

ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF NAMBOOTHIRI BRAHMIN COMMUNITY IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY TRAVANCORE

Dr.Ginu George*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the society of Travancore in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with an eye on the plight of women in the Namboothiri community. This comprehensive discussion focuses on the social situation of Namboothiri Women in Travancore. They were subjected to severe restrictions under the tyrannical dominance of the men folk. Although among all classes of women, the Namboothiri women enjoyed a singularly high and unlimited superiority, they were not free from social taboos. They had to suffer many oppressive customs and rituals like *ghosha* (veil), illiteracy, dowry, child marriage, polygamy etc. resulted in the deterioration of Namboothiri community.

Keywords: Travancore, Brahmin community, Namboothiri ,Antharjamam, Kaimukku Illom, Sambandham, Nayars, fanam and Kizhi

* **Lecturer in History, Assumption College, Changanacherry, Kottayam Dist. Kerala**

INTRODUCTION

Namboothiri Brahmin women or *Antarjanam* lived under the shackles of heavy restrictions from the part of the men folk who were tyrannical in conduct. Women were destined to serve her husband and were confined to the kitchen. They stayed within the four walls of the *illoms*. The end result was that women were in no better position than that of the slaves.

Namboothiri women and Patriarchal system

In the 18th and 19th century Namboothiri women in Travancore were very much restrained by the norms and customs of society. The definite patriarchal system that was followed gave women no freedom either at home or in the society. An Autobiography *Atmakathakku Oramukham* of Lalithambika Antharjanam supports this description with her own experience from her childhood onwards. As a girl, she was subjected to numerous restrictions. Her travelling was in a closed bullock carts and *Kettuvallam* or house boats. Even after her marriage also she was not allowed to attend the public meeting. It was considered a great sin for other family. They were regarded as inferior to men and hence they had no share of the family property except among the Nayers which followed matrilineal system. They were married off at an early age and dowry given to her became the property of the husband. She was called to do the duties at home as a good wife and mother. Female education was a taboo. A woman seldom had any right to go for a job and earn money. These were unthought of in their traditional society. They were facing major problems in the economic field that in the Brahmin families, women did not have the property inheritance rights which were solely enjoyed by the male progeny. But the situation was different among Nadar women. They were provided the right to own property and also the right of inheritance and the upper class women had no right to seek job and earn money. But lower sections were at least unskilled laborers.

In the social system of the Brahmin community, women were considered not as persons but as insignificant things. Discriminatory practices against the female child were conspicuous in almost every life cycle ceremonies. There was discrimination among boys and girls. The desire for a male child was so strong among Brahminical society. Thus Brahminical rites to this effect were introduced in the medical texts. *Pumsavana* or 'male producing' is a rite which aimed to

grant the family sons and the rituals were conducted after conception. Such discriminations haunted a woman for the rest of her life.

The birth of a girl child was unhappily afforded by the families. The female child grew up amidst such segregating thoughts of herself as an inferior to the males in the family. In educational matters girls and boys were treated differently. A girl was provided with very simple reading and writing. Sometimes basic arithmetic lessons were also provided. But a boy could undergo detailed learning experience. The girls internalised a second position especially with the contributing rituals that were patterned such.

Namboothiri Woman under Social Taboos

The sage, Parasurama, is believed to have asked all Namboothiri women to carry with them an umbrella when they go out so that they do not spoil the sight of the male sex. The Namboothiri woman had to cover themselves with a white cloth called *mundu* from neck to foot. They were not allowed to use gold items and nose rings. These women are therefore always attended by a Nayar woman in their outdoor movement, and they go sheltering their face from public gaze with a cadjan umbrella.

Chastity was demanded from them within the polygamous household set up. They enjoyed no right to own property. Widow Remarriage was also a taboo while the Namboothiri men were allowed to take many wives. This left many women in sorrow of having to share their husbands with other women. E.M.S Namboodiripad gives a detailed account of the marriage system among the Namboothiris. In certain cases Namboothiris married two or three women for conducting *penkoda* that means to give away his daughter or sister or other ladies from his family. Marriage was fixed on the basis of the matching of horoscope of the bride and groom.

Various societal customs added to the plight of *Antarjanam*. One such custom was polygamy. The institution of Polygamy became popular and was very common in South Travancore among almost all castes. In a polygamous system man can marry more than one wife at a time. The men from Namboothiris, Kshatriya and other higher castes, who had their own caste wives, practiced Polygamy by cohabiting with women of the Nayar caste. The system allowed only the chief

woman to be called a 'wife' while others were concubines and the children of the latter were considered illegitimate.

Child marriage was another ignoble custom of the society. The marriageable age for girls among the Brahmins was set at 5 or 7 while for the boys it was 10. Even before forgetting her mother's feed she became a wife to a healthy youth and is compelled to conceive, in order to become a mother. The age of the child-bride was so low that she could not even understand the real meaning of the relation. No parent would dare to make their girl stand unmarried past the marriageable age because it was very difficult to find a husband for her after the age. But the girl being so young and the husband being aged it took no time before the young girl became a widow. And to add to the plight the girl is restricted from marrying again. The young girls were thus doomed to a life of widowhood for the law forbade them to remarry. The position of a widow was more pitiable than any other social category. She had to put up with the caste conditions that caused her to mourn till her death. Widows could no longer eat betel leaves. They were compelled to bathe in cold water, and were insisted to appear in pure white cloth, shaven head and naked forehead. Luxury of ornaments and other amusements were barred for her. She could not attend feast and festivities. She was considered a bad omen in the community.

There was the system of *smarthavicharam* that made the condition of Namboothiri women pitiable. It was a trial for adultery and the first person was only considered as accused one because all the other accused persons had sexual intercourse with a prostitute. The Namboothiris were unable to understand the sexual deprivation that the women gravely succumbed to. But the patriarchal system believed that the women ought to be strictly controlled or else will go astray. And this was not an isolated conduct as such deviances were expected to occur regularly.

The person accused of crimes should undertake ordeal in a temple. The *ola* documents of Suchindram temple disclose that the *kaimukku* or ghee ordeal was adopted regularly among the population of Travancore. It was generally known as *Satya Parikshya*. The documents called *kaimukku* records found in Vattappalli Madam, where Namboothiris were thickly populated, deal with the details connected with a number of cases of *kaimukku* ordeal in the Suchindram temple.

The earliest among the available documents pertain to the ordeal conducted in 1627 A.D. It was approximately the extension of the *Smarthavicharam* under which Namboothiri community particularly the Namboothiri woman accused of adultery were first tried before a caste tribunal of elders. Permanent *smarthanmar* were arranged on a regular basis. The trial was to be done with the knowledge and permission of the Maharaja. There appears a record of the process of *smarthavicharam* that began on the 16 March of 1901 at the *illom* of Peringara Namboothiri in the area of *Muttambalam* belonging to Vijayapuram village in Kottayam town. A huge sum of money was distributed to the *smarthan*, to the *mimasakan*, to the *agakkoyma*, *purakkoyma* and to the relatives. *Smarthan* received a *kizhi* containing 24 *fanam*. Four belonging to the *mimaskan* category received 7 *kizhis* containing 16 *fanam* each. One *kizhi* was also given to *agakkoyma* and another one to the *purakkoyma* and another to the relatives. These expenses are incurred in addition to the other common expenses for the *smarthavicharam*. In addition there were also expenses to be met in the kind of money to be dispersed to the servant women in the *illom*. It was the family of the woman that had to meet the entire expenses incurred on the inquiry process.

The first and foremost punishment for the woman found guilty was that she would be expelled from the Brahmin community and she would no more be considered a person, but would only be a *sadhanam* in the eyes of others. The excommunicated woman would be ill fated or death likes condition. She was compelled to seek asylum in the house of an *avarna*. Such excommunicated women often had to be married to Mappilas and Ezhavas. If others did not marry the degraded woman, she would be kept in a separate place and be taken care of by the Raja though as his slave.

Besides, there was the dowry system that added to the misery of women. The system of dowry was well-associated with the Namboothiri marriage and the amount of dowry was much high and it was affordable only by wealthy *illoms*. A heavy *varadakshina* in marriage prevailed during that time. Large sums of money amounting Rs1000 to Rs 2000 were demanded as dowry and this practice led to alienation of *Brahmaswom* properties and the ruination of families. William Logan says, “in order to get their daughter married at all, a Namboothiri must be rich, for with each of them he has to pay the bride - groom a heavy dowry and many *illom*’s resources have

been drained in this way”. As polygamy was allowed many of the young girls got married to elderly Brahmins who were already married.

Ms. Lindberg, director of Swedish South Asian Studies Network at Lund University chronicled around 187 marriages held between 1935 and 1939 and researched on the practice of dowry in erstwhile Travancore. As a research conclusion he has recorded that it was among the Namboothiri Brahmin and Syrian Christian communities in Kerala that the system of dowry was highly incident.

When a comparison is made between the conditions of the Namboothiri women and Nayers women it is understood that the latter enjoyed far better situations. Their family organisation was matrilineal and that contributed positively to their high position. A Nayar family was known as *tharavadu*. Nayars were among the few castes that permitted their girls to get educated. Both the boys and girls of the community were given education in the nearby schools known by the term *kalaris*. When a section of a community is left uneducated it is the community as a whole that will get perished. This was one of the contributing factors that led to the diminishing position of the Namboothiri Brahmin community in the later ages to come.

This civil condition of Namboothiri Brahmins in Travancore reflects the pathetic situation of Namboothiri community. It is illustrated in the below table.

Table

Civil Condition of Namboothiri Brahmins in Travancore, 1931

S I. N o	Cas te	Sex	Population Death with		Married	Unmarried	Widowed
			Population Death with				
			0-6	7-13			
1.	Na mbo othi ri	M	7,	-			
			4				
			9	3			
			8	15			
			8	312			
	Bra hmi ns	F	6,	-			
			4	42			
			3	166			
			3	639			
			3	1,355			
			520	1,848	1,528		
			1,375	3,706			
2.	Oth er	M	2	-			
			7,				
			2	12			
			3	47			
			3	878			
	Bra hmi ns	F	2	-			
			6,				
			9	375			
			0	1,230			
			8	2,896			
			6,806	5,135	4,334		
			4,780	1,621	1,968		
			12,523	12,607	13,803		
			5,271	3,928	208		
			1,138	99	76		
			890	78	39		
			178	625	120		
			2,336	9,603	13,803		
			-	-	-		
			2	3	23		
			378	118	1,244		
			29	182	3,310		
			4	10	701		
			72	182	1,075		
			198	1,748	4,695		
			274				

Table shows that 46.91% of male members from Namboothiri community remained unmarried while unmarried women were of 36.31%. The percentages of married women were only 21.37%. Of the total percentage of Namboothiris the percentage of widowed male members was 3.65 %. Of the widowed female it was 27.17 %.The societal power that was allocated to the Namboothiri Brahmin community was not to last long with the coming of major societal revisions.

Conclusion

The society of Namboothiri Brahmins following the misreading of Hindu religion gave only a secondary position to their women. The essential duty of a woman was taken as giving birth to children and taking care of them. In the society woman was a daughter, mother or wife and nothing more than that. It also added to them an existence solely based on their men. Once their husbands pass away, women lose their status in family and suffer from many disabilities. Many Namboothiri women felt that being a Namboothiri woman was the worst fate any human being could have, and they sometimes prayed that no one should ever "be born a Namboothiri woman". The intensification of the Namboothiri women's sufferings and gradual decline of the Namboothiri population posed a challenge and deterioration to the Namboothiri community in Travancore.

Key words

Antharjanam : Woman of Namboothiri Brahmin's are called Antharjanam, word literally means "peoples inside the house".

Brahmin Community : Brahmin (also called Brahmana) is a Varna in Vedic Hinduism and also a caste of people who are members of it.

Fanam : Unit of currency, seven of which was equivalent to a rupee

Illom : The House of Namboothiries or Brahmins in Kerala.

Kaimukku : Dipping the hand

Kizhi : Bundle of money

Namboothiri : Hindu Brahmins from the Indian state of Kerala

Nayars : A popular caste, below in rank to Brahmins

Sambandham : A casual marriage alliance of Namboothiri Brahmins with girls belonging to other castes.

Travancore : Former princely state in southwestern India, now part of Kerala state.

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