



Namboodiri Contribution To The Kerala Society: A Study

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Introduction

The brahmins of Kerala possessed a highly prestigious position in the society even from the time of their migration and settlement. Kerala brahmins who were called as Namboodiris influenced the Kerala society from its core. We can trace influence of Namboodiri elements in every deed of social structure of Kerala. They controlled the social, economic, religious and the political life of the people. Their involvement brought both positive and negative impacts in the society.

CASTE SYSTEM.

The brahmins introduced the fourfold division of caste system in Kerala. The practice of the caste system and caste pollution in Kerala, made many social reformers to call it a mad-house of communalism. The caste system in Kerala differed from the caste system found in rest of India. There are no such groups of people in Kerala which include perfectly in the fourfold division and the only section of people which satisfies the concept of varna division is brahmins.¹The caste system introduced here divided the society into many layers and isolated the members of each caste and sub caste. The term for caste is *Jati*, which is derived from the Sanskrit word *Jan* means birth and there is no word in Malayalam or other Dravidian languages to denote caste.²

The system divided the society into two main divisions Savarnas and Avarnas. The Savarnas or the caste Hindus consisted of Namboodiris, Kshatriyas or the ruling class and the Nair community and the Avarnas consisted of Ezhavas, Pulayyas, Parayyas and other lower caste communities. The most notable characteristic of caste system in Kerala was untouchability and unapproachability. The

concept of pollution and practice of it become hereditary and passed from one generation to other.³ Namboodiris form the highest in the caste hierarchy and were stricter in the practice of untouchability. A kshatriya can pollute a Namboodiri by touch and approach. A Nair can pollute a Namboodiri by touching him, people of Kammalan group including masons, blacksmith, carpenters and workers in leather, pollute at a distance of twenty-four feet, Ezhava or Tiyya at thirty-six feet, Pulaya or Cherumas at forty-eight feet and Parayas at distance of sixty-four feet⁴. The last one among the polluting group was Nayadi and they should not come within the sight of a Brahmin.

The lower castes were denied the right of using the public roads. The use of footwear, umbrellas, fine clothes and jewelry were forbidden to the lower castes. The holdings of umbrellas in the public places were prohibited to all castes except Namboodiris and Kshatriyas. The lower caste people denied the right of education. They denied the right of using public wells and tanks. Even the approach roads were denied to them. The lower castes were required to remain naked above their waist. A piece of cloth can wear from waist to above the knee-joint or above the ankle. None of the Hindu except Brahmins covered their breast and to them to cover the breast was an act of immodesty.⁵ Degrees of punishments also varied according to the caste and the lower caste got the worst punishments.

JENMI SYSTEM.

After 8th century, the Namboodiri brahmins gained political and economic strength in Kerala. Temples were constructed on large scale and Namboodiris become the trustees of these temples. The rulers denoted vast lands to temples and these land and wealth were managed by the Namboodiris. They form the landed aristocracy and claimed the land as *jenmam* or birth right.⁶ The system divided the society and the at the top of the echelon was the Jenmi, who possess the absolute ownership of the land, next to him the Kudiyan and the lowest, the actual cultivators of the land called Adiyans. The main agrarian serfs were the Pulayas, Parayas and Cherumas.⁷

The Namboodiri Jenmi lease their lands to Nairs and rest of the land to cultivate by the serfs. The Nair community held this land as hereditary *kanam* tenancy. In return to the land rights, the Nairs owed military services. A portion of the produce from the lands would also be rendered. The Nairs retained a portion of land for cultivation by the serfs, the rest being leased under *verumpattam* tenure to the sub-tenant Ezhava households. These lands were in turn cultivated by the serfs. They also extract a portion of produced and rendered remains to their Jenmis.⁸ The serfs were attached to the plots and were paid in kind.

Marumakkathayam or the matrilineal system of inheritance was a distinctive feature of social organization in Kerala till recent times. It involved inheritance and succession through sister's children in the female line.⁹This system was relatively unknown in India, but it was not unusual in Kerala. In 19th century, nearly fifty percent of Malayali population of different castes and communities were matrilineal.¹⁰The matriliney in Malabar was a dynamic social institution that had undergone several kinds of mutations through the 19th and 20th centuries.¹¹

The marumakkayam system of inheritance was followed by some of the Ambalavasis, Ezhavas and Moplabs of Kerala. In Kerala, Namboodiri brahmins practiced patrilineal system of inheritance. The chief representative of the castes practicing Marumakkathayam system were Nairs. Among those who follow Marumakkathayam law, as the Nairs, the husband and wife are not of the same taravad or the ancestral household. The husband is only the member of his taravad who was in any way connected with the taravad to which belong his wife and children, and this connection ceases with his death, after which there is no bond between the taravads.¹²

There are two sets of theories regarding the origin of matrilineal system of Nairs. The first theory argues that matrilineal system evolved due to the absence of Nair men from their taravad as a part of their military duties.¹³The Nairs formed the standing army and were positioned far away from their taravads. But the theory of, because of the absence of men from taravad due to military duties is not applicable, as they primarily performed agricultural and administrative functions in medieval times.¹⁴The Nairs has economic and social dependency on Namboodiris and their hegemonic power induced Nair women to enter into sambandham relations with Namboodiris.¹⁵

CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGION

Namboodiris made the religious worship more ritualistic. A new form of worship started in Kerala. Bath and anti-pollution were considered as the prime requisites conducive to sanctity and one shall enter the temple only after freeing himself or herself from the least trace of pollution and after bath.¹⁶The official ritual -ridden routine generally called as *nityanidanam* from the auspicious early morning to late at night strictly adhering to a fixed time schedule, is a peculiarity of Kerala temples. The Namboodiris were responsible for changing the life style of the people of Kerala. The Brahminical samskaras like Jat akarma- the birth ceremony, Nama Karana- the naming ceremony, annaprasan- the ceremony associated with giving rice food for the first time to baby and Vidyarambha- the ceremony associated with starting of education, were accepted to the Kerala society with slight variations.¹⁷

Another important contribution of Namboodiris was in the field of bhakti cult. The Alwar and Nayanar cult seems to have little effect on Kerala. The absence of sectarian bhakti was a distinctive feature in Kerala. The general acceptance of Hinduism was the ultimate effect of the religious

contribution of Namboodiris.¹⁸ Hindu religious activities received a great impetus under Sankaracharya, Kulasekhara Perumal and Prabhakara. While Sankaracharya and Prabhakara influenced the elite of the society, Kulasekhara Perumal influenced the masses. Namboodiris contributed for the development of cultural activities also. Temple arts like Koothu, Koodiyattam were instituted. *Koothambalams*, where this art forms performed were constructed along with temples.¹⁹

CONTRIBUTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY AND LITARATURE

Namboodiris of Kerala were *Karmavadis* and Mezhatol Agnihotri was the first famous *Karmavadis* in Kerala, who wrote a sacrificial manual called *Sampradaya*. Prabhakar Acharya was one among the famous *Mimamsa* philosophers of India. He was the disciple of Kumarilabhatta, a great scholar in *Poorva Mimamsa*. Kumarilabhatta and Prabhakara wrote independent treatise on *Mimamsa* based on *Jaiminiyasutra*. This led to the emergence of two school of thoughts *Kumarilabhattamatam* and *Prabhakarabhattamatam* and both were followed by Namboodiris.²⁰

Kerala produced great philosophers and the greatest among them ever produced was Sankaracharya, the great Advaita exponent. Sankara travelled all over India defeated Buddhist theologians in arguments and spread his philosophy. Other important philosophers were Parameswara I, Bhavadasa, Subrahmanya, Vasudeva, Parameswara II, and Parameswara III. He systemized the philosophy of Upanishads. Sankara taught that various gods and goddesses were really of the same immanence, manifestations of the supreme being.²¹ Sankara was a great reformer of Hinduism. Even though his main field of activity was far away from Kerala, his teachings were percolated into different layers of the society and created a new outlook. He can be considered as the happy combination of an ideal philosopher and a practical performer, a great messenger of the cultural unity of India.²²

Namboodiris were great scholars of Sanskrit. They contributed a lot in the field of literature. Vararuchi, a great scholar and astronomer wrote *Vararuchi Samgraha*, one of the earliest works on grammar. It consisted of 25 slokas and a commentary called *Deepaprabha*. Vilwamangalath Swamiyar wrote two grammatical works *Subandha Samarajyam* and *Tiganta Samarajyam*. Vasu Bhattathiri wrote *Yudhishtiravijayam Kavyam*, *Tripudahanam* and *Sourikadha*.²³ Purnasaraswati's *Kamalinirajahamsam*, Kakkasseri Bhattathiri's *Vasumati Vikramam*, *Poornapurushardha* of Jadaveda, Karuthapara Damodaran Namboodiri's *Karuthapura Vijayam* etc. were some of the important dramas produced by the Namboodiris of Kerala.

The great works *Ramacharitham*, *Unniyachi Charitham*, *Unnichirithevi Charitham*, *Suka Sandesam*, *Koka Sandesam*, *Attaprakaram*, *Kramadeepika*, *Leela Thilakam* etc... were contributions of Namboodiris. They introduced Champu and Maniavalam literature. Namboodiris contributed in the field of bhakti literature also. *Narayaneeyam* by Melpathur Narayanan Bhattathiri,

Jnanappana of Poontham Namboodiri, *Krishna Gadha* of Cherussery Namboodiri were some of the greatest works on Bhakti.

CONCLUSION

The coming and settlement of Brahmins contributed great in the socio-cultural arena of Kerala society. They introduced new systems to establish and maintain their superiority in the society which produced both positive and negative impacts. The introduction of caste system and jenny system adversely affected the society and made the life of the masses miserable. It graded the society in to different strata. But at the same time their contribution in the field of literature and other branches of knowledge was great. They can be considered as the path finders of religion, philosophy, astronomy, grammar, mathematics, literature and language.

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