

FEMALE BODY OF ANTARJANAMS THROUGH THE TRAILS OF THATHRI

Sharafunnisa KM

Assistant Professor on Contract
Department of History
UC College
Aluva, Kerala, India

Abstract

The Antarjanams had to face discriminations and disparities right from their birth. The existence of social practices in the Namboothiri Community such as Sambandham , polygyny , marrying of younger girls to men much older than them , smarthavicharam , dissent to widow remarriage etc.. should be discussed in this context. The practice of smarthavicharam was a completely patriarchal and social construction to maintain the inequality in genders. Smarthavicharam was an endorsement for the male control over the female body. Thathri set forth a rebellion against the moral codes setup by the Namboothiri male community.

Key Words: Namboothiri, Antharjanam, Brahmanical patriarchy, Smarthavicharam , sadhanam, Thathri

The *namboothiris* were the brahmins of Kerala, who held topmost position in the caste hierarchy existed in Kerala. The *namboothiri* women who were called as *Antarjanams* were instructed to use an umbrella in order to save their chastity. She has to be accompanied by a *dasi*, wore gold ornaments and covered herself¹. The *antarjanams*

¹ P Bhaskaranunny , Smarthavicharam , Sahithya sahakarana sangham , kottayam , 2000, p.11

were never an independent being, who were subjected to the same level of atrocities and injustice faced by the lower castes.

Smarthavicharam was the best example to know the life conditions and social status of *Antarjanams*. *Smarthavicharam* was the system followed by the *namboothiri* community for the trails of *Antarjanams*, who were alleged to have sexual misconduct or adultery². The king ensured this evil dominance over *namboothiri* women as a weapon to protect the purity of brahminity³. Any kind of immoral acts were acceptable in the case of *namboothiris*, but it was a grave sin in the case of *antarjanams*.

If a *namboothiri* husband doubts his wife, he can approach the eldest male members of the family. Then they constitute an initial committee and the *antarjanam* will be questioned through her *dasi*. It was called *Dasivicharam*. If the answers of the *dasi* strengthen the allegations of the husband, the *antarjanam* will be sent to *Anchapura*. From there onwards, she won't be addressed by her name, but as '*Sadhanam*'. Thereafter the issue will be presented before the king. The king will constitute a committee headed by the *Smarthan*, 4 *Mimamsakas* and a representative of the king. The *smarthan* will be a male selected from the *namboothiri* community. The *mimamsakas* were experts in caste laws and they will be responsible for the framing of the questions to be raised to the *sadhanam*. Further proceedings will be in front of the *Anchapura*. The *smarthan* and

² Pandiyath Sankara Menon, Cochin and Her Courts Of Law (A Historical Survey), The Viswanatha Press, Ernakulam, 1937, p.33

³ P. Bhaskaranunny, op.cit.,p.139

the *sadhanam* are not supposed to see each other. So the *dasi* will function as an intermediary in between the *smarthan* and the *sadhanam*.

The proceedings will be continued till either the *sadhanam* admits the allegations against her or the doubts of the committee had cleared. It may long from few days to several months. Severe torturing methods may be imposed on the *sadhanam* for the confession. Sometimes, poisonous snakes were sent the room where the *sadhanam* sits⁴. The *sadhanam* could reveal the names of the individuals who had relationship with her. The *smarthan* had to submit the report of enquiry along with evidences and the list of culprits to the king.

Then the *sadhanam* and the men whose names are revealed by the *sadhanam* are excommunicated from the family, caste and the country. The family performs the rites declaring the death of the *sadhanam*. The excommunication is called “*Bhrashtu*”. The children born to *sadhanam* don’t belong to Brahmin community. They were called “*kaalathil Pettavar*”.

If the *smarthavicharam* proves the innocence of the *sadhanam*, the *smarthan* and the *mimamsakas* bows their head before the *antarjanam* and they will seek apology for the dishonor and difficulties caused to her. Such custom is called “*kshama namaskaram*”⁵. There are references regarding the *smarthavicharam* held in Cochin in

⁴ MP Basheer, Smarthan, Sooryanelli, Icecream : 3 kuttavicharanakal, current books, kottayam, 2005, p.16

⁵ A Madhavan, The Evolution Of Judicial System in Kerala, Kerala Law Journal Vol.VII, The Mathrubhumi Printing and publishing Co Ltd, Calicut, 1963, p.66

1829⁶. After the excommunication of the *sadhanam*, the 'marakkuda', the symbolic of *namboothiri* women's chastity, is removed. Sometimes the man responsible for her pregnancy takes her along with him. Some end up in prostitution.

While studying about *smarthavicharam*, it is very important to note the existing social practices of the time. Only the eldest son of the *illam* is allowed for marriage. Polygyny was in practice. The age difference between the husband and wife was huge. The *nambootiri* also had relationships outside the caste. The *antrajanams* were not permitted for remarriages. Many *antarjanams* were widowed at the tender age. Sometimes baseless rumors are resulted in *smarthavicharam*. William Logan, in his Malabar Manual, stated that *namboothiri* Brahmins were the most conservative and narrow minded among the malayali castes.

The *smarthavicharam* of Kuriyedathu Thathri or Kuriyedathu Savithri was the most controversial and last *smarthavicharam* in the erstwhile state of Cochin. Thathri, kalpakassery Ashatmoorthy Namboothiri's daughter, married to Chemmanthatta Kuriyedathu Illath Randaman Raman Namboothiri. She had been alleged for her relationship with her male family members. Thathri revealed the names of 65 males from Cochin, Travancore and Malabar. The maharaja send notice to the 65 men named by Thathri. The *Smarthavicharam* was held at Chemmanthatta, Pallimanna and Irinjalakkuda. Two of the 65 men cited by *sadhanam* passed away. Three didn't present themselves before the committee. 59 out of the 60 alleged men denied their guilt. Most of

⁶ News Letter, Regional Archives , Ernakulam , p.13

them claimed that they were not at the place on the dates claimed by Thathri. The evidences they produced were proved as fake⁷. Huge protection was arranged by the Cochin state when Thathri was brought from Irinjalakkuda to Thripunithura.

Pattachomayarath Jathavedan Namboothiri was the *smarthan*⁸. Kanippayoor Namboothiri functioned as *Akakoima*. Four *Mimamsakas* were appointed by the *smarthan*. The existing system envisaged the excommunication of *antarjanam* and the men cited by the *antarjanam*. It was only during the trials of Thathrikutty that the men named by *sadhanam* allowed to cross examine the *sadhanam* and her *dasi*⁹. For the first time in the history of Cochin Shree Ramavarma Maharaja (1895-1914) issued the order permitting the alleged men to cross examine the *sadhanam* either themselves or through *vakil*¹⁰.

Madras High Court insisted to include *purushavicharam* as part of *smarthavicharam* in 1899. 15 culprits in the *smarthavicharam* of Sridevi Antarjanam of Thazhakulath Illam had filed a petition before Munsiff Court of Chavakkadu stating the order of Madras High Court in 1903. The Brahmin sabha yogam held at Trichur stood for *purushavicharam*. Many Bahujan movements stood up for the reformation in the process of *smarthavicharam*. Sir V Bhashyam Ayyankar, Madras Advocate General, also

⁷ Smarthante Theerumanavum Swaroopam Cholliyavarude Peru Viavaravum, 1905, Regional Archives, Ernakulam

⁸ R.Sasisekhar, Theeyerinja Orma, Malayala Manorama Daily, 17th July 2016

⁹ A.Madhavan, op.cit., p.67

¹⁰ P.Bhaskaranunny, Smarthavicharam, op.cit., p.240

supported *Purushavicharam*. On these circumstances, on 7th June 1905, Cochin Raja issued order for *purushavicharam*. The order permitted the men to cross examine the claims of *sadhanam*. It was also a period of transformations in the judicial systems of Cochin.

Thathri fearlessly stated the names of many prominent persons in the society. Manakkal Namboothiri attempted to abduct and to kill Thathri. Thereafter Thathri was provided with tight security by the state. Initially the public was allowed to witness the trials of Thathri. But later the crowd was restricted.

The Malayalam movie “*parinayam*”, meaning wedding, directed by Hariharan and written by MT Vasudevan Nair is a story inspired by the *smarthavicharam* of Thathrikutty. Famous Malayalam novel “*Bhrasht*” written by Matampu Kunhukuttan in 1973 was also inspired from the *smarthavicharam* of Thathri. The term “*Bhrasht*” refers to “*out caste*” or “*excommunication*”.

The practice of *smarthavicharam* brought out the link between caste and suppression of women identities in to mere bodies. The ideals of *namboothiri* community was fixed in the oppression of women. The term *Antarjanam* itself means women is to be kept inside. The term *sadhanam* indicating the objectification of women. An *antarjanam* turns into a *sadhanam* during the *smarthavicharam*. An *antarjanam* had to face lengthy trails for sexual misconduct, whereas a *namboothiri* had permitted for polygyny and *sambandham*. *Antarjanams* were subjected to patriarchal domination. In 1915, a new term was used to refer the misconduct of *Antarjanams* called

"*Adukkaladosham*" which simply means the pollution of kitchen. The female body was attached to kitchen and home.

In the case of Thathri, she was abused even by her father and brother. Thathri was able to question the morality of *namboothiri* community. She stated even her husband's name who had approached her when she was menstruating and had intercourse with her. It is to be noted that the society of the period was not known about domestic violence or marital rape. In such a sense, Thathri was a revolutionary. The *namboothiris* were the unchallenged masters of both the material and spiritual realms. It was the only *smarthavicharam* which produced such a huge list of culprits consisted of elite Brahmins and people of power and other luminaries of the then society. The men were not able to counter the arguments of Thathri even though they were given the opportunity. *Smarthavicharam* was a best example to show the influence of caste and community in the judicial practices of Kerala.

The practice of *smarthavicharam* stemmed from the idea of "**controlling women**". There existed a social structure which empowered the *namboothiri* men to utilize the women of their own caste or lower castes. The notions of chastity, morality, purity etc., used to establish the brahminical patriarchy over the *antarjanams* with the overwhelming support of the state.