CHAPTER IV

GROWING UP IN MUTHUVAN KUDY

This chapter is an attempt to understand and describe how Muthuvan girls grow up in the kudy since their birth to their marriage. A Muthuvan girl in the kudy passes through various rituals and norms in every stage of development. And, it is through these processes a girl evolves into a Muthuvan woman. The elders and peers have an important role in the formation of a Muthuvan woman through their interaction, through the stories told by the older women and their involvement in the rituals that the children are undergoing. This chapter also explains and analyses the role of 'tradition', its beliefs, value systems and norms specifically those associated with sexual and reproductive health which influence the growth of a girl in that setting. I attempt to describe the living experiences of Muthuvan girl from her birth to marriage by taking life instances of the girls from infancy to old age, from the field which I have observed during my stay in two kudys. The first face of a girl’s life is analysed by bringing in the life of Kunjumani, whom I saw when she was 3 months old and have seen her growing till she began to walk. The next phase of a girl’s life is described by taking life instances of Sangeetha, who was 2 to 3 years, and then the events in the life of Aiswarya, Manju, Pushpanjali, Sunitha, Chithu are used to understand the process of evolving into a Muthuvan woman. The faces of all adult women I came across in the field appeared before me when I tried to draw the picture of a woman's life in Muthuvankudy. These life instances and insights have thrown lights in the direction of this thesis in explaining different phases of life of a girl child in Muthuvan kudy.

The discussions in this chapter attempts to trace the deep rooted elements of 'tradition' in the life of the Muthuvans and is set against the background of modern world views, life styles and practices. The dynamics in the practices are also traced here. An important thrust of this study is to approach and analyse these concepts and realities from the perspective of women, especially in the area of sexual and reproductive health practices. Like any other tribal community, Muthuvans also have traditional practices associated with the reproductive and sexual health practices. During my stay in the Muthuvan kudy, I was exposed to the richness of their culture and customs, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health. They hold many traditional practices which are at times flexible and therefore, there are changes that have been brought in by 'modernity'. But, their secluded life inside the forest, with limited interaction with other people
and the world outside as well as with media and market made them more rigid with regard to their traditional practices. The sexual and reproductive practices of Muthuvans including menarche celebration, marriage and child birth are studied within the wider context of the tribal weltanschauung (world view). Further, it has tried to explore the associated folklore and myths translated into the gamut of their customs, norms, rituals, practices and habits. There are many notions of pollution associated with biological characteristics of women's life. The social life of women too is regulated by terms of a patriarchal society. The second part of the chapter discusses on the construction of gender identity among the Muthuvans and examines the gender demarcations.

**Birth of a Girl Child**

The life of girl in Muthuvankudy is different from that of a girl living outside. Birth of a girl is important for her family and the parents value her much. Muthuvans especially the mother prefer to give birth to a girl child. Mother's lineage is carried by a girl child, as Muthuvans are a matrilineal community. Often, I could read from their words, the importance they give to motherhood than to marriage. “Anyone can marry and give me a child and go” these are the words I could hear from two of the Muthuvan women. It reveals that they don't give much preference to married life but give more emphasis to motherhood.

A baby born in the thinnaveedu is brought out to the vicinity of others after the first 3 weeks of birth. The mother gives birth to the child inside the thinnaveedu and she is shifted from the warmth of her mother to warmth of mud floor and fire from the hearth. A child birth is pleasurable moment not only for women but also to the entire community. Muthuvans fondly care for the children. For the initial 21 days her world is this grass covered narrow mud house and limited premises of the thinnaveedu. The mother of the new born has to cook, wash and clean on her own and along with this household work she has to take care of the baby. The mother carries the baby on the front part of her body tied with her sari. On the twenty first day she is allowed to come out of the thinnaveedu once the rituals are performed. It is then that the child is brought into the world where she has to live. When the mother comes out of delivery after three weeks she carries the baby on her sari. Before she comes out of thinnaveedu she has to take ritual turmeric bath. After that the father, grandfathers, elder brothers and other men are allowed to see the child. The baby is carried on her mother’s body attached with sari, she keeps the baby in the front part of her body in a sari pouch. This gives warmth to the baby from the mother's body. Further, it
helps the mother to recognize each movement of the baby. Baby's mouth is close to the breast so that breast feeding is done easily even when she is working. The Muthuvan child is attached to her mother's body even after birth, only difference is that earlier, it was inside the womb now it is outside. She sleeps and looks at the world holding on to the mother. The mother starts working in the agricultural field and cooking food for everyone from twenty second day onwards. This may also depend on the family support too. If her husband earns or is economically strong enough to support the family then the mother may stay few more days inside the house and do only the household chores.

When the child develops balance over the neck the mother carries the child on her back by using a separate cloth. This shifting is not only in position but in the way the child is tied also; earlier the baby carried on mother's sari that she was wearing; now the child is tied on her back using a separate cloth. Whenever, the baby wants to breastfeed, she is taken to the front side and after that she is placed on mother's back, inside a cloth knot. This way of carrying the baby is called poonukettal. This is like a cradle for the baby on mother’s body. This poonukettal is comfortable to both the mother and the child. For the mother both her hands are free and work normally while carrying the baby. She can work with her free hands and the baby is in the most comfortable place and is with the mother all the time. Mother carries the child wherever she goes, even inside the forest for collecting firewood. Sometimes, the mother sings lullaby in the Muthuvan language. When a baby wants her mother to take her, the child cries to mother, “amme poonu”, which means the child wants to get in to poonukettal. She starts going to the agricultural field along with her mother and see what her mother do there and sleep on her back, listen to the conversations and get the pampering from mother's fellow workers. In the evening she takes bath, along with her mother in the river and washes the cloths. While taking bath someone else holds her or she is kept on a rock in the river over the cloth for some five minutes. The mother carries the washed cloth in one hand and in the other hand mother holds the rope of the goat and lead them to the house. The multitasking mother is a role model for the little girl.

The initial steps towards forming into womanhood in the Muthuvan kudy begin in the childhood. She is either sleeping in the back of her mother or in other times watching what her mother does. The child observes her mother in her childhood. The child observes her mother’s role in the kudy at the same time as she is nurtured by the warmth and care of the mother and her relatives. This kind of moulding helps her to see kudy as her family. A bond between mother and child is developed. A man carrying a child tied on his back is a rare sight.
**Entering to Clan Identity**

Eventually, she becomes familiar to the community and people. Others, in the community come to see the baby. In some cases the marriage of the new born is fixed by the parents at the time of birth. The basic rule for marriage is clan. So the parents often decide the marriage of their children immediately after birth especially for girls. For girls it is appropriate to find out a boy elder than her from the appropriate clan. For a boy his parents have to wait for the next girl child's birth in the house of any of their relative of marriageable clan.

Among Muthuvan culture clan, lineage is very strong particularly for marriage and they mostly follow it and strictly prohibit endogamy. They promote inter clan marriage and among the other clans, they maintain preference for certain clans. For example, they prefer a boy from Ellukkottam clan to get married from Kaniyattukootam clan, than from other clans. From, the childhood onwards the elders in the community tease the children, referring them with prospective future brides/grooms. The elders in Ambalapadikudy used to tease Aiswarya, four year old girl, attaching her name with Unni, a six year old boy from another kudy. And they used to enjoy it with comments like, “look at her...how shy she is, hearing his name..” Aiswarya's marriage was fixed with Unni soon after her birth. Chandni and Raghu from Andavankudy, aged eight and ten respectively, are another examples for such early planning of marriage. They always play together, go to school together and spend most of the time together and both parents facilitate it. Everyone in the kudy recognises them as future husband and wife and they too have accepted it and live like that. The community gives such freedom to them and if one among them is not found around, obviously people asks the other, where he/she is?

Maniyamma said “we don't follow the marriage practices of Tamilians, when it comes to the practice of marriage between uncle and niece. She adds, “we also don't have marriages between sister and brother”. Here, brother refers to the sons of mother’s sisters or cousin brothers from same clan, so as for sisters. Maniyamma further clarified,

> Earlier we used to have marriage from a particular clan; but now, the present generation finds suitable couples for themselves, but never from the same clan. We have one position titled *Melvakka* in every clan, to take decision on matters of marriage. And he arranges everything when the concerned children reach the marriageable age. As everyone in the community knows the norms of marriage and their prospective couples, the relationship progresses without difficulty (Field notes 2008).

Thus, the children know their prospective partner and come to learn about their clan system.
Thinnaveedu as a Defining Junction of Life

At night the girl sleeps in the thinnaveedu, the place of her night stay, where she can see different groups of women. She stay with menstruating and delivered women with their babies and in the morning she will come back to the house and support her mother in all household chores and agricultural works. The same time she understands the role of a boy in the community. He sleeps in the chavadi and takes part in decision making regarding agricultural work and the arrangement of functions in the kudy. There is a boundary to enter the chavadi and thinnaveedu. Girls are not encouraged to enter chavadi and play in the surroundings of chavadi.

The same way the boys are not allowed to enter thinnaveedu and mostly boys have an aversion towards thinnaveedu, as this is a place attached with pollution. Parthivan a four years old boy, when her mother sits in thinnaveedu due to menstrual pollution says, “that is a dirty place, amma is sitting there, I don't want to go and see her”. When his brother was born, he did not go to that place and see the little brother. This kind of a demarcation between thinnaveedu and chavadi is developed in early childhood itself. Staying in thinnaveedu helps her to have a strong peer relation and mostly the relatives are her peers, since in one kudy mostly relatives stay together. There is no need to push her to go to thinnaveedu from the side of parents, she herself moves to thinnaveedu when she sees her peer and elder siblings go there.

In thinnaveedu too she sees the women staying in a separate room during their menstruation. These systems of the kudy force the girl child to place herself as a woman and learn the binding forces of womanhood of the kudy. She learns about the marriage and relationships through discussions in the thinnaveedu. A Muthuvan girl internalises her clan identity through her interactions with the people. She experiences the gender demarcation existing in the kudy. Thinnaveedu plays the role of nurturing a girl into identifying the clan system, women identities and preparing her for marriage, which they consider as a major life goal. She is getting training from old women on her role performance as a woman and the do's and don'ts in the kudy. She made to believe in the pollution associated with her body. In few of these thinnaveedu’s there are partitions in which one section will be used by the menstruating women and the other part by the girls for sleeping. This separation I could see in the Edalaparakudy of Edamalakudy but I could not see this in any other kudys. But in other kudys they keep distance from the menstruating women. Menstruating women sleep in a corner and others sleep in another corner. These separations make the girl understand the concept of pollution attached with a female body. She plays with boys and in the evening boys go to the chavadi and she goes to thinnaveedu. It helps
her to understand the gender separation and the role of thinnaveedu and chavadi in the kudy. There is no opportunity for a girl to interact with outsiders other than Muthuvans in the forest. Therefore, she do not know the differences and systems followed by others. Chavadi controls all the kudy activities and thinnaveedu is the place associated with reproduction and pollution.

**Schooling**

The girl's education begins and she starts going to school, either inside the kudy or the place of societykudy, where the government school is situated. Mostly girls and boys go together and the would be couples get opportunities to interact. From the school she starts learning alphabets and a new language, Malayalam. Teachers mostly speak Malayalam and that is a new language for the children. Some of the children stop education and some continue going to school even after the fourth class. After the fourth standard the children are expected to go out of Edamalakudy for further education as there are no schools which provide education after fourth standard. Therefore, most of the children especially girls stop going to school after fourth or sometimes they sit in the same class for two or three years. Being in school seems to be important and they are not much bothered about going up in the ladder. One day Vidhya came to me and showed a paper asking me to read it. It was surprising for me to learn that she was non literate. Her mother Maniyamma is the Anganwadi helper in Ambalapadikudy and had studied up to seventh standard outside the kudy. Maniyamma and family were staying outside the kudy and had migrated to the Edamalakudy later. Being in Edamalakudy deprived her children's education. Usually, if the parents are educated, they mostly prefer to send their children to school. But, the case of Vidhya shows they are not much bothered about that and they were not keen to utilize outside sources for children's education.

There was even an incident where two of the students of class four, named Thankalai and Vasavan, aged twelve and thirteen eloped. They went to another kudy in Edamalakudy itself and started living together there in an empty house. Lekha says, “What is wrong with that? They know each other from childhood that they would get married and live together. When they felt mature enough to live together they eloped”. The community does not deem it as a child marriage or find anything wrong in it and accepts them in due course. The community would have got this marriage done as per its norms; but the couple did not wait for that and they just started their own life at a time they decided.

The kudy system prefer to prepare the girl for marriage than sending her to school. Ammu was
studying in ninth standard at Marayoor. Her marriage had been fixed with her uncle’s son Sivan when she was a child. She was not much interested in studies and often talked about marriage. Once her grandfather, Mayilswami commented in the context of another wedding of an uneducated groom and educated bride, “What is the need for Ammu to study? Her groom has not studied and his father has got abundant cardamom plantation. Why does she need any education?” From this incident it is very clear that they do not prefer education, for them the kudy system and marriage is important for a child's growth. Education is a new thing in their life and one has to go and stay outside of Edamalakudy to get education. Another concern was that if one go out and stay after menarche how do they obey the pollution norms outside. Outside the kudy, they go to school and interact with others which also brings in a dilemma in the parents and other older generation. School is a different place which is out of their system. The teachers speak another language and their dress and symbols are different and as they move out of Edamalakudy for education, she starts understanding about a new world outside. Only those who go out of Edamalakudy for education or any other purpose like visiting relatives have seen the outside world. Otherwise Muthuvans generally do not have any knowledge about the outside world. But, the one who study outside are able to live with others belonging to different communities. This interaction gives ample opportunity to understand different cultures. But, interestingly at present both boys and girls are studying outside. This is the first generation who have gone out and are staying in a tribal hostel for their study purpose. Meeting other tribes in the residential school and also staying there gives them an opportunity to interact with different people. This generation of children when they come back after education, may be the change makers of Edamalakudy Muthuvan community. At Marayoor and other places they interact with other people in the market place, in the hospital or any other places but they also do not have living experiences. Therefore, the present generation those who have interacted with the outside world and have living experience with others may see the present Muthuvan kudy structure differently. Their attitude and behaviour is going to decide the future of Muthuvan kudys in general.

From Girl to a Woman
The dress of a girl child is a skirt and small shirt. They usually wear this type of attire until the girl is ten years old. This change in the dress code is marked by a function known as Kondakettu. This function takes place between the age of ten and twelve. The mama (maternal uncle) takes the lead for performance of this ritual and his daughter prepares the incumbent for the function. The girl who does all preparation is known as Mura, a name called only on the day of the ritual.
Otherwise, she is called as koottal. Usually, the brother of this Mura is the fiancé of this girl undergoing Kondakettu. However, only for the first and second daughters of a family, the mama perform these rites, while for the rest the father alone does it. So as is the case of marriage, where elder daughters' marriage is fixed even before their birth, the decision on the marriage of younger daughters is slow and depends on the availability of changar.68

Kondakettu is a function with which the perspective of the community about a girl changes, a change from seeing her as a kid to a 'woman'. Since kodakettu a girl starts to drape sari and her hair will be tied as a ball (konda) on the back side and decorated with lots of flowers and she is supposed to continue knotting her hair in this style. In most cases, the girl’s education will stop after the kondakettu. It means for her that all external contacts are curtailed. Now, the girl has ceremoniously entered womanhood and she is supposed to be performing all duties expected of a woman. On this day, the girl is declared 'eligible for marriage'. The girl on this day is taken to the river and on the way they sing songs, tease her and decorate her hair with lots of flowers and garland of flowers. She drapes a sari from there, gifted by her mama or father. Then the whole day she and her peers will play and enjoy in water and with songs. She is solemnly taken by the peer groups to the front door of each house in the kudy. In the evening there is food for all the people in the kudy organised by mama or father. People from other kudy are also invited in the evening for the feast.

Most of the girls from this age group have stopped their schooling after kondakettu. Chinnathai 18 years from Marayoor said 'I could not study after fourth class, by that time they performed the kondakettu ceremony. After that I was not allowed to go school and even all my peers stopped schooling after kondakettu'. Seematti, 23 years old, studied till fourth standard and she says,

Now, I don't know any alphabets. I only know how to work (paniyedukkan mathrame ippol ariyoo). After 4th class I haven't seen any paper or writing.

Some women from Marayoor also said that they stopped schooling after the fourth standard even though they had the facility for studying further there. I asked a few women and they said 'After the fourth standard kondakettu happened (kondaketti vittu)' (subjected us to kondakettu and thus restricted to the school).

68 Changar is the word they use for referring to husband as well as for cross cousins who are males. The word used to refer to wife and cross cousin sisters is kuttal

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Kondakettu is a ritual which is directly connected to maturity and shows a shift of identity from child to a woman. Her behaviour is controlled and she begins supporting her mother at home and learning all works a Muthuvan woman is supposed to do. The girl’s preparation to become a mother, wife or into an adult Muthuvan woman begins on the day of kondakettu. Change in her dressing also forces her to behave like a woman. This change in dressing helps her to understand the transformation of being a child into woman. And it also helps other members of the kudy to identify that the girl is ready for marriage. Kondakettu and the schooling are directly connected in Muthuvan girls life. She cannot go to school without uniform and konda hairstyle. Once the ritual of kondakettu is performed it means that, she cannot change this dress style in the kudy until her motherhood. After she becomes a mother she can drape normal sari. But those who are studying outside will wear uniform in the class and normal dress generally like a girl in her age is supposed to be wearing. Whenever they come back to the kudy during vacation or after finishing education, they completely obey the kudy rules and wear the dress which she is supposed to be wearing in kudy.

Attire and Identities

The normal way of draping a sari is called maradi. Maradi way of draping the sari is followed by the woman who is a mother. All unmarried women and those who are married but do not have children drap sari in a different style called Melpudava. Melpudava is worn in a way in which they put a knot on the shoulder with the two ends of sari (Picture is attached in the appendix). Even today, some of the old women drap sari melpudava style without blouse. When a young woman becomes mother, she has to change her dressing pattern from melpudava to maradi. Here, the motherhood is identified through the dress they wear. This shows the importance of the motherhood attached with Muthuvan. If, anyone sees a woman with this dress code, it is easy to recognise the identity of that woman. Women are not supposed to wear slippers. If they are going outside of the kudy, they will carry the slippers in hand and wear it from the outskirts of the kudy. They always knot their hair on the head, called Kondakettu. If the hair is without konda or open, it is considered as a bad omen. All married and unmarried wear many bangles, married women wear more bangles compared to that of unmarried women. Few of them wear gold chains.

The Anganwadi teacher from Marayoor elaborated a girl’s situation in the kudy

A girl named Sunitha from Periakudy studied up to 10th standard and scored good marks. Her father did not want to send her for further education and he wanted to arrange for her wedding. But she refused to marry and wanted to study more. She came to the Anganwadi
teacher, informed her desire, and threatened that she would commit suicide if her father did not send her for higher education. The teacher persuaded her father and told that “If anything happened to this girl I would call police”; and then he agreed to send his daughter for higher education. For one week the teacher went out of the kudy for training and when she came back to the kudy she heard that the wedding of Sunitha was over. Now she is in Edamalakudy and is appointed as an Anganwadi teacher. She used to come and meet the Anganwadi teacher of Marayoor Peria kudy when she visited her own family. She told the teacher that her life was full of hardships because her husband was very suspicious and he never allowed her to wear a good sari or even comb her hair properly (Field notes 2009).

For a Muthuvan woman, her identity is in her appearance which includes the way the sari is draped, the number of bangles and her hair style. This external appearance describes the women's identity as a mother or a married woman and the stages in her reproductive life. For example, the konda on her head and wearing melpudava identifies that she is preparing for marriage and has entered into womanhood. After kondakettu she starts learning all the works necessarily known by a Muthuvan woman.

**Thalemutt - Menarche: the Celebration of the first Red Spot**

When the menstruation starts, immediately the girl is sent to thinnaveedu and she stays three nights there and sometimes one or two more days depending on the availability of funds to celebrate thalemutt. Fourth day after the onset of first menstruation, maternal uncle’s daughter takes the girl to the river in the early morning along with her kuttal called *mura*\(^{69}\) on this particular day. When the girl menstruates for the first time and is made to stay in the thinnaveedu all the relatives come, greet her, and gift her things like bangles and chains. Thus, the 'first red spot’ is approached with reverence, celebrated and remembered forever. Muthuvan girls have late menarche mostly after fourteen. While I was in the Kudy I could observe three menarche rituals performed of the girls between the ages of sixteen, fourteen and fifteen years. Usually, the thalemutt celebration is the responsibility of maternal uncle. He organizes and spends for the function. But in some cases the father himself performs thalemutt ritual, especially for the younger ones. It is absolutely the right of uncle and when it comes to second and third there is a choice for the father. Earlier, it was only uncle’s responsibility but now the responsibility of performing ritual is taken over by the father. I observed the thalemutt ceremony of Chithu, who is the eldest daughter of her parents and her thalemutt was arranged by the maternal uncle. As he requested a day more to arrange for the money for celebration Chithu had to stay in the

\(^{69}\) One who supports the girl or the mate of the menstruating girl on this day
Menarche Celebration

One day I came to know that the thalemuttu ceremony of Chithu is being performed during my daily visit to Andavankudy. She was in the thinnaveedu and seeing me enter, she hid her face from my view. She was smiling but not looking at my face. She wore many bangles and chain around her neck, all gifted by the people in the kudy. She entered into thinnaveedu on Tuesday afternoon and Chithu’s menarche celebration had been planned for Sunday. All these days, I visited her in the thinnaveedu and all elamtarimakkal gathered there and sang songs called ashapattu. The songs they sing on this occasion are related to marriage and thalemuttu. Songs are full of teasing and has references to her being/becoming a woman. All women from the kudy had gathered around thinnaveedu to meet Chithu to give her gifts like bangles and chains. The gifts are supposed to be returned to the owner after the celebration since they give their own bangles to the girl.

To observe the rituals of menarche on fifth day, starting with the ceremonious bath, I reached the river side quite early on Sunday morning and stayed around the area close to the bamboo bunches. No one was there. After fifteen minutes, Chithu and her kuttal Kamakshi along with chinnakutty and elder sister of Selvi, came to the river. Chithu is a silent girl and she never talked much. Kuttal is the authorised person (mura) to do everything this day for Chithu. Kamakshi started to bead the flowers for Chithu and for herself. All elamtharimakkal had been collecting flowers from the previous day itself. They carried pots and turmeric powder along with them. Kamakshi put turmeric on Chithu’s face and hands. After that she poured a pot of water on Chithu’s head and the whole body. More elamtharimakkal reached from Andavankudy by that time. Chithu's kondakettu ceremony was performed before two years. And she had started wearing sari and her hair was tied in the back of her head after kondakettu. She stopped her education after passing the fourth standard.

Chithu’s hair was then covered with flowers. Everyone started to pour water on her. Aswathi and Seematti from Andavankudy reached the river, and started splashing water on each other. Many women both married and unmarried from Andavankudy gathered there in the stream and first they poured water on Chithu’s head and later on each other’s body. Chithu carried a pot of water containing turmeric powder on her head. All women started playing in the water which they refer

70 A group of adolescents or young unmarried girls
to as *thanmiyala*. Later they all carried a pot of water on head and returned to the kudy, moving in a line one by one. In between, they were passing by a small stream; they started playing again in the water irrespective of their age. They were singing *ashapattu* loudly. Finally, they reached the kudy. They all continued playing with water in the kudy also. They started splashing water on everyone around, including the health inspectors and Junior Public Health Nurse who had come there for medical camp. Bindu the single school teacher was inside the room hiding from the group. They started pouring water to the room through the narrow edges of the door. Then Bindu came out of the room and all people got around her and poured a lot of water on her.

Meanwhile Chithu had been taken to all the houses by Kamakshi. When she reached in front of each house they poured water on her and then she moved on to the next door. This was going on until noon. Later in the afternoon, Chithu was taken to the river again for bath. All elamtharimakkal joined and they were singing *ashapattu*. They took three hours to finish the ritual bath. Andavankudy kayarumakkal went to all kudys in the neighbourhood and invited them to Andavankudy for dinner. School-going boys, aged eight to twelve years, came to Ampalapadikudi and in front of each kudy they announced ‘*Andavankudykku virunninu vaa*’ (come to Andavankudy for the feast). When they came back to kudy all kayarumakkal prepared the food: rice and sambar. They had lots of hearths in open air in a single line; they borrowed vessels from different homes, and cooked rice and also prepared *sambar*.

By six o’clock in the evening all of them sat together in small groups of four to five persons and had the feast in banana leaves. Women sat in another place. The utensils are left unwashed (till the next day morning). By eight in the night, all finished eating and started dancing to the tune of their typical music. Men and women danced in separate places. Usually, the elamtharimakkal and Kayarumakkal danced together. It went up to ten o’clock midnight. All people in the kudy seemed to enjoy dancing. Jamanthi, a girl told me that she came from Ampalapadikudy mainly for dancing. Some kayarumakkal and elamtharimakkal from other kudy had come to Andavankudy for this menarche celebration/ function and to join the community feast thereafter. I had a good rapport with the peers of Chithu and her mura kamakshi and hence I could involve well in observing and participating in the events. But, I observed that initially they wanted to pour water on me but they were confused about my response. In the initial part I was not inclined because I wanted to record the function fully. Finally, when we reached Andavankudy their water play was in full-swing and they poured water not only on me but also on the team of health workers who had reached in the kudy. In this function I felt more or less an insider, because of the familiarity
of the group and since they also considered me as one among them.

Celebration of menarche is symbolic. Turmeric is considered as a purifier and they pour water on girl's body with turmeric. Again from the river she is taken back to the kudy and this purification process they repeat in front of every house in the kudy. The girl goes back to the river in the afternoon and take bath again and comeback to the kudy before the dinner. Enough 'purification' is done by this time with water and turmeric and people get ready to accept the girl as 'pure' back in the kudy. This process give an impression to the young girl that she is impure during menstruation and taking bath in the fourth day makes her pure and ready to enter back in to the kudy. Furthermore, they consider menarche as a sign of maturity. Gifts from others and the procession of all women from the river to kudy along with the girl show that a girl’s maturity is well celebrated by the Muthuvans. Kudy is like a single house and each house members behave intimately. Chithu was taken to all houses in the kudy irrespective of their relationship with each house. The dinner is served to all the people in the kudys and the others who came to Andavankudy. All the people of Andavankudy together organised the function and participated in it.

Chithu was happy and shy. Whenever, I talked to she never answered. She was very shy and smiled at me and responded by saying yes or no. Kamakshi says, she has her changar living in another kudy and now at anytime he can come and take his kuttal may be sometimes after a year.

**Menstruation**

During the menstruation all women need to stay in the thinnaveedu and follow the kudy rule that they should not be visible in front of men. Thus stay in thinnaveedu is immediately after the onset of menstruation to the fourth day of menstruation.

One day I was standing in front of Maniyamma's house. Maniyamma's daughter Vidhya went to collect firewood. Immediately I saw Vidhya, she was running to the backside of her house. So I waited her to comeback. After a while when I could not see her, I went and called her name. She responded from thinnaveedu and asked me to tell her mother that she is in thinnaveedu (Field notes 2008).

While in thinnaveedu, they cook for themselves and women from her family and from other family give rice and vegetables to them for cooking. They keep vessels in the thinnaveedu. The vessels used at home are not used in thinnaveedu. If in case the vessels are taken to the thinnaveedu they will be not taken back to their houses. They use used pieces of cloth to hold the blood or to absorb the menstrual blood. But they do not have much cotton cloths and so they mostly use synthetic sari. Synthetic cloths will not absorb much blood compared to that of cotton.
Whatever they use it is washed, dried and used again. After every use they dry it and fold it and keep it in a polythene bag which is tied to the roof of thinnaveedu. When they are in thinnaveedu they take bath in the premises of thinnaveedu. It is observed that many women who are in thinnaveedu did not take bath for first three days. They take bath before entering the kudy after each menstruation. They make mat and baskets when they are inside the thinnaveedu for their own use. Some times during the day time they sleep. When there are many menstruating women in the thinnaveedu they prepare the food together.

From the initial days of migration to the Edamalakudy Muthuvan people underwent lots of struggle due to lack of sufficient food. Therefore, they have developed systems of sharing food amongst themselves. This is found to be prominent factor of their culture. If anyone in the thinnaveedu does not get sufficient food she cannot come and ask the kudy people for food. During this period the women from other houses come and give food material to the ones who are staying in thinnaveedu even if the women sitting in the thinnaveedu belongs to a financially better off family and have sufficient food at her home.

I spoke to some Muthuvan women to get a sense of their perceptions regarding the concept of menstruation. They are aware that this is a process that happens every month. In one FGD Maniyamma reveals, the concepts of menstruation

> Woman’s uterus is a vessel that holds together each drop of blood dropped from her body every day. That vessel, uterus, has the capacity to hold thirty drops of blood in total. When it is full, that blood begins to flow from the vessel to the outside, which they consider as menstruation. Depending on a person’s height and weight, the size of the vessel also varies. When one is pregnant that blood is used by the baby that one does not bleed during that time. After delivery the vessel becomes wider due to baby’s size and which give more storage capacity. That is the reason why one gets menstruation two years after delivery.

All the women follow the rules of the kudy especially the norms and taboos connected to menstruation. The elder women always warn youngsters that if they do not follow these rules their kudy would be doomed. God will punish them in the form of heavy rain, floods, wild animal attacks, famine, and chronic diseases to the family and so on. A story is popular among them that gods once came to earth and Muthuvans moved back to the forest paying respect, but the nattukar stayed where they were, did not honour gods and thus defiled norms of purity. Muthuvans believe that they (Muthuvan women) retain their original purity even today by strictly observing the custom of sitting in thinnaveedu during menstruation, which they consider as an

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71 Nattukar the term denotes Malayali for Muthuvan
important cause of pollution. Subhadra from Andavankudy once told me, “you people did not
give way to god, did not keep up your purity, and so even now you are not sitting in thinnaveedu.
We had given way to the god when he came, so we are considered pure.” They believe that if
pregnant women go into the forest and step in the places dedicated to the god then during the time
of delivery they will be in trouble. The concept of purity is connected to bleeding; they told me
that they have medicine to make blood flow, but do not have medicines to stop the blood flow or
to reduce the flow after delivery.

Vasanthi, belonging to Ampalapadikudy says,

My husband once stepped in some blood which seemed like menstrual blood while coming
back from the stream after bath. He was walking on the path connecting the thinnaveedu to
the stream. So he assumed that it was menstrual blood and he felt severe pain in the leg and
fever that night. It lasted for a week.

If a woman during her menstrual periods appears in front of a man, it would affect only the woman
and not vice versa. Maniyamma clarifies:

During periods, we are not supposed to enter the kitchen and touch kitchen vessels. Some
vessels are kept separately in the thinnaveedu for our use. We never take it back home. While
at the thinnaveedu, we make mat, kutta and vatti with rattan plates. Some women say that
they are not purified even after spending four nights in thinnaveedu so they avoid going to the
forest for some more days. God dwells at some special places inside the forest and those
places are most pure. If we are not purified well after menstruation, the gods will punish us. If
an impure woman steps into god’s sacred abode, god’s wrath will befall on her (Field notes
2008).

To underscore their faithful adherence to strict norms of purity connected to menstruation, I refer
back to an incident I have briefly mentioned in chapter two: Sana, a 16 years old girl was in
thinnavvedu and she developed high fever, stomach pain and was screaming in pain; soon she
became unconscious and stayed that way for a while. Her mother was sitting on her side and other
women were making comments like, ‘This girl will die either today night or tomorrow.’ I
remembered that a classic ethnography researcher would just observe people without interfering
in their decisions and practices. But my social work exposure compelled me to take a step
forward and do something for Sana.

When I asked Kani about taking her to hospital his response was nothing short of what I
presumed,

No one will come and touch her because it is considered as a great sin of pollution and god
will punish them. So I cannot ask others to do it. I can ask them to do so after she spends three
nights over in thinnaveedu, and then it would not be a problem. It is impossible now to take
her to hospital.
Therefore, I went to Mr. Babu, the ST promoter, (a volunteer appointed by Scheduled Tribe department of the state government to coordinate the development of tribes in the tribal settlements) to get support from young people to take her to hospital. Babu said, ‘I would be willing to take her, then what about others? No one will come and others would discourage me too.’

Usually, a sick person is carried out from the kudy by four people. They tie a mat or jute on to two long stick and each edge of the stick is carried by a man. The sick persons would lie on the jute or mat. I realised that minimum four men were required to carry Sana up to the nearest available vehicle that is about nineteen kilometers away from the kudy. Two extra people were needed to take turn when someone gets tired. So whenever I asked the men and Sana’s mother both of them told me they will carry her to the hospital the next day. Sana’s mother had given some traditional medicine for stomach pain and water by doing some prayers, for drinking. When I went to her next day, I saw that one person, supposed to carry her to hospital had gone to forest to cut bamboo for housing and another one was not well. So they said they are trying to get another person and finally there were none to carry her. Three days passed in that way and Sana came out of thinnaveedu and she was better and the pain had reduced. Any way she did not go to hospital and somehow she survived. Sulochana, an Ulladan woman who used to work as Anganwadi helper in a Muthuvankudy seven years back in the kudy recollected a similar incident:

One Friday I met a Muthuvan girl with severe fever. She was too weak. I asked the people in the kudy to carry her immediately to hospital. They agreed and I went home. After two days of holidays, the next Monday, I came to the kudy and saw the girl in the same state. I asked the people to take her immediately and if not I would call the police. I also accompanied them. They carried her to hospital but on the way, she died.

Further, she added, ‘she was not in the thinnaveedu but she was back home from the thinnaveedu two days before. That may be one reason for not carrying her to the hospital and the other reason may be that they do not want to save a life. If one die they do not have any problem’.

Vasanthi adds:

Once a woman had severe bleeding during delivery, but no one was willing to take her to the hospital; even her husband did not take initiative. She died in the thinnaveedu three days after the delivery.

Radhamani, a worker in the cooperative society who stayed in Edamalakudy for some years, narrated an incident,
One woman was in the thinnaveedu for delivery and the baby did not come-out, the baby was stuck in the vagina and the mother cried inside the thinnaveedu for entire three days with pain. The people from other kudy also gathered there and started performing pooja. But, they could not save the life of mother and the child. Even the parents and husband never took any initiative to carry her to the hospital.

After spending three nights in the thinnaveedu, the restrictions are little relaxed in case of an emergency. During those three nights, whatever happens to the menstruating women, even serious ailments, is ignored and no men or women from the kudy would come forward to help them. Years ago it was impossible even on the third night to relax the restrictions and so people coming forward to carry the menstruating women who get sick was unthinkable. Raniyamma says, “In our childhood, whatever happens to us or our family members when we are in thinnaveedu had to be ignored and we had to stay isolated completely for seven days”. She recalled an incident of one of her friends, who was in thinnaveedu after delivery; when her husband died (he went to deep forest to take honey and fell down from a big rock), she was not allowed to come out and see her husband’s body. This incident occurred not in ancient past, but approximately twenty years back.

Many tribes have given up certain norms and practices nowadays and only Muthuvans hold on to most of these practices. However, the norms associated with the thinnaveedu have been undergoing some changes. Muthuvans are modifying the norms according to their convenience. They seem to be confused whether to continue the ‘tradition’ as such or to modify it according to their convenience. For example, earlier they were staying in the thinnaveedu for seven days and now that is reduced to three to four days. In Andavankudy menstruating women stay in the thinnaveedu for four days and in Amapalapadikkudy it is only for three overnights. After returning from thinnaveedu, some women feel that they are still impure. So they stay at home a few more days and do not go to the forest, since for them forest is a sacred place. It so happens that if their husband or somebody is sick in the family, they would not be able to attend to them during their stay in thinnaveedu. The same way if the husband or anyone else dies, menstruating women are not supposed to go home and see the body. In some cases, the Kani would allow them to see the dead body if they have completed at least two nights stay in the thinnaveedu.

Lactating mothers keep their babies and small kids with them in thinnaveedu during nights and they are taken back to their homes each morning by grandmas or aunts as it is difficult for the mothers to manage the kids. But, before they are taken inside the house, they are bathed at the thinnaveedu itself since they think that the child who slept with her impure mother is also impure.
Once the child is bathed, it means that he/she becomes pure and is worthy to enter the house. This practice is changing now. Maniyamma, while taking her granddaughter from her daughter in the thinnaveedu, explained to me,

Before, never would we take the baby from the thinnaveedu without giving a bath there and we let the impurities flow away in front of thinnaveedu itself. Now we are taking the baby from the thinnaveedu and bath the kid at our house’s courtyard before entering into the house.

Taking bath is an important aspect connected with pollution. After menstruation and delivery when women come out of the thinnaveedu they should take the purification bath. They consider that the heat emanating from a menstruating woman's body is capable of making others impure. Hence, they keep the system of two doors in the thinnaveedu, one door is only for the women who are staying there and the other door is for other women, children who come as visitors. The visitors will not cross the door and approach the polluted women. Earlier, it was compulsory for the visitors to take bath when they leave the thinnaveedu and before entering their homes in the kudy. But, now it is not so. However, a few old women are still very strict about it; they never visit the thinnaveedu to see their daughters or a newly born baby after delivery.

Nowadays, they are also scared of the attack by the wild animals at night, since thinnaveedu is a small mud hut with grass roof. During some seasons wild elephants attacking the kudy premises are common, and women who happened to stay at thinnaveedu on those days get terribly frightened and are unable to sleep due to the fear of elephant attack. Vasanthi recalls,

Once I was in my husband’s kudy that is Eruppukallukudy, and I went over to the thinnaveedu. All the other girls went to watch movies and no one came to stay over with me in the thinnaveedu that night and I was all alone in the thinnaveedu. I could not sleep at all because I was afraid. I remembered what had happened to another girl when she was alone in the thinnaveedu. A leopard came near her room and the girl yelled and ran into another nearby kudy’s thinnaveedu.

To add to their woes, during the monsoon and winter the stay inside thinnaveedu is very difficult; in winter if it is cold weather during monsoon the rainwater will be dripping inside from the roof. They are totally cut off from their work during these four days in the thinnaveedu. If the agricultural field is ready for harvesting in those days, they might lose the entire yield. If the paddy is ready for harvesting, they may lose the rice; lots of birds would come and eat up a great deal. The fragility of marital relationship also adds on to the anxiety of women who go to stay over in the thinnaveedu. Many couples in Eadmalakudy appear to be suspicious of their spouses. When the wife goes to thinnaveedu she is suspicious about her husband whether he would go to another woman. Men too have their share of problems when their wives go over to thinnaveedu.
They appear lonely as they do not talk freely to their in-laws. Sometimes he may not have many friends in his wife's kudy.

I had my personal experience during menstruation. I got my periods when I was in the field. I informed some women in the kudy that I was willing to stay in the thinnaveedu with due respect to their customs. But they said there is no need of staying there. “You stay where you are now and don’t go to any other places and we will bring your food to where you stay”. They brought food and water to my place. For bathing, I went to the premises of thinnaveedu. Lekha came and asked me. “Why did you tell us? If you did not tell, you could have gone anywhere as you wish. The single school teachers who stay in the kudy never tell us anything; they go around and get involved in all the activities like any other day.” When I returned from the kudy I gave the left over sanitary napkins to Vasanthi. She is an ASHA so she needs to travel and stay outside for training and accompanying other patients to hospital. She says, ‘We are happy if we get periods outside the kudy. There we will not be isolated.’ Once she got her periods in between the residential training for ASHA health workers at Munnar. She adds, ‘I struggled a lot for washing and drying the cloth. I heard about this kind of things available in town, but I did not know its name and where it is available. I am seeing this for the first time’.

Table No.4.1 Taboos Associated with Menstruation and Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taboos</th>
<th>Menstruation</th>
<th>Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not see men or go in the vicinity of men</td>
<td>Do not marry from the same clan (endogamy not allowed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not go to the forest for few more days after the stay in thinnaveedu</td>
<td>In exogamy marital tie up of a particular clan encouraged.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do not touch any vessels from the kitchen as well as do not give anything to the women in the plates from the kitchen.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In the thinnaveedu a particular door is used only by menstruating women to pass and move around</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During menstruation, wash cloth only by standing in a particular place near the thinnaveedu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men should not touch any menstruating women</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The upkeep of thinnaveedu in every kudy is done in such a way that it helps perpetuating the traditional norms and practices regarding purity and pollution connected to menstruation, delivery and related instances. The thinnaveedu is still kept as a place hidden by bushes and trees. There is a path to river from thinnaveedu, which is meant only for the use of women staying inside. There are exceptions in a small kudy like Ampalapadikudy, which is also closer to the entrance to the Muthuvan settlement in Edamalakudy. Here the women in the thinnaveedu do not use the direct path to the river as this route is almost closed down by thickly grown bushes and trees. Wherever there is common water supply system, the kudy people connect special pipes to the thinnaveedu for a while, when some women go to stay there. If there is only one woman in the thinnaveedu, she would have to wait for long for getting water. Either some women should fetch water over there or she would have to call any woman, who may come across in her eyesight. She is not supposed to see or call any men. Sometimes, women in thinnaveedu are forced to wash the menstrual cloths in the available water stored there. Many times, I noticed stains of blood in already washed cloths. They keep the cloth in a polythene bag, tie it and hang it up on the rusted roof until their next stay in the thinnaveedu. The roof, the mat, and the polythene covers all appeared blackened by the smoke from the hearth. Menstruation pollution is usually maintained for the abstinence from sex in those days. By staying in thinnaveedu, women are not seen by any men during the period of menstruation. If it happens so the curse will be on women. Therefore, they keep a distance at the time of menstruation. The concept of thinnaveedu may be originally for this purpose. Reasons behind this pollution practice may be abstinence from sex as well as rest for the body. That may help them to reduce the body ailments like pain from menstruation. Muthuvan menstrual beliefs are associated with pollution, god and punishment. The kudy system strictly maintains that and both men and women are carriers of these norms and beliefs to the next generation.

**Marriage as Institutionalising and Solemnising Relationships**

The age of marriage is normally 17 to 19 years for girls and for boys it is 19 to 22 years. But, it is observed that some girls marry before the age and some after twenty years too. Usually, they marry their changar. There are many ‘publicly known’ couple who are going to marry though now they are children. Vidhya told me that when she was in the hospital after delivery, one of her relatives came with his two year old son to see Vidhya's baby and said to Vidhya, ‘oh! This is my daughter in law and told his two year old son, “See your future wife”.
Usually, nobody in Edamalakudy knows their actual date of birth and age. Once I asked Raniyamma about her granddaughter Seematti’s age. She said “she did not know as the parents of Seematti were already dead and who else would know her age!” On another occasion I was conducting a basic household survey when I inquired about the age of a young woman to Elsayi, the Anganwadi helper of Andavankudy. She told me that, the young girl was exactly her own son's age, i.e., 19 years old. But she stopped me from recording it since the young woman was already married and had a child; she suggested to record it as 22 years old. In another case, Raniyamma says, her age may be 60, 70 or 80. I was surprised to know the big gap of 30 years she says. These narratives reveal that age is not a factor in Muthuvan's life. However, normally the age of marriage is after sixteen years or sometimes soon after menarche. The rituals are the important landmark in their life. For them age is not a prominent factor in life. Their life span is divided into different phases based on the rituals and events performed in one's life which includes, childhood till the ritual of kondakettu and then a girl till menarche. After that her status is changed to a marriageable woman, then delivery and after which she enters in to the motherhood. These stages represent her identity as a woman and when she becomes grandmother her identity starts changing to a ‘thathi’. If she has more grandchildren then the identity is more specific as thathi. In the Muthuvan culture one cannot find the adolescent, immediately after the menarche i.e. puberty a girl’s identity is formed in to that of an adult woman. This is common among the agricultural community as well. A girl as she grows is first asked to change her dressing style and then her behaviour.

An important expectation imposed on all marriageable girls is that she should have mastered all domestic chores very well. One should know payamedayal, nellu kuthal and katti undakkal and the list continues. Young men decline to marry girls who do not have these skills and knowledge. After marriage when the bride starts living with her husband and in-laws, if she is found out to be not smart enough in the domestic chores, she would be sent back home saying, paniyomnum ariyatha pennine evide venda (we do not want a bride who does not know any work). But for men it is not strict to learn these skills when compared to women for preparation of marriage. However, some boys are skilled to get honey and some are made expert in making

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72 Old woman or grandmother
73 to knot rattan bark thin plates used for making mat
74 to grind paddy and separate rice from chaff and husk
75 to prepare the food item katti from finger millet
bamboo baskets with strong bamboo. *Pukari*\textsuperscript{76} is the gift to the bride from the groom. It is prepared by the groom from a special kind of bamboo and making pukari is a skilled work. But, now this practice is not found among the Muthuvans. Pukari’s place is taken over by *mangalyasutra*\textsuperscript{77}.

Men are brave and knowledgeable in collecting honey from the top of tall trees. Honey collection is seasonal. For that a group of men stay in the interior forest for about three to five days. There is a kind of basket that Muthuvans use; it is made of strong bamboo plates and only men seem to know how to make it. Before marriage young men and women are supposed to learn and discern such difference of ‘trade/work’, which are constructed by gender demarcations. Men and women get some training before marriage to learn to make baskets. But men make baskets with strong bamboo. And women make it with rattan that is more tender. The sleeping mat making and firewood collection are only women’s work. The works that are supposed to be done by women is tender. For example in case of mat and basket making they use tender rattan plates. Whereas for making pukari and the basket for catching fish, strong bamboo is needed.

After marriage they start to live in a new household. From then onwards a man’s and woman’s work and every effort get coordinated primarily for themselves and for each other, oriented towards the new household they have created and ultimately aimed at the next generation. Immediately after the marriage the parents from both sides transfer their wealth, which is the agricultural land to their children. So both the bride and the groom hold land in places where they belong to. They make their own house near the bride's house. Once in a while she visits her in laws. Daughters usually take care of the parents and mostly the son in law is the nephew of the bride’s father. Maniyamma says,

> Daughters are always with us, daughters are the ones who must work and suffer for us, daughters are the ones who will look after us in old age, I wanted to get a daughter. My first child was a boy. I was worried after that once the first child is a boy the rest of them all be boys. But fortunately I got three daughters after that and then I relaxed.

Sometimes, women visit their in-laws and those who stay close to the in-laws may visit their own parents along with the spouse and the children. This visit may last for one to three months. On such occasions, they would find some empty house for their night stay; this becomes possible

\textsuperscript{76} A kind of comb, made of bamboo; women consider this as a wedlock or *mangalya sutram* (please refer the photo in the appendix),
\textsuperscript{77} A common marriage symbol
because some other people would have gone to stay with their own parents or in laws. They carry all the bedding to that empty house in the night and in the morning they carry it back home. I also stayed in such an empty home during one phase of my stay in the kudy. Unmarried or separated women stayed with me in the night for support. No married woman came to stay with me; it is observed that married Muthuvan women never liked to leave their husbands alone at home. An old woman Rajathi from Edalaparakudy told me:

We do not go and stay like this at any place; it’s like leaving husband and kids. If we have kids and husband they would be always together with us and never at separate places. When you go back, check if your husband is with some other woman!

Marriage customs are changing slowly with the entry of contemporary practices and influence of the world outside. If an outsider asked about their history the first thing that comes to their mind is their old marriage customs and ceremonies. Almost every other person, to whom I spoke with, was very excited to share memories about their old marriage customs and functions. In between they sang songs (ashapattu) connected to marriage. Ashapattu is a musical dialogue between boys (kayarumakkal) and girls (elamtarimakkal). They never sing these songs face to face; they sing and play hide-and-seek along with the bride. These songs are quite long and each small stanza carries unique meaning.

Ashappattu announces the maturity of a young girl and using many similes like pumpkin, bamboo flowers and so on, the flowering of a girl is denoted. The song which sounds like riddles goes like this:

Pushna poothathellam ilam poovu, nadithe poovu njan aashiche
Kallakalathiyi kallyidam thevayane, Mattakalathiye Malayettipidikalkare
Munkipoovu poothathe muthu mutha pennathe
Pathiripoovu poothathe pathuper chernnu santhosham

Pumpkin blossomed and all that are tender flowers; I desired for the very first flower. Kallakalathiy (the bride) is surely hidden in a secret place; you valiant climbers of hills and mountains try to find out the bride. The bamboo is flowered like pearls, it bounces in the air; the midnight flower has blossomed and (ten) people together celebrates that joy.

As part of the preparations for the marriage ceremony, the bridal party and the groom’s party sing Ashtapattu, while the bride is hidden by her friends and groom and his friends have to find her out from the hiding place. This hide and seek play happens in the forest and the friends of the bride give wrong signals and messages to the groom and his party to fool them around. The girl is taken around here and there and is hidden while the song is sung. This is the background of this song. The groom’s party challenges the girls in the bridal party. ’We will climb the hill and catch
you, who tell lies and send us in the wrong direction. The women use riddles like ‘the one who puts round bindi on the round face (vattapottum thottum vatta monjiyil), the crab which sits below the stone is like a garden’. They challenge the groom’s party to find out the answers and in doing so find out the hiding bride. ‘All can wish; but the wishes of only the one who comes first, will come true (ashayirunnath ashapettuadhyam vannavathu koduthath)’. Each stanza of ashappattu contains two lines and after each stanza they make a sound coloolooo…. Then begins the next stanza and the same sound is made again. Usually, women sing one stanza and then it is men’s turn.

When I asked about their marriage, Padma’s husband explained how marriage customs are changing these days. To make their point clear he explained to me the old customs:

The marriage ceremony used to be a prolonged event. When the groom and his friends arrive at the kudy, friends of the bride hide her. The groom and his friends try to find her. During daytime they play in the forest and at night they sleep in the thinnaveedu. These plays continue almost for a week. They would have lot of fun. In between, the bride’s party gives hints about their hiding place and make noises in order to mislead the searching party. These hide and seek play is enjoyed by all the people in the kudy. They sing ashapattu during this time. Finally, the groom and his friends plead to the bride’s mates and they point to the bride’s hiding place. Then the groom holds her hand and reaches the kudy from the forest, by that time the kudy is ready for celebration. The groom will give a pudava (new vestment, usually a sari) to the girl. Then the bride and groom should go around every house in the kudy and all would pour muddy water on them. It is like playing, mocking and teasing (field notes 2008).

Today, very rarely, Muthuvan women use pukari, which some old women still keep in their house. Earlier Pukari used to be considered as the mangalyasutram. The present generation men do not know how to make pukari. The place of pukari is now, taken by ordinary mangalyasutram that people in other communities use. Many women wear a yellow thread, adopted from the Tamil culture.

I recall the conversation with Meena and Chinnappan from Andavankudy who shared interesting matters on their marriage. They both were from the same kudy and they liked each other, but they never talked about it. But by some gestures and expressions they conveyed the messages of their mutual love. One night, on the way to thinnaveedu, when Meena met Chinnappan, she held his hand and said ‘Let us runaway tomorrow’. Chinnappan replied ‘Tomorrow is Friday; that is not a good day, so we can do it on Saturday’. This was their first conversation about their love and marriage. As per their decision they ran away to another kudy named Parappayar, lived together and later came back to their parents. When, I was in Marayoor one girl came to that kudy to visit her mama (uncle), soon after that she ran away with her changar and stayed in some other places
and later reached this mama's kudy. However, they couldn’t find a suitable place to stay in that kudy on that night. Therefore, she came to Anganwady where I stayed along with the girls who usually come there to support me and her husband went to chavady to sleep.

Mostly runaway couples go to another kudy that is far away and stay in an empty house or, if they fail to find empty houses, they would even stay in an erumadam. Some of the runaway couples stay there for one or two weeks, until their parents call them back home. Manu and Ponnu from Ampalapadikudy went and stayed like this in an erumadam for they could not find an empty house in any neighbourhood kudy during that time.

Mayilswami’s wife died two years back. Vasanthi, his youngest daughter said 'god touched my mother while she was working in the paddy field. Suddenly, she got fever and after two weeks, she died'. Mayilswami remarried at the age of sixty five. Maniyamma, his daughter was angry about this marriage. She comments: 'He wanted a young bride; what is the use of marrying again? We all are here to take care of him. Now, he is staying in Marayoor with his second wife. Why can’t he come here and stay? Mayilswami is happy with his second marriage but he also likes to stay in Edamalakudy. But, his wife is not willing to come to Edamalakudy, she does not want to stay away from her son and her belongings.

Preferences of Consanguinity and Exogamy

There is a strong preference among the Muthuvans, as mentioned earlier, for marriage between the relatives. The actual changar, if one is available, is often considered first, but more distant changar or other relatives are also preferred. The most important consideration is the clan. There is a hierarchy between clans. Marrying from a relevant marriageable clan is considered as a matter of pride. In each clan a responsible person makes decisions on marriage of young people from his clan. But, nowadays boys and girls tend to fix their marriage by themselves and attempt a ‘runaway' (elopement) in their sense of the term and as per their will. But they never allow a marriage from the same clan. They have practice in their culture in which if a man holds the hand of a woman with or without her permission the girl or woman belong to that man.

Still these old practices are common among Muthuvans. But, if ‘run away marriages’ (elopement) were very rare in those days, it is becoming quite common now. Recently, one girl named Angela

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78 Erumadam is made of wood and the roof will be with some long palm leaves. It is placed on a big tree on the branches or trunk of the tree, to enter into that some wooden ladder or rope will be there. Mostly it is placed in the agricultural field and one or two male stay there in the night to protect the field from attack of wild animals. Agriculture is seasonal and the rest of the time the erumadam is empty.
got married to a boy, a marriage which had been arranged against her will. Her father is the responsible authority to decide the marriage of all young people in their clan. After the marriage Angela went with her husband to Marayoor where he lives. From there, after a week she ran away with a young man who was her lover. Within one month she came back to Edamalakudy and then was accepted by the family.

Maniyamma commented on this,

In our times what all problem would arise if a girl and a boy fall in love and then decide to stay together. Today our young people are stubborn with regard to their wishes and desires. They will go get what they want and even if we try to stop them with our rules and norms. So I think we should consider their opinion and give consent for the marriage. Otherwise we see instances like this girl's case.

After running away with a man or woman they stay few days together in the forest or in any other kudy nearby and comeback to their own either changar's or kuttal's kudy and eventually the parents accept them.

They followed marumakkathayam custom i.e. descent to the eldest son of the eldest sister (Thurston 1909) but now that practice is no more followed and they share the property equally among the children irrespective of the gender. In the earlier matrilineal society Muthuvan women received more freedom and decision making power. Both the conjugal partners are in each other's company most of the time, especially middle aged and old couples, sharing domestic chores, subsistence pursuits and decisions. They usually sleep, eat and work together. In the trajectory of the changes from matrilineal to patriarchal, the women's position is lowered in terms of decision making. The whole household and agricultural work became her responsibility. However, when the wife is in the thinnaveedu, some men take care of the children and cook food for the children and for himself.

Even when practice of marumakkathayam is no more followed some features of the marumakkathyam can be still seen in the Muthuvan culture. The girls after marriage stay in her parent’s kudy. She visits her in-laws along with her husband once in a while. Cross cousin marriage is common in matrilineal families and is also seen in the Muthuvan culture. They call each other changar and kuttal. Changar is the word they use for a marriageable cross cousin as well as for their husband. In the same way kuttal is a word for marriageable cousin sister and for wife. They are born as changar and kuttal and a marriage is a cultural norm to live together. Usually, they play together from childhood and after menarche and kondakettu the girl detach a bit from her changar and she becomes more attached with her peer. She will be shy in front of her
changar in that stage. Usually a period after the thalemuttu the parents will fix the marriage. Another important feature is the relationship between the uncle and the nephew. Uncle and nephew talk to each other very less. They work together in the agricultural field silently and they talk only during the crucial times. Staying in wife's kudy sometimes makes the boy or the man feel lonely. When the wife goes to the thinnaveedu he often goes back to his kudy.

Divorce is possible when the couple demands for it. They need not specify any reason for that. However, both the couples should present their case and give explanations for divorce in the panchayam. In some cases, the couples never give any reasons for separation, as in the case of Thatha.

Thatha belongs to Ampalapadikudy and is the seventh one among eight sisters. Her husband Babu belongs to Andavankudy. After her marriage, Thatha's family came to Edamalakudy from Marayoor. Babu is the son of watchman Gopalan. Babu had studied up to tenth standard and he was a Scheduled Tribe (ST) promoter. He is young and gentle. When Babu came to Marayoor with the proposal after seeing Thatha, he had said that he wanted to marry 'only this girl'. They were married eight years back and separated after a year of marriage. No one knows the reason behind it and the couples never revealed it. So many Panchayams were held at the request of the family members and also with the concerned people from both the kudy, but Babu and Thatha never wanted to join back together. They still live separately (Field notes 2008).

Thatha is now with her parents and her younger sister Paru has also returned home after the separation from her husband; the latter has two children. Thatha is very sad about her sister Paru's marital separation. Recently, I heard that Babu had a relationship with another girl in Edalapparakudy and he wanted to marry her. But Thatha was so determined to block that marriage and she threatened him with dire consequences in public saying, 'I will kill him definitely with my sickle'. Babu was aware of the consequences. Thatha told me that Babu is scared of her and that is why he is still staying alone; otherwise he would have already married that girl by now. If both of them meet on the way, they will not even look at each other; they change the route and go in separate ways. Once, in a Focus Group discussion, some ASHA workers were talking about the sexual relationship in their community and somebody commented, 'May be Thatha and Babu separated due to some sexual problems. We do not know what exactly is the problem, but we assume that it is something related to this area'. Whenever I asked about her marital relationship, Thatha smiled and said, 'We are separated, but there is no reason' and then gives a smile again, but never revealed the reason.

79 This kudy is one of the twenty eight kudies in Edamalakudy and is situated two kilometers from Andavankudy.
Thatha said, ‘I don't want to marry any more. I will stay with my parents and will take care of them.’ When I asked Elsayi, Babu's elder sister, she said ‘I asked him many times the reason, but no answer and no one can unite them again. Both of them never revealed any reason behind their separation.’ This is a rare case among Muthuvans of a separated couple having no kids in the relationship but still living unmarried even after eight years of separation (Field notes 2008)

Another case from Andavankudy, Devi says, “Kuzhal Achuthan first married Chinnakutty's elder sister, later he ditched that girl and married her sister. Now he wants to marry the youngest one Chinnakutty. Therefore, Chinnakutty does not want to stay in this kudy. She has gone to Mankulam and is staying with her uncle's family. She has escaped to her uncle's kudy to avoid her brother in law”. It shows the system's acceptance of marrying the wife's sister. But it is obvious she is helpless and not bold enough to control his wish or express her disinterest.

There are a few cases of wife abandoning husbands in Edamalakudy too. Gomathi is an example for that. Within three years after her first marriage, she got divorced and married four times. The first and the present spouses were her cousins. After her fifth marriage, her parents strictly warned her and instructed her to stay with that husband. Now she is happy and has a baby. The reason for her repetitive marriage and divorce was that she was not happy with the former husbands. Whoever asked her about the former husbands, she replied with one sentence avan sariyalla, means he is not good. After separation, if the couple has children, the maintenance of children belongs to the mother. It seemed to me that many men and women in Edamalakudy are suspicious about their spouses. Even smiling at a person of the opposite sex may lead to a separation. They have a belief and follow a 'tradition', that if one man catches the hand of a woman, she is supposed to be his wife irrespective of their marital status. One incident happened recently in this regard.

A man aged 45 years held the hand of a 17 year old unmarried girl. She did not want to go with him. However, she refused and other old people teased and blamed her. She cried and asked the Kani to call up a panchayam. In the panchayam the decision was taken in her favour. If she is not willing to marry the elderly man, no one can compel her, said the panchayam. But later this girl went to Marayoor to her uncle's house, where from she committed suicide. Vasanthi comments, 'She must have got tired of hearing the comments of others' (Field notes 2008).

It is clear that the man has the privileges to hold the hand of a woman and thus forcefully propose to her as wife; an act which has far reaching implications that violates the basic freedom and autonomy of a woman.

Most Muthuvan people I met have a negative attitude towards the relationships outside the marriage. The life story of Rayappan is worth mentioning here. Before going to field work, I had
collected maximum contacts of people in Edamalakudy. One among them was Rayappan, who is a traditional ethnomedicine practitioner. On the way to kudy I asked a Muthuvan who was accompanying me, about Rayappan and this man looked at me and asked, ‘How do you know him?’ I said ‘I know him through a person, who conducted a traditional medical camp. Again, I asked about him where he stays and so on, but he did not answer and tried to avoid questions about Rayappan. I realised that there was something fishy about Rayappan. Later, I came to know that Rayappan now lives with a girl who is almost the same age as of his daughter. That discourse gave me an impression that people in the kudy have a negative attitude towards him. Furthermore, one day I went to Andavankudy to sleep overnight. I could not sleep in the thinnaveedu as I planned, so Devi invited me to her house and I went along with other women to Devi's house. Devi is Rayappan's daughter. Her mother was the first wife of Rayappan. The next day when I came back to Ampalpadikudy, Maniyamma asked me ‘where did you sleep?’ I said, ‘At Devi's house’ and Maniyamma commented 'Oh that is not a good place to sleep, her father is not good'. This shows Maniyamma's attitude towards the Rayappan's relationship with another woman. It is observed here that Muthuvans followed polygamy hundred years back, and still the community has some roots left of that trait. It shows the trend of living with another woman along with the community accepted marriage. Attitude of Muthuvans towards second marriage is not favourable and mostly consider it as an offense. The marriage system is in a transitional stage. The history of polygamy exists in the community in a different form. The attitude of others towards one who holds two relationships at a time is not favoured. It can be recognised from their words. I can say they are becoming more ‘moralistic’,

These moral values have crept into Muthuvan culture from outside. Traditionally, they were practicing polygamy and polyandry. But, now the sense of morality came up with the interaction with the outside world. It is obvious from Maniyamma's words. The people those who are in Ampalapadikudy has good outside exposure and may be these interactions made them think differently. And in case of Rayappan's wife and daughter they always hid this from me which shows that they also have a stigma attached with Rayappan's present life. And it is in this stage of transition that a system faces many unexpected shifts and changes. Here, the community is going to the trend of following monogamy and at the same time have a tendency towards polygamy that is attached with external factors which were not the part of their system.

Some women stay with their children after leaving their husbands and never take or get maintenance even for the children. Most of the women are assertive and courageous to manage
the family alone. The story of Meena points out certain level of autonomy that the women of Edamalakudy enjoy.

Meena is a 22 year old woman, very calm and hard working. She lost her mother in her childhood and her father got married and is staying in another kudy outside Edamalakudy. She has a sister, who is married and lives close to her house. Meena has a four year old daughter, Shangu, her husband is 26 year old and is an alcoholic. Meena warned him many times, that if he keeps drinking he would not stay there. He disappeared for two months. Later he stopped drinking and started living with Meena; but it did not get along well for long. She never let him enter the house if he came drunk. They remained separated for seven months, and when a panchayam was held on this issue she did not accept him as he was still continuing with his drinking habit and was not ready to quit that. Later, Shangu got married to another woman. Meena was little depressed about Shangu’s second marriage. Now Meena lives alone with her daughter. She does not have any agricultural land or other sources of income. She works in other’s fields for daily wage and sometimes take land on lease for her cultivation. At times she borrows money from others and she works for them in the field. One day I saw her, going to the field with high fever and she said that she had to giveback the borrowed money to another person and she cannot take rest. Her daughter is taken care by Meena’s sister at day time when she goes for work (Field notes 2008). (Recently I got informed that Shangu gave up his second marriage and has came back to Meena).

The social behaviour of the Muthuvans is deeply rooted in the matrilineal ideology based on the 'tradition’ of autonomy. The fact that woman controls and utilises land and agriculture, puts her in a favourable situation. It shows that she is not dependent and do not need the support of her husband or her husband's relatives. In fact she sees no point in continuing to maintain an unsatisfied marriage. Inside the family the women have power. She has the capacity to do the agricultural work alone and earn money to bring up the children all alone. But the norms, taboos and beliefs do not give any authority to women. In this case the power is with the system which is largely controlled by Muthuvan men.

**Marriages outside the Tribe: Responses and Consequences**

Muthuvans have given different identity status to different ethnic groups and attach different meanings to that. They call themselves Muthuvan and sometimes call their women Muthuvachy. For them, pandikkar are the Tamilians and nattukar are the Malayalees. Pandikkar and Muthuvans have lots of similarities in their culture and 'tradition'. They imitate certain customs of pandikkar and nattukar. They wear yellow thread around the neck as the symbol of marriage which they adopted from Tamilians. Mangalyasutram, a marriage symbol of nattukar, is also adopted by a few Muthuvans. If the Muthuvan wants to say that a baby among them is cute then they would say ‘this child is like that of nattukar’ and ‘nalla rasama kanan’ (the baby looks beautiful).
Muthuvan women are attracted to other men outside Muthuvan community and hence, few marriages happen outside the community. But, it is observed that no Muthuvan man married an outside girl. It may be that men completely adhere to the rules of the kudy. Rosamma an outsider, the wife of atom Mani, who used to come to the kudy for giving treatment to Muthuvans says, 'from outside which woman is going to marry a Muthuvan'. That means Muthuvan men are not attracted to any of the women in outside. Women who married outside sometimes became helpless and came back and had to struggle due to ooruvilakku\textsuperscript{80} (isolation).

Marriage from outside the Muthuvan community is punishable with total isolation from the kudy. The story of Thankathai is relevant here. Krishnankutty, a Girijan society employee who stayed in Edamalakudy for 23 years, narrated the incident.

Ten years back one woman named Thankathai lived in Edamalkudy. She was married to a Muthuvan, and he died eventually. Later she went to live with a Tamilian (not a Muthuvan) at Valpara in Tamilnadu, border of Edamalakudy with her two kids. She lived there some years and when her non-Muthuvan husband abandoned her, she came back to Edamalakudy with her two kids. No one accepted her and she was ostracized from the kudy and an ooruvilakku was imposed on her and her children. No one was allowed to interact with them; if they did, they also would be excluded from the community. She could not stay along with others in the kudy and she could not do any agricultural work. She did not possess any land, and could not borrow the land from others. She stayed in a rock cave with her two kids. Nothing to eat, they starved almost all days (Field notes 2008).

Girijan society staff, Krishnankutty was the only one who supported them by giving rice and cloths. Sometimes this woman would come to the society, but would stand far away, hiding behind a tree for hours waiting for Krishnankutty. She will not ask anyone about Krishnankutty for fear of further trouble. Later, at times towards the evening, when Krishnankutty saw Thankathai standing away, he would give her rice and other provisions. She hardly had any cloths on her body. He gave her old cloths of his wife as well. Her two boys usually stayed in that stone cave without adequate dress and proper beddings even during the winter. She starved for years, and one day her son came and informed Krishnankutty that she was dead. He went to the place where Thankathai stayed along with his wife to confirm the news.

Krishnankutty informed the kudy people about the demise of Thankathai, but no one came forward to do the customary rites for her. He urged the kudy people to do something for her as she was their own blood. Then they called a panchayam and in that they decided to bury the body. No one came to see the dead body, except for four or five people who were there to do the

\textsuperscript{80} It is total isolation from community, as punishment
necessary formalities. They buried her body in a separate place and not in the usual cremation ground. Nobody took care of the boys who were around ten years old. Two days they stayed at the same rock cave. Krishnankutty asked the kudy people to take them back, but they refused. Later Krishnan kutty took them to his house. After few days, Mayilswami, a Muthuvan who was a regular visitor in the kudy and a good friend of Krishnan kutty, found these children at his house. He was embarrassed to see this, an outsider taking care of Muthuvan children. He informed the people in the kudy about it. Mayilswami facilitated to call a panchayam and accepted these two boys into the kudy.

Another incident of marriage outside-the-tribe happened in the case of a Muthuvan woman who fell in love with an outsider named Bhaskaran, who used to do head load work in Edamalakudy. He was a nattukaran (Local), Maniyamma narrated their story.

Bhaskaran a non Muthuvan married a Muthuvan woman before eleven years and they started living separately in another place. He did the loading of Civil supplies Department items to the ration shop in Edamalakudy, but not any work of the kudy people. He did not have any connection with the kudy and kudy people. They were totally secluded from the Muthuvan community. No one talked with this Muthuvan woman and it was a tough situation for her. But Bhaskaran did not feel that much of seclusion because he interacted mostly with other nattukar loaders. Later, after eight years, they were now slowly being accepted by the people in the kudy. Even now, they will not allow that woman to enter in to the kitchen of any of the kudy and will not give water to her in their utensils. But they have started calling him as ‘Muthuvan Bhaskaran’. His identity from nattukaran is slowly shifting to Muthuvan. People started talking to this Muthuvan woman, but has not accepted her as totally what as it was earlier. Her movements are restricted, she cannot enter other peoples house. Her purity is challenged here after the marriage with a non Muthuvan (Field notes 2008).

It is interesting to note that the non Muthuvan is not attached with any pollution after marrying a Muthuvan woman, the pollution is attached to woman only. They are staying in Edamalakudy and a little away from the kudy and other people. Years passed after their marriage and he is accepted and allowed to enter their house but the one who belong to the same community is still attached with pollution. In the case of Kannaki two things made her acceptance back to the kudy immediate. One is that she belongs to higher clan and second is that she ran away with a non Muthuvan man who belongs to a higher caste. This shows the power dynamics existing between man, woman and the clan.

Yet another case is a man called Kamukan, fifty five years old, who was killed by a wild elephant. This incident occured when I was in the kudy in December 2008. He was a widower and he belonged to kaniyattokootom clan and he had a relationship with a woman belonging to the same clan. The woman committed suicide. Muthuvan do not allow the marriage and sexual relationship
between the same clan. For Muthuvan this is considered as a sin. Due to this reason he was under ooruvilakku. So he was under ooruvilakku and consequent exclusion at the time of his death. He was staying in a place far from the vicinity of kudy. The people belonging to the kaniyattokootom withdrew even from taking a decision on what to do with the dead body. But, after the panchayam which decided in favour of the dead man, people came forward to bury him.

While this incident happened, I heard Nakulan (who belongs to ellukuttom) saying to his brother in law who was the member of Munnar Grama Panchayath representing Edamalakudy, “You should not go there; you know that it is against the kudy rules. You can’t think differently just because you are the Panchayath member”. Nakulan was annoyed when a decision was taken in the panchayam in favour of burying the body. “Now the kudy rules are changing a lot” commented Nakulan, “Had this incident happened some ten years back, no one would have gone there and touched the body. He was expelled from our caste. You see, now the rules are here to save the culprits”. Nakulan belongs to the ministerial clan ellukoottom, a group which is very strict on rules and his brother in law, belonged to kaniyattookootom; the dead person also was from the kaniyattookootam. If a person from one’s own clan does something wrong, they would distance themselves more from that person. That is why Nakulan insisted that his brother in law should not go for the burial, but he knew that as panchayat member he might decide differently. At the end of all this, the Panchayath member did not go for burial; instead he gave a lame excuse that he had to go to hospital along with someone. Here we can see the concept of pollution associated with clan. This is the only case of a man who became excommunicated in Edamalakudy owing to marriage and sexual relationship within the same clan.

The Muthuvans sees the death of such a Muthuvan as a result of god’s wrath and punishment for straying away from traditional customs and norms. Paramasivam, the Kani of Andavankudy commented,

In the history of Edamalakudy it has never happened that an animal killed a Muthuvan. Here in our forest, all animals and Muthuvan stay together. Forest is for all of us. Animals never attacked Muthuvan. This is the first time it has happened.

The life of Vanamala is worth mentioning here. I met her at Vasanthi’s house. Vanamala is the niece of Vasanthi’s husband. She got married at the age of seventeen and stayed with her husband for two months. After two months her husband demanded that she should go back to her parents. He did not give any clear reasons. Later, he informed one of his friends that she had an affair with someone before marriage. Vanamala went to her husband's kudy many times and met her in-laws.
But, she could not meet her husband; he always kept running away from her. She was staying alone for about one year and after that she got married to another man.

The clan and the caste of the person to which one is getting married plays a significant role even in marriages outside the kudy. The life story of Kannaki explains the power relations of clan in marriage among Muthuvans. Kannaki is now 21 years old and belongs to Andavankudy. She is of a little dark complexion but with beautiful eyes and charming face. She likes to always dress up nicely, tie hair beautifully, wear flowers on her hair and wear many bangles on the hand. She prefer to wear saris with jerry work in melpudava. She speaks Malayalam fluently. Her mother works as cook in the single teacher school and earns Rs.500 a month. At the age of fourteen Kannaki had completed her fourth standard from the single teacher school. Then she met a man named Ramesh who is a chettiar boy who had come to the kudy for construction work. One day she disappeared from the kudy and all came to know that Kannaki went with an outsider and her family was in ooruvilakku for 3 days. After three days the family was accepted back in to the kudy when the family declared that they will not have any relation with her anymore. After one year, Kannaki came back to the kudy. When I asked about that she said, ‘He told me he will buy bangles and bindi for me and asked me to go with him. I was a child and did not know anything.’ They did not get married legally. He provided food and dress for Kannaki. After one year, her ‘husband’ took her back to Edamalakkudy. She did not like him. Now he has married another girl. However, he asked her permission before second marriage. When I asked her why she did not like him, she never explained anything more about that relationship. Bindu, the teacher in the single school said that Kannaki had started a relationship with her husband's brother as well, and that was the reason why Ramesh sent her back to the kudy.

Many stories are told by other people about Kannaki. Old Raniyamma thathi’s version was this: she went along with a Tamil boy and came back after a year. He was a very nice fellow. When, he decided to give up this relationship Kannaki was sent back to the kudy. When, I asked her mother about Kannaki's marriage, she said. “That was a big problem for us. Kannaki had spread the news that it was her grandmother who had told her to go along with that man from outside. After hearing this, many people from the kudy came and asked her grandmother about it. Grandmother denied it and committed suicide within a week. Grandfather was alone and he felt sick after a year and nobody was there to take care of him; then he too committed suicide. The first two days were

81 A caste who engaged mostly in trades.
miserable; we were left alone, no one talked to us. Later we also disowned her and only then the kudy people accepted us back to the kudy”. Kannaki's mother then said that “now she has to decide her future. I never want to tell anything to her. Who will come again to marry her?” Kannaki was with her mother and now she got married to a Muthuvan who stays outside Edamalakudy. But, it is his second marriage. He has abandoned his previous wife and children.

Once a woman is out casted from the kudy, it is difficult to accept her back in the kudy. It was a chettiyar boy with whom Kannaki eloped and lived for one year. Since the boy belonged to the upper caste, the kudy people accepted her back soon, even though she had to stay in the thinnaveedu for two months as part of the punishment. When, I asked about the stay in the thinnaveedu she denied it. She was trying to hide those aspects from me. Devi's grandmother said, ‘if we marry a chettiar or thevan then we would not have any pollution. That is acceptable by the kudy. We are forward caste and we can have relation only with those categories of castes. Otherwise, marriage outside the kudy is prohibited and is punishable by severe Ooruvilaku’. In the case of Kannaki, after she stayed two months in the thinnaveedu a panchayam was held and she was accepted to the kudy because the man with whom she eloped was a chettiyar, a forward caste in Tamilnadu. Kannaki’s case is an evidence for their pollution practice after marriage with an outsider. She stayed with chettiar a boy and was accepted back to the kudy. The same kind of situation was with Thankathai but since the relation was with a lower class man, when she came back to kudy she was completely secluded from the people. She struggled, starved and finally died. Kannaki is accepted back to the kudy and she is considered like any other Muthuvan women. Here, the difference of spouse's clan and caste becomes a significant factor for the pollution and ooruvilakku. It is clear that clan and its purity play a higher role in Muthuvan's life. Muthuvan's marriage system is flexible and that opens up a choice in front the girls and the boys. If from any of the couple if either the man or the woman does not want to continue they can give up the relationship.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explains the birth and growth of a Muthuvan girl amidst the binding cultural norms of the kudy. From the childhood she is made to identify herself as a member of Muthuvan and the particular clan in which she belongs represents her identity as a woman. A Muthuvan girl grows
by listening to comments on her marriage from the childhood. There is an inbuilt system in the community to mould the woman into the culture of the kudy. The social institution of marriage is very significant in the life of Muthuvan women and has very complicated and interrelated practices. But, a woman recognizes the nuances of marriage practices by observing them from the life around since early childhood. However, the practice when interrelated with events moderately implies gender demarcation. From the childhood onwards the life of the girl goes through various phases of cultural activities of the kudy which makes her form into a complete Muthuvan woman. She learns about the beliefs and norms of the kudy by seeing others, following them as well as from listening to others. She is not secluded from participating in any of the events. Even the instances of delivery, she is able to observe from her childhood. A girl even when she is seven or eight years is allowed to see and observe delivery which makes her bold enough to handle her own delivery and carry the multiple tasks in the family. The relationship of changar and kuttal starts from birth and they begin to live together after marriage. Her identity of kuttal is not changing after marriage. She is kuttal for him before and after marriage.

These experiences help the girl to understand the roles she need to handle in her later life. Marriage system is flexible and provides scope for choice. The norms are controlled by both the women and men. But, the taboos are mostly attached to women. It is interesting to note down their perception on age. They do not keep chronological record of age, instead they have stages like child, woman and elderly. A childhood stage is till the kondakettu event is performed and after that she is considered as a woman. This period is wider and she handles major tasks during this stage of her life. After she gets grandchildren her role is turned to a thathi, an old woman.