

Memories Speak: The Life of A Nambudiri Woman In Early Twentieth Century kerala.

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Women at various times and places were a majority of the population, yet their status was that of an oppressed minority, deprived of the rights men enjoyed. Women have for centuries been excluded from positions of power, both political and economic. They play an important role in the society. To write the history of women means documenting all of history. Women have always been making history, living it and shaping it. But the history of women was always written through male perspective. Women's history on the other hand constructs a new history that reflects the female experiences also. Women's history must contain not only the activities and events in which women participated but her record of changes and shifts in their perception of themselves and their roles! In fact a woman's memoirs is important to reconstruct the history because it provides us with different perspective on past events and those aspects of life hitherto neglected by male writers. This paper examines the memoirs of Devaki Nilayangode which portray the life and attitudes of *Nambudiri* women living through the early decades of 20th century. The paper analyses how far the book reflects the patriarchal norms that controlled and regulated the every day life of the womenfolk of the most privileged section of Kerala society and the changes brought about in their life in early part of 20th century. As this discourse is shaped by the subtle influence of social reform movement and the subsequent national movement this work can be regarded as a major historical source for recapture the life of *Nambudiri* women. My exploration focuses on her experiences and memories in the '*Illams*', the discrimination that she had to suffer as a girl child, the every day life of *Nambudiri* women that she experienced and her experiences of social reform activities by *Yogakshemasabha*.

Contextualizing the Narrative

The social background of this autobiography was the reform movement of late 19th and early 20th century. The nineteenth century witnessed a redefinition of women's space in Indian society. The new perception about women was formed out of India's intimate interaction with colonial state. The British regarded their dominance over India as a proof of their moral superiority. They argued that the women's position could be used as an indicator of society's advancement and severely criticized the condition of women in Indian society. Inspired by the colonial ideas of gender relations the women's concerns became central to the reform movement of the nineteenth century. A large number of reform initiatives were linked to the women's question. The issues that dominated the reform movement during this period were the abolition of Sati, women's education, widow remarriage and the struggle against polygamy. In Kerala too the colonial intervention was not confined to the economy or polity, but also extended to the area of culture and society.

The impact of colonization, changes in land relations, commercialization of the economy, the growth and spread of English education and social reforms provided the basis for the changes in the position of women.

It was among the Malayala Brahmins, Nambudiris as they were called, that the reform movements made a great impact upon women. Women have always occupied a subordinate position and enjoyed limited freedom in the patriarchal structure of Nambudiri community. Their women were regarded as the gateways or points of entrance into the caste system. Therefore they must be closely guarded. They were subjected to male authority, first to their fathers and then to their husbands. Women were expected to be wives and mothers and to lead a quiet private life within the four walls of *illam*. They were called *antharjanam* and were rarely permitted to go outside, that too with a cadgent umbrella (*Marakuda*) and a maid servant (*Dasi*). A reappraisal of women's position was attempted by the reformist activities of the Nambudiris. Through their efforts women's status in the community was redefined and discrimination of being women gave way to a better definition of womanhood. The most remarkable thing about the reform movement among the Nambudiris is the fact that here the reform of women became the central issue. In most of the other reform processes it remained a peripheral and marginal issue.

Woman And Autobiography

In writing a woman's life Carolyn G. Heiburn says that a woman's life can be described in four ways. "The woman herself may tell it in what she chooses to be call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call a fiction; a biographer woman or man may write a biography or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it unconsciously and without realizing or naming the process." A woman's autobiography generally deals with the various relationships like those with her parents, siblings and also with her spouse, children and other women of her family set up. It deals mainly with the emotional turbulence of women and their relationship in the social set up.

There are several autobiographies written by Indian women. In 1865 first autobiography by a woman was published. It was written by Rassundari Devi, a woman from rural Bengal. Henceforth we find autobiographies like Sunity Deves, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Nayantara Sehgal, Krishna Hitheesingh, Cornelia Sorabji, Captain lakshmi and so on. These autobiographies depict their innermost feelings, the social inhibitions, and cultural taboos.

There have been many women in Kerala who have felt the urge to express their inner self. Akkammacheriyan's '*114nte Katha*', Annie Theyyil's '*Edangazhiyile Kurisu*', '*Mystory*' written by Kamaladas '*Evan En. Priya C.J.*' by Rosie Thomas, '*Kesavadev, Ente Nithyakamukan*', by Seethalakshmidew were some among them. Devaki Nilayangode published her autobiography in 2008. She belongs to a community in which the patriarchal system hidden the world of knowledge from women. This was the first autobiography written by a Nambudiri woman which can be considered as an aftermath of the centuries of patriarchal oppression.

Brahmanical Patriarchy and everyday life of *Antarjanam*

In doing the history of everyday life attention is focused not just on the deeds (misdeeds) and pageantry of the great, the masters of religion and state. Rather central to the thrust of every day historical analysis is the life and survival of those who have remained largely anonymous in history. The studies on the everyday life sharpen our sights for history's victims and their suffering.

Women's history discovered the realm of the everyday as an arena where women played a central role. The everyday life, its mastering and organization is considered to be women's true domain. It was in the realm of everyday life that they developed all the qualities generally bundled together under the label of female diligence and efficiency. Both everyday life and women are categories associated with similar connotations : non-political, private, informal, powerless. Both appear to stand for something that includes the basic experiences of life. To unravel the everyday life of women is indispensable to understand the patriarchal oppression. In Kerala the Namboodiri women were regulated by brahminical ideology prescribed in *Sankarasmrithi*. Public space was a non-existing notion to them. Their domestic space was also strictly controlled by brahmanical patriarchy. Through her autobiography, Nilayangode reveals the picture of an *illam* in early 20th century Kerala, their lifestyle, their clothing, observances, food habits, ceremonies and her experiences as a member of Yogakshemasabha. In this paper I explore primarily with the aspects associated with Nambudiri women, girlhood, wifehood, widowhood and how did they respond to the call of V.T. Bhattathirippad.

Analysis of the Narrative

Devaki Nilayangode was born in 1928 in Pakaravoormana at Mookkuthala in Malappuram district. Her father was Pakaravoor Krishnan Somayajippad and her mother was Parvathi Antarjanam. She begins her memoirs portraying the life of her mother. Her mother was his father's third wife. She was just eighteen then, but Devaki says that in those days eighteen was considered late because usually girls were given in marriage at thirteen or even earlier. By the time of her father's third marriage, his eldest son Narayanan was already married and had children. Moreover, it was decided that his three year old daughter Parvathy would be given in marriage to Narayanan, the five years old son of Narippatta Namboodiri. From this description itself states it clearly that women's consent was not a necessity for marriage in those days. She also says in the book that she herself knew about her own marriage from her maid through a very casual comment made the day before her wedding. The Nambudiri Women were ignorant about the man-woman relationship and family structure as envisaged by colonial modernity.

Devaki's mother was an efficient manager of the household. She was able to read *puranas*. It was a major accomplishment because in those days girls were rarely educated. Pakaravoor was a huge *illam* where there were always visitors. There were male and female servants, and a number of *illam* residents. She remembers that her mother was a serious person and her children never once saw her laugh.

In the ritualistic traditions of brahmanical patriarchy, the Nambudiri women never openly expressed their emotions. Nilayangode's mother was a perfect example for this.

Among them the birth of a girl was not welcomed. When a woman became pregnant, there were special pujas for a baby boy. If the child was a boy servant uluted and announced the happy event. If a girl, dasi conveyed the news with soft knocks on the door and in muted whispers and to quote Nilayangode,

“I was born on Thiruvonam day in the month of Idavam. There were no joyous shouts that day, only soft knocks on doors.”

Nilayangode was brought up in a strict and disciplined atmosphere of *illam*. She was denied any freedom because in those days it was believed that girls should not be encouraged to think and act independently. The formal education is restricted only for the understanding of puranas. She says that, they were used to sing the songs of Silavati in childhood. Nilayangode remembers that when she sang the song of Unniarcha which she learnt from the daughters of *dasis*, her mother explained to her that singing these songs did not befit to the Namboodiri girls. This is a clear picture

Which shows that how does the brahmanical ideology control their women through pativrata concept.

The general subordination of women which was essential in Brahmanical patriarchy was operated through three devices : the first was ideology, the second was the right to discipline and keep women under control granted to their kinsmen; the third was the power of the king to discipline and punish them for adultery. The ideological level of controlling women was made possible through the shaping of women in *stridhana* and *pativrata dharma*. Women themselves internalized these ideologies and they accepted chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expressions of their selfhood.

In the words of Umachakravorthi *pativrata* concept was one of the most successful ideologies constructed by any patriarchal system, one in which women themselves controlled their own sexuality. They regarded it as a means of salvation. The mythologies play an important role in the formation of the *pativrata* ideal and the *silavati* ideal was the crystallization of the *patvrata* norm. She is the embodiment of Indian womanhood.

Another noteworthy description in the book was about widowhood. Parvathy, Nilayangode's mother was respected both within the family and amongst the village people. But the situation changed after the death of her father. Those who treated her with respect then began to neglect her. Like any other widows she was helpless and insecure. Through a tragic incident Nilayangode shows the plight of a widow in an *illam*. One day her younger sister was taken ill. She had fever and her stomach was upset. She was weakening rapidly. For the first time her mother asked the help of the men in their family to improve her daughter's condition. She forced her son to approach the men assembled in the hall for medical assistance. In reply they laughed at him and in the next night the young girl died. Her mother provided all the funeral rites without crying and Devaki writes about the incident.

“When it was over she came to my room, lay down my side, and for the first time in life, held me close to her. I had never slept beside her before. She was trying to control her sobs because I could feel her stomach press and heave against mine”.

In her *illam* there were three or four widowed *Antarjanams* who lived for a long time helping others. They were not allowed to participate in any auspicious ceremony or to meet others and they did all the observances prescribed for widows.

The practice of marrying young girls to old Namboodiri men created several young widows among Namboodiris. It was believed that the husband's death was caused by the ill-fated alignment in his wife's horoscope. The young widow's condition in the *illam* was harsh and pitiful. One such incident described in the book like this.

“A girl who was to go to her husband's house a month after the wedding. Before this could happen the husband died. A girl had no place in her parent's home after marriage. She could not be taken to her husband's either. What was to be done. The priests were in dilemma. Their solution was that the girl should go to her husband's house accompanied by two or three *Antarjanams*, who at the inauspicious hour of twilight, must kick open the kitchen door, take the girl inside and leave. Nobody welcomed her with a lighted lamp. All her life was spent in the darkness.”

Thus a widow was regarded unwanted and was a bad omen to see her any auspicious occasion. Nilayangode writes, in the Namboodiri community nothing was considered a greater sin of misfortune than the sight of a widow. She was referred to as the woman without the marital symbol, the *thaali* around her neck. In brahminical patriarchy a woman is considered to be at fault if widowed. So, before the cremation, she throws herself at her husband's feet as if asking forgiveness for her fault. The autobiography, then narrates the rituals that accompanied widowhood. She had to regulate her life according to her status of a widow and she can no longer participate in the domestic ceremonies that form a part of women's culture. It was the terrible condition of widows that prompted all the *antarjanam*'s prayers, pujas, and fasts for the longevity of their husbands.

The later narrative depicts the daily rituals of the *Antarjanam*, including their mode of dressing, education, and the way of looking after children. In each of these rituals we can clearly see the patriarchal domination. As far as clothing was concerned, their upper body was unclad, and they used only white clothes with thin borders. Perfumes, ornaments or flowers were unknown to them. In this, the description of ritual bath is very interesting. The ritualistic bath of a widow and the trauma associated with it was entirely different from the bath given to a pregnant *Antarjanam* which is the singular moment of recognition in her entire life.

The widows were not allowed to change their wet clothes after the bath during the period of defilement. The bath was three times a day. The first one was at dawn, second after the performance of rituals by her son, and the last one was in the evening. In the first two baths she was not allowed dry herself and had to sit in a dark room and shut away from others. But the bath following delivery was the most joyous one. In the words of Nilangode ,

“The ninety-day period of luxurious bath was the best time in an *antarjanam*’s life. They were free of the daily drudgery, baths were given twice a day for improved health and it was as if she had suddenly become a person of consequence.

Antarjanam is not at all a significant person either in her natal home or in her marital home. The comment made by Nilayangode shows how much a woman is neglected in such a patriarchal community. They who were denied education and access to the world outside, had no specific goals in their lives. They had only one prayer.

“May I have plenty of clothes and food. May I have marital bliss”

Another notable incident was the visit of their *Appan* (younger male members of an *illam*) and his two daughters to her *illam*. The daughters were Subhadra and Bharati. Subhadra was twenty and Bharati eighteen. They had knee-length hair, worn colourful blouses, and sari bordered *mundus* with an upper cloth, plenty of gold ornaments, and perfumes. On seeing Bharathi and Subhadra, Nilayangode and her sister became aware of their own appearance and how different they looked. Their hairs were not brushed, they did not wear blouse, sari or ornaments. Thus this entirely different visitors regarding the attitude and dress were initiated into the concept of the new woman as formulated by the colonial modernity. A further reference about the dress of *Antarjanams* appears when Nilangode says about an open letter by V.T. addressed to all Nambudiri women.

“Many of us are turning head over heels about *sambhandham* not because of our fascination for your sense of beauty, but merely out of a concern for morality. I do not hide the fact that many of us who are married are fed up of your ugly, disgusting dress, and ornamentation, and are able to do no more than curse ourselves.”

The women of Nambudiri community were been deliberately made unattractive and female sexuality was rigidly controlled. Dress codes for woman was strictly fixed according to custom. During Nilayangode’s youth, the above situation was slowly changing because the issue of dress code was undertaken by social reformism. Hence a new awakening about their own body and a new aesthetic sense developed in the minds of Nambudiri women.

Nilayangode concludes her autobiography by describing the reformist activities of *yogakshemasabha*. It was formed in 1908, to protect the privileges enjoyed by nambudiris threatened by the social and economic changes of early 20th century. They did not move against the existing practices. But by the 1920s a youthwing Nambudiri Yuvajana Sangham was formed. They began to argue for family reform, female education, dress code

reforms, the changes in the customs related to their women. It was V.T. Bhattathiripad who played an important role in the transformation of women's lives. Antaranjams began to break their traditional customs. In 1930 Parvathi manezhi an antaranjam attended a meeting without ghosha. An antaranjasamajam was formed to introduce them to reformist ideas. Nilayangode was also a member of Antaranja Samajam and worked together with Aryapallom and Parvathi Nenmenimangalam. Parvathi was one of the first *Antaranjams* who abandoned *ghosha* and Aryapallom was the first widow who remarried breaking the patriarchal norms.

When the annual meeting of *Yogakshemasabha* was conducted at Pakaravoor, Nilayangode describes the various responses of the Antaranjams of her illam. Some of them secretly had adored Arya pallom and Parvathi Nenminimangalam, some of them were too frightened to meet them. Her travels to various *illams* as a member of *Antaranjasamajam* to make *antaranjams* aware of their immense potentials was met with severe criticism as well as heartfelt felicitations. But ultimately this resulted in the transit of *Antaranjam* from private to public space. *Antaranjam* who had come out to the public space never retraced her steps back to tradition. Hence Nilayangode concludes by saying that there won't be any more autobiography of an *Antaranjam*.

Conclusion

The rituals of Nambudiri community were the signs of patriarchal domination that regulated their womenfolk. It is through a daring challenge and deconstruction of the rituals that a new concept of women is made possible among them. Their external and internal struggle, their survival, their response to patriarchy – all these are honestly depicted only when women write about their experiences. History is not a male centered view, imagination and experiences. History should also include the common everyday practices and rituals, common gauge and idiosm, changing landscape, cultural practices like food habits, clothing etc. This perspective is provided through women's writing and when it is an autobiographical narrative from a Nambudiri woman it's a refreshing and enlightening experience.

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