

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

**Dr. Sreenath V S**  
**Department of HSS, IIT Madras**

**Week 2 Lecture 14**  
**Transcript from the Video**

In today's lecture, we're diving into one of the most debated and dynamic aspects of 19th-century reform movements: the question of women and reform. You might remember from our previous sessions how deeply the native intelligentsia was invested in reshaping society. There was a genuine, urgent desire to reform Indian customs and practices—especially those seen as outdated or oppressive. While tradition remained central to how people imagined the ideal home and society, there was also a sense that tradition must evolve to keep up with the spirit of modernity. But here's where it gets complex: these well-intentioned reforms, often celebrated as progressive, also came with unintended consequences for women. As much as women were placed at the heart of the reform discourse, they were also frequently silenced, controlled, or idealized—rarely consulted. So today, we'll be looking closely at this double-edged sword of reform: how it aimed to uplift, but often ended up reinforcing old hierarchies in new ways.

In this lecture, we are going to examine how certain reformist activities took away agency from women. The first reform that we are going to see in this context is the abolition of matriliney in the Kerala context. The text that I would like to choose to explore the issue of matriliney vis-à-vis women's question is the novel *Indulekha* by O Chandu Menon.

Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* is a pioneering work in Malayalam literature. It is often considered the first major modern Malayalam novel, marking a significant departure from the erstwhile classical tradition. It established its modernity in many ways. For example, this is the first text to introduce a prose narrative that engages with contemporary issues. While the earlier works in Malayalam were set against the backdrop of puranic world, Chandu Menon set his story against the background of contemporary Kerala. The novel revolves around *Indulekha*, a highly educated, beautiful, and intelligent young woman from a Nair family. Her lover is *Madhavan*, a similarly well-educated and progressive young man. Their love is threatened by the predatory advances of *Suri Nambudiri*, an old, ignorant, and lustful person, who represents the decaying feudal order. Under the traditional matrilineal system, Nair women could enter into *sambandham* relationships with Nambudiri men. *Indulekha* who is a modern woman is not a passive victim. She firmly rejects *Suri Nambudiri*'s advances, thereby defying the social expectations of the time. *Madhavan*, unwilling to compromise with the oppressive system, moves to Madras (Chennai) to advance his career. After much struggle, *Indulekha* and *Madhavan* reunite and marry in a way that upholds their dignity and personal choice, symbolizing the triumph of modern, educated individuals over regressive traditions.

The novel is particularly important in our discussion of modernity because the text clearly evinces the aspiration of the Modern Nair men to establish their identity as progressive and liberal by bringing about a radical change in their community. Of all the major modernist themes that the novel takes up for discussion, the most important one is its criticism of the traditional matrilineal system.

Through the novel *Indulekha*, Chandu Menon wants to create for Nair men a radically new

modern identity which very well conforms to the notion of civility and modernity established by the West. This new form of identity is primarily attained by rejecting the traditional matrilineal system that was prevalent in Nair household of that time in Kerala. In the matrilineal system, as practiced by Nair community in Kerala, the wife's elder brother was the unquestionable authority in the family. Here, the responsibility of looking after the children was endowed with the elder brother of the wife thereby granting the uncle the responsibility of a social father. It is significant to note that in the matrilineal system, the real responsibility of the children was not connected to the biological father. While the real father remained as the biological father, the wife's elder brother functioned as 'the social father of the children.' The children mostly stayed with the uncle under his care and protection. The biological father was often viewed as a "stranger" to the child, while the maternal uncle played the role of a caregiver.

Closely associated with the system of matrilineality was the idea of sambandham which allowed a Nair woman to form multiple alliances. In the modern colonial society, sambandham, that is the practice of a Nair woman entering into multiple relations, was demeaned as 'concubinage.' In this system, the Nair women were also free to terminate the marriages at their will, as the married women still remained in their ancestral homes. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in his magnum opus *Kayar* gives a magnificent scene in this regard. In his novel *Kayar*, Thakazhi says that if the Nair husband finds his pillow and bed in the courtyard, as he visits his wife's house where the wife and children are permanently staying, then it is an indication that the marriage is terminated and he did not need to visit the place again.

The presence of such a system was a huge moral dilemma for the modern Nair men because it prevented the Nair men from having a family on his own. In other words, a Nair man in the matrilineal system could not independently assume control over his own wife and children, since his wife and children were directly under the control of another man, that is the elder brother of his wife. It was also a process of social emasculation as far as Nair men were concerned. It was this process of social emasculation that Chandu Menon wanted to resist in his novel *Indulekha*. According to Arunima, although Chandu Menon firmly believed that the Nair women and the form of marriage in the Nair community were different from the European situation, Menon as a modern man could not blindly support the system of matrilineality where his own masculinity was challenged. In other words, matrilineality is different and is native, and it is a system that is unique to his land and community. However, this system now needs to be reformed, since it completely effeminates Nair man. Similarly, the practices like sambandham was demonized as a concubinage by the colonial masters. What became the modern form of marriage in the colonial society was a patrilineal family. During this time, nuclear patrilineal relations came to define the ideal form of family in colonial society. Thus, the matrilineal systems, which allowed collective inheritance and flexible marital arrangements, was gradually replaced by monogamous patrilineal families where property and lineage were traced through male line.

I would also like to remind you that the eventual establishment of patrilineality as the commonly accepted kinship system was never an organic development. Nor was it a simple cultural preference. It on the other hand was a legally and ideologically enforced transformation in Kerala society. Patrilineality was increasingly presented as the "right" and "natural" order, in line with colonial modernity. It was achieved through the legal imposition of monogamous marriage and the assertion of individual property rights. The two crucial legal interventions in this regard include the Madras Marumakkathayam Act in 1933 and the Hindu Marriage Act in 1955. Through these legal interventions, the state actively dismantled these alternative kinship structures in favor of a nuclear, monogamous, and patrilineal family model. Thus

during the course of time, matriliney was systematically erased, and was replaced by a singular, state-sanctioned notion of family.

In the novel *Indulekha*, Chandu Menon is strongly trying to oppose the matriliney system which he thinks is at war with the modern values that he wants to embrace. In *Indulekha*, Chandu Menon imagines a new Nair world which does not follow the rules of matriliney. The kind of family that the central character of the novel Madhavan wants to set up for himself is patrilineal, nuclear and monogamous. It was also a form of marriage that was based on the notions companionate marriage. The traditional matrilineal system was thus replaced with a new conjugal family. It is outside the tyrannical hold of *karanavan*, the eldest maternal uncle. The wife and future children of Madhavan, who follows a patrilineal system of family, will be entitled to a share of Madhavan's self-acquired property.

In Kerala's system of matriliney, property was always inherited through the mother's lineage. This to a great extent ensured that women members in the family had strong inheritance rights. Nonetheless, women's control over property was very limited by virtue of the communal nature of family ownership. Property in reality belonged to the taravadu or the joint matrilineal family, as opposed to individuals. The management of the property was always overseen by the karnavan or senior male member in the joint family, often the maternal uncle. Although women had permanent residence and security, they never had real ownership over the property. They could not sell or transfer property without the eldest male member's approval. But The Madras Marumakkathayam Act (1933) weakened the communal property system by allowing partition, and the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 further dismantled matrilineal inheritance by establishing a patrilineal system, where sons and daughters inherited equally from their fathers. This transition from matriliney to patriliney granted women legal ownership and individual rights over property. Over time, these changes reshaped women's economic and social position, aligning Kerala's inheritance practices with broader patriarchal legal structures.

The end of matriliney and the introduction of the conjugal family unit were supposed to bring an end to the tyrannical hold of the eldest maternal uncle, the *Karanavan*, and to entitle wife and children to a share of the self-acquired property of their husbands/fathers. However the process of producing new rights also meant the sexual control of women within the conjugal family and served to define women and children in a dependent relation within a patriarchal framework.

In the matrilineal system, women had more freedom because they belonged to their taravadu or maternal family, which provided them with security and support. But with the shift to patriliney, they became financially and socially dependent on their husbands. The new conjugal family setup gave men more control over women's lives, especially their sexuality, because inheritance now had to follow a clear father-to-son line. This made monogamy, fidelity, and sexual discipline crucial to keeping property within the male lineage. So, while women gained legal inheritance rights, they also lost their independence, becoming more tied to male authority and stricter gender roles within the household.

In matrilineal system, sambandham was closely connected to the structure of taravadu. It allowed Nair women to form multiple alliances without being bound to a single, lifelong marriage. Since property and lineage were traced through the mother, women remained in their ancestral homes, and marriages could be easily dissolved if they wished. This gave them a level of personal and sexual autonomy that was unusual in patriarchal societies. However, with the rise of colonial rule and patriliney, sambandham was increasingly viewed through a

Western moral lens and was dismissed as mere 'concubinage' rather than a legitimate marital system. The shift toward a conjugal, monogamous family placed greater restrictions on women, requiring fidelity and sexual discipline to ensure that inheritance followed a clear father-to-son line.

Arunima's observations is worth quoting in this context. She says, "Just as Chandu Menon's novel, entitled *Indulekha*, was actually about the emergence of the modern Malayali man, so was the new political culture successful in sidelining women from the mainstream. The Nayers had achieved a new self and individuality in their transition to modernity—the pity was that it hinged on a rejection of the woman-centred 'otherness' of their matrilineal past." This is just a representative case. In many other reforms activities, which primarily aimed to civilize the Indian tradition, the women's agency was often curtailed. An interesting case in point is the story of devadasis in the South India. The Devadasi system which was prevalent in South India meant the dedication of young girls to temples, where they served as dancers, musicians, and ritual performers. These women who were called devadasis, meaning the servants of god, were considered wives of the deity, and hence were held in high esteem in their communities. A young devadasi was made part of the system through several ceremonies which were very similar to the marriage rituals of Brahmins. Before a devadasi reached puberty, she was only symbolically married to the temple deity. Once she reached the puberty, a grand ceremony was performed, symbolizing her union with the god. The ritual gave her the status of *nityasumangali*, suggesting that she will never experience widowhood in her life. From this point onwards, devadasis were free to choose their patrons who would be her sexual partner outside the framework of marriage. These patrons were often the wealthy landlords who used to manage the temple income. The children who devadasis gave birth to did not have any legal claim over the father's property. In spite of this, the relationship between a devadasi and her landlord was not purely sexual. Devadasis held an important ritual status in their patrons' household. They were also invited to perform ceremonies like weddings.

Unlike many other Hindu women in traditional patriarchal societies, many Devadasis were financially independent and had proper social standing. Devadasis followed the matrilineal system where their daughters could inherit the wealth, land and home of their mothers. In many cases, they also had control over temple lands and were given grants by local rulers and patrons to ensure their economic security. S Anandhi's observation in this respect is worth quoting here. She in her article "Representing Devadasis: 'Dasigal Mosavalai' as a Radical Text" opines that "During the medieval period, devadasis, who were honoured as, women associated with, temples, enjoyed some kind of position of power as well as temple wealth as their property. In 1011 AD, for instance, the Chola king Rajaraja presented lands and houses at Thanjavur to the temple dancers of Brahadiswara temple. Some of them were even entrusted with the temple management as trustees and as administrators of temple funds. This continued till the modern period."

The land that was given to the devadasis was officially in the name of the temple, and devadasis were allowed to use only the income from the land. If the devadasi had a female heir to continue the devadasi tradition, then these female heirs could inherit this property. It is also interesting to note that devadasis were also allowed to adopt a girl under Hindu law to pass on this right. This was a privilege that other Hindu women did not have. **Slide 11**

But, the social status of Devadasis started changing drastically with the advent of colonial rule and subsequent social reforms. The British administrators who viewed the devadasi system through the lens of Victorian morality found it immoral and oppressive, especially

because of its association with sex-work in later centuries. The British legal system, which considered the patrilineal inheritance and marriage-based property rights as the right practices of marriage and inheritance, treated devadasis as loose women and gradually undermined the financial autonomy of Devadasis. Many temple lands, which had historically been managed by Devadasis, were taken over by the government or temple committees dominated by male administrators. This process marginalized Devadasis economically, leaving them without traditional means of livelihood.

The final blow to the Devadasi system was in the form of the social reform movements in the early 20th century which sought to abolish the Devadasi system. The reformers, under the influence of the nationalist ideologies, saw the practice of devadasi system as a form of sexual exploitation against women and strongly argued for its legal prohibition. The Madras Devadasis Act of 1947 and many other similar laws in other parts of the southern part of the country outlawed the dedication of women to temples, thereby bringing an end to the system. Although the devadasi system was abolished in the name of protecting devadasis from sexual exploitation, its primary aim was to create a national cultural identity without the evil of unregulated sexuality. But while these laws which prohibited the devadasi system claimed to protect women from exploitation, they totally failed to address the economic and social displacement of Devadasis.

Niveditha Menon's observation here is very interesting. She opines that "The work of all the scholars on the idea of devadasi show that devadasis had rights to property, that other Hindu women did not have. But this right to property that devadasis had was ended by the abolition of the institution, often reducing the former devadasis to the very prostitution, which the reform movement had claimed to rescue them from, leaving them with little control over whom they could sell their sex to. Janaki Nair in her article "The Devadasi, Dharma and the State" further points out that since devadasis had performed sexual services within a broader cultural system, the devadasis held a unique position that set her apart from proletarianized sex workers. Once this cultural framework was gone through the official abolition of devadasi system, the devadasis were reduced to the status of proletarianised sex workers. This proletarianized sex work was often seen as a threat, rather than an adjunct, to the patriarchal household.

Similarly, when Hindu women's property rights were affirmed through legal reforms in 1933, the primary beneficiaries were upper-caste, middle-class women who followed monogamous, patriarchal family structures. The law mandated that only those women who followed the framework of the patrilineal, monogamous family system could claim rights over the property. Those women who were outside the framework of patrilineal, monogamous family system such as devadasis were excluded from these rights. The legal reforms reinforced the idea that only women within a recognized patriarchal household could inherit property, effectively denying inheritance rights to those outside this structure. In this way, the reforms reinforced patriarchal norms rather than truly expanding rights for all women.

In conclusion, while reformist activities in colonial India were often praised for modernizing traditions and improving women's conditions, they largely ended up limiting women's agency. The native intelligentsia sought to reform certain customs while preserving the essence of tradition, believing that tradition itself needed to evolve to fit modern times. However, many of these reforms, rather than empowering women, reinforced patriarchal norms and restricted their autonomy. By examining these reformist movements, we can see

how they often placed women in a more disadvantaged position, despite their progressive intentions. I hope you are thorough with all the major ideas we discussed in the lecture.