

Community Identity Constructs: Education for the Construction of Caste & Community Identity - Example of Namboodiri Community of Kerala

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Abstract

The paper discusses the discourses within a Kerala community on accepting Colonial modern Western education. Namboodiri community and the reformist organization Yogakshema Sabha conducted many discussions on accepting modern Western education. The transformation of Namboodiri into human beings envisages the erasure of their pre-colonial educational practices and acceptance of the values of the modern educational system. Internalizing the colonial modernity disseminated ideas was fundamental in transforming Namboodiri as a colonial subject. Educational institutions are one of the sites through which such notions are internalized. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how Namboodiri viewed colonial education and how they appropriated its value. This paper is an attempt to understand this process.

Keywords: *Yogakshema Sabha, Unninamboodiri, Yogakshemam, dharmacharam, Noottipanthrandukar, Swadharmanushtanam, Nambooritham, Antherjanam*

One of the features of the Namboodiri reform movement in Kerala was that they had their movement for better education. The reformers and community reformist organization Yogakshema Sabha continuously discussed the acceptance of Western ideas, including English education, as a way to reform the community. One of the thrusts of the Namboodiri reform movement was to modernize their education system. Unlike other communities of Kerala like the Nair's, the Ezhavas, and Syrian Christians, the Namboodiri resisted English education for a long time and were most reluctant to respond to the reform movement that swept through Kerala in the early 20th century.ⁱ Their disapproval of accepting English education was characterized as an uncivilized and foolish act both in the colonial and native writings of the 19th and early 20th centuriesⁱⁱ. But later, after much discourse within the community, Namboodiri accepted English education as an effective tool to change them into human beings.

Towards the second half of the 19th century, when English education began to spread in different parts of Kerala, Namboodiris also began to think about receiving English education and changing themselves according to time. It is interesting to note that English education became a central theme of debate in the deliberations and discussions of Yogakshema Sabha from the beginning to the end of its first phase (1908-1920). English education was viewed as a model for inventing a new identity in the changing world. The reformers and Sabha continuously reminded the urgency of accepting English education for employment and socio-cultural progress.ⁱⁱⁱ

During the first two decades of the 20th century, Namboodiri tried to balance the traditional education system and modern education. Hence, with the emergence of radical reformers like VT. Bhattathirippad, Mullamangalathu and Raman Bhattathirippad,

M.P. Bhattachirippad (Premji), the Namboodiri attitude towards Western education had changed. They conceived education as a tool for social reform.^{iv} A new identity was envisaged through English education. Subsequently, they acknowledged Western education as an indispensable factor in the changing modern world. Namboodiri's was optimistic that English education would help them abandon their primitive way of life and superstitious beliefs.^v

There are various interpretations of Namboodiri's aversion to Western ideas and English education. It can be argued that a false consciousness existed among the Namboodiri towards modern ideas and employment since they were not traditionally employed in Government or other professions. Like Nayar's, Namboodiri and other powerful upper castes of Kerala were initially slow in adopting modern education, wage employment, and trade and commerce opportunities.^{vi} They strictly believed in the caste hierarchy and feared that joining the public school with others for English education would destroy their caste purity.^{vii} This fear of pollution from other castes compelled them to avoid Western education.

The hatred and opposition of the Namboodiri elders (*Karanavers*) on educating the junior members (anathiravans) could be seen as the primary reasons for the slow pace of the progress of English education among the Namboodiri. The youths' enthusiasm also diminished when there was a lack of support from the elders. The elders insisted that only the eldest son needed education and younger sons could study themselves.^{viii}

The Namboodiri perceived the coming of colonial ideas and institutions as threatening their secure positions as the established elite. Perhaps this partially explains their early reluctance to imbibe ideas, institutions, and practices that accompanied colonial dominance; this is well reflected in popular stories and accounts by colonial administrators and other contemporary observers.^{ix} There was also discussion that Namboodiri's indifference to modern Western education was due to Landlords.^x This was well attested by the articles in '*Unninamboodiri*' and '*Yogakshemam*', the two magazines run by Yogakshema Sabha.^{xi}

In the first two decades of the 20th century, progress in education was viewed as progress in 'dharmacharam,' which means progress in matters related to royal justice and the Renaissance. During the reformist discourses, some leaders were aware of the nature of Vedic education, which was featured in the chanting of slokas without understanding the meaning of the words. They argued that the main reason for the gradual disappearance of Namboodiri from all the public places was adherence to their traditional educational practices. These leaders even feared that Namboodiri would become a part of history if this education system continued. The leaders tried to remind the community members that Namboodiri's that if they wanted to live as human beings, they had to join public schools and accept modern ideas.^{xii} In the discourses on accepting contemporary education, the reformers argued that Western education would help lead an independent life by earning a livelihood. Reformers added that this education would enable them to start scientific steps in agriculture. The reformers viewed Acquiring modern education as a way to obtain the necessary skills for modern life and as a means to resist the old order.^{xiii}

Yogakshema Sabha, though in its first phase, was reactionary in many matters related to social life, it could not be denied that they were aware of and acknowledged the fast-spreading significance of English education. They recognized the necessity of English education for interaction with polity and judiciary. Gradually, English education was also viewed as an effective measure of social sophistication and helped reduce superstitious beliefs. The inability to read and write English was identified as a real handicap, but the early leaders of Sabha were not ready to give up tradition. However, they realized that rejection of English education would adversely affect the progress of the community as a whole.^{xiv}

A discussion on English education for Namboodiri was held in 1872. The discussions urged the need for a council to spread public education among the Namboodiris. These discussions pointed out the difficulty of Namboodiri in joining public schools since it admitted students from all castes. The traditionalism that existed among the Namboodiris could be seen in this argument. But simultaneously, the call for English education was more or less agreed upon. But it was four decades later in early 1910, that the idea took a concrete shape. The Divan of Kochi expressed that he was unsure whether the Namboodiris needed special schools. He doubted the Namboodiri's willingness to join in the special schools and its funding. Divan entrusted C Mathai, Chief Inspector in the Education Department, to get a report on the condition of Namboodiri's education.^{xv}

During its early stages (1908-1920), Yogakshema Sabha continuously discussed the possibility of starting special schools to impart English education exclusively to Namboodiri. Special schools were envisaged as the center where Namboodiri could study English without disturbing their caste purity. Thus, Kulakkada particular school was started in 1912.^{xvi}

The discussions within the community resulted in the increase of Namboodiri students in public schools. According to the Travancore Census Report, 986 community children joined public schools in 1910.^{xvii} Sabha submitted memorandums and requests to the respective Governments of Travancore, Cochin, and Madras to promote English education. P. Kunhiraman Nair, a Member of the Madras Legislature, submitted a memorandum for Namboodiri education in the legislatures as requested by Yogakshema Sabha. Sabha directly submitted another memo to the Madras Governor in 1915. Secretary of Yogakshema Sabha, Kirangottu Vasudevan Namboodiri, studied English for submitting the memorandums in English, a language which indicates Sabha's enthusiasm towards modern education. Sabha even sent a delegation under Pumulli Tuppan Namboodiri, Olappamanna Narayanan Namboodiri, Cherumukku Vaidikan, Kurur Unni Namboodiri, and Chittur Narayanan Namboodiri to meet the Madras Governor while he was residing at the palace of Kollangottu Vasudeva Raja in 1915.^{xviii}

The changed concept of English education was exhibited in the 8th anniversary of Sabha at Vellinezhi in 1915. Acceptance of English Education was the central issue of discussion at Vellinezhi. The meeting warned that neglect of English education would adversely affect the progress of the community. Different ways and means for the popularization of English were discussed. When Kurur Unni Namboodiri, in his speech, sought financial aid for Namboodiri's education, many came forward with financial assistance for promoting English education in the community.^{xix}

A special session on English education was organized as a part of Vellinezhi conference. The resolution of 'education for Namboodiri's' presented by Kurur Unni Namboodiri suggested starting special schools for modern education. Thus, the first step towards social mobility and progress in terms of modernity was emphasized in education. The readiness to accept Western knowledge and steps for its promotion marked the community's growing awareness of the changing needs. Special schools were started at Peramangalam, Taliparamba, Karikkad, Panjal, Kulakkada, Tekkan Tottara, Killimangalam, Killikurussimangalam and Venmeni.

The Edakkunni Namboodiri particular school tried to balance traditional and modern education systems. This was evident from the strict instructions given to the school's students to observe all daily routines like bath, prayer, Vedic chanting, and conventional dress. Most Namboodiri traditions were observed, like Ekaadasi fasting, Vaavu half-fast (orikkal), and holidays on Ashtami Vaavu and Prathipadam. They had to go and pray in a nearby temple at least once a day. All students ate together in a large dining hall constructed by the committee. The teachers also ate with them, and most mostly stayed with them too. The principles of purity and pollution ('*Suddham*,' '*Asuddham*') were meticulously followed. Thus, Yogakshema Sabha in its early days was hardly "reformist" but chiefly "defensive." However, Edakkunni School played a significant role in the Namboodiri reform movement and became the basis for the Namboodiri educational progress.

Attempts to modernize Namboodiris through modern education faced opposition from a group within the community. At the beginning of the 20th century, traditionalists and landlords stood against all types of social changes. When Kurur Unni Namboodiri introduced a resolution for English education at the Vellinezhi session of Yogakshema Sabha in 1915, the orthodox vehemently protested against it and formed a collective known as „Noottipanthrandukar“ to oppose the movements in favor of English education. A newspaper from Thiruvananthapuram, 'Indian Twinker,' criticized the modern practices of Namboodiri, like modern education, Namboodiri regulations, and self-caste marriage. This newspaper argued that these changes would destroy *Namboodiritham* and they would become equal to non-Brahmins. The orthodox varna system should be continued for the welfare of the Hindu community. "*Dharmodharaka Samithi*" (protection of Dharmam) criticized the decisions of Yogakshema Sabha to start special schools. This organization declared that the special schools of Mannadi, Kumaranellur, and Edakkunni were evil centers.^{xx} But Yogakshema Sabha discussed the condition of Namboodiri schools and attempted to improve its conditions. A special meeting of the Sabha was held at Panjal in 1926 to discuss the pathetic condition of the Namboodiri special school.^{xxi}

The Namboodiri community made vast propaganda for accepting English education in 1920's and 1930's. Discussions in *Unninamboodiri* and *Yogakshemam* urged for the acceptance of English education. The journals convinced their fellowmen that the lack of education would lead to the stagnation of the community and projected successfully that even the lowest castes were exploiting the situation favorably. This discussion even urged the community members to accept teachers irrespective of their caste.^{xxii}

"*Swadharmanushatnum*" (performance of once on dharma), a memorandum prepared by the Kottakkal Upasabha of Yogakshema Sabha, urged the need to reform some traditional institutions according to the needs of modern society. The pamphlet was the best example for the continuance of tradition and modernism in the demands for English education. Memorandum stood for restructuring traditional Sanskrit education in modern ways. It recommended the conversion of '*Brahmacharyasrama*' (celibacy life prescribed for the young Namboodiri men) into a full-fledged period of training in true humility, self-control, Vedic knowledge, and knowledge in practical life. The memorandum accepted acquiring new skills like English education as a reform method.^{xxiii}

Changes in the education system were among the four revolutionary changes envisaged by the Namboodiri Youths in the 1930's.^{xxiv} With the spread of Western education, strong opposition to the old-fashioned customs started among ordinary people. "*Yachana Yatra*" (Hunger March) of 1931 from Trissur to Kasaragod was for helping the poor Namboodiri students. It became a strong publicity program for the spread of English education. Inspired by the hunger march, marches were conducted in different parts of Kerala, which underscored the importance of spreading English education.^{xxv}

The reformers lamented that the traditional form of education resulted in the elimination of Namboodiri from public places, and they have become a rejected community. They even feared Namboodiri's would become a part of history. English education was perceived as an effective method for ending isolated life. Reformers conducted heated discussions on the need for public schools. It was judged as a way to interact with members of other communities and change them into a social being. They hoped that English would play a significant role in the spread of nationalism and the activities of the Indian National Congress. Reformers admitted the fact that Namboodiri was far behind other communities in the acceptance of Western education. They also reviewed the role of English in abandoning Namboodiri's false belief in social evils like untouchability.^{xxvi}

In the 1920 Yogakshema Sabha and allied organizations like Namboodiri Yuvajana Sangham (Namboodiri Youth Wing) I conducted crucial discussions on English education for Namboodiri women. Various interpretations were given to the merit of women's education. Women's education was vital for keeping the virtues, removing all particularities, and bringing *Antharjanam* to modern domestic life. Namboodiri Female Education Commission supported these arguments.^{xxvii}

Discussions favoring women's education were not confined to Yogakshema Sabha alone but were publicly debated. Wealthy families appointed tutors for their girls, but the middle and poor families remained hopeless and helpless. In the discourses on women's education, it was argued that women, like men, had the right to education. The traditionalists argued that Namboodiri women's education should be confined to the ability to read Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas. Women were not allowed to know about the changing world. So, the attempt of the reform movement was to bring women out of the kitchen, allow them to get modern education, and travel freely. In the case of social life, English education was viewed as a tool for transforming the condition of Namboodiri women. While the majority demanded the transformation of Namboodiri women through modern education, there was also an argument for restricting women's education in their mother tongue.^{xxviii} This group argued that there was no need to teach English and Sanskrit to Namboodiri girls. According to this view, the primary education of Namboodiri girls should include reading, writing, basic Maths, house administration, and child care. However, youths supported English education and literary activities for the emancipation of women. Women Education Commission discussed the issues, including the nature of the present form of education imparted to Namboodiri girls and further steps required to improve the existing system.^{xxix}

Some reformist discourses on education also viewed English education as a tool for improving the economic status of the Namboodiri. They argued that Namboodiri was leading a life of poverty, though they had agrarian lands. People had stopped paying money (*dana dakshina*) to Namboodiri to get salvation. English changed the concept of manual labor. The reformers urged them to accept English education and start scientific agriculture to improve

their economic status. In this interpretation, the concept was 'live with work' and attained strength. Reformers thought that English education was a must for success in the competitive life of the modern world.^{xxx}

English education was also viewed as a method of realizing the rights and needs of the community. Reformers argued knowledge of administrative language was essential to bring the grievances to the attention of the authorities. At the same time, traditionalists contended that English education was not a must and it was not suitable for the lifestyle of Indians. But reformers rejected orthodox by convincing their fellow men that studying English was necessary as it was the language of the ruling class and for getting their rights. According to reformist perception, English education helps them review their own failures and drawbacks and reminds them to be cautious of the physical luxury of Western culture.^{xxxi}

The reformist discourses criticized traditionalists' concept of English and argued that the fault was not in English education but in how it was being taught. According to reformist perception, there was no question of purity and pollution in education and Government employment. Their discourses and emphasis were also given to good food as they argued that good health is needed for good education. They opined that Namboodiri students in public schools were not eating enough for fear of purity and pollution. Reformers doubted the efficacy of special schools in acquiring worldly knowledge. Reformist discourses also analyzed the practicability of Western education in the Gurukula system, and the majority opined that it was not practical. The reformer argued that instead of running special schools, the community should extend financial support to deserving students.^{xxxii}

One of the important issues taken up initially in the discussions on education was the merits of modern education over traditional education and the need for public schools in the place of special schools. Reformers questioned the need for special schools and believed that children should study in public schools.

The reforming of Namboodiri was another item of discussion in the discourses related to education. The rituals like "*Upanayana*" and "*Samavarthana*" forbade them from studying in public schools. Hence, they demanded the reforming of rituals according to the needs of the time. They were conscious that for educational progress, there was a need to allow them to study in public schools.^{xxxiii}

The active involvement of Yogakshema Sabha in crucial social issues in the 1930s "did not affect its involvement in the issues related to modern education. A lottery draw was introduced to raise permanent funds for the smooth functioning of the special schools. A total of Rs.25000 rupees was collected and utilized to spread education. An Educational Committee was formed with AKTM Guptan Namboodiri, Chittur Kunjan Namboodiri, and Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboodiri as members for managing the fund. A major portion of the profit from the lotteries was spent on women's education. But later, by the Ongallur session of Sabha in 1945, a rift occurred within the Sabha on using this educational fund.^{xxxiv}

Conclusion

To conclude, the demand for accommodating modern English education was in the limelight within the Namboodiri community during the first half of the 20th century. This demand resulted from the new consciousness of their degenerated condition in matters related to modern education. The attempts to change the condition of education should be viewed as Namboodiri's eagerness to change the constructed image of the community. English education was accepted as a mark of identity. But we should remember that all these processes emerged within the colonial discursive realm.

Serious discussions on education, like the need for special schools, public schools, the nature of women's education, and education as a tool for economic advancement, indicate the urge of the community to restructure themselves according to time. The call for Western education was led by Yogakshema Sabha, though there were variations in the intensity of their demands. Sabha was successful in mobilizing the community towards English education. Though traditional, early Sabha had taken the initiative to form special schools. During this period, Sabha discussed the possibilities of accepting modern education without affecting their traditional space. Support for special schools and the appointment of special teachers were to be viewed in this context. But gradually, crucial discussions within the Sabha started on issues related to special or public schools, the nature of women's education, and education for social change.

Modern education was perceived as a means for ending Namboodiri's isolation and getting into colonial modernity. It was also used as a weapon for fighting against traditionalism and accepting modern ways of life. Namboodir showed the willingness to abandon traditional customs and practices for modern education. Namboodiris went on to the extent of demanding the transfer of the money spent on unnecessary rituals and sacrifices to progress education.

All the above deliberations, related to modern education, express the attempt of the Namboodiri community to invent a new identity within the new space created by colonial modernity. Reformers were aware that the community should not survive without accepting different forms of colonial modernity, including English education.

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