

## Understanding the Construction of Community Identity - The Case Study of the Namboodiri Community of Colonial Kerala

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**Abstract:** The present paper addresses the question concerning the constitution of community identity. Antithetical to the dominant historical and ethnographic thinking that community is an essential category that continues through time, the present paper intends to hypothesize that any attempt to essentialize community identity would produce only an ahistorical argument. Identity is not essential, aspatial and atemporal, but it is historical. Therefore, it changes the changing socio-political and economic situations. When arguing so, we do not fall into the limitations of social determinism. Instead, we would say that the constitution of community identity is effectuated as a consequence of the corresponding relation between the socio-economic situation and the mentality of the subjects living in it. To establish this argument, the present study will analyze the strategies adopted by the Namboodiri community in three different historical conjunctures to structure and restructure their community identity in modern Kerala. The first is the colonial phase (or more precisely, the period of social reform), wherein how the Namboodiri who had internalized the values of colonial modernity appropriated new strategies to structure a „modern and civilized“ Namboodiri will form the central concern. The second situation is the period of Land Reform in post-independent Kerala, wherein we will examine how Namboodiri rebuilt their community identity differently when their existence was challenged economically. The third moment is the recent neoliberal phase, wherein we could see the Namboodiris reinventing their once-rejected past, which is embodied by ritual authority to address the risks and uncertainties created by contemporary Kerala.

**Key Words:** *Community, Yogakshema Sabha, identity, neoliberal*

During the colonial period, when the idea of social reforms disseminated all parts of Kerala and affected almost all communities, the Namboodiri community did not remain isolated. It was during this period that a response to the colonially constructed identity of the Namboodiri community was initiated. The colonially constructed notion of the Namboodiri community as dominating, essentially unchanging, and enjoying all types of luxuries was concretized during this period.<sup>1</sup> The popular literature and writings of this period have carried down these notions. Though reformers in the Namboodiri community like V.T. Bhattathirippad, Mullamangalathu Raman Bhattathirippad (M.R.B), and M.P. Bhattathirippad (Premji). Laboured to introduce reforms and to change the projected identity of the community, the constructed image of the community remained unchanged. This constructed image was disseminated among the masses through the discourses objectifying the Namboodiri community. The present study tries to perceive the essential characteristics thus attributed to objectifying community and how it eventually constituted a community identity as a discursive effect. The second context of Namboodiri restructuring was during the period of land reforms. As a result of the introduction of the Land Reforms by the successive Governments of Kerala, the then tenurial relations, whether it was Jenmi-Jathi- Naduvazhi form or that of feudal mode, began to change. The Namboodiri were the community that the Land Reforms profoundly influenced. The discourse which argued for and against land reforms that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s objectified the Namboodiri community, and in and through this discourse, once again, they were re-invented. Also, the community had to reinvent themselves to address the changing socio-economic situations. Yogakshema Sabha, the central organization that had been working to restructure Namboodiri communities, had followed new slogans and charted new programmes and new strategies in the 1980's. In the last three decades, Yogakshema Sabha and the community, in line with trends in the larger public, were at a crossroads, witnessing a resurgent phase of modernization. They expanded and consolidated their community base mainly through active involvement in public issues. Attempts to keep up their identity through reviving rituals and practices specific to the community and engaging in community-building activities by appropriating cyberspace have increased since the 1990s. These developments also show that the community is getting restructured even in the

contemporary period. These all show that caste or community identity is not static but changes over time. Any attempt to essentialize caste/community identity would lead us far away from understanding social reality. The discussions on concepts like caste, community, identity, and modernity can help us comprehend the principles of structuring a community. This understanding has a bearing on the recent argument that the modern castes of India were also the product of colonial modernity.<sup>ii</sup> Understandably, during the reform phase, the Namboodiri community gradually shifted from caste elitism to community consciousness. Paradoxically, the community again showed the tendency to project their caste elitism during the post-independence period. During the reformist period, with the spread of English education and the influence of colonial modernity, Namboodiris understood the futility of sticking back to their caste elitism and internal differentiations. Further, it forced them to accept a broader consciousness of being a community. The internal hierarchies within the caste had been erased to form a united community. There is a common apprehension that modern communities are the product of colonial modernity. Colonial modernity claimed that social reforms in India were an offshoot of people's wishes to improve themselves. This had been made possible by internalizing the idea of culture and civilization brought by the colonial masters by the colonized. It has been argued that colonialism was made possible, survived and strengthened by the cultural technologies of rule; in making religion the primary factor in the definition of community, the British laid the basis for a discourse that claimed to represent the interest of loosely conceived social categories.<sup>iii</sup> For the perpetuation and elegance of administration, the colonial Government inaugurated the study of diverse conditions of the colonial people. The British launched the Census in 1871 and subsequently implemented organized methods for taking the census of the people. Census contributed to the formation of communities as British officials identified religion as the unit for its social, political and administrative measures. The census was a prime factor in initiating the feeling of community among the people of India. Though initially, the British categorized people in terms of religion, gradually, people themselves felt the consciousness of the community. Identities were multiple in the pre-colonial period, and the ill-defined boundaries of the pre-colonial communities were replaced by discrete categories that could be enumerated strictly and claimed exclusive identification by their members. This discursive operation induced people to participate in the public sphere regarding collective identities defined by the state. Modern governing practices thus reconstituted the meaning of community and ethnicity, producing a brand of modern ethnic consciousness in India.<sup>iv</sup> The Census of 1871 categorized people as "Hindu" and "Muslim" without bothering what these categories constructed. „Religion“ was the colonial reference point, and this practice culminated in forming a separate electorate.<sup>v</sup> The census report formalized the meaning of religion to mean a community comprising individuals bound by a formal definition and accorded characteristics based on the data garnered by the enumerators. The opinion of Kenneth W Jones is relevant here, "the census defined communities, counted them, and examined their characteristics as social and economic units".<sup>vi</sup> In this construction of communities, the colonial authorities paid little attention to the internal hierarchy of class, language, and regional or sectarian factors of India. The Census of 1881 referred to Hindus, Muslims and Christians as nationalities. Thus, nationality became an overall category within which we have castes, sub-castes, sex, age, marital status, occupation, education, and language. Kenneth W Jones further added that the only area of the census without a religious dimension was the section on infirmities—the deaf, dumb, blind, lepers, and insane.<sup>vii</sup> M.N. Srinivas even connects the origin of caste associations to Indian reaction to the recording and ranking of castes in Government Census Reports at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>viii</sup> Thus, one of the aftermaths of the census was using the single term "Hindu" to designate a population that ranged so widely in belief, practice, identity and recognition.<sup>ix</sup> The enumerated categories were significant in the identity formation of communities. Once the British constructed such communities, communitarian narratives began to flourish at about the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which showed that all the natives unhesitatingly imbibed this construction. They now began to conceive themselves as members of the enumerated communities bound by doctrinal creeds, ignoring the diversities within the community itself. The apprehension that collective consciousness among the communities resulted in collective action is true in the case of the socio-religious movements of Kerala. Emile Durkheim pointed out that a timely combination of collective consciousness and collective action resulted in societal changes.<sup>x</sup> As far as the Namboodiris of Kerala are concerned, this collective consciousness blossomed

towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in the formation of Yogakshema Sabha. Durkheim opines that collective actions resulted from the positive responses to the crisis in the society and a society strained by the continuous struggle between the forces of disintegration (rapid differentiation) and the forces of integration (new and renewed commitment to shared beliefs) move to progress. The same notion applied to the study of the Namboodiri community. On the other hand, Max Webber indicated that religious and ideological leaders were continuously formulating new definitions of the world, and only a few of them attracted their followers.<sup>xi</sup> K.N. Panikkar argues that renaissance and revivalism were integral to the search for identity.<sup>xii</sup> Colonialism provided a cultural context for their articulation. The modern collectivity of Namboodiris tried to restructure itself with the concept of modernity and a rational and scientific outlook during the reformist period. Attempts were made to refashion their customs and traditions in tune with rational social behaviour that colonial modernity essentially advocated. Yogakshema Sabha, the community organization of the Namboodiris, like other caste associations of the reformist period, helped bring social mobility among the Namboodiris. The Namboodiri community, as a part of the modernization process, accepted modern Western education, the chief symbol of colonial modernity, as a medium for achieving the skills necessary for materializing all these objectives. Thus, the Namboodiri reform movement always tried to construct a separate identity for the community to attune to the changes in the modern world. Theoretically, there are two opposite solid positions in understanding the question of identity. They are the „primordiality“ and the „constructivist“. The primordialism perception held that collective people with enduring social identity, solidarity, and boundness could be considered a community. They generally regarded community as natural groupings based on ties of shared blood, language, history, territory and culture. This perception argues that ultimately, by evolutionary movement, the community would disappear and be replaced by more homogenous social firms like class. A limitation of this position is that they conceive the community as an essential being. Meanwhile, constructivists believe that communities are non-essential. They further argued that community emerges in opposition to the changing socio-economic-political order. For example, the community we discuss here emerged during the colonial period. Through the utilization of different technologies, the colonial state created communities; therefore, the community has been viewed as the production of colonial modernity. Colonial construction of community was both discursive and non-discursive. Drawing upon Faucault and Edward Said, the constructivists believed that community identity was invented by operating specific political and discursive processes.<sup>xiii</sup> The concept of the invention of tradition and the imagination of communities are probably the most widely cited theories today about community formation. Benedict Anderson argued that identities (ethnic or national) uniting a large number of people could arise only after a certain technological level had been attained. To him, print capitalism facilitated the collective imagining of communities.<sup>xiv</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Range point out the constructive nature of tradition in its modern form. The product of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, constructivism is the position of scholars who are trying to understand social processes from post-structuralist positions, including the Subaltern studies group. Thus, the survey of existing literature on the community as an analytical category reveals that most modern scholars broadly follow a constructivist perspective about the community. Almost all of them identify colonial administrative practices and ethnology as major strategies in constructing modern ethnic identities. European construction of community identity examines how modernization under colonial Government has led to sharper articulation of identity among the subject population. The argument is that the formation of communitarian tendencies is an effect of renaissance and social reform in India. It is the result of the growth of literacy and print capitalism and the development of communication networks that have ensured the lateral integration of the people who subscribe to a caste, religion, region, or speak the same language; such a community is an imagined one, to borrow the expression of Benedict Anderson. However, the community is ridden with internal contradictions of its own, and despite the assumption of a common culture, invented „tradition“, and genealogies, they cannot hope to become a cohesive whole in any respect. Edward noted that mandate is relevant here; „All interpretations are what might be called situational; they always occur in a situation whose bearing on interpretation is affiliative. It relates to what other interpreters have said, either by confirming, disputing, or continuing. No interpretation is without precedents or some connection to other interpretation“. <sup>xv</sup> Edward's specific emphasis on the situation is essential for the present study.

The situation has been viewed in two senses: one, as mentioned earlier, three socio-political situations within which the community identity is constituted and reconstituted. Second, there are different situations within which interpretations are made, either by the colonists or by the community, which develop new dispositions to interpret themselves or interpretive attempts of the present research. All these are linked, but more important is that situation and constructivism enable us to proceed with a non-essentialist argument and expose the dynamics of the constitution of social realities. This would remain the methodological backbone of the present study. Social reform is another critical domain that appears in the study. The central argument on the origin of the social/reformist movement is that it emerged out of the degeneration of society.<sup>xvi</sup>M.S.A. Rao identified three levels of structural changes based on three types of social movements: reformative, transformative and revolutionary.<sup>xvii</sup>The reform movement brought about partial changes in the value system, was a transformative movement aimed at effecting middle-level structural changes, and the objective of the revolutionary movement was to bring about radical changes in the totality of social and cultural systems. Rao argued that the reform movement also differed in intensity and conflicts; conflict was the least common among the reform movement, but it acquired a sharper force in the transformative movement, and in the case of the revolutionary movement, conflict was based on class struggle. Kenneth W Jones defined the socio-religious reform movement as socio, movement and religious. „Socio“ implies an attempt to reorder the society in social behavioural, customs, structure, or control. A „Movement“ implies under standing any process that reshapes any one of these components or a combination of them. The term, „religious“ refers to the type of authority used to legitimate a given ideology and its accompanying Programme.<sup>xviii</sup>All socio-religious reform movements demanded changes, ranging from a relatively limited approach of defensive and self-consciously orthodox groups to radicals who articulated a sweeping condemnation of the status quo. In short, a socio-religious reform movement advocates modifications in social behaviour, justifies such advocacy by one form of religious authority, and then builds an organizational structure it maintains over time. Kenneth W Jones identifies two types of socio-religious movements: transitional and accumulative. The first of these was pre-British in origin and pre-modern in its objectives and nature of functioning. The second group functioned within the colonial milieu and was led by individuals of cultural interaction, which is accumulative. The present researcher has utilized insights from both M.S.A. Rao and Kenneth W. Jones. They agree upon the aspect of social reform's transformative and transitional potential. Looking at the effect of social reform on the Namboodiris, especially their family restructuring and the condition of women, the transformative (transitional) nature of social reform has been discussed. Meanwhile, the discussion on the “accumulative” nature of social reform developed by Jones has been used to refer to the continuity of tradition Even when social- reform is going on.

**Conclusion:** The Namboodiri community adopted different strategies to structure and restructure their community identity in modern Kerala. During the colonial period, the reform movement and reformist organizations tried to project themselves as civilized and contemporary. During the period of Land Reforms, Namboodiri tried to rebuild their community identity differently when their existence was challenged economically. During the modern period, Namboodiris is trying to reinvent their once-rejected past, embodied in ritual authority, to address the risks and uncertainties created by the neoliberal world.

### **References**

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<sup>i</sup>1 Literature from European Travelogues of the post-15th century to native literature in the 19th and early 20th century followed this suit

<sup>ii</sup>Nicholas Driks, a constructivist, thinks that castes were invented by colonial anthropology, and colonial states institutionalized castes through census and other administrative practices. (Caste of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India, Princeton University Press, 2001, p.115) Similarly, Kenneth W Jones held the view that modern castes in India created the British administrative system (Socio-Religious Reform Movement in British India, New Delhi, 1944, p.81). Gyanendra Pande also expressed the view that „sub-castes and local loyalties too fragmented pre-colonial society to have a larger alliance to emerge“ (The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, Oxford University Press, 1990 p.199)

<sup>iii</sup>Aysha Jalal, Self and Sovereignty; Individuals and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850, OUP, New Delhi, 2001, p.34

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- <sup>v</sup>KNPanikkar, Communal threat, Secular Challenge, Earth Worm, Madras,1997,p.110
- <sup>vi</sup>Kenneth W Jones, Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India, Vol.3,Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.184
- <sup>vii</sup>Ibid,p.184
- <sup>viii</sup>MN Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, Berkeley, 1996, pp.94-100
- <sup>ix</sup>12 Nicholas B Dirks, Castes of Mind, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2002,p.225
- <sup>x</sup>Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society, Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press,2001,p.274
- <sup>xi</sup>Max Weber, Theory of Social and Economic Organisation, The Free Press, New York, 1964, pp.53-56
- <sup>xii</sup>K.N. Panikkar, Colonialism, Culture and Resistance,Oxford University Press,2007, p.27
- <sup>xiii</sup>The studies of Nicholas Driks, „Caste of Mind“ (Delhi,1992), Gerrald N Barrier, „The Census of British India, New Perspective“ (Delhi,1984), Gyanendra Pande, 'Construction of Communalism in Colonial India" (OUP, Delhi, 1996) Terence Range, „Power, Religion and Community'(Subaltern studies, Vol.VII, OUP,1992), Dipesh Chakravarthy, „Habitations Of Modernity-Essays in the Wake of subaltern Studies“ etc. points on the constructive nature of identity.
- <sup>xiv</sup>Benedict Anderson, imagined community-Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Verso,London,1983,pp.42-47
- <sup>xv</sup>Edward Said, Covering Islam,Vintage,1997,p.162
- <sup>xvi</sup>H. Blumer argues that social movement arises out of undefined or unstructured situations, which causes stress in the system (H. Blumer, "Collective Behaviour" in A.M. Lee (ed) New Outline of the Principles of Sociology,New York,195,p.130), J.A.Bankas and Olive Banks holds that Social movements are functions of dissatisfactions with the existing order.(“Feminism and Social Change: A Study of Social Movements” in George K Zolloschan and Walter Hirich(ed), Explorations in Social Change, London, Routledge, and Logan Paul,1964,p.522) And Wallace opined that revitalization movements starts only when the participants of a culture feel that the system is unsatisfactory.(Revitalization Movement,p.256)
- <sup>xvii</sup>M.S.A. Rao, "Conceptual problems in the Study of Social movements" in M.S.A. Rao (ed), Social Movements in India, Vol.1,New Delhi,1978, pp.1-15
- <sup>xviii</sup>Kennet W Jones, op.cit, p.2