

Chapter II

Brahmanical Patriarchy, Caste Codes and Control of Female Sexuality in Keralam

The caste system in India has often been studied with a sense of 'pan -- Indianness' and the situation that obtained in the north was generalized to hold true for the rest of India. Considering the fact that the meanings and deployment of the ideology of caste had its implications in quite a different form in Keralam, such distinctions have to be delineated at the outset.

While in the Gangetic basin there existed the fourfold divisions, viz., of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra, in Keralam there was no significant Vaishya caste. There was also a whole range of practices whereby the caste ordering took regional or local forms. Such differentiation held true for customs, practices, rituals and in the employment of spiritual texts to legitimize the hierarchy and regulate day to day living. While purity and pollution continued to determine the relationship between castes, endogamy – a crucial tool in maintaining caste hierarchies and differences – was followed in ways that did not fit patterns found elsewhere.

The Kshatriyas in Keralam who formed the ruling class did not conform to the caste prescriptions on endogamy. Their women took suitors from among the Namboodiri Brahmins only. They were entitled to the *Upanayana* (sacred thread) ceremony and held certain purity / pollution markers common to the Namboodiris here.

The *Sambandham*(liaisons) relationships contracted by the Namboodiris with women lower down the line of caste were against scriptural directives. ‘Neither the *Anacharams*(sixty four injunctions) or the *Sankarasmriti*(the *Smriti* attributed to Sankaracharya) sanctioned the Namboodiris’ relationship with Nair women. The *Smritis*, in fact, ban such intercaste mixing that might happen in the Kali Age. ‘A *dvija* who marries a Sudra woman would lose his caste and become a Sudra himself. Sankaracharya forbade Namboodiris from approaching Sudra women even for satisfying lust’¹.

The *Sankarasmriti* lays down that the Nair has to maintain a stipulated distance from the Namboodiri. In the case of the Nair, the Namboodiris most often overlooked the injunction against unapproachability and practiced only untouchability against them because the Namboodiri always wanted a Nair servant to be at his beck and call² and also because of the *Sambandham* marriages that were contracted.

Namboodiri Customs and Practices

‘The Namboodiris in Kerala by the close of the tenth century A.D. began to command a position of power that was backed by a material superiority as well. The ‘Namboodiri’ was constructed as the most superior – ‘his person was holy, his directions

¹ K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *Kochi Rajya Charitram*(History of Kochi)(Malayalam), p. 768

² Idem.

are commands, his movements are processions, his meal nectar, he is holiest of human beings, he is the representative of God on earth'³. Etymologically, the word 'Namboodiri' was explained to be derived from 'nambuka'- to trust -and 'thiri' an honorific suffix meaning sacred.⁴ The name, according to this derivation, indicates the position they held as the confidential advisors and trusted friends of the Rajahs and chiefs. There is another derivation of the word from 'nam' (knowledge) and 'purikka' (to impart) and this alludes to the great Vedic learning which they, as a class were supposed to possess and which alone in their opinion constituted true knowledge⁵. Thus the Namboodiri was hailed as the most superior group and his presence in Keralam was explained on the basis of texts like *KeralaMahatmyam* and *Keralolpathi*⁶ According to these, the Namboodiris were the descendants of the Brahmins who were brought to Keralam from all parts of India by the renowned sage and warrior Parasurama. He is believed to have settled them in sixty four villages into which the region was divided into at that time. They were also made lords of the land with high privileges and honours granted to them to make them permanently stay here. Certain innovations in their customs and manners are said to have been introduced

³ Travancore Census Report 1874 – 75, p. 191

⁴ Mammen P. Mammen, 'Traditional Kerala Society' in *Journal of Kerala Studies*, March 1975, p. 284.

⁵ V.Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, Vol II, p. 248

⁶ These two texts, the former in Sanskrit and the latter in Malayalam are of unknown authorship and date of composition

by Parasurama⁷. He created the Malayalam language and made the Namboodiris tie their hair into a *Kuduma* (knot on one side of the head).

Such legitimations as provided by the two texts mentioned above gave sure ground for the maintenance of hierarchies prevailing, at the same time, in the economic, social, cultural and spiritual domains. . Perhaps the strength of the Namboodiris lay in the fact that they could exert influence over the local inhabitants not merely through the use of force but also by taking recourse to a superior sense of justice that could keep the different caste groups bound together in a social system of mutual dependence. At this point, they could not do without the Nairs and other castes and these other castes could not maintain themselves without the help of the Namboodiris. When the Namboodiris settled in the sixty four gramas, along with the *Gramani* Brahmins who were in charge of the *gramas* (villages), the Nairs were also recognized as assisting in administration.

The Namboodiri Brahmins in Keralam were different from Brahmans elsewhere on many counts. They followed the *Sankarasmriti* as their guiding text and were guided by the sixty-four *Anacharams* outlined in it⁸. These directions were called *Anacharams* since they were *acharams* (practices) not followed anywhere else⁹. K.P.Padmanabha

⁷ L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin*, Vol III, pp.170-1

⁸ A list of these have been given in the Appendix

⁹ K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *op. cit.*, p.89

Menon opines that none of these were against the Sastras but were inspired by the need to discipline the practices of the Namboodiris, a system not in vogue elsewhere. It was also found suitable for the geography of Keralam. For ,e.g. water was abundantly available in ponds, rivers and tanks and hence ritual ablutions and cleaning did not pose problems.

The *Anacharams* were believed to have not been introduced by Sankaracharya in the eighth century A.D.. It seems that he merely codified the practices contained in the *Bhargavasmriti*¹⁰ on the basis of insights gathered during his journey to different places. The *Anacharams* were mostly about the purity of body and food and outlined ways of paying obeisance to Gods, of the four *ashramas* or stages in life, on the control of women and the various customs and practices to be followed by the members of the community¹¹. There were also included certain prescriptions for leading a ‘clean’ social life.

To state these directions briefly; ‘ Do not send back a beggar empty handed, do not learn the *Mleccha*¹² language, do not view oneself in the mirror, do not look at one’s wife while she is eating, do not look at naked, bare breasted or menstruating women, do not look at a girl’s genitals or watch animals having intercourse. Do not bite nails or

¹⁰ *Smriti* attributed to Bhargava-Parasurama

¹¹ Ibid., p.94

¹² term used to refer to non Hindus

bodily hair, wear dress or slippers worn by others or wear broken sacred thread. Do not teach the Sudra letters, do not feed a Sudra before first eating and do not stay in a region where a Sudra holds power. Do not talk to a menstruating woman or touch one's own genitals except for cleaning. Regarding the rules for eating only food bitten and chewed by the teeth should be eaten. Do not eat naked, with wet clothes on, with feet not touching the ground, sitting on broken wooden seats, crouched, sitting on someone else's lap, lying down or in broken utensils. Do not eat curd at night or milk in the daytime. Do not eat food served disrespectfully by your wife. Do not eat in full public view¹³. Apart from the *Anacharams* there were sixteen *Shodhasa Kriyas* that touched upon even the most minute aspect of the Namboodiri's life from the day of conception¹⁴.

The concept of purity and pollution was followed to the point of seeming absurdity. Pollution could be contacted in numerous ways – birth, death, menstruation, etc., made women impure which could be got rid of through a purificatory ritual of bathing and wearing freshly laundered garments brought in by the *Mannathi* (washerwoman). If the child born to a woman was female that required additional purificatory rituals. There were different other occasions for minor pollution like that

¹³ Quoted from the *Sankarasmriti* Chapter 12, 2nd padam on *Sadacharams* (Moral codes) in P. Bhaskaranunny, *Smartavicharam* (Malayalam), pp. 27 - 8

¹⁴ See Appendix

entailed in touching cooking utensils, accidentally touching bedspreads laid out by a menstruating woman, etc. Urinating and defecating left a person polluted. Touching a corpse was impure. These innumerable instances for pollution called for elaborate purificatory rites called *Saptasuddhi* including *Kshetrasuddhi* (of the temple), *Grhasuddhi* (of the home), *Sthalasuddhi*(of the place),*Dehasuddhi*(of the body) and so on. Apart from the purity and pollution concepts there was the *mattitham* which meant 'that which was to avoided to prevent sin.' This included the taking of Dravidian terms to refer to animals, persons or *Illams* (Namboodiri households). The *mattitham* was limited to certain hours and minutes in a day¹⁵.

Other than these, the Kerala Brahmins were different also in the system of marriage they followed. Only the eldest son married within the caste while the younger ones contracted *Sambandham* relationships with Nair women. The property was indissoluble and impartitionable, this also being a reason cited for the stipulation that only the eldest son may marry. Unlike among other Brahmins, girls could be married off even after attaining puberty and no tonsure was done on widows.

¹⁵ P. Bhaskaranunny, op. cit., pp. 36 - 7

Caste Codes and Women

The caste codes placed special emphasis on the controls that could be exerted on women. Apart from the *Anacharans* numbering from forty four to forty nine¹⁶ that dealt with women, there were several written and unwritten codes that ruled over her. The Namboodiri woman was called *Antarjanam*, literally, people of the inner household. She was to cover herself with the *Ghoshā*¹⁷ and *Marakkuda*¹⁸ and not view any adult male other than her husband. Parasurama, it is believed, ordained that all Namboodiri women should carry with them an umbrella whenever they went out, to prevent their being seen by those of the male sex, that a Nair woman should invariably precede them, that they should be covered with a cloth from neck to foot, and that they should not wear jewels¹⁹. It was a grave sin to view even her husband's younger brothers old enough to have completed their Vedic education. Inside the house the *Antarjanam* was to remain bare breasted and with little ornaments or ornamentation.

¹⁶ 44) Brahmin women must not look at any other persons besides their own husbands

45) Brahmin women must not go out, unless accompanied by women servants

46) They should wear only white clothing

47) Noses should not be pierced.

49) Brahmins should forfeit their caste if they have intercourse with other Brahmin women besides their wives, cited in Edgar Thurston, et al., *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, p. 188

¹⁷ Blanket like garment draped around the body

¹⁸ Cadjan leaf umbrella

¹⁹ Edgar Thurston, et al., op. cit., pp. 153 - 4

The Namboodiri women despite being born into the most superior caste, and because of it, received little or no privileges. A baby girl born into the family was not a happy prospect. A baby boy, however, was welcomed with joyous celebration while a girl child was received with solemnity; the family members beating their heads against the wall to publicize their sense of regret and gloom²⁰. From her birth, through her childhood, youth and into old age her life was patterned by custom. Though men of the community were also subject to numerous injunctions like avoidance of the use of foul language, touching of private parts except for cleaning, refraining from wearing broken sacred threads, etc.²¹, the restrictions on their women went ahead to exercise a complete check on her movements and social interactions. Her personal life was subjected to strict surveillance. Long lists of do's and don'ts determined every aspect of her everyday life; the clothes and ornaments she wore, the way she sat, ate, talked, bathed, and moved. She was not to sin even in her thoughts²². An Antarjanam's life was to be austere to the point of sainthood. She was forbidden from the use of fragrant flowers and perfumes and was not to lie on pillows. She was not permitted to view festivals, water sports, ball games or

²⁰ Pathiriseri Narayanan Namboodiri, 'Antarjanangalum Bandhu Samudhaya Streekalum'(Antarjanams and Women of Related Castes), *Unni Namboodiri*, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 190

²¹ P. Bhaskaranunny, *Pattombatham Noottandile Keralam(Kerala in the Nineteenth Century)* (Malayalam), p. 60

²² *Ibid.*, p.65

Kathakali nor visit market places and courts or walk along routes where *Mlecchas* frequented²³.

The marriage system of the Namboodiris also had its consequences for the women of this caste. The Namboodiris were patrilineal and followed primogeniture. Sankara's fifty ninth *Anacharam* ordained only the eldest son to marry. Most Namboodiris however explicitly state that the reason for the extreme emphasis on primogeniture was to keep the *Illam* property intact; if only the eldest son could produce an heir to the family estate it would never have to be divided²⁴. The younger brothers of the Namboodiri family entered into liaison relationships with Nair women. Known as *Sambandham*, it was a valid marriage that was socially recognized though it involved no obligations, financial or otherwise to the Nair wife²⁵. From the point of view of the Namboodiris these liaisons were definitely not marriages, though they were often viewed as such by the matrilineal castes. The liaisons, were useful to Namboodiris in two ways .Firstly most obviously it provided sexual partners for the younger sons and secondly, just as critical, to create useful connections with important families. The Namboodiris gained considerable power

²³ Ibid., p. 53

²⁴ Joan P. Mencher & Helen Goldberg, 'Kinship and Marriage Regulations Among the Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala' in Kurian George (ed.) *The family in India – A Regional Overview*, p. 294

²⁵ K. B. Pillai, *The Culture of Social Stratification / Sexism – The Nayars*, p.165

through alliances with important matrilineal families such as local chieftains and even ruling houses²⁶.

Though only the eldest son, *Moosath*, could marry within caste, he was permitted to take more than one wife. Traditionally, he could have up to three wives at a time, but if one should die he could then take another. This was in addition to the *Sambandhams* contracted with Nair women. The Namboodiris thus had a dual system of relationships, one set of rules governing their endogamous *veli*²⁷ and another their hypogamous *Sambhandhams*. This had its bearing on the power relations between the sexes both within and outside the caste. The Namboodiris were notorious for their sexual exploits, a trend that was reflected in the literature and arts of the period from the fourteenth, fifteenth centuries AD when they were at the height of their dominance²⁸. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, the noted historian, calls it the orgiastic season of the Namboodiris²⁹. The sensuous pursuits of the men should be contrasted with the prescriptive codes that had been laid down for their women. While these women were to subscribe to the rules of confinement and limited social mobility, many among their men led sexually

²⁶ For, e.g. the Kanippayyur Mana had maintained such relations with the Trippunithura *Kovilakam*

²⁷ Caste Marriage

²⁸ Dance halls, the *Koothambalams* began to be built at this time and the sculptures on them depicted the dancing girls in erotic postures while literary works like *Unniachi Charitam*, *Unniyadi Charitam*, etc., had dancing girls as their heroines and sensuality as their hallmark.

²⁹ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *Annathe Keralam* (Mal.), p. 158

'promiscuous' lives. The double yoke of caste orthodoxy and patriarchy came to heavily rest on the Namboodiri women.

The system of marriage being thus, it was also absolutely necessary for girls to be married off at whatever cost. An unmarried girl of marriageable age in the family was a source of shame and guilt. With the practice of only the eldest male member of a family marrying, there weren't enough men available to marry the women. Hence often, the women became the second or third wives of the *Moosaths* or were married off to very old widowers. The difference in age often left behind young widows when the old men died. Huge dowries demanded led to the pauperization of the *Illams*, so much so that the birth of a daughter came to mean a major misfortune to the family.

Another practice in this sequence was that of exchange marriages where a father, in order to get his daughter married off, agreed to marry the sister of the man who marries his daughter³⁰. These exchange marriages might have turned mother against the daughter as the latter became the cause of the former's status as a co-wife. The jealousy among the several wives is reported to have taken vengeful forms, each accusing the other of infidelity or even sprinkling irritants on the other's bed about to be occupied by the husband. The wives had to eat leftovers from their husbands' plates. If the man had three

³⁰ K. B. Pillai, op. cit., p. 192

wives he would leave behind three banana leaf plates, the one he ate in reserved for the eldest wife, others placed touching it meant for the other wives. This was considered then as a rare honour³¹.

The widows had to adhere to stipulations regarding their dress (to wear only white) their food (simple meal once a day), not wear any ornaments or use collyrium for their eyes, even their hair was not to be properly done. She was to live as an ascetic, pass her time in prayers, fasts and observances and in helping in household chores. She had to absent herself during any auspicious ceremonies in the household³².

Brahmanical Ideology and Control of Female Sexuality

The brahmanical social order sustained itself on the principles of caste and gender hierarchies. Along with the maintenance of gender hierarchy there was the need for effective sexual control over women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity. The purity of caste was contingent upon the purity of women³³. Nur Yalman, the anthropologist, says that 'a fundamental principle of Hindu social organization is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and the ritual quality within it. The

³¹ P. Bhaskaranunni, *Smartavicharam*, p. 52

³² The plight of the widows has been poignantly narrated in the story, 'Athi Kadhnam' written by V. T. Bhattatiripad in K. Ayyappa Panicker, et al., (ed.), *Nooru Varsham Nooru Katha* (Hundred Years Hundred Stories)(Mal.), pp. 150 – 5

³³ Uma Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in India: Gender, Caste, Class and State', *EPW*, April 3, 1993, p. 579

three are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organizing female sexuality. Indeed neither land, nor ritual quality, i.e. the purity of caste can be ensured without closely guarding women who form the pivot for the entire structure. The honour and respectability of men is protected through their women'³⁴.

Such preoccupations within the caste codes are not of recent origin. In ancient India too, the brahmanical texts are replete with norms for women that are, in effect, powerful admissions of the power of non-conforming women, or all women who have the power to non-conform, to break the entire structure of Hindu orthodoxy. In these texts it is evident that the upper caste woman is the object of moral panic³⁵.

The purity pollution concept was cardinal to the caste system and by extension to the value system which governed women's behaviour. Though caste was determined and inherited through the male line, women's sexuality was equally important to ensure purity. Purity was both external (by touch) and internal (by blood). Internal purity was to be maintained by preventing the mixing of impure blood. Hence to maintain the purity of the caste, women's sexuality was to be controlled. Contact with low caste men would contaminate the blood of high caste women. Paternity had to be strictly ascertained as

³⁴ Nur Yalman, 'On the Purity of Woman in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1993, pp. 25-58

³⁵ Uma Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 580

him as God and to rever the water that washed his feet as sacred as the Holy Ganga water³⁸. Such ideas were reinforced by rituals and practices and through recourse to constructions of ideal womanhood – like those of the mythological characters of Sita, Savitri, etc³⁹. The effectiveness of such ideological inputs lay in the fact that it ensured that the mechanisms for control came from inside the women without employing external compulsions.

Where the ideological failed to work, brahmanical law codes were evoked for the maintenance of the social order. The use of physical coercion and punishment was the last resort, the authority for this being claimed by the castemen⁴⁰. The trial of chastity peculiar to the Namboodiri Brahmins of Keralam known as *Smartavicharam* was a unique mechanism for the regulation of the high caste woman's sexuality and for thereby maintaining caste purity. Any Namboodiri woman whose chastity was in doubt would be brought to this trial. There were elaborate procedures for the conduct of these trials which involved the sanction and supervision of the local Raja and concluded with the ostracism of those guilty. The need for this was that 'adultery is a sin causing ruin to the

³⁸ P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pattombatham Noottandile Keralam*, p. 61

³⁹ Uma Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 582

⁴⁰ *Idem*

family and community and whomsoever commits it should be thrown out for the protection of the community and family⁴¹.

The Procedure for the *Smartavicharam*

Chapter VIII, I Padam, Slokas one to thirty five of the *Laghudharmaprakashika* in the *Sankarasmriti*⁴² outlines the procedures for the trial. If a householder has reasons to believe that his wife has had *Adukkaladosham* (has committed adultery) he should along with those close to him announce his suspicion to the members of his clan. Inviting four or five close relatives who have good discerning capacity and the *Vadhyan* (Vedic Scholar) to his house he calls upon the most honest among the *dasis* (female servants) to be questioned on the truth of the suspicion raised. If the suspicion was reinforced by the response of the *dasi*, the *Antarjanam* would be transferred to the *Anjampura* (fifth room outside the *nalukettu* or quadrangle) and henceforth would be referred to as *Sadhanam*⁴³. The *Sadhanam* in the *Anjampura* is closely guarded to prevent outsiders from influencing her and to prevent her from committing suicide⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Vadakkumkur Rajaraja Varma Raja, Keraleeya Samskrita Sahitya Charitram (History of Sanskrit Literature in Keralam) Vol I, p. 248

⁴² Quoted in P. Bhaskaranunny, Smartavicharam, pp. 120 – 130

⁴³ Matampu Kunhukkuttan, renowned literary person, author of the first novel on the life of Kuriyedath Tatri *Bhrashtu* and a member of the family of the *Smartans*, explained that the word *Sadhanam* literally means an 'object' denoting in the grammatical sense the object from which a subject could ask questions to and elicit responses from. Personal interview, , Thrissur, 26 September 2001

⁴⁴ P. Shungoony Menon, Thiruvitamkur Charitram (History of Tiruvitamkur) (Mal.)

A lot depended upon the *dasi's* statements. She could deny charges and a whole trial could be put off and the woman be left to lead a normal life⁴⁵. If a householder raises suspicion about his wife and upon the *dasivicharam* (questioning of the *dasi*) it does not stand, he has to atone for raising such suspicion. The day that the woman is confined to the *Anjampura*, there would begin a ban for the members of her *Illam* on socializing and they would not be allowed to attend social gatherings and celebrations⁴⁶. Afterwards the householder would notify the king. Those seeking royal sanction and supervision for the *Smartavicharam* had to pay a neat sum to the royal exchequer. Consequently, the Raja would appoint four brilliant *Mimamsakars*⁴⁷, a *Smartan*, the judge whose office was hereditary, an *Agakoyma* and a *Purakoyma*. The *Purakoyma* would be sent as the Rajah's representative and would hold a sword to maintain order. The Raja should also send along a garment for the *Purakoyma* to cover his head during the trial. The Raja also arranges for notices to be sent to the men accused.

The *Mimamsakars* would think up the questions to be asked. He would communicate this secretly to the *Purakoyma* and *Smartan*. This takes place outside the house where the women resides or at the temple nearby.

⁴⁵ William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, p. 122

⁴⁶ K. C. Manavikraman Raja, *Malabar Gazette*, Book 4, p. 123

⁴⁷ *Mimamsakars* are scholars learned in the scriptures

On the day of the trial the committee would congregate outside the room where the woman has been interned. The procedure begins by arranging for the suspicion to be brought to notice by the *Sadhanam* herself. For this purpose the *Smartan* makes a feint of entering the room, as if in ignorance of everything that has transpired. The *dasi* stops him and informs him that her mistress (still a caste woman) was inside and the *Smartan* effects astonishment and asks her the reason why her mistress was inside. With this question the enquiry may be said to have begun. The *Sadhanam*, seated inside and hidden from view, answers through the *dasi* who in turn transmits the response. Most often this response would be an admittance of guilt and the reasons for her internment. After this admittance the procedure is relatively easy. She can now come out and openly sit before the men and even chew *paan*⁴⁸ (since through her admittance she ceases to be a caste woman).

If the woman does not admit guilt the trial cannot proceed. Prolonging trials could prove very expensive for the householder since food and boarding expenses for the committee members in addition to payments for each member as well as for the Raja were to be borne by him. The *Sadhanam*'s refusal to admit guilt invited comments like

⁴⁸ William Logan, op. cit., pp 124 - 8

'hardhearted *kulada's* (disgraceful women) could prolong it purposefully'⁴⁹. The trial could continue for weeks, months or years in which case the committee would not meet continuously. All this while, the family members would be subject to social boycott and would be unable to attend or participate in social gatherings.

Instances are cited of snakes and rodents being thrown into the woman's room to scare her into admitting the act done⁵⁰. Apart from force used, there were other factors that would make the woman confess. Food would be provided to her only occasionally and the long and tiring sessions of interrogation would leave her exhausted. The family members would make repeated pleas that the prolonging of the trial would lead to their ruin. The *Smartan* would also request her to admit guilt and atone for her sins promising her that she would be looked after well by the Raja. The householder may also as a last resort come forward and admit his own guilt begging the trial to be concluded at the earliest, also promising the woman a sizeable share of the property⁵¹.

Once the *Sadhanam* admits guilt the interrogation proceeds. The *Smartan* would sit facing her and ask who the first person with whom she related was. On her reply, the names of more persons, if any, would be sought. In this way all the names would be

⁴⁹ Vadakkumkur Rajaraja Varma Raja, op. cit., p. 220

⁵⁰ L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, op. cit., p. 212

⁵¹ William Logan, op. cit, pp. 124 – 8

ascertained. The *Purakoyma* with his head covered by the garment would follow the procedure closely. If he finds the questioning not to his satisfaction he would drop the garment from his head. The *Smartan* would take the hint and rethink whether his questions strayed from those prepared by the *Mimamsakars*. The *Purakoyma* would replace the garment when the error is rectified. The *Smartan* would, later in the day, convey the responses of the woman to the *Mimamsakars*. The *Purakoyma* follows the same motions as before if the reporting is found to be not satisfactory. The *Purakoyma* also has the duty to later appraise the Raja on the performance of both the *Smartan* and the *Mimamsakas*.⁵²

The numerically ordered list of the men involved would be prepared and the ostracism verdict termed *Swaroopam Chollal* would be pronounced ex-parte on the strength of the *Sadhanam*'s words alone⁵³. The 1905 case of Kuriyedath Tatri's trial, to be discussed subsequently, was however different. The *Swaroopam chollal* was done invariably on a night that would be decided upon after consultation with elders. The Raja who ordered the trial had to be present at the time. The *Smartan* would recall and narrate the procedures that had been followed in the trial and the *Kuttippattar*⁵⁴ would climb on a

⁵² L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, op.cit. p.212

⁵³ C. Achyuta Menon, Cochin State Manual, pp. 593 - 596

⁵⁴ They were either Tamil or Kannada Brahmins who were paid for this job. Namboodiris refused to do this even for a payment since this entailed serious pollution.

stool and read out the names of the men to be given *Bhrashtu* (ostracism). The *Kuttippattar* had to bathe afterwards for cleaning the pollution acquired in reading out the names.

The *Sadhanam* who admits to her acts would also be ostracised. Her *Marakkuda* would be taken and thrown away to symbolically deprive her of caste status. If the woman atones for her deeds and agrees to live a 'clean' life the Raja was bound to look after her. Arrangements were to be made for her stay and maintenance

On the other hand, if the *Sadhanam* was proved innocent the householder and the committee should bow before her asking pardon (*Kshama namaskaram*) for the difficulties and the humiliation imposed on her and respectfully send her back to where she came from⁵⁵. This was termed as *Azhivuchollal*.

An ostracised *Sadhanam* was dead, for all practical purposes, to her family and her death rites of *Udakavicchedam* would be performed after which the husband of the woman does expiatory rites and arranges for a purificatory meal of *Suddhabhojanam*⁵⁶.

The men involved would be left high and dry after their ostracism. They were not to come near or touch the wells or ponds. No one would wash his clothes, shave him or

⁵⁵ C. Achyuta Menon, op. cit., p. 594

⁵⁶ In this last rite in the *Smartavicharam*, the family members and relatives of the woman as well as eminent Namboodiris take part. It was ritual for cleansing the pollution entailed in living in the proximity of sin. After this rite the social boycott of the *Illam* members end.

cook for him. Even the coconut plucker would refuse to work in his groves. The boycott was complete and final. The Matampu Antarjanan now aged ninety four recalls how her husband's uncle Parameswaran ostracised after the 1905 trial, used to try visiting their *Illam*. She would offer him something to drink only to be reprimanded by her husband.⁵⁷ Getting *Bhrashtu* was tantamount to being taken to the gallows. He may commit suicide or leave the land

The children born to the woman after she committed adultery lost their caste. The children born of her husband who have undergone the sacred thread ceremony were made *Chakiars* and the others become *Nambiars*.⁵⁸

Some of the men ostracised would plead innocence to the Raja and on occasions the right would be conceded for the man to receive a *Pampu*⁵⁹ from the *Smartan* and travel to Sucheendram near Thiruvananthapuram to undergo the *Kaimukku* (hand dip) test. The *Smartan* should be convinced that there was a possibility for innocence. The ordeal is undergone, under the sanction of the Raja of Tiruvitamkur, by the accused person dipping his bare hands in scalding oil and taking out a bell metal image. The hand is immediately bandaged and if on examination of it on the third day was found unhurt, the

⁵⁷ Personal interview, Matampu Antarjanam, Thrissur, 26 September 2001¹

⁵⁸ *Chakiars* were the Koothu actors and *Nambiars* the drummers on the *Mizhavu* drum accompanying the *Chakiars* in their performances.

⁵⁹ *Pampu* was a letter of consent from the *Smartan* to undergo the *Kaimukku* trial

man would be declared innocent⁶⁰. What is evident in this system of trial and punishment is the arrangement made within the community for the maintenance of caste purity where both men and women who go against the injunction of preserving the high caste woman's chastity would receive punishment. It was indeed an expensive affair and the householder taking the initiative for the conduct of a trial on his own wife takes a step suicidal both in the economic and social sense. The expenses incurred caused ruin to many an *Illam* especially in the late nineteenth century when several Namboodiri Illams were on the decline due to a variety of reasons. Most householders were opting to keep silent on the issue since it was very rare for a *Sadhanam* to emerge innocent after the trial. Even then, the instances of *Smartavicharam* were numerous. Cases were reported from the Puramendekkadu Mekkad Illam in 1870, Kottachiral Illam in 1897, Thottappaya Illam in 1898, Ashtath Mundanad Illam in 1899, 1902, 1908 and 1916, Parayath Thekkumpuram Illam in 1899, 1902 and 1908, Padinjarepattu Illam between 1915 to 1920 and Kottamangalath Illam in 1917 and 1927, to name a few⁶¹. The question arises as to why the Namboodiris went ahead with such trials. the possible answer would be that it was

⁶⁰ K. K. Pillai, *The Sucheendram Temple*, p. 224

⁶¹ N. M. Namboodiri, *Samuthiri Charitratilale Kanappurangal (The Hidden Pages of Samuthiri's History)*, p. 17

only the claim to spiritual purity that helped maintain the Namboodiri superiority⁶². Such purity then was to be preserved at any cost.

An idea that strongly comes through in the available evidence is that despite the numerous checks on her movement and punishments meted out for violation of rules, transgressions did take place. There were indeed plenty of circumstances which made adultery possible despite the controls:- 'the *moosaths* remained away either on *Sambandhams* or for prayers or celebrations elsewhere. His younger brothers did not reside in the *Illam*. Only the male servants outside and the *dasis* inside would remain. The heat of emotions of the *Antarjanams* living in neglect precipitated such situations. An *Antarjanam* was to speak to the male servants only through the *dasis* but this was often flouted. The *dasis* may have connections with men outside and may act as a medium for communication'⁶³. V.T. Bhattatiripad, the prominent social reformer, refers to three Namboodiri girls of Kambrath Mana near Pulamantol who ran away from their homes and had sexual relations with eminent persons visiting the Travellers' Bungalow there⁶⁴.

⁶² Personal interview, Matampu Kunhukkuttan, Thrissur, 26 September 2001

⁶³ *Malayala Manorama* daily 12 July 1905

⁶⁴ V. T. Bhattatiripad, *V. T. yude Sampoonakrithikal*(Complete Works of V.T.), p. 626

After ostracism the woman could choose whether to stay under state protection or to go wherever she liked. Some of them joined their lovers, some were taken by the *Chettis* (merchants) or Muslims and some entered prostitution⁶⁵.

Some references though not corroborated by other evidence have been found of an institution in North Malabar called the *Mannanar Kotta* where the ostracised women could take refuge. The Raja of Chirakkal is believed to have set aside lands for the institution that was looked after by a Tiyya (caste lower than the Nairs) with the title of Mannanar⁶⁶. The woman who wished to lead a married life was to enter through the door on the east and if she entered through the northern door she would be sister to the Mannanar⁶⁷. Though personal investigation in the region of Chirakkal could not substantiate to the existence of this institution, it perhaps indicates that the life of an ostracised woman was perhaps free of the constraints that she was otherwise subjected to due to her high caste status.

There are also instances of the woman's father providing maintenance for the daughter to settle down with her lover as happened in the case of Peringora Namboodiri in Kottayam whose daughter came to live with Kunjunni Thamban⁶⁸.

⁶⁵ William Logan, op. cit., p. 126

⁶⁶ Referred to in William Logan, op. cit., p. 126 and Vadakkumkur Rajaraja Varma Raja, op. cit., p. 24

⁶⁷ P. Karunakara Menon, *Dakshinentyayile Jatikal* (Castes of South India), p. 107

⁶⁸ *Malayala Manorama* daily, 29 May 1905

Sexuality on Trial: The Case of Kuriyedath Tatri

The sensationalised trial of Kuriyedath Tatri in 1905 needs to be dealt with in some detail here. Tatri still lives as a legend in public memory and is represented in literature and art even today. Conversations with people in and around Arangottukara (where she was born into the Kalpakaserry *Illam* there) and Chemmanthitta (where her in-laws' house Kuriyedath *Illam* was situated in) reveal her strong presence in social memory despite the nearly hundred years that had gone by. This was also despite the taboos that existed on remembering her even in dreams.⁶⁹ Since the productions of images of Tatri in literature, cinema and popular discourses are too many and varied in content, the only subjective articulation may perhaps be the statements that she herself makes of her sexual relationships.

The *Smarthavicharam* trials were not recorded before in history. It was only in Tatri's trial that the Raja had ordered for a change in procedure and instituted a trial of the men concerned. This new process was to be documented. Since it was necessary to record the time and place of the acts, these statements became biographical as they reveal the various events in her life from the day of her attaining puberty to marriage and so on. Her sense of time is determined by the linking of her acts with the days of temple

⁶⁹ Priyadatta Antarjanam, Personal Interview, Thrissur, 20 August 2001

festivals, celebrations in the family like childbirth, *Upanayana* rituals, marriage of kith and kin, Kathakali performances, death, illness, etc. Tatri's accounts form an excellent source for a social history of the period and in the process of narration she mentions those *Illams* which had the means to conduct Kathakali performances, of the various gatherings and rituals, the eminent Namboodiris who participated in important social events and so on. Her narration also reveals critical disjunctures between the prescribed rules governing the Namboodiri community and the actual lived life then.

Tatri's life may be reconstructed on the basis of her own accounts. She was born as the second daughter of Ashtamoorthi Namboodiri of Kalpakasseri *Illam* situated at Arangottukara which stood at the border of the Palakkad and Thrissur district of Keralam. As a young girl, upon her own insistence, she was given some basic education. At the age of ten she went to live at Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath *Illam* to learn music. It was here in 1893 that she had relations (perhaps for the first time) with Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath Nambyattan Mooss Namboodiri⁷⁰. She later married the younger brother of this Nambyattann Namboodiri.. The Nambyattan Namboodiri was more than fifty years old at the time and Tatri was only ten. She had not yet attained puberty which she did only later

⁷⁰ The names of that time signify the following in their order: the place of location of the *Illam* or household, the name of the *Illam* or household, the first name of the person and finally the suffix of caste name. Also the term *Mooss* if he happens to be the eldest son of the Namboodiris.

at the age of fourteen. Subsequently, her teacher in music, Pushpakath Narayanan Nambyassan spotted her moving around in the *Illam* with Nambyattan Namboodiri and suspecting an affair, asked her about it. Tatri testifies, 'he was my guru and I could not lie to him.... Later, on another occasion when I went to bathe he came over to the *Kulappura*⁷¹ and made known his desire for a physical union with me. I helped him realize that desire then and there. That was the first time with him in 1893. There was yet another occasion too which was in 1898. I had not given him any presents in lieu of the music training imparted and asked him to come to Kalpakaserry (her natal home) so as to give him two *Mundus* (garments). He came in the morning and left only the next day afternoon. That night we had sexual union.... He was dark and heavy with a bad tooth on the lower jaw and must have been around forty years then'⁷².

It was again in 1893 that she had relations with her maternal uncle Okki Illath Itteeri Namboodiri. This uncle was later instrumental in her having relations with Akazhi Narasimha Namboodiri in 1901. The reasons for the union were simple. She wanted to borrow a necklace to wear for a wedding and asked the Akazhi Namboodiri for it who turned down her request. She approached him through her uncle who procured it for her

⁷¹ A kind of shed constructed near the bathing tank to facilitate change of clothes.

⁷² Tatri's testimony in Smartavicharam Records (henceforth *TISR*) on Pushpakath Narayanan Nambyassan, Ernakulam Regional Archives.

on the condition that she had to have physical relationship with the Akazhi Namboodiri. She agreed to return the necklace in person and required her uncle to let her know the time, place and the manner in which she was to meet the Akazhi Namboodiri. Tatri relates the events: 'I was sleeping with the kids inside the *Thekkini*⁷³. Uncle had told me that Akazhi Namboodiri would come at dawn and wait at the *Purathalam* (outer verandah) and I was to meet him there. I acted as per this instruction. Had sexual union. Akazhi Namboodiri got up and left. I came back to the *Thekkini* and lied down. The next day I left the place'.⁷⁴

Her relations were varied, born out of different compulsions and with very different kinds of men. Her childhood friend Mundayoor Illath Madhavan Namboodiri had a secret relationship with a woman of the Warriar caste at Kalpakassery. Once on a trip to a nearby temple together, Tatri asked Madhavan about the relationship that he carried on against the wishes of his father. Tatri says, 'I asked this as a pastime. While replying, he asked me of my relationship with the Namboodiri of Desamangalam *Illam* and I told him the truth. Then he said that if I were to let him have sexual intercourse with

⁷³ Room to the south

⁷⁴ *TISR*, Akazhi Namboodiri

me he would stop visiting the Warriar woman. I agreed. Five or six days later he had come to my *Illam* at Kalpakassery and we met in sexual union. This was in 1894'.⁷⁵

She had relations with her sister's husband as well. Her sister had come home to deliver a baby and the husband Palathol Illath Itteeri Namboodiri used to visit the place. Once the Namboodiri had returned after a temple festival and brought with him some beautiful *Mundus* with silken borders. Tatri says, 'I took one and kept it away as my own and sent word through a woman telling him that I wanted it. He sent back a reply that he would give it if I were to personally request him. After a few days while I was returning after my bath I met him returning after his evening prayers. I reminded him of the offer on the *Mundu*. He agreed to give it to me and expressed his desire for physical union. I agreed. I told him that I slept in the room on the north and would come out when he lets me know. Accordingly, the sexual union took place'.⁷⁶ This Namboodiri was fond of her enough to arrange Kathakali performances at the *Illam* for her benefit. He even used to hand over his purse to her from which she took around Rupees fifty.⁷⁷

The most startling to the contemporary mind is her relationship with her own father Kalpakassery Ashtamoorthy Namboodiri. This happened in 1900 when Tatri was

⁷⁵ *TISR*, Mundayoor Madhavan Namboodiri

⁷⁶ *TISR*, Palathol Illath Itteeri Namboodiri

⁷⁷ *Idem*.

eighteen and just before she got married. Her mother had delivered her younger sister then. Her father had a chronic stomach ailment and used to feel better with a massage. Tatri occasionally massaged him and on one such occasion the union happened.⁷⁸

Meanwhile in 1900 Tatri got married to Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath Raman Namboodiri, the younger brother of Kuriyedath Nambyattan Mooss Namboodiri. As per the Namboodiri custom only the eldest son, the *Mooss*, could marry within the caste. Since Nambyattan Namboodiri had no children, the second in line Raman Namboodiri married. Legend has it that the elder brother engineered this wedding to have Tatri at his side. All the injunctions so familiar to an Antarjanam regarding the *Pativratadharm*a and the dos and don'ts before and after marriage were thrown to the winds. Her life was in no way altered after her marriage. She faced hardly any restrictions on her movement and traveled very widely for an Antarjanam to do so in those times.

One other relationship was with her mother's younger sister's son Kalpakassery Narayanan Namboodiri. Tatri had come to stay at her natal home and was told of her cousin's involvement with several women which the family disapproved of. Tatri was asked to personally give him good advice. Tatri reports, 'I tried to drill some good sense into him. He resisted and we broke up. Our mothers made us patch up again. I tried again

⁷⁸ *TISR*, Kalpakassery Ashtamoorthy Namboodiri

and he told me of the problems back in his family.... He said he wanted to leave the place and would like to have physical union with me before he left. I forbade him and tried to dissuade him from leaving. He refused to listen. However, out of a lack of guard on both our sides that night a physical union took place'.⁷⁹

Her deep interest in Kathakali made her take more than one man related to this art form. Her relationship with Narikkotta Raman Nair, a Kathakali actor in 1899 owed itself to her request that he do the role of Lalita in the play *Narakasuravadham*. Since it was a female character Raman refused on the grounds that his friend was doing Bhima and he didn't want to settle for a smaller character. Tatri got him to do it by agreeing to fulfil his desire for a sexual union.⁸⁰ She had relations with Ranath Achyutha Poduval⁸¹ because he was a Kathakali singer and with Panankavil Govindan Nambyar in order to acquire a copy of the play *Narakasuravadham*⁸². The most celebrated of her association with Kathakali is the relationship she had with Kavungal Sankara Panicker. Panicker was the performer par excellence of that time⁸³ who is still referred to with great awe by Kathakali artistes even today. Tatri had seen his performances and got acquainted with

⁷⁹ *TISR*, Kalpakassery Narayanan Namboodiri

⁸⁰ *TISR*, Narikkotta Raman

⁸¹ *TISR*, Ranath Achyutha Poduval

⁸² *TISR*, Panankavil Govindan Nambyar

⁸³ K. P. S. Menon, *Kathakali Rangam*, P.102

him when he came to Kuriyedath *Illam* for *Cholliyattam*⁸⁴ Tatri asked him to come to Kalpakassery and Panicker agreed. There at the isolated *Pathayapura*(outhouse) Panicker performed the *Cholliyattam* as Tatri sang the *Padam*⁸⁵. The play was *Keechakavadham* from the Mahabharata, the scene was of an enamoured Keechaka requesting Draupadi to meet him. Bhima goes in her place and kills Keechaka. This particular scene is enacted with the form of Bhima lying hidden under a sheet and Keechaka imagining it to be Draupadi moving in under the sheet providing an erotically charged moment in the play. Tatri testifies: ‘The Cholliyattam was progressing. At the end in the moment of Keechaka and Bhima lying together our physical union actually happened’.⁸⁶

The events and the men described above are only a few among the sixty four she named. It was a mixed group ranging from Namboodiris of the most eminent *Illams* like Desamangalam to the men of the Nair and Nambiar castes who were in charge of elephants. There were astrologers, performers, singers and actors involved. Also in the line were her close relatives ranging from her father, brother, brothers-in-law (both sister’s husband and husband’s brothers), uncles and grand uncle as well as the Nair servant from her natal home. These men were from ages between seventeen and sixty.

⁸⁴ Cholliyattam was the rehearsals of Kathakali, without costumes or face make-up. They revealed the suppleness and aesthetic of the body that would be naked except for the garment around the waist.

⁸⁵ Small verses sung for the performances narrating the story

⁸⁶ *TISR*, Kavungal Sankara Panickar

Tatri remembered every detail of these relationships, the how, when, where and why of these sexual unions. The immediate reasons for such sexual unions were many; in lieu for perfumes, garments, gold, books etc. or driven by pure passion born of the aesthetic urges within her as in the case of Kavungal Sankara Panicker. The men would respond to Tatri's desire for any particular object with the information that they had of her prior relationships and then demand the same. A few happened because she was caught in compromising positions (as when lying with her uncle). She had to agree to Padinjare Madathil Venkateswara Patter's request in order to silence the man. But even then, she rejects his request after giving in twice stating clearly that she had agreed twice since she feared that he would tell what he saw and that it would be difficult to do so again in the future.⁸⁷ Tatri's statements amply bear evidence to her own initiatives and desire as being responsible for her relationships. There was no force or blackmail used on the part of the men. Most of these men gave her various gifts and money. Despite the fact that most of these men related to her more than once, none stopped her from having other relations or tried to possess her exclusively.

Tatri was only twenty three years old when she was brought to trial. There was a long period of thirteen years when she carried these relationships with these men. A large

⁸⁷ *TISR*, Padinjare Madathil Venkateswara Patter

section of the Namboodiris between the geographical area between Arangottukara and Chemmanthitta knew about Tatri's relations in secret one man knowing of her involvement with another. This territory was also the area across which Tatri travelled widely. The restrictions on the mobility of the Antarjanams were effectively circumvented by her by taking along the Nair *dasis* and staying overnight at *Illams* and eating only there. She could also with slight alterations in dress and hairstyle pass off as a woman of a Nair or Warriar caste⁸⁸.

Tatri's entry into the space of the art form Kathakali is significant. Till twenty five years ago when a Ladies troupe was organized at Trippunithura, Kathakali remained largely as a male art form in terms of actors, audience and emotions. Even the female characters were enacted by male performers. Not only the art form Kathakali, but singing was also forbidden for Namboodiri women. This being so, Tatri lives in popular memory as an extremely beautiful woman who sang beautifully and had long tresses of hair⁸⁹. Her candid and unabashed rendering of her sexual experiences testifies to the virtual absence of guilt or shame. Not once did she deny her involvement. The *Purushavicharam* instituted newly by the Raja Rama Varma had, contrary to the earlier practices allowed

⁸⁸ Matampu Kunhukkuttan reports that he heard this from elder Namboodiris.

⁸⁹ Kundaru Nair (Tatri's dasi Parekkat Madhavi's great grandson), personal interview, Arangottukara, 27 September 2001

for the men named to defend themselves on their own and also to cross question the woman. All the men unanimously denied involvement and tried to argue, rather unsuccessfully, that Tatri was unnecessarily harassing them. The new procedure had also provided for the men to cross-examine Tatri. One such questioning goes thus:

Kalpakassery Narayanan	to	Tatri
Have you had relations with me?	:	Yes
When did it happen first?	:	In the month of Meenam(Pisces) on the 27 th .
Which year?	:	Year before last
Do you remember any identification marks on my body?	:	I can't remember any particular ones
Who asked for the relation first?	:	Narayanan did
Who acted in the first instance of sexual union	:	I did
When was the second time?	:	On <i>Vishu</i> day
Weren't I away for officiating rites elsewhere then?	:	It was your father and not you who had gone for it ⁹⁰

⁹⁰ 141 E ,*Smarthavicharam* Records,henceforth *SR*

Such were the responses that contemporary newspapers reported that the woman ‘argued as smartly as a barrister’⁹¹. One of the men involved had appealed to the Raja for permission to allow the eminent lawyer and retired District judge, Ramachandra Iyer, to represent him. The appeal was turned down but finally he was permitted to question the woman. However, the *Sadhanam* very cleverly responded to the cross-examination and the lawyer was left disappointed.⁹²

The men accused tried to absolve themselves by appealing to the Raja in writing citing various possible causes for their being implicated wrongly⁹³. Tatri’s father claimed that she was getting back at him for his having discouraged her from staying at her natal home after rumours about her ‘wayward’ behaviour had spread. Her cousin Narayanan alleged that Tatri had a grudge against him since he had asked her to go back to her in-laws’ house and had on another occasion reprimanded her for stealing money. Tatri’s sister’s husband explains that Tatri’s unpleasantness with her sister had led to her implicating him. Many others who could cite no reason tried to argue that they were either sick or away when the said act was alleged to have taken place. Some claimed physical inability for the act. The state, on this occasion, provided the services of the

⁹¹ *Malayala Manorama* daily, 5 July 1905

⁹² *Idem*

⁹³ The various letters have been cited from the *SR*

local government apothecary to examine the private parts of the two accused Kalpakassery Narayanan Namboodiri and Vadakkemadathil Appu Pattar to verify their claims. The Raja records in his diary on this: ‘spoke a few words with Subramanya Iyer the local Apothecary who has come here as directed by me to examine and tell us his opinion about a plea set forth by two persons who are involved in the *Smartavicharam* now going on. His opinion was that the plea of the two persons was unreliable’⁹⁴.

Interestingly, the *Smartan*’s attitude was also in Tatri’s favour. Unless and until the men would prove their innocence conclusively and without doubt, the *Smartan* was to go by her statements alone. In the concluding remarks on the *Smartavicharam* the *Smartan* Jatavedan Namboodiri states that ‘the *Sadhanam*’s statements had strengthened suspicions about the men beyond doubt. The only remaining factor to be looked into was whether the men were able to remove these suspicions raised. After hearing the men out there is no reason to disbelieve the *Sadhanam*’⁹⁵.

In the section where he comments separately for each person called in for the *Purushavicharam*, the *Smartan*’s conclusion for most are that he ‘see(s) no reason to disbelieve the *Sadhanam*’⁹⁶. While the men argued that the *Sadhanam* implicated them

⁹⁴ Abdicated Rajah’s Diary dated 4 July 1905, *SR*

⁹⁵ 141E, *SR*

⁹⁶ *Idem*.

upon a grudge the *Smartan* concludes that the reasons cited for the grudge are too trivial to warrant such action⁹⁷. Her uncle pleaded innocence on the ground that Tatri was mentally unstable. The *Smartan* overruled this plea with a compliment paid to Tatri's excellent memory and coherence of argument. While Tatri's father tried to prove his innocence the *Smartan*'s remark was that it was impossible to believe that the woman would pass such lies about her own father⁹⁸. Thekke Madathil Shamu Pattar produced a title deed proving that he was a minor at the time of the alleged offence. The *Smartan* gave his opinion that the status of being a minor did not necessarily indicate his age or incapability for the sexual act. In general the *Smartan* held that nobody would 'imagine that the *Sadhanam* would implicate anyone through a lie that would not benefit her in any way'⁹⁹. Of the sixty five men called for *Purushavicharam* (the sixty fifth being her own husband), two had already died while three others did not appear due to illness or absence from their home. None admitted their involvement but could not prove their innocence beyond doubt. All sixty five were subjected to *Swaroopam Chollal* and excommunicated.

It has been seen that the high caste women had been virtually confined within their private spheres, such seclusion being prescribed by both the texts and by the

⁹⁷ *Idem*.

⁹⁸ *Idem*. This was against Kuriyedath Nambyattan Namboodiri's plea.

⁹⁹ 141 E, *SR*

existing customs. However, ‘this did not prevent “illicit” sexual activity. Institutional structures designed to prevent illicit sexual relations did not, however eradicate sexual “lapses” altogether’¹⁰⁰. There was active collaboration from among the Namboodiri women themselves besides the support from the Nair *dasis*. In the case of Tatri’s relationship with Pushpoth Sankunni Nambyassan, a Namboodiri woman named Kizhakkoot Tatri had conveyed the information about Tatri to the Nambyassan. This Nambyassan was already a paramour to Kizhakkoot Tatri. It was through Kizhakkoot Tatri that Sankunni Nambyassan requested Tatri for physical union. Both Tatri went together for the temple festival and it was Kizhakkoot Tatri who took her as far as Pushpoth Illam to meet Sankunni Nambyassan where she left her.

Though a lot of Namboodiris knew about Tatri’s relationships she was not brought to trial for a long period of at least thirteen years. This may perhaps have been because of the eminence of the men involved and also because of the fact that those involved were precisely those on whom the responsibility of maintaining caste superiority and purity rested. There is a much circulated rumour that her relations came under trial after the Vasudevan Namboodiri of Kandanchatha *Mana* of Chemmanthitta

¹⁰⁰ Uma Chakravarti, ‘Wifewood, Widowhood and Adultery: Female Sexuality, Surveillance and the State in 18th century Maharashtra’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s.29, 1&2, 1995, p.11 in 18th century Maharashtra’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s.29, 1&2, 1995, p.11

first told the Raja about it. Kandanchatta *Mana* stands adjacent to Kuriyedath *Illam*. Vasudevan Namboodiri officiated as a priest at the Trippunithura temple and therefore had occasions to come within close proximity of the Raja. The present members of this *Mana*, Sankaranarayanan Namboodiri and Parameswaran Namboodiri showed great reluctance to discuss the matter¹⁰¹. The Kuriyedath *Illam* faced ruin as a fall out of the trial and the plot of land (ploughed many times as repeatedly stated by Kandanchatha Sankaran Namboodiri) stands desolate except for the old bathing tank with broken steps leading down¹⁰². There is a possibility for investigation in the fact that the plot of land where Kuriyedath *Illam* once stood is now under the possession of the Kandanchatha *Mana*.

In a community where female sexuality was attempted to be controlled and its outward expressions were taboo, Tatri's case stood out as rebellious, scandalous and sensational. The incident obviously created an uproar in the high and low circles of the community. The tremors it sent can be gauged from the continued presence of Tatri in the writing of different genres, viz., legal, literary and journalistic, in popular movies as well as in the myths that were created around her, which are being discussed here..

¹⁰¹ *TTSR*, Sankunni Nambyassan

¹⁰² Personal Interview, Chemmanthitta, 27 September 2001

The legal validity and authority of the *Smartavicharam* came under serious criticism during Tatri's trial. The pronouncement of verdict based on the *Sadhanam*'s words alone was seen as a major legal lapse. It was felt that 'there has been no change in the way in which all mentioned by the *Sadhanam* are ostracized. This is due to the continuing belief that the *Sadhanam* of today would speak only the truth. But the *Sadhanams* of today are most unlike those of earlier times which is evident from the fact that this *Sadhanam* has named at least seventy men...(having) seduced seventy men of repute more skillfully than an **adulteress** and travelled around disguised as a woman of the lower caste'.¹⁰³ The legal climate was becoming instrumental in crystallizing moral attitudes on women that placed women as guilty in all cases of sexual offence. In the community's bid to absolve itself of guilt Tatri was condemned. The newspapers of the time wrote, 'how could anybody trust the words of a woman who openly admits her **adulterous** character?'¹⁰⁴ 'The number of men involved indicates that she was worse than a **prostitute**. She moved about freely and did what she liked. How can truth be expected of such a woman with absolutely no morals?'¹⁰⁵ They write her off with the comment, 'when a woman sets her mind on something, not even Brahma, the creator, can stop

¹⁰³ See Appendix for photograph

¹⁰⁴ (emphasis mine). *Malayala Manorama* daily, 7 June 1905

¹⁰⁵ *Malayala Manorama* daily, 31 May 1905

her'¹⁰⁶. The transformation in attitudes regarding women and their sexuality is notable. Despite controls on women's sexuality, both the State and the community represented by the *Smartan* did not condemn the women. The colonial climate with its models of the chaste woman was introducing the ideas of adultery and prostitution while describing a female sexual offender. While not subscribing to the view that the pre-colonial state was more favourable to women, what is apparent is a shifting discourse on the sexuality of women.

Tatri's absorption into literature found its mark in the essays of the noted literary figure, M. Govindan. Govindan is awed by the aura that Tatri exudes and is prepared to deify her¹⁰⁷. He feels that Tatri should be brought back, not for another trial, but for one's own trial in her presence¹⁰⁸. Govindan, born of a Namboodiri father, had heard of a 'fallen' Antarjanam jumping into a well in his neighbourhood while being chased by Namboodiris who wanted to punish her. The sense of collective guilt of a community, as in Govindan, contributed largely to the portrayal of Tatri as a noble avenger of the wrongs done to the woman of her community.

¹⁰⁶ (emphasis mine) *Malayala Manorama* daily, 7 June 1905

¹⁰⁷ *Malayala Manorama* daily, 19 July 1905

¹⁰⁸ M. Govindan, Govindante Upanyasangal(M.Govindan's Essays)(Malayalam), p.716

Matampu Kunhukkuttan's *Bhrashtu*¹⁰⁹ was the first attempt to portray Tatri's life in literature. Written as a novel, Tatri in this book was a heroic woman, frustrated by the innumerable restrictions placed on her by the conventions of the Namboodiri clan and her husband's neglect and indifference. She then deliberately conducted secret liaisons with prominent men of several upper caste families. This was the longstanding and most popular image of Tatri that was circulated widely. Fiction got transformed into history and in conversations with people of the region many quoted the novel as an authentic account of Tatri's life¹¹⁰.

Alangod Leelekrishnan's four part series in the popular Malayalam weekly *Mathrubhumi* gave a similar version of Tatri as an avenger of her tribe¹¹¹. So did K.B.Sreedevi's novel 'Yajnam' (sacrifice)¹¹². Lalitambika Antarjanam, the foremost woman writer among the Namboodiris wrote a short story *Pratikaladevata* (Goddess of Revenge) on Tatri also in a similar vein. This would be discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter. In the latest book *Kuriyedath Tatri* a novel by Nandan published in 2001, Tatri continues to be the rebel who lashed out at the double standards of the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 724

¹¹⁰ Kamalakshi Warasyar of Wadakke Wariam, Arangottukara gave me the version from *Bhrashtu* that Tatri was sexually violated by her husband's brother on her wedding night. Personal Interview, Arangottukara, 27 September 2001. However, Matampu Kunhukkuttan who authored this novel told me that all the such details in his novel were pure fiction, Personal Interview, Thrissur, 26 September, 2001

¹¹¹ Published in English under the title 'Outcaste' by Macmillan, New Delhi, 1996

¹¹² Thrissur: Current Books, 1998(1974)

community that suffocated its woman¹¹³. The old reading of Tatri is retold again and again and Tatri became the stereotype of a victimized woman subjected to the sexual exploits of the Namboodiri men. Her prolonged submission to such exploitation led her to break all taboos and take revenge on the men.

The representations in literature were unanimous in the admission of her sexual acts. However, such analyses of her sexuality in terms of revenge serves to take the edge off a sexually desiring and desirable subject who acted within a largely autonomous space. While trying to valorize Tatri for her ability for revenge, the understanding is that she was still an adulteress (for justifiable and noble reasons though!) This language is an echo of the popular sentiments expressed in the newspapers of the time that viewed Tatri as a seductress and prostitute. Such an image also lends credibility to the arguments that women (the *Sadhanams*) could lie without ethics to achieve their own ends.

Popular movies like *Maarattam*, *Bhrashtu*, *Parinayam* and *Vanaprastham* were inspired by the theme of Tatri's life. These however dwell on the aesthetic of her relationship with Kavungal Sankara Panicker.

Tatri's sexuality was explained in terms of a strategy for seeking vengeance against the community's ill – treatment of its women. Her life became an important

¹¹³ *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Nov 30 – Dec 6 1997, Dec. 7 – 13 1997, Dec 14 – 20 1997, Dec 21 – 27 1997

testimony to the need for a renovation and reform of caste structures to radically redefine the nature of male female relationships. Tatri's experience was accounted for in the hapless plight of the Namboodiri women that could provoke them to go to extremes. Three years after the Tatri's case sent shock waves into the community, the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha was organized in 1908 for initiating social reform. However, V.T.Bhattatiripad, who was at the forefront of the reform initiatives, was perhaps the only reformer who refers to Tatri's life with awe.. He too saw her as part of an 'unseen women's guerrilla squad fighting against the sexual anarchy of the patriarchal community'¹¹⁴. He stated three possible reasons for a woman to enter into an adulterous relationship-lust, money and revenge. If it was for lust there was no need for Tatri to have relationships with so many men. It wasn't for money either since many of the men involved were far from rich. He concludes therefore that it was a wave of protest that motivated her¹¹⁵.

Despite the fact that Tatri shattered the institutionalised notions of morality within the Namboodiri community even V.T.Bhattatiripad refuses to accept Matampu Kuhukkuttan's and Lalitambika's versions of Tatri in their works of fiction. These two

¹¹⁴ Nandan Kuriyedath Tatri (Malayalam), Kottayam: DC, 2001

¹¹⁵ V. T. Bhattatiripad, V. T. Yude Sampoomakritikal (Malayalam), p. 627

had portrayed her as victims of the sexual violence of Namboodiri men. V.T.Bhattatiripad had the opinion that the above mentioned portraits of Tatri did not fit his own imagined picture of Tatri.as he could not imagine her as a victim.He feels that this *Smartavicharam* would not have happened if the woman had been able to marry a husband of her choice¹¹⁶.

Thus even progressive writers who contributed to the reform literature are ‘unable to accept Tatri as a remarkable presence in social Renaissance because, while being on her side, they cannot reject the patriarchal ideology that condemns her as fallen’¹¹⁷.

Sexual relations as in the case of Tatri were either explained as a response to experiences of exploitation and victim hood or wished away altogether. Parekkat Kundaru Nair, the great grandson of Tatri’s *dasi* Parekkat Madhavi and now aged seventy-five, expressed indignation at the public discourse on Tatri’s sexual life. He insisted that the whole story was false. The Tatri he had heard of as a child was a nice young woman. She surely must have named these men out of revenge and no sexual acts had actually taken place. Despite all these relationships, Kundaru Nair asks, why was it

¹¹⁶ V.T.Bhattatiripad, V.Tyude Sampoomakritikal(Complete Collection of V.T’s Works),pp.626-7

¹¹⁷ K.E.N.Kunhammed, ‘Varenya Navotthanathinte Athirukal’ (Limits to Elitist Renaissance) ,Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Nammude Sahithyam Nammude Samooham(Our literature Our Society) p.61

that Tatri bore no children? This question was inspired by one version on Tatri's life that claimed that she later got married and had two children. Kundaru Nair held this up as a proof of her innocence (read chastity). He further substantiated his argument by pointing to the peculiarity of the number sixty-four. The Namboodiris had settled into sixty-four gramas, the *Anacharams* were numbered sixty-four, there were sixty-four arts, to name a few instances, suggesting that Tatri symbolically picked sixty-four names at random¹¹⁸.

Both while trying to legitimize the sexual acts or in erasing it out altogether, as though not having happened, Tatri's sexuality was demanded to have a reason for its existence and expression. Sexual acts were not then seen as a product of desire of the self or body but as a mere effect of a social cause, be it denial, victimhood or revenge. Tatri's sexuality certainly evoked and still evokes fear in the contemporary male psyche. The people at Arangottukara cautioned against treading the spot where Kalpakassery *Illam* once stood. The workmen who went down to clear the old bathing tank on the premises supposedly complained of suffocation. The officiating priest at the Arangottukara Karthyayani temple is believed to have consecrated a silver figurine as Tatri along with the temple diety. This account could not be substantiated though. Tatri is still believed to

¹¹⁸ Idem

lurk around the place as a *Yakshi* (demoness) to devour Namboodiri men on full moon nights¹¹⁹.

Tatri certainly was an exception who cannot be translated into any general understanding regarding the lives of the Antarjanams of those times. But, she definitely throws a lot of light into the secret lives of the otherwise cloistered Antarjanams. Her life testifies to the fact that despite the innumerable restrictions placed on the Antarjanam's mobility, they could move around as they liked provided they followed the instructions on carrying the *Marakkuda*, and wearing the *Ghosha*, took Nair dasis along and stayed only at Namboodiri *Illams*. Visiting temples was an excuse often used for ensuring mobility. The possibilities for flouting rules were therefore endless and the rules that were prescribed for the control of sexuality and even accepted were different from the actualities of lived life. Tatri's case along with that of others fully illustrates how hidden relationships constantly transgress the boundaries prescribed by men, sometimes powerful men.

¹¹⁹ Parekkat Kundaru Nair, Personal Interview, Arangottukara, 27 September 2001