CHAPTER V

MUTHUVAN WOMEN: RITUALS, CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS

This chapter describes the experience of being a mother and tries to bring out the prescribed gender roles in the Muthuvian kudy. The previous chapter has attempted to describe the living experiences of Muthuvian women from her birth to marriage and in this chapter the life of women in the kudy from motherhood to death is explained. There are many notions of pollution that are associated with biological functions of women's life. The social life of women are regulated by the patriarchal rules and beliefs attached to it. Further, this chapter describes the meaning that the women ascribe to these notions of pollution and taboos and how they are being constructed. The first part of this chapter brings out the women's life associated with motherhood and later life. The second part of the chapter discusses the construction of gender identity among the Muthuvans, examines the gender demarcations and role of external objects in their life. The chapter starts with child bearing experiences of Muthuvian women.

Child Bearing

Muthuvans consider pregnancy as a normal event; no additional care is given to the pregnant women in terms of food and work. Women themselves are not used to care during the pregnancy. No additional or special food is served or prepared for the pregnant women. Medical camp is conducted once in a month or once in two months by the department of health. The pregnant women visit the medical camp through the influence of ASHAs, for which the pregnant women need to get up in the morning and walk to the place where the medical camp is being conducted; they have to climb the hills even without having proper food. Once, in one of the medical camps when the nurse went outside the room to prepare for Tetanus injection the pregnant woman who was inside ran away from the medical camp for fear of the needle. Another woman, who was four months pregnant had come to the camp and underwent all the checkups. When I asked her about food, she said that she had food in the morning and she was waiting for her companion to go back; after a while she fainted and fell on the ground. Her friend later said that she had not eaten anything in the morning. She was pregnant after six years of marriage. The ANM says, 'Pregnant women fainting down are quite a common scene in medical camps of Edamalakudy'. Climbing the mountain in the morning without food and waiting in the camp makes them move vulnerable.

Muthuvans recognize the role of man and woman in a woman becoming pregnant. Maniyamma says, 'no woman can become pregnant without the support of a man'. Here the
man's role is recognised. When Maniyamma says this, she is able to recognise the equal role played by a man and the woman in a woman becoming pregnant. They believe that a man carries the baby at first in his womb and puts it in the womb of his wife which equalises the role performance.

Muthuvans in general do not eat egg, especially the girls. The boys eat eggs once in a while. They believe that since egg is in the shape of uterus, a girl or woman eating eggs would create problems during the time of delivery. During pregnancy eating eggs are strictly restricted. They believe that if a pregnant woman eats egg, which results in uterine prolapse at the time of delivery. Maniyamma says, since it is also contagious disease if any one touches the body of that woman at the time of labour, they will be affected too. And in these kind of situations no one turn to that side. Some of these beliefs make Muthuvan women adhere to all rules of the kudy. Pregnancy period is considered as normal and they do all their work including firewood collection. But, in the advanced stage of pregnancy they will not go into the interior forest to collect firewood. They believe and consider some of the places of the interior forest as god's place and if pregnant woman steps on that place it make the god angry which result in complications at the time of delivery. Dharani, from Andavankudy says, 'if a pregnant woman happens to deliver in the forest that may cause danger to her family. God will punish her and her family'. They do not take any medicines like iron and calcium tablets given during the medical camps. They take it, tie and keep the tablets on the bamboo plates on roof of the house. When I asked Paru about her intake of Iron and Folic Acid (IFA) tablets she replied that 'I got it from the health camp, but I never used it. Since last one month I am keeping that'. The preferred place of delivery is her mother's place. Therefore, the pregnant women usually reach her mother’s kudy at her seventh month if she is staying in her husband's place. Most of the married women stay in their natal kudy with her husband. Either her husband or father or both together will make a temporary thinnaveedu for the expecting mother. It is in this thinnaveedu the mother and the baby stay alone for the first twenty one days of delivery. For the support of the mother during night time someone from the kudy or a member from her family stays with her. In the common thinnaveedu all other women and girls are present during the night and menstruating women during the day time. Some of the Muthuvans in Andavankudy make separate thinnaveedu for the delivery purpose, since the common thinnaveedu is crowded and after 21st day they will demolish it or anyone who is in need can make use of it. Further, women prefer a place near to her house. If the common thinnaveedu is near to her house she do not have much problem since it facilitates her mother or sisters to visit her frequently. If one wants to go to hospital and if her husband's place is outside Edamalakudy then she continues to stay there and go to hospital from her husband’s place.
Those who are staying outside the Edamalakudy and who do not prefer a hospital delivery come back to their mother's place in Edamalakudy even before the seven month. I met one woman in Marayoor. Her mother and sisters are in Edamalakudy and she was planning to go to her own kudy (where her mother stays) for her delivery. In some instances the pregnant woman leave the kudy in their sixth or seventh month itself to facilitate the delivery in the hospital as they can't walk through the place during the later period of pregnancy. She has to arrange her stay outside in any of the Muthuvankudy where her relatives stay and from there to the hospital. After delivery too, she has to stay back for sometime since she cannot carry the newborn and walk through the forest for a long distance. If one stay outside in a relatives place, they have to make a thinnaveedu there for the woman and the baby. After reaching from the hospital she is directly taken to this thinnaveedu and she has to stay there for 21 days. Influence of ASHA and the training received by the ASHAs is making an observable change in the antenatal and delivery practices of the Muthuvans. Muthuvans are not only are secluded in the forest, they are also secluded from the interaction with non Muthuvan groups. They only interact with other Muthuvans. The training received by a Muthuvan ASHA is a residential programme which includes other ASHAs belonging to different communities and places. That has given an opportunity for Muthuvan ASHAs to interact and understand other culture. They are getting training and practical sessions from the district hospital regarding delivery procedures. Now, due to the influence of the ASHAs the Muthuvan women have started to going hospitals for delivery even though the number is very less. It is a recent phenomenon. Even, when women go to hospitals for delivery, most of them favour to give birth at the kudy and prefer to follow their own systems and practices.

**Delivery—Traditional Customs and Practices**

Muthuvans consider pregnancy and labour as usual part of life and for them there is nothing extraordinary in it. The place of delivery is crowded with all women of the particular kudy including children and few old women. People immediately disappear after the delivery. If the delivery is over they think the process is over. They do not think about the placenta. Children are bold enough to see the pain of delivery and that gives them courage and familiarity with the process of labour. This experience enables them to handle this kind of situations even if they are alone. But, no men are allowed to enter this area during delivery. For one or two days someone from her family helps her with cooking. After that the new mother herself has to do the cooking, washing and bathing the baby. She will carry the baby on her back, tying the baby on her sari. They do not cover the baby’s body with any separate cloth. They simply cover the baby with what the mother is wearing. Since the baby is on its mother’s body it gets
the warmth from the mother. Whenever, they take the baby from mothers’ body, they cover the baby with cloths, mostly a piece of an old sari, often synthetic. Once an expectant mother enters the thinnaveedu for delivery, no one from the kudy will go out of the kudy for work till she delivers.

Meempad⁸³ - The Labour Pain

I reached Edamalakudy for the second phase of my field work, which was arranged during the time of Paru’s expected delivery. They said that it would be in the month of November and I reached there by October. I waited till the end of December. Nothing happened. They do not know the expected delivery date and the very last menstrual date before delivery. They hardly go to meet a doctor in any of the hospital; they only meet those doctors who come to the kudy during the medical camp. Therefore, in the case of Paru, there was no scanning done for the detection of delivery date and they did not know the last menstruation date as well. Paru’s meempad started on December 21st night and she gave birth to a healthy baby boy on that night at 10.30 pm. This was her second delivery.

Paru is the youngest of eight sisters and is now separated from her husband after the second conception, that is after seven years of marriage. Later, her husband came to her kudy to call her back. But, she did not go. She said that he was mentally ill, had beaten up her up, and so she did not want to go with him. Her husband married another woman. But after hearing his second marriage she was disappointed and desperate. There are many similar cases in the kudy where women have been abandoned after marriage. Paru kept going into the forest to collect firewood even on those days very close to her delivery. On December 21⁴th evening, I noticed that Paru had gone for collecting firewood and after a while she came home carrying a big bunch of firewood on her head. Her sister Thatha was getting tensed about her delivery and a week before Thatha had taken Paru to a thathi who chants mantram⁸⁴. Thathi prescribed a herbal medicine and also sprayed water on Paru. Thathi professed that she would deliver within three days. But, she did not deliver even on the fifth day after that and Thatha was nervous and contemplated on calling Atom Mani⁸⁵. But they had to repay due of two thousand rupees to him for the treatment that they took during Thatha’s leg injury two months before. Paru’s family was well prepared for the delivery. They had made a small hut for her with a single door. The hut was made up of grass walls and grass roof. Over the grass roof, they had

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⁸³ Labour pain
⁸⁴ A kind of prayer
⁸⁵ Atom Mani is his nick name; actual name is Babu. He said he is interested to do experiments with medicine. He stays about 40 kilometers away from Edamalakudy. Even at night if someone calls him to come to the kudy he would come and treat them with his medicines and charge a good amount. His wife also used to come to attend emergency delivery cases. She is basically a midwife.
Child Birth

I went to Paru’s house in the evening and took some pictures of the family. After dinner, I went to sleep. But while I was asleep, I heard peoples’ footsteps, running here and there. I got up and asked Jamanthi and she said that Paru had been taken to thinnaveedu. I ran after them and reached the spot. She was reluctant to go to thinnaveedu specially prepared for her because she was afraid of the wild elephants, which had entered the outskirts of the kudy on those days. The common thinnaveedu of the kudy is almost in the centre of the kudy. Hence, they reached this common thinnaveedu. Reaching the thinnaveedu, I saw all the women and even small girls gathering there. Someone searched and found a stone for sitting. Parvathy was sitting on the muddy floor on that stone near the fire hearth. She was crying alle... alle.... from pain. When she saw me she covered her abdomen part with cloth. So I did not want to disturb them with my presence and I went back and stayed with the crowd. She was struggling to deliver the baby and there was no trained midwife. Maniyamma, the traditional birth attendant trained by health department was out of the kudy on that day. Vasanthi was the ASHA recently trained in delivery care, but she had never assisted in any delivery.

Meanwhile, Jamanthi’s mother asked me to take the baby from the womb. She had a feeling that I would be expert in this. The part of the baby’s head was visible outside, but the baby was still not coming out and Paru kept yelling loudly. Some people mentioned that if Maniyamma was there she would have put her hand inside the vagina and would have held the head of the baby and pulled it out. Thatha was holding Paru’s hand and some firewood kept in thinnaveedu turned out to be support for the body. I could see Paru vigorously holding the fire woods to control herself. Thatha, was upset and was asking for Atom Mani’s mobile number. But her mother discouraged her. Paru was struggling with pain and some people again asked me to support in delivery. I suggested Vasanthi to handle the situation. By that time the head was slowly coming out and Vasanthi held the head and gently pulled the baby out. Paru was screaming with pain. Vasanthi held the head of the baby with both her hands and the rest of the baby’s body was now touching the mud floor. Baby cried out loudly. The blood and mud from the baby’s body was wiped off by Thatha with a cloth. It was a healthy baby. Vasanthi loudly said “baby boy”. All people were happy. They put fire in the centre of the thinnaveedu. Paru herself cut the umbilical cord with a rattan plate with the help of Thatha. Thatha held the baby, covered it with an old coloured cloth and removed the mud from its body. Paru tied the end of umbilical cord towards placenta, with small piece of rattan. Hence, it remained outside and did not go inside. The logic is that it will come out if
something hangs on that since it gives a pull to placenta to come out of womb due to gravitational force. In some cases if placenta did not come out they will do some pooja and during the pooja they will throw some ashes in the air. These dust produce sneeze and that force would push the placenta outside. Atom Mani revealed that 'they tease the woman who had delivered by imitating how she cried. When she laughs she shakes her body which also pushes the placenta out'. Paru got up and took two to three steps near fire and stood for some moment then lay down and rested. Muthuvans after the delivery walked around the fire. People slowly started dispersing. Thatha, her mother, Jamanthi and Vanamala were still there. Then Jamanthi and Vanamala slept in a corner of the thinnaveedu.

In between Paru was getting pain; placenta had not come out even after half an hour. Thatha again asked her mother to call Atom Mani. Her mother did not respond, later she took some water and did some pooja and gave the water to Paru. She drank a little, and lay down for a while. She held two small onions with her and she ate that. According to them small onions have a capacity to clear the womb. Again she got up from the floor, sat with her legs widespread and cried out in pain; after two minutes the placenta came out. The bloody clothes were kept inside the thinnaveedu and her mother said they would remove it next day morning. Paru did not put or wear any cloth or pad for the bleeding; she kept a big cloth under her and lay down on that. Thatha’s mother went home. Thatha was holding the baby. I asked her to sleep and said I would carry the baby for some hours. I asked Paru to feed the baby but she was very sleepy and tired. Thatha also slept. I held the baby for hours. I carried the baby till morning three o’ clock and I felt tired so I called Thatha, and then Thatha held the baby. I went to my room and slept for three hours.

Early morning I came back to thinnaveedu. Thatha asked me to note down the date and time of the child’s birth and also asked me to suggest a name. Usually, they won’t think of giving a name to the baby until the child is sent to Anganwadi or school. The date of birth is decided by the Anganwadi worker or school teacher based on people's description of an incident in the kudy or reference to a meeting held at the time of child's birth. Thatha informed me that the child had six fingers on both his feet. Till that morning Paru had not started breast feeding the baby, both mother and baby were sleeping continuously. By 10 o’ clock in the morning she breastfed the baby, after hearing the baby crying. But I did not see her breastfeeding frequently and instead they were feeding the baby with water.

Rosamma an outsider, wife of Atom Mani, who visits frequently Edamalakudy for giving treatment to the Muthuvan people says,

Muthuvan starts breastfeeding late and instead of breast milk they give sugar water to the
baby. A small piece of cloth is dipped in sugar water and given to baby drop by drop. Whenever, I suggest them to give milk they would say 'no milk in breast. What to do'. However, later they begin to breastfeed child and the child grows with breast milk (Field notes 2009).

They had not prepared anything before the delivery, even the stone in the thinnaveedu for the pregnant woman to sit for delivery. They took such things easy and started searching for the stone in the night, though they had prepared the small hut with grass for Paru. The next day morning after delivery, Paru had rice with lots of water and tamarind rasam that had been prepared at her home and brought to the thinnaveedu.

After delivery Muthuvan women take bath in hot water for three days. Mother prepares the hot water for herself and the baby. For the first three days their food is prepared at her home and served at thinnaveedu. After three days the new mother herself has to prepare the food. The firewood, utensils and all cooking supplies are provided from her home. If it is a new thinnaveedu made for that delivery, other people in the kudy also would provide things to her. In some of the family they prepare their own thinnaveedu just close to their house. For Paru also they had prepared separate thinnaveedu but since they were scared of wild elephants, they chose the common thinnaveedu which was surrounded by more houses. Cooking utensils and vessels are kept in the common thinnaveedu for the exclusive usage of people in the thinnaveedu. Paravthi’s family made a pit very close to the thinnaveedu and kept all blood-stained cloths and placenta in it and covered it with mud. They put two big pieces of wood over the pit. Paru washed and took bath standing over that wood. She stayed in the thinnaveedu for twenty one days. During this period, she was not allowed to go out and see any men. They do not have any special care after delivery. They usually avoid pulses during this period; tamarind and garlic are the main items used with the rice. After delivery they continuously give tamarind and garlic along with rice for sixteen days. They say that it is good to clean the stomach and good for digestion. Therefore, they prepare rasam with lots of tamarind and garlic. Paru's mother says, 'Garlic supports proper digestion and it helps to release the bad air in the stomach which is deposited during the process of delivery'.

Those who visit the newborn baby and the mother are supposed to take bath before going back to their home. Now a days, this is not strictly followed, but elderly women still practice this custom. There are cases where some old women never go to the thinnaveedu to meet their children or grandchildren even in extreme need. The 21 days stay in the thinnaveedu ensures that the wound of the delivery is healed during this period. If she comes out of thinnaveedu it

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86 A watery preparation with tamarind, garlic and salt eats along with rice

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will not heal and as she will engage in other work, which may affect her health. The mother herself washes the clothes without the support of others. The placenta and the blood also are removed by her. Literature shows menstrual blood is used for magic power. So, in Morocco after the delivery women will give the clothes for washing into the hand of most trusted people (Obermeyer 2000). In the case of Muthuvans too, the women are rigid in their belief that one should wash her clothes after delivery and remove placenta by herself which may be due to the fact that she is scared of someone using her blood for some evil purpose.

They have medicine for stopping the fertility of women. Muthuvan will not reveal this medicine but Atom Mani said that now a days some of its ingredients are very difficult to find. One of the ingredients is the root of jackfruit tree which is growing towards north. Now no one attempt to find out these medicines.

**Deaths during Childbirth**

Death of mother and baby during delivery are not rare among Muthuvans. From their narratives it is observed that most of the deaths occur due to excess bleeding during delivery and retained placenta. In the spirit of strict observance of purity and pollution rules, a man would not touch a woman with excess bleeding, even if it is his wife or sister. In case of emergency women cannot take her to the hospital by themselves as they have to climb the hills with the sick and the hospital is too far. Of late there are some changes happening in Edamalakudy with more people approaching ‘Atom Mani’ and his wife for help. Maniyamma gave me a clear picture of the present situation in the kudy, ‘Many women died at the time of delivery due to bleeding, and their sisters or parents are taking care of their children.’

When I asked Maniyamma for more details on the delivery deaths, she explained further:

> Usually, after the child birth, mothers appear to be all right, but after sometimes, say half an hour, they begin to bleed abnormally. Then we do prayers; sometimes that reduces the bleeding and sometimes not. Then we give our herbal medicine to stop the bleeding. Some women refuse to eat that as they are scared that it would make them unconscious. Then, we cannot do anything. We wait for the slow death. In some cases the child also dies after some days. Sometimes the placenta will not come out after the delivery. That is very painful for women who have just given birth to a baby. After four hours of delivery they usually go to take bath and fortunately the placenta may come out. If it does not, then it leads to death. Atom Mani has been coming to the kudy for almost twenty years and meets people's health needs. But, sometimes he charges rupees 2000 to 3000, which many of us cannot afford. So death is the only thing in front of us. But now some women from our kudy have started going to hospital for delivery. From Andavankudy no one has gone to hospital so far for delivery.

The comments of Krishnankutty are also significant in this context:

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87 He was an employee of the Girijan Society and served in Edamalakudy for twenty three years.
I have witnessed many delivery deaths when I was in the kudy. One woman was the wife of watcher Gopalan’s brother. The baby died in the womb and she delivered the dead baby and she died four days after the delivery, due to bleeding. The whole family watched the death of that woman and no one was willing to take her to the hospital. Another woman delivered, everything was normal, but the placenta did not come out. She was crying loudly from the thinnaveedu and I asked her father to take her to the hospital, but he refused and gave various excuses. She cried for three days continuously; luckily she survived may be with their herbal medicines (Field notes 2009).

Rosamma the health attendant who stays 40 km away says,

Most of the cases of death in delivery are associated with placenta. Immediately after delivery women start walking inside the thinnaveedu around the hearth, she does not wait for the placenta to come out. So finally the placenta will remain in the womb. Once I had taken a placenta which was five days old, which had full of worms in it. In some cases they call me to take out placenta after two or three days. I had to give oxytocin injection to induce contractions and then I took it out with hand (Field notes 2009).

Subhadra, an old woman from Andavankudy added, 'I delivered nine children; among them three girls survived and five boys died. Earlier days were like that; we deliver many but get only a few'. In early days, only those new born babies with better immunity survived. Frequent pregnancy and delivery destroy women’s health. They neither take pre-natal nor post-natal care and rest. They consider delivery as a normal event, which is clear from the fact that they start to work form the thinnaveedu itself. They carry the baby on their back and get back to work. They never give any additional food to the baby. Even after six months, they continue to breast feed and that is the main food for the baby. They do not have many alternatives instead of breast milk. Both infant and mother benefit from long nursing and breast feeding. The baby gets breast milk and mother's parity become lengthy. Some mothers give finger millet porridge to the baby. Because of their custom of having no much choices of baby food except breast milk, the survival of the baby becomes very difficult if the mother dies after delivery. They feed kattii\(^{88}\) and rice, when the baby grows to eat solid food. Infants who lost mother hardly survive; they give finger millet porridge to the baby. If the baby dies usually the others says, ammayillatha ath marichathu nannayi. (It is good that the child without mother passed away).

Atom Mani has taken two deliveries inside the thinnaveedu. Usually Muthuvans do not allow any man inside the thinnaveedu. Actually, he was in the kudy on his routine visits and at that time someone was critical in the thinnaveedu. That is the reason he entered into the thinnaveedu and conducted the delivery on request from her family. Mani told me that his entry to thinnaveedu is due to his long term relationship with those families. But his wife Rosamma is called often and she said that she has attended more than 20 delivery cases in Edamalakudy.

\(^{88}\) A pasty preparation from finger millet powder
The Elderly
One day a woman came to Ampalapadikudy from another kudy. She was carrying a two year old son on her back and that was her third child. I observed a talk between Vidhya and this woman in their language. When she went back Vidhya explained to me. She was advising her to go for sterilization since among her three children the eldest one is a fifteen year old daughter and is going to get married. Therefore, Vidhya was asking her to avoid the delivery of her and her daughter together. Further, she explained to me that in earlier days the mother and daughter used to give birth at the same period. And even now there are such cases but is comparatively less. Rearing up children is not only mother’s role but the kudy also takes responsibility of that. Children are cared by other relatives when mother goes for work or for firewood collection. Daughters often support the mother in all the household work and when she grows up a little she herself go for firewood collection along with her peers. So the mother is relieved from some works. Normally, Muthuvan women reach the menopause in the age of late forties. Chiyyatha, 50 years from Andavankudy says, ‘my thinnaveedu stay has stopped since two years. I could not realize that initially, and then one day while seeing my sister in law going to thinnaveedu, I realized that last month I did not go there and that was a realization that here is no more thinnaveedu stay’. Another woman Kanniyamma, a 55 year old from Andavankudy says, ‘for me it stopped first and after 6 months it appeared again once and after that I did not get it’.

The old woman is referred as thathi in their Muthuvan language and is same in Tamil language too. Thathi is a rich source of knowledge on traditional practices and strictly holds on to the norms in the kudy. They control the young women to become more obedient and follow kudy rules. They are proud to narrate the stories behind the history of their arrival to Kerala from Tamil Nadu. Mostly thathis stay with their daughters but not together with them in their homes. They make an attachment to their house and sleep and cook there. That is a small room with lower roof, mud floor and a hearth. Subhadra, stays with her daughter. Occasionally, her daughter's mother in law visits her and she also stays in the same room sometimes for two weeks. Both these old women sing songs and enjoy cooking together. Among Muthuvans it is observed that they do not retire from the agricultural work. They work in the field in all possible ways till their death and earn for themselves. None of the older women are dependent on their children for their needs. Sometimes, they support their children's agricultural field and get some rice and finger millet for that. Otherwise, they work in their own small agricultural field and collect wild leaves and prepare food out of that. But, the Muthuvan have strong support system especially in case of food. If any one does not have food then others provide. Often their children or grand children give rice and other prepared

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items to them. Even, if they are bedridden they stay there separately and their children go to take care of them. Mostly, the grandchildren and their peer will come and have a chat with them. Older women are proud of their legacy, of their clan and its history and are mostly attached with pooja and other activities like 'controlling of evil spirits'. Further, they know many traditional remedies for general ailments. The rich wisdom of traditional knowledge is utilised by younger people in the kudy.

**Positioning Women in the Kudy**

The distinction between patriarchy and matriarchy operates in a fluid way among Muthuvans and so the question of gender is addressed quite differently among them. In each practice associated with sexual and reproductive health one can see an element of gender demarcation. Women are placed little below in terms of restrictions and punishment. With regard to lineage, Muthuvans follow the matriarchal system. But, when it comes to customs and 'traditions' that define gender restrictions and the taboos associated with it and this tribal community maintains deep-rooted dominant attitudes, power relations and restrictions to the grave disadvantage of women. Women are considered as weak and fragile and accordingly their movements and behaviour are defined and restricted by their kudy system. One of the still followed customs in the kudy is that if a man holds the hand of a woman it is considered as an act of proposal, and she supposedly belongs to that man, without any need of consent from her. Such rules and practices favour men and perpetuate male domination and amounts to negate or invalidate the identity and autonomy of women.

The narratives of old women give a crucial account of their life in the forest, which is highly demanding and challenging in terms of gender. After marriage, the couple usually stays adjacent to their parent's house. In some cases, but rarely, the bride gets incorporated into her husband’s household while yet retaining a foot hold in her own parents’ home. She would signal her respect to her in-laws by refraining from addressing them by name and by adapting to conceal her body and remaining secluded in relation to other male members in the family. Her movements are monitored and her contacts with others are regulated by elder men in the family. She is not allowed to talk to other men and she should get permission from her husband to go anywhere outside her house.

While discussing about the gender roles among Muthuvans it is interesting to note that at home or inside the family the women do not face any discrimination. The couples mutually decide on the financial matters, children's education, marriage and agriculture. But the kudy structure or the Muthuvan kudy system controls the women.
Kudy System: Visibility and Invisibility of Gender Roles

Gender demarcation is prominent in many aspects and is expressed through controlling the ways that women have to conduct their lives, adhering to the norms of the kudy. Women are not supposed to talk to any male members in the community even if he belongs to the same clan. Her male circle is her father, siblings and after marriage her husband and son. And she should not appear before a male member who belongs to another clan. When a woman passes through a narrow path if a man happens to come across, the woman is supposed to hide her face from him and also hide herself behind the bushes. But this custom is not strictly observed in the Muthuvan kudys in Marayoor. People in Marayoor are more confident due to their enhanced interaction with outsiders and the gap of gender asymmetry is less. They have a school near by the kudy run by Christian nuns. When I was in Edamalakudy I was usually accompanied by some women and we used to walk long distances. While crossing a narrow path if we happen to meet a man, my fellow women would hide herself from the vicinity of the male. She told me that if she did not do it in traditional way, the elder men and women will scold her and even punish her. But such things never happened in Marayoor. There, most of the paths within the community are broad and even if it is narrow, the girls never hide themselves inside the bushes or hide their faces behind a bush or branch. The facts that women have to hide their face from the male member in the kudy and from outsiders indicate a gender disparity resulting in discrimination against women. This is the way the girls are bought up for maintaining the clan purity. If they face each other, that may lead to more interaction and older generation is scared that eventually that may lead to marriage. This age old practice is for preventing the marriage between the persons from the same clan and they also want to facilitate marriage with a particular clan or with the pre-determined person.

The age old system of separate dormitories for men and women still exist, in its most traditional form, only among Muthuvans and not among any other tribes of Kerala, which again limits the different status of men and women among Muthuvans defined by strict gender roles. The other tribes of Kerala (in Idukki district) like Ulladan, Urali and Mannan also had maintained separate dormitory systems for men and women with different names. But those customs has faded away from their culture and even from their memories as evident in their conversations. Sulochana, a forty eight years old Ulladan woman married to a Mannan man, said that she did not know anything about thinnaveedu and had never seen those systems in both Ulladan and Mannan cultures. Then Sulochana's mother shared her memories.
In our childhood during the time of menstruation we used to go and stay in the valaymapura (thinnaveedu) for four days. After my marriage I came to Adimaly and then I haven’t gone into valaymapura. Now, we do not have such practices among Ulladan community. But Muthuvan wherever they live, still keep the system of valaymapura (Field notes 2009).

The system of separate dormitories for boys and girls among Muthuvans has undergone slight changes. Boys are strictly made to sleep in chavadi, but if there is no place in the thinnaveedu girls are allowed to sleep together in any of the houses where only women stays. Chavadi is comparatively big and maintained well. As (‘an outsider’) member from the main stream society, I felt at first strange about the very concept and practice of such a separation between male and female. But, later the knowledge about their clan system and the marriage customs, gave insights to the historical and the sociological background of the gender demarcation among them. Their clan system is developed and maintained to preserve their identities, particularly for purpose of marriage and clan hierarchies are still observed. If a woman marries outside the community, from a higher caste and come back to the kudy, after disposing that marriage, she is isolated in the kudy for purification for a limited period. Whereas, in the case of a marriage with a lower caste man, she is secluded for years and not allowed to rectify her purity and sometimes is not taken back to the community. Only women married from outside Muthuvan community and no case was heard about a Muthuvan man marrying outside the Muthuvan community.

**Boundaries in Social Life**

In Marayoor, the girls easily interacted with me and sang the songs like ashapattu whereas in Edamalakudy girls were shy to sing these ashapattu. Obviously, people at Marayoor have more exposure to the outside world. People from outside community like teachers, health workers come and interact with them as of part of government programmes and commercial traders come for buying the sugarcane, jaggary and lemon grass oil. Moreover, the Muthuvan kudy in Marayoor is just five kilometers from Marayoor town and have motor able road to the kudy. While I was there, several men from outside came daily to the kudy premises to cut the eucalyptus trees for which they had taken contract from the Department of Forest, State Government for cutting the trees. They cut and upload some ten to twenty loads of wood every day. While the skilled labourers like drivers and cutters come from outside, the people in the kudy assist them as causal labourers. This gives them ample opportunity to interact with outsiders. On most of the Sundays they go to markets, even if they do not have anything to buy, they accompany others. Sunday is the market day in the Marayoor town. These Sunday visits expose them to other tribes and non tribes, which force them to reflect their own life patterns and outlook.
Among the Muthuvans, the strong grip of 'tradition' and traditional practices becomes evident in the way the Muthuvans consider the status of women and the way women conceive their own status and position in the kudy. Most of the elderly women (i.e. above the age of sixty) appear to have accepted and assimilated the conventional restrictions in terms of gender demarcation, assertion of individuality and free mobility. In conversations, most women in the kudy, except a few educated young women, sounded well in-sync with the traditional practices that restrict the individuality and freedom of movement. They are taking these conditions in a sense of helplessness and accept it as natural and not as a call for dissent or open protest or violation of 'traditions'. But interestingly, Muthuvan women, both young and old, act more convincingly, when it comes to the encroachment of 'modernity' into their traditional sexual and reproductive practices, adapting to change in varying degrees. Muthuvan consider themselves as of higher caste like that of Brahmins and do not want to engage with other tribes. Subhadra from Andavankudy says, 'If a Mannan comes we will not allow him to enter our house'. These notions are carried by old people and are passed through generations.

The case of Raniyamma, an old woman from Andavankudy, is a typical example that represents the restrictions imposed on Muthuvan women and their helplessness and dependence on males as a result. Whenever, I visited Andavankudy during day time, Raniyamma was there moving around her house. Most of the other women folk would be in the field. Raniyamma is a loving woman, who always welcomed me to her house. Recently, her 26 years old son, who was staying in Marayoor with his wife, committed suicide. Her grief was doubled by the fact that she could not go to Marayoor to see the body of her son. It would have been a different story if a man wanted to travel such a long distance away from the kudy. Raniyamma says, “My son is young and he was very caring; he is the one who loved me more than any of my other children. Often he comes here to Edamalakudy from Marayoor to spend time with me, but I could not go to see him”. She could not see her son’s body since it occurred in Marayoor, some 40 kilometers away from her kudy in Edamalakudy. Earlier, Muthuvans used to walk through forest such long distances, but not anymore. Her son Raghu, who stays in Andavankudy itself, went to Marayoor without informing Raniyamma to see the body of his brother. Raniyamma says, “He might have thought that I would be upset on seeing the body and carrying me all the way to hospital and then to Marayoor is difficult for him”. Her son was buried the next day after the postmortem, but she could not attend the burial. Since her husband is also dead, 'tradition' inspects that she needs the company of another female member to travel. Even today with many other things changing, women are still not allowed to travel alone, even from one kudy to another kudy nearby. In most
mainstream communities elders restrict the movement of unmarried girls; whereas, among Muthuvans, these restrictions are imposed on all women, irrespective of age and marital status.

Even during bereavement Raniyamma welcomed me and talked to me. Sometimes she used to sit inside the room near the hearth. And at times, she was planting sugar tubers in the land near her courtyard. Whenever, she see me she used to stop her work and come to me. Even, if I asked her to continue working, she would say that she was about to stop it, “I am tired, I cannot work like my early days.” So I asked to Raniyamma, how old she was. She said “May be 60, 70 or 80, I don’t know”. Raniyamma's case explains how a woman is restricted by the system through different norms.

**Clan, Marriage and Gender**

The prevalence of the clan system among the Muthuvans is not apparent and observable to the outsiders, even to those who are living in Edamalakudy like the Anganwadi workers. It is through the clan system one can see gender demarcation among the Muthuvans. The marriage is strictly exogamous. Marriage from the same clan is strictly punishable. In order to maintain the purity of each clan, they insist that women avoid interaction with all the males other than her husband and brothers. Earlier, marriage of a boy or a girl being born in to a clan used to be fixed at the time of birth or even before it by the representatives of the clan. This childhood engagement leads to a natural nourishment of the relationship among boys and girls. Each koottam has its own representative responsible for all the decisions regarding marriage. Old women and men try to perpetuate the gender demarcations and the associated taboos and restrictions in order to retain the clan purity through marriage and in order to maintain purity they control or restrict the interaction between the opposite sexes. Of late, old generations are scared of possible violations of clan restrictions especially those connected to marriage by their young generations, who are more susceptible to the influences of 'modernity'.

The relationships with the in-laws are restricted and both of them do not sit together and talk. The father in-law and daughter in-law will not stay in the same home. Muthuvans shows respect to their in-laws without talking and sitting together. They call their in-laws vappan. In most of the marriages, one from the inlaws are either aunt or uncle for the daughter in-law and it is the same with her changar too. If the marriage is fixed in childhood, then the bride and groom knows that these are the people who are going to be their inlaws. Therefore, from childhood onwards they keep a distance with their mama (uncle) and mami (aunt). In many

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cases the in-laws and parents both are also changar and kuttal means they are cross cousins. When I used to sit with Vasanthi, a twenty two year old married woman from Ampalapadikudy, her vappan (she stays in another kudy and she came here to her son’s house for a few days stay) came to her kitchen from the field. I got up and asked vappan to sit with us and drink tea. She refused, did not stay there, and went to the kitchen in the next house to drink black tea from there. After the departure of vappan, Vasanthi explained to me,

She will not sit with me. She saw me sitting here with you and that is why she went back. We will not sit together. In our culture we will not talk to each other too. She never sleeps in her son's house even if it is a two room house. In the night she goes and sleeps in any other house where some woman stays alone.

The Interplay of Purity and Pollution
As we have discussed earlier Muthuvans strictly observe pollution associated with death, menarche, menstruation and delivery. Death is the only one polluting factor which affects men. If a woman becomes ill the other women cannot carry her to the hospital as they would need help and support from men to carry her long distance climbing the hill. In their custom it is forbidden for a man to see a menstruating woman and a woman at delivery, since both are connected to bleeding. They consider menstruation and delivery as biggest causes of pollution. So the men cannot even imagine carrying a bleeding woman to the hospital even if something worse is happening to her. Nowadays, with the intervention of the health department and the trained ASHA volunteers, some changes are entering the kudy slowly. But, during earlier days these changes were unthinkable. Even if someone’s wife or daughter cries out loudly from the thinnaveedu due to pain or profuse bleeding, others would never touch or carry them to a hospital. They believe that God would punish them for all sorts of violations connected to purity and pollution and if someone touches her God might destroy the entire clan.

One of the most unique traditional systems among the Muthuvans connected to purity and pollution is their separate system of chavadi/ thinnaveedu. During my first day in Edamalakudy, my entry point was Andavankudy. The Kani took me to the chavadi and from there he began explaining about their kudy. There were some boys and men in the chavadi. That big hall is made of mud with grass roofing. It has just one entrance and a space in the centre which is kept as a fire place and there some musical instrument like a drum was kept. The hall looked very clean and cool; there were no furniture and or any articles in the hall. This separate sleeping arrangement for male and female child from the age of eight is meant to instil in them a sense of purity, which is implemented through strict gender demarcation from childhood onwards. While Chavadi is a vital place of the kudy, thinnaveedu is
considered as the most polluted place. At the time of celebrations in the kudy, men and women dance separately around their different sleeping places. Such a sense of segregation seems to have prevented spontaneous relationships among them and restricted interactions between opposite sexes to a great extent from childhood itself. But it is observed that there is a strong peer influence from the same sex among the children. For them the chavadi and thinnaveedu gives ample opportunities to interact with the cousins and peers which help in building a healthy relationship and make an influence in every important aspects of one's life.

**Kudy Norms**

The customary beliefs have certain idioms. The important among them, mostly those that bring out subjugation of women, are the following.

**Table No. 5.1 Norms among Muthuvan**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No</th>
<th>Popular Norms among Muthuvans in Edamalakudy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>If a woman holds on umbrella or wears slippers, her husband would die</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The women can untie her hair only when husband die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>If a woman, sitting in thinnaveedu, appear before men her clan will perish and her family members will suffer from illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A woman shall not go out alone; and if she goes out alone she has to swear and declare before God that she is pure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Those who are back to the community after excommunication, especially through marriage with outsiders, shall be given food outside the house during functions</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Once Maniyamma explained the concept of pollution associated with menstruation: the bad odour from the body of menstruating women will stay on the door. If someone passes through that door the bad air will enter into them and they will also will become impure’. The non menstruating women are supposed to take bath after their visit or night stay in the thinnaveedu to purify from the pollution. From another point of view, the chavadi and thinnaveedu could be seen as a system to foster sexual freedom of husbands and wives in their own homes without any interventions from other members. Traditional houses in the kudy are single room system with just one room for everything, which works as kitchen, dining and storing room and also sleeping place at night.
Contraceptive Pill: An Anti-Menstruation Tool

The Muthuvans say that they never felt the need for birth control till the time of introduction of Mala-D. When the department of health, first introduced Mala-D (oral contraceptive) to Muthuvan women, it was merely a contraceptive pill and was perceived as an ‘external object’. The Muthuvan women come into contact with many objects and gadgets from the outside world and Mala-D was one among them. Usually, the external objects confuse them initially. The same happened with Mala-D too. Slowly the initial hesitation about Mala-D as an object brought from outside to began to phase out and women started using it as a contraceptive as instructed from the medical team. Later, they found out that these tablets can also prevent one's menstrual cycle if one took only the white pills continuously without a break. A stripe consists of twenty eight tablets, in which twenty one are white hormonal tablets and the rest seven black coloured iron tablets. Mala D is used in a normal sense by consuming one pill each day for 28 days. But, the Muthuvan women, in order to prevent menstruation, take one white tablet per day and after finishing the 21 white tablets, they continue with the next strip of white tablets, instead of taking black iron tablets. So Mala-D became the best tool to control menstruation to retain ‘purity’ or stave off four days of ‘impurity’ every month. The easy availability and affordability (it is freely distributed by the health department; it costs nominal charges in open market) and the acceptance by most women made Mala-D a big favourite in the kudy. I asked Maniyamma, an ASHA how they found out the Mala-D's menstrual control effect and she replied:

We are using it this way since five years. We don't know who found it. May be someone forgot to take the black pills and went on to the next dose of white pills and from that they learnt the connection of this pills and menstruation. It may also be that someone did not like the taste of black tablet. Any how they found that one could prevent menstruation by consuming white tablet continuously, without taking the black. That news has spread among all the Muthuvans and that was an important thing for all of us.

Thus, menstruation and the contraceptive Mala-D both struck a unique relationship among people of Edamalakudy. Jamanthi says, ‘people of Edamalakudy can live without food but not without Mala-D’. From their words it is understood that the arrival of Mala-D is a important turn in their life and they are very much influenced by that.

Anganwadi teacher Saroja reported,

Some girls start to take these tablets after menarche. Their mothers or elder sisters have introduced the pills to these girls, so they continue with that. Even those women who underwent termination of pregnancy through tubectomy also take this contraceptive tablets to avoid menstrual cycles.

Maniyamma informed:
I have undergone sterilization after my fourth child. I myself is an ASHA. I know taking Mala-D is not good. But, sometimes we do not have any other choice. Last year we planned to go for Chennai Adiparasakti temple. For that I had taken one month Mala-D. Otherwise I could not have gone. When we stay in the kudy we have to obey the kudy norms. Now we have a choice because of this Mala-D. Whenever we are ready to go to thinnaveedu we would give up Mala and go to thinnaveedu. Vidhya had another view point ‘Only when my husband goes to meet his parents, I would give up Mala-D and go to stay in thinnaveedu. Otherwise who is there to take care of my husband other than me?’.

Muthuvan women consider the contraceptive pill as the best tool to save themselves from the fear of attack of wild animals and isolated stay at thinnavedu at the time of menstruation. Now the acceptance of Mala-D has become an extended phenomenon among other family members such as husbands and mothers-in-law in the context of labour force participation. During harvest times where the labour is most required women’s absence from the field can spell heavy burden on the families. Hence, to avoid that even husbands and mothers-in-law nowadays expect women to take the Mala-D tablets and avoid the stay in the thinnaveedu during harvest season. They would scold women if they have to stay in the thinnaveedu during this time and pass such remarks ‘instead of taking tablets she is going and sitting in thinnaveedu when there is work to be done’. Mala-D supports the increase in labour force in the agricultural field.

The principal ritual to regain purity lost through different forms of pollution is the ritual bath in the stream. The stream is the center of all observances and the rituals associated with pollution. Every event and ritual is closely linked to a ceremonial bath that is considered as a declaration of purity from the pollution. Muthuvan women take ritual bath at the time of thalemuttu ceremony, on last day of every menstruation (after they come out of thinnaveedu) and after delivery. At the time of thalemuttu, the elder women take the girl to the stream and give an elaborate bath. Many women join them during this ceremony, collecting water in pots and pouring on each other’s body as if bathing each other. At the end they carry home a pot of clear water which symbolises purity and the round shape of pot symbolises maturity. At the time of marriage, the bride visits all houses and people pour down water on her body when she stands at each house's entrance. The ritual bath that a woman takes twenty one days after her delivery is also significant. After spending twenty one days in the thinnaveedu as part of delivery and the pollution connected to it, the woman comes out to take bath in the stream. She takes this ritual bath on the twenty first day morning along with the new born baby before returning to normal life in the kudy. Otherwise, these days she takes bath in the premises of thinnaveedu or sometimes in the stream. Few women also accompany her to the river and there the new mother apply turmeric at her face and pour water with turmeric. Other women would accompany her support is ensured and she ties the baby in her sari itself. (A picture is
Muthuvan’s life is closely linked to the nature and from this inseparable relationship flow their belief systems. Soil, water and fire have an important place in the Muthuvan's life. They employ their typical ethnomedicines for different ailments and also some of them take recourse to black magic when they get ill. Whenever, someone in the kudy gets fever they take sufficient rest, lying down on the mud floor near the hearth. They believe that the soil will absorb all impurities from their body and the fire will burn and thus expel all evil in the body. Further, they believe that there are more chances at catching bad omen and evil spirits at the time of menstruation and after delivery. Therefore they want to sleep or lie down very close to the fire to save themselves from bad omens and evil spirits.

To maintain strict observance of ‘purity-impurity’ traditions and practices the Muthuvans have age old rituals and celebrations, most of them related to sexual and reproductive health and therefore mainly related to women. The implications of these strict norms regarding pollution affect men too in terms of what would happen to them if they come into contact with women, including their own wives or daughters, who are in potential state of ‘pollution’. Children, especially girls, are prepared in their culture to strictly observe these strict norms of purity and pollution and the traditional rituals and practices derived out of those norms. These rituals observed at different stages of life have special significance to their conventional concepts of reproductive and sexual health. Muthuvan women strictly adhere to the 'traditions', customs and rules of the kudy with regard to separation of sexes and obligations imposed on women in particular. This whole package of 'traditions', customs and practices has its basis on their beliefs in purity and pollution, which are not simply mundane things for them, but are connected to forces beyond. Their world view is deeply rooted in their beliefs of the beyond which are not necessarily gods and goddesses.

Muthuvans are adapting to changes now 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 or four days. It did not happen all of a sudden; it happened over a long duration for this relaxation to take effect. In Andavankudy menstruating women stays in the thinnaveedu for four days and in Amapalapadikkudy it is for three days stay. This also shows their less rigidity in the duration of stay. After some time Andavankudy people also may reduce it into three days by referring to Ampalapadikudy people. After reaching back home from the thinnaveedu some of them feel that they are still impure. So they stay at home a few more days and do not go to forest, since for them forest is a sacred place.
Life inside the Chavadi- Exposure to Electronic Media

There are changes happening in the Muthuvan 'tradition' among men too. One such major change is within the chavadi with increased exposure to adult films especially among the young folk. They do not feel hiding this from even outsiders. Once Joshi, the teacher shared his experience with me,

when I was going to Munnar, Ranjan came and asked me to bring a CD (Compact Disc). Then I asked what kind of CD. He smiled and said “You know it”. When I asked him to explain, he told me that the same kind of CD which Bhaskaran used to bring into the kudy. Then I understood what he meant and I told him that I could not bring such CDs to the kudy (Field notes 2008).

Ranjan explained that they used to watch CDs of adult movies in the chavadi sometime in the evening. He said that they usually do not hide it from children; the reason he gave is that these children are also going to enter this stage one day. The old men folk also consider it as normal, ‘All outside world is watching this; then why shouldn’t we?’ they ask. They are negotiating their world with life from outside. Young generation looks prone to change, they would want to change or modify their 'tradition'. When some changes do happen in the customs or practices among the Muthuvan men, the old folks seem to appreciate the change. Whereas, the changes among young women are resisted by old women in many cases like wearing slippers, changed style of wearing dress and carrying an umbrella along with them.

Studies show that pornography exposure can lead to emotional disturbance, sexual knowledge and liberalised attitudes, shifts in sexual behaviour, sexist and objectifying understandings (Flood 2009). These new changes towards pornography may influence their sexual behaviour and eventually their marital life. Sometimes, that may lead to a marital discode. One of the spouses may not be able to cope up with the sexual behaviour of other which may eventually lead to a marital separation.

Social Institutions and Women

The Muthuvan family structure is matrilineal as they get their lineage through the mother’s side. Family property is equally shared among all the children. But, in terms of roles and participation women are marginalized. In case of decision making at the level of panchayam, the man-made rules discriminate and restrict women. The representatives of the panchayam are mainly from the male members of ellokootom clan. Whenever, there is a dispute in the kudy, panchayam gives a hearing to both parties in the pretext that it does not show any bias, be it a man or a woman and everything will be resolved through a fair piece of judgment. However, mostly they never question the norms and beliefs existing in the community and never deal the consequences faced by the women due to that.
The case of Seematti, a 21 year old young woman in Andavankudy is a typical example in this context. Seematti lost her parents when she was just two years old and was brought up by her maternal grandmother Raniyamma. According to Seematti, her father used to be a drunkard and used to harass her mother every day. One day he killed his wife and then committed suicide. The day he committed the murder, there was a lot of commotion at home, but none of the neighbours dared to intervene in the family matter fearing any backlash from her father. Two days later, they found the two dead bodies and the two year old girl child sucking her dead mother’s breast. Then her grandmother took Seematti to Andavankudy and she was brought up there. She was called by the kudy people as valathe, which means ‘one who is bought up by others’. She studied up to fourth grade in the society Lower Primary school and could barely read or write, but is a very hard working person.

At the age of fourteen Seematti got married to Ramu from Edalaparakudy and they built a house in Andavankudy. He was mentally ill and used to abuse her physically. Sometimes he would be in a very depressive mood. For her it was difficult manage him and he was not interested in family. Therefore, Seematti gave up that relationship and started living with her daughter, Kalpana. At the age of four Kalpana died of fever and cough. I met Seematti after two weeks of her child's demise. When the child got fever Seematti could not take her to hospital. No one was there to carry her up to Munnar. ‘I did not have any money’ she told. Seematti’s sister and brother lived in another kudy and she do not have much contact with them. At the time of her child's death her brother came but not the sister. During pongal she wore an old and faded sari. She said ‘I have a better sari but I cannot wear that. Because the people will scold me, saying that after her child’s death see how she is walking’. The same way she said, ‘I cannot comb my hair and use soap and take a proper bath.’ Using soap and a proper bath means beautification of body and these are restricted for a woman undergoing loss. She was bold enough to give up the relationship with her husband and had decided to bring up her daughter alone. She has a desire for a family life too. She is struggling to stand in between the kudy norms and her desires.

Those days, a panchayam was held in Andavankudy connected with Seematti. When I asked Seematti about this panchayam, she recalled how Panchayam was conducted and they delivered the judgment in a case in which she had nothing to do at all. Her name was dragged into it by a person in the kudy since he did not like her. Panchayam was held in Andavankudy at the behest of Veluswami, a 20 year old man from that place. He complained against Seematti that once she held his hand and said that she liked him. Veluswami did not like her and that is why he complained against her. He alleged, 'she is married, had a child, and also
her husband is alive. Then why she is behaving like this to me'. During the panchayam the concerned persons summoned Seematti and asked her about the incident. She denied the incident. She said, she never held his hand and talked to him about marriage. However, when verdict was given it went in favour of Veluswami’s appeal upholding that Veluswami should never be disturbed by Seematti. Mostly Panchayam works and try to keep justice, but sometimes the members in the panchayam never think what the actual reason is and so they never ask other people's opinion about the issue. Other people mostly don’t openly give any opinion as they are scared of the punishment.

When I asked about the remarriage Seematti rejected the idea and said, 'I don't want it, I don't like anyone. These stories are all nonsense. I will live alone till my death. I would never go back and think about a reunion. Now, I have my thathi, my grandmother with me. When she dies, I will commit suicide. Thathi told me “when I die you also die. Otherwise no one will be here for you”. One day I asked the grandmother about Seematti's age and she said ‘Who knows her age?, Her father and mother died; then who would know her age?’ (athinte appanum ammayum chathupoyi….pinne arkkariyam athinte prayam?).

As Seematti is alone now she locked up in her modest, single-room mud house and stays with her grandmother. Once she showed me her baby's finger prints on the mud wall of her house. She kept that place without renewing the plastering to preserve her daughter’s memory. She said she did not even feel like taking bath. Somehow, she was trying to get back to life slowly. For a mother who has lost her child, there are lots of restrictions and instructions on how to behave in the kudy. She is not supposed to wear good dresses, comb her hair and not even apply soap on the body and oil her hair. Seematti wants to show that she obeys the rules of the kudy and at the same time she expresses her desire to enjoy life. After her daughter's death she was deeply sad, but she kept all norms of the community. But when all others started singing she asked me to record her voice and also asked me not to tell anyone that she had sung a song. She wants to be a good woman in front of the kudy people, but at the same time she could not hide her natural desires as a woman.

Even after my field work I am in touch with the people of kudy over phone; during one such conversation Vasanthi informed me that Seematti had died. She got high fever and was bed ridden in the kudy and after five days she died. Two months before her death she fell down near the water tap of a bore-well of the single teacher school and became unconscious. Others interpreted that incident as some evil act and that tap is infested with evil spirit. All women stopped taking water from that particular tap. She always worked hard and hardly had any proper food. Her fainting may be due to lack of proper food and anaemia.
Later I learnt from Bindu teacher (who is a single school teacher in Andavankuy) that Seematti once had a big fight with a woman named Pommi in the kudy and she alleged that Seematti was having an illicit relationship with her husband. But Seematti denied that. Bindu teacher further told that Pommi’s sister Dharani have hinted like ‘we should impose ooruvilakku on her and my husband was the previous kani and is the one who is going to take decision’. He belonged to ellokootom (clan). Then, Seematti was scared of that and consumed poison. People have come out with different versions but actually that was a suicide. Later, I clarified this with Vasanthi and she said it was a suicide. Seematti’s case is a representation of Muthuvan women’s desire to live, desire for biological needs and craving for love. But the community restricted her natural desires and she could not survive her ailment. She did not have a voice to demand treatment for her daughter. No one wanted to save Seematti. As per Maniyamma ‘It is good that she died, otherwise who would be there to take care of her’. She was a young separated woman and had lost her child; while her peer group was enjoying. She could not survive with the loss and norms of kudy. She was bold enough to give up the relationship with her husband and decided to bring up her daughter alone.

Study shows that the regular use of hormonal contraceptive brings changes in the hormonal balance of the body and women become depressed and this may lead to suicide (Pitula 1995). The intake of hormonal contraceptive among Muthuvan may be a reason for increasing suicide incidents in the kudy. Sometimes this variation of hormone in the body affects the stress and mood of a woman who takes oral contraceptives frequently.

**Conclusion**

The case of Seematti reflects that power and social hierarchy exist in the kudy. In front of these norms and customs she could not survive and her grandmother’s word ‘you commit suicide after my death’ added to her vulnerable situation. Besides after the loss of her child she could not find any hope. Old age is an independent age and older people take the key role to maintain the ‘tradition’ and kudy norms to an extent. Some of the old women become more spiritual and perform pooja against evil spirits. Menopause is a normal event which helps them to stop going to thinnaveedu and they are happy on that. They are not giving much importance to menopause. Others give respect to old people and at the same time they enhance their independence by offering free land for their cultivation. Neither the old people want to be dependent on their children nor do the children want to offer support.

A girl who is allowed to watch delivery since her childhood understands childbirth and its process and consider it a normal part of a woman's life. This makes her develop the Muthuvan Identity. This chapter describes the growth of a girl. A girl who is watching delivery from her
childhood is made to understand that the childbirth and its process is a normal part of a woman's life. Their social systems chavadi and thinnaveedu are supportive system which teach and make understand the youngsters about the norms and rituals of Muthuvans.

A woman in the Muthuvan kudy is at the lower end of power structure, and no autonomy is given to the Muthuvan women. As explained and described above the components of Muthuvan culture actually mediates their limitations and struggle.