

EXCERPTS FROM SMARTHAVICHARAM

P. BHASKARANUNNI

Abstract: This piece, a compilation of excerpts from the monograph *Smarthavicharam* by P. Bhaskaranunni, provides the basic bearings and orientation of the Namboothiri community which entailed rigorous measures like the chastity trial.

There was a clear, categorical and strong objective for the trial of chastity or *Smarthavicharam*. No matter what, a Namboothiri woman was not supposed to conceive and give birth to a hybrid or cross breed child. *Trikaranaashudhi* - the purity and unity of thought, word and deed- was strictly practised by the Brahmin community in the preceding years with strictness and assiduity, so were caste distinction and caste purity.

Regimentation was the predominant line of thought of people who lived in those circumstances and age. Considering it as the breath of life they were obstinate in not allowing a Namboothiri woman whose marriage, sanctified according to the rites, giving birth to a cross breed child. Brahmins firmly believed that they were demigods on earth and as a result the Brahmin man led a libertine life but confined their women inside the four walls of the house. They left their women with maid servants to check whether their women were indulging in furtive dalliances and liaisons. Brahmin men harassed, fined, punished and disciplined their women in every possible way. Under the pretense of protection, he held her divine womb as a receptacle for the sperm of the man she had wedded. The spiritual dominance that the Brahmins had over the sceptre and power in fact helped them to protect and preserve their social, ethical and moral codes intact. These notions got a customary and scientific aureole in no time.

Was *Smarthavicharam* a thunderbolt unilaterally employed by patriarchy to protect *Brahmanya*? It would be incorrect to say that. It was blatant selfishness -abhorrently

egotistical-but disguised as a form of penance enveloped in rigid beliefs, rituals and rites. (103)

The commingling of *varnas* led to a fear of deterioration of the eternal *jatidharma* and *kula dharma*. *Smarthavicharam* could be perceived as a greater dread to counter even a more profound fear of deterioration. The age-old customs of *trikaranashudhi*, *bahyashudhi* or the external cleansing and the path of redemption are not only blockaded but closed forever.

Only the eldest member or *Mahan* of the *illam* is entitled to *veli* (formal marriage). Even while he has a formally wedded wife, he could establish any number of marital relationships. Nobody would find fault even if the groom is aged sixty or seventy years and the bride is just eleven or thirteen years. That has always been the custom. One can have any number of marital relations outside the community as well. *Antarjanam* or Namboothiri women are forbidden from remarriage. There are innumerable maidens outside communities as well as child or young widows. And, there is no end to the woes of co-wives. An example can be cited. The bedroom is a stage for carnal desires and sexual anarchy. Fellow wives have an intuition to identify which of the wives that the Namboothiri who with not less than three formal marriages and innumerable sexual escapades outside, will share his bed on a particular night. Those who are denied the chance, out of anger, frustration, jealousy and envy frothing up within, will not miss a chance to mix powdered pepper in the *kindi* (nozzled bowl) of water kept in the toilet for the selected one for ablution. This is the inside story of most *illams* (Namboothiri households). They will act like this as and when situations arise. Quarrels and fights increase.

It is also common to spread canards about an *Antharjanam*, which often started by fellow wives or maid, filled with jealousy and spite and armed with contemptuous tongue, linking her with Nair managers or men from other communities coming for trade of agricultural produce or even with lower castes assigned for menial jobs like splintering wood or pruning the compound. Even if the *Antharjanam* walks past any outside man with absolute indifference to their presence, or exchange a common greeting with a look or a word, the consequences will often be immensely cruel and barbaric. It has been said that even a nightmare by the grand sire of the *illam* about an *Antharjanam* exchanging a word with an outsider often led to conduct of a *Smarthavicharam*.

During the *Smarthavicharam*, the *Antharjanam*, her family and men whom she points at are ostracised. None of them will then be allowed to use the well or ponds. They will not be allowed inside homes. Their clothes will not be laundered. They will not shave. They

will not be served food or will get helping hands for their fields. They will not get people to pluck coconuts. Being ostracised is just like being sentenced to death by hanging. The ostracised one will either commit suicide or leave the land. Leaving the land means leaving the land where Malayalam is spoken. The stamp of banishment will follow everywhere. Foreign land will be the only refuge.

Marriage is a sacrament for the Namboothiri. Remember that a Brahmin attains *Dwijathwa* (twice born identity) or *Brahmanya* after his Upanayana whereas a woman attains it through marriage. Even the ceremonial wedding ceremony has a distinct feature. The girl's father sits in front of the family deity with his daughter close to him chanting the mantra. The *mangal sutra* cleansed by sprinkling the holy water is made to be worn by the male deity after which it is tied around the daughter's neck. It is this sacred thread that the bride holds on to while chanting hymns in her late evening prayers. The wedding cloths which the groom brings are first touched by the bride before being subjected to chanting of the *mantras*. These clothes are placed on the idol's pedestal before they are worn.

Translators:

REKHA KARIM, REKHA M. AND SAMEERA RAJAN. Assistant Professors, Dept. of English, Govt. College, Tripunithura