



# Community Organization And Changing Political Strategies: A Study Based On The Yogakshema Sabha Of Kerala

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**Abstract:** This study is an attempt to understand how an organization formed to reform a caste in course of time changed their political strategies to achieve their desired goal. It will also enquire the ways in which a caste of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala is becoming a community incorporating their counterparts from other region as well as erasing internal division within. The organization chosen to argue out the changing political strategies is Yogakshema Sabha, a community organization formed by Namboodiris of Kerala. I have argued that, right from the inception till the end of 1940s Yogakshema sabha was not following a single strategy. There were periodical shifts. The shifts have been identified in four stages. First is between 1908 to 1920, second, 1920-30, third stage is between 1930-40, and the final stage is 1940s. By closely looking at the practice and programmes of the Yogakshema sabha during this periods, one could see that, it is gradually moving from a moderate stand of protecting the traditional interests and modern education of the Namboothiris in the onslaught of modernity, to an urge to actively participate in the ongoing national movement and radical social reform, and end with urging community men that one could survive in the modern world only by becoming a labour force in the contemporary colonial capitalist society.

**Keywords:** *Swadharmanushtanam, ghosha, widow remarriage, Yuvajana Sangham*

**Introduction:** Yogakshema sabha, an organization for Namboodiri reforms, was formed in M.E1083 (1908) at Aluva. Among the caste organizations of Kerala, the Namboodiris were rather slow in imbibing caste cluster consciousness.<sup>i</sup> There are various interpretations on the formation of Yogakshema Sabha.<sup>ii</sup> First is the argument that, when the British established their colonial control over Kerala, the Namboodiris got deprived of their earlier political role and social dominance. Sabha emerged as a response to it. Second, The debates over the legality of *Sambandham* marriage in the 1890's and the rivalry and tension between the two upper castes also should be seen as a factor for the coming of Yogakshema Sabha.

Thirdly, the growing educational and employment opportunities of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the caste restrictions that prevented the Namboodiris from getting it created a consciousness among the Namboodiris for internal reforms. Fourthly, the tenancy reforms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which questioned the rights of Namboodiris, also moved the Namboodiris in to an organizational frame work. But, we feel that, all these interpretation by and large agree on the argument that Sabha was the response of Namboodiris to the new socio-economic and political demands of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This new socio- economic political order established by the British occupation of Kerala resulted in, as pointed out by Genevieve Lemerciner, organizing the “Namboodiris as a group withdrew from political scene and confined themselves within the social space bounded by their double function as land owners and religious agents”<sup>iii</sup> Unlike other caste organizations like SNDP, Sadhujana Pripalana Sangham etc, which criticized and attacked the dominance of upper castes and related social disabilities, the Namboodiri reformers were targeting their own community to give up outdated beliefs and practices and to accept modern ideas.<sup>iv</sup>

**Sabha for protecting the tradition:** The period from 1908 to 1920 Sabha was dominated by orthodox sections and was ready to protect the traditional character of the Namboodiris. Sabha declared its primary aim as the protection of Brahmanism.<sup>v</sup> The works of Sabha was centered on *swadharmanushtanam* (observing self duty), protecting of rituals, relation between land lord and tenant etc. When English School was started at Edakkunni (Near Trissur), Namboodiri boys only were admitted in where the students had to follow strict rules and regulations. The school tried to keep up

with both the traditional and modern system of education. In that sense Yogakshema Sabha in its early days was hardly “reformist” but chiefly “defensive”.<sup>vi</sup>

In the second anniversary of Sabha held at Trissur ME.1085 (1909) ironically opposed the adoption of modern medicine such as the injection against small pox. The attitude and prejudices of Namboodiri community on modern ideas including modern medicine were reactionary during that period<sup>vii</sup>

A few attempts to secularize Sabha can be seen in the discussion for changing its name. With a view to include different sections of the Brahmins of Kerala it had been advised to change its name from Yogakshema Sabha into ‘Kaeraleeya Brahmana Samajam’. But in two years time, due to the influence of the orthodox Namboodiris, the new name was dropped for the old one itself.

Early leaders have agreed upon an adjustment which accommodated the old and new. Severe debates on the acceptance of English education within the community were on during 1908-1920. The shift in attitude of Namboodiris can be traced, when financial aid for Namboodiri education was sought at Vellinezhi anniversary (1916, ME1091), many came forward to contribute money and that is characterized as ‘*Vellinezhiyile Velli Mazha*’ (silver rains of Vellinezhi) Very soon Namboodiri special schools were started in different parts of Kerala. With English education, traditional education was also imparted in those schools. From the very beginning there was strong opposition to the progressive movement of Sabha. Oppositions against the Vellinezhi meeting was started and the opponents met at Sukapuram and formed

‘Noottipandrandukar’ under the leadership of Paschima Raman Namboodiri and ordered to cancel the decision of 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary<sup>viii</sup>

**Into Nationalism:** The issue of nationalism was firstly discussed in the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary held at Kolakkada. In the second decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kurur Unni Namboodiri actively participated in the National movement. Some articles of *Unni Namboodiri*<sup>ix</sup> stressed the need of participation in the national movement.<sup>x</sup> The attitude of Namboodiris on national movement and community reformist programmes during this period can be seen in an article of *Unni Namboodiri* which vehemently criticized the attitude and programmes of Kurur Neelakandan Namboodiri, who actively participated

in the Gandhian freedom movement and anti-untouchability programmes but reluctant to participate in the community reformist programmes.<sup>xi</sup> The changed attitude of the Namboodiri youths towards national movement reflected in the participation of V.T.Bhattathirippad, Mullaneshi Raman Bhattathiri, and Premji(M.P.Bhattathirippad).

During the period of Malabar rebellion Sabha formed a 'Protection Committee' for helping those escaped from Eranad, Valluvanad areas and reached Trissur and the South. It is said that from ME.1097 Kanni 27<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Dhanu (1921) between 200 to 300 refugees reached daily in these places and they were given food and shelter by this committee. Malabar rebellion badly affected a group of Namboodiris. Namboothiri scholars like Moozhikkunnath Brahmaddattan Namboothiripad argues that, during the later part of the rebellion it became communal and some Namboodiris were attacked.<sup>xii</sup> This resulted in making Sabha inactive.

The majority of the participants in salt satyagraha in Payyanur were Nayars and Nambudlris, most of them belongs to the dominant families of the region.<sup>xiii</sup> During the Guruvayur Satyagraha, Yogakshema Sabha came forward to support all the publicity programmes. Guruvayur Satyagra gained much news coverage in the Unni Namboodiri magazine and E. M. Sankaran Namboodiri was entrusted with reporting of the Satyagraha.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Radical social reform:** The need of restructuring community was understood by the Namboodiri youths and they became more active and began to take more radical positions by the close of 1920's and in the beginning of 1930's. Though the *Yogakshema Yuvajana Sangham*<sup>xv</sup> was formed in 1919, it remained long as an appendage of the latter, sans a personality of its own and having no separate programme of action.<sup>xvi</sup> The radical youth leaders put forward the demands like abolition of joint family system, recognize the right to partition, marriage within the community(endogamy), education for girls, doing away with the pardah system for women, annul untouchability, create respect for labour, and stopping mis-spending in the temple.

Sabha was courageous enough to question the decision to enact the novel *Indulekha* of Chandu Menon in drama form at the meeting of Kerala Sahitya Parishad(literary forum) which was conducted at Trissur Vivekodayam High school in ME.1103. Sabha got angry on this decision because Sabha

considered that novel *Indulekha* commonly created pain to the Namboodiris. Under the leadership of Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiri a deputation of Sabha met Appan Thampuran at Ayyanthol palace and requested to withdraw the decision to enact the drama. Appan Thampuran promised that the parts depicting Namboodiris as simpleton will not be presented in the Parishad meeting.

The Sabha meetings in these period warned the laziness of the Namboodiris which they found was the cause for all backwardness. The meeting complaint that people whom respected Namboodiris in the past had now began to laugh at them. The laziness of the Namboodiri in the marriage affairs resulted in the decline of their population and Namboodiris were insulted for engaging in other caste marriage.

The changes in the attitude of the Namboodiris can be seen in the articles published in *Unni Namboodiri*. The journal kindled heated debates on the issues related with time. For example The editorial of *Unni Namboodiri* in its ME1104 Makaram edition says, 'listen the revolutionary call', victory to progressive and deadline to the traditionalists. We don't need Antharjanam-hood<sup>xvii</sup>(womanhood) inside *Marakkuda*.(cadjan umbrella) That already burned along with its friendly leaves. Our Antharjanam-hood will not melt by the gaze of any one or burn in any sunlight.<sup>xviii</sup> For strengthening their revolutionary activities Namboodiri youths wrote and published small pamphlets against social evils. For Instance Desamangalathu Valiya Narayanan Namboodiri wrote a small pamphlet namely '*Namboodirimarude Durnadappu*' (misdemeanor of Namboodiri).<sup>xix</sup>

The Edakkunni meeting of Yogakshema Sabha was a milestone in forming the Namboodiri identity constructs. The first revolutionary incident of the meeting was that Mrs. PM Manazhi, a Namboodiri women attended the meeting by refusing to wear *Ghosha*(veil), *Marakkuda*(cadjan umbrella) and dressed in a progressive way. Secondly, at Eddakkunni the play '*Adukkalayil Ninum Arangathekku*' was enacted. It was a period when people superstitiously believed that Vallatholam Narayana Menon, one of the greatest poets in Malayalam, became deaf by translating Rig-Veda in to Malayalam. People believed that Vedas could not be chanted loudly as the lower castes should not listen to it. To refute this belief Vedas were chanted in the public stage at Edakkunni. Namboodiri men, disguised as Namboodiri women, were presented in the stage in a period when a Namboodiri girl had even no right to present before the public.

VT's drama was followed by a number of social dramas which had given a new awakening to the community. MRB's '*Marakkudaykkullile Mahanarakam*', a play, was performed in the Guruvayur meeting in 1930. This drama pointed out some of the reformist agendas like breaking of sacred thread, wearing of blouse by Antherjanam, cutting of tuft etc. It was in the 1931 Mannarassala meeting that the drama written by Lalithambhika Antharjanam '*Savthrikkutty*' or "widow remarriage" was staged. In the Vadakkanchery meeting of 1933 the novel '*Aphante Makal*' of Muthirangodu Bhavathrathan Namboodiri was staged. After two years the drama '*Ritumati*' of Premji was also staged.

In the 1930's Namboodiri youths expressed their opposition to tradition not only through the pages of *Unni Namboodiri* and *Yogakshemam*<sup>xx</sup> and staging of social dramas, but through conducting some direct struggles like picketing of marriage of Namboodiri women with old men and campaigns for self caste marriages. Changes in women dress and ornaments were another programme organized by the youths in the 1930's. Boycott of *gosha* (veil) and widow remarriage were two other powerful programmes that got support from the community. These works of the youths created a favorable condition for the passing of Malabar Marriage Act of 1933. The widow remarriage between Mullanezhi Raman Bhattathiri and Nangema Antharjanam was conducted in September 1934 by V.T.Bhattathirippad. VT understood that there were many Namboodiri women who became widows at an early age.

Using of processions and other campaigning in reinstating Namboodiri identity can be traced back in '*Yachana Yatra*' (Hunger march) conducted under the leadership of VT Bhattathirippad in 1930. *Yatras* (processions) and dramas changed the mind of Namboodiri youths. By these programmes the number of students at Namboodiri schools and public schools increased and so on the changes in dressing style of the Namboodiris also speedened.

In the beginning of 1930's Namboodiri women began to organize themselves around the issues connected to them. Mrs. PM Manazhi, a Namboodiri woman attended the Edakkunni meeting of 1929 by boycotting *Ghosha*(veil), *Marakkuda* (cadjan umbrella) and dressed in a progressive way. Another incident that shocked the orthodoxy of Namboodiri community was that in 1931 at Taliparambha *Antherjanams* boycotted *Ghosha* under the leadership of Parvathi Nememnimangalam, Aryapallam and Devaki Narikkattari and they came out to the stage and declared that their chastity was not lying in

*marakkuda*(cadjan umbrella) and had broken it. They decided to wear saree and other dresses like that of women of other castes.

In 1930's Sabha showed the courage of bringing back the excommunicated families ("Bhrashtanmaar", included in the infamous '64') and those who had changed faith during Tippu's persecution. Their children were encouraged to apply for admission in Namboodiri schools. In the Haripad meeting in ME 1110 (1934) that the decision was taken to consider all such excommunicated persons as equals. At Thrissur in 1935 (ME 1111) V K Narayana Bhattathiri, an out caste in the Thathri's case<sup>xxi</sup>, was elected to the Executive Committee.

The Yogakshemam movement became passive in post-1935 period. By this time the Madras Namboodiri Act was passed with the effort of Mattannur Madhusoodhanan Tangal in 1932 and the Travancore Namboodiri Bill was introduced by the efforts of CN Tuppan Namboodiri in the succeeding years. Thus some Namboodiris felt the fulfillment of their aims. Another reason was the entry of many prominent leaders like EM Sankaran Namboodirippadinto politics.

**Becoming a labourer** :Yogakshema sabha got a new vitality in 1940's when it had taken

economic reconstruction of the community as its important goal. During this period Sabha faced another challenge, it was the problem of dowry system. Several Namboodiris married their daughter to and Kannada Brahmins as a measure to escape from the huge dowry demands of Namboodiri young men. For these economic restructuring programmes Yogakshema sabha was influenced by communist movements.

Namboodiri women awakened identity and national spirit gradually moved towards labour. They understood the importance of labour and thereby freedom. In the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sabha held at Ongallur, Palakkad in ME1120 (1944) EMS Namboodirippad made a clarion call of changing the Namboodiris in to human beings. Sabha supported starting of job centers for women and the first was started at Lakkidi. There were arguments for creating 'permanent funds' for labour centers. The radical position of women can be seen in the slogan of, '*mangalasuathil Kettiyadan angana maradimayalla*',(Namboodiri women, not slaves to be tied through marriage) declared by Parvathi Nenmenimangalam at Sukapuram in 1946. The awakening of Namboodiri women also can be seen in their participation in Paliyam Satyagraha of 1948. Namboodiri women were led by Arya Pallam.

Argument to dissolve Sabha started after 1945. Many argued that Sabha had achieved the aims

outlined in its statute and there is no need of it.<sup>xxii</sup> Some left Sabha by opposing its progressive stand and some others entered in to politics.<sup>xxiii</sup>

**Conclusion:** The political strategies had been changed not because of the interest of the sabha alone, but it was responding to the changes happening in the larger social world. Though it meant to reform Namboodiri community, which it could not achieve only by reforming itself, it needs to acknowledge the larger socio-political developments including resisting colonial domination, cultural practices and economic exploitation.

## End Notes &References

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<sup>iv</sup> Thayatt Sankaran, From Suri Namboodirippad to VT Bhattathirippad, in VT oru Ithihasam (ed) Palakeezh Narayanan, Cherukad Smaraka Trust, Printhalmanna,2004(reprint), p,56

<sup>v</sup> NV Krishna Varier, VT oru Ithihasam, in VT oru Ithihasam (ed) Palakeezh Narayanan, Cherukad Smaraka Trust, Printhalmanna,2004 p,28

<sup>vi</sup> Devika.J-Engendering individuals:The language of re-forming in twentieth century Keralam, Orient Longman,2007,p-45

<sup>vii</sup> Mullanezhi Sivadasan Namboodiri, Yogakshema Sabha Charithrangalilude,Panchangam books,2011,p,20

<sup>viii</sup> Sastrasarman,From Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha to Yogakshema sabha, Yogakshemam, 1985, March, April,May,p,2

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<sup>x</sup> Mozhikkunnam Brahmaddattan namboodirippad, 'Nammude Innatte athyavasyam'(Our essentialities of today), in Unninamboodiri, ME1099, Kanni ,vol.5,no.1p,12

<sup>xi</sup> 'Kurur Neelakandan Namboodirippadu avarkalkku',(to Kurur Unni Namboodiri) Unninamboodiri, ME 1103 Karkkidakam,vol.9,no.11 p,625

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<sup>xiii</sup>E.M.Sankaran Namboodirippad, Ente jivitha katha (My life story), Calicut, 1965. p.297; Mathmbhuml, 3,May 1930

<sup>xiv</sup> KGopalankutty, Malabar padanangal,Kerala Institute of Languages, Thiruvananthapuram,2007p,75

<sup>xv</sup> Yuvajana Sangham, Youth wing of Yogakshema Sabha

<sup>xvi</sup> K.Gopalakrishnan, VT Bhattathirippad, Makers of Indian Literature, Sahitya Academi,New Delhi,2010,p,40

<sup>xvii</sup> Antharjanam, Namboodiri woman

<sup>xviii</sup> Unninamboodiri MakaramME1104,vol.10,no.5,p,287

<sup>xix</sup> Desamangalathu Valiya Narayanan Namboodiri ,‘*Nambdoodirimarude durnadappu*’ (misdemeanor of Namboodiri ) in Unninamboodiri, ME1099, Vrichikam, vol.5,no.3p,164

<sup>xx</sup> Yogashemam, mouth piece of ogashema Sabha

<sup>xxi</sup> Kuriyedathu Tathri, a Namboodiri women was trailed by the Namboodiri caste council in ME 1080

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<sup>xxiii</sup> PS Kesavan Namboodiri, Limit of Community Organisations, Yogakshemam, April, 1980, p,82

