



Inventing new identity: From Caste to Community; Namboodiris in the Cyber World

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Abstract : The present world is the world of cyber world. We can see large number of cyber space through which different political parties, business groups, individuals, persons specializing in some particular areas like sports, games, communities, caste groups etc and etc trying to establish their own identity. In the age of globalization every one searches new identity as they feels insecurity from the others.

The present study is an attempt to understand the dynamics of imagining a new community identity by the Namboodiri- Brahmins of Kerala in the cyber world. Through various cyber spaces like Websites, Social networks, Blog, Twitter etc Namboodiris are inventing a new identity beyond their caste frame. Namboodiris actively participate in the internet social networking and interactions. There are a lot of active Namboodiri communities in social networking sites like Facebook, Wats app groups, Telegram, plenty of active email groups in yahoo, gmail etc. which reflects the attempts to develop a new identity. Identity is became an seminal issue in the academic world.

Till recently, identities are often being considered as natural that something man is born with. But really such a notion of identity has been challenged and it is argued that identities are socially constructed . Like nation, caste/community identities are also imagined. This imagination is made possible often through recourse to many factors including a sense of belonging and shared heritage. This imagined identity has political implications and this political implications shift in relation to changing spatio-temporality. How the Namboodiris in the contemporary cyber age, are reconstituting themselves through cyber world is an issue which demands serious academic discussions.

The present paper refers to four types of internet spaces.

- 1) General Websites
- 2) Social networking sites such as Instergram, , Facebook, Google+ etc.
- 3) Blog sites
- 4) Various sharing networks Wats app groups, telegram, Signal.....

These four spaces work as an important medium of articulation of social relations among Namboodiris. It gives space for interactive discourse for Namboodiris.

General Websites are internet space that gives information on a range of matters on Namboodiris. The sites on Namboodiris are constantly visited by people and it is found that the number of Google sites for Namboodiris is 83299¹. These sites are not the product of Namboodiris alone. The ownership range from state, NGO's, individuals etc. On these sites most of them are related to discussion on cultural pattern of erstwhile Kerala where Namboodiris are presented as an important caste.

The dominant position enjoyed by Namboodiris in Kerala society during pre-colonial and colonial period Kerala underwent drastic changes during the post-independence period, especially after social reforms, the introduction of land reforms etc. These reforms adversely affected the social status of the Namboodiris and gradually they lost many of the privileges previously they enjoyed. To resist this new trend, Namboodiris began to introduce new strategies. It is in this background we must read the first major website devoted exclusively to illustrate Namboodiris at their caste identity came in. The website is named as "Namboodiri Website Trust" which was web hosted on September 1999². The site aimed at documenting culture and traditions of Namboodiris at Namboodiri.com. The site says it as a voluntary non-profit oriented forum based at Calicut and its duty is to provide details concerning Namboodiris. The interesting feature of this website is that it ventures to rebuild the caste identity of the Namboodiris which had underwent changes as the consequences of social reforms, land reforms and new socio-political order. The focus of discussion centered on caste, sub castes, families (Illams) and personalities. The site tries to project elitism of Namboodiris is pictured here.

Towards the end of the 20th century, Namboodiris began to reassert their supremacy over Kerala society. There is a new demand for priestly profession of Namboodiris as well. It is in this context that the Namboodiris began to imagine caste identity. The cyber expression of this new trend is the website mentioned above. This site still relies upon caste and sub caste divisions. The movement to transfer the boundaries of sub caste division is hardly seen in any of the postings. Moreover the emphasis given to families (Illams) and personalities support this argument.

But the middle of the first decade of the 21st century the representation of the Namboodiris in the websites underwent major change. Now it is not confined to just the caste identity, but larger solidarity of the Namboodiris are imagined. Discussions are not on caste, sub caste, families or their tradition, but the need for having a community identity, with a modern outlook. AGNI (Arena for Global Namboodiri Interaction) indicates this shifting paradigm³. AGNI declares that, its aim is "getting to know each other, bring them all under one umbrella which is otherwise scattered in various parts of the world"⁴. Instead of speaking on caste, tradition etc this site tries to create a new identity. The title description in the AGNI site reflects this changing attitudes. It reads "we are no longer following the traditional life style of our ancestors, our forefathers were enjoying life with all possible luxuries and comforts of the time. That has become the story of bygone era. Things have changed much. Today, highly competitive world, we must change our attitude and perspective towards life and we should be ready to adopt new technologies in order to reach the top. Today, we can

¹ www.google.com/accessed on 20-12-2011

² www.namboothiri.com/accessed on 24-12-2011

³ www.agni.ws/ accessed on 25-12-2011

⁴ www.agni.ws/ accessed on 25-12-2011

proudly say that Namboodiris are there, holding prestigious positions, in all most all areas, apart from his usual bread winning job of a “shanthikkaran” or “dehannakkaran”⁵. The statement manifestst the declining importance of caste identity and also their move towards modernity. AGNI created a web based directory as a satellite for Namboodiri community world wide. It is ready to give information’s on job opportunities, real estates, vehicles etc for its members. The important news related with the community is published through an e-news letter to which any Namboodiri can contribute articles.

The change of attitude from caste to a larger Namboodiri community can be seen in the website of Yogakshema Sabha, the organization of Namboodiri community, through its official website yogakshemasabha.org. Yogashema Sabha through its site makes active interactions in the cyber world and urges for the unity of Namboodiri community and active involvement in the social and political issues. These trends indicate the declining importance of caste and move towards a community identity and modernity.⁶

Social networking sites such as Orkut, Facebook, Google+ etc provide greater space for social interaction between the people. The Namboodiri communities appear in Orkut, one of the popular social networking site. Orkut had more acceptance among the Keralite’s, till very recently Facebook occupied its position. Orkut is a Google based social networking site that, “ designed to make your social life more active and stimulating”. Orkut enables the users to create their own communities.It is surprising to note that the Orkut communities formed for and by the Namboodiris has stretched over 50012 with in a short span of 7 years from 2004 to 2011.⁷

Some of the early communities formed in Orkut are “Brahmanas” “Namboodiri” “Malayalala Brahmin” “Namboodiri Network” “Brahmins of Kerala” “All Kerala Namboodiri Family” etc. These Orkut communities are not prescribing a single idea of retaining to tradition. Major aspect communities formed till 2006 was that, they were trying to project the caste identity of the Namboodiris. Many communities are often confined to a major group with in the Namboodiris. Moreover their elite culture is celebrated. For example “Kerala Brahmin” an Orkut community formed on 20th December 2006 says that, Namboodiri and Bhathathiri clan of Kerala, one of the most pure and elite of the Brahmin classes of the country⁸. They were also rulers and patrons of Kathakali and traditional art forms. Now spread across various nations like UK, USA etc. They forms good group of Indians who makes their country proud and the ‘Sanathana dharma’ which we are all a part”⁹. Another community namely “Malayala Brahmin” calls for regaining elitism by resorting to six duties of Brahmin community namely teaching, learning, performing yaga*, make performing yaga, accept dana and give dana. Here also Orkut community is seen as a one of the elitist among themselves. What happens to Namboodiris involved in other means of subsistence has been undermined. It shows that, the things which are fundamental for imagining their caste identity has been retained and Orkut communities of for this purpose are created.

⁵ www.agni.ws/ accessed on 25-12-2011

⁶ www.yogashemasabha.org accessed on 26-12-2011

⁷ www.orkut accessed on 18-10-2011

⁸ www.orkut accessed on 18-10-2011

⁹ www.orkut accessed on 18-10-2011

* Yaga-sacrifices

But when we come to have a look at the Orkut community that came in to being since 2009 we could see radical change in the perceptions narrated above. For example a community namely “Kerala Brahmin Rocks” says “this is a community for all modern day Kerala Brahmins who follow rituals and perform poojas. Kerala Brahmins must realize the fact that are politicians are against us and we are alone. We are struggling for existence. We have to fight. Politicians only need relations to vote bank. We are not united. So we must unite and fight against the illegal and unbearable acts against us”¹⁰. We should only discuss the problem of the nation and Brahmins in this community. Another Orkut community created on 29th July 2009(more than 52000 members) asserts,” community is open to all irrespective of caste, creed or nationality. Join this community to know more about who we are, what are we supposed to do and keep alive the flame of purity and knowledge”¹¹.

In these Orkut communities tradition and elitism were not the focus, but the survival in to the contemporary age. It assured that upholding elitism and the former caste exclusiveness would not help them to become a pressure group. Becoming a pressure group will fetch them new opportunities. How do they can achieve a unity beyond caste line at the same time, not far beyond these confines then a problem. The solutions then they finds in the erasure of caste elitism and exclusiveness and by forming an umbrella group of Namboodiris of different denominations. Here their occupation, tradition is not considered primary, but their position of twice born only. That is now instead of becoming a caste groups exclusive to elite Namboodiris, it is becoming a community incorporating various sub divisions with in the namboodiris.

A blog is a type of website or part of website. Blogs are usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other materials such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order .Most blogs are interactive , allowing visitors to leave comments and even message each other via widgets on the blogs and it is this interactivity that distinguishes them from other static websites. Like social networking sites Namboodiris are the early adaptors of Blogs.Many blogs related with Namboodiris like ‘Namboodiri network’, ‘Youth namboodiri’ ‘Namboodiri network blog’etc gives scope for active interactions and forms active cyber network communities .Namboodiri network blog comments, “Namboodiris are well known for their social networking skills. Namboodiris have plenty of religious functions and ceremonies in their entire life from Jathakarmam*to Shodasam/Savinni*.Each and every occasion is utilized for building new relations and to enhance their social activities.”¹² Blogs, which got wide acceptance in the cyber world very recently we can see the image of Namboodiri as a community and not as a caste or groups. For example a Blog created by Damodaran Namboodiri says, “ When so many Namboodiri related communities and websites exists on the web what is the need for another site? Is it really needed? Will it be useful to the community? These were the few questions I had in mind before starting this website.The inspiration to start the site came from the numerous communities with in the social networking sites and their inherent limitations to specifically suit the Namboodiri

¹⁰ www.orkut accessed on 18-10-2011

¹¹ www.orkut accessed on 18-10-2011

* birth

¹² www.namboodiri-network-blog accessed on 28-12-2011

community needs. In addition to this, my interest/hobby in understanding our origins(family history/genealogy), my professional experience in building websites and the encouragement from family and friends literally helped to bring up this site up and running”¹³. This site relies on the Namboodiri community to create and drive the content, engage in conversation with an aim to

- a) Preserve our heritage in digital formats.
- b) Educate and understand the Namboodiri tradition, culture through collaborative interactions.
- c) Assist and guide Namboodiri community members on financial, education and professional areas.
- d) Build relationships-Understand our past , build friendships and establish new relationship
- e) Enrich and promote talents through social media tools

This site utilizes all networking like photo sharing, video sharing, blogs, forums etc to achieve the objective. In addition to this family tree (genealogy) section enables to research and find distant relatives and the matrimonial section enables to establish new relationship.

Many of the recent internet sites related to Namboodiris urges Namboodiris to register to these sites and build their own online identity through active participation and interactions. Here we can see the importance given to the community which incorporates various subdivisions with in the Namboodiris.

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6. [www.orkut](http://www.orkut.com) accessed on 18-10-2011
7. www.yogakshemasabha.org accessed on 21-12-2011

¹³ [www.google .com](http://www.google.com) accessed on 30-12-2011