

# Evaluating the Nambuditi Caste Reform Movement

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An attempt is made in this paper to examine the Nambudiri caste reform movement in the Kerala state, India, from various angles. The centre of this movement was the Nambudiri Yogakshema Sabha (Nambudiri Welfare Association), founded in 1908, and its junior wing, the Yuvajana Sangham (Youth Organization). The Nambudiri Brahmans formed a community enjoying the highest rank in society, ritually as well as economically.

The origin of the reform movement in this community, regarded as the most orthodox, has to be attributed to the radical changes brought about under British rule. With English education established in the country, the traditional value system sustaining the highest status of the Nambudiri became suspect. Besides this, the emerging public opinions had started asserting against the existing structure of landholding as well as marriage customs which allowed Nambudiri males to contract marital relationship with non-Nambudiri females belonging to the matrilineal communities of Kerala.

In the early stage of the movement, the reformers chiefly focussed attention on the need for spreading of English education among the Nambudiri males. Despite much opposition from the conservatives, the knowledge of English was gradually acknowledged as essential to catch up with the times and to protect their interests in the public arena.

Later on, the scope of the reform came to encroach upon the marriage and inheritance system and the life style of Nambudiri women called Andarjanam. The reformers demanded that the younger sons in the Nambudiri households should be allowed to marry in their own community. This issue created a big controversy among the Nambudiris because it was apprehended that the in-community marriage of the younger sons would lead to the partition of joint family properties.

With regard to the problems concerning the Andarjanam, i.e. female education, polygamy, the custom of female seclusion, prohibition of widow remarriage and so on, we find subtle disjunctures between the priorities of the male reformers and those of the Andarjanam themselves. Moreover, whereas literary works played an important role in propagating the reformers' ideas as well as in organizing the movement itself, the manner of depicting the Andarjanam showed lack of appreciation of their own initiative and subjectivity in the minds of the authors who were mostly males.