

EXAMPLE IS BETTER THAN PRECEPT IN REVOLUTION

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Abstract: This article summarises the responses of three men, M.K. Kumaran, V.T .Bhattathirippad and the writer to Thathri and her life .

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Respected Sir,

This letter is written by a man whom you have no personal acquaintance with but one who adores you from afar.

This letter is prompted by the novel *Amrithamadhanam* (Churning for Ambrosia) by Unnikrishnan Puthoor. I read 200 pages of the book. Then I felt that it contains a lot of false ideas about that age. *Smarthavicharam* took place in 1080 [C.E. 1905]. My understanding is that seventy-six years ago not even English education among Namboothiris had been initiated, let alone Yogakshemasabha. But this novel depicts the existence of separate reform organizations for Namboothiris and Antharjanams and portrays Kunjunnooli as the leader of the women's organization. How true can this depiction be? The novelist claims that he has conversed with you and has studied the social situation of those times. It is not out of this reason alone that this letter is written. You are one who has played a major role in transforming Namboothiri caste and Kerala history. I would like to know what your response is to this novel.

I had heard the story of this *Smarthavicharam* from Lalithambika Antharjanam several years ago. She had told me that she intended to write a novel. Thathri is the protagonist of one of her short stories. In Madambu Kunjukuttan's *Bhrashtu* too, this revered lady- I hold her

soin my mind- is the heroine. No other character has attracted me so much. It is imperative that the world should be made aware of her exact history. Shall Unnikrishnan's story help in this regard? If not, it would be a pity.

M.K. Kumaran

V.T. Bhattathirippadu wrote this reply to Kumaran.

Dear Sri Kumar,

Thank you very much for your friendly letter. I am happy to welcome one more special guest to my friend circle. Let this relationship last long.

Sri Puthoor and I belong to the same domain. We get opportunities to be in contact with each other. We may have had discussions on the resounding problems of life. But I have no knowledge as to whether he has gained anything from me with regard to his Amritamadhanam which is being written now. He also would not have wished to have my seal and signature in the ideas discussed therein.

Just like any other writer inquisitive of Kerala history, I have also been put to deep thoughts by this character called Thathri. I don't intend to label those communal-cultural establishments revolutionary. I too had wished to give a truthful description about the values precipitating the incident which helped to bring about a sea change. I have not been able to record that action-filled chapter with reliable evidence. Thathrikuttyas portrayed by Madambu Kunjikuttan and Lalithambika Antharjanam does not match with my imaginary picture of hers. Anyway, it still remains a sorrowful fact that no writer could make a truthful record of an event which happened here within a period of a century and half.

It is true that the proclamation of the Maharaja of Cochin in the Malayalam Era 1080 shocked all Keralites in general and all Namboothiris in particular. Perhaps this also has been the chief reason behind the formation of Yogakshema movement. But as mentioned in the letter, the existence of special reform organizations for Antharjanams and Namboothiri men at that time is not true. As I had been ten years old at that time, I know that there were no such women's organizations or leadership then. But there is evidence that here and there, there had commenced the debut occurrence of sexual anarchy in the Anthapurams, even before this *Smarthavicharam*. I have knowledge about three girls who

had left home from Kambrathu Mana after attaining puberty living their lives by having sexual relationships with famous persons who visited Travellers' Bungalow in the District and Taluk centers. I have seen two of them myself in the Pulamanthol river.

One Antharjanam of Chalavara Ashtamath Illam lived as the mistress of a young servant of the Mana even while her husband was alive. She continued her sexual perversions and finally her husband was thrashed to death by her lover. I feel that there has been a slight decline in these kind of perversions after the *Smarthavicharam* of Thathrikutty

I haven't read Puthoor's *Amruthamadhanam* and hence I am not fit now to opine about the book.

I was drawn to the disgusting nature of Namboothiri Sambandham through *Indulekha*. In the community reformation endeavours that commenced from then onwards, I gave special importance to the uplift of Namboothiri women from those hellish circumstances. I can claim that I have been completely successful in this attempt.

I haven't seen Thathri. I have heard that she was beautiful to look at and was a scholar. I infer that if her community rituals had allowed her to marry an appropriate groom at the right time, there wouldn't have occurred a problem like this *Smarthavicharam*.

One submits to prostitution mainly due to three reasons. One is lust, the second is money and the third is revenge. One can justify that, it is Thathrikutty's conscious retaliation against the patriarchal sexual anarchy which existed at that time in the same vein. Because, if it had been for lust, she would have satisfied herself with a chosen few men. As she had approached the poorest of the poor, we cannot expect that her intention was money. Hence it becomes clear that she is prompted by her rebellious attitude. By seizing those who desired any kind of influence, power or leadership in the community, she would have humiliated them by having sexual intercourse with them.

There is no evidence that a guerilla model struggle under the leadership of Thathri existed for this purpose. But it can be assumed that this struggle received the willful participation of some of her close friends. For example, as directed by Thathrikutty, it might have been a Kalyani or Madhavi who had sexual intercourse with the despicable men who boast of having slept with Thathri. In that sense, not only in dress or discourse, but in demeanor also she might have imparted training in a systematic process with regard to sexual intercourse. Stories have been heard about how through such impersonation certain chief

priests were trapped and some marks were collected for evidence. In short, in the sexual conquest made ranging from elite Namboothiristo mahouts, it is clear that many prominent persons had been trapped. Therefore my personal opinion is that this might be honoured as a struggle for cultural renaissance and its leader Thathrikutty should be commemorated for it.

We may consider it as sounding the culmination of the dark age of Kerala which in the name of Chandrolsavampracticedsexual promiscuityand ceremonial worship of the prostitute.

Yours
V.T.

My father had nothing but scorn for those who viewed Thathri—, that mother who pointed out that revolution is not for exhortation but for practicing—as a whore who turned entire Kerala upside down by leading an immoral life. When some consider Sankaracharyar as the reason behind the communal renaissance that occurred in Naalukettu, for some others it is affected by Sankaran Namboothirippadu—thus Namboothiris in Kerala always had only two extreme ends.

It was in the indoor courtyard which strictly adhered that no man except husband and father can see the face of an Antharjanam, that Thaathri held her head high and questioned patriarchy using her talent and body.

Married men could have extramarital affairs and *Sambandhamsas* they wished and could practice polygamy. Not only did the conflicts in the inner chambers due to *adhivedanam* (marrying again when the first wife was alive), but the marriage of one son alone also caused difficulties in the marriages of girls.

The heartbreaks of virgins who had attained puberty, the competition among co-wives, the sobs of young widows, the blind colossal darkness which prevented even an attempt to dream of changes that can be brought about by education and self-dependence – this is where Thathri kindled a flame. It was this light which provided heat for the whole of reformation movement in the Namboothiri community. The documents reveal that there had been many *Smarthavicharams* before and after Thathri. But there has not been any other incident which shook even the very root of the Brahmin culture. Thathri might have

slipped and fallen. Yet she was able to excommunicate a great section of the society among whom were people like the aristocratic Namboothirippadu, the scholarly priest, father, uncle, brothers, and teacher who belonged to her husband's home and neighbourhood *illams*, artists, priests, those who attended to menial service in temples, servants and even the King .

It is not accidental that Yogakshemasabha was formed in the house of Cherumuk in the banks of the Periyar river in Aluva three years after the *Smarthavicharam* of Aarangottukara Kalpakassery Savithri Antharjanam who had been married to Chemmenthatta Kuriyedath took place. Though it was the anxiety about the possible destruction of landlordship and Brahminism that led to the birth of the Sabha, the thoughts of reformation including women's education and new family order originated with the Thathri incident.

It was also from the inspiration gained from this goodness that the Namboothiri youth were induced later to promise to their sisters, "from the fort of tradition which would never break apart even if attacked with a strong saw, if at least one stone can be upturned, that is a feat. We partake in all your hardships. If we eat, you shall also eat. Or, we shall eat only after you have had food. If you laugh, we shall also laugh".

When this legendary incident took place, my father was five years old. The year of *Smarthavicharam* is 1080 (1905). Thathri was born in 1048 (1873). She died at Palakkad in 1115 (1940). Her place of birth, Aarangottukara is not far away from Mezhatthoor. My father though very excited about Thathri never set his heart to probe deep into the story of her life.

S. K. Pottekkatt stayed at my home for a night to collect information about Thathri for his novel, *Bhaarithapuzhayude Makkal*. Father told him then that it was a natural law to be interested in sensual pleasure in youth. But to enquire about the ways followed by Thathri would itself turn into another *Smarthavicharam* remarked father. Historians can collect the *Smartham* documents as well as the experiences of the contemporaries still alive. But father stated that he was not ready to sell Thathri and serialise her in that manner.

Once my father's long-time friend and actor M.S. Namboothiri took him to watch the movie '*Bhrashtu*'. Thus father also got the opportunity to indulge in the appreciation of '*Bhrashtu*' piping hot. "I wish that cinema as a medium should be beneficial in accelerating the cultural progress of the society. In that sense '*Bhrashtu*' was thought-provoking and tormenting me", he gave in writing.

I also reminisce about a local journey made by my father at that time. The journey was to Mundamooka temple, Shornur from where he learned the letters from a little girl while working there as a priest and on the way back, to KalpakasseryManaparambu where Thathri was born. Father had a dip in the river from where he had drawn many a pot of water to anoint the Mundamookaidol. Then he also visited a place overgrown with bushes, known as AarangottukaraVaariathValappu. On that day my father told a social worker friend who had accompanied us, “This place belongs to the woman-redeemer who made a real explosion in the reformation movement during the first decade of the twentieth century. If you want you can take some soil from here and preserve it.” My father has also had a tradition of exhorting that in the *sreelakams* of the Namboothiri homes, it is the picture of Kuriyedathu Thathri that has to be installed ritually as a deity....

¹ Son of the social reformer V.T. Bhattathirippadu. He wrote this article which appeared in *Samakalika Malayalam Weekly* in July 2005.

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