

# THE DYNAMIC CHANGES IN THE DRESSING PATTERN OF THE MALAYALIS SINCE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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**Abstract:**

*The early societal condition and the dressing of the Malayalis are based on caste hierarchy and pass through different centuries and some of the drastic changes and landmarks in the dressing pattern of the Malayalis have been witnessed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all over the world witnessed different cross-cultural and historical experiments and its waves reached all the corners of the world directly or indirectly in which the sense of dressing and related fashion, design, trends, academics, challenges, etc. reached everywhere, including in Kerala. It gradually unties the clutches of caste on dressing in Kerala; it was a continuous process, and even now, the Malayalis are experimenting with different types of dressing and promoting trends and styles in dressing and allied industries. The journey of the dressing pattern of the Malayalis and its trend-setting was not accessible from its conventional types to modern. The dressing pattern and fashion do not exist independently, while its history indicates that it has direct contact with culture, art, politics, commerce and society.*

**Keyword:** culture, fashion and trends, humiliation, malayali identity, tradition.

**Introduction:**

Kerala, God's own country, was reorganized on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956, wherein Malayalam is the dominant language, and the people are called the *Malayalis*. The Keralites used to wear typical types of dressing, such as the *mundu* and *neriyathu*, as their traditional dressing pattern. The dressing is a cultural spectacle and a mirror of time, society and people. The dress of a people depends on their taste, appearance, sense of beauty, art, socio-geographical environment, etc.<sup>1</sup>

While passing through the changes in Kerala dressing since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is essential to understand the state's history. While analysing the historical background of dressing in Kerala, can see that a typical type of inequality existed in the use of dressing. It has been argued that caste supremacy and humiliation were evident in our traditional caste system.<sup>2</sup> Some degradation existed in which caste was the leading factor and each caste was given a different type of dressing. So inequalities based on dressing were the typical system in earlier Kerala and can see that some discrimination had existed even up to the first

four decades of the twentieth century. The lower castes and women were the utmost victims of the time and proper use of dressing was denied entirely to them. Too many agitations and protests like the *Channar* agitation, agitation in Kayamkulam were happening in Kerala, which was part and parcel of the inequalities based on the dressing. The condition of inequalities on dressing was changed due to the arrival of the Europeans, efforts by the Christian Missionaries, English education, the role of socio-religious reformers, agitations and protests, acts and reforms introduced by the concerned authorities, etc. and which paved the way for the reduction of inequalities on dressing in Kerala.

While looking back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can see that some people do not cover the upper part of the body including women. The famous social reformer V.T. Bhattathiripad witnessed in a temple, in Kudallur Mundamukasasthamkavu, in which sweeper girls to the older women were half naked and they didn't cover their upper part of the body.<sup>3</sup> Even after the three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the great social reformer Mannathu Padmanabhan said in his speech that such a system is still in existence in Kerala. An evil practice existed in the famous Kottaykkal Temple that the *Nair* ladies should enter the temple without covering their breasts. Mannathu Padmanabhan opposed this system and raised his voice against the system. Mannathu Padmanabhan said that "this is not fair and that they should oppose it and if it is not possible, the *Nair* sisters should not cooperate

with the temple." He says this in the Kottaykkal speech in 1931.<sup>4</sup>

The famous Kerala poet Changampuzha Krishna Pillai describes the *Pulaya* children as 'they are half naked' in 1937, tells about the condition of lower castes in that particular period.<sup>5</sup> The wife of famous prose writer C.V. Kunjuraman wore a *raukka* and her husband's mother hit her because she opposed the social system happening in almost the same period<sup>6</sup> indicating the evil practices that had existed in the pages of Kerala history. At that time, society saw it as bad behaviour to hide the breast, particularly in front of the upper castes. The statements like "humans are not meant to dress up; they are meant to create history"<sup>7</sup> showed the importance of changing scenarios during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Kerala.

Caste identity was prevalent in the society of Kerala and its symbols and signs are there in every part of the society including the basic needs of human beings such as food, dress and shelter. The food, dress and shelter style of the upper caste had an elite touch and for describing their basic needs beautiful and powerful words were used like *Illam* and *Mana* for their shelter; they used ghee ingredient food and their food are *chuttada*, *kozhukkatta*, *ottada*, etc. The *savarna* (upper caste) food were called *Pakka* and their dress was called *uthareeyam*, *neriyathu*, *kasavu*, etc.; all these words have come under the elite category, while the shelter of the *avarnas* (lower castes) were called *maadam*, *kudi* (hut), the food of the

*avarnas* were called as *kacha*, their gruel are called *kaadi* they were denied from using ghee in their food preparations, their dress should be identifiable to the society with the wearing style, the caste of a person is identified following their *uduthukettu* (wearing style of dress), like up to the knee, above the knee, up to the anklets, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The condition of women in a society is also a catalogue to evaluate a society. If their women enjoyed more freedom, the society should be considered sound in all its spheres. In contrast, a society permanently curtails the rights of women and humiliates them on every occasion on a gender base; it will be analysed as a dead society. The condition of women in the society of Kerala before the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very vicious and its intensity began to decline in subsequent centuries, but the unequal treatment of women continued in different forms even now in Kerala, in which dress carrying a vital role, the dress is an identity of every woman and always it gave them confidence and comfort. Still, society's focus and views are indifferent even now when considering women's dressing sense. Most of the time, the rural areas of Kerala faced such problems at their peak.

The renaissance in Kerala always tried to rejuvenate the society from all these taboos and it gave a rational outlook to the society and consistently advocated for critical reasoning. The religious conversion by Christian missionaries, the advent of Europeans, the intervention of education, the role of socio-

religious reformers, the impact of media, etc., helped a lot to give a rebirth to the society of Kerala. At first, the women in Kerala got permission to cover their breasts only in their bedrooms, later the Proclamations made by Tipu Sultan in 1822 and the *Channar* Agitations from 1822-1859 helped the lower caste women to achieve their rights and goals in later days, but the complete and proper sense of dressing among them started again after years and years.<sup>9</sup>

So gradually, the dressing system and the dressing concepts changed, significantly it changed dramatically after the formation of the state. The newly formed government took care of the dressing of its people and as a part of this, they promoted the textile industries in Kerala. The state introduced some acts and regulations for the promotion of the textile field and as a result, some new textile industries were started and some of the oldest industries were rejuvenated. Dress is an index of evaluating the great cultural heritage of Kerala and it is also considered to express the *Malayali* identity. The influence of art forms, folklore, martial arts, etc., is precious in elevating dress as a symbol of cultural identity. Both the political and cultural changes permanently changed and uplifted the dressing style and fashion of *Malayalis*. Its after-effects are as usual far-reaching and multi-dimensional.

A change in the dressing came in Kerala from 1975 onwards, according to the trends seen in movies. With the changing trends

in fashion and design, dress codes have changed.<sup>10</sup>

The entry into the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked a significant transition in the society of Kerala and its culture. The late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have to seem the political intensification of sectarianism, in terms of nationalism, indigenous self-determination and ethnicity, often using dress to affirm social, cultural and political identities.<sup>11</sup> The period also witnessed the entry of globalization into Kerala. The effects of globalization and gulf migration impacted the dressing sense and trends among the *Malayalis*. As a result, people used to wear modern T-shirts, trousers, jeans, hats, etc. and they tried to imitate westerners through their dressing. To a certain extent, the dress is one of the most vital cultural products introduced by human beings and which have a pivotal role in every social structure.<sup>12</sup> However, the social, economic, cultural, political, religious, gender and administrative interference are different following time, ideology, region, economy, politics, etc.

Gradually Kerala began to move on with the world trends and fashion; all these changes are the products of the influence of media, both printed and visual. Even fashion channels and magazines produced immense fashion and costume sense among the *Malayalis* without any forms of discrimination and everything is going to be fine with fashion and comfort.

As a result of all these, the traditional dressing of the *Malyalis* started to disappear

and is now reserved for special occasions like *Onam*, *Vishu*, marriage and other unique festivals only. But there was a slight change in the wearing style of traditional dressing by some people and it is not the same as that of the conventional type, but it is based on the fashion and comfort of the user. Today *sarees* are available in other forms, like *sarees* with crop tops, short *sarees*, pre-draped *sarees*, cocktail *sarees*, ready-to-wear, etc. and all these are centred on fashion, comfort and flexibility for the user.<sup>13</sup>

Now the social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and online shopping platforms like Myntra, Flipkart, Amazon, Meesho, etc., have affected the changing trends of the dressing consciousness of the people and they are in search of a “new” type of dressing according to trends and fashion. Fashion is dressing patterns that change rapidly and spread across more regions.<sup>14</sup> The ongoing trends of online shopping for dress items have emerged very recently and its successful continuation indicates how *Malayalis* are accepting the changing trends in the field of fashion. The period between 2010 -2020 is considered a years of technology, social media, gender-neutral fashion and sustainability and it should be marked as the year of transformation basically in dressing and style, the introduction of social media, influencers, artificial intelligence and a new wave of development. These years always welcomed comfortable fashion and gave goodbye to formal wear. Casuals, party wear, maternity wear, office

wear, executive wear, etc. became more popular with classic, folkloric, sports and elegant terms. T-shirts, gowns, midi, off-shoulder, maxis, wraps, sheaths, sweaters, smocks, tea-length, jeans, suits, shorts, jackets, swimsuits, etc., are the latest trends in dressing all over the world, including Kerala.

So can see that a century ago, *Malayalis* wore the dress that was put aside in the name of caste, religion, custom, etc. and which is now used by them as a sign of beauty, pride, power, wealth, prestige, etc.

### **Conclusion:**

In short, dressing in Kerala had a long-term journey from its earlier times, especially from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary times, because it faced many challenges and transformations. Dressing in Kerala is not an independent one and it did not solely emerge in the region, but it has a tremendous long-term history to disclose to the world. Once in Kerala, the dressing was caste and gender-based and in those days, some categories of the society were afraid of it; now all types of unequal treatment on dressings have vanished. It became possible due to several factors and the socio-political interferences are there for the transformation. Globalization, gulf, Singapore, and European migration, etc. helped the *Malayalis* to become trendy in their dressing patterns. Food, dress and shelter are the basic needs of human beings and people always try to style and update all

### **References:**

these three factors from time to time in accordance with their ability; dress puts one step forward because dress always gives them confidence and comfort and the people take it into their consider and dress as a symbol of their identity which always tried to uplift and update their dressing sense and fashion in which the media both printed and visual, social media platforms, online shopping opportunities carried a significant role.

So the dressing pattern and sense of the *Malayalis* was unpolished in earlier days and it became polished due to the close contact with lots of factors its glittering began to express since the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards and right now, the dressing sense of the *Malayalis* is in its zenith of glory and different types of academic courses, related with apparels, companies, textiles, costume designers, fashion designers are investing here and numerous fashion designers are emerging from Kerala. Rejuvenation in the Balaramapuram weaving centres, the Balaramapuram weaving clothes got the opportunity to represent in proud international platforms, including Oscar. Fashion and dressing are constantly changing and always compete with the dynamic world. Kerala's fashion trends are constantly evolving, not stagnant but do not pull out the conventional merits; they even follow traditional attires like *saree and mundu* as a part of their festive occasions with fashionable looks.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 68.

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