Chapter IV

Caste Organisations, Social Reforms and Women
Impact of the transforming Economy on the Caste System

The nineteenth century society in Kerala witnessed a serious and critical introspection on the part of the various castes within the context of the ‘modern’ order. In the colonial period in Keralam from the eighteenth century onwards, both the economy and society underwent serious transformation. The introduction of a cash economy, emphasis on agricultural improvement, development of plantations and setting up of new industries radically changed the economic bases of society and profoundly altered social relationships. The material hierarchy of tenurial relations that backed the social/caste hierarchy was gradually being eroded. With the traditional economic system gradually breaking down, the occupational structure of Keralam underwent significant changes. There was a pronounced shift from agriculture to processing industries. By 1901 nearly half of the work force in Keralam was engaged in non-agricultural pursuits. By the end of the nineteenth century the economy was opened up for railways, plantations and industries and by the beginning of the twentieth century a substantial working class evolved simultaneously with the diversification of the resource base of the region.

All this was mediated by a burgeoning colonial capitalism. Though there were regional variations in development between the three politico - administrative units of Keralam, viz. Tiruvitamkur, Kochi and Malabar, the capitalist development led to a slow
release of productive forces from the feudal, caste-based agrarian structure. Capitalist relations of production were making their impact felt on social relations as well.

The colonial interventions as well as indigenous developments were radically transforming the polity, society and economy of Keralam in the nineteenth century. In the pre-colonial period, the high castes, viz. the Namboodiris and the Nairs had been the dominant groups who were also the largest appropriators of surplus marginalizing the other castes down the line. Through colonial intervention an articulate middle class, mostly from the intermediate castes like Ezhavas, was emerging. From the mid nineteenth century onwards, the Ezhavas gradually started acquiring land rights since they had accumulated money through prosperous traditional Ezhava occupations such as coir making, coconut trade, toddy and arrack trade, artisan occupations, various handicrafts, head load work etc. \(^1\) Thus Nairs and Brahmins, on whom the earlier social organization was built, lost their power while the new group of the intermediate castes experienced considerable social ascendancy. The successful articulation of the bourgeois interests by substantial sectors of the economy with direct or indirect colonial support

---

helped them in attaining a higher position in the social ordering. Unlike the Nairs, the Ezhavas entered the new economic enterprises and productive work and thus depended less heavily on government jobs. This relative independence meant that they were not severely curbed by traditional ties.

Simultaneous with this significant shift in the status of the intermediate Ezhava caste was the coming into existence of a 'salariat' as a result of colonial transformation. The material interests of this group provided a backbone for the politicization of the emerging caste groups. This group was constituted by the urban educated sections of the population who were not only already in government employment but were also aspiring for such positions by acquiring the necessary educational qualifications. The opportunity offered by such contexts were effectively made use of at first by the Nairs who first took to western education and became the first to take up employment in government services on a large scale. The strengthening of caste identities was beginning to make itself apparent within most of these urban educated classes especially among the Nairs. The Malayali Samaj (of Nairs) and the Malayali Memorial submitted in 1891 with the

2 Idem.
3 Ibid., p.441
4 K.N. Panikkar, Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836-1921, p. 79.
5 The memorial was to seek employment for educated Malayalis and to prevent the influx of Tamil Brahmins into Tiruvitamcor civil service. The Memorial was basically a Nair initiative since they were the most affected.
agitations that followed served its purpose in rousing the political consciousness of considerable sections of the people.  

The protest-reform movements that emerged in the twentieth century were products of the emerging class structure. While for the castes lower down the line it revealed the twin objectives of breaking down the shackles of tradition and of resisting the domination of the superior caste, for the Namboodiris it meant the reform of traditional structures that lay in the way of their modernizing initiatives.

What should perhaps not be left unsaid is the issue of the rising nationalist movement in Keralam that brought large sections of the people into the anti-imperialist struggle by the 1920s and 1930s as well as the Communist movement that was slowly starting to take shape. The structural changes in the economy and the political struggles were linked and these together with the demands for reform had a direct bearing on the women of the different castes.

Colonial Ideological Inputs

The development of capitalism and the slow but steady rise of a bourgeois class in India necessitated a reworking of the social fabric as well. The liberal and rational scientific thinking had infused sections of the upcoming educated classes with the spirit

---

of reform. Perhaps this theory of cause and effect with regard to ‘Western’ education and social reforms is an overworked one and may not help explain all attempts at reform. An example of this would be the case of Sree Narayana Guru, the Ezhava reformer in Keralam who operated not strictly within the Enlightenment framework.

However, by and large, the nineteenth century intellectuals did expect transformation in their social and economic environment within the colonial political framework itself. This accounts for the role they assigned themselves, namely the creation of an ideological basis for a bourgeois order, ‘with refined individuals, refined homes and refined society’ within a colonially subject polity. Colonialism with its claims of a civilizing mission had a crucial role to play in this regard. Ashis Nandy talks of a civilizational imperialism where, of the two genres of colonialism, the first was for the physical conquest of territories, the second ‘more insidious in its commitment to the conquest and occupation of minds, selves, cultures…… The second was pioneered by rationalists, modernists and liberals who argued that imperialism was really the messianic harbinger of civilization to the uncivilized world.”

---

7 K.N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectual and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*, p. 25
If the colonizer could establish his own civilizing mission, it was then not unconsciously imbibed by a naïve, innocent, indigenous elite. For, as Leela Gandhi remarks, ‘the process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and colonized’. If there is a face of colonial oppression there is also one of the compelling seductions of colonial power..., (while it) is fundamentally coercive, its campaign is frequently seductive....... It is equally likely to appear as the disinterested purveyor of cultural enlightenment and reform. Viewed in this sense, colonialism strove to colonize minds and altered radically the cultural priorities of the colonized once and for all. It also created enduring hierarchies of subjects and knowledge - the colonizer and the colonized, the Occidental and the Oriental, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the developing.

The positioning of the Indian people within this hierarchical scheme placed them at a point of returning a voyeuristic gaze upon Europe. This study will, however, argue subsequently that such a gaze was not always an unqualified one with regard to the articulation of the reform discourse.

---

10 *Idem*.
11 Gyan Prakash (ed.) *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, p.3
12 Leela Gandhi, *op.cit.*, p.11
Colonial State and Reform

In the nineteenth century the 'women question' loomed large. This was not a question of 'what do women want?' but rather 'how can they be modernised'. It became the central question in nineteenth century British India because the colonial rulers and writers consistently condemned Indian religions, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women. About the Hindu society James Mill remarked, 'nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women..... they are held accordingly in extreme degradation'. Colonial rule was instrumental in putting forth ideas about women's rights and in placing the women's question as an index of progress. James Mill wrote, 'among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted'.

The colonial State made no hesitation about their perception of the status of Indian women which they held as indices to measure India's culture and civilization. The colonial notions on rationality and individualism were employed as yardsticks while writing about women. The fact that the women were oppressed by the institutions of caste

---

13 Geraldine Forbes *Women in Modern India*, p.2
15 Idem.
and by feudal practices lent legitimization to their role as a civilizing agent who would help liberate the downtrodden, of which women were an essential category.

Within the liberal discourse the primary needs of women were located to be education, freedom from enforced widowhood, change in the 'outdated' manner of dress and so on. Behind the facade of emancipation were the real battles of colonialism waged. There was a valorization of motherhood in its modern form, especially while in discussions on the age of marriage, taking recourse to modern biology and the science of eugenics. Further the colonial judicial discourse on divorce and annulling of marriages circulated theories on the meaning of virginity, conjugal sexuality and the relationship of men and women to sexuality and reproduction. The colonial State since it had a major role to play in initiating social reforms, was seriously engaged with the definition of normal and unnatural sexuality and in the regulation and punishment of sexual deviance and transgression.

The social reform movements were first initiated in the Presidencies where the colonial State could directly intervene. However the initiative did not come from the colonial State per se but from the different groups like Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj,

---

17 Patricia Uberoi (ed.) 'When is a Marriage Not a Marriage? Sex, Sacrament and Contract in Hindu Marriage', Patricia Uberoi (ed.), op. cit., pp. 347 – 368
etc., as in Bengal, that were being organized with support from the rulers. These groups avoided allegiance to any particular religion and strove to establish certain universal democratic modern values, whether in the matter of modern education or the emancipation of women.

Reform Experience in Keralam and Elsewhere

Certain departures of the reform programme in Keralam from that in Bengal have to be delineated here. While in Bengal the ‘ideological apparatuses of the state played a crucial role in this process (of acculturation) actively intervening to reorder the intellectual and the cultural domain of the ‘natives’ \(^{18}\), in Keralam the caste communities were organizing themselves for reforms within.

In Bengal, the debate on Sati for, e.g. was initiated primarily by colonial officials signifying the concern for the status of women that emerged in the nineteenth century. This was elaborated by a re-definition of scriptures, which was the central pursuit in the reform. The equation of scripture, law and tradition and the representation of women as tradition was fashioned out of the requirements of an ‘expanding colonial power in need

\(^{18}\) K.N. Panikkar, op.cit., p.126
authority as well as their practices especially the Sambandhams. The Nairs and the Namboodiris had been bound together, for at least seven centuries, by these Sambandham relationships. Hypogamous for the Namboodiri male and hypergamous for the Nair female, the practice received sanction from tradition and legitimacy from apocryphal texts like the Kerala Mahatmyan. The story goes that celestial women were brought from Indra’s world by Parasurama to satisfy the sexual cravings of Kerala Brahmins. Parasurama is said to have pronounced his commandments to the men of castes lower than the Brahmins to satisfy the desires of Brahmins, enjoining upon them to put off chastity as well as the cloth that covered their breasts and declared that their promiscuous intercourse with three or four men in common was void of the least tint of sin. 22 Many influential Namboodiris relied on such tradition to seek continuance of the practice.

However the authority of certain other traditions and scriptures like the Smritis 23 was overlooked by the Namboodiris in their many customs and practices. For e.g., the Smriti says, ‘the Sudra’s appointed path to heaven is in serving the Brahmins. The practice of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas having sexual intercourse with servile

23 The Smritis were part of the traditional scriptures of ancient India and were many in number. The most often quoted ones with regard to Brahmanical patriarchy are the Smritis of Manu and Yajnavalkya.
(Sudra) women is in accordance with the Sastras. If a Brahmin wished to have sexual
intercourse with a Sudra’s wife, the Sudra would be bound to gratify the wish. 24

The Namboodiris in Keralam followed the Sankarasmriti as their guiding text
believed to have been compiled by Sankara the philosopher who lived in Keralam in the
eighth century A.D. The Anacharams outlined in the Sankarasmriti, which have been
discussed in the earlier chapter, had given sanction to the practice of only the eldest sons
of the Namboodiris marrying within caste thereby providing the community with the tacit
support for following the Sambandhams. The Namboodiri reformers, however, sought to
break tradition and Poorvacharams 25 and did not want to compromise on a negation of
tradition. The overriding concern was the need for progress. The reform literature
popularised that ‘customs are made for man. Man is important, not the customs…. All
customs that hindered the community’s progress should go.’ 26 More blatant
denunciation followed of the Smritis that purportedly lent support to the practice.

Referring to the Manusmriti, Muthiringot Bhavatratan Namboodiripad, the author of
Aphante Makal a novel on social criticism, and a leading personality of the reform

24 Ibid., p.11
25 Customs existing earlier on.
26 Unni Namboodiri, Vol. 7, No.4, 1926, p.227
movement, opined that 'that verse was the outcome of a power hungry pen. The pages it occupies have only to be torn away.'

The motivation for reforms among the Namboodiris came from the dire need to catch up on 'progress' and this was backed by the desire for 'modernisation'. The case for reform was presented in such a manner that every practice that stood in the way of the community's onward march should be done away with. There were rarely any attempts to take recourse to tradition claimed to be re-read without 'distortions'. In this sense the colonial rule with its moral civilizing aims only provided the context for a re-evaluation and consequent negation of tradition along lines more consonant with the 'modern' economy and society, believed to have been the consequence of India's incorporation into the capitalist world system.  

As mentioned earlier, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in general, were the periods when the existing caste hierarchies and disabilities born there of were being seriously challenged in Keralam. With the break up of feudal relations in land owing to the colonial transformation in agriculture and commercialization, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the social hierarchies that accompanied the

---

27 Unni Namboodiri, Vol. 9, No.2, 1928, p.151

28 Lata Mani, op.cit., p.88
economic ones. From the seventeenth century onwards, the balance of the hierarchical positioning was gradually being upset with many Nairs becoming wealthy, educated and powerful. By the 19th century this manifested itself in the efforts on the part of the Nairs for reforms in property and marriage. The Malabar Marriage Commission Report and the discussions on it give ample evidence to the fact that the Nairs were in the vanguard of social reform. The educated Nair striving for progressive reforms then, was both the model and the ‘other’ on which the new Namboodiri ‘self’ was being constituted. This was because the Nairs were among the first to become colonial subjects within a modernizing discourse and more than the colonial rulers they became role models for the other communities, especially, the Namboodiri, whose cultural and social systems were closely linked with the Nair ones.

The Reform Program

The struggle between matrilineal property rights and patrilineal property rights and individual rights was intense as can be seen from the Legislative Council Debates, newspaper reports, memorandums presented to the colonial authorities and the literature
of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century whereby the ideas of individual freedom and equality also gained momentum\textsuperscript{29}.

The Nairs by the end of the nineteenth century were already focusing on the reform of their \textit{Marumakkathayam} Laws of inheritance\textsuperscript{30} The Malabar Marriage Commission was appointed in 1891 gave its Report\textsuperscript{31} on this. Consequently in 1896 the Malabar Marriage Act was passed.

The Malabar Marriage Act which was consequently passed in 1896 was limited in its objectives and sanctioned as a tentative measure a system of registration of \textit{Sambandham} as a valid marriage under certain conditions which were:

1. Neither party must be subject to a personal law according to which he or she cannot validly contract a marriage. (The Namboodiri or Nair personal laws regarding marriage should not, as per this clause, be opposed to the said marriage. The fact, however, was that the Namboodiri personal law did not provide for hypogamy, as in \textit{Sambandham}, and marriage to \textit{Sudras}. The fourth clause was a sequel to the first one)

2. The customary rules of consanguinity and affinity are to be observed.

\textsuperscript{29} Meera Velayudhan, ‘The Growth of Political Consciousness Among Women in Modern Kerala’, Kerala Gazetteers Dept., op. cit., p.486-7
\textsuperscript{30} For the Nairs, the inheritance was traced down the female line and the succession was according to matrilineal descent
\textsuperscript{31} Malabar Marriage Commission Report henceforth \textit{MMCR}, 1891, Madras Archives
systems directly affected the Namboodiri community as well. For ,e.g. the Tiruvitamkur Nair Regulation which came into force in 1925 states that ‘the marriage of a male or female contracted while already being married or after the Regulation came into force would be void’ thereby placing a ban on even Namboodiris who might wish to contact Sambandam or even prevent Namboodiris with Sambandhams existing from marrying within caste\textsuperscript{35}.

By 1908 the Namboodiris were also organizing for reform and the Namboodiri Yogkshema Sabha was formed at Thrissur with men like Kuroor Damodaran Namboodiripad, V.T. Bhattacharipad, M.P. Bhattacharipad, M.R. Bhattacharipad, E.M.S. Namboodiripad and others in the forefront. Besides speaking through the Yogakshemam Weekly and Unni Namboodiri monthly, numerous essays, skits, satirical poems and short stories that articulated the reform discourse were published. The large volume of reform literature that came from the community owed itself largely to men like V.T. Raman Bhattacharipad, M.R. Bhattacharipad, Muthiringot Bhavatratan Namboodiripad, V.P. Bhattacharipad, Pandom Vasudevan Namboodiripad, Akkitham Vasudevan Namboodiri and others. Among them, V.T. Bhattacharipad’s Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku (From

\textsuperscript{35} Quoted in Unni Namboodiri, vol.9, No.6, 1925, p491
144

the Kitchen to the Stage), a propaganda oriented social drama staged for the first time in 1929 was 'an event that provoked an upheaval'.

The story in brief was this: The eldest Namboodiri of Vilayur family had a son and a daughter named Kunchu and Thethi. Madhavan, a young Namboodiri student who stayed at the Vilayur House, and Thethi developed affection for each other. Thethi's marriage is fixed , to an old and senile Namboodiri, without her consent being taken. On the basis of a petition filed at the court that the bride was unwilling, the court issued an injunction to stay the wedding. Finally Madhavan marries Thethi at the appointed time.

The plot of the story was fully propaganda oriented and was aimed directly at the orthodox elements among the Namboodiris. It was staged in Namboodiri families so as to enable the women folk to see it. The women who had never before in their lives attended a meeting or heard any speech, much less seen a drama – unmarried girls, young widows, married ladies, old women-everybody started seeing it from the hideouts in various corners of their family houses. E.M.S.Namboodiripad writes that the idea of fighting polygamy, opposing old persons marrying young girls and also the idea of love marriage began to be seen by the Namboodiri women as possibilities.

36 E.M.S.Namboodiripad, How I Became A Communist, p.97
37 Idem.
38 Ibid., p. 99
'natural'. The reformers were of the opinion that 'at a time when the desire for individual freedom is the fashion and when even those who have (the Nairs) held the joint family in respect are agreeing to partition of tarawads \(^{41}\) it would not be unnatural for Nambudiris to create individual families and enhance their numbers. While those who have individual families enjoy and shower the natural affection due from a man to his wife and his children, only the Namboodiris lead the disgusting life with the autocratic Karanavan\(^{42}\) on the one side and the warring Anantaravans\(^{43}\) on the other, while the Antarjanams\(^{44}\) bear the brunt of this arrangement'.\(^{45}\)

The existing marriage practices were seen to act as obstacles to the creation of individual families and the reformers responded to it sharply. One such opinion sums up the disabilities of the caste thus: 'almost every evil conceivable as arising out of the various systems of martial relations is curiously enough, mixed up; and you can get the system of marriage as is prevalent in my community. The question of widow re-marriage though not coming to the purview of immediately practical politics is a question that cannot be left out of account by a social reformer. More than half the number of married

\(^{41}\) Nair households
\(^{42}\) The eldest son became the Karanavar who managed the family affairs
\(^{43}\) Nephews
\(^{44}\) Namboodiri women
\(^{45}\) Unni Namboodiri, vol. 7, No. 7, 1926, pp. 400-1
women in the community are widows. Then there are a class of ladies who cannot
strictly be called widows but are really so-this, owing to the fact that two or three ladies
are married to one and the same person. The horrors attendant on the prevalence of
polygamy are too harrowing.... There are only ten per cent of Namboodiris who have not
had to resort to polygamy. This is due to.... the custom of younger sons not marrying
within the community..... and while all the daughters are to be married there are only the
eldest sons to marry them. The enormous amount demanded as dowry --actually there are
families who have become bankrupt after giving away four or five girls in marriage -- is
a very serious problem'.

It was believed that the provisions for endogamy, monogamy and partition of
tarawads could at one sweep do away with all the existing evils and also improve the lot
of women considerably. Though the most important demands were for the creation of
individual Namboodiri families, the sustenance of such units posed serious problems
now. How were these families to support themselves? Partitioning of property alone
would not help since the Namboodiris were not trained in any skills for livelihood. The
opinion was that 'priesthood is (was) not a sufficient source of livelihood . Hence the

---

46 E.M.S. Namboodiripad, OFNB, pp. 8-11
Namboodiris should now take up jobs proving their vigour and masculinity.' 47 Modern education was seen as the sole solution to get out of this tangle. As a result more and more young Namboodiri men were taking to the new education. This again generated a further crisis that threatened to strike at the efforts for establishing monogamy and endogamy as the rule which was expressed as, 'many an educated youth have become terrified at the possibility of having to marry such ignorant and illiterate (Namboodiri) women' 48

That the Namboodiri women were lagging behind miserably in the matter of education was taken serious note of by the reformers. They remarked, 'Our women who adorned glorious positions have been reduced to mere cooks or have been objectified into devices for satisfying lust. We should have educated the women along with the men. The reason for a lot of our plight is the ignorance of our women. Beyond cooking a few dishes, they have no knowledge of any hygienic principles..... we have not only denied our women scientific knowledge but by suffocating them within the Ghosha and Marakkuda 49 have shut off their sensory perceptions as well. 50 It was apparent that the condition of the women was affecting the reforms negatively. The educated woman

47 Unni Namboodiri, vol. 9, No.6, 1925, p.498
48 Unni Namboodiri, vol. 9, No.3, 1928, p. 207
49 Blanket like garment draped over the body and the cadjan leaf umbrella
50 Unni Namboodiri, vol, 9, No.3, 1928, p.206
on the other hand, was to serve the function of promoting the reform agenda. More crucial, however, was the need to create an enlightened wife for the ‘modern’ man. It was felt that, ‘it will not suffice for only the men to acquire education and broaden their outlook. Just as a bird cannot fly to its destination on a single wing, a community cannot attain its goals with the advancement of only the men. Indeed both men and women should improve their lot. Only then will their conjugal life be pleasurable and their children be brave and noble’. 51

Very often the women (as wives and mothers) were accused of sabotaging the reform attempts. 52 The Unni Namboodiri makes references to women who were against the idea of Parivedanam (the younger sons marrying within caste) that the reformers were zealously campaigning for. These women thought that ‘even if these youth undergo hardships due to the Sambandhams, they could at least obtain salvation by following the caste rules. Many a youth had gone in for Sambandhams out of pressures from their mothers’. 53 The reformers felt that the education of their women could solve many social

51 Unni Namboodiri, vol. I, No. 6, 1925, p. 452
52 Idem.
53 Unni Namboodiri, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1928, p. 209
problems as well. One such opinion was voiced as, 'if our women were educated Sambandhams would have disappeared from our land'.

If the conservative Namboodiris objected to the girls being sent to schools they were to possibly arrange for Namboodiri teachers to teach them at their homes. A Women’s Education Commission was appointed by the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha which after a year’s deliberations came out with its Report delineating the state of women’s education in the past and giving recommendations on possible reform. The Report however showed its colour on two counts. One was that it recommended that wherever there were a considerable number of Illams located together, the schooling could take place in any one of these Illams. Its recommendations were clearly against the idea of public schooling for girls. Secondly the education, within its purview, was limited between the ages of five and twelve beyond which they did not see the necessity for women to get educated. The justifications given by the Commission in this regard was that it needed to be practical and not idealistic. This was, as they claimed, because not

54 Kuroor Damadoran Namboodiripad ‘Stree Vidyabhyasam’ (Women’s Education), Unni Namboodiri, Vol. 9, No.3, 1928, p.209
55 Unni Namboodiri, Vol. 9, No.4, 1928, p. 282
many among the conservative Namboodiris would agree to invest money on and sent their daughters to public schools\textsuperscript{56}.

While the reformers dreamed of a world where women would be educated and freed from deplorable social customs they were conscious of the limits that this education could extend to. Muthiringot Bhavatratan Namboodiripad hailed as the author of one of the finest pieces of reform literature on women\textsuperscript{57} had headed the Women’s Education Commission mentioned above. Perhaps this does not seem contradictory because the reform agenda pertaining to women at various levels was careful not to tread on openly revolutionary grounds.

The ‘new’ woman, though educated, was to be devoted to the home and family. Biological and anatomical justifications were given to make women stick on to the role of a housewife and even while being educated she was to be proficient in cooking, housekeeping, baby care, hygienic lifestyles, care of elders, etc.\textsuperscript{58} The reformers held that there were two categories of women to be educated - the married women and the younger maiden. As for married women their husbands had to take a decision in this matter. ‘They could make their wives read newspapers and journals or maybe even a circuiting

\textsuperscript{56} Emphasis mine. The details on this debate appeared in \textit{Unni Namboodiri}, Vol. 9, No. 7, 1928, p. 409.
\textsuperscript{57} His novel \textit{‘Aphante Makal’} was a telling statement on the miseries of the Namboodiri women
\textsuperscript{58} Parayil Raman Namboodiri, \textit{Namboodirimar} (Namboodiris), p.73. Besides this work, the \textit{Unni Namboodiri} was replete with references to this end. See Vol 1, No. 6, 1925, p.452
library could be established for these Antarjanams. Some opinions on sending girls to public schools were also expressed. An Illam (Namboodiri household) was proposed to be provided as hostel for the girls so that along with the new education at school, traditional learning and housekeeping skills could be provided by the folk residing in the Illam. There was a general anxiety at the time that educated girls would be disobedient and self-willed. Reformers like Kuroor Damodaran Namboodiripad took special pains to explain that education would not have such disastrous consequences.

Besides the Antarjanam’s education, another major issue of concern was her attire. It was felt that the Antarjanams’ clothing was far from respectable or desirable. Voices of shame were expressed on this - ‘even these Namboodiri women whose thinking is ill-advanced would be disgusted at their own dress and ornaments. In this age of fashions, their clothing look at least a thousand years old. To however rich or a pauper household an Antarjanam might belong, her clothes look just the same. Her ugly upper blouse, bronze bangles worn up to her elbows and her plain upper and lower garment leaves nothing for anybody’s desire. Hence, like women of other castes, the Namboodiri women should also add glamour to their attire.... Especially at a time when we are

59 Unni Namboodiri, vol. 9, No.3, 1928, p.218
60 Idem.
clamouring for endogamous marriages, it is of utmost urgency that the imbalance between the modern educated Namboodiri men dressed in modern attire and the old fashioned women be rectified. While women of other castes have responded to the call of changing fashions.... our women, confined to kitchen corners and the hearth paint a sorry picture.\textsuperscript{61} The \textit{Ghosha} that was enforced was strongly disapproved of. It was held that ‘a woman’s chastity is (was) the product of a cultured mind and not of the \textit{Ghosha}.\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{Women In the Reform Programme}

The reform programme attracted a number of young Namboodiri women. Their first meeting was held at Guruvayur and created a stir in the community. In a meeting at the residence of V.T. Bhattatiripad, Parvati Nenminimangalam and Arya Pallam cast away their \textit{Ghosha} and \textit{Marakkuda}. Premji says, ‘They brought our decisions on the attire of women into practice’\textsuperscript{63}. Parvati Nenminimangalam later became the Chairperson of the Yuvajana Samajam held at Talipparamba. The \textit{Unni Namboodiri} reports, ‘there was a great commotion among the orthodox old Namboodiri who threatened to outcast them. Parvati Antarjanam (Parvati Nenminimangalam) presided at a meeting of young Namboodiri women. The meeting held at Karalmann in 1934 was attended by about a

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Unni Namboodiri}, vol. 7, No. 11, 1926, pp. 647-50
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Unni Namboodiri}, vol. 7, No.12, 1926, pp. 675-9
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Unni Namboodiri}, vol.1 No.2, 1947 pp.73
hundred Namboodiri women. A Select Committee had been formed to inquire into the details of the Namboodiri Bill that was being discussed at that time. Parvati Nenminimangalam was nominated to the Kochi Legislative Council to give evidence on behalf of the Namboodiri women. She impressed upon them the injustices suffered by Namboodiri women and the Bill was passed against polygamy without amendments. This was despite the fact that the Raja had vetoed the former Bill presented, under public pressure from the orthodoxy. Premji (as M.P. Bhattachiripad, the reformer, was endearingly called) in his obituary note on Parvati. Nenminimangalam in 1947 recalls this incident: “She began her moving narration about the plight of the Namboodiri women and the relief that the proposed Bill could bring. It was evident from the intermittent applause that the assembly was already in her favour even before she finished her speech.”

An Antarjana Sabha, the women’s wing of the Yogakshema Sabha was also organised with women like Parvati Nenminimangalam and Arya Pallam at the helm. The Yogakshema Sabha was pleased to have an organisation ‘to take the reforms to the inner recesses of the Illams where even sunlight could not penetrate with ease’.

---

64 Ibid., p.66
65 Ibid., p.69
the Antarjana Sabha was noteworthy. It had a strong impact on the women of those times and more and more women began to give up the Marakkuda and start wearing blouses, sarees and gold ornaments. In the 1929 annual session of the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha, a woman was present wearing the blouse. There were cases of remarriage and pubescent girls continuing their education. Nevertheless, the fact that a woman’s wing existed but differed only in its gendered membership and locale of activity and not in issues raised, is indicative of the absence of an autonomous initiative. The Antarjana Sabha was more often that not a centre of activity for putting the Yogashema Sabha’s decisions into practice. It was only in 1944, thirteen years after its birth that the Antarjana Sabha held an independent meeting on its own when, as Premji describes, ‘the Antarjanams proved that they could do things on their own."

The Namboodiri Act

The Namboodiri Act that the Yogakshema Sabha worked towards was one that stated issues regarding property, inheritance and endogamous marriage as their central points of reforms. The Cochin Nambudiri Act was passed in 1939 and had in it the chapters on Illam and its management, marriage, guardianship, intestate succession and

---

67 *The Hindu*, 28 April 1931
adoption. The main thrust was on making the Illam a more democratic space by controlling the autocratic powers of the Karanavar and by rendering Illam management more transparent. It also permitted caste marriages thereby paving the way for ending Sambandhams. With regards to intestate succession though the unmarried daughter was entitled to an equal share, with the sons, which could be claimed as dowry, the women once married ceased to hold any stake in the property of their natal Illam. The idea that a woman belonged to her husband's household was thereby established by law. Moreover one other crucial drawback was that a Namboodiri male could marry for a second time in cases 'where the wife has not borne him any male child within ten years of her marriage'.

The Cochin Nambudiri Act established once and for all the strong patriarchal bias already existing in the community in a renewed form. The accent of the Bill was in making an independent nuclear family based on individual enterprise possible. The conditions for making endogamy possible that the bill provided was also, in the long run, to serve this end.

---

69 The Cochin Nambudiri Act, Act XIV of 1934, Ernakulam Regional Archives

70 Clause C of subsection 19, Chapter III, Cochin Nambudiri Act of 1934
It was expected that 'the penalisation of polygamy contemplated in the Bill would pave the way not only for exterminating the jealousies, wranglings and bickerings of the zenanas of the Namboodiri families but also to putting a stop to the dreadful practice of giving girls of sixteen and seventeen to men of sixty and seventy as their third and fourth wives. Again it will result in a considerable reduction in the appalling number of would-be young widows and save them from the cursed fate of spending the prime of their lives in living tombs of degradation, despondency and despair'. 71

The provisions suggested in the Act were those put forward by the Namboodiri Yogashema Sabha. It was felt that with such a piece of legislation to meet the changed needs of modern times, the Namboodiris would show miraculous improvements in all the spheres of life at no distant date. 72

Critique of Reforms

The reformers were primarily concerned with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only 'limited and controlled emancipation..... women themselves were not always partners in the schemes created for their regeneration;.

'Though the skits that were staged directly targeted the Antarjanams in their theme, they

71 N.K. Krishnan Namboodiri, OFNB, p.15
72 N.K. Krishnan Namboodiri, OFNB, p.14
were staged mainly for men. "This idea was reiterated by Arya Antarjanam who remarked that women faced problems in openly viewing the plays and were sometimes forbidden from doing so. Those who could watch did so only behind the cover of palmyre screens."

There were repeated engagements within the reform programme regarding the idea/ideal of marriage. The reformers were sometimes wary that the ideas of freedom and individuality that the movement threw up would be taken too far by the women. The domestic roles of women were not to be put in peril. In a discussion on the theme of freedom, an article in the *Unni Namboodiri* examines the conditions of divorce and spinsterhood that were reappearing in the community in new ways. Instead of being enforced as in earlier times, this time it was born out of the conscious choices of women. The article reports, ‘Women’s sense of freedom has now reached this point.... However much a husband permits his wife freedom, she finds the fact that she is after all a man’s wife and that she has to consider his opinions as well, a bondage as strong as that imposed by an iron link’. This was a response to the comment of a woman that she was ‘born too early for her age and though marriage is acceptable the term martial bond was

---

73 Premji’s interview, Mathrubhumi daily, 2 Feb. 1995.
74 Idem.
75 *Unni Namboodiri*, Vol. 8, No. 9, 1927, pp. 495-6
scary'. She had as a conscious choice opted for spinsterhood. Since this was also the period of the struggle for national freedom, the idea of freedom could not be given up altogether. However these men found it necessary to qualify the idea that 'it would not be difficult to agree on these thoughts on freedom if it were not about husband-wife relationships'. The conception of freedom within male female relationships was stigmatized as a license-seeking for free sex. The reformers could conceive of freedom for women only within the confines of the idea that marriage was the fulfillment of a social duty. This idea was that 'marriage was not for the fulfillment of a personal desire, it was a duty that society placed on a person.... It might not always be satisfying ...... (but) of the two elements in marriage-sexual pleasure and procreation, the latter was to be given a larger premium since sexual pleasure was insignificant and short lived'.

Anxious outbursts of criticism make their appearance over possibilities of women's independent initiatives in society. Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad, one of the well known scholars of time who was also linked to the reform programme, remarks, 'there are several negative consequences as well as uselessness to the idea of a Stree Samajam (women's groups) and Stree Swatantrayam (women's freedom)....

76 Idem.  
77 Ibid., p-499  
78 Ibid., p.498  
79 Ibid., pp. 499-500
Primarily it is going to affect the marital relationship in three ways. Firstly, it would reduce the pleasures ensuing from marriage. Secondly, the youth would therefore hesitate to contract marriage and third even when marriages take place they may become short lived. The possibilities of women’s own interpretation of their freedom were seen as attempts to selfishly wrest rights from men. The conjugal lives of such women being bereft of mutual trust, it was concluded, would crumble.

It was in this situation that the women’s question became part of a quite different political agenda, being central to the constructions of selfhood and projections of otherness. This was perhaps the dilemma that the nascent nationalism faced. Partha Chattrajee discusses an ‘Eastern’ type of nationalism, trying to re-equip the nation culturally to transform it but not being able to imitate the alien culture (western nationalism /Europe) for fear of losing its distinctive identity, thus being both imitative and hostile to its model. Women were markers of the distinctiveness of a tradition and the project of rescuing the tradition from the evils of colonization meant retaining the ideal of womanhood. Yet the modern age provoked the need for change. These two urges led to the ‘imagination of a new woman; a woman willing to welcome the new age,

---

80 Unni Namboodiri, Vol.7, No.7, 1926, p.423
81 Unni Namboodiri, Vol.7, No.6, 1926, p.356
82 Patricia Uberoi, Social Reform, Sexuality and the state, p. xiii
83 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalism and the Colonial World, p.2
while not forgetting her tradition, her ideal'. This perhaps accounts for the ways in which women were marginalized from a discourse which was claimed to be about them.

While the colonial situation to a large extent provoked reforms, even the most progressive among reformers drew a line between the reformed Namboodiri woman and her British counterparts. Sharp denunciations were made of the ‘western’ woman who acted against nature by dieting, doing slimming exercises, playing football, wearing men’s dress, drinking, smoking, wearing short hair and even wrestling! They were aghast at a new technique arrived at in Paris where one could lead a conjugal life and yet have no children! While fighting in earnest for reforms in the Antarjanams’ attire, behaviour, education and other aspects of refinement, it was made clear what her new found freedom would be. ‘Our women with their modest demands have no desires like their European counterparts to have equal share in government and public activities.’ The agenda for reforms was clearly a liberal one that was ‘handed out’ to women for their emancipation. ‘There is nothing that any creature would so much desire as freedom. Not providing it would be a sin. To enjoy nature and to acquire some knowledge of the

85 Unni Namboodiri, vol. 7, No.5 1923, pp. 260-5
86 Idem.
world they (women) should be granted some freedom as it is unavoidable in the changing times.'

At this juncture, it is interesting to note how the two communities, viz., the Namboodiris and the Nairs, looked at each other. There is a mixed bag of hate and desire in the Namboodiris' attitude towards the Nairs. Being bound to each other through marital relationship, these relationships had been used by both groups to their advantage. However, by the nineteenth century, the Namboodiris clearly recognized the cultural superiority that the Nairs exerted on them and how ‘backward’ they had become vis-a-vis the Nairs. While pinpointing the caste responsible for the Sambandhams Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad admits that ‘the Namboodiris do not talk back at the Nairs nor accuse their Marumakkathayam system of causing untold troubles to Namboodiri women; or that these women try to wrest the Namboodiris’ wealth through Sambandhams. That they do not do so is indicative of the fact that the Namboodiris are not as powerful as the Nairs and hence in a tussle for power the Namboodiris would be the vanquished lot.' While the discussions on the Nair Marumakkathayam Bill moved in the direction of legalizing Sambandhams already contracted and even demanded a

---

88 Unni Namboodiri, vol. 7, No.4, 1926, p.230
89 Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad, Samudaya Maitri (Mal) p. 120
90 Marumakkathayam Bills, 1932, Madras Archives
share of the Namboodiri ‘husband’s’ property for the Nair woman, this was condemned in no unclear terms by the Namboodiris. So was the case regarding the arguments about the origin of the Marumakkathayam system. Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad makes a vitriolic attack on the Nairs for accusing Namboodiris of ‘using’ the Nair women for the satisfaction of their excessive sexual urges; that they used these women with the frequency and lightness of a mere change of clothes. The other side of this, of course, was the Namboodiris’ own humiliation that their men ‘who have contracted Sambandhams were seen only as ‘stud bulls’ by respectable Malayalis. Heated exchanges went on between Kanippayyur and Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai who accused Namboodiris of treating Nair women as no different from Devadasis. 

Arguments on this matter accusing either of the communities took place between Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad as the representative of the Namboodiris and Elamkulam Kunjan pillai and Puthezhath Raman Menon on the other as representatives of the Nairs. Puthezhath Raman Menon had suggested that the Namboodiris introduced Marumakkathayam (matrilineal system which included Sambandham relationships) for their own ends. Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiripad counters these arguments saying

92 Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, Kerala Charitrattile Iruladanja Edukal (Mal), p. 160.
93 Express daily, October 22, 1967
that the Namboodiris considered it as a source of shame accusing the Nairs of luring the Namboodiri men into these relationships.\(^{94}\)

The discussions on marriage reform both in terms of the *Marumakkathayam* Bills and the Namboodiri Bills threw up an entirely different version of the community’s sense of morality. The Malabar Marriage Commission Report states the problem of not finding a term to denote the man-woman relationship involved in the *Samhandham* practice.\(^{95}\) There is an apparent display of shame that the customary cohabitation of the sexes was now looked upon as indecent and unnatural. ‘An institution (*Samhandham*) which by debauching the women of one class, condemns the women of another to life long and enforced celibacy is not one which justice need hesitate to condemn.\(^{96}\)

With the socio economic bases that effectively supported such mutually beneficial relations losing ground, the relationship between the two communities were suffering sharp breaks. This was also the period when caste identities were being re-thought and re-worked within the colonial urged contexts of modernity. Simultaneous to the denunciation of the Antarjanam’s attire and social behaviour, was the open appreciation shown to the proficiency and desirability of the Nair women who was to act as the role

\(^{94}\) *Panchangam*, Press, *Panditarajan Kanippayur Sankaran Namboodirippadinte Lekhana Samaharam* (Collection of Essays), pp. 44-8

\(^{95}\) *MMCR*, p. 12

\(^{96}\) Ibid, p.9
model. This perhaps accounts for the continuing representation of the quintessential Malayali female in the form of the Nair woman. The stereotype of the modernized Nair woman celebrated in the novel *Indulekha*\(^{97}\) was a woman who was learned and accomplished, an expert in posing arguments on contemporary issues, playing tennis and taking her own decisions as about her marriage. The ways in which even such a reform discourse juxtaposed the Nair and the Namboodiri woman bring in interesting insights. The fashionable and accomplished Nair woman with her dangerous sexual propensities became both a source of inspiration and awe in the minds of the Namboodiris. The Namboodiri woman’s sexuality, in contrast was to still be passively channeled into the monogamous, heterosexual family. The reform debate certainly did make a contestation over sexuality - normal and abnormal sexuality, of licit and illicit relations, and sexual propriety and what qualified as sexual deviance. This was in turn very closely linked to the maintenance of the social order and to the questions of group identity.

The reforms within the Namboodiris tried to do away with an ‘essential caste form’ by breaking away from practices and customs specific and exclusive to the community. The slogan of the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha was to make the

\(^{97}\) Authored by O. Chandu Menon in 1898, this was the first novel in Malayalam
'Namboodiri a human being' indicating the humanistic and individualistic values of modernity that informed the reforms. However caste barriers were not done away altogether and were to be moulded into modern forms and women were to serve as the main indices of this identity. This meant that while redefining identities, women’s role in the social order was designed to promote the 'modern Namboodiri' family.

98 V.T.Bhattatiripad, op.cit. p.566