

200 years on, Nangeli's sacrifice only a fading memory

Nangeli gained her place in history as the woman who cut off her breasts to protest against an inhuman tax imposed in erstwhile Travancore

Updated - October 21, 2013 11:39 am IST - Kochi:

NIDHI SURENDRANATH



The area near Manorama Kavala, Cherthala, was once known as Mulachiparambu and was the site where Nangeli, in 1803, cut off her breasts to protests against the breast tax imposed on the lower caste women of Travancore. Photo: H. Vibhu

Many books and histories have been written

about caste oppression in Kerala and the men and women who fought the injustice. Yet the story of one woman's protest has almost faded away from the collective memory of the State.

Nangeli, who lived in Cherthala in Alappuzha over 200 years ago, gained her place in history as the woman who cut off her breasts to protest against the inhuman *mulakkaram* (breast tax) that was imposed in the erstwhile kingdom of Travancore.

Caste oppression

Kings of the time ensured the subjugation of the lower castes by imposing heavy taxes on them. Their wealth was built on some of the worst taxes imposed anywhere in the world. Besides the tax on land and crops, peasants had to pay taxes for the right to wear jewellery, the right of men to grow a moustache, and even the right of women to cover their breasts.

The heavy taxes ensured that the lower castes were kept eternally in debt, while members of the upper castes flourished.

“Nangeli was a poor Ezhava woman from Cherthala. Her family could not afford to pay the taxes and was in debt to the rulers,” says D. Sugathan, advocate and former MLA from Alappuzha.

“The tax collector, then called the *parvathiyar*, came to her house one day and demanded that she pay the tax,” he says. The legend goes that Nangeli cut off her breasts and presented them to the *parvathiyar* on a plantain leaf. The tax collector fled in fear, while Nangeli bled to death at her doorstep.

Her husband Chirukandan came home to find his wife lying dead and mutilated. He is said to have jumped into her funeral pyre out of grief.

“The incident happened in 1803. It created a lot of anger and the practice of collecting breast tax was put to an end here by 1812,” says Mr. Sugathan, who mentions Nangeli’s story in his book ‘*Oru Desathinte Katha, Kayarinteyum*’.

While Nangeli’s sacrifice put an end to one form of caste oppression, the land where she lived came to be known as *mulachiparambu* – the plot where the woman of breasts lived.

“Nangeli’s story is unique also for the fact that it is the first recorded instance of a man committing *sati*,” says Ajay S. Sekher, a teacher of English at the Tirur centre of Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit. A blog post written by Mr. Sekher, who researches issues of caste and gender, has introduced many to the story of Nangeli and *mulachiparambu*.

An earlier generation of political leaders grew up hearing about Nangeli's protest and its significance in Kerala's history. Leaders C. Kesavan and K.R. Gowri Amma have mentioned her in their autobiographies.

'Unique resistance'

"Nangeli's story is an articulation of a unique resistance and struggle against a Brahmanic patriarchy. The tradition of such resistance by leaders such as Gowri Amma could perhaps be traced all the way back to Nangeli," says Mr. Sekher.

The legend of Nangeli's mutilation of her own body in protest against oppression has been handed down through generations.

Today, however, her tale is preserved only in the memories of a few old-timers and researchers. There are no memorials to her name, no books extolling her courage.

The name *mulachiparambu* too has been covered up, perhaps due to embarrassment. The plot, divided up between several owners, is situated near the SNDP office at Manorama Junction in Cherthala.

Published - October 21, 2013 11:38 am IST