

HARLOT OR HEROINE ?

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Abstract: This article from Malayalam, July 2005 seeks to vindicate/exonerate Thathri of all the accusations labeling her as a whore and a seducer. It makes an attempt to locate and validate the true motives that may have driven Thathri to execute her elaborate scheme. V. T. Bhattathirippad assumes that it is not lust or the greed for wealth that instigated her, but her strong desire to protest against the grossly unfair patriarchal system of her days when woman was reduced to insignificance, into a mere Sadhanam. In fact, V.T. suggests that, in truth, Thathri is the torch-bearer of the various reform movements that were soon to follow within the Namboothiri community. Many a murderer and a bandit have turned heroes with the passage of time. The writer argues in favour of Thathri being recognised as a Renaissance heroine instead of a harlot. Many a person accused of crimes has later turned great heroes, but Thathri has no redemption in sight.

Which single individual, among all the people who lived in Kerala in the previous century, had prompted the most number of creative works? Names ranging from Sree Narayana Guru to EMS might come to one's mind. When any attempt is made to fix a name, there is one name to be considered , whether one likes it or not, the name of Kuriyedathu Thathri!

Born and brought up in the 1880s as the daughter of Ashtamurthy of Kalpakassery *Illam* ,Arangottukara*Desom* in Thalappilly taluk, Trissur district, Thathri later became the wife of Raman Namboodiri of Kuriyedath*Illam* in Chemmanthitta of the same district. Her presence is explicitly and implicitly felt in the following works:

Novels:

Brasht (Ostracism): MadambuKunjukuttan

Amruthamadhanam(Churning for the Elixir): Puthoor Unnikrishnan

Yajnam: K. B. Sreedevi

KuriyedathuThatri: Nandan

Sarpam(The Serpent): M. Govindan

Story:

Prathikaradevatha(The Goddess of Vengeance) – LalithambikaAntharjanam

Poems:

BrashtayayaAntarjanam(The OstracisedAntarjanam) :OduvilKunjikrishna Menon

OruThaarathinte Katha (The Story of a Star): Premji

OruKoodiyattathinteKatha(The Tale of Koodiyattam) : M. Govindan

Plays:

Maraattam:Kavalam Narayana Panikker

OroroKaalathilum: K. V. Sreeja

Thathri: Shailaja (NSD, Delhi)

Cinema:

Maraattam

Parinayam

Vanaprastham

Moreover, her name appears in articles, essays, dissertations and folk tales penned by writers ranging from V. K. Bhattathirippad to Dr. K. M. Sheeba who still carry memories of that bygone era in their hearts.

Her fame rests on the historic *Smarthavicharam* that took place in Kochi almost a century ago. Similar instances of preceding and succeeding *Smarthavicharams* have sunk into oblivion. A few may remain in the reminiscences of the relatives of the *Sadhanam*, but the legend of Thathri keeps surfacing intermittently. When the Suryanelli harassment case¹ came to light, one magazine published an article titled “Yet Another Thathri”. When the High Court acquitted the accused, many comparisons were drawn between the methods of the erstwhile *Smarthavicharam* and the present –day judiciary which is considered the

¹Suryanelli Case: A sexual harassment case in Kerala which was filed in 1996 involving a 16 year old girl and 42 accused.

pillar of democracy. Which was the cruder of the two? Which was more misogynistic: autocracy or democracy?

The Obsession of Malayalis:

The belief that MGR and Balaji were the offspring of one of the men who were ostracised during the Thathritrial, and that the actress Sheela is the granddaughter of Thathri has enhanced her fame. She gains more relevance with the advancement of feminist ideologies. Those people who seek to learn Thathri's story and history are mesmerised by her. Most writers have admitted to this fact. Each work, for them, is an attempt to escape from Thathri. The situation was very much the same when Thathri (who according to K. P. S. Menon was a beautifully endowed lady greatly accomplished in Kathakali and music) was alive. A number of lustful Keechakas² must have harboured dreams about her. It is certain that the number went above sixty-four by all means. All those who walked into her trap must have longed for an unburdening of their desire along with its fulfillment. Even to this day numerous people, infatuated with Thathri, visit Kalpakassery and Kuriyedath like eager pilgrims. The novelist Puthoor Unnikrishnan introduces the sagacious scholar Thiruvangattu Narayanan Nambisan as the person who kindled fond thoughts about Kuriyedath Thathri in his mind. Many are those who lodge similar feelings in their hearts even today. The novelist even longed to take home a handful of the red soil from the courtyard of the house where Thathri was born. From Nandan's description of more than fifty people who supplied information related to Thathri in the novel *Kuriyedathu Thathri*, of which the fourth edition was published within two years of its first publication, it can be clearly understood that she remains an obsession to many imaginative Malayalis even to this day.

An Inspiration for the Renaissance

Kuriyedathu Thathri is the goddess of vengeance in Lalithambika Antharjanam's work³. The story is a conversation between the author and a Thathri-like apparition who appears in her room one lonely night as she awaits the Muse for inspiration. On realising that she is talking to Thathri, the author retorts thus: "Oh! Oh! This is she . . . the very utterance of

²The lustful prince in Mahabharata whose sexual misdemeanor towards Draupadi led to his death at the hands of Bheemasenan

³Short story titled "Goddess of Revenge" (Pratikara Devata)

whose name is prohibited by our mothers . . . the person whose very name induces revulsion . . . that . . . that . . . what do I say.”

This was the opinion etched in the general consciousness of those days. Thathri has had varying epithets down the passage of time including whore, *Sadhanam* (object), seducer of artists and nymphomaniac. But, there was one person, V. T. Bhattathirippad, who fought for the welfare of the Brahmin community, hailed Thathri as the heroine of Renaissance in Kerala. In response to the doubts raised in his letters by M. K. Kumaran, V. T. admits that this character had prompted him into serious contemplation, like it has done many writers genuinely interested in Kerala history. He had analyzed the Thathri incident in detail. He said that there are three reasons that may prompt a woman into prostitution: 1. Lust, 2. Wealth, and 3. Protest. In the case of the first one, the woman can satisfy herself with the men of her choice. The only aim is pleasure, either her's or that of the man she desires. This does not call for much adventure. And it would also be unnecessary to collect birthmarks and evidence related to the men concerned. Thathri cannot be accused of indulging in sexual intercourse for wealth either, because some of the men named by her, though elevated in social status, were not exactly affluent. The reason for her having taken valuable gifts, including a ring bearing the royal stamp of the Maharaja of Cochin, became self-evident during the trial later.

Refuting both these factors mentioned above, V. T. wrote, “Then it is evident. Protest was what prompted her. Her plan was to seduce men of influence, power and leadership in society, and humiliate them with the accusation of sexual intercourse.” This is revenge. Often protest becomes a strong impetus for the transformation of a person into a rebel. Many circumstantial evidences validate M. Govindan's speculations that Thathri acted in accordance with a thorough scheme well-aided by a group of supporters. Oftentimes many of her lustful suitors, who had only heard of Thathri but had never seen her, must have been deceptively bedded by other members of the group. How much of amorous play would be permitted in the mostly clandestine rendezvous in dark attics and cellars? For beastly men who treated women likewise, little else would have mattered other than sexual gratification. There may have been quite a number of men, who, fearing humiliation, would never have disclosed their doubts to anybody. These speculations may well serve to solve the mystery of the fact that Thathri was safeguarded from pregnancy in spite of having had intercourse with several men.

The End and the Means

The courage and dauntlessness of Thathri's deeds have been applauded. The proclamation of the Maharaja of Cochin in the Malayalam calendar year 1080 shocked all Keralites in general and the Namboothiris in particular. V. T. Bhattathirippad writes, "Perhaps, this may have been one of the reasons for the founding of the reformatory Yoga Kshema Movement." The novelist Puthoor Unnikrishnan said that in his mind, Thathri stands as a symbol of feminine fortitude which resists the masculine superiority and cruelty, both in sexuality and other matters. In Madambu Kunjukuttan's *Brasht*, the two male characters Kutty Oickan and Unni Namboothiri are seen to seek the blessings of the heroine before they embark on a caste reform campaign. They are not reluctant to declare that Papthikutty (real-life Thathri) is their inspiration. The Goddess of Vengeance raises the question whether the tears of an Antharjanam is of no value whatsoever. Thathri had let loose a tempest that shook the norms and customs of society. Many a great tree was uprooted. Was she not letting herself be burnt at the stakes in order to lighten the path for the Yoga Kshema Movement and the Unni Namboothiri Movement? Then why is it that she is not marked in history as a cause for the Renaissance?

What is the obstacle? It is the fraudulent/pseudo moral policing entrenched in the Malayali psyche. The very same Lalithambika Antharjanam who said to Thathri that "from the deafening silence of darkness, you hurled an explosive firecracker. That was a very bold warning . . . having fallen into the future generation that fireball has burst into flames . . . in the glow of this fire all the mistakes of the avenging goddess seem pardonable" also says elsewhere "but the end does not justify the means, dear sister." What does this prove? It reveals the typical Malayali tendency that dons a double-face when confronted with daring statements.

Let's once again look at the matter. Was her means entirely wrong? Especially, looking at it from the present perspective? It was a time when the prowess of a woman was counted by the number of men she had slept with. This however, was not applicable to the Namboothiri woman. People of other castes and Namboothiri men could have any number of sexual relations. The vast majority did not count this to be a sin. Even the extramarital affairs of Namboothiri women were condoned as long as they were not caught red-handed. Thathri might have been infuriated by this unfair discrimination and cruelty faced by the Antharjanams. The heroine of M. Govindan's "Oru Koodiyattathinte Katha" raises this question: How can the woman alone be responsible for praise and humiliation? Have you ever pondered this question in silence? They say she has destroyed the reputation of the family; How can one destroy something that did not exist at all?

V. T. seems to be logical in his observations, “Thathri’s was a deliberate protest against the sexual anarchy promoted by the patriarchy of those times.” It was a technique of treating fire with fire. Her protest did not end merely with trapping the men. She presented evidences against them, took them to trial and got them excommunicated. Despite the availability of the state of the art investigative technology, did we not see an accuser turning accused and all forty-two accused going scot-free? That is why we cannot but eulogise the brazen Thathri who managed to grill sixty-four men.

Men who were once despised as bandits and murderers later came to be hailed as makers of history. The Moppila Mutiny became a freedom struggle. Today, even Kayamkulam Kochunni has earned public acclaim. The people of Kerala purchased two thousand copies of the autobiography of a sex-worker within two weeks. The passage of time ushers in new information. With new information comes new interpretations. Hence, with *Smarthavicharam* entering its centennial year now, should it not be proclaimed that Thathri has been freed of her ostracism? The Chemmanthitta temple has been taken over by the Archaeological Department. Shouldn’t the nearby Kuriyedath *Illam* and its precincts be considered as historical monuments too? Why the delay in constructing a shrine for Thathri in compliance to the rites performed at her birthplace? Who removed the silver statuette of Thathri that had been preserved in the Karthyayani temple at Aarangottukara? Historians! Do come this way! – Thathri and her scheme too are part of Kerala’s history and pride.

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