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Yogakshemasabha: The Pioneer of Namboodiri Reform Movements – A Study

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Abstract

Indian societies particularly Kerala society was marked for the existence of a rigid caste system. People were bound together by the caste rules and violating it leads to caste ostracism. Brahmins of Kerala who were generally called by the name Namboodiris, were the strict followers of their caste rules and these rules pulled them behind in the society, with the introduction of English education. A group of young people emerged among from them to work for the community reforms and established Yogakshemasabha to impart the importance of English education and to gradually bring an upliftment in their life.

Key words: Namboodiri, Yogakshemasabha, English Education, V T Bhattathirippad, Yuvajanasangham

Introduction

Later half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of social reform movements in Kerala. The society went through revolutionary changes during this period. English education and western Science had made a great impact on the society. The Namboodiri Brahmins were on the top of the social order based on caste and they exercised great privileges and influence in the then society. They hailed a prestigious position even from the time of their migration and settlement. With their knowledge they grow in power and became the advisories of rulers and it as for many years. Namboodiri brahmins were very conservative and strictly follow the customs and practices. They keep aloof themselves from English education by calling it as *mlechhabhasha* which means the language of barbarians. Introduction of western education and emergence of socio-religious reform movement brought new changes in the society. Important positions and power began to get occupied by the English learned people. The Namboodiri began to loss their power and influence in the society. In this circumstance Yogakshemasabha, an organization for reforms in the Namboodiri community established. In the beginning it was an organization for Namboodiris to regain their power and position but later they turned into reform movement by taking steps against the evil practices within the community. The role of Yogakshemasabha and its leaders in reforming the Namboodiri brahmins from their age-old evil practices, is indispensable in the history of Namboodiri reform movements.

Problems With in The Namboodiri Community

The most affluent group of Kerala society were the Namboodiris and they strictly observed their community norms. Unlike the Brahmins in other parts of India, they followed Sankarasmrithi as their law book and lived according to the customs, practices and rules according to it. Namboodiri women who were called as *Antharjanams* and the younger sons in the Namboodiri households called *Afphans* were the group of people who suffered the most in the Namboodiri community. The term Antharjanam means the one belonged to inside. They were restricted in every deed of their life from birth to death. They denied the right of education and even don't get proper food and married life. They were considered only as an object to participate in rituals. Even in the marriages their concern was to maintain the purity of their blood. Even though the issue was among a minority section, it had its influence in the society as they belong to a caste that enjoyed high religious and social status.¹

The life conditions of *Afphans* in the Namboodiri households were unpleasant. After their childhood they almost have to cut off their connections with their ancestral households as they don't possess any property rights. They spent their lives in prayers and rituals in the bath houses adjoined to the ponds or in the premises of temples.²In the Namboodiri family elder sons only allowed to marry from within the community and they only inherit the property. *Afphans* were denied the family life and only allowed to maintain illicit relation with Nair women. They become completely stranger in their family and had to live in the dependency of their elder brothers.³They spend most of their time in rituals and practices, resisted themselves from acquiring new knowledge, slept comfortably in ignorance and gradually slipped into irrelevance.⁴

Yogakshemasabha

Socio-religious reform organizations acted as a medium to rise voice against the evil practices of the society. The community building program of Namboodiri Brahmins began with the formation of Yogakshemasabha. Yogakshemasabha was founded on 26th February 1908 in a meeting held at the house of Cherumukku Vaidikan Vasudevan Somayajippad in Aluva on the banks of river Periyar.⁵In the beginning Yogakshemasabha aimed at safeguarding the interest of Namboodiri community as they began to lose their importance in the changing society. The Sabha focused on moral, political and economic progress of the Namboodiri community by acquiring the modern education. It was the first organization of Namboodiris on an all-Kerala level.

Yogakshemasabha was a well fare association of Namboodiris, aimed at the educational progress of Namboodiri community for maintaining their power and superior status in the society. The infamous trial and ostracism of Kuriyedathu Thatri in 1905 seems that it doesn't have much impact on the formation of Yogakshemasabha, even though the incident shook the entire Namboodiri community. The initial sessions of Sabha stressed only on the protection of Namboodiri supremacy. There was no provision in their regulation for the emancipation of women. In the regulations of Yogakshemasabha it is clearly mentioned that it should not do anything that would adversely affect the traditional customs and practices of Namboodiris.⁶Their regulation itself proves that they were not interested in uplifting the Namboodiri women from their pathetic life or rectify their evil practices.

Progress through education become the aim of the Yogakshemasabha. Sabha organized annual meetings to discuss about the importance of acquiring English education. In the 8th annual meeting of Yogakshemasabha held at Vellinezhi in 1916, a decision was taken to open an education institution for Namboodiris which would impart modern education without affecting the caste rules and rituals of Namboodiris.⁷Yogakshemasabha become successful in raising an amount of Rs.25000 for the construction of a Namboodiri school. The conservative Namboodiri group opposed these acts and they found a new organization called Nivarini and conducted meetings against Yogakshemasabha in conservative Namboodiri centers. They completely rejected the idea of new English school and advocated for safeguarding the traditions.

In 1919 new Namboodiri school started functioning at Edakkunnil Illam with two regional centers at Edappalli and Peringottukara. Trained teachers were appointed there to impart English education and the students enrolled there were provided facilities to follow their rituals and practices as per the tradition. To encourage the reading habits and to enhance the language skill, a library-cum reading room was also established along with the school. With the establishment of a Namboodiri school, a new organization by name Namboodiri Yuvajanasangham was formed as a volunteer group at Trippunithura Royal school. They actively participated in the annual meetings of Yogakshemasabha. The formation of Yogakshemasabha Yuvajanasangham was a turning point in the history of Yogakshemasabha as its members played a pivotal role in directing the activities of Sabha into rectifying the evil practices of Namboodiri community.

Yogakshemasabha was influenced by Indian National Congress and the issues of nationalism and thoughts of freedom movement began to discuss in the annual conferences of Yogakshemasabha. Yogakshemasabha Yuvajanasangham leader V T Bhattathirippad attended the Ahmedabad session of Indian National Congress. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Congress, the Yuvajanasangham began to concentrate in the community reform activities.⁸ They demanded for the family reforms and advocated for the marriage of younger Namboodiri men from within the community. They argued against the system of *adhivedanam* by which only the eldest son in the Namboodiri community allowed to marry and have a family life. Yuvajanasangham demanded for the reforms in property rights and joint family holdings. They decided to fight against polygamy, marriage of young women to old men and enforced widowhood. The conservatives rejected these acts as they afraid to come out from their traditional believes. They left Yogakshemasabha and started a weekly newspaper Sudarsanam to propagate the traditional views of conservatives.⁹

From the 16th annual meeting Yogakshemasabha started discussions about female education. Decisions were taken to give females admission in Namboodiri schools and from 1105 girls were began to admit in Namboodiri school in Panjal. Yogakshemasabha passed resolutions against *sambandham* relations and distributed articles and leaflets to aware the Namboodiri youth. In the 22nd annual meeting of Yogakshemasabha held at Edakkunnil, Parvathi Manezhi an Antharjanam threw away her *ghosha*, the traditional veil of Namboodiri women which cover them from head to toe, and participated in the meeting.¹⁰ V T Bhattathirippad's, *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku*, a drama which portrayed conditions of Namboodiri women, was staged for the first time in this meeting.

In 1931 under the leadership of V T Bhattathirippad, a Yachana Yathra was organized to raise fund for the functioning of Namboodiri school. Yogakshemasabha introduced a lottery for raising money and a huge rally was organized from Kanyakumari to Kasargod. The rally helped to change the attitude of some conservative Namboodiris towards the modern education and it become successful in raising huge amount of money for the education of Namboodiri men and women. The annual meeting of Yogakshemasabha held at Guruvayoor in 1931 decided to found an organization exclusively for women. In the following day itself the Namboodiri women met at Chettupuzha under the leadership of Parvathy Nenmini Mangalam and founded Antharjana Samajam.¹¹ Samajam attracted new members to it and gradually the number of members increased. They broke all shackles around them and actively participated in the community building programs. By 1933 when Yogakshemasabha was celebrating its silver jubilee hundreds of Antharjanams participated in its meeting. In order to make the Antharjanams self sufficient the Samajam started a workplace in Lakkidi as a memorial of Samajam leader Parvathy Nenmini Mangalam.

The 23rd annual meeting of Yogakshemasabha held in 1932, called for the boycott of the system of polygamy. They opposed the system of *sambandham* in which the Namboodiri men can have sexual relation with Nair women, but don't have the wife status. The kids born to them also don't have the right to call the Namboodiri as father. Yogakshemasabha demanded for the wife status of non-caste wives and to permit the non-Namboodiri to marry Namboodiri women.¹² The meeting called for the introduction of a bill penalizing polygamy and enabling the junior members to get separate shares of property and family life. The Namboodiri bill was introduced in Cochin Legislative Council by Kiplagat Sankaran Namboodiri and Chellur Ittiravi Namboodiri and in Travancore it was introduced by Thuppan Namboodiri. The bill was rejected and completely opposed by the conservatives in both councils and was vetoed by the king himself. A similar bill was introduced in Madras Legislative council

and it become law and came into effect in Malabar region.¹³ A procession of Namboodiris under the leadership of Chittoor Kunjan Namboodirippad was organized from Trippunithura to Kanakakunnu. In the next assembly the Bill passed with slight changes and become law.

The life of Namboodiri widows were pathetic and most of them become widows in very tender age. As the elder son in the Namboodiri family only allowed to marry from within the community, young Namboodiri girls were forced to marry old men sometimes of the age of their father or grandfather. In 1930 Namboodiri Yuvajanasangham leaders picketed marriage of a young Namboodiri girl with an old man at Aluva.¹⁴ Yogakshemasabha took up the cause of widows. They decided to organize the widow remarriages. In 1939 first Namboodiri widow remarriage was organized under the leadership of V T Namboodirippad. The members of Namboodiri Yuvajanasangham removed their sacred thread and condemned polygamy and advocated for the widow remarriage. In the Ongallur session of Yogakshemasabha, presided by E M Sankaran Namboodirippad, a resolution was passed for the abolition of dowry system.

Conclusion

Introduction of modern education brought changes in the life of Namboodiris. Reform movements and an organization Yogakshemasabha was started and eradication of social evils become their aim. They become successful in reforming the marriage rules of Namboodiri community. The systems of sambandham, adhivedanam, polygamy was ceased forever. Yogakshemasabha become successful in passing the Namboodiri Bill in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Their most important achievement was in the field of education. Schools for Namboodiris established and girls were given admission in schools. Those who lived in the dark rooms of Namboodiri households began to get the light of education. The position of women become better and they began to participate in the public events. Yogakshemasabha achieved most of its goals and gradually lost its importance. The Sabha become purposeless and this led to the natural death of the organization. In 1980 a group of young Namboodiris took initiative to reestablish the organization in Trissur and Yogakshemasabha continues its function still now as a welfare organization of Namboodiri community.

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