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Ginu George
Research Scholar, Assumption
College, Changanassery,
Kerala, India

***Yogakshema Sabha* and women empowerment**

Ginu George

Abstract

The study entitled *Placing Namboothiri Women in the Space of Women Empowerment* presents the society of Kerala in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with an eye on the predicament of women in the Namboothiri community. This inclusive discussion focuses on the social situation of Namboothiri Women and also highlights the contribution of *Yogakshema Sabha* in the empowerment of women through their activities.

Keywords: *Yogakshema Sabha, Antarjanam, Brahmin community, Illom, primogeniture, Sambandham*

Introduction

The status of women in India has been subject to a transformation over the past few millennia. During Vedic period it is noted that women enjoyed equal right as men. But during medieval period their rights were decreased and more protectionist attitude towards women prevailed. Many constrain and conditions were put on women's education, religious rights and privileges and on their social and political activities. Today there is a greater awareness about the problems that women face and much is being done to solve these problems. The dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society. Women empowerment occupies a prominent role in the discussion among various communities especially in the Brahmin community.

The social status of women in Kerala was one of the main obstacles in the modernization of the society. The women who were locked behind the four walls of the family were destined to live under the male dominated order. The women in the upper caste Hindu households especially the Namboothiri Brahmin women in Kerala had to suffer the horrors of the outdated rituals. 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.

Women in the Namboothiri Brahmin Community

The women of Namboothiris were subjected to severe restrictions and were absolutely under the tyrannical dominance of the men folk. Although among all classes of women, the Brahmin women enjoyed a singularly high and unlimited superiority, they were not free from social taboos. The male dominant Brahmin communities implement oppressive customs and rituals like *Ghoshha* or veil system, illiteracy, dowry, child marriage, polygamy to distort the personality of the Namboothiri women. There were separate living spaces for women and men of Namboothiri *illoms*. They were not supposed to come to the portico of the house.

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. After the age of six or seven, Namboothiri women were confined indoors, and not seen even by their own fathers or brothers. They were allowed only praying, a bath and cooking in the kitchen and could not wear gold jewellery, but they were allowed only silver and brass.

Correspondence
Ginu George
Research Scholar, Assumption
College, Changanassery,
Kerala, India

Female children were brought up to understand that they are not only free but are also a step below their brothers. The girl child's education was just reading, writing and basic arithmetic while that of the boy child was an elaborate learning process throughout almost his entire life.

Among the Namboothiris, the women had a miserable fate due to the rule of "primogeniture" followed by Namboothiris. According to this rule, only the eldest son of a family inherited the property. In order to keep the property intact, only the eldest son was allowed to marry, that too from his own caste. The rest of the male members in a family did not have this right but could only engage in *Sambandhams* with Nair Women. Consequently many of them had to suffer lifelong compulsory maidenhood or become one of the many wives of an old Namboothiri. The Namboothiri women were forced to marry aged Namboothiri men and live as their wife. Even teenage girls who did not know the meaning of marriage were forced to marry aged men. Thus, Namboothiri *Illoms* were sometimes filled with young widows and also widows could not remarry and she was ignored and became an inanimate object of contempt. Apart from these problems, they were denied English education, or schooling. The total denial of education and their social insularity made the Namboothiri women totally subservient to their men. They had no opinions, beliefs and attitudes of their own other than those spelt out by their men.

The community, therefore, gloomily welcomed the birth of a girl child. This early gloom turned into restrictions as the child grew. Her movements, deeds, words, and even thoughts were so restricted as to make her life worse than that of a slave. Realizing the importance of women in community transformation, social reformers have given much attention to the upliftment of Namboothiri women. The miserable condition of the women of Namboothiri community in Kerala urged the radical Namboothiris to do something enduring for their upliftment. Most of the changes that happened in the Namboothiri community were because people themselves realized that things have to change in their society.

Yogakshema Sabha and Empowerment of Namboothiri Women

A revolutionary group of Namboothiris congregated in Cherumukku Vaidikan's *Illom* located on the bank of the Periyar River, on the Mahaasivaraathri day of Feb-Mar, 1908. The meeting was presided over by Desamangalam Valiya Sankaran Nambudiripad. This event, in fact, gave birth to *Namboothiri Yogakshema Mahaasabha* later known as *Yogakshema sabha*. This movement was spearheaded by stalwarts like Kurur Unni Nambudiripad, Chittoor Narayanan Namboothirippad and V.T. Bhattathiripad. The main objectives of the young Namboothiris was to remove the superstition and customs that they saw as redundant in the new era of Western education and upward mobility. V.T. Bhattathiripad, which brought about some semblance of modernization to the community. He was very much radical in the action and desired change not only for the Namboothiri community but for the entire Kerala society. He encouraged widow remarriage in the Brahmin society and tried to reform the conservative practices of the Namboothiri community in particular and the society at large. He conducted the first mixed-race marriage in the Brahmin society.

It was in the field of education that the *Yogashema Sabha* had its major advancement. *Nambodiri Vidyalayam* was founded by Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha in 1919 at Edakkunni, near Thrissur. Goal of this *Vidyalayam* was to give modern education to Namboodiri boys and girls. In 1931, the school welcomed co-education and girls gained admission into it. In order to achieve the educational goals of the *Sabha*, and to prepare the students to get admissions in the main *Vidyalayam*, English coaching was given by teachers in Brahmaswam Madhom at Thrissur.

Women Activists and Yogakshema Sabha

Women in Namboothiri community started actively participating in the reform movements since 1930s, as a part of the general upsurge in communicative and interactive structures, social mobility and class differentiation. Influence on Namboothiri women empowerment centered on the eradication of social evils like Ghosha system, childmarriage, widowhood, restriction in dresses, lack of education etc. Many social reformers, both men and women, emerged from the Brahmin community. Namboothiri women expose great enthusiasm in the field of women empowerment. Uma Antharjanam, Parvati Nenminimangalam, Arya Pallam, Kainikkara Devaki Antharjanam, Lalitambika Antharjanam etc. were the industrious women activists in *Yogakshema sabha*.

Lalithambika Antharjanam played an important role in the social transformation of the Namboothiri community and of Kerala society in general. She contributed to the social reform through her writings with the idea of contributing to the principles of equality and liberty. She had a self-improved writing style that contributed to the cause of women. She also has written on the tension between the woman as a centre for bonding and the woman as an individual. Antharjanam herself was to expose to the world at large the inhuman practices and superstitious beliefs that prevailed in the Namboodiri community. Lalithambika Antharjanam has spoken about the role of women as the main tenacious force in Indian society and her support of artificial birth control techniques in her book *Mulappalinte Manam*. Through her writings, she explicates the suffocation of Namboothiri women, their struggle in a hostile world, their loneliness and their search for an identity of their own. Parvati Nenmeni Mangalam, who was active in the social reform movement among the Nambudiris and who played a leading role in organizing Nambudiri women, stressed the need for women to change their attitudes. She encouraged women to take a lead in smashing the old structures and building a new one. She generated awareness about their strength through the perception that they were not the weaker sex.

Priyadatha had the credit of the first *Antharjanam* who passed S.S.L.C and also first teacher from the Namboothiri community. She was absolutely active in the Nampudiri Reform Movement. She had established *Antharjana Samajam* for mobilizing Namboothiri women. The major intention of this *samajam* was to propagate education, liberate women from the traditional rituals and the other social taboos. She was very active with Arya pallam, Parvathi Nenmeni mangalam and Parvathi Manezhi, social reformers and also participated in the Ghosha Bhahishkaranam or removal of veil.

Kanjoor Kali Antharjanam was an active participant in the revolutionary movement in Namboothiri community and

also had participated in the Yachana Yatra along with Arya pallam and Gowri antharjanam. She was in the first group of women who came forward to stitch back their ears or Kathu Murikkuka which was restricted to the Namboothiri women. She had also participated in Misra Bhojanam, Ayithochadanam or eradication of untouchability etc. She was an active participant in the annual meetings of *Yogakshema sabha*.

An important personality lived in Kurumoor Mana, Edappaly, Ernakulam is Neeli Antharjanam who was in the fore-front of the Namboodiri renovation movement of Kerala and with the Gandhian thought because of the influence of her brother Narayanan Bhattathiripad. He was a modernizer and a social reformer. Neeli Antharjanam was married by an orthodox Narayanan Namboothiri. She can't adjust conventional system in her husband's house. Lastly she depart from the house and became a part of society. But she suffered a lot from the society, so she went to *Sevagram ashram*. From there she participated in freedom movement with Gandhiji.

Kallat Priyadatha belongs to a revolutionary family, called Ittiamparambath Mana. She had formed Mahila samajams and mobilised women in the Mahila samajam. Before that she was active in Antharjana Samajam. She had participated in the *Yachana Yatra* conducted for the establishment of "Thozhil Kendram" at Lakkidi. Kallat Priyadatha had participated in the Paaliyam Satyagraham along with Pathiyil Priyadatha and others. She was beaten up by the police severely, and was put in jail for two days. She went to most of the *harijan* colonies to give speech and spread the message of anti-casteism. She had become a good orator after the Paaliyam Satyagraham.

Devaki was one of foremost women's leaders and Krishnan Namboothiri a progressive activist. The love for nation and need for self-reliance shaped her attitude towards development. Communist ideologies were attracted Devika and she got the membership of the communist Party in 1943. She was active in the Kerala Women's Federation and was elected as a councillor in the Trivandrum Municipal Corporation in 1970. She initiated a nutrition food distribution programme for children in her ward under the aegis of the Corporation. The brilliance and the social conscience of Devaki proved well in framing many community development programmes implemented by the Corporation during that period. She was of the strong opinion that without the active role of women, socialization will be a distant oasis. She also took an active role in the formation of the All India Democratic Womens Association. As a social activist Devaki Warriar is one among the stars which will pave insight to the coming generation.

Conclusion

Throughout its advancing years of activities the *Yogakshema Sabha* contributed fervently to the development of Namboothiri women. The empowered women of the society have the potential to create dynamic changes in the members of the *Yogakshema Sabha*. The remarkable attempts made by *Yogakshema Sabha* contributed a lot of changes in Namboothiri community especially among women. The women of upper caste despite their caste hierarchy were ready to work for the peasants and workers. Most important is that they were in the forefront for the empowerment of the women in Namboothiri community and also fought for the eradication

of untouchability and illiteracy. Another brave move was through mixed marriages, which really questioned the caste hierarchy as well as the women's position in the institutions like marriage and family. Mixed marriage unlike mixed dining created great change in the attitude of both upper caste towards lower caste and vice versa. The contributions of the *Yogakshema sabha* make way for a better future for the Namboothiri women.

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