

lateral studies



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Lateral Studies # 2

NAMPUTIRI, ANTHARJANAM, MAN, WOMAN : REFORMING
MALAYALA BRAHMINS

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Introduction : Reconsidering Reformism

'Community' movements in twentieth century-Keralam have often been characterised as representing part of a 'Malayalee Renaissance.'¹ It has been further claimed that the experience of 'Renaissance' in Keralam was of a more specific and intense sort compared to the North Indian experience, that the strong anti-caste thrust of *avarna* groups in reformism made it a stronger and more fundamental experience of social change. Thus the social change that took place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Keralam (which comprised of several elements, prominently, the increasing opposition to traditional limitations upon individuals, including those of caste) has been most often characterised as an essentially liberating experience that freed the individual from feudalism, caste and debilitating family-forms. "At the beginning of this century", writes A. Shreedhara Menon, "Caste and feudalism encircled Keralam. Institutions like untouchability, polygamy, polyandry and matriliney flourished under the patronage of feudalism. The larger section of people in society did not have the freedom or the opportunity to grow or develop according to their own ambitions."² The experience of 'Renaissance' (along with other factors like progressive legislation etc. on the part of the State) however, seems to have altered the scheme fundamentally :

"The ordinary man in Keralam today has been liberated from the bondage of caste and feudalism. The institutions that functioned as impediments to the socio-economic progress of people have all been reduced to ruins."³

It has also been recognised that the formation of organisations which set up the building of modern communities as their major goal was a salient feature of this period, and that the ideas of individual liberty and social change gained circulation in and through such organisations.⁴ The new identities given by

the new organisations are considered to be of a sort which respected and fostered individual aspirations. Very often, they are projected as a sort of a 'first step' in the sense of paving the way for movements based upon identities that could be potentially shared by a greater number of people, such as the national movement or the communist movement. It has been argued that "...communal approach to problems in Travancore and Cochin was gradually widened and transformed into a national and political movement to achieve the goal of freedom and responsible government."⁵ The 'awakening' that community movements made possible is seen to underlie this. It has also been claimed that the progressive ideas that gained prominence in and through movements such as the Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) movement facilitated the rise of the communist movement in Kerala.⁶ There have been, however, noteworthy attempts to qualify the claim that community movements necessarily helped to root movements appealing to wider sections, with wider political goals.⁷ But despite their differences, most of these accounts largely rely upon the notion of an already-present Individuality which the 'Renaissance' helps to release or develop; in this sense they remain along with the self-claims advanced by the spokespersons of reformism itself, even when they occupy apparently-opposing positions.

There have been, at times, attempts to explore internal conflict, expressed or dormant, within such movements, or stress one aspect (i.e. liberation of individuals or institution building) over the other in reformism. There have also been differences of opinion regarding the specific political orientation of the institutions set up by reform movements. However, very often, Individual liberation is seen to rest more or less uneasily alongside the other aspect prominent in these movements, that of building the institution of the modern community, in quite many other accounts. Scholars have, for instance, have differed in their interpretation of the famous consecration of an 'Ezhava Shivan' by Shree Narayana Guru at Aruvippuram in 1888 – some have preferred to see in it an attempt at Sanskritisation,⁸ while others interpret it as 'social protest.'⁹ A third position has viewed it as an "intervention in popular culture, with a view to transform it in the image of, but distinct from, the upper-caste culture", but it is further argued that this was appropriated by the rising Ezhava

middle-class to suit its aspirations, and thoroughly institutionalised in the SNDP Yogam.¹⁰ 'Liberation' and 'Institutionalisation' often figure as the two political poles between which reform movements have swung. The tension between individual-liberation and community-building has often been accepted as a key feature of Nambutiri reformism too, in both its journalistic¹¹ and academic characterisations. A recent paper on the Nambutiri reform movement has sought to argue that palpable tension existed between the liberatory aspirations of Antharjanams (Malayala Brahmin women) and the interests of those who aspired to build the modern community.¹² The advocacy of intra-caste marriage of young Nambutiris (Malayala Brahmin men) is seen to be stemming from economic, not liberatory-political interests.¹³ The reformist initiative is itself seen to have arisen from the need to modernise the community (in fact, the pre-existing caste), to make it an effective player in the modern public domain.¹⁴

What is striking about most of the above work is that key notions like 'Individual', 'liberation', 'protest', 'community-building' etc. are hardly ever subjected to close examination. Take, for instance, the notion of 'liberation'. Even in the disagreements that arose within Nambutiri reformism in the 1930's, the rhetoric of liberation was fully implicated in the project of transforming men and women into useful and hardworking subjects; it always referred to a collectivity into which the Individual was to be integrated, be it the 'Nambutiri Community', the 'Indian Nation' 'Malayalee Society' or whatever. Even in attempts that were made to redefine the notion of women's liberation and link it to women's participation on equal terms with men in the public domain, their integration as 'useful' subjects into a modern collectivity is upheld. Even those accounts which at times recognise that the notion of 'liberation' voiced within reformism was not equivalent to the commonsensical understanding of 'freedom', have not tried to state it explicitly. In most instances, the effort is to describe the experience of reform as the movement of the "Ordinary Man" from a condition of constraint to a state in which these are removed.¹⁵

The notion of *Swatantryam* that had gained currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Keralam was linked to the realisation of a self-reflecting consciousness that could at the same time conform to an ideal subjectivity. The 'free'

Individual when imagined was always and already implicated in modern collectivity. When one goes through the writing left behind by reformist movements, one finds an intense concern with *fashioning* Individuality, even when this activity is described as 'liberating the Individual'—one need only to note the intense debates over the content of Individuality, the specific practices that were found necessary for its fashioning, the kinds of institutions that were prescribed for the attainment of this end and so on, especially marked within Nambutiri reformism. Reform movements may, then, be regarded as institutions that sought to *fashion* Individuals, rather than as forces that 'liberated' a pre-existing Individuality. Fashioning Individuals need not be taken as the production of docile subjects; indeed, it implies the conferring of new sorts of agency on Individuals so fashioned, Individuals equipped with the capability to effectively operate within the modern community and the modern public domain. However, this agency should not be equated with 'freedom' in its commonsensical usage (i.e., lack of all sorts of constraint). Again, treating reform movements as institutions that fashion Individuals does not mean that they must be conceived of as a sort of machinery, mechanically producing subjects. Reform-movements do appear to be a kind of 'apparatus' or as a part of one, but they were also indisputably the site of struggle about fashioning. By the 1930's, for instance, the so-called conservatives among the Malayala Brahmins had been completely drawn into reformist language, speaking in the interest of 'Nambutiris' etc. The disputes that raged within Nambutiri reformism in the 1930's could be read more fruitfully as debates about *fashioning* and its goals rather than as a tussle between 'less liberating' and 'more liberating' positions. Even if the reform-movement did function as a sort of machinery, what it was to be, who was to operate it, how it was to function, under what conditions and limits it was to work, and a host of other critical matters were constantly at the centre of debate and struggle.

The project of modern community-building that appears at the heart of the reformist agenda in Keralam was by no means a simple assertion of pre-modern collectivities. The modern community which reformers set up as their goal was distinct in many striking ways. The formation of the modern community was clearly seen to be dependent upon the destruction of pre-

existing forms of knowledge and practices found characteristic of the older collectivities. It required that their members be *subjects*, who participate in the process of making the community, not those who are simply born into it, or simply get used to its practices and usages. The modern community, further, can be described as a substantial entity with sets of features identified as 'characteristic of' or 'typical to'; it is not, as the pre-modern collectivity, a set of groups interlinked through networks of sharings and obligations, arranged in hierarchy, exhibiting a sort of 'family resemblance' in practices, customs, in the structuring of everyday routine etc., often recognisable as a totality only from the outside.¹⁶ Almost every community-movement in Kerala displayed remarkable zeal for ending internal hierarchies and practices that worked to mark distance between groups—be it Nambutiri, Nair or any other. The relations envisaged in the modern community, between members and the collectivity, ideally, were to be different from those in the pre-modern collectivity. Re-formation of the collectivity clearly implied the re-integration into it, of the members of the collectivity as Individuals.¹⁷ This definitely targeted the loose pre-modern collectivity in which several groups with 'family resemblance' were interconnected through networks of obligations and hierarchical arrangement; but it sought to transform this into the internally-homogenised modern community. Here the creation of the Individual and the building of the modern community need not be regarded as opposing tendencies. If the view which regards community-movements as vehicles through which forces that release an already-present Individuality are activated is unacceptable, this does not automatically endorse a perspective that would regard them as simple efforts at institution-building. One consequence of either accepting tacitly the common-sense notion of liberation or failing to scrutinise it closely is the reinforcement of the idea that the project of 'liberation', is somehow 'pure', free of all interest, not entangled in power-politics. Indeed, such interpretation of *Acharam Viplavam* (Revolution in Observances) has resulted in the constitution of a modern mythology flourishing around figures like V.T. Bhattatiripad.¹⁸ This is not to devalue the role such figures have played in struggles, or to downplay their personal suffering but merely to remind that the subtle shift involved in considering them to be hallowed, exalted beings rather than historical actors, needs to be cautiously taken, since such

adoration often blunts critical and historical perspective. For example, there is some basis to put forth the hypothesis that the demand for reorganising power-relations within *Illams* (the Malayala Brahmin homestead) was the result of not just the humanistic response of some young Nambutiris to the gross injustices they witnessed (as most journalistic writing in Malayalam makes it out to be), but also of the need to cope up with the breakdown of Patriarchal power in the *Illams*. In 1905, the *Malayala Manorama* was warning the Malayala Brahmins of this danger, pointing out that women and the servant-class in the *Illams* were colluding against the men, and that unless Patriarchal power was reinstated on a stronger and more modern basis, all would be lost.¹⁹ Soon after this warning the sensation-making 'Kuriyedathu Tatri' case²⁰ broke out, seemingly confirming the *Malayala Manorama's* warning. Criticisms of the systems of alliance prevalent among the Malayala Brahmins had been voiced much earlier, for example, by the protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century,²¹ but it was this incident that the most famous of Nambutiri reformers would refer to as a turning-point in his consciousness, something that opened up a new awareness of the 'condition of the Nambutiris' and the need for change within *Illams*.²² It may be remembered that the major organisation that worked for the constitution of the modern Nambutiri community, the *Nambutiri Yogakshema Sabha* (YKS from now on) was formed not very long after this incident.²³ Even if the question of Women's liberation came to be voiced energetically within Nambutiri reformism only later, the issue of the reorganisation of the family was present much earlier. In Nambutiri reformist writing, it is almost impossible, in most instances, to pinpoint exactly where one begins, and the other ends. This evidence would not only qualify the 'materialist thesis' regarding the origins of the YKS but also afford a less romantic conception of the struggle to reconstitute family-relations in *Illams*. This, of course, would strongly qualify the veneration of heroic liberators.

This paper proposes to briefly examine the project of fashioning Individuals as it was presented within the community-movement of the Nambutiris in the early twentieth century. This involves an exploration of the way in which 'tradition' comes to be constructed in reformist self-knowledge, seen as the necessary 'raw material' available for reformist transformation—which is

made in the first section. This argument implies that 'tradition' gets constructed not by merely assembling together various elements of the pre-modern social order, but by the active interpretation of these elements and their interconnections with the help of categories given by modern knowledge. Here, two such key images, the 'Nambutiri', and the 'Antharjanam' which also figure in transformed fashion in the modern community, are studied in some detail. These images may or may not conform to pre-modern social reality, but it is beyond doubt that they were central to reformist self-knowledge, and therefore, crucial in making reformism itself possible. The importance of self-knowledge in the project of self-transformation can be hardly underestimated. As early as 1822, we do find evidence for attempts on the part of the State in Tiruvitamkoor to put checks upon the high rates of dowry among the "Nambutiris and Pottis" (which was found to be causing suffering to Antharjanams, loss of their sexual chastity and prolonging spinsterhood among them).²⁴ The importance of self-knowledge seems to be that such measures on the part of the State could have some effect only when a new awareness of their 'condition' was produced and actively circulated among these groups themselves.

The project of fashioning Individuals (and the modern Community) stressed the need for instituting new practices that would be useful for its fulfilment. But what these were to be, what institutions would serve to establish these, and a host of other questions were intensely debated in reformist circles— even the nature of the ideal form of social ordering according to which the modern community was to be organised was a matter to debate. But strikingly, amidst these differences, there was the common acceptance of the need for a non-reciprocal relation of power between the Reformer and those who were to be reformed. And this relation was most intensely exemplified in the relation posited between the Nambutiri—Man as Reformer and the Antharjanams whom he was to reform.

Self-Knowledge

The transformation of the Malayala Brahmins into a modern community fully capable of operating within the political, socio-economic and cultural institutions of modern society was unquestionably an item that figured high up on the agenda of

'Nambutiri reform'. The means towards achieving this end were also clearly identified—the fashioning of the Individual. The Nambutiri *Kutumba* (Family) Regulation Committee stated this in unequivocal terms :

"..But the true and permanent well-being of the community does not depend upon the promulgation of royal legislation. Members of the community must realise that it mainly depends upon the abilities of each individual and act accordingly. The community will be truly blessed only when such knowledgeable and open-minded individuals become numerous."²⁵

The modern 'Nambutiri' community was to be a collectivity that would be built and maintained through 'positive' efforts of Individuals. But this did not involve the dismissal of the older collectivity in total.²⁶ Rather, what was envisaged was a Reformation—the transformation of those who belonged to the older collectivity into Individuals through which a community organised on modern lines would be created.

The agenda of self-transformation meant that reformism was intensely concerned with looking 'inwards' into the existing collectivity and the individuals comprising it. This self-inspection produced a large body of knowledge that claimed to represent the truth about the nature of the collectivity and those who belonged to it. The author of a text titled *Valkkannady* (Hand-Mirror) claimed :

"This hand-mirror has been crafted to reflect some of the figures that inhabit that hell, the *Anthappuram* (inner-quarters) fit only for ghosts. This mirror will reflect images only vaguely due to the inadequacy of the materials used to make it and the inefficiency of the craftsman who made it; only that whatever gets reflected in it is true. In any case, I hope that this will aid Antharjanams to perceive themselves and gain self-consciousness, much more than that faded piece of bronze to be found today in *Anthappurams*.²⁷"

The *Valkkanady* that is to be rejected is not really a mirror at all, but a piece of bronze; whereas the newly-fashioned *Valkannady* recommended by the author promises insight. This

looking most often revealed lacks, defects, failing, lack of the ability to produce and conserve wealth, lack of freedom and so on. Through such insight such familiar figures as the stubborn and unreflective 'elder', the passive, suffering Antharjanam, the dull, lazy and ineffective youth came to represent aspects of contemporary reality of Nambutiri life :

"Quarter of a century back, the Nambutiris' condition was quite pathetic. In those days, the Nambutiri community was dozing on the couch of evil aristocracy within that gradually-degenerating mansion of the older order. The community possessed virtually nothing for the attainment of success in worldly life. The Nambutiri had no idea what modern education or an honourable lifestyle was. He grew up with absolutely no thought about life. The Nambutiri had no thought of community or nation..In short the Nambutiri community of those days was filled with young men lacking education and responsibility, elders who were adamant and conservative, and Antharjanams who lacked freedom and knowledge.²⁸"

But obtaining a dismal picture of the self through introspection did not necessarily lead on to rejecting it—rather, it was recommended that one must try to correct it, to fill up gaps, remedy lacks. The existing collectivity would, then, be transformed; it would not wither away. Obtaining insight, therefore, was crucial in reforming and widely accepted as such. A major part of reformist writings were dedicated to this project of exploring the current state of affairs in the collectivity, discovering a past for it, making general assessment of the preparedness of the members for modern life and so on.

"It is of scarce doubt that if a community is to be led towards a glorious future, its past and present must be known. One may characterise those efforts to reform society not based upon accurate knowledge of the past and the present of the community as similar to the fruitless exercise of trying to build forts in the sky.²⁹"

Numerous articles that appeared in the *Yogaksemam* and the *Unny Nambutiri*, speeches that were made in the innumerable meetings of the *YKS, Nambutiri Yuva Jana Sanghom* (Nambutiri

Youth League) and other fora, compilations of articles brought out under the auspices of the YKS etc., addressed the need to provide such knowledge. It was disseminated through a wide variety of media including fiction, poetry, songs and plays.

But, as already hinted above, this involved not just neutral, objective and value-free description, though reformers often made this claim. First of all, one needs to consider that only when liberal ideas, filtered through English sources (that were already in circulation in the late nineteenth century in Keralam) were accepted as necessary for knowing oneself and the world by sections of Malayala Brahmins did reformist zeal and self-knowledge begin to accumulate. Kanippayur Sankaran Nambudiripad remembers that in the first decade of the twentieth century when the 'Kuriyedathu Tatri' case broke out, the newspapers were vociferous in their criticism of such practices as the *Smarthavicharam*, interpreting it as evidence of the breakdown of Patriarchal power, and the morality that accompanied it. Kanippayur remembers that the majority of Malayala Brahmins³⁰ who were little familiar with the newspapers, and almost totally isolated from what circulated in local society as 'Western Knowledge', were hardly touched by it.³¹ It is quite possible to think that these sections interpreted *Smarthavicharam* quite differently. For the *Smarthavicharam* was also a procedure of 'purification' which restored to the *Illam* an 'original purity', supposedly lost in the sexual misconduct of its members, to be regained by either punishing the transgressors, or acquitting the Antharjanam. Far from signifying a lack, a failing or a state of decadence (as it did to the newspapers), the successful conclusion of the *Smarthavicharam* could clearly signify the good health of the mechanisms of regulating sexual conduct among the Malayala Brahmins.³² Later, reformism would more or less accept the newspapers' interpretation, though seeking to reinterpret the significance of Tatri's action. 'Western Knowledge' was openly acknowledged as indispensable in the generation of insight "There is no other way than to allow the Western sun to reflect from your mirror of knowledge by cleansing it of the dirt of superstition accumulated since ancient times, using the water of Compassion."³³

What is involved here is not simply a project of rendering transparent the harsh realities of life within *Illams*, but also actively

interpreting it *in order to justify the need for intervention by modern-inspired reformers*. This is probably most evident in the reformist revelations of the harsh regimen that Antharjanams had to follow and the strictly Patriachal arrangements in *Illams*. It was as if the revelation of the Antharjanams' restricted existence automatically required that they be projected as *passive* victims, meekly submitting to male oppression, who would definitely end up in silent and unrelenting suffering without help from (male) reformers. It was though one could not think of reforming the Antharjanam without first projecting her as a victim who could not help herself. In the following passage, put by a reformist author into the mouths of 'Antharjanams', this surfaces fairly clearly :

"We are helpless. There is no one who sees or hears our woes. We do not even have the freedom to complain. If we speak out the truth, even our husbands and fathers get angry.. Among us there is no one who does not suffer as maidens, co-wives, widows or as wives of old men. We are prepared to do any amount of work in the kitchen, to toil without rest from daybreak till ten at night. All these are our regular duties. If only we were lucky enough to see that there is someone who loves us.³⁴"

Antharjanams are then made to entreat women of other castes not to accept Nambutiris as husbands. " We are watching diligently for the results of your kind efforts. Save us! Save us!³⁵"

This also required that any sign of subversive action on the part of Antharjanams be rejected as misguided and undesirable. In the famous reformist play *Ritumati*,³⁶ the rebellious Devaki puts up stiff resistance to her family's efforts to reintegrate her into the *Illam*. Detained in her own *Illam*, she appeals to her reformist cousin to lead her out, explicitly opting not to leave on her own : "If I leave like that, what fate will befall me? Who will grant me refuge? Will I not have to live among strangers, like Uma Behn?³⁷" The reference to 'Uma Behn' is significant. This was the name of Uma Devi Naripetta, who, according to V.T. Bhattatiripad's version of her story,³⁸ discarded her identity as Antharjanam, taking several lovers, and finally marrying a working-class unlettered Muslim. Devaki, then, must not follow Uma Devi's example; she must wait for a reformer to lead her out into Womanhood. This is also evident in reformist recreations of Kuriyedathu Tatri's story in which the effort is to 'explain' her

acts. "But I do not treat this as merely the story of a fallen woman", wrote Lalithambika Antharjanam about her recreation of Kuriyedathu Tatri's story in her shortstory *Pratikaradevata* (Goddess of Revenge), "rather, I view the event and this individual as the harbinger of the revolution that was activated in the community later on."³⁹ In this text, and also in much later versions, such as Madampu Kunhikuttan's *Bhrasht*⁴⁰: Tatri's act is indeed reinterpreted as an act of subversion against male oppression and not simply as excessive self-indulgence—however, such acts are no longer to be emulated since the alternative of reform is available. Indeed it is unequivocally argued that to prefer such acts of subversion instead of the reformist alternative would not be acceptable at all—as is evident in V.T.'s retelling of the story of Uma Devi Naripetta. In both *Pratikaradevata* and *Bhrasht* the seemingly recalcitrant figure of Kuriyedathu Tatri is ultimately subjugated to the figure of Antharjanam-as-victim. She is portrayed as the familiar Antharjanam—young, innocent, docile, passive—who came to undertake desperate acts of revenge. In *Bhrasht*, the transgressor leaves the job of fighting injustice towards women among the Malayala Brahmins to young male reformers, acknowledging her act to be undesirable.⁴¹ In *Pratikaradevata* too, Tatri condemns herself as a 'sinner' beyond any hope of salvation.

Interestingly, in many texts that relate the oppression of Antharjanams, especially literary texts, there appear female figures who are not passive at all, and in fact wield considerable influence—quarrelsome co-wives who manage to dominate their husbands, domineering, conservative Antharjanams hell-bent upon oppressing daughters or daughters-in-law. But these figures too must be reinterpreted as ignorant collaborators who ensure their own slavery (interestingly, the undesirable Uma Behn is further faulted for having been a dominating co-wife, in V.T.'s story).⁴²

In self-representations by Antharjanams one does find, very often, the figure of the passive Antharjanam accompanying statements about the oppressive structures that restrict them. Speaking at the Shree Mulam Assembly in 1937, Member K. Devaki Antharjanam evoked the then familiar picture of Antharjanams thus :

"Most Antharjanams observe *ghosha* (purdha). They have eyes but are prohibited from enjoying pleasant sights. They

have legs but their movement is circumscribed. Their state is quite like that of household utensils. In short the Antharjanam is a jailed creature. Antharjanams are constantly policed; they are not permitted to breathe fresh air to see the world. An Antharjanam is born crying, lives her life in tears and dies weeping"

Also important is the fact that the representation of the 'Nambutiri', 'Antharjanam' or of life within *Illams* perpetuated in and through self-knowledge was indebted to depictions that pre-dated Nambutiri reformism. In earlier accounts by Europeans the 'Nambutiris' appear mysterious and alien, even threatening, to the Western eye.⁴⁵ But towards the close of the nineteenth century this arrogant, inscrutable, oppressive-looking figure was being increasingly accompanied with or even replaced by other sorts of characterisation. The 'Nambutiri' was still an oppressive figure, an impediment to the well-being of others, a squanderer and parasite. Rebuking the Tiruvitamkoor Sarkar, the missionary Samuel Mateer wrote thus :

"As it is crowds of sensual and dissolute Brahmins are maintained in idleness, their intellectual and manual labour is lost to the community and they are encouraged to continue to regard themselves as quite a different species of man from the wretched down-trodden low-caste population."⁴⁶

By the early twentieth century, the modern-educated sections of local society had begun to share this criticism. "They are the lords of the soil," wrote T.K. Gopal Panikkar about the 'Nambutiris', "possessing large powers of oppression and domination over the labouring classes, the Nairs... their social liberties are circumscribed by the opprobrious intervention of a priestly class who have ever-remained an obstructive element in their national economy."⁴⁷

But by this time, this figure was becoming less distant; its distancing was becoming less fear-inspiring. Increasingly, 'Nambutiris' came to figure as 'simpletons', benign folk bewildered by the rush of progress, and therefore 'backward'. Rendered passive, they seemed to deserve more of persuasion and sympathy. "Considering all these factors" wrote the *Nazrani Deepika* in 1906, (the 'factors' mentioned prominently included

their lack of English education) "it must be pointed out that the Nambutiris will fall a step below lower classes like the *parayas* and *pulayas*. Hence they must be given precedence among the Educationally Backward classes.⁴⁸" The *Malayala Manorama* too found it necessary to persuade the Nambutiris, and opted to tolerate their resentment towards well-meant advice, on the grounds that this was a result of their 'simplicity': "Our experience has shown that their simple-mindedness can be such that they might make such interpretation" (ie., that the *Malayala Manorama's* advice was intended to spite them).⁴⁹ In his report on the Census of Travancore of 1891, V. Nagam Aiya wrote thus about the 'Nambutiris':

"The Nambutiri's hospitality and charity are proverbial.... (and the Brahmin guest) is most kindly treated, and in spite of the uncouth manners and queer conversation which he may meet with, he is certain to carry away the happiest recollection of the Illom.....They are simple, innocent, unobtrusive and unassuming."⁵⁰

Contemporary ethnographic work, too, made use of this attributed 'simplicity' to interpret Malayala Brahmins—this was best exemplified in Edgar Thurston's interpretation of the belief attributed to the Nambutiris that "Europeans have tails" as evidence for their 'simplicity'.⁵¹ It is interesting to observe that this attribution of animal qualities to Europeans is not interpreted as a kind of 'Othering'. In fact, the 'Othering' of the Europeans appears all the more clearly in a story attributed to the Nambutiris in which the 'origin' of Britain is narrated and the British are identified as the true descendents of the monkey-army of the *Ramayana*.⁵² In many late nineteenth century Malayalam novels the 'Nambutiri' is inevitably pitted against the ideal modern Man almost feature by feature. In *Indulekha*⁵³ for instance, the figures of Kesavan Nambutiri who insists upon understanding the white man's powers in his terms—as the result of magic—and of Soory Nambuturipad, the woman-chasing simpleton whose gestures of courtship appear beastly to the thoroughly-modern heroine, are but versions of the Nambutiri-as-gullible simpleton. Even the malevolent Kuberan Nambutiripad of *Saraswativijayam*⁵⁴ turns out to be a fearful and gullible character when confronted by modern legal machinery. In *Indulekha*, Madhavan, the hero, and Soory Nambutiripad, form several pairs

of contrasts. Madhavan's merit lies in his personal qualities and achievements, Soory's in his birth and inherited wealth alone; Madhavan has the capacity to earn 'on his own' through government service, Soory has to depend on the labour of others; Madhavan is equally at home with what are specified as 'Western' and 'traditional' knowledges, Soory knows nothing; Madhavan is capable of Love, Soory knows only lust. Nambutiri reformers later openly acknowledged their debt to such depictions preceding reformism among the Malayala-Brahmins. V.T. Bhattatiripad, in a speech, remarked :

"Chandu Menon wrote the novel *Indulekha*, *Marumakka thayi* (*those groups acknowledging matriliney*) women took it to their hearts. We on the other hand became painfully and angrily aware of our grandfather's—that Soory Nambutiri's—idiocy and lecherousness.⁵⁵"

The image of the suffering Antharjanam, too, predated reformism. "The condition of the Nambutiris being thus." remarked the *Nazrani Deepika* in 1906, "that of their females requires little narration. To be born female in the *Illams* of Nambutiris where even sunlight does not fall properly is itself hell.⁵⁶" In *Indulekha* the Antharjanam figures precisely as what should not be accepted as the model for the self-transformation of women.⁵⁷ *Saraswativijayam* too narrates the story of the passive, good-hearted, gentle, innocent, voiceless, all-suffering Antharjanam (guarded with "Moslem jealousy", wrote Nagam Aiya in the *Manual*)⁵⁸. This was a figure that would grow in enormous proportions within reformism, quite outdoing the image of the Nambutiri in its ability to legitimate reform.⁵⁹

However, this image received a sharp jolt with the Kuriyedathu Tatri case in which a figure unrepentantly 'sinful', calculating, ruthlessly bold and outspoken, who could argue "like a barrister" and defeat her opponents, seemed to take the frontstage.⁶⁰ The *Malayala Manorama* felt obliged to explain :

"In earlier times, human beings were much less crooked and false. In those times if Antharjanams happened to commit some folly out of foolishness or innocence, they would readily confess. They had no intention of deliberately defiling anyone. The Antharjanams subjected to *Smarthavicharam* these days must be smooth operators.⁶¹"

It is not really surprising to see that the image of Kuriyedathu Tatri would continue to haunt the reformers for a very long time.⁶²

Sometimes the lacks and failings that were pointed out in self-knowledge were interpreted as the lack of *gender*. The inability of the Nambutiris to engage in productive activities or acquire the skills necessary for modern political and cultural life was sometimes openly read as the lack of 'Manliness'; similarly, the lacks identified in Antharjanams were read as the lack of 'Womanliness'. In the proposals put forth regarding the reformation of the collectivity along modern lines, often it was implicitly accepted that one had to acquire a gender in order to be an Individual; that one's 'inherent (gendered) capacities', had to be developed. In one of the most famous of all reformist plays in Malayalam, *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (From the Kitchen to the Frontstage), the lack of Manliness emerges as crucial in the hero Madhavan's self-appraisal :

"Am I not a Man ? Can I not earn my keep through labour, like others ? I definitely can... Yes, I have decided to learn some English, come what may... I must certainly get to know what the sky, and what the earth is."⁶³

Similarly, Antharjanams were to be transformed into Women—capable domestic managers, Reproducers—efficient organisers of their specific domain, the domestic. Implicit in this was the recognition that Antharjanams in the pre-reform order lacked Womanliness. An author in the *Unny Nambutiri* recommended,

"Give them an education capable of making them ordinary women, of making them human beings! Let them also become women! Human beings! Let the community prosper!"⁶⁴

Yet precisely because of the attribution of qualities like innocence, piety, patience and chastity to them by reformers, they seemed sometimes much better candidates for modern Womanhood than, say, women of the *Marumakkathayi* (matrilinal) groups—though of course it was admitted that they lacked the proper modern training that would activate this 'inherent' Womanhood.⁶⁵ It was also felt that only modern self-fashioning was capable of transforming Antharjanams into

Women, and Nambutiris into Men. The desired identity centred on gender, seemed available only to those who would undergo modern self-fashioning.

To briefly recollect what was argued in this section, the generation of insight through 'looking inward', to identify one's strength and weaknesses so as to enable self-transformation was a widely-acknowledged need within Nambutiri reformism. Its importance was perceived to be such that efforts to fashion Individuals and a reformed community that was thoroughly-modern through them, were considered fruitless if not guided by such insight. Revolving around the collectivity of 'Nambutiris', reformist self-knowledge helped to set up the Nambutiri-Man and more controversially, perhaps, the Antharjanam-Woman, as the final goals of reformism—as we shall see, in the proposals regarding self-correction that were put forward within Nambutiri reformism.

Self-Correction

Nambutiri reformism was by no means homogenous as far as proposals of change were concerned. In the various proposals regarding 'Re-form' (found not only in the list of concrete suggestions discussed in the YKS meetings but also in reformist speeches, articles in reformist publications, in reformist literature or theatre) we do find differing, even opposing positions. Such differences have sometimes been characterised, for example, as a 'liberal-radical' conflict.⁸⁸ In this section the attempt is indeed to demonstrate the variety of positions that were raised within Nambutiri reformism—however, there is no claim that this is an exhaustive account. But since it is not possible to make detailed enquiries into the self-claims reformers made about the political orientation of the various proposals here, the use of terms like 'radical', 'liberal' etc. will be eschewed. Instead, in order to demonstrate both the difference and the sharings between them, we have preferred to focus upon certain specific ones. It is hoped that this will help to shift attention away from the correctness or incorrectness of political labels fastened on to reformist proposals and bring into light the specific ways in which they conceive of the re-formed collectivity and the measures by which it was to be realised.

It is possible to regard all these proposals as formulations

of the means of self-correction of the 'Nambutiris'. First, all of these share a minimum degree of acceptance of the presence of a 'Nambutiri community' as a substantial entity, with a certain unified past and present. Each of these accept to lesser or greater degree the history of the 'glorious past' of the Nambutiris (or at least; one in which Nambutiris held power and authority) as well as the evaluation of the present as a period of decline. Secondly, all these accept, in various degrees, the need for self-correction. Thirdly, they all accept the necessity of human intervention for Re-form to be actualised. However, if such commonality may be found, equally or even more importantly, there are differences between them. For example, even when each of these proposals or sets of suggestions accepted the history of the Nambutiris' 'glorious past', it is important to note that in each case, this served to legitimise quite different versions of the ideal modern collectivity.

Here we first consider a Memorandum prepared by the Kottakkal *Upasabha* (local unit) of the YKS proposing the Re-form of the Nambutiris, titled *Swadharmanushtanam* (Performance of One's Own Dharma), published in 1917.⁶⁷ The replies submitted by E.T. Divakaran Moos to the questionnaire circulated by the Nambutiri Family Regulation Committee, published in 1925,⁶⁸ have important sharings with this. By examining these we might obtain a definite version of imagining Re-form.

In these proposals, the ideal modern Nambutiri community is envisaged as one which preserves its internal hierarchies, norms, values, knowledges, kinship and marital arrangements but which has acquired sufficient means to ensure its continued prosperity in a rapidly modernising world. Internal changes are not ruled out; but these are to be kept minimum. Customs, practices and usages already prevalent are not regarded as anachronistic. In fact, there is the conviction that it is quite possible to retain them while acquiring certain skills like English education, and Western knowledge, necessary to protect the interests of the community in the modern world. The *Memorandum* even found that some of the traditional institutions were in tune with the needs of modern society :

"In these days in which Western scholars have published a great many works that dwell upon the necessity of the