

Iyer women of Kerala  
By  
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Women play a very important role in the safeguarding of culture of any community. It is they who really teach the next generation about the customs, history, religion and culture to the upcoming generations of boys and girls. A peep as to how they were earlier generations and how they are treated now is what is attempted here. Please remember that I am in my sixties and I had gathered lot of information from my elders belonging to my father's and grand father's generation. I am confining my self to the iyer women of Kerala.

Grand mother's generation.

Most of the men and women at that time lived in Agraharam's and Otha Madams across Kerala. Most of men earned their livelihood by money lending, cooking, and music and to a small extent by learning Vedas .The women of that time not only did not earn money but according to the Mithakshara Nyaya which they followed were not supposed to own any immovable assets. Education was almost unknown to them except in a few rich families. They got married before they attained menarche. If the parents were not able to arrange the marriage of their daughters by that time, the whole society of iyers looked down upon them .Because of this most of the poor families gave their darling daughters in marriage to very old widower as second or third wife. There were also instances of selling of these children to Old Brahmins of Andhra. The sale was arranged in Madras town. After marriage even a small girl of seven or eight was supposed to wear the 18 yards sari in the traditional way. They were sent to their husband's home only after they came to an age and the nuptials were celebrated after that. There was large number of deaths of men and women at that time due to scourges like Small Pox, Malaria, and Plague. There were several cases where the girl after marriage became a widow even before she came to an age. Her head was then shaved off and she was forced to live in her family a life of a widow. It is not an exaggeration to say that most of the Iyer houses had a widow living with them. Because the joint family system prevailed, these innocent girl children were mostly ill treated by their mother in laws. Any rebel girl was sent back to their parents hose and lived alone. They were called Vazhavetti. First pregnancy was a great risk. At least one in 6 of the girls died during their first delivery. The husband happily married another girl as soon as possible.

Most of the men partook in temple feasts or took free meals in Ootu purais. The unmarried girls and boys also were allowed in these free food programs. These children were instructed by their mothers to bring home Papadams, Fruits sweets etc which were served to them. They lead a very frugal life. Apart from this was the fact that a good number of men entered in to Sambandam (marriage contract) with Nair or Ambalavasi women. .Wife beating was a very major hobby of most of the men. The wife had not only bear all this but also look after all the heavy work of the house like drawing water from deep wells, wet grinding, looking after cows, cleaning the house as well as courtyard, looking after a hoard of children etc. May be due to their very frugal food habits they

outlived their men most of the times. Most of them like their men lost all their teeth before they were 60 and became hunchbacked if they live up to the age of seventy.

Looking back, this life appears to be very inhuman but they really enjoyed it. They used to tell stories to their kids sing and also took the leadership in arranging several annual festivals. The family customs were known to them and they implemented these with iron hands. Once they became old (whether they were Sumangalis or widows) the men respected them.

It is painful for me to recollect that the word used to chastise a man, woman, boy or girl was Mundai (widow) (Kammannati in Tamil Nadu).

### Mother's generation

Things did not improve much but most of the men folk started doing jobs or running businesses (Mainly hotels) . This meant that their family fortunes were better. They had better dresses and could buy some ornaments. At least part of them started wearing the normal saris and the Madisar was reserved for special occasions. Due to modern English medicines death during delivery became rare. Most of the men lived beyond 50 and few of them started celebrating Sashti Abdha Poorthi. They were able to educate their children and once they started earning, they started looking after their mother well. Cracks began to appear here and there in the joint family system. Religion was very important. Love marriages were not known. Divorces and widow remarriages were unknown. When the British government brought the Sarada Act in the thirties to ban childhood marriages, An Athi Rudram was conducted in Palakkad .The population of widows in the agharam came down. Instead of every house having a widow it was a few widows per street. Wife beating was there but not very common. Mother in laws were uncrowned queens of the family.

### My generation

It is hard to believe that the entire society changed with tremendous rapidity. Child marriages never took place. Girls started getting married after they crossed twenty and the boys when they were nearing thirty. Very large number of iyer boys got into white collar jobs and joint family system ceased to exist. But clannishness was very much there and members of the same mega family felt that they were one. Love marriages were taking place but mostly within Iyers. Widow remarriages and divorces started to happen. Wife beating among iyers was a thing of past. The Hindu Code law gave them equal right to hold property. Many of the woman started taking up jobs to increase the income of the family. They were encouraged in this endeavor by their husbands .Men and women were healthy and normally lived up to around seventy years of age. Hunchbacked men and women or old people with walking sticks became a rare sight. People without teeth , became a very rare commodity. But in spite of all this the women of my generation did not leave their tradition.

### My next generation.

They have changed a lot. Most of them belong to the upper middle class and in most cases women were employed. Love marriages especially outside the caste became not so

rare. Widows mostly married. Divorces were taking place with great rapidity. But in spite of all this, I find that still they are the guardians of our families and tradition. When I move with them, I am very proud of belonging to the previous generation of these excellent youngsters.