

# TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL COORDINATES OF CHASTITY TRIALS

P.K. SREEKUMAR

PRIYA JOSE K.

---

## I

The erstwhile princely states of Travancore and Cochin (which were merged with the British Malabar in 1956 to form the linguistic state of Kerala) witnessed an unprecedented mushrooming of organisations which can generally be described as community-based in the decades around 1900. Most of them used caste as their principal rallying point while a few sought to forge larger religious identities<sup>1</sup>.

It was during an unusually narrow span that every single community association that would play vital roles in the turbulent future trajectory of Kerala sprang into existence. South

---

<sup>1</sup>The most noteworthy platform which sought to merge denominations was The Syrian National Union Association. Generally speaking, the Association was a common but abortive platform founded by the Jacobites (Antioch Syrians) and Catholics (Romo Syrians) in the closing decades of the nineteenth century with a view to achieving immediate material goals of upward social mobility through greater numerical strength, modern education, entrepreneurship, financial instruments and cultural innovation and to bring about the eventual merger of the partner communities. The most important role in its formation was played by Fr. Manual Nidhiry, a catholic priest who would later adorn the garb of a pontifically-privileged Vicar General for a brief tenure, and Pulickottil Mar Dionysius, the Metropolitan of the Antioch Syrian Christians. Though the motives behind such a coming together can be understood and interpreted in a multitude of ways, it seems logical to see it as entailed by the developments within the churches under consideration. For a detailed understanding of the movement see George, Mathew and Nidhiri.

Indian Gospel Society in 1895; Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam in 1903, Catholic Maha Jana Sabha in 1905, Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham in 1907, Namboothiri Kshema Sabha in 1908, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha in 1909, Brahma Prathyaksha Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham and Kalyana Dayini Sabha in 1912 and Nair Service Society in 1914<sup>2</sup>.

Organisations based on caste or creed were nothing new to the people or government of these princely states and British Malabar. They had been in place for long, occupying the center-stage in the personal and public life of the population. However, the new organisations were structurally and qualitatively different from their predecessors. While the old organisations had confined themselves to the relatively inconsequential and safe task of evolving and effecting internal rules to keep individual castes intact and redressing 'deviations', the newly emerged ones resolutely strove to recast the very founding principles of the society. They sought to meld sub-castes<sup>3</sup> into numerically stronger cohesive communities with enhanced political bargaining power with a view to gaining social recognition, economic resources, due representation in legislative assemblies and a

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed examination of most community-based organisations, see P.F. Gopakumar.

<sup>3</sup> It is not easy to determine whether a caste was divided into sub-castes or a caste was a label to describe sub-caste groups which were the real units of the system. P. Bhaskaranunni endorses the position that what really counted was the sub-castes (*Pathonpatham*, 28). Louis Dumont, who considers caste as the basic social unit in India, writes: "Now the caste is not a niche or a block but is generally subdivided, at least at a primary level, into different subcastes, and there are often many further subdivisions. So much so that it has sometimes been suggested that the subcaste be considered the important group." (61).

prestigious rung in the social ladder<sup>4</sup>, began to run industries<sup>5</sup>, organise awareness programs and to found educational institutions.

---

<sup>4</sup>The image of the ladder, strictly speaking, is incapable of explaining the nature of caste, we think. A ladder presupposes a beginning and an end, and is a relatively stable structure. We feel it is more productive to image castes not as rungs of a ladder but points of a circle. In the latter model, any caste has at any given point has someone above and beneath it. This attitude can be observed to exist in two models. One: a given caste is perceived to be above some and below some others. It needs to be remembered that this positioning is purely a matter of perception without objective existence. Two: most castes consider themselves as fallen Brahmins. Here every group assumes to be at the centre originally and thus the most important in the caste edifice. This is an observable mindset in Kerala and thus contributes to the everlasting survival of caste. In the context of British Malabar, Conrard Wood writes: "Even among the field slave population the distinctions of caste were observed minutely. The different castes into which the slave population of Malabar was sub-divided observed different forms of worship and had their own separate customs. Inter-marriage and inter-dining were prohibited as was even the close approach of members of different slave castes. In the 1830s, for example, it was reported that in one part of north Malabar a 'Poolyan' (Pulayan or Cherumar) might not approach within ten paces of a Vettuvan, a 'Parian' (Parayan) was obliged to remain the same distance from a 'Poolyan' and a 'Nyadee' (Nayadi) twelve paces from a 'Poolyan'. Some years later, H.V. Conolly reported that the abhorrence of the Ernad Cherumar to the vicinity of the Nayadi was so great that nothing could induce the former to work with the latter. In North Malabar, where the rules of distance pollution seem to have been less rigidly observed, Vettuvan and Pulayan agricultural labourers could be induced, on one European-owned estate, to work together. However, after work the former invariably bathed before returning home when they uttered the usual cry to warn the coming Pulayan to quit the road and retreat the prescribed distance" (83).

Most crucially, imbued with the newly attained sense of universal human rights and dignity, they posed serious challenges to the religious credos and theological discourses that had legitimatised stratification along caste lines and concomitant discriminatory practices for long. Secondly, the direct and indirect presence of the imperial regime had substantially reduced the martial power, economic might and governmental sway of these groups, resulting in their inability to act with impunity. Unlike in the past when a Brahmin or even a Nair could kill a low caste man for polluting the former by transgressing the prescribed distance for purity, the same crime would attract prosecution and lead to probable punishment within the British legal mechanism.

What made these assertive organisations possible was a host of factors that germinated largely as a result of the colonial interventions and direct British rule in the nearby Malabar. In these places the hundred years between 1836 and 1936<sup>6</sup> witnessed an avalanche of unsettling structural changes that would not spare a single social institution, cultural practice, conceptual framework, epistemological matrix and customary law. Prohibition of slavery, right to dress, printing, publications, cash-based economy, modern/English education, memorials, census and other enumerative operations, registration of land, missionary discourses, proselytisation drives, newspapers, new representational mechanisms, inception of democratic institutions, anti-Christian rhetoric, subaltern empowerment, petitions and the birth of a public sphere, along with other factors, literally plowed the rigid soil of caste-induced restrictive norms. It was to the normative discourses, which had been deemed divinely ordained and inviolable until recently, that these events inflicted crippling, if not mortal, blows.

---

<sup>5</sup>Arguably the Ezhavas were in the forefront of using industry as a means for social emancipation. See P. Chandramohan *Developmental Modernity in Kerala* pp 105 – 07.

<sup>6</sup>The years are not arbitrary. It was in 1836 that the Church Missionary Society ended the 'help mission' to the Jacobite Syrian Church and started independent conversion. 1936 is a milestone in the history of Kerala because the Temple Entry Proclamation was issued by the king of Travancore this year.

Obviously the turn of events buoyed up the downtrodden social strata, ushering in an era of unprecedented apostasy and iconoclasm. The new political consciousness and aggressive civic assertion displayed by the hitherto unprivileged and unrepresented caste groups began to enfeeble the economic and administrative preeminence of savarnas, to dent their cultural capital and to eviscerate the prevailing polity. In the process, power equations began to get redefined, gradually weakening the grip of the dominant castes on the social hierarchy, economic engines and production relations.

In 1905 Ayyankali, one among the most influential social reformers of the period, founded the first pre-primary school for the dalits in Venganoor with a view to educating and eventually emancipating agrestic slave castes; the building, however, was set ablaze by the upper caste members before daybreak. In the same year there erupted a fierce clash between the Ezhavas and the conservative Nairs of Travancore as the latter opposed the movement of the former to enrol at government schools on the basis of a government order<sup>7</sup>.

In literature the age under reference witnessed the proliferation and consolidation of the novel, a derivative discourse liberally borrowed (and deftly customised) from colonial-continental literary traditions, though the genres of poetry and drama would continue to be influential for a few more decades to come. The persisting charm and appeal of verse and poetry can be understood from the fact that *Kavanakaumudi*, a journal in which every single item including advertisements would be in verse, was launched in 1905 and lasted till 1931 (Raghavan 102). The popularity of plays was such that in 1893 Anthappai published a short novel which mounted a scathing attack on the unprecedented and ludicrous proliferation of the genre and playwrights in Travancore (Irumpayam 117- 25).

In May 1905, the first Malayalam short story by a woman—‘Nanichupoyi’—was published in the now extinct magazine *Sarada*<sup>8</sup>. The Industrial exhibition organised by the S.N.D.P. Yogam in 1904 symbolically signalled a decisive shift from agriculture to industry by tapping the emancipatory potential of technology within the limiting conditions of colonial

---

<sup>7</sup>For a comprehensive and quick understanding of the events that characterised the decade see a) Radhika C. Nair 7 – 22 and b) M.N. Vijayan 321 – 71.

<sup>8</sup>The year is not without controversies. Dr. M.M. Basheer suspects that the author’s name Kalyanikkutti can be the pseudonym of a man (12); for a translation of the story see Sree S.V.

modernity. In other words, it was a historic era bustling with concerted and unprecedented modernisation drives in most arenas of life.

However, during the same period, the uppermost rung of our complex caste ladder<sup>9</sup>—the Namboothiri community—was experiencing a moral implosion that would reverberate generations down the line and would burn itself indelibly in our public imagination: a chastity trail, more popularly known as *Smarthavicharam*. Needless to say chastity was an attribute exclusively earmarked for women; most men of the same community wallowed in every kind of conceivable sexual adventure, throwing away moral and ethical considerations into the air. Conceptualised in this way, *Smarthavicharam* was highly gender-biased and can be productively understood as an entrenched social mechanism designed to ensure the eternal subservience of the female sex. Even though many castes used to associate the societal welfare and the safety of men with the chastity of its womenfolk (at least as Thakazhi would have us believe in his best-selling novel *Chemmeen*<sup>10</sup>), the case of Namboothiri women was unique. These women were literally the biological signifiers of purity and safety, and were guarded accordingly.

It is against the backdrop of this social web that we have to understand the very concept of chastity trails and the way in which they have been rendered into historical and literary narratives. As far as Namboothiri women were concerned chastity was much more binding than in the case of womenfolk from any other caste, social or ethnic group. Even though the consternation and panic associated with miscegenation and the resultant loss of ‘racial purity’ was paramount, the actual circumstances that entailed a chastity trail were flimsy: any woman accused by anyone of sexual liaison was sure to face the ordeal and even a shadow of doubt on the moral demeanour of a woman was enough to raise accusations.

---

<sup>9</sup>Or the strongest point of the caste circle.

<sup>10</sup>The core idea of *Chemmeen* (1956) – the safety of the fisherman directly depended on the chastity of his wife – was criticised by Dr. V.V. Velukkutti Arayan immediately after the publication of the novel (Mohandas 156 – 80). One of first critical engagements in Malayalam with stereotypical representation, the work has been surprisingly underestimated and obscure. See also K.E.N. P. Padmarajan his novella *Kallan Pavithran* (1979) parodies the belief by writing that when a thief is at work, his wife should remain loyal to ensure the safe return of the man.

Our argument, which is only implied by compiling the records of and responses to this custom, is that 1) what we take for granted as unproblematic instances of *Smarthavicharam* are actually indeterminate and dynamic narratives constantly produced and reproduced as responses to specific socio-political requirements or compulsions and 2) the enduring and apparently eternal appeal that *Smarthavicharam* holds out stems from the fact that it is a heady mix of sexuality, incest, interdictions, transgression, caste and power within the larger mechanisms and modalities of Kerala society.

## II

In *Indulekha* (1889), often considered the first full-fledged Malayalam novel, there are three Namboothiri men who differ in terms of age, class, stature and outlook but united by a common denominator: each one is a laggard in his own way. None of them come to grips with what is broadly called ‘modernity’. While Suri Namboothirippadu is a downright dandy and a butt of ridicule (a byword for idiocy in current Malayalam), Cherussery and Karuthedam are utterly clueless as to how to negotiate with the agents and instruments of modernity. Perhaps nothing better captures the epistemological quagmire that they were stuck in than a conversation that Karuthedam strikes up with his *sambandham*—who is Indulekha’s mother—in which he speculates that a power loom is propelled by some sort of a pyro-magic spell! Cherussery, though a paragon of virtue, fidelity and classical scholarship, is blissfully ignorant of what is happening around and is thus experiencing what can be called a cognitive lapse within a time warp.

In addition to *Indulekha*, a handful of inchoate Malayalam novels such as *Saraswathi Vijayam* (1892), *Lakshmikesavam* (1892), *Sukumari* (1897) and *Parishkaravijayam* (1906) accentuate the new paradigm. Running throughout these novels is an overt antagonism towards Brahmins, and Sanskrit (which is most often presented as retrograde and anachronistic) figures as a preserve of this elite caste group. For instance Sanskrit is presented as the big Other of English in *Saraswathi Vijayam*. It is by copiously quoting Sanskrit verses that Kuberan Namboothiri legitimises his relative superior position in the social hierarchy, maintains his hegemonic subjective position and justifies his atrocities including murder. Tellingly he is insensitive to contemporary social upheavals and the tides of colonial modernity. He does not try to break free of the episteme wrought by Sanskrit and is incapable of assimilating new ideas and ideals. This is hardly surprising as

the medium to access the new views—English— is alien to him. On the other hand Marathan, a Pulaya youth allegedly murdered by a henchman of Kuberan Namboothiri, escalates the social ladder through the twin processes of English education and conversion to the Protestant Christian Denomination of Basel Mission. Intriguingly, Namboothiri's daughter, who is ostracised from the Brahmin community on fabricated charges of adultery (we do not know if there was a *Smarthavicharam*!!), also embraces Christianity and her daughter is married to the same Marathan, rechristened Yesudasan, literally 'the servant of Jesus'.

*Parishkaravijayam* also contains broadsides against Sanskrit, but within a pedagogical framework. It criticises the practice of making pupils learn Sanskrit conjugations and inflections by rote, thus rendering them unable to read anything new or to construct their own sentences. On the contrary, the progressive-minded Mathu claims that English education instils in learners the ability to generate original sentences through carefully planned gradational books.

In these novels Brahmins as a rule are portrayed as profligate, philistine and hedonistic; virtually all of them womanisers, gluttons or moneylenders<sup>11</sup>. Generally speaking the Namboothiris are presented as ignorant, arrogant and incompetent, but not innately crooked. Contrastingly we have the figure of the ascending Nair. In most novels of the age Nairs as a whole are educated and receptive to changes, unlike the stubborn Brahmins, possessing an overwhelming desire to lead and dominate. It is not a coincidence that in almost all Namboothiri jokes modernity is the principal frame of reference.

Such novelistic representations and jokes are merely the tip of the iceberg, the symptoms of decadence and corruption that had eaten into the internal social structures of the community. True, the Namboothiris still had land and held sway over matters relating to ritualistic norms and interdictions. But, in other spheres their former power had been weakened and other communities had started to make use of new possibilities such as English education and employment. For instance Madhavan in *Indulekha* is a barrister and he eventually becomes the Collector of Madras Presidency, a preeminent position of power and influence which no Namboothiri youth of the age could aspire, or perhaps did not care to achieve. The invasion and subsequent reforms of Tipu had heavily impacted on the fortunes of the landed gentry in Malabar, especially Namboothiris. In Travancore, the

---

<sup>11</sup>See P.K. Sreekumar and Priya Jose K.



changes brought about by Marthanda Varma and Dharma Raja had the same effect while in Cochin the political postures of SakthanThampuran were strong enough to whittle away the grip of Brahmin hegemony (Gopalakrishnan 466-67). Caught between declining fortunes and dazzling changes<sup>12</sup>—both beyond the ability of the community to make sense of and to catch up with—a few of the Namboothiri men started to critically introspect, the practices within the community. Soon it became apparent that unless and until there were collective actions, the future of the community was doomed. Thus, the Namboothiri Yogakshema Sabha was founded in 1908. But fissures began to appear almost immediately as youngsters wanted more radical interventions while the old men preferred cosmetic measures which would ensure traditional values but give an outward appearance of reform and modernity: thus the birth of Namboothiri YuvajanaSangham in 1928, which sought to introduce timely changes in the religious, social, ritualistic and economic affairs of the Namboothiri community (Ramankutty 111), and their famous publication *Unni Namboothiri*.

Of the multiple issues that had plagued the community, the question of marriage and inheritance was easily and quickly diagnosed as the most malignant. Primogeniture was institutionalised and naturalised so much so that the younger male members of a Namboothiri family were denied the right to have a proper marriage and family from within

---

<sup>12</sup>Anchoring himself on extensive and authentic data, P. Chandramohan comments how Namboothiris were falling behind other Brahmins: “ Well-versed in Sanskrit and traditional knowledge but reluctant to succumb to the elements of change taking place in the nineteenth century, they [Namboothiris] remained conservative as they kept themselves away from modern education. The other category of Brahmins, generally described as ‘foreign’ Brahmins—for they had immigrated from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra—were mostly traders, moneylenders and priests. They were quick in taking advantage of the changing socio-economic scenario in general, and the changes in educational infrastructure in particular. Out of a total of 162 Matriculates in Travancore in the year 1872, 71 belonged to this community; and out of 14 Bachelors of Arts, 10 were non-Malayali Brahmins. They had a significant say as well as proportionate representation in the administrative machinery from the time of the ruler Marthanda Varma (especially since the mid-eighteenth century) and by 1881, they seem to have cornered a major portion of government jobs. Compared to the Namboodiris, these Brahmins were more resilient and willing to make use of opportunities that came their way. They were pragmatic and free from the observed sense of social prestige” (7-8).

their own caste. Deprived of a lawful wife and children, they depended on the morganatic system of *sambandham* that has been often criticised as licentious and libertine, devised for the gratification of male sexual desire only. Conversely, the eligible firstborn of each Namboothiri family in most cases married many times, ostensibly with a view to ensuring the gender ratio within the community. They also freely took advantage of the *sambandam* system. The young women of the community had to bear the brunt of the system: most of them found themselves married to considerably older, perhaps senile, men, often as his third or fourth wife, and widowhood was highly probable, if not certain.

The young group leapt headlong into the issue: these iconoclasts wanted every Namboothiri man to have a wife from his own community, organised the first widow marriage among Namboothiris in 1935, promoted modern education, and nurtured rational thinking. For them the increasing frequency<sup>13</sup> of *Smartha vicharam* was a rallying point for reformation. The alarming increase in the frequency of chastity trials vindicated their position that the community needed radical reconfigurations, not superficial modifications. No wonder V.T. Bhattathirippad later remarked that Thathri (whose trial in 1905 has become something like a cultural archetype) was a trigger in the history of reformations though it caused great shame to the community and her kinsmen (627).

Here we have to understand that the much celebrated trial of Thathri in 1905 was among many. But in scale, drama and impact it eclipsed both its predecessors and successors. It persists with us in various genres: literature, history and sociology among them. In order to get the process of the chastity trial in perspective, we need to thoroughly understand the practice of *Smarthavicharam*, its rules and regulations, *modus operandi*, etc. The next section is an attempt to form a comprehensive idea of its ingredients, implementation and implications.

### III

---

<sup>13</sup>It is reported that there was a steep increase in chastity trials between 1851 and 1930 (Aji 273). While this can be a direct indication of the deepening moral decay, it is better to be cautious. It is logical to suggest that there were many trials before 1851 but went undocumented. So the new frequency need not necessarily be an index of increased trials but can be a manifestation of more inclusive statistical-administrative representation.

The Portuguese traveller and writer Duarte Barbosa, who spent sixteen years in Cochin as part of a mercantile contingent, in his *Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar* (c. 1521) accurately, describes the hereditary right to priesthood and immunity from secular law enjoyed by the indigenous Brahmins or Namboothiris. Then he makes an interesting observation on the marriage, inheritance and conjugal fidelity of the caste group under reference:

They marry only once, and only the eldest brother has to be married, and of him is made head of the family like sole heir by entail, and all the others remain bachelors, and never marry. The eldest is the heir of all the property. These Brahmans, the elder brothers, keep their wives very well guarded, and are of great esteem, and no other man can approach them; and if any of the married ones die, the person who becomes widowed does not marry again. And if the wife commits adultery, the husband kills her with poison. (121)

A word of caution, which has serious implications for historiography, is in order at this juncture. The descriptions of Barbosa, despite their clarity and vivacity, raise a handful of questions about reliability and authenticity. In other words, what was the controlling gaze of the author? Was he in a position to observe indigenous cultural practices as they were and to record them without prejudice? In order to tackle this problem, we need to look at other sources. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the contemporary historian celebrated for his archival research, cautions that the first Portuguese traders who learnt native tongues such as Duarte Barbosadid not go much beyond a spoken version of the language and that they also depended more often than not on finding able intermediaries- frequently converted Jews and Muslims- who would make the effort of translating other languages into Portuguese for them (18). Gracia de Orta<sup>14</sup>, author of *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India* (1563) sneers that the Portuguese navigate the world only to procure a knowledge of how best to dispose of the merchandise that they bring here and what they shall take back; they are not desirous of knowing anything about the things in the countries they visit; if they know a product they do not learn from what tree it comes, and if they see they do not compare it with one of our Indian trees, nor ask about its fruit or what it is like (86-87).

Thus though there are reasons to suspect the authenticity of Barbosa's observations, let us consider it a start and go on to check another source. Sheik Zeen-ud-deen's *Tohfut-ul-*

---

<sup>14</sup>One of the first Europeans to coalesce information on indigenous medicinal herbs.

*Mujahideen*, written in sixteenth century and often considered the first modern history of Kerala, generally concurs with Barbosa but with a notable difference in the case of younger sons:

. . . when there are several brothers in one [Namboothiri] family, the eldest of them alone enters into the conjugal state (except in cases where it is evident that he will have no issue), the remainder refraining from marriage, in order that heirs may not multiply, to the confusion of inheritance. The younger brothers, however, intermarry with women of the Nair caste without entering into any contract with them. (64)

If we assume that Barbosa's observations were right<sup>15</sup> (even if we accept younger Namboothiri men consorted with women of other castes) we have to infer that there occurred a moral plunge among the Namboothiris in the intervening centuries: when we meet them in the nineteenth century, things have changed unrecognizably, as we have already seen. Authors from Kerala have unambiguously stated on many occasions that it was very common, almost an established practice, for the eldest Namboothiri brother to have three or four wives from his own caste and any number of loose sexual relations with Nair woman (Bhaskaranunni, *Pathonpatham* 475-76). Karunakara Menon Pannikkottu in his *Dakshina Indiyayile Jathikal* (1915) states that Namboothiris were permitted to have up to four wives (134).

It may be noted in this connection that the insistence on primogeniture was an instance of ossified conventions and was not based on any prevailing norm. P.V. Ramankutty suggests that the Namboothiri men selectively appropriated and interpreted lines from *Sankara Smriti*, conveniently overlooking those portions which permitted younger sons of a family to have proper marital relations (105). Thus when Lewis Moore in 1882 comments that

---

<sup>15</sup>The living historian Kesavan Veluthat, though in a different context, indirectly suggests that the immoral life of Namboothiris (often expressed by the expression 'orgiastic season' coined by the pioneering linguist-historian Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai) before the European advent is more or less a myth; neither the authors nor the characters of the much maligned *Manipravala* works are Namboothiris (13-14). His position is not new. Way back in 1965 Kanippayyoor Sankaran Namboothirippadu published a book titled *Shashtipoorthyupaharam* (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Pusthakasala) which sought to tear Elamkulam's position, which severely criticised Namboothiris, into pieces.

“there is. . . no rule of law and no custom prohibiting the junior males [of a Namboothiri family] from marrying” (11) his frame of reference seems to be either the *sastric* normative matrix or the colonial legal discourse, not the traditional codes that governed the day-to-day life of all the castes in Kerala. The point is that whatever the law dictated, the Namboothiris partook of the moral universe they had inherited intact from their hallowed forebears.

To cut a long story short, the fall of the Namboothiri from the strict monogamist to the concupiscent polygynist is shocking and telling. There can be a number of explanations for this—such as polygamy was necessary to maintain gender balance, many men remarried to raise hefty dowry for their daughters—but the net result was that women were always at the receiving end. Still, interestingly the treatment meted out to a woman suspected/accused of infidelity in the nineteenth century was an improvement on the earlier custom recorded by Barbosa: at least now she was to be tried within a quasi-legal mechanism, instead of being poisoned to death straightaway. This mechanism of enquiry into sexual offences with a view to conclusively ascertaining the chastity of Namboothiri women—whether they are married or not—and to acting accordingly is called *Smarthavicharam*. The process is translated here as ‘chastity trial’ whenever occasion - demands.

### ***The Structure***

Though *Smarthavicharam* as such—its contextualisation, historicisation and reconstruction—is not our concern, it is necessary to get the basic information of the practice. What follows is a compendium collated from a few authentic sources of yore: *The Malabar Manual* (1887) and *The Travancore Manual* (1906) supplemented by insights gleaned from the writings of K.K.N. Kuruppu, Joseph Edamaruku and P. Bhaskaranunni. Though there are marginal differences in them, attributable to changes in time and place, the core remains the same. We have used the present tense mostly despite the fact that the custom petered out the 1930s.

The first cardinal point to remember is that Namboothiri women were tightly and jealously guarded from the gaze of men other than her husband, sons, father and brothers, that chastity was reckoned as of the highest importance and that even the slightest suspicion on chastity could entail a trial and the resultant excommunication or rare acquittal. Once a woman is suspected of adultery by her own kinsmen or by neighbouring Brahmins, the caste neighbours should be forthwith informed of the same by the master of the house and

they should be guided by no considerations of personal affection or public shame. The person suspecting may happen to be the father, brother, mother or son of the woman and the consequences of betrayal may be ruinous to the family's financial resources and reputation, but no attempt is made by any one at concealment. The maid-servant of the woman is then interrogated<sup>16</sup> by caste elders and the family members, and if she incriminates her mistress, the matter is brought to the attention of the king, or depending on the polity of the time, the local ruler or the chieftain. The suspected woman, now onwards referred to by the neuter noun *Sadhanam* (object) is forthwith segregated in a separate house called *anchampura*<sup>17</sup> (fifth house) in the compound itself but apart from the main building; and all the persons implicated in the crime are placed under an interdict.

In order to formally prosecute a Namboothiri woman, in other words to conduct a chastity trial, the king's written sanction was mandatory. A fee of sixty-four *panams* or Rs. nine, a hefty sum by contemporary standards, has to be sent in along with the application for sanction and the money is credited to the treasury. A committee of enquiry comprising a *Smartha* or judge, two *Mimamsakas* (persons versed in law, selected by the *Smartha* usually from his own village), one *Akakoyma* (regulator of order at the trial who holds his appointment by heredity) and one *Purakoyma* (representative or agent of the king or the political authority) is then constituted and appointed. They assemble at some convenient spot, generally in a temple not far from the place where the accused is lodged. The trial is a public spectacle as all people, subject to prevailing caste restrictions and regulations, who are interested in the proceedings are permitted to be present. The *Purakoyma* stands with a sword in hand near the *Smartha* and other members of the tribunal.

When all is ready, the king's written sanction is first read out aloud and the whereabouts of the accused ascertained. The *Smartha*, accompanied by the officer on guard and the royal representative, next proceeds to the accused's house; the officer on guard remains outside while the others enter. At the entrance, however, they are met by the maid-servant, who up to this time has never lost sight of the accused. She prevents the men from entering.

---

<sup>16</sup>The procedure is called *Dasivicharam*.

<sup>17</sup>It may be mentioned in passing that *anchampurna* also meant the kitchen store and that *adukkaladosham* was another term – perhaps a euphemism – to signify breach of chastity; Herman Gundert defines it as “forbidden intercourse of women” (Muraleedharan 26, 28).

In feigned ignorance of the cause of thus being stopped, the *Smartha* demands an explanation, and is told that a certain person is in the room. The *Smartha* demands more information, and is told that the person is no other than such and such a lady, the daughter or sister or mother (as the case may be) of such and such a Namboothiri of such and such a family. The *Smartha* professes profound surprise at the idea of the lady being where she is and again demands an explanation from which he formally grasps the situation<sup>18</sup>.

Here begins the trial proper. The accused, who is still strictly *gosha*<sup>19</sup>, is questioned through the medium of the maid-servant, and she is made to admit that there is a charge against her. This is the first point to be gained, for nothing further can be done in the matter until the accused herself has made the admission. This point, however, is not easily gained at times, and the *Smartha* often has to appeal to her own feelings and knowledge of the world and asks her to recollect how unlikely it would be that a Namboothiri female of her position should be turned out of her parent's house and placed where she then was unless there was some genuine and demonstrable cause for it.

The *Smartha* and his colleagues then return to the assembly in the temple premises and the former relates in minute detail all that has happened since he left the conclave. The *Akakoyma*'s task is to see that the version is factual and faithful. He is not at liberty to speak, but whenever he thinks the *Smartha* has erred in describing what happened, he removes from his shoulders a piece of cloth and lays it on the ground as a sign for the *Smarthato* brush up his memory and to come up with the acceptable narrative. The latter takes the hint and tries to correct himself. If he succeeds, the *Akakoyma*'s cloth is replaced on his shoulders, but if not, the *Smartha* is obliged to go back to the accused and obtain whatever information is required for the right reportage.

During the entire course of the trial the kinsmen of the accused are temporarily cut off from social and ritual intercourse with other Brahmins pending the result of the trial, and all *Sraddhas* (sacrifices to benefit the souls of the deceased ancestors) are put on hold. The rationale behind the practice is that, until the woman is found guilty or not, and until it is

---

<sup>18</sup>The elements of drama and ritual unmistakable here.

<sup>19</sup>The traditional attire of a Namboothiri woman. Women were clad in white all over and head covered with a large umbrella. To forgo these paraphernalia was a symbolic revolt. The first such event took place in 1929 (Ramankutty 118).

ascertained when the sin was committed, they cannot, owing to the probability that they have unwittingly associated with her after the disgrace, be admitted into society until they have performed the expiatory ceremony (*Prayaschitham*). The tribunal continues its sitting as long as it is necessary, that is, until either the accused confesses and is convicted, or her innocence is established. It is to be specially noted that no verdict of guilty can be given against her except on her confession: no amount of circumstantial and corroborative evidence is sufficient.

In former days when the accused would not confess, various modes of torture were employed to extort a confession. One method was to roll up the accused in a piece of matting and to let the bundle fall from the roof to the court-yard below. Another was to turn live rat-snakes and other vermin into the room beside her; in certain cases even cobras were used, and it is said that if after having been with the cobra for a certain length of time and unhurt, the fact was accepted as conclusive evidence of her innocence<sup>20</sup>. Yet another method to wrench a confession was to starve the accused woman. On other occasions a blend of persuasion, cajoling and threats would be used. The entreaties of her consanguineous and matrimonial relations, who are staring at a very likely financial ruin<sup>21</sup>, were key in this method. Equally important are the expostulations and promises of the *Smartha*, who tells her it is best to confess and repent, and promises to get the chief to take care of her and comfortably house her on the bank of some sacred stream where she may end her days in prayer and repentance. Often the family of the accused would come forward, offering her a large share of the family property, if she will only confess and allow the trial to end.

Whenever the accused offers to confess, she is examined, cross-examined, and re-examined very minutely as to the time, place, person/s, circumstances, etc., but the names of the adulterer is withheld (though it may be known to all) to the final dramatic revelation. Sometimes a long list of persons is given and is similarly treated. In this strange punitive regime persons accused by the woman are never permitted to disprove the charges against

---

<sup>20</sup>This is notable as it is similar to a general ordeal in which the accused person thrust his hand into a container with venomous snakes. if unbitten he was deemed innocent. Similar was the case of the oil ordeal.

<sup>21</sup>Given the exorbitant amount involved in the case of a protracted trial this bargain made excellent economic sense.



them<sup>22</sup>, but the woman herself is closely cross-examined and the probabilities are carefully weighed. And every co-defendant, except the one who, according to the woman's statement, was the first to lead her astray, has a right to be admitted to the boiling-oil ordeal as administered at the temple of Suchindram<sup>23</sup> in Travancore. The order for submission to these ordeals is called a *Pampu* and is the prerogative of the *Smartha* to issue one.

After the confession of guilt, the tribunal meets in the drawing-room of the accused's temporary house. She remains in a room, or behind her big umbrella, unseen by the members of the tribunal and other inhabitants of the land who are present, and the final examination is carried out by the *Smartha*. A profound silence is observed by all present except by the *Smartha*, and he alone puts questions which have been framed and arranged beforehand by the members of the tribunal. The solemnity of the proceedings is enhanced to the utmost degree by the demeanour of those present. If the accused is present in the room, she stands behind her maid-servant and whispers her replies into her ear to be repeated to the assembly. Once the guilt is conclusively established, the woman, hitherto strictly *mghosha*, is now asked to come out of her room and lay aside her umbrella and to be seated before the *Smartha* and the tribunal; she sometimes even takes betel and nut in their presence.

When the trial is finished, the sentence is pronounced and the name of the paramour/s is revealed through a nocturnal denouement in which the king, or the ruler who sanctioned the trial, is present. While the *Smartha* himself gives a faithful and thoroughgoing account of the trial, the name of the adulterer is announced by a Tamil Brahmin called the *Kutti Pattar*, who immediately afterwards proceeds to the nearest pond to immerse his whole body to wash away the sin he has contracted by uttering the accused name.

The next proceeding, which formally deprives the accused woman of all her caste privileges, is called the *Kaikottal* or hand-clapping ceremony. The sentence of ex-

---

<sup>22</sup>Accused men were given a chance to prove their innocence only during the trial of Thathri in 1905.

<sup>23</sup>The ordeal is undergone, under the sanction of the Raja of Travancore, by the accused person dipping his bare hands in scalding oil and taking out a bell metal image. The hand is immediately bandaged and if on examination of it on the third day was found unhurt, the man would be declared innocent.

communication is passed by the *Smartha* in the woman's presence, and thereupon the accused's umbrella—a symbol of her chastity and caste stature—is formally taken from her hands by a Nair of a pollution-remover caste. Amid continuous clapping of hands from the assembly, the woman is then instantly driven forth from her temporary quarters and all her family ties are symbolically severed. Her kinsmen perform certain rites and formally cut her off from the relationship. She becomes in future to them even less than she has died. Indeed, if she happens to die in the course of the enquiry, the proceeding goes on as if she were still alive, and they are formally brought to a conclusion in the usual manner by a verdict of guilty or of acquittal against the men implicated.

Following the hand-clapping ceremony is the feast of purification given by the excommunicated woman's people, at which for the first time since the trial, her relations are permitted to eat in company with their caste fellows, and with this feast, which is partaken of by every Namboothiri who cares to attend, the troubles of the family come to an end<sup>24</sup>.

### ***Fate of the Excommunicated Woman***

The woman thus driven out—in a sense liberated—has a handful of options. One: some are recognised by their paramours or seducers and can start a family life. Two: some others would become prostitutes. Three: a few are taken as wives by the merchants of trade centres. Four: the king himself would furnish a hut and provisions for a bare minimum survival. Five: they could go to a distant land, become anonymous and turn a new leaf. Six: they could join a few homes or institutions specially endowed to receive them<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup>For a compressed account of the entire procedure see Muraleedharan 366-67.

<sup>25</sup>Logan: "These last named institutions are of a peculiar character. Perhaps the best known, because it has formed the subject of judicial proceedings, is that of the Muttadatta Aramanakal in the Chirakkal Taluk with extensive jungly land revenues. The members of this institution are respectively styled as Mannannar or Machchiar, according to whether they men or women. They have baronial powers and keep up a sort of baronial state, for which purpose two hundred Nayars of the Edavakutti Kulam (or clan) were in former days bound to follow the Mannanars when out of active service. The members of the institution are recognised as the Tiyan (or toddy-drawer) caste, and the sons of

### ***How Expensive was the Trial?***

By any contemporary standard the trial was ruinously expensive. Every day, after the proceedings, the members of the tribunal were to be sumptuously entertained by the kinsmen of the accused throughout the course of the entire trial which could stretch itself inordinately at times. Considering the fact that a trial sometimes lasts several years, the tribunal meeting occasionally and the accused's kinsmen being obliged to entertain the members and any other Namboothiris present on each occasion, it was sure to place a huge strain on the family coffers. In addition, the kinsmen had to meet the whole expense for the enquiry including the substantial monetary payment to the *Smartha* and the *Mimamsakas*. Another payment was to be given to the royal authority. Logan suggests that "it is a very serious matter to a family to have to incur the expenses of such an enquiry, for the cost rarely comes to less than one thousand rupees and has been known to amount to as much as twelve thousand rupees" (122—26). Aiya supports this by saying that "during the whole course of the trial, which often takes great length of time, the master of the house has to feed the committee of enquiry and as a result suspected families are generally ruined whether the enquiry ends in conviction or acquittal" (272—74). To cut a long story short, the trials must have played a crucial role in the financial collapse of many Namboothiri families in the past.

### ***Condition of Namboothiri Women in the Past***

It is necessary to get a fair understanding of how girls were typically received and raised in a Namboothiri household. In brief, while the birth of a boy was greeted with feast and fanfare, the arrival of a girl spelt gloom and consternation, all the more so in the case of poor families as dowry was exorbitant. Sreedevi Olappamanna writes that a second-rate treatment was meted out to Namboothiri girls in the matter of food, cloths, dignity, status,

---

Machchiyars become in turn Mannanars (or barons). The women take husbands from the Tiyan community. The women who are sent to this institution are those convicted of illicit intercourse with men of the Tiyan or of superior castes. If the connection has been with men of lower caste than the Tiyan, the women are sent to another institution called Kutira Mala, still deeper in the jungles of the Western Ghats." (134). Bhaskaranunni expands the discussion (*Smarthavicharam* 142- 47).

education and so on; the constant reminder that she is to be sent to another house sooner or later would create a sense of inferiority and unbelonging in her (26). Olappamanna comments that even in the early 1960s, modern education is not meant to instill self-reliance and the spirit of emancipation but is mere value-addition in the marriage market and that remarriages and widow-marriages are exceedingly rare (26). The famous widow marriages under the leadership of V.T. Bhattathirippadu<sup>26</sup> and others did not become a standard practice in the community. She clearly states that a girl is brought all alone once she starts to menstruate, has to perform rigorous rituals intended to get a good husband, does not have any say in her marriage and future, and loses the right to patrimony on marriage; if widowed she becomes an ill omen and has to lead a miserable existence: invisible, on a meagre diet, at the mercy of other family members (27). The impassioned speech made by Parvathi Nenmenimangalam supporting the proposed Namboothiri Bill is a testimony to the abject condition of girls those days; she lashed out against the prevailing system of marriage and argued that the root cause of the overall decay of Namboothiris could be traced back to this decadent and barbaric matrimonial system<sup>27</sup>.

### ***Whys and Wherefores***

As we have already seen, the motives behind *Smarthavicharam* cannot be reductively understood. While the fear of miscegenation and the belief in racial superiority are plausible causes, there is a more logical candidate: the uncanny obsession with overall but selective purity. That is, Namboothiris as a whole were very much bothered about maintaining purity<sup>28</sup> but somehow men found nothing wrong in having sexual relations with

---

<sup>26</sup>V.T. Bhattathirippadu organised the first widow marriage in the community in 1935.

<sup>27</sup>The excerpts of the speech are available in Bhaskaranunni (*Smarthavicharam* 42-43).

<sup>28</sup>There is an interesting story about Thalakkulathur Bhattathiri who lost his caste and later married a Sudra woman—it was self-imposed decision—by unwittingly sleeping with a woman of inferior Kaniyan caste. (For a detailed discussion see '*Aithihyamala*). More notably, the loss of caste due to sexual relation with caste inferiors was not confined to Namboothiris. For example some Malayarayas believe that “they were, at a remote period, Nairs, and were brought to a state of degradation by the reprehensible conduct

Nair women. But the reverse was unthinkable: nothing could be more reprehensible and dangerous than, say, a Sudra man begetting children in a Namboothiri woman. It seems that this obsession with purity was one of the abstract machines or driving forces behind this custom.

We have to be mindful of the role played by ritual purity in delineating the superior/inferior position of a given caste. It should be specifically remembered that purity here is not physical or medical but ritualistic. As K.M. Sheeba summarises, mainly paraphrasing Bhaskaranunni, the concept of purity and pollution was followed to the point of seeming absurdity as pollution could be contacted in numerous ways—birth, death, menstruation, etc., made women impure which could be got rid of through a purificatory ritual of bathing and wearing freshly laundered garments brought in by the washerwoman; if the child born to a woman was female that required additional purificatory rituals; there were different other occasions for minor pollution necessitated by touching cooking utensils, accidentally coming into contact with bedspreads laid out by a menstruating woman, etc.; urinating and defecating left a person polluted and touching a corpse was impure (37). In a marriage this fear manifests as anxieties over miscegenation. Thus, we can postulate that the chastity trial was an orchestrated expression of all these fears combined, basically concerned with purity. According to Bhaskaranunni, the chastity trials had the clear and rigid purpose of preventing miscegenation and thus to keep racial purity of the community intact (100), but he soon admits that elements of male sexual selfishness are evident in the custom (103); this selfishness is embellished and enmeshed in rigorous and austere rituals (103). He considers the idea that the trial was a method to ensure purity only as a working premise (104).

Aji K.M. suggests that the interdiction against exogamous marriage—which is a form of restricted and regulated sexuality—is directly related to the preservation of perceived racial purity; thus it becomes the most emphatic symptom of caste; to ensure and sustain bloodline and hallowed traditions, it is necessary to avoid miscegenation at any cost; in other words, what nourishes caste is a set regulations pertaining to the women of the caste (267). He goes on to suggest that the preservation of caste purity, coupled with rigorous primogeniture, meant continuation of monopoly over land and other resources (270). To

---

of their women-kind, who were outcasted owing to their illicit intercourse with low-caste men of the plains.” (Iyer, 29)

rephrase, the insistence on female chastity was intertwined with material concerns like ownership of land and other sources of revenue.

In summation one may tentatively suggest that the institution of *Smarthavicharam* was an intricate and multi-layered social institution which was directly and tangentially connected with and informed by obsession with racial purity, sexual exploitation, gender-specific exploitation and financial undercurrents. Perhaps it is the presence of such a wide range of elements, all within a sensational framework, that accounts for the enduring charm that *Smarthavicharam* has held out for historians, sociologists, writers and activists of every hue.

### ***Earliest Instances***

Fra Paolino de San Bartolomeo, a disclalced Carmelite who resided for thirteen years (1776-1789) in India writes about what is arguably one of the oldest references to the ostracism of Namboothiri women in Kerala<sup>29</sup> even though he does not specify if there was a trial or not:

The crime of adultery. . . is punished by the expulsion from the caste, and according to circumstances, even with banishment. If the bride or spouse is alone guilty, she loses the prerogative of her caste, and is sold as a slave to some foreigner whether Christian, Jew or Mahometan. This was the case, in particular, with the celebrated wife of a Brahmin at Allangata who had been degraded and sold, and who was afterwards baptised by the Bishop of Areopolis in Malabar. She spoke and wrote Sanserid [Sanskrit?] language with great ease. I myself once baptised, at Edapalli, a Brahman woman who had also been guilty of adultery. When I asked her why she wished to embrace the Roman Catholic religion, she replied: *Inikadosham*<sup>30</sup> *vannu poi*; that is 'I have been guilty of a sin'. (270- 71)

---

<sup>29</sup>The work was originally published in Italian in 1796 and a German translation in 1798. The English edition, from which we have quoted, appeared in 1800.

<sup>30</sup>The presence of the word *dosham* strongly indicates adultery and a chastity trial; as we have already seen in popular parlance or as a euphemism, adultery was referred to as '*adukkala dosham*'.

Another clear mention of the trail which took place in 1887 is archived in *Kavalapara*<sup>31</sup> *Papers* edited by K.K.N. Kurup. It hints at previous trials of the same nature though their outcome is unspecified. On this occasion, however, the accused woman is formally acquitted and the accuser—her own husband—is forced to openly apologise and is fined<sup>32</sup>. Here are excerpts from a letter addressed by the manager of the Kavalappara estate to William Logan, the Collector of Malabar and now widely remembered as the author of *The Malabar Manual*:

There was again, now, an investigation, as before, into the moral conduct of the inmate of the Alampilli Mana, of Eruppa Desam, mentioned in the order No. 31, dated 15<sup>th</sup> January 1885. The Smartha and others who conducted the investigation decided that the statements made by Viroopakshan Nampoothiri of that Mana about the moral character of his wife was sheer calumny. And in the meeting held at the Eruppa Temple. . . the open apology was made to express contrition (for the calumnious statements) and dining with caste people was conducted and took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> instant. At the time of expression of repentance, the amounts that had to be paid to the Smartha. . . and the Mimamsakas. . . and to the estate according to the custom, was placed in bags before each of them by their owner and it was after that that he expressed his apology. The amount of Rs. 88 which was in the bag meant for the estate has been receipted in the accounts and the fact is reported to you for information. (Kurup 126-27)

P. Bhaskaranunni in his comprehensive monograph *Smarthavicharam* (2000) lists trials which occurred in 1870; then he cites twenty similar incidents from Malabar before briefly discussing trials of various degree and outcome in 1840, 1838, 1896, 1897 and 1904 (151-56). Quoting from N.M. Namboodiri's *SamuthiriCharithrathileKanappurangal*, K.M. Sheeba enumerates trials in 1897, 1898, 1899, 1902, 1908, 1916, 1920 and 1927 (54). What

---

<sup>31</sup>A once Nair feudatory of Malabar.

<sup>32</sup>It was possible for the banished adulterers to come back to their family and community life. K.P. Narayanapisharodi writes that the Kathakali maestro Kavunkal Sankara Panickar and the vedic scholar V.K. Narayana Bhattathiri, both of whom were ostracised in the trial of 1905 which is briefly discussed below, openly repented and thus were absolved from social banishment (111). Are we to understand that a man accused in the chastity trial had the option to plead guilty and resume normal life after paying monetary compensation or undergoing imprisonment?

emerges from these events is the fact that chastity trials—though they were sure to bring about financial ruin and loss of prestige—were a rather common occurrence and that they betray the heightened sense of caste-racial-monetary consciousness that Namboothiris cherished as an endogamous group. From an economic perspective, as already mentioned, such trials must have brought about the ruin of many a Namboothiri family in the decades around 1900.

### ***The Trial of 1905***

The widely and ruthlessly written about trial of Kuriyedathu Thathri in 1905 was neither the first nor the last of its kind. But it has become a cultural and moral obsession with Malayalis, something like a persisting cultural memory. One reason is that by 1905, Victorian morality had taken root here and many local practices and institutions were interpreted as immoral and an obstacle to progress. So, when the said trial churned up as many as sixty-four men from the Brahmanic caste space, the event was immediately construed as a symptom of the moral decay that had eaten into the Namboothiri community. Secondly by this time there were a good number of newspapers and periodicals in Kerala, often committed to reconfiguring power relations and customary practices which were hitherto deemed immutable. Thirdly, as mentioned at the beginning, the 1900s witnessed the birth of caste organisations, including the Namboothiri Yogakshema Sabha, which seized this trial as signifying the overall decadence of the community. Fourthly, right from 1905 we have had a steady flow of literary and historical responses to this trial which have entrenched it in our public imagination. Fifthly the trial occurred at a juncture in which the joint family was gradually giving way to the nuclear family and its associative moral credo. Sixthly, as a part of the British system of documentation everything began to be registered and reported; that arguably explains the surge—fiftyone trials between 1851 and 1930. This is important as it does not mean that there were no such trials before the period. We have every reason to believe there had been cases as reported by Fra Paolino de San Bartolomeo. The point is that due to colonial administrative mechanisms trials achieved unprecedented visibility. Seventhly, almost half of Thathri's paramours were men who were not ritually permitted to have sex with a Brahmin woman. This was a shocking mix of blood and thus scandalised the Namboothiris in particular. We can hypothesise that had all the lovers been Brahmins the dimension of the trial would have been different. Eighthly the event had a pan-Kerala nature as both the princely states and the British Malabar were inside its purview (Manojkumar 247). Finally, as Aji K.M. suggests, the explosive power of the 1905 trial lies not only in the potential derived from the public display of sexuality,



which is considered an intimately personal matter, but also in the fact that it is produced in a conceptual space characterised by the complex interaction of the power equations of caste, gender and class (268).

The 1905 trial attracts academic attention for another crucial reason: the extent of the role played by the state in the affair as well as the malleability and transmutability of caste. Manojkumar makes a long observation:

The King/State was the sole authority to intervene in the matters of *jati*. The *jati* elders were permitted to take all decisions pertaining to the *jati* rules—be it an addition, annulling, and departures from the existing rules. But though they and the body in which they were members function as the agency to determine the alterations had full rights over the decisions, it should have had to be authorised/sanctioned by the King/State. There is an important occasion within the course of *Smarthavicharam* of Thathri which substantiates this argument. The occasion is of the meeting called by the Rajah of Cochin on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Edavam, 1080 (1905 May 22) at Thrissur in which the elders and prominent persons among the Namboothiri Brahmins were present and the decisions were taken on the hitherto unknown and unheard *Purushavicharam* (summoning and trying the males whom Thathri had stated as courted with her). The proceedings clearly recognise the authority of the King over the Brahmins and the elders. (251)

K.M. Sheeba, whose doctoral dissertation contains rich information and insightful observations on chastity trials provides a succinct account of the life and times of Thathri. What follows is a summary of her arguments spread over pages 57-72. The *Smarthavicharam* trials were not recorded before in history. It was only in Thathri's trial that the king had ordered for a change in procedure and instituted a trial of the concerned and the new process was to be documented. Since it was necessary to record the time and place of the acts, these statements became biographical as they reveal the various events in Thathri's life from the day of her attaining puberty to marriage and so on. Her sense of time is determined by the linking of her acts with the days of temple festivals, celebrations in the family like childbirth, *Upanayana* rituals, marriage of kith and kin, Kathakali performances, death, illness, etc. Thathri's accounts form an excellent source for a social history of the period and in the process of narration she mentions those *illams* which had the means to conduct Kathakali performances, of the various gatherings and rituals, the eminent Namboothiris who participated in important social events and so on. Her narration also reveals critical disjunctures between the prescribed rules governing the Namboothiri community and the actual lived life then.

Thathri's life may be reconstructed from her own accounts. She was born as the second daughter of Ashtamoorthi Namboothiri of Kalpakasseri *illam* situated at Arangottukara which stood near the border of the Palakkad and Trichur districts of Kerala. As a young girl, upon her own insistence, she was given some basic education. At the age of ten she went to live at Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath *illam* to learn music. It was here in 1893 that she had relations (perhaps for the first time) with Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath Nambyattan Namboothiri. She later married the younger brother of Nambyattan Namboothiri. Nambyattan was more than fifty years old at the time and Thathri was only ten. She had not yet achieved puberty which she did only later at the age of fourteen. Subsequently, her teacher in music, Pushpakath Narayanan Nambyassan spotted her moving around in the *illam* with Nambyattan Namboodiri and suspecting an affair, asked her about it. Thathri testifies:

. . . he was my guru and I could not lie to him. . . Later, on another occasion when I went to bathe he came over to the *Kulappura* [bath house] and made known his desire for a physical union with me. I helped him realise that desire then and there. That was the first time with him in 1893. There was yet another occasion too which was in 1893. I had not given him any presents in lieu of the music training imparted and asked him to come to Kalpakassery (her natal home) so as to give him two *mundus*. He came in the morning and left only the next day afternoon. That night we had sexual union. . . . He was dark and heavy with a bad tooth on the lower jaw and must have been around forty years then.

It was again in 1893 that she had relations with her maternal uncle Okki *Illath Itteri* Namboothiri. This uncle was later instrumental in her having relations with Akazhi Narasimha Namboothiri in 1901. The reasons for the union were simple. She wanted to borrow a necklace to wear for a wedding and asked the Akazhi Namboothiri for it who turned down her request. She approached him through her uncle who procured it for her on the condition that she had to have physical relationship with Akazhi Namboothiri. She agreed to return the necklace in person and required her uncle to let her know the time, place and manner in which she was to meet Akazhi Namboothiri. Thathri relates the events: I was sleeping with kids inside the *Thekkini*. Uncle had told me that Akazhi Namboodiri would come at dawn and wait at the *Purathalam* and I was to meet him there. I acted as per this instruction. Had sexual union. Akazhi Namboothiri got up and left. I came back to the *Thekkini* and lied down. The next day I left the place.

Her relations were varied, born out of different compulsions and with very different kinds of men. Her childhood friend Mundayoor *Illath* Madhavan Namboothiri had a secret relationship with a woman of the varrier caste at Kalpakassery. Once on a trip to a nearby

temple together, Thathri asked Madhavan about the relationship that carried on against the wishes of his father. Thathri says:

I asked this as a pastime. While replying, he asked me of my relationship with the Namboodiri of Desamangalam *Illam* and I told him the truth. Then he said that I were to let him have sexual intercourse with me he would stop visiting the Warriar woman. I agreed. Five or six days later he had come to my *Illam* at Kalpakassery and we met in sexual union. This was in 1894.

She had relations with her sister's husband as well. Her sister had come to deliver a baby and the husband PlatholItteeri Namboothiri used to visit the place. Once the Namboothiri had returned after a temple festival and brought with him some beautiful *Mundus* with silken borders. Thathri says:

I took one and kept it away as my own and sent word through a woman telling him that I wanted it. He sent back a reply that he would give it if I were to personally request him. After a few days while I was returning after my bath I met him returning after his evening prayers. I reminded him of the offer on the *Mundu*. He agreed to give it to me and expressed the desire for sexual union. I agreed. I told him that I slept in the room on the north and would come out when he lets me know. Accordingly, the sexual union took place.

This Namboothiri was so fond of her that he would arrange Kathakali performances at the *Illam* for her benefit. He even used to hand over his purse to her from she took around Rupees fifty.

The most startling to the contemporary mind is her relationship with her own father. This happened in 1900 when Thathri was eighteen and just before she got married. Her mother had given birth to her younger sister then. Her father had a chronic stomach ailment and used to feel better with a massage. Thathri occasionally massaged him and on one such occasion the union happened.

Meanwhile in 1900 she got married to Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath Raman Namboothiri, the younger brother of Kuriyedath Nambyattan Namboothiri, the eldest son of the family. However as Nambyattan had no children, the second in line Raman married. Legend has it that the elder brother engineered this wedding to have Thathri at his side. All the injunctions so familiar to an Antaranjanam regarding the *Pativrata dharma* and the dos and don'ts before and after marriage were thrown to the winds. Her life was in no way altered after her marriage; she faced no restrictions on her movement and travelled very widely for an Antaranjanam of those days.

One other relationship was her aunt's (mother's younger sister) son Kalpakassery Narayanan Namboothiri. Thathri had come to stay at her natal home and was told of her cousin's involvement with several women which the family disapproved of. Thathri was asked to personally redeem him for these undesirable relationships. Thathri reports:

I tried to drill some good sense into him. He resisted and we broke up. Our mothers made us patch up again. I tried again and he told me of the problems back in his family. . . . He said he wanted to leave the place and would like to have physical union with me before he left. I forbade him and tried to dissuade him from leaving. He refused to listen. However, out of a lack of guard on both our sides that night a physical union took place. (62-63)

Her deep interest in Kathakali made her take more than one man related to this art form. Her relationship with Narikkotta Raman Nair, a Kathakali actor in 1899 resulted from her request that he perform the role of Lalita in the play *Narakasuravadham*. Since it was a female character Raman Nair refused on the grounds that his friend was playing Bhima and he did not want to settle for a smaller character. Thathri got him to do it by agreeing to fulfil his desire for a sexual union. She had relations with Ranath Achyutha Poduval because he was a Kathakali singer and with Panankavil Govindan Nambyar in order to acquire a copy of the play *Narakasuravadham*. The most celebrated of her associations with Kathakali is the relationship she had with KavungalSankaraPanicker. He was the performer par excellence of that time who is still referred to with great awe by Kathakali artistes even today. Thathri had seen his performances and got acquainted with him when he came to KuriyedathIllam for *Cholliyattam*. Thathri asked him to come to Kalpakassery and Panicker agreed. There at the isolated outhousePanicker performed the *Cholliyattam* as Thathri sang. The play was *Keechakavadham* from the *Mahabharata*, the scene was of an enamouredKeechaka requesting Draupadi to meet him. Bhima goes in her place and kills Keechaka. This particular scene is enacted with the form of Bhima lying hidden under a sheet and Keechaka imagining it to be Draupadi moving in under the sheet providing an erotically charged moment in the play. Thathri testifies: 'The *Cholliyttam* was progressing. At the end in the moment of Keechka and Bhima lying together our physical union actually happened.'

The events and the men described above are only a few among the sixty-four she named in the trial. It was a mixed group ranging from Nambothiris of the most eminent *Illams* like Desamangalam to the men of the Nair and Nambiar castes who were in charge of elephants. There were astrologers, performers, singers and actors involved. Also in the line were her close relations including her father, brother, brothers-in-law (both sister's husband and

husband's brothers), uncles and granduncle as well as the Nair servant from her natal home. These men were from ages between seventeen and sixty. Thathri remembered every detail of these relationships, the how, when, where and why of these sexual unions. Thathri's statements amply bear evidence to her own initiatives and desire as being responsible for her relationships. There was no force or blackmail used on the part of the men. Most of them gave her various gifts and money. Despite the fact that most of these men had physical relationships with her more than once, none stopped her from having other relations or tried to possess her exclusively.

Thathri was only twenty-three years old when she was brought to trial. There was a long period of fifteen years when she carried on relationships with these men. A large section of the Namboothiris between Arangottukara and Chemmanthitta knew about her relationships. This territory was also the area across which Thathri travelled widely. The restrictions on the mobility of the Antarjanams were effectively circumvented by her taking along with the Nair *dasis* and staying overnight at *Illams* and eating only there. She could also with slight alterations in dresses and hairstyle pass off as a woman or Nair or Warrior caste.

Thathri's entry into the space of the art form Kathakali is significant. Till a Ladies troupe was organised at Tripunithura, Kathakali remained largely as a male art form in terms of actors, audience and emotions. Even the female characters were enacted by male performers. Not only the art form Kathakali, but singing was also forbidden for Namboothiri women. This being so, Thathri lives in popular memory as an extremely beautiful woman who sang beautifully and had long tresses of hair. Her candid and unabashed rendering of her sexual experiences testifies to the virtual absence of guilt or shame. Not once did she deny her involvement. The *Purushavicharam* instituted newly by the Raja Rama Varma had, contrary to the earlier practices, allowed the men to defend themselves on their own and to cross question the woman. All the men unanimously denied involvement and tried to argue, rather unsuccessfully, that Thathri was unnecessarily harassing them. The new procedure had also provided for the mean to cross-examine Thathri. One such questioning goes thus:

Kalpakassery Narayanan to Thathri	
Have you had relations with me?	Yes
When did it happen first?	In the month of Meenam on the 27 <sup>th</sup> .

Which year?	Year before last
Do you remember any identifications marks on my body?	I can't remember any particular ones
Who asked for the relations first?	Narayanan did
Who acted in the first instance of sexual union?	I did
When was the second time?	On Vishu day
Weren't I away for officiating rites elsewhere then?	It was your father, not you, who had gone for it.

Such were the responses that the *Malayala Manorama* reported that she “argued as smartly as a barrister.” One of the men involved had appealed to the king for permission to allow the eminent lawyer and retired district judge Ramachandra Iyer to represent him. The appeal was turned down but finally he was permitted to question the woman. However, Thathri cleverly and ingeniously responded to the cross-examination and the lawyer was left disappointed.

The men accused tried to absolve themselves by appealing to the king in writing, citing various possible causes for them being wrongly implicated. Thathri's father claimed that she was getting back at him for having discouraged her from staying at her natal home after rumours about her ‘wayward’ behaviour had spread. Her cousin Narayanan alleged that Thathri had a grudge against him since he had asked her to go back to her in-law's house and had on another occasion reprimanded her for stealing money. Thathri's sister's husband explained that her unpleasantness with her sister had led to her implicating him. Many others who could cite no reason tried to argue that they were either sick or away when the said act was alleged to have taken place. Some claimed physical inability for sexual act. The state, on this occasion, provided the services of the local government apothecary to examine the private parts of the two accused—Kalpakassery Narayanan Namboothiri and VadakkemadathilAppuPattar—to verify their claims. The king records in his diary on this:

spoke a few words with Subramanya Iyer, the local Apothecary who has come here as directed by me to examine and tell us his opinion about a plea set forth by two persons who are involved in the *Smarthavicharam* now going on. His opinion was that the plea of the two persons was unreliable.

Interestingly, the *Smartha*'s attitude was also in Thathri's favour. Unless and until the men would prove their innocence conclusively and without doubt, the *Smartha* was to go by her statements alone. In the concluding remarks on the *Smarthavicharam* the *Smarthan* Jatavedan Namboothiri states that 'the *Sadhanam*'s statements had strengthened suspicions about the men beyond doubt. The only remaining factor to be looked into was whether the men were able to remove these suspicions raised. After hearing the men out there is no reason to disbelieve the *Sadhanam*.'

In the section where he comments separately for each person called in for the *Purushavicharam*, the *Smartha*'s conclusion for most are that he sees no reason to disbelieve the *Sadhanam*. While the men argued that Thathri implicated them upon a grudge, the *Smartha* concludes that the reasons cited for the grudge are too trivial to warrant such action. Her uncle pleaded innocence in the ground that Thathri was mentally unstable. The *Smartha* overruled this plea with a compliment paid to Thathri's excellent memory and coherence of argument. While Thathri's father tried to prove his innocence, the *Smartha*'s remark was that it was impossible to believe that the woman would pass such lies about her own father. Thekke Madathil Shamu Pattar produced a title deed proving that he was a minor at the time of the alleged offence. The *Smartha* gave his opinion that the status of being a minor did not necessarily indicate his age or incapability for the sexual act. In general the *Smartha* held that nobody would 'imagine that the *Sadhanam* would implicate anyone through a lie that would not benefit her in any way'. Of the sixty-five men called for *Purushavicharam* (the sixty-fifth person being her own husband), two had already died while three others did not appear due to illness or absence from their home. None admitted their involvement but could not prove their innocence beyond doubt. All sixty-five were excommunicated.

It has been seen that the high caste women had been virtually confined within their private spheres, such seclusion being prescribed by both the texts and by the existing customs. However, this did not prevent illicit sexual activity. Institutional structures designed to prevent illicit sexual relations did not, however, eradicate sexual lapses altogether. There was active collaboration among the Namboothiri women themselves besides the support from the Nair *dasis*.

Though a lot of Namboothiris knew about Thathri's relationships she was not brought to trial for a long period of at least thirteen years. This may perhaps have been because of the eminence of the men involved and also because of the fact that those involved were precisely those on whom the responsibility of maintaining caste superiority and purity

rested. There is a much circulated rumour that her relations came under trial after the Vasudevan Namboothiri of Kandanchatta *Mana* of Chemmanthitta first told the king about it. Kandanchatta *Mana* stands adjacent to Kuriyath *Illam*. Vasudevan Namboothiri officiated as a priest at the Tripunithura temple and therefore had occasions to come within close proximity of the king. The Kuriyath *Illam* faced ruin as a fallout of the trial and the plot of land stands desolate except for the old bathing tank with broken steps leading down.

In a community where female sexuality was controlled and its outward expressions were taboo, Thathri's case stood out as rebellious, scandalous and sensational. The incident obviously created an uproar in the high and low circles of the community. The tremors it sent can be gauged from the continued presence of Thathri in the writings of different genres.

#### IV

##### ***Early Responses***

We have already seen a few administrative and bureaucratic references to the said custom. They are by default indifferent to the subtle aspects of the custom. Even Logan, who otherwise took a lively interest in indigenous cultural practices and religious denominations, makes only apathetic remarks about it though their importance as primary sources in writing history is paramount and unique. The works we are going to discuss qualitatively differ from the previous ones: they betray a concern with the society and the prevailing customs. In other words they are emotionally charged, transitively written and have a clear position vis-à-vis the trial and its larger background.

In the *Malayala Manorama* newspaper of 27 June 1903 appeared a long report on a chastity trial held in the same year. The report has the tone of an editorial and thus is considered the first response to the trial during the twentieth century. The report begins by giving factual information on the persons and places involved. The event took place in Kunnamkulangara in the princely state of Cochin and the accused was a young widow. The entire procedure was carried out under the overall supervision of the king of Cochin. As the accusations were proved, the woman was ceremoniously cast out from the community and was rehabilitated in an isolated hut on the banks of the Chalakkudy river. It is to be noted that this trial strikingly anticipates the historic trial of Thathri in 1905.



The report goes on to state that though there will not be many people sad over the fate of the woman (as it has been conclusively proven that she violated the moral codes of her community) there is concern for the fate of the sixteen ostracised men from various castes (ranging from Namboothiri to barber) as they were not given a chance to state their side. Though this is the established practice in such trials, the report dwells on the sinister possibility that this woman of loose morals might have been induced by people with vested interests: they might have persuaded her to name people who they nurse a grudge against and how can we be sure that all of them are guilty?

While the aforesaid write-up is journalistic and does not have an identifiable author, the case of Punnassery Nampi Neelakanta Sarma, a versatile Sanskrit scholar, physician and educationalist, is different. He generally and specifically wrote about the trial of 1905 in his bi-lingual journal *Vijnanacintamani*. General in nature, it critically discusses the institution of *Smarthavicharam*, its concomitant issues and potential outcomes. Sarma first provides a concise and accurate description of the trial: its modalities, constituent parts, target, etc. He mentions the work *Laghudharma Prakasika*, a work attributed to SreeSankara, as the manual of the trial<sup>33</sup>. Then he mentions a few accused, again in general terms, who dared to appeal to the king against the decision of the *Smartha*. Finally he suggests that the trial needs to be revised taking into account the changed times and social sensibility (Narayanapisharodi 107—08).

The second article by Sarma was published in the same year. Unlike its predecessor it pointedly discusses the Thathri trial of 1905. He describes Thathri as now residing in a hut donated by the king at Chalakkudy and as training some girls in music. Then he paints a sympathetic picture of the ostracised men who are helplessly flitting from place to place, disgraced and often impoverished, before mooted plans to evolve a mechanism to rehabilitate these unfortunate men. Notably he justifies them on the grounds that many of them engaged in intercourse with Thathri assuming her to be a prostitute or a woman of lower caste; during the contemporary moral universe of Kerala it was not a sin for women to have simultaneous partners from her own or higher castes. Thus the ostracised men—most of them Brahmins—took her for a woman of this category and thus cannot be considered guilty. Interestingly he points to a more poignant issue: though the *Smartha* and his associates had heard the names of the paramours from the accused woman, they kept it

---

<sup>33</sup>It is a summary or compressed version of *Bhargavasmriti*.

as a closely guarded secret. As a result, a few unsuspecting fathers gave their daughters to these men in marriage. Now these girls are virgin widows and are condemned to remain so till their end. He also points to another consequence: there are some children born after the banishment of their fathers. Such children have been or will be relegated to the caste of Chakayar and there is no way to save them from this fate (Savitri in the novel *Yajnam*, discussed below, faces this existential predicament). Sarma concludes by emphatically suggesting that the rulers and priests of Kerala put their heads together to evolve a fairer and sounder mechanism to deal with future cases of accusations on conjugal infidelity and that the king of Cochin himself take the initiative (Narayanapisharodi 109—11).

While Sarma's position as a whole was pro-Brahmin and called for a radical revamping of the system, his contemporary OduvilKunjikrishna Menon (1870-1916) had a diametrically opposite take. His 172-line long Malayalam poem 'Aparadhiniyaya Antarjanam' (1910) is satirical and pro-women in that it interprets Thathri as a victim of the treacherous matrimonial system rooted among Namboothiris. Bhaskaranunni opines that the admiration for the seductive beauty of the femme fatale combined with the lasciviousness and hypocrisy of prominent caste members renders the poem all the more appealing and sweet (*Smarthavicharam* 241). The poem vividly describes the charming grace of Thathri, some of her celebrated lovers, the unprecedented uproar that her trial triggered, the way in which twenty-five armed policemen accompanied her, the infatuation of the police chief to her and how even the most respected Namboothiris were easily seduced by her physical beauty.

Most probably *Sarpam* (1968), a novella by M. Govindan, is the first prose narrative to use the story of Thathri and her amazing relations. A dense piece dwelling on the complex correlation between sexuality and subjectivity, the second part of *Sarpam* contains direct references to the liaison Thathri had with the Kathakali maestro KavunkalSankaranaPanickar, the details of which are given in the last section. Govindan interprets her infatuation<sup>34</sup> as an irresistible attraction to a mythical character, not to the

---

<sup>34</sup>He took pains to write as many as five articles on his choice; see Govindan 1986: 697 – 732.

body of the performer and adds that what roused lust in her was not the man but the art (19).

In all probability Madambu Kunhikuttan's *Bhrashtu* (1973) was the first, and the most influential, novel with the chastity trial as its central theme. Madambu considers the string of cataclysmic and shattering events culminating in the trial and banishment of Papthikkutty as the physical manifestation of Destiny that one cannot negotiate, let alone prevent or avert. The implication of this worldview is that no one is personally responsible: we are mere pawns in the hands of a superior power. In *Bhrashtu*, Namboothiris are depicted as having been a noble and intellectual ethnic group once; now it is the age of decadence. Crucially *Bhrashtu* introduces the interpretation that the trial was a cleverly engineered and executed machination by the then king of Cochin to demoralise and destroy the prestigious Namboothiri community; the novel also contains the later-day refrain that had Thathri continued to name her paramours, the king would have been the next and thus he ensured the trial was wound up immediately. Both these beliefs have echoed down ever since—they have congealed into some sort of conventional wisdom. The next novel on chastity trials *Yajnam* repeats and thus reinforces these beliefs.

Is the thesis that the trial of Thathri was due to royal intervention tenable? It is a question that needs deep and extensive research. But we would like to invite scholarly attention to the fact that the *Malayala Manorama* newspaper reported a trial held at Kottayaam in 1901 in which an unmarried girl was suspected and accused of having illicit relations. Notably the paramour proved to be a member of the Cochin royalty: KunjunniThampuran of the KorattySwaroopam in Mukundapruam taluk which is a part of Cochin (Edamaruku 25). And soon there was trial in 1903, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, which as we

---

have seen is a miniature of the 1905 trial. The point is that no royal member was involved in both these trials; on the contrary they inflicted a fatal blow to the Namboothiri community.

K.B. Sreedevi's *Yajnam* (1976) describes how the saintly and scholarly Kunhikuttan, eagerly waiting for the birth of his heir, is falsely implicated in a chastity trial and flees the land fearing the inevitable ostracism. After wandering about for a while he eventually reaches Banaras, becomes a college teacher, reconceptualises Brahmanism as a quality of mind, gets enlightened, and never comes home. His daughter Savithri, bearing the stigma of her father's 'sin', is treated as a quasi-outcaste, though she is not actually expelled from the household. Growing into a bitter and rebellious woman, she finally marries Kuttan, a zealous young reformist hailing from an aristocratic Namboothiri family, flouting all customary practices. At the end of the novel there are indications of a family reunion: Savithri, along with her enterprising husband, is getting ready to meet her father for the first time.

Narrated through a blend of omniscient third-person and shifting perspectives of a few characters, *Yajnam* is more concerned with the catastrophic effects of the trial on a sprouting family. The accused woman, whose revelations wreak havoc on the family, is pictured as avenging the moral credo of the Brahmin community even though it not clear how or when she was wronged.

A remarkable feature of *Yajnam* is that it reconceptualises the overriding and obsessive Brahmin sense of purity into something physical and biological, in tune with the colonial definitions of cleanliness and hygiene. Savithri seeks to prove that purity is not ritual but physical; she expostulates to her indignant aunt (who is shocked to see Savithri inside the house proper and hanging clothes on a line) that she is not a leper and no one can prevent her from accessing her own house. To reinforce the argument she says that she is the daughter of a Namboothiri and the so called sin of her father does not contaminate her in any way. This is a new understanding of sin. Though fate as an explanatory mechanism figures in this novel here and there, different characters have different ideas about it. While a crestfallen Kunhikuttan accepts his plight as the mysterious decision of a superpower—destiny—youngsters like Kuttan and Savithri believe that they decide their future and fate.

Closely following the heels of *Bhrashtu*, Puthoor Unnikrishnan's 545-page tome *Amruthamadhanam* (1981) considers the trial of 1905 as the well thought-out and meticulously implemented saga of vengeance. In the preface Puthoor fleetingly mentions

*Bharashtu* as an idealised narrative which does not do justice to facts. Puthor goes on to claim that his heroine—Kunjunnooli—bodies forth the collective female urge to resist sexual and non-sexual hegemony of man; by transforming Thathri into Kunjunnooli, he has tried to endow universal dimensions and appeal to the character and the events depicted in the novel.

*Smarthavicharam* resurfaced in popular culture after a respite in 1993 through the moderately successful movie *Parinayam* written by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and directed by Hariharan. Though it was not based on a specific chastity trial but telescoped many points of time and places, the number of paramours mentioned by the accused—sixty four—made the public instantly identify it with the trial of 1905. The movie, narrated through flashbacks from the perspective of the heroine Nangeli—a demure girl of surpassing grace, beauty and refinement, and a Kathakali connoisseur—visualises her journey from marriage through widowhood and seduction to self-reliance. The movie ends with a sequence in which is shown as working on a charka, the symbol of Gandhian self-reliance and independence.

It seems that *Parinayam* was hardly appreciated as a socially relevant historical drama at the time of its release. What appealed to popular interest were its melodious music by the veteran composer Ravi, brilliant camera work, directorial finesse and rich frames. The influential review by Kozhikkodan in the elite *Matrubhumi* weekly is an example. Written in a judicious vein with aesthetic sensibility, it gives a summary of the movie and eulogises the technical aspects of the movie often in superlative terms (42-43). This is not a fault. At that time, the most established critical tool was aesthetic and the practice of historicising and politicising everything theoretically was only gaining a foothold.

In *Parinayam* (in contradistinction to the view in *Bhrastu*) the trial is the natural and inevitable fallout of a decadent social structure. There is no glorification of the past and the role of fate is limited. The heroine cleanses her caste and is not revengeful. She does not flee the land or marry someone from another community but decides to plod her way forward by becoming economically independent within a Gandhian framework. Though fate is not a causative agent if we take the overall narrative tone and tenor of the movie, there are a handful of characters who make sense of the traumatic events in terms of the invisible hands of fate.

There are clear temporal tags which indicate that the events in the movie are supposed to have occurred in 1940 or thereabouts. The first one is a notice written by V.T.

Bhattathippadu in 1930 as a letter to Namboothiri girls and is described as ten years old. Kunjunni talks about a “yachana yatra” to raise funds for a school; this occurred in 1931. Kunjunni, an angry young man in the mould of V.T. Bhattathirippadu, also talks about the staging of V.T.’s play *Adukkalayilninnun Arangathekku* which was enacted for the first time in 1929. There is a talented Kathakali artist ostracised in the 1905 trail; he is described as desperately wandering in search of a role for thirty-five years. Thus the events of *Parinayam* take place in 1940. The *Smartha* says that they are ruled by George VI. The movie takes place in a somewhat modern space. There are pointed references to the rule of law, police station and possible punishments.

*AvasanatheSmarthavicharam* by A.M.N. Chakyar (1998) is an autobiographical work which narrates how the author’s father, having been implicated a chastity trial in 1918, committed suicide to escape shame and how other surviving members were relegated to the lower caste of chakyars. However, the title is misleading as there is clear evidence of similar trials after 1918. For instance in *Kavalappara Papers* we come across a letter written by the Muppil Nair to Somayajipad dated 22 December 1920. It is about the wife of one Jathavedan Namboothiri. The letter clearly states:

... the suspect has been placed in (*Anchampura*) prison in the fifth room of the house, after a preliminary enquiry of the (*Dasi*) female servant in attendance on her, arrangements should be made to have the enquiry made into the matter in accordance with the previous custom and usage. (137)

Bhaskaran unni’s dense and informative monograph *Smarthavicharam*(2000) is one of the most comprehensive and panoramic studies on chastity trials. What makes the work noteworthy is the way in which the author provides a compressive, in fact almost exhaustive, background of the custom by profusely quoting from authentic sources some of which are difficult to obtain. Such descriptions stand the common reader and the researcher in good stead.

The work in great detail discusses every aspect of life led by the Namboothiris. The author pictures this community as strictly adhering to a lifestyle informed by and saturated with ritualised practices and scriptural interdictions in every conceivable domain of human activity: from birth to death—in fact even before and after these events—a Namboothiri’s life is controlled and regulated by works which are considered divine and inviolable. He cautiously postulates (as we have seen) the preoccupation with racial purity as the prime moving force behind the custom.

It is only after providing background information which sprawls over more than a hundred pages that he comes to the core topic of trials. Its structure, requirements, implementation, etc., are extensively dealt with. He then examines a good number of documented and historically tenable/valuable instances of the chastity trial. After this he talks about the celebrated trial of Thathri in great detail. In addition to a summary there are full-length quotations from the documents of the trial now preserved in Regional Archives, Ernakulam. The last of the work is on literary works based on chastity trials.

## V.

### ***Responses since 2000***

Nandan's novel *Kuriyedathu Thathri*, published in 2001, unfolds in three sections: *Aithihya Kandham* (myth section) *Charithra Kandham* (history section) and *Swapna Kandham* (dream section). He analyses this historical event from multiple perspectives. The novel has intertwining and overlapping narratives which include journeys to collect material for the novel, popular stories as well as historical evidences. His narrative sometimes resembles journalistic writing. The concluding section is titled "Into Nature". The ostracised Thathri owns the sky and not land now. She even tastes it. She confesses to her maid that she has never hated men, only their insufferable pride and denounces the inferiority of women. She waits for a man whose eyes contain visions of love and hopes that flowers will bloom again.

*Ororo Kalathilum* by Sreeja K. V. is a play which has *Kuriyedathu Thathri* and a modern day young girl, a painter as protagonists. It was first published in 2004. The anonymous girl is the representative of the modern day "victim" whose plight is callously celebrated by the media and society. Another painter, representative of the ever present patriarchy rapes her along with his friends and the drama juxtaposes her experiences with the experiences that Thathri had to undergo almost a century ago to prove that things have not changed at all and that "time is just a distance". In the epilogue the frightened girl asks the retreating Thathri for a way out and she smiles by way of an answer before leaving with Konavally Madhavi, her maid. In the background we listen to lines from the poem by M. Govindan "will have to forge a path yourself".

*Thatrikkuttiyude Smarthavicharam* by Alankodu Leelakrishnan published in 2004 reached its seventh edition in 2017 which vouches for its popularity and the hold that Thathrikutty still exercises over the Malayali psyche and imagination. He begins by quoting V. T. Bhattathirippadu's comment that Thathri was undertaking a guerrilla model warfare against the sexually decadent patriarchal set-up by employing the same strategy and concludes by stating that this revolt has led to the emancipation of Namboothiri women.

*Smartham, Suryanelli, Ice cream: Moonu Kuttavicharanakal* by M. P. Basheer appeared in 2005 when *Smarthavicharam* was celebrating/observing its centenary and when Kerala was witnessing a deluge of sexual trafficking cases. He attempts to present facts relating to three cases well known by the above mentioned names as attempts by three women to raise voice against the sexual profligacy of men in Kerala. His narrative moves seamlessly from Nandan's novel *Kuriyedathu Thathri* and also the records in Kochi archives. By quoting from *Malayala Manorama* of 1905 he proves that the public sentiment demanded that the accused should be given a chance to prove his innocence and this along with a ruling by Madras High court in connection with another *Smarthavicharam* of 1889 resulted in the *Purushavicharam* ordered by the King. His work also mentions the well known works in which Thathri features as the protagonist. He concludes by saying that the ostracised males forgave each other but they never forgave Thathri.

In fact the year 2005 was sort of commemorated as the centenary of Thathri's trial by most magazines in Kerala. They published a plethora of articles and memoirs some of which were mere iterations and others based on hearsay. There were a few serious, academic ones too. *Samakalika Malayalam* weekly in July brought an issue containing writings by K.B. Sreedevi (author of the novel *Yajnam* mentioned above), V.T. Vasudevan, Geethartha, N.R. Gramaprakash and K.K. Mohanan. The magazine *Pachakkuthira* published an article titled 'Thathrikkuttiyum Thiruvithamkoorile Budhijeevikalum' by Cherai Ramadas. *Mathrubhumi* Weekly came up with essays and excerpts from the trial documents and thus sought to provide a more balanced and comprehensive picture of the event during April-May issues of 2005. There were articles by K.M. Sheeba, J. Devika, N.P. Vijayakrishnan and an old piece by V.T. Bhattathirippadu. Readers also participated in the ensuing debate by offering perceptive positions, most of which can be considered articles of their own right.

*Kuriyedathu Thathri vicharathinte Kanapurangal*, a study brought out in 2015 by Adv. Biju Kaipanplakkal upholds the opinion that the entire *Smarthavicharam* was a finely orchestrated conspiracy and he invests Thathri with a personality so complex that it could



not be separated from art. Needless to say, for him “art is sex and sex is art”. He is sure that Thathri never harboured any hatred against men but the work concludes with the statement that the greatest contribution that Thathri made to womenfolk is that she shredded to pieces the masks that men whom they had adored, including her father and brother had worn. He offers a scathing criticism of Oduvil Kunhikrishna Menon’s poem ‘Aparadhiniyaya Antarjanam’ alleging that the poet “found satisfaction in throwing it up on the face of Namboothiri community the inferiority complex accumulated through generations when he got a chance” (32).

The following are some of his arguments in favour of the conspiracy theory: that the procedures followed were not in accordance with *Sankarasmriti*. The burning down of Thathri’s *sillam* to ashes must have been part of the conspiracy and a wilful effort on somebody’s part to eradicate her personality forever. The *Purushavicharam* conducted was a farce and a downright denial of justice as the *Purushavicharasabha*/ government, had the ultimate authority to decide whether further proceedings should or should not be initiated against the accused no matter what the *Sadhanam* or *Smartha* finds out. The highly biased *Purushavicharasangham* came to Thathri’s rescue when she lost confidence and claims that the *sangham* got her to concede to their plans by resorting to a heavy degree of physical and mental torture.

Regarding Thathri’s life after the event he notes that even after excommunication, Thathri was under the custody of the king and the government and it is possible that once the government weakened she might have escaped or she might have been murdered. By quoting three correspondences between government officials he raises a question as to why should the king show such concern for a woman who had been ostracised by the community and society whereas he has not shown any such concern in the case of the accused/ guilty and concludes that this unbounded kindness must have been a ploy of self-defence.

A chapter of his work is an enquiry into the later life of those who were ostracised and their families. He notes that those families intermarried and formed a society on their own. Erakkattiri, where they settled, became a hub of activity and they became social reformers. Their progressive efforts were later given momentum by the *Yogakshema Sabha* under the leadership of V. T. Bhattathirippadu. The last chapter contains a survey of works about the event.

The popular historian Manu S. Pillai published a long article in *The Hindu Magazine* of 1 October 2017. By referring to the Sanskrit movie *Ishti* (2015) he describes how the women

of this community lived in the past and how the trial of 1905 changed everything. In 2018, Rajan Chunkathu wrote an article which offered a wealth of information on the *Smartha* tradition in Kerala. Irinchayam Ravi's *Thathreebhagavathi* (Thathri, the Goddess) published in 2019 is a novel that runs into more than four hundred pages. Full of dialogues and vivid descriptions, the novel seeks to comprehensively verbalise the wax and wane of Namboothiri households in the last two centuries. That Prasanna Karthain 2014 titled her collection of stories *Smarthavicharam*, though it has nothing to do with chastity trial or its associative aspects, bears ample testimony to the extent to which memories of this event still has the potential to grip popular imagination.

The specter of Thathri and her chastity trial still hound us. In every literary and visual genre, it has inspired all sorts of works and no respite to such works is in view. It is against the backdrop of this persisting presence that the essays and translations of this volume become relevant. The idea is not to detect what “really” happened but to comprehensively understand the trial as a milestone event in the historical evolution of our society and selves.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aji, K.M. “Thathri: Sambhavam, Lingapadavi, Parinamam.” *Malayalappacha*, 5: 2017. pp 262 – 87.

Aiya, V. Nagam. *The Travancore State Manual Part II*. New Delhi: AES, 1989 (1906).

Barbosa, Duarte. *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar*. Tr. Henry E.J. Stanley. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1865. (1521)

Bartolomeo, Fra Paolino de San. *Voyage to the East Indies*. Tr. John Reinhold Forster. London: Vernor & Hood, 1800.

Basheer, M.M. *Adyakala Sthree Kathakal*. Calicut: Lipi, 2010.

Basheer, M.P. *Smartham, Sooryanelli, Icecream: Moonnu Kuttavicharanakal*. Kottayam: D.C., 2005.

Bhaskaranunni, P. *Smarthavicharam*. Kottayam: SPSS, 2000.

--. *Pathonpatham Noottantile Keralam*. Trichur: Sahitya Akademi, 1988.

Bhattathirippad, V.T. *V.T.yude Sampoorana Krithikal*. Kottayam: DC, 2006.

- Chakyar, A. M. N. *Avasanathe Smarthavicharam*. Trivandrum: Cultural Publications 1998.
- Chandramohan, P. *Developmental Modernity in Kerala: Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam and Social Reform*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2016.
- Chunkathu, Rajan. 'Vaidika Smarthan'. *Prasadhakan*, 2018 September. pp 168 – 73.
- Edamaruku, Joseph. 'Smarthavicharam'. *Malayala Manorama Weekly*. 2 March 1968. pp 23-29.
- George, V.C. *Nidhirickal Manikathnar*. Koothattukulam, 1952.
- Gopalakrishnan, P.K. *Keralathinte Samskarika Charithram*. Trivandrum: Language Institute, 2008.
- Gopakumar, P.F. Ed. *Faces of Social Reform in Kerala*. Trivandrum, 2015.
- Govindan, M. *Sarpam*. Kottayam: DC, 2004.
- . *M. Govindante Upanyasangal*. Kottayam: SPCS, 1986.
- Irumpayam, George. *Aadyakala Malayala Novel*. Kottayam: SPCS, 2010.
- Iyer, L.K. Anantha Krishna. *The Cochin Tribes and Castes Vol. I*. Madras: Higgin Botham, 1909.
- Kaippanplakkal, Biju. *Kuriyedathu Thathrivicharathinte Kanappurangal*. Kozhikode, Mathrubhumi, 2015.
- K.E.N. *Chennmeenile Sangharshangal*. Calicut: Raspberry, 2013.
- Kozhikkodan. 'Parinayam'. *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. 1994 March 6-12.
- Kurup, K.K.N. Ed. *Kavalappara Papers*. Calicut: Uty of Calicut, 1984.
- Leelakrishnan, Alankodu. *Thathrikkuttiyude Smarthavicharam*. Kozhikode, Mathrubhumi, 2017.
- Logan, William. *The Malabar Manual Vol I*. Delhi: Low Price, 2009 (1887).
- Manilal, K.S. *Hortus Malabaricus and the Socio-Cultural Heritage of India*. Calicut: IIAT, 2012.
- Manojkumar, P.S. "Shaping of Rights: State, Jati and Gender." *Malayalappacha*, 5; 2017. pp 246- 61.
- Mateer, Samuel. *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People*.

London: John Snow, 1871.

Mathew, Alex. *The Reunion Movement among the St. Thomas*

*Christians: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. MG University, 2007.

Menon, Oduvil Kunjikirishna. *Aparadhiniyaya Antarjanam*. Trichur: Sahitya Akademi, 1983.

Mohandas, Vallikkavu. *Arayan*. Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2010.

Moore, Lewis. *Malabar Law and Custom*. Madras: Higginbotham, 1905 (1882).

Muraleedharan, Nellickal. *Kerala Jathi Vivaranam*. Chengannoor: Rainbow, 2010.

Nair, Radhika C. *Kerala Charithrathile Avismaraneeya Sambhavangal*. Kottayam: DC, 2006.

Nandan. *Kuriyedathu Thathri*. Kottayam: Current, 2001.

Narayana Pisharody, K.P. *Punnassery Nampi Neelakanta Sharma*. Trivandrum: Cultural Publications, 1990.

Nidhiry, Abraham M. *Father Nidhiry: A History of His Times*. Kuravilangadu: 1974.

Olappamanna, Sreedevi. 'Antarjanam'. *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, 1961 August 27, pp 51 – 53.

Pannikkottu, Karunakara Menon. *Dakshina Indiyale Jathikal*. Calicut: Vidyavilasam, 1915.

Pillai, Manu S. 'Savitri's Revenge'. *The Hindu Magazine* 1 October 2017.

Puthoor, Unnikrishnan. *Amruthamadhanam*. Kottayam: SPCS, 1981.

Raghavan, Puthuppally. *Kerala Pathrapravarthana Charithram*. Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2008.

Ramankutty, P.V. "Smruthi Paramparya Prabhavavum Prathirodhavum Keraleeya Brahmana Jeevithathil". Ed. Dr. V.J. Varghese, Dr. N. Vijayamohanan Pillai and Dr. Scaria Zakkaria. *500 Varshathe Keralam: Chila Arivadayalangal*. Kottayam: SPCS, 2015.

Ravi, Irinchayam. *Thathreebhagavathi*. Trichur: Green, 2019.

Sheeba, K.M. *Caste, Sexuality and the State: The Changing Lives of the Namboodiri Women in Keralam in the Twentieth Century*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, 2002.

Sreedevi, K.B. *Yajnam*. Kottayam: SPCS, 1976.

Sreeja, K. V. *Ororo Kalathilum* , Kottayam: D. C. 2004.

Sreekumar, P.K. and Priya Jose K. 'Empowerment and/or Enslavement: English and Early Malayalam Fiction'. Vol 4 (2), *Journal of DBCT*, September 2017.

Sree S.V. Tr. 'Oh, The Way I Blushed' in Ed. Priya Jose K. *Negotiating Cultural Distances: An Anthology of Early Women's Short Fiction in Malayalam*. Tripunithura: Govt. College, 2018.

Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. *Europe's India: Words, People, Empires 1500 – 1800*. Cambridge: Havard UP, 2017.

Veluthat, Kesavan. *Devabhasha: Daivathinte Swantham Nattil*. Tripunithura: Sanskrit College, 2015.

Vijayan, M.N. Ed. *Nammude Sahityam, Nammude Samootham Vol I*. Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2000.

Wood, Conrad. *The Moplah Rebellion and Its Genesis*. New Belhi: People's Publishing House, 1987.

Zeen-ud-deen, Sheikh. *Tohfut-ul-Mujahideen*. Tr. M.J. Rowlandson. London: John Murray, 1883.

#### Contributors:

P.K. SREEKUMAR. Is Assistant Professor of English and Research Supervisor at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam.

PRIYA JOSE K. Is Assistant Professor of English at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam.

