

## Reformist Discourses on the position of Women- The case of Namboodiri Women of Kerala

Dr. Girish Vishnu Namboodiri,

Associate Professor, KMM Government Womens College, Kannur

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the reformist discourses on the Namboodiri women who were objectified as a constituent of a stagnant community that adhered to primitive life forms. Responding to it, the reformist discourses on Namboodiri women that attained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s reached the level of demanding complete freedom of women in the 1940s. The male-centred women reformism later assumed autonomy and launched struggles to change their status inside and outside the family. Namboodiri women's emancipation movement gradually demanded complete women's freedom by changing the traditional concept of women to that of modern women who lived by their work. A close look at the changes of the Namboodiri women would reflect the transformation of women from scripture education (learning in epics and Puranas) in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the reading of literature like “Pavangal”, “Chintavishtayaya Seetha”, “Ramanan” by 1940s.<sup>i</sup>

**Key Words:** *Antherjanam, Ghosha, adhivedhanam, kuduma, Yogakshema sabha, Sapatnis*

Objectified Namboodiri women were presented in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. Awakening among the Namboodiris resulted in conscious efforts to reform the life of the Antherjanams. This apprehension could be seen in the reformist policies, speeches and writings. One of the reform movement's chief features was the enthusiasm the male reformers showed to rescue their women folk from their deplorable conditions<sup>ii</sup>. In the reformist discussions, the emancipation of the community was closely linked to the emancipation of women. These attempts created intense debates within the

community when a group of conservatives vehemently opposed attempts for women's empowerment. The prevailing belief systems influenced male reformers' perception of women's emancipation. The Namboodiri women were also not able to come out of the kitchen. Attempts to redefine the identity of Namboodiri women in the first half of the 20th century produced an unusually enthusiastic, lively discourse on the issue. The Namboodiri Female Education Commission Report of 1927 was the best example of the discourses within the community on women's questions.<sup>iii</sup> The reformist discourses regarding Namboodiri women were centred on diverse subjects like the transformation of Antherjanams to human beings, the need for women samajams (associations), and the concept of modernity. By the 1940s "s discussions on Kuriyedathu Tathri, which were absent during the earlier period, once again became active. This was a clear indication of the changed position of the reformers on women's issues. These discussions projected Tathri as the initiator of the Namboodiri women's emancipation movement and reflected the arguments for and against women's emancipation within the community. Though reforming the Antherjanam was the theme of these debates, the reformers took different positions on how and how women could be reformed. However, most reformers expressed their view that reform would be incomplete without bringing Antherjanam into the domain of modern life.<sup>iv</sup> The restrictions imposed on Namboodiri women by the 19<sup>th</sup> century degraded them to the status of victimized human beings. The plight of Namboodiri women was adjudicated by religious scriptures like Sankara Smrithi, *sambandham* (exogamous marriage), *adhivedhanam* (polygamy), and restrictions on travel, food and clothing. This objectification of women was represented in the colonial and native literature from the 16<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The status of the Namboodiri women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was more or less equal to the status of other Indian women, which considered women as completely inferior to men, having no freedom, no

significance and no personality.<sup>v</sup> Socially, she was kept in a state of utter subjection, denied all rights and living under suppressed and oppressed conditions. This objectification of Namboodiri women could be traced in the writings of Abbe Dubois in his "*Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*", where it is stated that if a girl who had arrived at an age when the signs of puberty were apparent died before having had intercourse with a man, caste custom rigorously demanded that the inanimate corpse of the deceased should be subjected to a monstrous connection. For this purpose, the girls' parents were obliged to procure by a present of money some wretched fellow willing to consummate such a disgusting form of marriage; for, were the marriage not consummated, the family would consider itself dishonoured".<sup>vi</sup> Namboodiri reformers were silent on the women's question up to mid-1920. Interestingly, they had already begun to demand a modern way of life for the Namboodiri males but remained silent on women's emancipation. When other communities urged for women's reform, the Namboodiris raised the issue at a later stage. Early leaders of Yogakshema Sabha were not aware of the grievances of their women folk. The discussion on women's questions had been started within the Sabha only after 1920. The sambandham relations of the founding fathers of Yogakshema Sabha itself were a cause for their being silent on women's issues earlier. Though there was an argument that the incidents of Kuriyedathu Thathri influenced the formation of Yogakshema Sabha, the silence of the Sabha on the issue of Thathri indicated its position on women's issues.<sup>vii</sup> With the spread of modern education and colonial modernity, changes were visible in the outlook of Namboodiri youths towards their women. Sabha started discussing the problem of Namboodiri women from 1927 onwards. The Namboodiri radical youths, who gradually took over the leadership of reforms, demanded changes in the condition of women. Along with the revolutionary activities of the Yogakshema Sabha, their women also came out of their

traditional veils. They began to cope with the social change under the leadership of Parvathy Nenminimangalam, Parvathy Nilayangod, Parvathy Manazhi, Arya Pallam, Neeli Mangalass and Lalithambika Antharjanam. Issues like female education, dress, monogamy, widow remarriage, intra-caste marriage, and freedom of travel began to be voiced forcefully within Namboodiri reformist circles. An Antharjanam became a member of the Namboodiri Yuvajana Sangam in 1928. Namboodiri women began to organize their own Samajams (associations). The changing view resulted in admitting Namboodiri girls to Namboodiri Vidyalaya at Edakkunni in 1929. Yogakshema Sabha publically discussed the question of widow remarriage in its Edakkunni session. There was stiff opposition to the reformist programme of widow remarriage. The participants split into two groups, with radicals like Pandam Vasudevan Namboodiri and P.M.Manazhi standing in favour of widow remarriage, but others like P.S.Kesavan Namboodiri and G. Sankaran Potti strongly opposed it. A resolution was introduced for the right of *sapatnis* (co-wives) to divorce and remarriage. V.T. Bhattathirippad and other youths strongly demanded widow remarriage, and they viewed widow remarriage in the light of the success of „*swvajathivivaham*’ (self-caste marriage) against ‘*sambhandam*’ (exogamy). The radical youths argued that the marriagereform would be complete only by the widow remarriage, which was considered the last „defect“ that continued to persist in the existing system. As a stop-gap arrangement, youths suggested the remarriage of widows and captains. Still, in future, the demand for the remarriage of saplings would not occur at all since the elimination of polygamy. But the orthodox Namboodiris stood against the demand for *sapatni* (co-wives) remarriage as *captains were wives and hence guarded*, and they were not objects of moral panic.<sup>viii</sup> Yogakshema Sabha publicly discussed the question of widow remarriage in its Edakkunni session. There was stiff opposition to the reformist programme of widow remarriage. The participants split

into two groups, with radicals like Pandam Vasudevan Namboodiri and P.M.Manazhi standing in favour of widow remarriage, but others like P.S.Kesavan Namboodiri and G. Sankaran Potti strongly opposed it. A resolution was introduced for the right of *sapatnis* (co-wives) to divorce and remarriage. V.T. Bhattathirippad and other youths strongly demanded widow remarriage, and they viewed widow remarriage in the light of the success of „*swvajathivivaham*’ (self-caste marriage) against „*sambhandam*’ (exogamy). The radical youths argued that the marriage reform would be complete only by the widow remarriage, which was considered the last ‘defect’ that continued to persist in the existing system. As a stop-gap arrangement, youths suggested the remarriage of widows and captains. Still, in future, the demand for the remarriage of saplings would not occur at all since the elimination of polygamy. But the orthodox Namboodiris stood against the demand for *sapatni* (co-wives) remarriage as *captains were wives and hence guarded*, and they were not objects of moral panic.<sup>ix</sup> Mrs Parvathi Manzhi attended the Edakkunni session by boycotting Ghosh (veil) P.M. Manazhi, thus inaugurating the movement to abandon traditional symbols and rituals that restricted the freedom of Antherjanam. It symbolises their march from the kitchen to the stage, which gained momentum in the coming years. Theatre was used as a weapon for women's emancipation in the 1930s. The dramas created awareness among the community of the grievances of Namboodiri women and the need to eliminate them. The drama written by V.T.Bhattathirippad, *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* (From Kitchen to the Stage) was the first attempt to portray the actual condition of Namboodiri women and the urgency to release women from their deplorable conditions. It revealed the horror of the restrictions imposed on women, and the performance resulted in significant changes among the Namboodiri women.<sup>761</sup> The drama created a spirit against polygamy and old marriage and supported love marriage and widow remarriage.<sup>x</sup> The theme of Mullamangalathu Raman

Bhattathiri's (M.R.B) *Marakkudaykullile Maha Narakam* (Hell behind the Cadjan Umbrella) was the sapatni (co-wife) conflict. It showed the intensity of polygamy in the Namboodiri houses. Drama emphasizes the need to change women's way of life by picturing the tragic lives of married women. „*Ritumathi*“ of Premji portrayed the restrictions faced by a Namboodiri girl who attained puberty. The drama emphasized the right to wear modern dress and education for women. Like men selecting their life partners, women's right to select their partners was pictured in these dramatic representations. *Aphante Makal* took up intra-caste marriage and polygamy as the theme.<sup>763</sup> Ghosha (veil) boycott became active among the Namboodiri women along with this movement. Women like Kanjoor Gauri Antherjanam, Kanjoor Kali Antherjanam, and Arya Pallam participated in some stages of Yachanayatra. They exhibited the urge of women to move from the kitchen to the public sphere. This positive vibe among Namboodiri women motivated them to the movement of stitching back (*kathu murikkukkal prasthanam*) their ears. A steady increase in women participants in the Yogakshema Sabha meetings attested to the awakening among the Namboodiri women. Parvathi Nemeniangalam became the first female president of the Youth wing in the Taliparamba session. More than 100 women participated in the jubilee of Sabha celebrated at Karalmanna. The appointment of Parvathi Nemenimangalam and Arya Pallam indifferent Government assignments could be viewed as recognition of their work for women's emancipation. Parvathi was nominated as a select committee member of the Cochin Namboodiri Bill. Arya Pallam was elected as a member of the Malabar District Board. Kainikkara Devaki, another reformist leader, was elected as a member of the Srimulam Assembly.<sup>xi</sup> The first widow remarriage among the Namboodiris was a ritual revolution. The general acceptance of the venture was well reflected by the presence of personalities like Nilambur Valiya Raja, E.M.Sankaran Namboodirippad, Mannath

Padmanabhan, Nalappatt Narayana Menon, Arya Pallam, Kuttikrishna Marar and K.Ayyappan. The marriage was not accompanied by any customary religious rituals followed by the Namboodiris except for using the *tali*. The marriage ceremony was followed by inter-dining, which rejected the untouchability. The first widow remarriage was characterized as the first humanistic activity of the Namboodiris after establishing domination over Kerala. Though radical reformers inaugurated a new era of women's emancipation through widow remarriage, there was also an argument that widow remarriage had not been deeply rooted among the community in the 1930s, and only a few cases of widow remarriage had been reported among the Namboodiris.<sup>xii</sup>

**Conclusion:** The above discussions show that dialectics existed within the Namboodiri community throughout the reformist phase on issues related to women. The attitude and program of the male reformers reflected their constitution of women. By the 1940s, Namboodiri women had begun to organize themselves and lead independent lives. The transformation of Namboodiri women from the status of Kuriyedathu Tathri to self-empowered women was achieved partially towards the close of the 1940s. By this period, Namboodiri women were self-aware of their rights and needs. The meetings of Antherjana Samajam asserted their consciousness of the need to live independently. During this period, women were both the objects of reform and agents of reform.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> See Devaki Nilayankode, *s Yatra Kattilum Nattilum*, Mathrubhumi Books, 2006, p.32 . It reflects women's change from house restrictions to freedom to live according to their tastes.

<sup>ii</sup> K.C. Narayanan, „Verunangatha Vakku“ in *Mathrubhumi weekly*, Vol5 (11) January 1997

<sup>iii</sup> *Namboodiri Female Education Commission*, 1927, p.2

<sup>iv</sup> For example, see “Stree Vidhyabhyasam” (women education), *Unninamboodiri*, 1928(ME.1103 Chingam), Vol.9(12), pp.724-725, V.T.Bhattathirippad, “*Karmavipakam*”, D.C Books, Kottayam, 2007, p.339 from the speech “Namboodiri Manushyanayi Maranamenkil” (If Namboodiri turn in to man) made in 1930



<sup>v</sup> The writings of Samuel Matteer, C.A. Innes, testifies this objectified nature of Namboodiri women, see Samuel matter, *The Land of Charity, A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People*, Asian Educational service, New Delhi(reprint), 1991, p.30

<sup>vi</sup> Abbe Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Vol.1, Cosimo, New York, pp.17-18The learned translator and editor of Abbey work Mr Beauchamp, in his footnote, while asserting positively that the custom no longer existed, leaves room for doubts as to whether it did not exist at the time of Abbe wrote, Mr Logan remarked that Abbey account of the strange funeral pile marriage requires confirmation. KP. Padmanabha Menon, op.cit, p.84, Alngode Leelakrishnan, *Tathrikuttiyude Smarthavicharam*, Mathrubhumi, 2011 third edition, pp.10-11, Justice Narayana Marar with Kaimukk Vaidikan Krishnan Namboodiri, enquired it and opined that not only did the custom exist at the present slightest vestige of any tradition that it had existed among them at any time. Malabar Quarterly Reviewsays that “the above was merely to illustrate the wild, baseless and fanatic notions concerning the people of Malabar”. *Malabar Quarterly Review*,1908, Vol.1, p.20

<sup>vii</sup> Alangode Leelakrishnan, *Tathrikuttiyde Smarthavicharam*, Mathrubhumi, 2011 Third edition, p.51

<sup>viii</sup> MM. Editorial, „Antharjanangalude unarcha“,08/06/1928, For example, a woman from Changanassery presided over Karunagappally Samajam

<sup>ix</sup> MM, “Edakkunniyile Namboodiri Sammelanangal” 15/01/1930, see also Vidwan V Krishnan Namboodiri (MRAI, Thiruvalla), „Namboodiri women” in *Mathrubhumi weekly*,1938 July 25,p,27

<sup>x</sup> EM Sankaran Namboodirippad, *Atmakatha*,p,116, It is surprising to note that two women-centred dramas of Yogakshema Sabha- „*Savithri’ or Widow remarriage*” and „*Tozhilkendrathilekku*” did not receive much popularity though the theme was widow remarriage. „*Savithri’ or Widow remarriage*”, represented Namboodiri women of the 1930”s, who were movingtowards modernity.

<sup>xi</sup> Premji, „Parvathi Nenmenimangalam”, *Unninamboodiri*, 1947 (ME.1122 Edavam), Vol.1(2,p,65

<sup>xii</sup> Narayanan, KC (ed), *VTyude Sampoorana Krithikal*, DC Books, Kottayam,1997, pp. 290-300, It is said that participants hailed the venture, especially the role of V.T. Bhattathirippad in particular, for the extraordinary courage shown by him in executing the marriage. It revealed V.T.’s sympathetic attitude towards widows in general, which is associated with his concern for the welfare of his widowed sister-in-law. VT Bhattathirippad, „Vidhavayude Jeevitham Taliraniyunnu”, in A. V Sreekumar (ed), *VT Vellithuruthitazhathu Raman Bhattathirippad*, V.T. Centenary Celebration Committee, Mezathur, 1997, p,140