

PATRIARCHY, CASTEISM AND CONJUGALITY: MARRIAGE REFORM AMONG THE NAMBOOTHIRI COMMUNITY

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Marriage has been a centre of concern for all communities whether patrilineal or matrilineal. Every society developed their own patterns of marriage to cater to the interest of respective communities. Marriage, like any other institution evolved by man, has undergone timely modifications and reinterpretations. The social reform movements of the late nineteenth century were very keen about the marriage practices and sought to reconstruct it. The reform was envisaged by imbibing western notions of love and conjugality and redefined marriage within tracts of Indian patriarchy. The Namboothiri community, the most orthodox of the period, witnessed an attempt for amelioration of their customary marriage and family practices. However, all the reforms were done within the limits of patriarchy and even the proposed changes strengthened the traditional patriarchal system. At the outset it was portrayed as revolutionary changes but, all the reforms reaffirmed patriarchal control over women, marriage and family.

The history of twentieth century social reform movements convinces the centrality of marriage in the reform discourses. Every discussion on reforming communities, empowering women, and modernising practices ends up with an obligation of redefining marriage- its nature, practice and structure. In colonial India, the socio religious reform agenda could not be materialised, without addressing the then existing norms of marriage. Consequently, social reformism throughout India proposed amelioration in marriage practice and custom, invariably proposals went in tune with the scriptural version. Marriage reforms turned out to be a project for curbing women's sexuality. The presence of colonial state and the emergent socio-economic structure heralded an era of marriage reforms in most of the Indian provinces. As the practice and customs related to Indian marriages were complex, so were the concerns of reformism. Issues like child marriage, dowry, age of consent, widow immolation, widow remarriage, women's sexuality, property rights within marriage, customs of marriage were all contested leading to a multiplicity of interpretations.

The very historiography of social reform movements conveys an idea that the colonial state was keen on the emancipation of women. Henceforth the state embarked on

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legislation which sought to liberate women from the archaic controls of tradition. But an analysis of the whole reform agenda from a feminist perspective reveals the nature of colonial intervention went hand in hand with the traditional patriarchal notions of women's existence. In short, the patriarchal reform agenda with the support of the colonial jurisprudence set out to restrict women's lives and their sexuality within a legal framework. It was made to believe that women have been rescued from the age old slender, but the colonial state legalised the patriarchal check on women.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed movements for reforming marriage practices in different parts of the country. Beginning in Bengal, reformism spread to Bombay and Madras Presidencies. The proposed changes were not in any unilateral pattern, there existed religious, regional and caste differences both in the agenda of reform and also in the methodology adopted. Social reform movements were highly complex in the sense that, though they were all emancipator superficially, we can see a modernised genre of patriarchy was in the making. A new patriarchy which was different from the traditional scriptural version, at the same time influenced by European norms was being forged. This new patriarchy envisaged the 'emancipation' of women within the limits of a consolidated casteism. These trajectories of reformism were quite similar among the upper castes and lower castes.

Following the Pan Indian scenario of reformism, the Malayalam speaking region of South India, also sought to address their social backwardness. This region which was known for its social exclusion was composed of two Princely states - Travancore and Cochin and a British Province of Malabar. This paper would look into marriage reforms of the early twentieth century within the Namboothiri community. The changes in the social norms that led to reformism and the methodology adopted for attaining the same are to be ascertained. It has to be conceptualised how the proposed changes were imbibed by the community and how a drastic change in the marital system and conjugality was instituted.

VELI MARRIAGE 'BY TRADITION'

The Namboothiri community of Kerala was quite different from Brahmins in other parts of India, in their marriage relations, inheritance patterns and property ownership. In Malabar though they wielded power, Namboothiris formed a very microscopic fraction of the population. However, they did not constitute a homogenous group as they were divided among themselves into eight sub-castes - Thambakkal, Adyan, Visishtan, Samanyan, Jathimathrakan, Sagethikan, Sapthan, Papishtanmar. Sub-castes were exclusive groups, among whom inter marriage or inter dining were to be avoided. The social exclusiveness was more keenly observed by antharjanams than Namboothiri men.

In a Namboothiri family, usually only the eldest son would marry within the community; all other male members would go for sambandham, with the women of the royal family or Nair community. Although younger Brahmin men bore children with Nair women, this arrangement did not lead to extended ties between the communities, and the illoms remained a distant, monastery-like place where the unmarried youth were busy with religious and domestic duties. (Moser & Younger, 2013, p. 286-301) At the same time women of the community were to follow stringent rules of endogamy. Hence this peculiar marriage rule created a condition where the eligible Namboothiri men for marrying Namboothiri women would always be scarce. In arranging veliNamboothiris strictly observed community endogamy and gothraexogamy, bride and bride groom must not be related to each other through father or mother and the bridegroom must be the eldest son of the family. (Fawcett, 1900, p.60) Grihasthans, eldest Namboothiri man of an illom, remarried for various reasons for paying off debt by accepting dowry, for marrying off their daughter or sister or if they had no issue by one wife or to have a son he may remarry. Consequently, polygamy, adhivedhanam, became a common practice among the Namboothiri community. Sixty- or seventy-year-old men married very young girls and most of the grihasthans had four or five veli. However, by custom a Namboothiri was permitted to have four wives at a time. (Aiya, 1906, p.258) Adhivedhanam was justified as a 'system' devised to reduce the number of unmarried girls within the community.

One of the main issues involved in marriage was the ever-increasing demand for dowry, which aggravated the number of unmarried girls and resulted in the economic decline of illoms. To get rid of the demand for dowry, a system of exchange marriage developed. Grihasthans married several times, in exchange their sisters or daughters would be married by the relatives of grihasthans' new wife. (Vallikunnu, 1987, p. 147) Marriage was conceived as a solution to pay off debts by accepting dowry. An atharjanam can be married only once, and there was no scope of divorce or widow remarriage and early widowhood was also very common.

MARRIAGE 'IN REFORM'

In Kerala Namboothiris were the last to embark on reform and the result was the formation of NamboothiriYogakshema Sabha in 1908. Paradoxically, Namboothiri Yoghakshema Sabha was formed not to initiate reforms within the community, but to reinstate their privileges, which were being challenged under the wake of colonialism. They showed extreme reluctance in discussing the issues concerning traditions and customs. However, from the second annual session onwards the issue of kanyadanam was addressed in almost all conferences of the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha, but ended up without any

decision. Cherukunnathu Narayanan Namboothiri invited the attention of the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha to the problems involved in the marriage of antharjanams; in many illoms there were several elderly unmarried girls. Commenting on the issue Desamangalath Anujan Namboothiripad said that, marriage of antharjanams being a ritualistic matter, decision could be made only after detailed discussions done in all upasabhas and, accordingly the question was indefinitely postponed. Regarding the issue of antharjanams' marriage Periya Mana Vishnu Namboothiripad presented a paper in which he argued that for the solution of the problem the entire Namboothiri men must marry within the community.

From the inception of the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha there was a growing contempt against the sambandham relations of young Namboothiri men. At the fourth annual conference of the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha, VellimanaSubhramaniyan Potti presented a paper in which he argued that the population of the Namboothiri community is dangerously diminishing, due to the practices of sambandham with women of other caste. Pointing towards the threats from sambandham he suggested that all Namboothiri must start marrying within the community. But, at the same conference, it was rejected by many representatives arguing that such a move would lead to poverty and impoverishment in the community. In course of time several articles were written in Unninamboothiri which ridiculed sambandham and promoted parivedanam.

Popularisation of 'kanishtavivaham' was suggested on the grounds that it would rescue antharjanams from their sufferings of being co-wives or dying as spinsters, ie. when all Namboothiri men start to marry within the community the problems faced by Namboothiri women - polygamy and being lifelong spinsters- could be resolved. The insistence on own community marriage by the Sangham was not due to their concern for women. By that time many of the young members felt that sambandham was ridiculous; besides the writings of Nair reformers who stood against Brahmin sambandham, also made the Namboothiri youth oppose it. By the 1920's a consensus regarding marriage was arrived among the members of the Sangham and they decided to accept 'own community' marriages.

'POLITICS' OF SAMBANDHAM

Yoghakshema Sabha and Yuvajana Sangham could make a profound influence on the community at the ideological level; it failed to create any change in the practices of Namboothiris. When the parents of young girls and the Unninamboothirimar, the junior members of illoms, wanted sajathivivaham and parivedanam, fearing the orthodoxy many dared to accept it. Unninamboothirimar, devoid of any income and control over illom property, were hesitant to sajathivivaham. The greatest resistance was from grihasthans of illoms, who had controlled the illom property, and who feared that if the younger members also

started marrying from the community it would affect their autonomy. Even the members of the Sangham, fearing the hostility of elders in the illom, desauparodham and mattuvilaku imposed by local chieftains, entered into sambandham relations rather than marrying a Namboothiri girl. Unninamboothiri severely criticised the double stand taken by the members of the Sangham, and demanded them to practise what they preached, by stopping sambandham with women of other castes.

The NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha and Sangham decided to take strict action on those who went for sambandham and adhivedanam. They adopted more radical forms of protest like picketing and non-cooperation to achieve the desired ends. According to E.M.S. Namboothiripad, the agenda of transforming marriage practices of the community turned out to be a 'marriage revolution' which brought far reaching changes in women's life. (Namboothiripad, 1927) Volunteers would lie down in front of the house, where the wedding they opposed was to take place. If someone had to go, they could only do so by stepping on the volunteers.(Veluthat, et al., 2013, p.98) Thus when Kurur Neelakandan Namboothiripad, a prominent leader of the community who participated in the anti-colonial movement, set out to marry a woman of another caste, he was thwarted by the volunteers of the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha.(Namboothiri, 1969, p. 118) Similarly, when a young educated Namboothiri was to begin a sambandham relation in Kavalappara tarawad, he was picketed by the volunteers, but Kavalappara Moopil Nair retaliated by attacking the volunteers.(Namboothiri, 2012, p. 75) In the same way NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha volunteers organised the picketing of adhivedanam and marriage of old men at several places including Peruvanam, Thrissur, Ongallur and Veghanellur. Picketing was organized by the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha under the leadership of P.S.Kesavan Namboothiri, V.T.Bhattathiripad, C.K.Namboothiri, Chitoor Kunhan Namboothiripad and many others. Unfortunately, the picketing failed as the orthodoxy strived to successfully organize such marriages and, when the volunteers blocked the path, they broke down the fence and went in stealthily. Though the direct result of picketing and protest organized by the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha was negligible, it led to widespread discussions within the community and helped in the dissemination of a new and progressive ideology against these practices.

A complete negation of sambandham could not be steadily achieved, because to a large extent many Namboothiri families were economically dependent on such marriages. (Kunhuttan, 1973, p.73) The Nair liaisons were useful to Namboothiris in two ways: most obviously, to provide sexual partners for their younger sons, and just as important to create useful connections with important families. (Mencher & Goldberg, 1967, p. 87-106)

Namboothiris were the fathers of all traditional rulers of Kerala, because the royal lineages invariably selected Namboothiri men as husbands for their women. Moreover, women of sthani Nair tarawads also had sambandham relations with Namboothiri men. It was not easy to end sambandham relations with these families which had been continuing for centuries, and also due to the fact that these families were the prominent support for Namboothiri orthodoxy. Most important were the relations of the Cochin royal family and Namboothiri illoms. Princesses of Tripunithara could marry only Namboothiri men, hence to arrange such relations agents of royal families visited the Namboothiri Vidyalayam with exciting offers for attracting Namboothiri boys. However, boys from poor illoms accepted these offers and became 'husbands of princesses,' who fetched them a regular income. Now, under the influence of reformism, the young leaders of the community stood against marriage relations with the royal families, and resisted the pressure from royal agents and from their own illoms.

The young reformers who were keen in reorganising the community came up with diverse programs for materialising changes. One group suggested the acceptance of sajathivivaham as a remedy for a short span of time, till the existing problems were solved. Another group demanded inter-caste marriage and widow remarriages for ending all exclusiveness of the Namboothiri community. (Kumar, 2002, p.54) Meanwhile the Sangham formed a marriage sub-committee, Vaivahiha Sangham, under the leadership of V.T.Bhattathiripad, E.M.S.Namboothiripad and Pandam Namboothiri which was to organize sajathivivaham by selecting suitable partners. (Yogakshemam, 18/07/1930) In 1929 at the Edakunni session a proposal was introduced in favour of divorce and remarriage of sapatnis. The radical reformers present at the Namboothiri Yoghakshema Sabha argued for remarriage of sapatnis. But the elder leaders of the Namboothiri Yoghakshema Sabha, vehemently opposed remarriage of sapatnis as they were wives and their husbands were alive. The successful interference of the Namboothiri Yoghakshema Sabha and Sangham resulted in several sajathivivaham like that of V.T.Bhattathiripad, E.M.S Namboothiripad and many others.

STRATEGIES ON 'STAGE'

Reform literature produced by the Namboothiri reformism was outstanding in volume and in its acceptance by the community. However the most spectacular influence was created by the staging of V T Bhattathiripad's play, 'AdukalayilNinnuArangathekku'(From Kitchen to the Stage). The play was first staged at the Edakunni conference of the Namboothiri Yoghakshema Sabha on the 24th December 1929 session despite stiff resistance from many orthodox leaders. The play could make a profound impact on the

perceptions of the community and changes in the system of marriage was widely discussed. The play had a revolutionary effect on the community as it portrayed the love of a Namboothiri girl for a Namboothiri boy, who being a younger member of his illom was not to marry an antharjanam, and marriage between them through the interference of the state. By staging a love marriage, V.T. Bhattathiripad advocated a change in conjugal relations among Namboothiri couples. The play was hugely successful rousing women against polygyny as well as old men's weddings with girls and equally significantly, it promoted the notion of love marriage in the community. (Namboothiri, 2020, p. 214)

M.R. Bhattathiripad's Marakudakulile Mahanarakam and M.P. Bhattathiripad's Rhitumati also promoted heated debates in the community. The orthodoxy strived to withstand the call for modernising the marriage practices and familial organisations. These plays directly communicated with audience; were creative and endorsed the reform agenda of the young generation. It was readily accepted by the women and they imbibed the waves of reform, i.e. in a sense, the plays could reduce the efforts of the reformers as their intention was achieved through staging these dramas.

THE MADRAS NAMBOOTHIRI ACT, 1933

The Madras Namboothiri Act of 1933, enforced monogamy by abolishing *adhivedanam* and caste endogamy. The Act also legalised *sajathivivaham* of all major Namboothiri males, and prohibited him from entering into *sambandham* relations. (The Madras Namboothiri Act, Act XXI of 1933) Even after the legislation revolutionary changes in marriage continued under the leadership of V.T. Bhattathiripad. The greatest achievement of the Namboothiri reform movement was in 1934, when the community witnessed the first widow remarriage. This was materialised under the leadership of V.T. Bhattathiripad and the first widow from the community to get remarried was Uma Antharjanam, V.T. Bhattathiripad's sister-in-law and I.C.P. Namboothiri's sister. She married M.R. Bhattathiripad, a young reformer and a popular figure among the then Namboothiri reform activists. Parvathy Nenmenimangalam invited all antharjanams in Kerala for the marriage through Mathrubhumi. In 1940 the Namboothiri community witnessed the first inter-caste marriage of an antharjanam when V.T. Parvathy married P.K. Raghava Panikkar, a Nair. (Pilla, 1998, p. 42) Inter-caste marriages were permitted for Namboothiri men but antharjanams could marry only Namboothiri men. V.T. Parvathy was V.T. Bhattathiripad's step sister and the marriage was first proposed by N.P. Damodaran, co-worker of V.T. Bhattathiripad. V.T. Bhattathiripad's father, though not in favour of inter-caste marriage, never resented it and blessed the couple. Revolutionary changes in marriage continued further within the community when Priyadatta, I.C.P. Namboothiri's sister, married Kallat Krishnan, an Ezhava by caste. Both of them were

active in the theatre movement, and in 1952 they got married.

CONCLUSION

The propaganda by the NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha and the Sangham, along with legal mediation, resulted in the negation of orthodox marriage practices in the Namboothiri community. Within a short period of time several widow remarriages took place in the community, and the social stigma attached to widow remarriage ceased to exist. However, there was no significant change in the dowry demand, which went on increasing. So was the superstitious belief of the community that girls were to be married off under any circumstances. Consequently, a new tendency emerged in the community by which girls were married to or sold to Brahmins in Sirsi or Mangalore. The NamboothiriYoghakshema Sabha, Sangham and the Samajam together fought against the new development in the community. Unfortunately, it was not easy, because the economic backwardness of many illoms prompted them to accept such marriage proposals. Similarly, even after the enactment many Namboothiri men continued to marry women of matrilineal castes, which was also the result of fiscal problems. Hence it was suggested that economic prosperity of the community by adopting modern education and employment was the only solution for the complete elimination of illicit marriage practices. Moreover, through marriage reforms, patriarchy in the community was strengthened further by creating a space for the development of 'masculinity.'

The self-critique reform movement among the Namboothiris successfully disseminated modern notions of family and marriage within the community. The reformers identified that their traditional system of marriage and family was the cardinal reason for most of the issues they faced. Community experienced a 'marriage revolution' by denouncing the archaic practices. Consequently, the alternative suggested was the acceptance of the 'ideal pan-Indian monogamous family structure', based on strictly endogamous marriages.

A new conjugality was induced within the matrimonial relations of the family. The colonial intervention ended up in the legalisation of reform agenda ie. the amelioration suggested by reformers was to a certain extent incorporated in the Madras Namboothiri Act. The monogamous system of marriage made every Namboothiri a householder and promoted conjugal patriarchy. (Manmathan, 2013, p. 979-983) Naturally, they were to provide for wife and children and thus reforming marriage was perceived as a method to confer true manliness for Namboothiri men. (Devika, 2007, p. 114)

Reformism of the Namboothiri community, unlike other communities of Kerala, addressed the issues of women and set out to resolve it, within the limits dictated by patriarchy. The system of marriage and practise of primogeniture were identified as the

central issues that led to the deterioration of the community. Consequently, the young reformers set out to ameliorate the marriage system and this cannot be conceived as completely out of the genuine concern for women. It can be argued as a measure to strengthen 'masculinity' within the Namboothiri community. However, the orthodoxy, in the long run, was to accept the changes that redefined the Namboothiri community.

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