

Social change through modernistic reconstruction of family life- An example of Namboodiri of Kerala during the reform period

**Dr.Girish Vishnu Namboodiri,
Associate Professor, Dept. of History,
KMM Govt.Womens College, Kannur**

Abstract: *This paper aims to delve into the influence of colonial ideas on reforming the Namboodiri family structure during the colonial period in Kerala. The family was a crucial area where the colonial concept of reform made its mark, leading to the reconstitution of community identity. This paper provides a detailed discussion of how the Namboodiri family form was discursively objectified and how this new colonial subject emerged from this subjectification process, advocating for the transformation of family structure.*

Keywords: *illam, thatavad, sambandham, Yogakshema Sabha, Unni Namboodiri, adhivedhanam*

Introduction: The Namboodiri reform movement, as evidenced in many of the reform movements in India, underwent three distinct stages: reformist, transformative, and revolutionary. The reformist period brought about partial changes in the value system, the transformative stage aimed to effect middle-level structural changes, and the revolutionary stage aimed to bring radical changes in the totality of social and cultural systems. The reformist discourses on family structure were seminal in restructuring Namboodiri's identity in the 20th century. The Namboodiri movement, which began in the first two decades of the 20th century, initially projected moderate demands for changes in family relations and the educational system. However, by the 1920s, the reform movement had evolved to aim for more changes, with discussions on different aspects of family life. It had acquired a radical character and was demanding revolutionary changes in society by the 1930s.

The policies of Yogakshema Sabha, create a vital role in the progressive reconstitution of Namboodiri family life. The Sabha's attention was on the Sambandham system from the beginning. The issue of partition of the joint families became prominent in the 1920s in Sabha's activities. Sabha had taken up issues like widow remarriage, reforming of dress, cutting of "kuda" (tuft) and other traditional symbols as a way for modernizing the family life of the Namboodiris in 1930's. By the end of the first phase of Yogakshema Sabha, they understood the importance of labour and family life, which was reconstituted according to the needs of the time. The numerous articles in Unninamboodiri, Yogakshemam, different Commissions and reports instituted by Yogakshema Sabha viz Namboodiri Family Regulation Committee Report (1925), Namboodiri Female Education Committee Report (1927) and the Namboodiri Family Regulation Bills showed the urge of Namboodiris to reconstitute their family according to modern lines. These articles and reports show a constant attempt to redefine the meaning of family, the concept of property, ritual status and social status among the Namboodiris.

Yogakshema Sabhainpraxis - Attempt to reorganize family life: The policies and attitudes of Yogakshema Sabha from its initiation in 1908 to the end of its first phase of activities in 1947 reflected the demand for modernizing their family life. The discussions within Sabha were the byproduct of the challenges they faced in the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Yogakshema Sabha, during its early phase, stood for the protection of the customary concept of family life. During this phase, the protection of Brahmanism, the rights of the rulers and the spread of dharmacharam were the primary concerns of Sabha. Early leaders of Sabha freely engaged in sambandham with other castes. The leadership was in the hands of the conservatives, who were not interested in the problems of the junior members of the family and the women folk. The early leaders wanted to preserve the religious and economic superiority they had enjoyed in the traditional society. But they understood that the community would be a laughing stock in society without an English education. They were even eager to the rigid and conventional brahmanyam (Brahminhood) to embrace English education. Yogakshema Sabha, in the 1920s, began to discuss different aspects of family life. Partition of joint families, the end of the sambandham form of marriage, the popularization of self-caste marriage and economic reorganization became Sabha's

primary concerns. Unninamboodiri and Yogakshema had serious discussions on the need to restructure Namboodiri's family life.ⁱⁱⁱ Yogakshema Sabha successfully sent their representatives to the Travancore, Cochin and Madras legislature. Sabha started working to pass the Namboodiri Family Regulation Bills. It viewed Family Regulation as a significant step towards modernizing family life. The appointment of commissions under the initiative of Sabha, like the Namboodiri Family Regulation Committee in 1925 and the Namboodiri Female Education Commission in 1927, were viewed as examples of Sabha's changed attitude towards modernizing family life. Sabha became more radical by the 1930's, and it reflected in their family organization. With the influence of the youths, Sabha began to demand the stopping of sambandham, adhivedhanam, the promotion of widow remarriage and the abandoning of traditional symbols and practices. This radical shift of Sabha could be seen in the speech of Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri in the Edakkunni session^{iv}, in which he demanded four critical changes in attitudes. Rejection of Vedas, destruction of the joint family system, liberating girls from house imprisonment and unity of the different groups within the Namboodiris. It was further testified when the 25th session of Sabha at Mavelikkara passed a resolution for reforming their dressing pattern. Sabha experimented with different methods for modernizing family life. Theatre proved to be a successful channel for spreading the idea of reforming the family structure. V.T. Bhattathirippad, Mullamangalathu Raman Bhattathirippad, M.P. Bhattathirippad, Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri and Lalithambika Antherjanam fully exploited the potential of literature in their reforming activities. The theatre in the 1930s discussed almost everything about family life. The theatre activities portrayed the need to restructure the community according to the changing times. These dramas were the contributions of the Unninamboodiri (youth) movement in the 1930s. For them, theatre practice was part of the social and political praxis of the period in which they lived. V.T. Bhattathirippad's play "Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku" (From Kitchen to the Stage) was enacted at Edakkunni session of Sabha in 1929.^v Practices like sambandham, marriage of girls to old, adhivedhanam (polygamy) and joint family system also came into discussion in the drama. MRB's "Marakkudaykullile Mahanarakam" (The Dirty Hell inside the Protective Umbrella), Premji's (M.P. Bhattathirippad) "Ritumati" (Pubertal Girl), Lalithambika Antherjanam's "Savthrikkutty" or Widow Remarriage portrayed the degenerated family life of the Namboodiris. "Aphante Makal" of Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri is considered the best social novel in Malayalam literature after Indulekha.^{vi} "Aphante Makal" (Paternal Uncle's Daughter) is something like a solitary lamp highlighting the social evils of the community that enjoyed priesthood, wealth and social superiority. This social novel beautifully portrays the mechanical repetition of Vedas by boys, the girls' illiteracy, the rites of repentance, unhappy marriages and attempts for social change. Several short stories published by social reformers had realistic approaches to the sufferings of the community. V.T. Bhattathirippad, Mullamangalathu Raman Bhattathirippad and Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri were the pioneers in this field. These short stories portrayed the modern men and women who rejected the ways of orthodoxy and embraced progressivism. They also narrated the stories of the victims of the contemporary social system. "Rajanirangam" (VT), "Valkannadi" (MRB), "Poomkula" (The bunch of flowers) (Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri). He utilized the short story medium to criticize many Namboodiri customs like dowry, Smarthavicharam and gender inequality. Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri's stories like "Vidavayude Vidhi" and "Atmahuthi" speak on the degenerated conditions of Namboodiri women and the dowry system. Lalithambika Antherjanam's works like "Moodupadathil", "Takarnna Talamura", "Kilivathililude", "Prathidwani", "Manushyan Mathram", "Prathikara Devatha", "Vidhibalam", and "Moodupadam". were protests against social customs and stressed the need for social transformations. All these stories were realistic and could catch the younger generation's spirit. These stories aimed to convert Namboodiris into „human beings“. Their purpose was not to entertain the leaders but to make them unhappy against the existing ritualistic social order and inspire them with nationalism. The *Yachana Yatra* (hunger march) of 1930, under the leadership of V.T. Bhattathirippad, was a strong publicity program for reforming family life. During the *Yachana yatra*, leaders focused on reforming their dress and manners. The *Yatra* also shocked the traditional social setup and the whole Kerala society.^{vii} The movement for modernizing family life, which got momentum in the 1930s "was also reflected in women's activities. The changed attitude of Namboodiri women towards

their way of life was demonstrated at the Taliparamba session of Yogakshema Sabha in 1931, when women (Antherjanams) appeared without ghosha (veil) under the leadership of Parvathi Nenmenimangalam, Aryapallam and Devaki Narikkattari. After throwing away the Marakkuda (*cadjan umbrella*), Namboodiri women came to the stage and declared that virtue was not in holding it. They decided to wear sarees and other dresses like the other caste women.

Yogakshema Sabha organized direct struggles for achieving marriage reforms in the 1930s. Picketing of sambandham marriages and adhivedhanam (polygamy) were common during this period. Unninamboodiri published reports on the picketing of girls' marriages with old men and sambhandams' marriages under the leadership of Sabha Youths, who were at the forefront of these direct struggles against marriage evils. 5 Sabha also organized massive propaganda for intra-caste marriages. It was against the growing orthodoxy among a section of Namboodiri society that V.T.Bhattathirippad published the pamphlet „Let us set fire the temples“ (*Eni Namukku Ambalangalkku Tee Kolutham*). Traditionalists reacted sharply against V.T.Bhattathirippad, and with their influence, Cochin Raja issued an order for expelling V.T. from Cochin State.^{viii} The training given to Antherjanam in modern domesticity and the promotion of intra-caste marriage were the focal points in connection with the modernization of family life in the 1930s. Moreover, they were aware of the promotion of the remarriage of widows and the relief of young women who were forced to marry old men.^{ix} The movement for widow remarriage was a radical step in the movement for family reorganization. Though two widow remarriages were conducted under the leadership of V.T.Bhattathirippad, the movement was not a complete success.⁵⁴⁹ It was clear evidence to argue that many of them, even in the 1930s, were not progressive enough to accept such revolutionary ideas. The fact was that the Namboodiris and the whole community rejected the argument against dowry.^x Though V.T.Bhattathirippad tried to popularize widow remarriage through massive campaigns, the orthodox section of the community was not ready to accept it.⁵⁵² One of the reasons for the failure of the programme was that V.T.Bhattathirippad and the progressive youths lacked organizational support because Sabha was under the control of an orthodox group. The radical steps taken by the movement had some fundamental results. The Madras Namboodiri Act was passed in 1932, and the Travancore Namboodiri Bill was introduced in 1935. Sabha launched the programme of breaking the „*Poonul*“ (sacred thread) and cutting the *kudu* (tuft) in the 1930s. These programmes helped pace the demands for reforming the dress code of the Namboodiris. Sabha also courageously established relations with those convicted in the Thathri case. In a meeting in 1937, Sabha decided to remove the untouchability inflicted on VK Narayana Bhattathiri, a convict of Thathris case. The minor success in eliminating social evils related to sambandham, adhivedhanam, and partition of the joint families resulted in lethargy that led to inaction within Sabha by 1935.^{xi} The attitude of Sabha that the community men should become labourers and productive forces in the 1940s made thorough changes in their life concepts. Sabha leaders in the 1940s urged them to collaborate with other communities to end social evils. The slogan of Sabha, „transform Namboodiri human beings, reached momentum at the Ongallur session of Sabha in 1944 under E.M.S. Namboodirippad, aimed at a complete reorganization of their family life. The beginning of labour centres for training Namboodiris in different professions was a landmark in the reconstitution of family life.

Self-Reformist discourses: During the reform movements, there were severe discourses on various issues related to marriages, caste exclusiveness, rational outlook, the concept of modernization and ritual reforms. Discussions on these issues appeared in the pages of Unninamboodiri and Yogakshema, small pamphlets written by reformist leaders, and discussions on the reports of various commissions. The discussions reflected the self-reformatory character of the Namboodiri reform movement. The significance of the talks was that they centred on issues like reforming marriage, the concept of „Namboodiritham“ (Brahminhood), communal harmony and economic reorganization, which reflected their urge to change according to time. These discussions within the community in the 1920s resulted in the radical movements for family reorganization in the 30s and the passing of Namboodiri Bills like the Madras Namboodiri Act and Travancore Namboodiri Bill. The reform movement aimed to transform them into human beings by reforming rituals, dress and language. Reformers asked them to abandon their false belief of domination over others. They also requested Namboodiris to cooperate with the traditionalist in their opposition to abandoning traditional symbols and dresses. In reformist opinion, proper education, clean clothing

and reformed ornaments could make them human beings the reform movement aimed to reform the dress of both men and women. Men appeared in public by wearing shirts and *dhoti*, and women with sarees and blouses. By 1940, the attitude and dress of the Namboodiris had changed. Reformers also demanded change in food habits and stood for the freedom of individuals to accept the food of their choice.^{xii}

Conclusion: The above discussions show that the Namboodiri reform movement was a self-corrective movement for reforming their outdated customs and practices during the reform period. Not only did the reform movement, under the leadership of the reformist organization Yogakshema Sabha but also the crucial journals of that period, Unninamboodiri and Yogakshemam, seriously carried out the program of modernistic reconstruction of family life.

References

ⁱ In the early meetings of Sabha resolutions were passed against sambandham. This factor is also supported by the argument that the consciousness for changes in social life resulted in the formation of Yogakshema Sabha in 1908 see G. Arunima, "Writing culture, of Modernity and Malayalam Novel", *Studies in History*, 13, 2, n.s, 1997, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 275

ⁱⁱ KC Narayanan, "Verunangatha vakku" in *V Tyde Sampoorana Krithikal*, DC Books, Kottayam, 1997, p. 18, M.S. Namboodirippad, Presidential address to 34th anniversary of Yogakshema Sabha, "Namboodiriye Manushya nakkuka" (to make man out of Namboodiri) 24-12-1944, *Desabhimani*, 1945, pp. 22-26

ⁱⁱⁱ Editorial, "Coming 25th", Unninamboodiri 1925 (ME. 1101 Thulam), Vol. 7. (2), p. 2

^{iv} Edakkuni session of Sabha was held in 1929. This session marked the move of Sabha into radical line

^v The story is centred on Tethi and Madhavan. Kunju, brother of Tethi and Madhavan were friends. After reading Unni Namboodiri Madhavan decided to go for modern education. Tethi's marriage was proposed with an old man, Karkatankunnath, without her consent. Kunju got an injunction from the Legal Magistrate against the marriage. He later arranges a public meeting and got married to Madhavan. The theme was revolutionary and a bomb shell on orthodoxy. About the condition of Younger brothers in the Namboodiri family the lament of a character that "who is there to love an aphan (junior member)..... I may take birth as a dog, or a cat, or any other despicable being. But I never like to be born as an aphan in the Namboodiri community," really manifest the pathetic condition of the youths. (VT, *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku*, (1930) DC Books, Kottayam, 1994, pp. 379-380)

^{vi} Tayyat Sankaran, "Samuhya Prasthanavum Sahityavum" in AV Sreekumar (ed), *VT Vellithuruthi tazhathu Raman Bhattathirippad*, V.T. Centenary Celebration Committee, Mezhathur, 1997, p. 198

^{vii} Sastrasarman Karikkad, "From Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha to Yogakshema Sabha", *Yogakshemam*, March 1985, Vol. 6 (3, 4, 5), p. 3

^{viii} P. Narayanan Namboodiri, "Achara viplavavum acharyanaya V. Tum-II" (Ritual revolution and the leader V.T), *Yogakshemam*, March 1985, Vol. 6 (3, 4, 5), p. 7

^{ix} VT, "Punarvivaham Allenkil Vidhavavivaham", *Karmavipakam*, pp. 344-47

^x M.N.K. Nayar, "Parivarthanathinte randu mughangal", (Half century of transformation), *Yogakshemam*, March 1985, Vol. 6 (3, 4, 5), p. 35

^{xi} N.V. Krishna Warier, "Adhuneekaranathinte randu mughangal", (two faces of modernization), *Yogakshemam*, September 1979, Vol. 1 (1), p. 19

^{xii} P.M.

Manazhi, "Antherjanagalumavarudeveshabhushanangalum" (Antherjanams and their dress and ornaments), *Unninamboodiri*, 1926 (ME. 1102 Chingam), Vol. 7 (12), p. 716,

M. Ramavarma Thampan, "Namboodiri Yuvakkale" (Namboodiri youths), *Unninamboodiri*, 1927-28 (ME. 1103 Dhanu), Vol. 9 (4), pp. 244-254