

Tradition's Trysts with Modernity -Lessons from Punnasserri Neelakantha Sarma

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Abstract

Focusing on the life and works of Panditharajan Punnasserri Nampi Shree Neelakanta Sarma, who brought modernity to Sanskrit education and journalism this paper explores how Kerala society has faced the Renaissance and modernity. His path was modernization by reforming tradition instead of liberating modernity.

KEYWORDS: Punnasserri Nampi, Sanskrit Tradition, Kerala Modernity, Sanskrit Education

Colonial modernity was confronted by Malayalees in various ways- with passions, trepidations, hostilities and reform interests towards modernity. The renaissance that followed as a part of it also had many aspects. Therefore, the heroes of renaissance and the men of that time cannot be just fitted into black and white frames. Extremely conflicting standpoints and ideological confusions can be seen in them in varying degrees. These difficulties will arise even when we read about Punnasserri Nampi Shri Neelakantha Sarma in the context of renaissance.

Generally speaking, we can say that the Malayalee community reacted to Western occupation in four ways, although these generalizations may get us into trouble.

1. The rise of cultural middleclass: These middle class men became the tools of western occupation, mimicry and propaganda in all spheres, including culture, language and education- A middle class with bureaucrats working in the courts of justice. They were early novelists and story writers, and the ideal heroes of early prose.
2. The Conservatives who resisted modernity with weak oppositions which arose from defunct tradition.
3. Modernists who developed a new worldview in the light of modern enlightenment and social renaissance.

4. Those who faced and resisted cultural modernity by incorporating a modern worldview into tradition and thus structurally rearranging tradition, under the external pressures of modernity.

Punnasseri can be aptly placed in this fourth category. Contrary to popular arguments, he was not a renaissance hero who set out to overthrow the traditional social order and create a modern society. In him, modernity is seen as an external social pressure, not as an internal wisdom. He was a reformer of tradition, who tried to give tradition the capacity to strive, by modifying and redesigning it, in accordance with a modern worldview. The conflicts and contradictions in his positions should be assessed accordingly.

Punnasseri Neelakantha Sarma,– Biography

Punnasseri Nampi Neelakanta Sarma was born on June 17,1858; and died on September 14th 1935. He was a Sanskrit scholar, teacher, writer, astrologer, physician, educationist, editor and renaissance hero. Ihapuraryastava, Ghoshapuramaharajnicaritra, Sailabhiswarasataka, Dipastambasataka, Pattabhishekaprabandha, Sringaramanjarimandana, Visakhavijayollasanumodana, Buddhashtaka, Jyotissastrasubodhini (two parts), Prasnamargavyakhyana (for Uttarardha and Purvardha), Panchabodha (commentary), Chamalkarachintamani(commentary), Aasauchadeepika(commentary), Commentary for Mahishamangalabhana, Commentary for Sreekrishnavilasa (for the first four cantos), and Raghuvamsaprabhashana are his major works apart from numerous articles, essays and hymns.

Conflicts, Contradictions and Coherences in Ideology

Nampi was neither a part of liberal modernity nor did he travel with it. He existed in a space of traditionalism and conventionalism. But his way was to approach modernity with sympathy, and reform tradition according to modern worldviews. Hence, conflicts and synergies were mixed in his views. The position he took during *Smarthavichara* need to be considered in the context of this integrated approach. He took the modernist position that rituals decline as time progresses. But in *Murajapa* controversy, his opinion was to follow the conventions as much as possible. Though he was a traditional physician, he had

no objections to modern medicine. At the same time, he took the stance that Namboothiris shouldn't be forced to take preventive vaccination for smallpox. His logic was that Namboothiris would come that way when *Govasoori* becomes common. Like this, his views were often conciliatory. We can see him taking a tactical position in cases of ostracism too. He also says that only kings have the authority to declare ostracism and that there is no reason to declare ostracism for marrying a foreign woman. He points out this lack of credentials in the case of temple-entry too. Again, this contradiction can be seen in Punnasseri in the case of the operations of landlords' organizations. Like in the case of temple-entry, Punnasseri had a peculiar viewpoint in the case of caste system. Just a look at the statement- "there is no need to kill something that is about to die"- is enough. As a matter of fact, it was not possible for Sri Narayana Guru or any other social reformer to take such a stance.

Punnasseri had no role in the growing anti-colonial struggles, social movements or national freedom struggles. Evidence for his interference in national movements or anti-colonial movements is unavailable. But many from Punnasserikkalari actively participated in such movements. He was also critical of British policies on Indian economy. Thus, we can conclude that his path towards modernity was by reforming traditions and making it able to face modernity.

Naturally, many contradictions can be seen in this synchronization. Or, we can say that renaissance itself was full of contradictions. Punnasseri might have many activities carried out by Christian missionaries like educational activities, advocating modern medicines and hospitals, extending printing and publication, maintaining the closeness to colloquial languages, journalism etc. as models in his course of action. Thus, he focused on working as a good missionary of traditions under the daylight of modernity. This missionary model and sense of modernity is reflected in various activities he carried out, like establishing a Sanskrit school and linking it to modern education, and establishing institutions like hospitals, cooperative societies, printing press, bank etc. He established a co-operative society named *Karshakachinthamani* and a bank named *Chintamani* in Perumudiyoor. These initiatives can be seen as role models in co-operative movements of Kerala which largely influenced the social progress in Kerala. Punnasseri's response to colonial modernity was reformative and at the same time resistive.

We can say that this modern consciousness worked in him in five different ways:

1. Structural reforms in Sanskrit education: he tried to bring an academic structure to his Gurukul, according to modern collegiate standards including school and college levels which were to be carried out in the order Padashala and Mahapadashala, and other aspects like graduation, certificate, syllabus, affiliation, grant, calendar, hostel etc. Thus, it is Punnasseri who brought out a modern curriculum for Sanskrit studies, and brought in English and Malayalam studies along with Sanskrit in schools. The purpose of including subjects like Mathematics, Geography and Malayalam was directed in the same route. It was in 1915 that the first batch came out with certificates after completing Sanskrit studies as a part of modern education.
2. The attempts made to bring Sanskrit studies into the mainstream is more important. Sarasvatodyotini Samskrita Pathasala (Sarasvatodyotini Sanskrit school) was inaugurated in September 1889. It is not coincidental that this took place in the year that followed Arivuppuram consecration of Shree Narayana Guru, the capstone of Kerala renaissance. Soon, he sought to elevate this school into a higher education center. He connected it with university and public education without just limiting it into a traditional learning center. Moreover, it was one of its objectives to make Sanskrit education accessible to backward castes, women, Muslims and Christians. It was also prompted by the proposal of Madras government that it was mandatory that everyone should be admitted in order for colleges to get grants. Documents show that students belonging to different sections of society like Ezhavas, carpenters, blacksmiths, Muslims and Christians studied here from 1889 to 1917. With the help of Shree Narayana Guru, nearly 40 people have reached here to study Sanskrit. Punnasseri had to face a lot of hostility for admitting students of lower castes. One such threat which came in the form of a threatening letter was published in 'letters to chief editor' section of *Vijnanacintamani*.

In 1906-07, the Sanskrit school gained recognition and University grant from Madras Government.

In 1911, this school was recognized by University of Madras as Model Sanskrit School. It was on 11.06.1911

that Model Sanskrit School was converted into Central Sanskrit College, Pattambi. It was Vidyanidhi Krishnamacharya who inaugurated the college. The college was approved by the University of Madras on June 20th, 1912.

It should also be mentioned that the Namboothiris were reluctant to become students of this college where lower castes, women and other communities learned. They were inclined to learning in monasteries in Trissur where only Namboothiri Brahmins were admitted. Even while following caste system and untouchability in his own life and living without exposing his original thoughts in matters like temple entry or modern preventive medical treatment, it is noticeable that Punnasserri believed: "Saraswathi has no untouchability". By 1922, Malayalam was also introduced along with Sanskrit courses.

3. Another step was the establishment of printing press and publishing of books in order to print and promote Sanskrit texts. The press was named *Chintamani*. This press caused Nampi great financial losses. The functioning of the press was occasionally interrupted. *Pattambi Panchangam* which was published here was very popular across Kerala.

4. Newspaper journalism- He introduced the first Sanskrit newspaper in India, *Vijnanacintamani*. The publication started in 1883 with the assistance of Vellanassery Vasunni Moosad. It was published in three stages- in 1883, 1887, and in 1891, and made subscribers all over India. The paper was initially printed in Malayalam script. There were two parts, namely *SamkrithaMayookham* and *MalayalaMayookham*. *Vijnanacintamani* went ahead for 28 years, pausing and resuming now and then. It was popular all over India as one of the earliest newspapers in Sanskrit. Many scholars of the day contributed to *Vijnanacintamani* and Nampi's introductory notes was the major highlight.

He has also made petition trips to raise fund for *Vijnachinthanami* which was run amidst severe financial crisis. It was also a way to connect various people to literary enterprises in Sanskrit. It gave exposure to a new discourse in Sanskrit. Rather than merely making literary intellectual discussions, there was also an attempt to make Sanskrit a linguistic medium suitable for contemporary subjects, prefaces and observations. It is to be stated that Malayalam was also taken along, by allotting special sections for Sanskrit and Malayalam. Later, with the popularization of Malayalam publications, the linguistic medium was fixed as Sanskrit. We can see in these magazines that he developed a national perspective through various ways

,like expanding the world of reading to a national level by converting the script to Devanagari script, and organizing Sanskrit language enthusiasts who were scattered in various parts of India.

5. The Most important contribution of Punnasseri and his Gurukul is developing the interpretive capacity of Sanskrit studies beyond traditional knowledge systems, and assimilating it into colloquial languages. The pass-outs of Punnasseri's school gained fame by working in new branches of Malayalam language and literature... and they defended against the modern Western concepts and approaches which kept influencing these areas and firmly fixed Malayalam literature in Indian aesthetics and philosophy.

Kuttikrishna Marar's novel approach to Indian thoughts and the attitude of P Kunhiraman Nair against colonial modernity can be examined in the similar manner.

Thus, we can conclude that Punnasseri had a synergistic approach which was shaped by modernizing the traditional knowledge field of Sanskrit, and securing traditions by making internal reforms in accordance with the steps of modernity, and by responding gently to modern word view, assimilating when required. He was not a part of liberal modernity. Rather, he took the position of a reformer who placed his feet on the former premises of tradition and confronted modernity with sympathy.

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