

DERISION AS CRITIQUE: ENGAGING WITH MATRILINY IN COLONIAL KERALA

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Abstract

This paper analyses some aspects of the transformation of Matriliney in Colonial Kerala as reflected/contested in the language of laughter during the early print culture in Malayalam. In the discourse of language, it is in laughter that one could observe a serious critique of modernity and its various agencies of reform. The emergent male from the upper caste and middle class Nairs emerged as the main custodian of literary humour in the context of colonial modernity in Kerala. It was also the period in which the indigenous practices such as sambandham marriage among Nairs, Nair matrilineal joint family system, individual property rights and the partition of tharavad, etc., came under colonial legal intervention. The anxieties over the legal abolition of 'family' centered practices came to be expressed in the language of laughter during this period, although the marriage practice among Nairs, without much protest, was legitimized. The question of legal abolition of 'family' centered practices rendered ambivalent expression in the language of laughter. However, marumakkathayam (matrilineal system of inheritance), as it was practiced until then, was an effective system to protect Nair property and their traditional noble privileges, and the destruction of this inheritance practices led to great anxiety among a section of Nair elites. In this context laughter was used as a rhetorical device by the literate elites to reinforce social control and in fashioning the community consciousness against the newly emerging socio-cultural forces. Here, derision appeared as an effective means to defend traditional status, values and found supportive in maintaining the social status quo. Self-deprecating humour was directed towards the

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community to address increasing conflict within the Nair tharavad system. But at the same time humour was also used to celebrate some of the ideas of modernity. The complex ways in which humour functioned, often ambivalently and contradictorily, in the context of the legal abolition of matriliney in 20th century Kerala is addressed in this paper.

Keywords: Derision, rhetorical device, matriliney, *sambandham*, *tharavad*

Introduction

The system of law in which descent and succession to property is traced through females is known as matriliney or *marumakkathayam* system of inheritance. The children of such unions belonged to their mother's *tharavad*¹ and the principal property connection was between mother and children. The *Karanavar*, the eldest male member, who is the maternal uncle in the *tharavad*, was the head and guardian of all the members including married women and their children as well as *tharavad* property. In Kerala matrilineal kinship system was commonly followed by Nairs, Thiyyas and Malabar Muslims. Mukkuvans and some tribes also followed matriliney.² Among Nairs *marumakkathayam* was associated with a peculiar social custom of having customary alliance with Namboodiri Brahmins and in some occasions with Ambalavasi castes (groups who render temple services) and Kshatriyas. This *sambandham* marriage alliance sanctioned hypergamous sexual relations following matriliney. The origin of the matrilineal system is still a matter of debate among scholars.

This paper examines the role of laughter as a 'rhetorical device' in a society in transition where the public sphere was a highly structured realm.³ The present paper mainly deals with the case of Nairs, as the literary humour/satire used here as a source was mainly used by middle class Nairs to evoke concerns about their community. In the traditional caste system Nairs are below Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Ambalavasis who are noted for the inclusion of various sub-castes. Early access to new resources brought by colonial modernity such as western education and print helped Nairs to transform themselves as a privileged group. Their initiatives took place in a context where different caste based community reform movements were seeking their own space in the emerging social sphere of the 20th century Kerala. Humour, in the hands of these middle class, was

also a tool for resistance to reinforce social control and fashion the caste communities from the newly emerging socio-cultural forces.⁴ It has been observed that in the usage of satire or humour as rhetoric of laughter in the emerging public sphere, ridicule became the primary resistant model for the dominant group of men to contest with the new socio-cultural forces that developed under colonial modernity. What is significant about the period under consideration is the predominant presence of the dominant groups with their contentions over the need to redefine caste communities within the locus of 'tradition'. But even this voice of concern was mainly articulated only for the perceived benefit of the caste groups that were considered (envisaged) within the *varna* system.

In the context of colonial modernity, the laughter of ridicule is seen to operate in different directions. On the one hand, laughter of humour or satire is taken as a means to target traditional practices and the related ideological system. Here humour functions as a form of celebrating modernity through ridicule of tradition bound power relations, and providing opportunities for laughter against the traditional 'characters.' Images of clever and deceitful *Ammayis*, and obstinate *Karanavars* were the objects of laughter in the newly emerging literary genres. On the other hand, ridicule is understood as a form of resistance against what the newly emerging middle class people perceived as a total collapse of their world of values. It is important here is to observe the process of suppression involved in certain discursive strategies and the power play working within communities partaking of colonial modernity. As there is hegemonic presence of dominant social groups in their participation with modernity under colonialism, even ridicule appears as an effective means to defend their traditional values and status quo. Works of critical scholarship have analyzed the role of ridicule as a form of social control which critique the notion that humour, comedy and laughter always work for the social good.⁵ Ridicule also provides an ambiguous and acceptable medium for the expression of hostility against the 'other' (P.Wilson 1979; 212).⁶ In the context of Bengal studies on nationalism and anti-colonial resistance gave rise to the analysis of literary humour. These studies discuss how Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay used humour to ridicule power (of the colonizer) and its rationality, including modern legal system.⁷

Property was considered as the foundation of matriliney. Basic institutions of Nair matriliney were the *tharavad*, the marriage system which permitted polyandry and polygamy, divorce and remarriage, and inheritance where descent was through the female line. Various

accounts show that partition of *tharavads* led to bitterness, dislocation and disharmony among its members (Saradamony; 1999).⁸ Many scholars have studied Nair matriliney, and its transformation in Travancore and Malabar.⁹ None of these studies focused on the role of humour or satire as a literary device to critique the new changes brought about by colonial modernity.¹⁰

The present paper provides insight into the complex and dynamic ways in which humour employed by male laughing subjects, mostly Nairs, to engage with matriliney in colonial Kerala. Different caste-based reform movements were seeking their own space in the emerging social sphere of the 20th century Kerala. The newly educated middle class deployed the language of ridicule, irony and humour to contest the new socio-cultural forces that developed under colonial modernity. The indigenous practices such as *sambandham*¹¹ among Nairs, their matrilineal joint family system, issues like individual property right and the partition of *tharavad* were some of the specific aspects considered for legal intervention and legitimization during the late 19th century. The language of nineteenth and twentieth century reform identifies the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres as the domain of 'woman' and 'man' respectively.¹² Though in an early formulation Chatterjee argues that nationalist elites considered the 'private' as the 'legitimate' space of women to be protected it is difficult to apply in the case of Kerala. By the late 19th century itself some of the newly educated middle class from communities such as Nairs supported 'legalizing' family practices and the colonial state was happily invited to perform family succession reforms into the 'inner' space. Tanika Sarkar too contests some of the arguments of Chatterjee in the Bengal context itself (Sarkar 2001).¹³

Legitimization of *Sambandham* Marriage Practice

A wider level of social criticism was raised against the 'loose' nature of Nair *sambandham* from within the Nair community and outside.¹⁴ The much provoked ridicule against Nair marriage and morals caused to create embarrassment and a sense of anomie among educated Nairs. New notions of Victorian morality, conjugality, and property relations brought about by colonial modernity were important factors which caused widespread discontent over these indigenous practices. Jokes and anecdotes targeted the practice of *sambandham* as 'concubinage'. By idealizing romantic love and companionate marriage modernity appeared in a celebratory mode in many of the new literary genres. Late 19th and early 20th centuries literary writings exemplify this.

For instance Chandu Menon in his novel *Indulekha* expresses many of the concerns and crises confronted by the *tharavad* centered Nair families of Malabar during the late 19th century.¹⁵

'N. Sankara Marar, the late sub-divisional *sherishtadar*, Tellichery, was once invited to a kalyanam (marriage) by a high official... All being seated, the host, on the entrance of an old man, an invited guest, got up and with much reverence introduced him to the *sherishtadar* as his father. The visitor passed into the interior apartments and in a few minutes more another old guest made his appearance. The same ceremony was gone through by the host who again introduced the newcomer as his father. Sankara Marar tried to control his tongue, but could not, and on resuming his seat said: "Please Mr... excuse if I do not get up when another of your father comes"¹⁶

The reformists who argue for the legalization of Nair marriages circulated such anecdotes to laugh at the transitory nature of *sambandham* relation. The Nair is the butt of their jokes, which imply that "a Nair does not know who his father is."¹⁷ In the official discourse, *sambandham* practice was not recognized as a legally valid relationship as constituting marriage.¹⁸ As a member of the Malabar Marriage Commission, Chandu Menon expressed his voice of dissent against the legislative interference into the existing marriage relation of Nairs which he argued as having validity both in law and religion. But Namboodiris in their response said that they do not consider it as marriage and no court of law regarded it as marriage.¹⁹ However the image represented by Sury Namboodiri's 'lust' contrary to the idealized 'romantic love' of Madhavan and Indulekha in the novel undermine the practice of *sambandham* relation between Nair woman and Namboodiri man. Another issue the Commission looked into was whether it is connected with the religious observances of the people. Namboodiri's answer to this question was Sudra women are created for Namboodiri bachelors to play with. Fair representatives of the classes who oppose legislation admit that there is no religious element in *sambandham*.²⁰ On the basis of the recommendations of the Commission in 1896 Madras Government passed the Malabar Marriage Act. This allowed members of any caste following *marumakkathayam* in Malabar to register *sambandham* as a marriage. The act did not achieve desired result. Following this Travancore *marumakkathayam* committee submitted its report in 1908. Committee recommended legal recognition of *sambandham* as marriage, intestate succession, testamentary succession, duties and powers of the Karanavan and Ananthirvan and partition. Many people

gave their witness report for validating *sambandham*. The report says that it was important to encourage stable marriages. Legislation of marriage as *sambandham* did not create any controversy.²¹ In an article K. Padmavatiamma discusses the moral degeneration that occurred to women due to the *sambandham* practice in the *marumakkathayam tharavad* system of Nairs. She strongly supported a change in this system.²² In an editorial on Nair Bill *Mahila* criticized royal family member's hesitation to accept Nair wife's and children's right to property of their non-Nair husbands.²³ Changes in Nair marriage was reinstated in the regulation of 1912. Thiruvitamkooor Nair Act of 1925 and the Cochin Nair Act of 1920 made *sambandham* illegal. It shows that the marriage practice among Nairs, without much protest, was legitimized and humour was a main instrument with which the newly educated middle class pose concerns of morality.

Widening Conflicts and Legal intervention of Matriliney

The increasing conflict within the *tharavad* and 'court room trials', Karanavar's obstinacy and bias, Ammayi's (aunt/wife of *karanavar*) cunning and spiteful 'devices' to turn her husband against his nephews who were his heirs in the *marumakkathayam* system etc., are some of the frequently appeared subject matter for laughter in the new literary genres. The dramatic increase of disputes in the courtroom during the period has been observed as a metaphor for the changing sensibilities of the people. Literary works heavy with irony referred this period as the 'age of *karanavar*'.²⁴ Achuthamenon's *Ammayipanchatantram* (literally 'five tricks by the aunts') is a good example of humour, which, by targeting *Ammayi* and her hidden devices, brings out the conflicts within the matrilineal *tharavad* and the transformation it engendered in the Nair family system.²⁵ He caricatured the cunning strategies of *Ammayi* (aunt) that created spite within the *tharavad*.

Wheedling, sleight of hand and thieving,
Tale-bearing²⁶ and shifting from home
These but form the five-fold ruses of a mother-in-law.²⁷

In the above quoted verse, Achuthamenon enumerates and caricatures the tactics of the *Ammayi*, the *tharavad* *Karanavar*'s wife, to win over her husband and discredit other members of the family which finally led to the collapse of the *tharavad* system. For inducing her husband to shift his loyalties, and ultimately his home, sly and devious methods were used by her. She stole, simply to blame

someone else for the theft; she invented tales to foment dissension among the family members. The number of tricks, however, was not limited to five: there were ever so many sub-sections for each of the ruses. *Ammayi* is complimented, though sarcastically, for her craftiness in making suitable changes in the six prescribed duties of chastity²⁸ which wives needed to observe in the olden times.

The function of humour in *Ammayipanchatantram* is similar to the didacticism of the tales in *Jataka*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Panchatantra*, and *Hithopadesa*, which purport to impart moral lessons to the readers. By loading the words with unexpected meanings and connotations, the satirist makes woman an object of laughter. At the same time, she is successfully used as a tool to ridicule the stupidity of men. By pointing out the (invisible) presence of a woman behind almost all incidents Achuthamenon's humour objectifies the woman and her prime role in the decline of joint family system of *tharavad*. His humour has ambiguous meanings. On another level his humour involves elements of self-ridicule for men's inability to understand the true nature of clever women. They win over men in the domain of domestic sphere or home. Deploying misogynistic humour, Achuthamenon and Sanjayan give gendered dimensions to the disintegration of joint family system.

Kunjan Nambiar, Malayalam satirist poet and performer of *Thullal*²⁹ during the 18th century, has contributed many *thullal slokas* (for instance, *Khoshayatra*, *Sitaswyamvaram*, *Nalacharitham*, *Rukminiswayamvaram*) about Nair *Karanavar* and *Ammai*. *Thullal* targets *Karanavar* for spending *tharavad* property for *Ammai* and his family and *Karanavar* decides everything based on *Ammai*'s opinion (*Khoshayatra*). *Ammai* is portrayed as the one who influences *Karanavar*.³⁰ Nambiyar's *thullal* acquires the nature of carnival laughter. In most of the songs *Ammayi* and *Karanavar* appear as a category against *Karanavathi* or sister.³¹

There are amusing accounts showing how the increasing nature of conflict between *Karanavar* and the junior members within the Nair *tharavad* undermined the cohesion and the smooth functioning of the *tharavad*. The newly emerged junior members' dissatisfaction regarding the disparity between what was due to them and what was actually received by them is seen to shake the principle of impartibility and dent their loyalty. *Karanavar* was often objectified as controlling and spending the common income on himself, his wife and children. Some of the newly educated junior members' acquisition of independent income through government job also affected the integrity of the *tharavad* system. The unequal distribution

of income to different *thayvazhis* created disparity among several *thavazhis*, and the junior members in the less fortunate *thavazhis* were quick to demand English education. Chandu Menon's novel *Indulekha* illustrates the obstinacy of the *Karanavar* who is against the newly acquired ideas of individual freedom and equal education for the members of different *thayvazhis*. The major arguments put forward for the partition of *tharavad* are the conflicts within the Nair *tharavads* and the consequent destruction of properties. In the Malabar Marriage Commission Report one of the witnesses told that 'not a day passes without some fight or other'. It also points out that disintegration is inevitable. Another major reason for the conflict is *Karanavan* does not fulfill the needs of *Anandaravan* (nephew) and *Anandaravan* refuse to work for the *tharavad*.³²

Notions of new family forms, increasing conflict and civil litigations between members of different *thayvazhis* led some of the Nair youths to seek legal abolition of matriliney. The newly educated 'progressive' reformers sought a new form of patrilineal nuclear family, based on 'modern' notions of new conjugality and a shared right in the property. By the closing decade of the 19th century itself, a section of newly educated and employed youth had moved away from the *tharavad*.³³ Thiruvitamkoor Nair Act of 1925, Madras Marumakkathayam Act 1933 and Cochin Marumakkathayam Act 1938 are some of the legal measures taken towards to bring reform and the partition of Nair *tharavads*. Finally, the Kerala Joint Family system passed matriliney abolition act in 1976.

Partition of Nair Property in Thiruvithamkoor

As *marumakkathayam* was an effective system to protect Nair property and their traditional noble privileges the complete destruction of the family form rendered great anxiety among a section of Nair elites. The right to give half of the self-acquired property of the husband to wives and children was recognized through the regulation of 1913 though they could claim no right over his property in the old order. However, again by 1920s, a group of supporters, which included C. Krishna Pilla, Changanacherry Parameswaran Pilla and T.K. Velu Pilla could get predominance over the group of C.V. Raman Pillai in passing a resolution in favour of individual partition and by 1921, the legislation for the partition of the *tharavad* became possible.³⁴

E.V. Krishna Pillai has written many humorous essays targeting Travancore Legislative Assembly elections and the members contested in that elections. Partition was an important issue during the election

of 1922. Some of them dealt with this issue in a paradoxical manner. Essays reflect the dilemma that partition will lead to the decline of Nair *tharavads* but if not the partition then Nair prosperity will not happen as conflicts and disintegration has already happened in the *tharavad*.³⁵ The popular proverb in the nineteenth century states that “even if one is a Nair one should be born in a *tharavadu*” (Arunima 2003; 11). This kind of proverbs and many of the writings of the time explicitly denotes the nostalgia for high status and privilege enjoyed by aristocratic Nair *tharavads*. Mainly elections were also contested by two prominent groups of the time — pro-partition and anti-partition groups. This difference of opinion and conflict was evident in all Kerala Nair Samajam too. Anti-partition groups considered individual property as the root cause for the progress of Christians. In Thiruvitamkooor, pro-partition group comprises prominent members P.K. Narayana Pillai, K.P. Raman Pillai, Kunju Pilla, Changanassery Parameswaran Pilla, etc. Malloor, O.N. Krishna Kurup, the editor of *Vidooshakan*, P.S. Neelakanta Pillai and others opposed it. The bill was passed in the legislative assembly in 1925 and the very next year itself the bill was implemented as a regulation. Many families were moving towards partition which gradually led to a great loss of properties and the decline of Nairs. After the implementation one of the main concerns and discussion among Nair leaders and association were the protection of Nair families and thereby to regain the prosperity of Nairs. For this purpose they mobilized people at the local level organization of Nairs. Some of the members came forward to achieve this aim. They were: Malloor, Dr. K. Madhavan Pilla, Ilankam Veetil Madhavan Pilla, P.K., A. Narayana Pilla, and E.V. Krishna Pilla. But gradually their initiative was weakened.³⁶

In the *Mahila* magazine also a series of essays was published on ‘Thiruvitamkooor Marumakkathaya Bill’ using the pen name ‘a Nair Woman’.³⁷ It talked about the bill submitted by C. Raman Thampi in Thiruvitamkooor Legislative Assembly. Pointing out the inheritance rights of women in the matrilineal system, the essay evokes critique against the new move of men to pass the bill for individual partition and equal share for the members. The article is critical towards the process of establishing men as the manager and controller of property. The nature of control over properties changed overtime. Earlier, the eldest woman in the house enjoyed more power which gradually declined when *Karanavar* established his control over the *tharavad*. The concept of equal share for all the members in the *tharavad* is seriously opposed in the essay. Rather it argues that women’s share

would be three or four times more than men.³⁸ But different from this in an editorial on ‘Kochi Thiyya bill’ presented by Mr Ayyappan in the Kochi legislative assembly *Thamasa* sarcastically points out the quarrel made over the bill by C. Krishnan from Kozhikode and Valappattu A. P. Raman. Bill supported a small share to women which is not equal to men.³⁹ But both of them were against giving any share to women which may lead to the disintegration of Thiyya *tharavad*. This anti-women and unequal approach was criticized in the editorial and it talked about the problem in making statements about women by men. Women should also need some property to have power and position in society. Editorial concludes by suggesting all women to support the bill and try to pass the bill in the assembly.

As a result of the legislation allowing partition of *tharavad* properties a significant amount of Nair landholding changed into the hands of Syrian Christians. In view of the new crisis of losing Nair properties, especially when the junior members sell out properties and move away from the *tharavad*, a wide range of criticism was registered against the reformist initiative of the partition of the *tharavad*. This became a theme for contests in humorous magazines and associations too. They used ridicule as a rhetorical device to deal with the matters ranging from caste-based community issues and their negotiations to maintain the status quo. A good number of these magazines directly or indirectly jostle for the caste based community’s development and argue for the need of unity among communities such as the Nairs. The need for eliminating internal conflicts among the Nair community is frequently editorialized in magazines such as *Rasikan* and *Vidooshakan*.⁴⁰

Essays written with irony and false praise contested the claims that partition will provide opportunities of self-development for women, freedom from the control of *Karanavar*, solution for Nair youth’s unemployment and capital investment. In an essay, “Individual Share” partition appeared as a voice of dissent pointing out the absurdity in dissolving joint family system.⁴¹ Heavy with false praise the essay talks about the developments of Nairs after the partition, particularly Nair women’s opportunities for self-development once they are free from the control of the *Karanavar*. Demand for partition and the new changes in the joint family system, *Karanavar*’s obstinacy and the disagreement between juniors too were targeted. Individual property right and partition is caricatured as a weapon to destruct the system of matriliney.⁴² The editorials in magazines such as *Vidooshakan* puts forward the argument that only if the law has been enforced among all other caste communities in Thiruvithamkoor

could it be legitimized among Nairs too.⁴³ Disagreements regarding the individual property rights constituted a major theme for conflicts among Nair communities, especially in its associations.⁴⁴

Similarly editorials in these magazines argued that partition is good only for the Nairs who have more properties and fewer members. *Vidooshakan* sarcastically points out that anti-partition group strongly disagreed with the partition as it threatened the large holdings and as for them the maintenance of the *tharavad* was the only way to preserve landed interests and their position. However, the pro-partition group advocated partition to improve and maintain the property as it gives freedom to improve the shared property. Since the percentage of rich people is very few (less than five percentage) partition of the *tharavad* would worsen the condition of many families.⁴⁵ The major arguments put forward for the partition of *tharavad* are the conflicts within the Nair *tharavads* and the consequent destruction of properties. Ridiculing the consideration of partition as a remedial action and solution for Nair youths unemployment and their lack of capital to invest in any business initiative, editorials in *Vidooshakan* pose concerns of Nairs' forthcoming crisis once they lose their traditional properties: 'if partition happens, in addition to their employment problem, they would not be having a house to live as it gives them the right to sell the property.' Though the editorial agrees with the increasing conflicts and related problems within the Nair *tharavad*, it expresses a voice of discord against the partition and advocates for solutions of common consent. Targeting the legislative initiative of people like Justice Sankarapilla, the editorial ridiculously suggests to 'surrender properties to nephews so as to meet with day-to-day expenses and also to manage them responsibly.' Another regulation of 1924 gives right for every adult member of a *tharavad* to claim their share of property and leave the joint-family.⁴⁶ Following this legislation a series of writings appeared in magazines such as *Vidooshakan*, using the language of irony and false praise to ridicule the new legislation. Individual property rights and the legitimization of the Nair Bill became a persistent issue for false praise in these magazines with ironical remarks about the changes going to happen after the partition of the *tharavad*. In a flattering voice, *Vidooshakan* addresses the period of partition as the 'golden days' and pays 'gratitude' for community servants and leaders who promulgated the Nair Bill.⁴⁷ The positive changes in the 'golden days,' which the pro-partition group highlighted, were the flourishing economic growth of Nair properties due to the individual share. The young generations' new

initiatives for various banks, companies, industries, and businesses are illustrated in an unctuous manner. What is evoked throughout the essay is a lot of anxiety over the loss and increasing possibility of transferring Nair properties to other communities. Another threat posed in these writings was the issue of romantic love and the new trend of free choice of marriage.⁴⁸ Sometimes these magazines talk about the meaninglessness of protests and worries since the bill is already passed.⁴⁹ Adopting a Nair identity most of the writings evoke self-ridicule in their critique. Their main anxieties are about the breakdown of *tharavad* properties, the collapse of Nair privilege and the ethos of the traditional joint family system and the degradation of nobility. The essay “The Regulation of All Kerala Individual Property Right” targets the possible future changes following the partition.⁵⁰ Freedom for mixed marriages and partaking food with lower castes, increasing spite and conflict among the same family members as well as caste groups, the favourable trends for new community identity devoid of religion, caste or class, freedom to disavow religious identity or convert into another religion, freedom to accord with or not to accord with the traditional customs and rules are some of the major consequences cited. Reformists and community leaders are caricatured as ‘beneficiaries’ for their active roles. Heavy with sarcasm, the essay highlights the internal conflict and spite: “even if any of their family members have expressed their willingness to buy the land for the same price offered by an ‘outsider,’ through acquiring the record of selling the property for a high price, anyone has all the freedom to sell-off their property at anytime to ‘others’ irrespective of their caste with a low price.”⁵¹ Most of these essays were aiming to create community and caste consciousness among the people. In view of the great furore about the decline of *tharavad* prosperity and the increasing transfer of land to other social groups after the regulation, *Vidooshakan* ridicules people’s protest speeches against the Bill as it happens only after the regulation is passed. The essay sarcastically asks:

Where were all these great noble men till now? Sleeping? For how long period this Nair regulation remained as a draft bill in the gazette! ... After that, how many times it was debated in the legislative assembly? All those days, like a quiet cat, these leaders remained silent and ... now, only when the regulation becomes legalized they create great hue and cry about the partition of the Nair *tharavad*. As if the Nair regulation burst the sky and came down one day without being disclosed earlier to anyone!⁵²

Targeting the growing number of civil litigations which was already

prevalent among Nair *tharavads* and the possibility of increase in the number of cases after the introduction of the Act, *Vidooshakan* sarcastically proposes the solution:

Divide Thiruvithamkoor into thirty subdivisions of community taluks and let there be an equal division of labour force of B. L. lawyers, Munsiff court lawyers and criminal lawyers in the state. Appoint a committee of three of these people in each taluks for doing the partition of Nair *tharavads* equally and systematically.⁵³

Vidooshakan, in another of its essay, “Three Cheers to the Nair Bill”, says:

Even if we praise excessively it is not more or enough for Mr. Parameshwaran and the group who took the initiative for giving freedom to the people suffering in the joint family setup, by breaking up the setup completely. It needs to be said that according to the state of this bill it is a great benefit and very much timely that the makers of the Bill have fixed the stumps after the survey for preparing a ‘public road’ for any beggar or scavenger to become Nair and to acquire the status of the Nair easily if they need.⁵⁴

Following the regulation, the Nairs recorded great loss of property, and the holdings of wet land appear to have been fragmented and subdivided.⁵⁵ The essay appeared in the humorous magazine *Tamasha* clearly pose serious concern about the decline of the Nair properties and suggests possibilities of revising the law.⁵⁶ The critics disagree with the Nair individuals’ ultimate right over their properties although they agree with the new form of nuclear family set-up and the patrilineal inheritance to solve the problems of conflict among the members in the joint family. The article suggests the possibility of a joint family kind of control and management over the nuclear families just to avoid the selling and transfer of properties.

Critics problematize the law in view of the selling of the Nair properties. The magazine *Naradar*, in a manner similar to the divine minstrel Naradar, ridicules the logic of the law as it entitles the children to claim the individual share immediately after the completion of eighteen years.⁵⁷ The essay suggests imposing additional rules to prevent the selling and further provisions for giving the share only during the time of their marriage or extend the age of claiming property to twenty five instead of eighteen.

C.V. Raman Pillai and E.V. Krishna Pillai are the main writers who used laughter to evoke nostalgia about *tharavad* centered Nair lifestyle in the context of Thiruvithamkoor. As *marumakkathayam* was an effective system to protect Nair property and their traditional

noble privileges the complete destruction of the family form rendered great anxiety among a section of Nair elites. The literary farces of 19th and 20th centuries promulgated 'ideal' notions of *tharavad* centered Nair lifestyle. Most of C.V.'s farces express the nostalgia for *tharavad*-centred Nair lifestyle and provides humour in the form of anxieties which ridicule the changing attitudes of the new generation, their attachment to western styles like nuclear family, free choice of marriage, and their unwillingness to follow customary wedding. Instead of traditional *sambandam* practices among Namboodiris and Nairs, and free choice of western marriages, C.V.'s and E.V.'s farces idealized marriage with cousins. Most of C.V.'s farces represent anxieties towards the transformations happening to Nair community. In other words, he chooses the medium of humour to laugh at the newly emerging parasitic middle class, their pride, pretense, deception and blind attraction for romantic love. For instance, C.V.'s *Cheruthen Columbus* caricatures the picture of a newly educated middle class man's ambition to become modern by marrying an educated woman out of their own free will.⁵⁸ The presence of romantic love and its naturalness is a persistent theme in C.V.'s and E.V.'s farces. It functions in twin forms. On the one hand, romantic love is idealized as the 'inner force' which ensures the solidarity and longevity of the monogamous marital union. On the other, C.V.'s and E.V.'s writings articulated the romantic love between cousins in the *tharavad* centred families and projected it as an ideal arrangement for preventing the destruction of *tharavads* and its properties. Because the introduction of Nair bill gradually led to the large scale selling of Nair properties to Syrian Christians and Ezhavas. Farces caricature the visions of 'unfit' changes in the community by ridiculing the situation.

Compared to Chandu Menon's 'ideal' model of woman Indulekha's more refined tastes and modalities, the woman protagonists in the farces of C.V. and E.V. are strong and embody many qualities symbolic of popular cultural tradition. Most of the farces of the time promulgate notions of 'ideal' *tharavad* forms and reliable marriage practice. The underlying message in his farce is that a woman's freedom should not be devoid of her duties and obligations to the family and husband. He ridicules the perception of *swatantryam* which leads the youngsters to go against the community's morals, values and noble deeds. His farces objectify a series of modern ideas and deeds as 'unnatural' and pose serious concern about the superficiality of new changes in the name of reform.⁵⁹

Sanjayan's Anxieties over the New Changes

In the context of Malabar it was the writings of Sanjayan which evoked nostalgia for *tharavad* centred Nair lifestyle and concerns of the complete destruction of their world of values. Following the 1933 Madras Marumakkathayam Act, sanctioning the partition of the *tharavad* in the British Malabar, well-known Satirist Sanjayan has written a series of essays with mixed feelings. Sanjayan openly takes sides with the *marumakkathayam* system and expresses his grievance against the destruction of *tharavad*.⁶⁰ Though he agrees with the adversities of *marumakkathayam*, especially *Karanavar's* misusing of power by tormenting the junior members in the *tharavad*, he argues that such a situation is due to the lack of timely regulations to improve the system.

Sanjayan expresses great anxiety about the Marumakkathayam act as it leads to the decay of nobility and prestige, ruination of Nair property, increasing of civil litigation, and bestows unbridled freedom to the youth in spending wealth by selling property. He ridicules the consequences of the Act in his universe of laughter. For Sanjayan, the crux of the problem of partition is the decay of '*tharavaditham*' (the nobility attached with the traditional joint families) which he points out is not a buyable capital if it is lost once, though one might be able to regain the property and wealth one had in the past.⁶¹ He openly expresses his nostalgia for *tharavad*, *tharavaditham*, *Karanavar* and *Ammayi*.

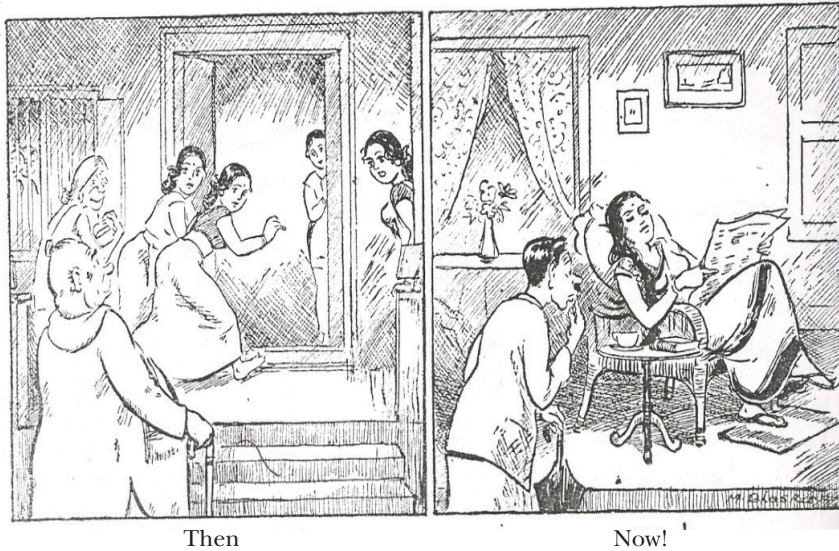
The diamond-decked aunts of yore turned
 The land of Keralam into God's own land
 Those times, Oh Lord Siva!
 Are gone with the wind!
 And even the majority of their kind of progeny too
 Have gone to dust.
 And from then on a kind of evil spirits
 Have begun to take birth on the earth.⁶²

In the above-mentioned song Sanjayan expresses his nostalgia about *tharavad* centred joint family system and the lack of women's 'diamond-decked' qualities of motherly care and patience in the present day *Ammayi* (aunt) who is rather objectified as the root cause for sowing spiteful conflict between the members of *tharavad*. According to Sanjayan "the *tharavad* itself is under the control of *Ammayi* and the merits and demerits of the administration of the *tharavad* are reflected in the character of *Ammayi*."⁶³ Sanjayan's main point of argument is that *Ammayi* is the subject who controls

the *tharavad*, even if *Karanavar* seems to be the head of the family. He categorizes the *Ammayi* figure into three classes on the basis of three aspects of cleverness, namely, noble, devising, and gentle. As he mentioned in the song the first groups were those who tolerated everything, were altruistic, and were the symbols of prosperity in the *tharavad*. The second category symbolizes the picture of the *Ammayi* in *Ammayipanchatantram* who uses different devices as the masks of their virtues. What takes the central focus of his laughter is the third category of *Ammayi* who 'became good' through their gentle qualities at some point of time after she gives birth to a girl child. Sanjayan's humour takes the form of *vakrokthi* when he talks about the gentle side of *Ammayi* who 'become good.' Sanjayan says that "this transformation in her character happens when suitable male heirs are there in the *tharavad* to marry this girl in due course."⁶⁴ During the time marriage alliance between first cousins was a usual practice specially to preserve the *tharavad* property. Here Sanjayan talks about her gentle devices which help her transform into the good *Ammayi* that could be understood once she starts talking and dealing gently with the nephew (heir). Sanjayan perceives women's prophetic vision or far-sightedness in calculating future things and act accordingly.⁶⁵

Regarding the contestation over children's right to father's property, Sanjayan makes the point that the property which is earned by one's own effort can be claimed by one's own children but the 'trust fund' owned by someone else for a different purpose cannot be claimed. He uses the word 'trust fund' to connote the wealth of the *tharavad*, and not that of a single individual. Sanjayan explicates *marumakkathayam tharavad* as an abbreviation of a socialist state which provides the members with equal wealth and security. According to him, it is a system which sends out those who are efficient to fend for themselves, while providing equal security and wealth for those who are not capable of seeking out and in landing in professional jobs. Here Sanjayan positively evaluates how the *Marumakkathayam* Act brought a successful resolution to the crisis of some families and the disparities in treating the families of different *thayvazhis*. Similarly members in the *tharavad* are capable of respecting others' rights and convenience without being much selfish.⁶⁶

Here the focus of Sanjayan's laughter is the new changes in the home. Figure-I⁶⁷ presents the picture of a serious deviation from the style of behaviour which women followed at home in conformity to the traditional society. The cartoon in the left column represents the women of old domesticity who on seeing a stranger coming



Then

Now!

'A Stranger is Coming to the House.'

Figure I

home are in a hurry to flee from the front veranda or remain behind doors without coming face-to-face with the new visitor. It also reflects women's shyness, respect, fear and discomfiture to appear in front of a stranger, which were the modalities of the old order of gender in olden days. Different from the women in olden days, Sanjayan caricatures the new women's lack of shyness and respect towards others. The cartoon strip on the right side reflects the changes in home due to modernity where the woman appears reading newspaper in a sitting posture which is completely mannish in style. Instead of the man who is supposed to be the master in the household, it gives the picture of a new woman who is familiar with western modalities, print media, and the one who reads newspaper. Thus the new woman is in certain ways interrelated to the domain of 'public.'

The language of satire or ridicule becomes a prior genre which constitute critique against 'modernity' as well as 'tradition.' Humour has different roles and functions. In certain contexts humour used to pose critique against the abolition of certain family centered practices. Satirist face the threat of shaking the prestige, power, property and unity of the community decide to defend their tradition and its values through evoking critique, anxiety, nostalgia and ridicule. Thereby they find resolution in laughter. Magazines and associations are two major sites to develop community consciousness

and ridicule is also used to create unity among them in protecting their prestige and values. Rather than a legal intervention and complete abolition of practices like matriliney reform interventions to alleviate the problems within the system was suggestive in their writings. In such contexts humour was used as a rhetorical device. But in some other contexts humour is also used to evoke laughter and ridicule against the existing practices which they considered as 'aberrant' one. For instance, most of the accounts evoke sarcasm against *sambandham* between Nairs and Namboodiris. Similarly conflicts within the *tharavad* too was one major literary allusion for new changes. Satirists often reflect male centered and patriarchal society's views towards women in their writings.

Notes

1. *Taravad* is a *marumakkathayam* family consisting of all the descendants in the female line of one common female ancestor. It is a joint family with community of property governed by the inheritance law of *marumakkathayam*.
2. A few Mohamedans inhabiting the villages of Varkala and Neendakara followed the Marumakkathaya system. A small number of Christians in Neyyattinkara were also practiced Matriliney. Pulayas in the mid-19th century practiced both matriliney and patriliney. Modayil Pothen Joseph, *The Principles of Marumakkathayam Law*. 10; K. Saradamoni, *Matriliney Transformed*. 59-60.
3. By outlining laughter as part of the communicative language of a society Billig distinguishes between the 'rhetoric of laughter' and the 'rhetoric of unlaughter'. Ridicule and sarcasm is used to evoke particular attitude among the people. See Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*. 200-203.
4. There are studies which show how social agents deploy humour as a means of resistance to domination and as a device to reinforce social control. For instance see, Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton, ed., *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*. xiii-xxi.
5. See the works of Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*. 236-242; Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes*. 189-231; Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, ed., *Beyond a Joke*.
6. Christopher P. Wilson. 212
7. Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*. 1-71, 158-168; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 54-84
8. K. Saradamony. 24, 60-62
9. For instance, see the works of Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*; K. Saradamoni, *Matriliney Transformed*; G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa*; G Arunima, "Matriliney and its Discontents." 157-167; Praveena Kodoth, "Framing Custom." 1-57; Praveena Kodoth, "Courting Legitimacy." 349-384
10. Bringing examples from the writings of E.V. Krishna Pilla and Sanjayan, G. Arunima has analysed satirists' shifting selfhood and subjectivity in relation to satire and its theatricality and contingency. But, the study does not address how sarcasm used as a literary device in the debates emerged as part of the transformation of Matriliney. G. Arunima, "Shifting Sands." 442-454.

11. *Sambandham* is a customary form of marriage among Nairs which even sanctioned hypergamous sexual relations between Nair women and Namboodiri men following *marumakkatayam* have been accounted of a feature of polyandry.
12. Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in Kumkum Sagari & Sudesh Vaid (ed.). 116-157; 233-253.
13. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*. 109, 164.
14. See for Details on this issue. Robin Jeffrey. 143-144; K N Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*. 193; Praveena Kodoth, "Courting legitimacy." 35, 349-384; G. Arunima, "Matriliney and its Discontents." 157-167
15. O. Chandu Menon, *Indulekha*. 54-56. When Madhavan provoked Indulekha saying that women in Malabar do not practice the womanly virtues Indulekha retorts: ... It is completely wrong if you think that we Nair women are immoral or like concubines as, unlike Antharjanams (Brahmin women), we do not live lives prohibiting from education, and intercourse with others.
16. M. Othena Menon Committee Report. 19, anecdote, qtd. in K.N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*. 193.
17. *Kerala Patrika* 16 May 1891 qtd. in K N Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*. 193
18. *Malabar Marriage Commission Report*, 1891. 12.
19. *Ibid.* 24
20. *Ibid.* 26
21. *Report of the Marumakkathayam Committee-Travancore*. 7-11; K. Saradamony. 86-88
22. K. Padmavattamma, "Parasreemargam." *Sarada*, vol. 10, no.11, (1906) 1
23. Editorial column- Mahilabhashanam (Feminine discourse), "Nair Bill," *Mahila*, vol. 4, no. 4, (1924) 132
24. For instance, M.R. Nair, "Konthummante Yatrayayappu." *Sanjayan* vol. 2. 183-185; "Ananthiravan Parayunnu." *Sanjayan*, vol. 2. 529-532; See also G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa*. 19. Karanavar is the head of the family in a *tharavad*. *Sanjayan* has also caricatured the role of Karyasthans (manager) in the *tharavads* who according to him were the real administrator of *tharavads*.
25. Karattu Achutha Menon, *Ammayipanchathantram*. 1-60. Achuthamenon (1867-1913) was a contemporary of Vengayil Kunjiraman Nayanar (Kesari) and O. Chandu Menon. Like his contemporaries, he knew very well both traditional as well as modern English education. However, there isn't enough accounts which throw light into his life and intellectual world. *Ammayipanchathantram* is the main literary work known to have written by him. Unlike the works of his contemporaries, it was not subjected for much discussion and study by scholars. It was written on a request from Appan Thampuran for a community specific issue to be published in his *Rasikaranjini* magazine which later republished it as a text by 1884. The signs of dissension within the joint family system of Nair *tharavads* provided the cue to caricature the main 'character', Ammayi by framing the essay accordingly. Adopting the narrative form of cunning devices deploying by the main characters in the Panchathantra stories the 'typical' image of the Ammayi of the time who deploys devices to win over others is humorously illustrated by Achuthamenon.
26. "Naradakriya." While identifying calumny as the fourth device of *Ammayi*, the author relates this 'quality' or practice – 'Naradakriya' – to that of the ascetic Naradar, the best-known calumniator in Hindu mythical texts.
27. Karattu Achuthamenon 3. The poem is translated by late Prof. M. K. Ramachandran Nair and Dr. R. Vijayalekshmi. I am greatly indebted to them.
28. Be a chief advisor to the husband like a minister to the king in administration;

- Be instrumental in serving him; Be a Lakshmi in manner; Endure like goddess Earth; Be a mother to him in love and care; Be a courtesan at bedtime.
29. Solo performance combining the dance and recitation of stories in verse
 30. K.N. Ganesh, *Kunjan Nambiar*. 70
 31. *Ibid.* 204-206
 32. *Malabar Marriage Commission Report 1891*. 30-31
 33. Praveena Kodoth, "Courting legitimacy." 349-384.
 34. Robin Jeffrey. 232-233.
 35. E.V. Krishna Pilla, *Eviyude Thiranjedutha Kruthikal*. 35-36
 36. *Ibid.* 774-775
 37. See for instance, A Nair Woman, "Thiruvitamkooor Marumakkathaya Bill." *The Mahila*, vol 1, no. 4, (1921) 148-150
 38. *Ibid.* 149
 39. Editorial, "Kochi Thiyya Bill," *Thamasa*, vol. 1, no. 3, (August 1933) 59
 40. See for instance, K. Krishnanunni and K. N. Krishnapilla, "One New Association-Kerala Nair Mahasabha." *Rasikan* vol. 1, no. 8, (1930) 159-160.; "Understood." *Rasikan* vol. 1, no. 9, (1930) 177-178.; Editorial, "The Week of Nair Association." *Rasikan* vol. 1, no. 9, (1930) 161-163.; "Feminine style of fight with NSS and Mahasabha." *Rasikan* vol. 1, no. 10, (1930) 183; Editorial, "Rasikaravana." *Rasikan* vol. 11, no. 8, (1940) 105; Editorial, "Nairmarude Pothunavu Adhava Service" (Nairs' Common Tongue or Service). *Rasikan* vol. 5, no. 5, (1934) 99
 41. P. Ananthan Pilla, "Aaloharibhagam" (Individual Share). *Vijayabhanu* vol. 1, no. 1, (1921) 7-20.
 42. Editorial, "Aaloharibhaga Bhooripashamatre." *Vidooshakan* vol. 3, no. 5, (1921) 74-78. The editorial questions the hidden secret behind possessing majority's support for the legislation of partition.
 43. *Ibid.* 77
 44. *Vidooshakan* in its editorial clearly expresses how the contentions about the Nair Bill caused conflict between the organizers and the people who assembled in the Paravoor Nair meeting. The editorial caricatures some organizers' secret attempts to pass the resolution of individual property rights in the Nair meeting without revealing the agenda. See, Editorial, "Nair Mahajana Yogam." 265-268.
 45. Editorial, "Hasthathadanathilninnu Bhishadanathilekku" (From cheers to begging). *Vidooshakan* vol. 3, no. 3-4, (1921) 44-46.
 46. Robin Jeffrey, *Decline of Nair Dominance*. 233; "Aalohari Swargathilekku." *Vidooshakan* vol. 6, no. 2-3, (1925) 31-34.; "Parivarthana Khattam" (Stage of Transition). *Vidooshakan* vol. 6, no. 5, (1926) 111.
 47. Heavy with irony and paradox humorous magazines refer the transition period as 'golden age.' See "Aalohari Swargathilekku." *Vidooshakan* vol. 6, no. 2-3, (1925) 31-34; "Parivarthana Khattam" (Stage of Transition). *Vidooshakan* vol. 6, no. 5, (1926) 111.
 48. "Aalohari Swargathilekku." 32
 49. *Ibid.* 32-33.
 50. "'Sarasamudhayamachambi' member", The regulation of All Kerala Individual Property Right, *Vidooshakan* vol. 6, no. 2-3, (1925) 66-68. The regulation is caricatured as a means to acquire mutual accord, socialism and the state of equal share in the wealth, awareness of *swathantryam* (freedom), and political mobility.
 51. *Ibid.*
 52. "Parivarthana Khattam." 111.

53. "Aalohari Swargathilekku." 33
54. We (pseud.), "Three cheers to the Nair Bill." 256.
55. Robin Jeffrey, *Decline of Nair Dominance*. 233.
56. Column Thamasa Vimarsanangal (The critics of Tamasha), "Samudhaya bheeru." *Thamasha* vol. 1, no. 3, (1928) 5-6.
57. "Malloorinte Annathe Kanneer" (Malloor's tears at those days). *Naradhar* vol. 1, no. 9, (1941) 14-16.
58. C. V. Raman Pilla, comp. *Prahasanamala*. 219-255.
59. *Ibid.*; E.V. Krishna Pilla, E.V. Krithikal Vol 3. 312-780
60. M. R. Nair, "Ammayigaveshanam," *Sanjayan vol 1*. 307-309.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.* 310. He has used the popular term 'Aandukal' to denote *Ammayi* in this song which, he claims, was popular in some areas of North Kerala.
63. *Ibid.* 306-314. The subject of laughter in this essay is the wife of the head of the family (maternal uncle's wife) in matrilineal Nair system. The relation between *Ammayi* (Aunt) and her husband's nephews were not good in most of the cases and she was a major object of laughter in almost all representations. Generally, *Ammayi* is represented as the one who starts row to spite her husband's nephews since they were his heirs in the matrilineal Nair family, especially in literary productions that celebrate the new changes of traditional matrilineal family into modern nuclear family.
64. *Ibid.* 313
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.* 308.
67. M. Bhaskaran, "Annum-Innum!" (Then- Now), cartoon, *Visvaroopam* vol. 1, no. 5 (Dec. 1940) 155

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