

# **MODERNITY, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE QUEST FOR RITUAL REFORM AMONG THE NAMBUTIRI BRAHMINS OF KERALA**

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Modernity in India took its shape under colonial domination and hence is characterized as colonial modernity.<sup>1</sup> Different regions of India experienced colonialism differently, in accordance with the timing of colonial impact, variations of colonial policies and the specificities of regional societies. As a result, social and community reform – itself a product of colonial modernity – came to incorporate differential responses to colonial critique of Indian society.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the exponents of social reform were convinced that India's salvation lay in embracing modernity. This created a problem. The institutions they wished to adopt were all products of European civilization and hence 'other'. This raised the question of how modernity could be reconciled with tradition and the way of dealing with it if a conflict arises. Indian leaders answered it in one of the three ways as can be called modernism, critical modernism or syncretism and critical traditionalism.<sup>3</sup> For the modernists, Indian society provided no hope for the future and yet its salvation lay only in its radical reconstruction along modern or western lines. The critical modernists pleaded for a creative synthesis of the two civilizations, whereas the critical traditionalists preferred to mobilize indigenous resources, borrowing from Europe whatever was likely to supplement and enrich them. Almost all the socio-religious reform movements of modern India kept within their fold an inescapable inclination towards tradition and hence these movements, especially those of later origin as well as the earlier ones in their second stage, took a strikingly cautious

attitude towards the modern and the western and started inclining towards the traditional and the cultural. This was because they had to face the apparent contradiction of colonialism as a liberating and modernizing agency and colonial culture as the 'other'.

The notion of civil society is a product of modernity. Civil society is distinct from communal existence because it is based, not on birth or status, but on voluntary associations and contractual relations between individuals.<sup>4</sup> It had its roots in reason, science, secularism, liberalism and humanism. It represented the transition from the closed community to the open society: a transition from custom to law, from status to contract, from birth to merit, from privilege to justice, from hierarchy to equality, from communalism to individualism, from heredity to association. It spoke the language of rights instead of privileges. But we have in the twentieth century an ardent critic of civil society in Gandhi whose *Hind Swaraj* represents one of the sweeping critiques of civil society in which modern civilization is the term that corresponds to 'civil society'.<sup>5</sup> Gandhi rejected capitalism, democracy, scientific progress and secularism, in the act by which he rejected civil society. He rejected progress as the prevailing system was not seen to represent backwardness. As an exponent of tradition and cultural nationalism, he dismissed the critiques on traditional institutions and ideas – he did not consider seriously the point that kinship would reproduce patriarchy, religion would reproduce authority, and caste would reproduce hierarchy. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* conceived a radically different social constitution from the civil society that had formed the cradle of the Congress.

The generative force behind the series of social and cultural developments which went into the making of modern Kerala was colonial modernity. In Kerala, where caste hierarchy almost harmonized with the class order, with the upper castes monopolizing avenues of both power and property, the initial echoes of reform was manifested in the rise of mutually opposing caste/community movements – lower castes struggled for social equality and upward mobility while the upper castes stood for changes in

the family structure and defence of privileges. As the predominant landowning community and the priestly class, and at the apex of the social order with innumerable rights and privileges, the Nambutiri Brahmins of Kerala took up a highly orthodox position even after other communities realized the need of internal caste reform. But to keep aloof from the resurging social upheaval was found self-annihilating; the forces of modernity and civil society were so strong that total indifference may end in a drastic 'fall' from which a rejuvenation would be extremely difficult. Thus, finding it difficult to escape from the pressures of civil society and unable to sacrifice the privileges bestowed by custom, the Nambutiris in the early twentieth century were smothered by the external pressures of civil society and the inner urges of the Gandhian ideal.

### **The Nambutiri Ritual Tradition**

The Kerala Brahmins called Nambutiris were migrants to Kerala<sup>6</sup> and constituted less than one percent of the total population of the land.<sup>7</sup> Though numerically small, they were the dominant caste of the land with enormous possession of land holdings and innumerable social and political privileges. A Nambutiri sought his tradition in the *Keralolpathi* chronicle and the legend of Parasurama.<sup>8</sup> As per tradition, Parasurama reclaimed the whole land by himself from the sea and donated it to the Brahmins. Nambutiris referred to *Sankarasmriti*, a treatise held to be written by Sankara, as the authentic and divine scripture which regulated their everyday life and life-cycle rituals. It ordained their life in accordance with the 64 *Anacharams* or irregular customs not observed by Brahmins elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Canonical injunctions and priestly inhibitions forced the Nambutiris to follow a strictly rigid life. From birth to death, both the male and the female led a ritually regimented life.

The social behaviour of the Nambutiris was determined by their status as landlords and priests. They formed the landed aristocracy of the country and claimed the lands by *janmam* or

birth right,<sup>10</sup> tracing their title to the legend of the original gift by Parasurama. But they did not cultivate the land by themselves; instead, they let them out to tenants, mostly Nairs, on various tenures.<sup>11</sup> They lived on rent and vigilantly guarded their property and the regular inflow of rent. They strictly followed the injunctions of Manu, 'never serve'.<sup>12</sup> Seldom did they earn their livelihood by personal exertion; they did not involve in any other vocation going into the world to earn a livelihood in the ordinary way.<sup>13</sup> Overdependence on rent made them indolent while obsession with ritualism forced them to depend on the Nairs, with whom they had age-long ritual association, for everyday life.<sup>14</sup>

They were also temple priests; but it was only the poorest of them who would consent to act as priests in temples. It was beneath dignity to live by priestly profession. However, most of the patriarchs engaged themselves in daily rituals at home, in the morning and evening, and were intensely preoccupied with ritualistic acts like ablution and divine offerings. They had to take several dip-baths every day and additional baths if they got polluted either by distance or touch pollution or by traveling long distances. Junior sons were equally engaged in ritualism by being temple priests or by involving in *yagas* or temple festivals or in simple ceremonies like birthdays of dignitaries. Death pollution lasted for a whole year during which people were not supposed to take part in any socially worthwhile activities and families were not allowed to conduct any auspicious functions like marriage. Several people spent time in evening casual talks (*vedivattam*) in the temple precincts and once in six years most of the Nambutiris set out for Thiruvananthapuram to take part in the 56 day-long ceremonial *murajapam* convened by the Travancore government to entreat the country prosperous.<sup>15</sup> Great obsession with worthless ritual engagements made the Nambutiris an object of public ridicule and they were increasingly getting identified as an extremely unproductive class and a burden to the society at large.<sup>16</sup>

Conjugal anarchy was an important cause of concern of the young and educated Nambutiris in the early decades of the

twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> To keep down the number of the members of this caste, only the eldest son in the family was allowed to formally marry a female of his own caste by Vedic rites and beget children of Nambutiri status. He also followed *Adhivedanam* or polygamy and could keep three wives at a time. Younger sons were ideally expected to remain celibate and devote their lives to religion, but in actual practice, they normally formed permanent or semi-permanent liaisons, called *sambandham*, with women belonging to matrilineal caste groups. The children of such unions were attributed the caste-status of their mothers. So, unlike other patrilineal communities, not all the children of all the sons belonged to the family. For the Nambutiri it was concubinage and for the Nair it was true marriage.<sup>18</sup> The practice of primogeniture forced the younger sons to grow indifferent to the management of the joint family property while the ban on *kanishtavivaham* (ritual taboo against younger sons getting married from within the caste) turned a major share of the Nambutiri progeny into non-Nambutiris.

The life of a Nambutiri woman (*antarjanam*) was rigidly regulated and strictly guarded. Girls were brought up with the single aim of making them chaste and obedient wives. Girl children grew up with the belief that they were second to boys in status and opportunities at home and ought to sacrifice for the maintenance of the familial and social order. There were strict restrictions on their freedom of movement within the home and outside; at home, from the day they physically mature, their movements were limited to the inner quarters of the illam house, where the male folk would not trek in, and when they go out rarely, such as during their daily visit to the temple or to attend a marriage or funeral of a kin relative, they would have to be in strict *ghosha* (veil) and invariably accompanied by a maidservant. Female chastity was guarded with Spartan vigil and complaints about adultery were dealt with harsh measures. The institution of *smartavicharam* was devised to contain female sexuality and to root out the probable threat to caste purity.<sup>19</sup> The practices of polygamy and aged marriages, the patriarchal notion of marriage

as a sacred bond and the total absence of freedom for divorce or remarriage, severe restrictions imposed on female chastity and strict observance of domesticity, all made women's lives extremely ritualistic and miserable. Their daily life was a monotonous repetition of habituated behavioural practices ranging from domestic duties including cooking, childcare and service to the husband to sacred engagements like temple visit and attending ritual observances at home. The life of a widow was even more piteous; at home they were inauspicious objects and to the outer world they were perceived as socially dead. Restrictions upon their behaviour, conduct and sexuality were extremely stringent.<sup>20</sup> Like an unmarried girl who had attained puberty, an unguarded widow was an object of moral panic. Therefore a widow had to be marked and marginalized. There were severe regimentation and strict routine in life. Public symbols and the peculiar code of conduct that marked a widow were meant to make them powerless.<sup>21</sup>

Every Nambutiri was theoretically, a life-long student of the Vedas, under close study between 7 and 15, or for more than 8 years of his life, and nothing whatsoever was allowed to interfere with this. But their scholarship was not of a high order;<sup>22</sup> it had become a ritualistic act; its quality had greatly deteriorated by then, it had lost its vitality and had become unproductive with an unnecessary stress on parrot-like recitation.<sup>23</sup> History, science or mathematics were never a part of the curriculum nor was there any instruction in the native tongue of Malayalam. Education was with Spartan discipline; play and pleasure was strict taboo. It was not intended to mould good individuals or pundits but Vedic scholars and ritual experts. While education for boys was compulsory, there was no such insistence on girl's education. They were not supposed to get any school education because cooking and child care did not warrant formal instruction and training. More importantly, education was found to sweep away the submissive mental make up of the girls which would help build them rebellious. Some girl children got education at home on essential lessons of

home care and moral values in the native tongue Malayalam. Undue stress on tradition and ritualism and the gender-centric mode of instruction made the conventional system of education essentially pre-modern.

### **Reform as Reaction**

As the dominant, and the most conservative, caste in Kerala and as the chief landowners, the Nambutiri Brahmins did not much bother about the changing trends of the modern times and hence even at the beginning of the twentieth century continued in the old world of rituals and customs and remained socially exclusive. But they realized that modern education and new economic enterprises had begun to unseat the traditional human relationships. New education and material progress along capitalist lines became the new criteria of social ranking. To much of their dismay, the Nambutiris realized that not only were their claims to social superiority no longer heeded but even the existing rights, especially land ownership, were greatly threatened by the advancing tenancy movement. It was under these circumstances that the Nambutiri *Yogakshemasabha*, the premier reform organ of the Nambutiris, was founded in 1908. At the beginning it had a strictly limited and highly orthodox agenda such as the retention of the feudal estates and the acquisition of necessary skills, like legal awareness, through modern education, for its maintenance. In that sense it was hardly 'reformist' but chiefly 'defensive'.<sup>24</sup> Programmes which could reform the power structure within the family or partition of ancestral property were not entertained and the question of the much needed marriage reform was never addressed. But the rise of a new class of educated young intelligentsia soon subverted this orthodox agenda. As *sambandham* was increasingly frowned upon as degenerate and primitive,<sup>25</sup> its replacement with *swajativivaham* acquired prominence. The old joint family, which was seen to foster idleness and to pinch individual liberty and enterprise, was sought to be replaced with nuclear families. In order to perpetuate the fruits of reform, measures were taken to enact a family regulation. As all

these changes required the wholehearted support of the *Antarjanams*, efforts were also made to bring them out “from the kitchen to the theatre”.

The *Yogakshemasabha* movement has gained repute as the most radical and humane, and hence ideal, of all communitarian movements and least influenced by sectarian considerations. This romantic discourse has greatly obliterated the ‘defensive’ character of the movement and its class disposition. The two basic issues that dominated the rhetoric of reform in the 1920s were *swajativivaham* (against *sambandham*) and partition of joint property, both of which were closely linked with class and community interests.<sup>26</sup> Both were meant to check the drain of ‘progeny and property’ through *sambandham* marriage and the tenancy reforms. In fact the rising forces of modernity and civil society had begun to unseat the enviable social position of the Nambutiris. English education and new vocations had been replacing the old criterions of social respect and recognition; modern notions of the family and the individual had been making old forms of structures obsolete; primogeniture and feudal lethargy was making it difficult to protect Nambutiri feudal estates, especially against the ruthless tenancy movement; excessive obsession with ritualism was impinging enterprise and individual initiative which, in turn, retarded material progress and helped to transform the Nambutiris into objects of public ridicule; inhuman treatment meted out to their own womenfolk had undermined the image of the Nambutiris as the most unenlightened segment of the society; and the uncompromising rules of social distancing followed by them had helped to target them as the chief exponents of social conservatism.

On another level, reform of rituals and customary practices was essential for the Nambutiris to survive in the new civil society. Their exclusiveness and caste marks were greatly hindering their engagements in the public sphere. The most important obstacle was their steadfast insistence on distance and touch pollution. They could not openly appear in public places or enter into modern



professions for fear of defilement; rigid customary rules of commensality greatly obliterated their social intercourse with non-Brahmin people and hindered their spatial mobility; their exclusiveness was harming themselves because it obstructed their participation in modern political organizations – as the new form of association and new means of social control. Strict rules of pollution had started driving the lower castes away from the Hindu fold and religious conversion as a means of social emancipation was seriously debated in Kerala during this time. In fact religious conversions were greatly harmful to the interests of the upper castes because the new converts generally refused to respect the conventions of caste hierarchy or to follow caste dharma. It was explicitly expressed during the protracted rebellions of the Mappilas in which the Nambutiri landlord rights were greatly under threat. In the 1920s and 30s the Nambutiri *Yogakshemasabha* actively took part in the anti-untouchability and temple-entry movements; this was partly because they had well understood the major trends of the times but partly also because the norms of ritual pollution had been retarding material progress of the community – it was practically impossible to maintain pollution rules in modern occupational contexts.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The great awakening among the Nambutiri Brahmins in the first half of the twentieth century was decisive in shaping their mode of social engagement in later times. The community as such underwent radical transformation; the Nambutiris imbibed modern values and became educated, rational, urban, enterprising, gender-sensitive and politicized. Some of the great political leaders of modern times like E.M.S. Nambutiripad emerged from this community. Several women activists like Arya Pallam and Devaki Narikkattiri also rose from among them. Their encounter with modernity and civil society also benefited the whole society of Kerala because, being the dominant and ecclesiastical section, they had guided the social behaviour of other caste groups. But

they never envisaged a radical transformation of the existing social structure but looked forward to a mere structural readjustment. They wanted to bring about changes in customs and institutions which served to undermine their social command and which openly conflicted with the notions of modernity and civil society.

### Notes and References

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