

ANTHARJANAM

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Abstract: This article which appeared in May 1968 in Mathrubhumi Weekly chronicles the different stages in the life of a Namboothiri woman and holds up a mirror to reflect the living hell inside the illam.

Cloaked in cloth, providing only a faint glimpse of the feet, walking demurely under a cadjan umbrella, glancing sideways at the world outside... this is the image that the term Antharjanam brings to one's mind. She is saddled with this umbrella, which incidentally cannot be folded, not only when she takes a walk outside, but also when she travels in a car, bus or a train! The space underneath the canopy is nothing but living hell. The enduring efforts of the social reformers have managed to erase it to some extent. However, the Antharjanam still stands bewildered and hesitant: the attire might have changed, but how can one break age old customs and conventions!

Childhood

The birth of a girl child is never celebrated in the Namboothiri household. While the arrival of the boy is welcomed happily with cheer and delight, a light knock on the door is the only signal to inform that the girl child is born. As far as the *illam*, the Namboothiri household, is concerned, a girl is nothing but a problem. Her destiny was to move from one kitchen to another. Right from birth, this sense of unbelonging, of insignificance is ingrained deep in her. The birthday of the boy child is invariably celebrated with pride and merriment. While the boy celebrates his birthday with *palpayasam* and sweets, the girl child's birthday passes by without any events supplemented only with prayers and *pindipayasam*. As she grows, so grows her parents' apprehensions about her.

On turning eight or nine years of age, she starts wearing earrings and dress. It is now that she begins offering *nivedyam*. She has to take bath early in the morning, followed by offering *appam* and *ada* to gods and prostrating before the deity. During some auspicious

days there is a special offering to Lord Ganesha. The abundance of *ada* and *appam* and other such sumptuous sweets made on the day of this ritual called *ganapathiyidal* fills the whole household in a festive mood. The girl children are not supposed to eat dinner during the month of *Thulam* (October- November). They must only have lunch. The same ritual is observed during *Thiruvathira* too.

Puberty

The beginning of menstrual cycle marks the transition of the girl into a woman and it also marks the end of the peaceful, free existence of the girl child. She is restrained from running and picking a mango as it falls down ripe and sweet, she is allowed only to see it from the portico. It is even forbidden for her to come to the front if there is someone in the portico . Thus without friends, without freedom she recedes into a lonely world of her own.

Getting flowers ready for the garland, making *karuka* garland, applying cow dung on the floor, assisting in kitchen, making food for the family members – her life is reduced to these household chores and arrangements for daily prayers. A girl has nothing much to learn beyond this basic education. Learning to write on the floor and reading the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavatha* was all she needed by way of education. Today the situation has changed a lot. She has started attending schools and colleges. But the ultimate aim of this education is nothing but marriage. Self-reliance does not come into the equation. No one is even bothered about it. As a result, even today, the ‘basic education’ mentioned earlier is deemed more important than college education. An Antharjanam, a graduate or not, is destined to confine her life within the precincts of the prayer room and kitchen. She cannot survive without learning to cook and make ritual offerings of food to god.

She has to make offerings to god every third Monday which is considered an auspicious day. During these days, she is permitted to have anything only after the devotional offering made to Lord Shiva at dusk. Menstruation is a period of austerity and penance. Her fasting and worship have the sole aim of getting a good bridegroom. Each flower that she picks, each garland she makes is for him and him alone. Marriage is her only hope out of this prison of rituals and beliefs.

Marriage

A Namboothiri woman is not supposed to nurture any dream or have any opinion about her own marriage. She has absolutely no say in this regard. She marries whoever is selected by

her parents. He then becomes the centre of her world, whether she likes him or not. Her life becomes a tale of obedience, an absolute compliance in thought, word and deed to whatever her husband says. Only the eldest son of the Namboothiri family used to marry from the same community in olden times. They followed the system of primogeniture. During those times, polygyny was prevalent among Namboothiri men and many Antharjanams had to bow down before elderly men for marriage. Remarriage and widow remarriage are impossible even today. There have only been one or two cases of widow remarriage, that too were conducted disregarding the disapprovals around.

After marriage, she becomes a guest in her natal home. She holds absolutely no rights to ancestral property. She forfeits her claims to property with her marriage. She must live as per the financial conditions of her husband's home. Sometimes the four sisters of a household may live in four diverse financial states. The girl who was born with the silver spoon in her mouth may end up with a ladle in her hand and vice versa. Marriage makes her a member of her husband's home, so much so that she has to observe only three days of *pula* even when her parents pass away.

The first ritual associated with marriage is *aayaniyoonnu*. The bride and bridegroom light the auspicious lamp and eat food in their respective homes simultaneously. It is the prerogative of the mother to serve them their food. When the bridegroom arrives for marriage at the bride's house, escorted by his relatives who cheer and applaud, the bride sits in the *vadikkini*, fully cloaked and anxious, with rice and *valkannadi* in her silver ringed, henna-laden hands. The bride's father gives the *thali* (wedding locket), duly offered to god for blessings, to the bridegroom who ties it around her neck. The bride cloaked in the *manthrakodi* brought by the bridegroom, escorted by her uncles, is ceremoniously walked to the platform where the bridegroom weds the bride with fire as the witness.

It is not customary for the married couple to see or talk to each other for four days after marriage. The bride is confined to a room and sits on a mat during these days. She is not allowed to take bath, or even to brush her teeth. When the other married women dance and sing in the central quadrangle of the house, the newly wed woman is expected to sit in the room alone, counting each passing day with sighs of hope and exasperation and dreaming only of her husband. On the fourth day, the bride, along with the other married women takes an oil bath and then adorns herself in the dress and ornaments brought by her husband. She is then served porridge cooked in milk. The day is celebrated with a sumptuous meal accompanied with *kheer*. The newlyweds can start their life of marital bliss if there is an

auspicious moment on that day. If there is no auspicious moment, they will have to wait till there is one.

The bridegroom takes his bride and her relations to his household on the prescribed auspicious day. This ritual is called *kalveppu*. The bride is welcomed into her husband's household with loud cheer and ululation. When the bride steps into her husband's household with her right feet first, the mother-in-law scatters turmeric powder on the bride's feet, a gesture inviting happiness and prosperity. The mother-in-law, sits along with her daughter-in-law in the central courtyard and makes the ritual offering of food to the gods. It is also customary for the married women of the family to come into the central courtyard and engage in auspicious practices like flower adornment, *moonnum koottal* and then chanting. After this, the sisters-in-law of the bride adorn the bride with gold and make her circumambulate the jasmine plant. The newly married couple is then seated and served sweet bits like milk and plantain. With this the rituals associated with marriage and *kutiveppu* come to an end.

Wifehood

She now becomes the part of the husband's family forever. Her life starts revolving around the needs and wishes of the members of her husband's family. She also faces the hard realities, trials and tribulations of life, just like women of other communities.

Even today the Antharjanam does not have the freedom to go outside, work and earn her living like the menfolk of her community. It is the exclusive prerogative of the menfolk of the family to do so. He is the only earning member of the family. The community expects the woman to be a good wife and homemaker.

There is a proverb 'Giving birth to ten babies will absolve one's sins' widely circulated among the Antharjanams from time immemorial. The husband requests his bride via chants during the rituals of marriage to make him her eleventh son. The prime responsibility and aim of her life is to give birth to sons (only the son is counted as a child, girls are not!) . Pregnancy becomes a series of pious observances and prayers all aimed at begetting the male heir of the family. Prayers and chants are deemed more powerful than medicine. She must observe every ritual available to beget a male child, including serving oneself with ghee after chanting *purushasooktham*, performing *pumsavanam*, *seemantham* and so on. If after all this paraphernalia, a girl child is born to her, everyone accuses her and pities her of her unfortunate destiny.

Widowhood

The most cursed life in the Namboothiri community is that of a widow. She leads the life of the living dead. The woman who can die while still married is really lucky. There used to be a lot of child widows earlier, due to the prevalence of polygyny and marriage to old men. They lived like wheelbarrows of unrealized dreams and wishes! Their eyes had nothing to look forward to, their lips had no one to direct a call to, their dreams had no hope of being fulfilled!

As she throws her *nedumangalyam* on the funeral pyre of her husband, tears are her only refuge. For the next ten days of *pula* she should not even wear washed clothes. She cannot have rice and salt except the green gram porridge served once a day. She sleeps on the bare, moist floor. After the eleventh day rituals of her husband's death including offering *pindam* ensues a year of mourning. The death of her husband in fact knells the death toll of her life too.

The widow should not take part in any auspicious functions. She should not adorn herself with good clothes or ornaments. She cannot even wear clothes with coloured border. She has to immerse herself in prayers and fasting like a saint. There are countless days where she has to observe half day fasts. The fasts make her emaciated and thin. Her life has now been reduced to ritual of prayers and the relentless wait for the final moksha. Death is her only deliverance.

Glossary

Ada , appam - sweet dish made of rice and jiggery

Adhivedhanam – polygamy by Namboothiri men.

Antarjanam - Namboothiri woman

Ayaniyoonu - a ritual conducted in associated with marriage ceremony. Both the bride and the bridegroom will have traditional sadya simultaneously in their homes at an auspicious time .The name Ayaniyoonu came from the style of this ritual where the bride/groom having the lunch with five people.

Karuka - an auspicious plant (doob grass), the garland of which is offered to Lord Ganesha to ward off obstacles.

Kutiveppu - ceremonial receiving of the bride in the groom's house after marriage.

Mailanchi – mehndi , beautiful designs drawn on hands with henna.

Manthrakodi – literally meaning blessed new cloth is the specially brought by the bridegroom’s family to be given to the bride. It symbolizes protection, care and the beginning of new life.

Moonnum koottal- betel chewing with three items - betel leaf, lime and specially treated arecanut called "Kaliyatakka"

Nedumangalyam – also known as thali/ mangalsutra – It is a symbol of marriage and is worn by the bride until her husband's death. ... It is worn as a symbol of marital dignity and chastity.

Nivedyam/ naivedyam - food offered to a Hindu deity as part of a worship ritual

Palpayasam – kheer, a sweet dish of rice/semiya cooked in milk

Pindam - balls of rice offered to the soul of the deceased. It is believed that it helps in the journey of the deceased to the paraloka , otherworld

Pindipayasam – kheer without adding milk or coconut milk and usually offered to God

Pula – pollution and period of abstinence (caused by death or birth)

Pumsavanom - also called ‘male producing’ is a rite performed during the third month of pregnancy aimed to grant the family sons.

Purushasooktham - a ritual performed to receive the blessings of Lord Vishnu for a healthy and intelligent child.

Seemantham - a pregnant women’s ceremony performed during the seventh month of pregnancy. It is performed to take blessings from elders for safe delivery, to keep the evil spirits away and to have good health.

Thiruvathira - *Thiruvathira* is observed on the full-moon day of the month of Dhanu. It is believed this is the day, the Goddess [Parvathi](#) finally met [Siva](#), after her long penance. It is believed that observing Thiruvathira vratham would ensure that a woman's husband would have a long life.

Vadikkini - The traditional architecture of the *nalukettu* (the Namboothiri homestead) is typically a rectangular structure where four halls are joined together with a central courtyard open to the sky. The four halls on the sides are named *Vadakkini* (northern block), *Padinjattini* (western block), *Kizhakkini* (eastern block) and *Thekkini* (southern block)

Valkannadi - a mirror with a relatively longer handle. It is usually made of either bronze or ‘Panchaloha’, which is an alloy of gold, silver, copper, zinc and iron.

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