

The Hapless Life of Namboodiri Women and the Ripple of Changes by Antharjana Samajam

Asha L Revi

Research Scholar in History, Department of Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram

Abstract: *The study entitled The Hapless Life of Namboodiri Women and the Ripple of Changes by Antharjana Samajam intended to reveal the pathetic life and conditions of Namboodiri women. It also portrays the roles played by Antharjana Samajam and its leader Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam in emancipating the Namboodiri community. Namboodiri women were popularly called as Antharjanams. The term Antharjanam means those who belong to inside or the inside people. The present study recounts the suffering of Antharjanams and role of Antharjana Samajam in their reform movements. Antharjana Samajam was an organization founded by Namboodiri women for emancipating themselves and to eradicate the social evils. Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam raised the first voice from among the Antharjanams for community reforms. She along with other leaders fearlessly throw away the ghosha and marakkuda, two traditional symbols of a Namboodiri women and began to appear in public platforms.*

Keywords: Antharjanams, Menstruation, Marriage, Antharjana Samajam, Community Reforms

1. Introduction

Brahmins of Kerala were called as Namboodiris. They were the most privileged class in society and held high positions in the social strata. A brahmin centered varna-caste system prevailed in Kerala with some peculiarities of its own. One of the main concerns of Namboodiris of Kerala was maintaining the purity of their blood. They were conservative and followed the custom of pollution with others and even among themselves. The Namboodiri women were generally called as Antharjanams. The term means those who live inside. The terms *Akayilullor*, *Attemar* and *Akathullor* were common denominations for Namboodiri women which also means those who remains inside. They were completely secluded from the society and were restricted in all deeds of their life from birth to death. Their life and movements were restricted only within the four walls of Namboodiri households, nearby temples, and the matrilineal household of the Namboodiri women. The Antharjanams while they are moving out had to wear ghosha, a long piece of white cloth covering from head to toe and marakkuda, the cadjan umbrella. They were always assisted by Nair woman while they are moving out. For the outsiders the Antharjanams had a privileged life-living in luxury, always escorted by their maids. But in real they were oppressed by the male centric laws of Namboodiri community.

The life of women in the early periods of History, from the evidence got from the Indus Valley Civilization sites, especially the bronze statue of dancing girl and other human figures shows that there was freedom of women in public life and no mark of female seclusion [1]. In ancient India knowledge was not denied to women there were references about philosophers, poets and authors of Vedic hymns. They were also trained in dancing, painting, and music. Women like Lopa Mudra, Gargi and Mythreyi were even participated in the discussions of abstruse metaphysical problems [2]. The period between 600 BCE to 300 CE or the early five centuries of common era was considered as the Sangam period. The country south of Krishna River was divided among three crowned kings namely the Cholas, Cheras and

Pandyas. These kingdoms together are called Thamizhakom. During this period Kerala was part of Thamizhakom. Women held a satisfactory position during this period. Megasthenes in his work recorded about a woman ruler who ruled Pandyan Kingdom [3]. But the Sangam works also gives some hints on beginning of polyandry, and the concept of chastity of women. There were also some references about widows like they had to shave their head, wear colorless clothes, had to sleep on floor and should take light food. The condition of women deteriorated during the later period. According to Irfan Habib "The pre-modern society was undoubtedly oppressive to women" [4]. The condition of women further deteriorated with the advent of Brahmins. The Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala treated their womenfolk cruelly and harassed enslaved and punished them without any hesitation. They were considered only as an instrument for reproduction to maintain the purity of their clan. The wife of a Namboodiri was called by the name Sahadharmini.

They need their woman to perform certain rites and rituals. Antharjana Samajam played a great role in evoking the Namboodiri women who were oppressed by the male centric laws of Namboodiri community.

2. Problems of Namboodiri women

Namboodiri women or Antharjanams were a group of people who were kept aloof from the society by the Namboodiri men. According to JDevika "Gender was undoubtedly one of the major axes of internal regulation among the Malayala Brahmins" [5]. In a Namboodiri family, even from the time of pregnancy there starts prayers for getting a male child. Birth of a female child was not welcomed warmly. They were denied proper education. Some basics of reading, writing and arithmetic were taught to them, which the Namboodiri community believed was more than enough for a Namboodiri girl. When a Namboodiri girl menstruated, there were number of taboos they had to observe strictly. Don't touch the roof, don't brush the teeth, don't paint the eye lashes, don't adorn hair with flowers, don't use sandal paste, don't sit outside, don't take foot from metal vessel.

They had to remain in a room outside which is held in an uncleaned manner. They allowed to take bath only in the fourth day morning of their menstrual cycle. They were treated most inhumanly during their menstrual period with unclean and unhealthy conditions [6].

The Namboodiris of Kerala practiced strict primogeniture and polygamy was prevailed among them. They only allowed the eldest son in the family to get married from within the community. The eldest son only inherited the property rights also. A dowry system existed in the community and the bridegrooms demanded huge dowries. Thus, most of the Antharjanams remained unmarried. Some Namboodiri girls were married in exchange and some Namboodiris to mobilize money for their daughter's marriage, married young Namboodiri women. Some rich old Namboodiris married poor and beautiful Namboodiri girls just for their physical pleasure. The poor girls become the fourth or fifth wife of the old Namboodiri, almost of the age of their father or grand father and soon become widows. Thus, the number of young widows were also huge in Namboodiri community [7]. In the Namboodiri community the brides were selected by the groom's family. The qualities for a Namboodiri bride are described as that she should have brothers, should be clean in every manner, should have a pleasant conversation, good behavior. She should emit a good body odor, should be fair and should have a high and full bosom. She should not be from same gotra, lame or maimed, cruel hearted, should not have abnormal limbs, without hair on her body or be very hairy [8]. Thus, they select the brides after certain experiments, just like selecting a good commodity from the market.

In the Namboodiri community women were not allowed to see the face of any other men than their father, after attaining puberty. They were allowed to see the bride groom's face only after the marriage ceremonies are over. A.M.N Chakyar in his book "The Last Caste Inquisition" had detailed one incident. It was on one such occasion that one bride reportedly got up and ran away from the marriage scene nearly frightened by the groom's appearance [9]. In Namboodiri community life of a widow was not less than an imprisonment. They believe that it was because of her ill-fate her husband passed away. She was considered as the guilty of her husband's death and was treated by the community cruelly. She was considered as a bad omen and was not allowed to attend any auspicious occasions. The Namboodiris believed that their women are weaker and should be protected otherwise they would become prey to sexual assault. They made laws for women to observe and were monitored strictly. They were always assisted by the Nair companions. If there arouse any doubt on the morality, the Namboodiri women were trialed under the Smriti laws by Smarthans. Smarthans are the arbitrators of Namboodiri community who were well versed in Smritis. The Namboodiri women were expelled from the society if they found guilty. During this trial they were inhumanly tortured to extract the truth. These procedures were called as Smarthavicharam, and it was the cruelest treatment of Namboodiris towards their women.

3. Antharjana Samajam and Community Reforms

By the end of nineteenth century there emerged several socio-religious reform movements. The spread of English education and modern thoughts gave a new impetus to the community building programs of Kerala society. The community building program of Namboodiri community began with the establishment of Yogakshemasabha and its youth wing Namboodiri Yuvajana Sangham. The Namboodiri women were constrained themselves within the four corners of their Illams, i.e., the ancestral household of Namboodiris. It was found very difficult to bring even a very small ripple of change among them. It was very difficult to educate them about the importance of freedom. There was a need for someone from among the Antharjanams to work for their emancipation and to convince others to participate in community building programs. It was at this time some Antharjanams under the leadership of Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam came forward to participate in the reform movements.

Antharjana Samajam, the women's organization of Namboodiri Yogakshemasabha was founded on the initiative of Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam. A meeting held at her house about ten to twelve Antharjanams participated, and they take a decision for a women organization. They prepared a memorandum and submitted to Yogakshemasabha about the importance of having an association exclusively for Namboodiri women. In the 23rd annual meeting of Yogakshemasabha held at Guruvayoor, the decision was taken to found Antharjana Samajam, the organization of Namboodiri women. In the next day itself Antharjanams summoned under the leadership of Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam and founded Antharjana Samajam [10]. Small meetings of Antharjanams were organized secretly in the kitchens of Namboodiri houses. These meetings and works of Antharjanams slowly brought waves of change among them.

Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam along with Arya Pallam, another great leader of Antharjana Samajam threw away ghosha and marakkuda and began to appear in public meetings. This gave new impetus to Namboodiri women and more and more began to join the Antharjana Samajam. In 1933, when Yogakshemasabha celebrated its silver jubilee, hundreds of Antharjanams participated in it [11]. Yogakshemasabha introduced a Bill in Kochi Legislative Council for penalizing polygamy and for getting separate share for the younger Namboodiris. But the Bill was rejected several times by the majority in the Council. In 1931, Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam was nominated to Kochi Legislative Council to give evidence on Namboodiri Bill on behalf of Antharjanams. She made an extra ordinary lecture in favor of Namboodiri Bill. In that speech she strongly addressed the injustice towards Antharjanams, the issues they faced and pathetic conditions of their life [12]. After the speech, the assembly went silent. No one dared to utter a single voice against her. The Bill passed without any change and became law.

The Young Namboodiris started marrying within the community because of the Namboodiri Bill. The

emancipation of young widows who had a life of imprisonment became the next goal of Yogakshemasabha and Antharjana Samajam.

They advocated for widow remarriage. Meetings were organized to make people think about the liberation of widows and its importance in community building programs. Finally, they got a triumphant, when they become successful in conducting the marriage of a widow Uma Antharjanam with Yogakshemasabha leader Mulla Mangalathu Raman Bhattathirippad [13].

The pioneer leader of Antharjana Samajam, Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam passed away in 1947 at the age of 36. In the same year Antharjana Samajam started a workplace at Cheramangalathu Mana in Lakkidi. Parvathy Memorial Thozhil Parisheelana Kendram'- the workplace started by Antharjana Samajam, named after their great leader Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam who devoted her entire life for the emancipation of Antharjanams. In the beginning there were sixteen members in the workplace. In the workplace special trainers were appointed and provided training for Antharjanams in making candles, umbrellas etc... The Antharjanams in the workplace wrote a drama 'Thozhil Kedrathilekku' and staged it in different places. The drama was wholeheartedly welcomed by the Antharjanams wherever it staged and more and more Antharjanams joined the workplace. They sell the products made by Antharjanams in markets which provide small earnings for Antharjanams. It played a vital role in making Antharjanams self-sufficient and self-reliant.

4. Conclusion

Medieval Kerala society was noted for social inequalities. The Brahmins were on the top of the caste system and enjoyed all sorts of privileges. They created strict rules and regulations to observe to maintain the purity of their race. They were law abiding people and strictly followed Sankarasmriti, the law book which they believed to have written by Sri Shankaracharya exclusively for Malayala Brahmins. These laws were purely male centric, and women suffered the most in the patrilineal society. Namboodiri women who were called as Antharjanams sustained without any fundamental rights within the households. The spread of modern education and thoughts brought changes in the Namboodiri community and Yogakshemasabha and Antharjana Samajam were founded for the community reforms. They worked to the core to eradicate the social evils. A young woman Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam emerged as a central figure in Antharjanams movement. The leaders like Arya Pallam, Devasena, PathiyilPriyadatha etc... stood with her courageously. They strongly fought for liberation of Antharjanams and became successful in their efforts. More and more Antharjanams came forward and became self-reliant. Antharjana Samajam and its members played a great role in eradicating the evil practices of Namboodiri community and reforming it.

References

- [1] Ranjana Mitra, *Position of Women as Depicted in Early Indian Epigraphs* (cir.273BC to 550AD), Journal of IndianHistory, Vol. LXXIX -LXXXI, 2000-2002, pp.1-2.
- [2] Santi Arora, *Position of Women in India in the 4th Century BC*, Journal of Indian History, Vol. LXII, parts 1-3, April, August, December 1984, p.12.
- [3] R.C. Majumdar, *Classical Accounts of India*, Calcutta, 1960, pp. 456-457.
- [4] Irfan Habib, *Medieval India*, National Book Trust, India, 2013, p. 161.
- [5] J. Devika, *Memories of an Antharjanams*, Introduction, New Delhi, 2013, p. xxi.
- [6] Parayil Raman Namboodiri, *Namboodiramar (Mal.)*, Mangalodayam Press, Thrissur, 1980, p. 94.
- [7] Kavil Avanjikkattu Bhavadasan Bhattathirippad, *Samudayamitram (Mal.)*, Yogakshema Grandhavali No.3, Mangalodayam Press, Thrissur, 1920, pp. 55-56.
- [8] K.P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala Vol.3*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2001, p. 75.
- [9] A.M.N. Chakiar, *The Last Caste Inquisition*, Thrippunithura, 1999, p. 128.
- [10] M.P. Binu Kumar, *Charitra Vazhikalile Shreelak (Mal.)*, National Book Stall, Kottayam, 2011, pp.21-22.
- [11] Premji, *Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam*, Usha Kmari (Ed.) 'Thozhil Kendrathilekku', Samatha, Thrissur, 2014, pp. 160-161.
- [12] *Unni Namboodiri Vol.28*, pp. 65-73.
- [13] Anappaya Sethu Madhavan, *Chithalum Maralaum Thattathe V.T (Mal.)*, Poorna Publications, Calicut, 2005, p.66.