beyond the walls of her palace but also by ambitious members of her family in an all engulfing contest for power. With remarkable stoicism, however, she navigated her troubles- political, personal and dynastic- winning the reverence and love of her people far sighted policy and good government”(Pillai,19).

Yet there are other real characters in the book includes the antagonist, Junior Rani Sethu Parvathi Bayi, painter Raja Ravi Varma, the man who made a change in societal family order through his art work ‘*Here comes Papa*’ and his choleric wife, the devious matriarchs of ‘violent, profligate and sordid’ character, wife swapping court favourites, vigilant English agents who colonised India especially Kerala to fulfil their ambitions, quarrelling consorts and lustful kings and zamorins.

The layers of feminism were extensively seen in the southern parts of India in eighteenth and nineteenth century, especially in Kerala. When feminist movements whole over the world campaigned for women’s rights including voting, propertypossession, receive education, to have equal rights within marriage, women in Kerala especially, women of Travancore were ahead of time. They enjoyed the actual rights of women on those days. When other parts of the world saw the gender stereotyping of women, ‘Women’ in Kerala saw that as a taboo. For example when society created certain gender norms to women to be passive, shy, toexclude from their own passion and choices; this womenin southern parts of Kerala where just opposite of it in the terms of lifestyle and thoughts. This made Kerala women different from others parts of country, unfortunately it was not scribbled in histories until Manu S. Pillai made a five year constant research on Kerala history and reached to the conclusion with the abundant information of the bygone queen Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai who made drastic development in Travancore that we see today.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nestled among the robust Western Ghats and Arabian Sea, the Travancore from 1729 to 1949 existed almost as with a unique culture and traditions. At the same time as world changed under patriarchy, Travancore enjoyed Matriarchy. The succession was always from maternal aspect. When the nation hollered against Polygamy and revolted for re-marriage of widows. In the southern Polyandry existed with all mighty right and power. Even to the twentieth century, both men and women moved around bare breasted and that was not social taboo on those days. The book also depicts that in Kerala sexual openness were reflected in society through procedure called 'Sambandam' followed by Nairs and Ambalavasis wherein they had been allowed to enter into couple of contractual marriages. Travancore as kingdom always held the King in high regard and regarded him with admiration and devotion. The kings of Travancore were often praised in folklores, but the years from 1924-1931 were largely ignored. This awkward void piqued Manu's interest and he discovered a fascinating story about the Ivory throne's last female monarch, Her Highness Sree Padmanabhasevini Vanchidama Vardhini Raja Rajeswari maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai Pooradam Tirunal Attingal Mootha Thampuram commonly known as Sethu Lakshmi Bhai. As per the research, Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai was known to be as one of the important ruler of Travancore. Actually Sethu Lakshmi Bhai and her sister Gowri Parvathi Bhai were adopted from Utsavamadam Palace family in Mavelikkara. In the female line Travancore became heirless. Ayilam Thirunal Mahaprabha Thampuratti, Sethu Lakshmi Bhai's mother, belonged to the Kolathunad Royal family branch. Hereafter, Sethu Lakshmi Bhai was named as 'Senior Rani' at age of six and Sethu Parvathi Bhai as 'Junior Rani' of Travancore at the age four. When she was promoted to major in 1912, the Maharaja gave her the control of *Sreepadam* estate which included the revenue from Attingal and large land holdings owned by Sethu Lakshmi Bhai. When Sri Mulam Thirunal's reign came to an end in 1924, following his death on behalf of Sri Chitira Thirunal Bala Rama Varma his maternal aunt Sethu Lakshmi ruled princely state from 1924 to 1931.

"Foucault, one of the few writers on power who recognise that power is not just a negative or repressive thing that forces us to do something against our wish but can also be a necessary productive and positive force in society. In his Power Theory, he introduces a new mode of power called disciplinary power" (Foucault, 27). This mainly focuses on social discipline. For instance, Sethu Lakshmi Bhai as ruler, she executed her power for social needs more than her individual needs. The regency was formed amidst the problems, including Satyagraha in Vaikom. Gandhiji had a personal interview with the Maharani soon after 1925, and he praised for her simplicity and nobility. As a result a royal decree was issued, opening Travancore's public roads and streets to all Hindus regardless of caste. During Senior Rani's time, incredible things happened in social, political and economic fields.

Foucault's notion that power is constitutive of that upon which it acts has enabled feminists to explore the often complicated ways in which women's experiences, self-understandings, comportments and capacities are constructed in power relations in which they are seeking to transform (Foucault, 17). In the case of Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai, the word 'power' becomes more meaningful based on the notion of Foucault. It's because as a ruler the 'power' works based on the engagements she had with her people especially with women for their empowerment. There are many instance in the book where Pillai points out the clear understanding of the use 'power' as a ruler of the state and the feminist layers of social reform she had done for women in Travancore.

Maharani enacted a number of laws for the benefit of her female subjects. There was a transformation of Kerala into modern times as Maharani succeeded to the throne as a regent. The establishment of the village administration scheme, the productivity of civic bodies, high rise in literacy rates, women's empowerment and the rise of communism and unions. The big leap forward in state modernisation, the decision to develop the Kochi port was pivotal as was the royalty's

sincere concern for the people's welfare. Along with the interplay of the castes and religions: Sethu Lakshmi Bayi's reign saw a dramatic increase in Christian population and the growth of minority religions and the lower caste Ezhava's for entry into the temples.

In 1920s she insisted on women attending college and offered financial assistance. She had also declared that women who attended college in the state would receive an invitation to tea with their queen. This was an accomplishment and source of joy for women at the time. Dr Mary Poonen Luckose, Travancore's first woman graduate who graduated from best colleges in the west, was elevated by Maharani after her succession, from being in charge of Women and Children's hospital and her personal doctor, to the head of the Travancore's Medical Department. Dr Mary was also appointed to the Legislative Council by the queen. She was the first woman to be given this opportunity. It was first time in India that a woman was appointed as the head of the Department, and Lady Legislator set an example. Her appointment was announced in the Madras Mail, with the headline 'Feminism in Travancore'. Queen again nominated Mary Luckose in the next session of the council. Maharani's liberal behaviour for the rights of women can be seen in Kerala's history. But unfortunately history has wiped out revolutionary acts done by women especially Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai in Kerala.

There are other lots of 'powerpack' feminist activities were done by Maharani in Kerala before actual Feminism flourished all over the world. Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai gave female students opportunity to study the Law in 1927. Miss Anna Chandy was the first female judicial officer Anglo Saxon world not only in Travancore. She began her practice at Kottayam and ran for several legislative elections but lost and eventually became criminal lawyer at High Court in Trivandrum in 1930. Male colleagues in the court mocked her because she is a woman, saying that she uses her femininity to win cases. Another one said that if he would have won cases if he had worn a blouse and a sari. Anna Chandy was also referred as Kerala's *First Generation Feminist* of Kerala, according to sources. Sethu Lakshmi Bhai lifted Women's College in Trivandrum from second to first grade 1927, gaining affiliation with the University of Madras in the process. History, Natural Science, Languages and Mathematics were among the subjects they taught. Women's education was improved by bringing trained teachers and lecturers down from Europe at a substantial cost. In Travancore's college, there were about 232 female students and in English schools, there were about 9,500 female students. By 1928, there had been such a huge explosion in the women's education by that the unemployment enquiry committee had to surprise of its members by conducting specific studies on the problem of female unemployment in Travancore. Maharani made a comment on it in one instance 'A degree,' it would note in its report 'make a daughter as valuable in the parents' eye as a son also expressing some amazement that women 'look for employment as eagerly as men do...' (Pillai, 278).

Mrs Elizabeth Kuruvila, another woman was selected to the Legislature by the Maharani in 1928. Maharani attempted to provide women with equal opportunities in Government positions. By 1931, she had nominated more women for the Sri Mulam Assembly. The Maharani rewrote the rules of assembly to allow women to run for and vote in the Assembly. Women were granted their rightful position in the political life of the nation, as per Maharani's wishes. It's worth noting that these women came from different castes, both high and poor, in order to serve their fellow humans.

The Attingal Rani was also responsible for a slew of other social changes. Animal sacrifice was outlawed in Travancore by Sethu Lakshmi in 1925. She rescued women's lives from an age-old social practice called Devadasi system by doing so. She eschewed the traditional practice of appointing upper caste Brahmins and Nairs as Dewans. In 1925, she named M.E Watts as her Dewan. The Nairs and Ezhavas marriage and inheritance law were modified. The method of inheritance was another important factor that distinguished from the rest of India. In Kerala, the 'Marumakkathayam' method of inheritance was widely used. When the other parts of India actively engaged in polygamy system, the Kerala especially in Travancore women actively engaged in

‘polyandry’ system where women were free to have more than one husband or male mate one at a time. The female child is always given preference. Manu Pillai mentions another level of ‘power’ female children had during those times. Once the female child inherits the possession or throne one is allowed to call her name instead everyone should address her as ‘Her Highness’. Even her father or husband should address her as ‘Her Highness’. The husbands were not allowed to talk directly with Rani without their permission and they were not permitted to sit beside of their wives as per the rules of the court. The husbands were seen as the mere subjects to the Rani.

But this system was broken by Rani in later years. In later 19th century after the influence of British in Kerala many changes were made in the rules of the state. The more interesting thing is, Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bai is the one who supported the ideologies of the British. In that impact she made several changes in the system of Inheritance called ‘Marumakkathayam’. The Nair Act of 1925 was enacted to deprive nephews of all rights to their uncle’s land. It provided for the partition of Nair Tharavads and incised the very root of Marumakkathayam system. These laws gave women the same rights as men when it came to inheritance of land. Matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy. Even though she changed the matrilineal lineage system to patriarchy albeit she gave more interest in women empowerment through their education. In Travancore the marumakkathayam system was eventually replaced by patrilineal nuclear family system in 1928. In 1925, a law establishing, Panchayats in rural areas was passed with the aim of fostering local self-government. In 1926, the Newspaper regulation act was enacted to prevent the misuse of press. It became a disputable topic as it curbed many rights of press. Education got more significance under her reign. Mainly she concentrated on women education as mentioned earlier.

Foucault in his works he criticises traditional power models. Power is not about simply saying no and oppressing individuals, social classes or natural instincts, instead power is productive. It shapes forms of behaviour and events rather than simply curtailing freedom and constraining individuals. He argues in *The History of Sexuality, Volume. One*: “If power was never anything but repressive, if never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?” (1978:36) (Foucault, 14)

Manu S. Pillai in his book, depicts some of the other incidents where the kings who misused their ‘power’ for their greed. Unlike Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bai there were kings who ran after the power. “In 1729 Marthanda Varma upon his accession sent a chilling message across Kerala, showing himself capable of not only breaching age-old tradition, but also exercising ruthless force to satisfy his ambitions. He set an eerie example, for instance, by slaughtering his own cousins in cold blood when they refused to fall in line with him” (Pillai 16). In the book Manu talks about how Marthanda Varma expanded the borders of the Travancore and the people considered him as invader who came to invade their land. The people had great hatred towards the king. In order to quell this dangerous situation Maharajah discovered the power of faith.

“In January 1749, a decade before his death, Marthanda Varma performed a fabulous, visually stunning ceremony in the great Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Trivandrum. It was loaded with religious meaning, making a tremendous statement to the world at large. That morning the Maharajah laid his sword before the sanctum- sanctorum of the temple, and through a number of elaborate and awe-inspiring rituals, dedicated his freshly forged principality to the presiding deity in perpetuity. Travancore, as it existed on that date, now belong to Marthanda Varma or any of his family but Sri Padmanabhaswamy. The Maharajah assumed the ostensibly humble title *Sri Padmanabha Dasa*, Servant of the Lord, hereafter claiming to rule over Travancore as the earthly representative of his dynastic deity. Any action against the ruler or the principality was now *swamidroham* a crime against almighty” (Pillai, 248-249)

As a result, a new story emerged, portraying Marthanda Varma as a great and zealous defender of faith. It’s worth noting that this was calculated political gesture aimed at obscuring the injustices of

Marthanda Varma's conquest and cloaking the bloodshed of war in a veil of religious mystique.

"He was hardly being original here, for sensible monarchs before him had always used faith as an instrument of power; even the Muslim Sultan Balban of Delhi had himself declared Allah's vice regent on earth in the thirteenth century in order to secure his power in an unstable political environment." (Pillai, 249)

In other incident also took place in the history where Manu sarcastically shows how Carmalite Christian friars came to Kerala. They understood that the king is not the Brahmin but Nair or Kshatriya. So in order to elevate the status in June 1751, Marthanda Varma through the means of another extravagant ceremony known as *Hiranyagarbha*, upgraded his own dynastic line in caste and social status.

"As early as 1739, in fact the Dutch recorded that the Maharajah was anxious to perform a ceremony by constructing golden cow through whose mouth he was to go in and come out again at the tail in order to bear the title of Brahmin, which one of his ancestors held for himself through such a ceremony, while acquiring for his family, which was before of lower kind, the elevation to the Kshatriya caste, His Highness wearing the thread on this account" (Pillai, 250).

ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The fundamental subject that the author has covered is the social and political machinations for power. Pillai attempted to revive a long-forgotten age-old custom, the matrilineal system, which appears to be "abnormal" in today's world. The book's most talked-about issue, which led to the integration of many women from all walks of life, regardless of status or caste, into society. Despite the fact that Rani was a strict orthodoxy, she opened the roads for low caste people and allowed them to work regardless of their caste or social background. While it is clear from the book that the author is enthralled with the life of Sethu Lakshmi Bhai, he does not display any favouritism when describing the book's protagonists. These seven hundred pages of book is truly testimony of the life of Sethu Lakshmi Bhai where who was once a ruler of state and died unknown. When history forgot to mention her younger writer made his consequent effort to bring the extraordinary woman to the lime light. The use of Foucault's power theory also helps for the detailed understanding of power tussles and matrilineal power that occurs in the book.

CONCLUSION

The other interesting information that author of the book discusses that earlier; the princes were always equal to the citizen. But this was changed by Travancore King Marthanda Varma. Here, Foucault's Power Theory is more applicable in this situation where he states that "Where there is power there is resistance" (Foucault, 95). Foucault states that power cannot be treated as control or mere oppression. It is only through the articulation of resistance the power can spread through the social field. In this case when Marthanda Varma exercised power using religion people tried to resist and stood against the evil agendas of King Marthanda Varma. Here by using Foucault's notions of power, Manu S. Pillai shows how power is utilized negatively and productively by Kings and queens of Travancore.

He also points out the feminist agendas practiced by the Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai before the actual flourishing of Feminism. Though the book focuses on Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai and her turbulent reign, it begins with a wide yet colourful overview of Kerala history years. To help the reader, understand the epochal changes that were afoot in Travancore in the early 20th century, Pillai delves into the arrival of the Portuguese, the fall of the royal families of Calicut and Cochin, the emergence of Travancore and the matrilineal culture. Kerala's social, political and historical development over three centuries, almost to the time of partition has been painstakingly recorded in the book.

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