Abstract

Every society has an expectation about how its members should and should not behave. Such expectations later develop into norms and taboos that are explained and expanded through rituals and practices. Apart from being observed strictly, these taboos and norms are sometimes subjected to violation which deserves severe punishment. There also exists ‘allowed times’ including ceremonies, rituals and festivals during which the normal consequences of taboo breaking are suspended. Russian literary theorist and philosopher Bhakthin coined a term Carnivalesque to mean such occasions in which the political, legal and ideological authority was inverted — albeit temporarily — during the anarchic and liberating period of the carnival. ‘Thiruvathira’ is a festival of women belonging to the Nair and Namboothiri families of Kerala, commemorating the death and resurrection of Kamadeva, the cupid of Indian Mythology. The paper seeks to reach a socio cultural context that provides the tolerance of subversion of norms and to provide insight for further research in this area. The paper attempts to discuss the reliability of the rituals of ‘Thiruvathira’ as an emancipating strategy of the silenced and marginalized women and also analyses the politics of such occasions and unravels diverse lifestyle and culture of the Nair and Namboothiri(Bhrahmin) women that necessitates the taboo breaking in this festival.

I. INTRODUCTION

For the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Bhakthin, Carnivalesque is both the description of a historical phenomenon and the name he gives to a certain literary tendency.
Historically speaking, Bakhtin was interested in great carnivals of Medieval Europe. He saw them as occasions in which the political, legal and ideological authority of both the church and state were inverted — albeit temporarily — during the anarhich and liberating period of the carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin's points out four categories of the carnivallistic sense of the world:

1. **Familiar and free interaction between people:** carnival often brought the unlikely of people together and encouraged the interaction and free expression of themselves in unity.
2. **Eccentric behaviour:** unacceptable behaviour is welcomed and accepted in carnival, and one's natural behaviour can be revealed without the consequences.
3. **Carnivalistic misalliances:** familiar and free format of carnival allows everything that may normally be separated to reunite — Heaven and Hell, the young and the old, etc.
4. **Sacrilegious:** Bakhtin believed that carnival allowed for Sacrilegious events to occur without the need for punishment. Bakhtin believed that these kinds of categories are creative theatrical expressions of manifested life experiences in the form of sensual ritualistic performances.

Through the carnival and carnivalesque, a *world upside-down* is created, ideas and truths are endlessly tested and contested, and all demand equal dialogic status. The “jolly relativity” of all things is proclaimed by alternative voices within the carnivallized text and context that de-privileged the authoritative voice of the hegemony through their mingling of “high culture” with the profane. For Bakhtin it is within literary forms like the novel that one finds the site of resistance to authority and the place where cultural, and potentially political, change can take place.

## II. EXPECTATION FOR BEHAVIOR

Every society has expectations about how its members should and should not behave. A norm is a guideline or an expectation for behavior. Each society makes up its own rules for behavior and decides when those rules have been violated and what to do about it. Norms change constantly. They differ widely among societies, and they can even differ from group to group within the same society. Appropriate and inappropriate behavior often changes dramatically from one generation to the next. Norms can and do shift over time.

Sociologists have separated norms into four categories: folkways, mores, laws, and taboos.

A folkway is a norm for everyday behavior that people follow for the sake of convenience or tradition. People practice folkways simply because they have done things that way for a long time. Violating a folkway does not usually have serious consequences. A more is a norm based on morality, or definitions of right and wrong. Since mores have moral significance, people feel strongly about them, and violating a more usually results in disapproval. A law is a norm that is written down and enforced by an official agency. Violating a law, results in a specific punishment. A taboo is a norm that society holds so
strongly that violating it results in extreme disgust. The violator is often considered unfit to live in that society.

Where there are rules, there are rule breakers. Sociologists call the violation of a norm deviance. The word deviant has taken on the negative connotation of someone who behaves in disgusting or immoral ways, but to sociologists, a deviant is anyone who doesn’t follow a norm, in either a good way or a bad way.

Apart from being observed strictly, these taboos and norms are sometimes subjected to violation which deserves severe punishment. There also exists ‘allowed times’ including ceremonies, rituals and festivals during which the normal consequences of taboo breaking are suspended. ‘Thiruvathira’ is one such festival of women belonging to the Nair and Namboothiri families of Kerala, commemorating the death and resurrection of Kamadeva, the cupid of Indian Mythology and also unravels diverse lifestyle and culture of the nair and namboothiri women that necessitates the sanctioned taboo breaking during this festival.

Thiruvathira is a festival of woman, celebrated originally in the Brahmin houses. The origin of the festival is shrouded in obscurity. Historians differ in their opinion about the place from where the Brahmins migrated to Kerala and when they had migrated. K. P Padmanabha Menon is of the opinion that the Brahmins had migrated to Kerala during the third century B C . According to William Logan the Brahmin settlement in Kerala took place only during the eight century AD. Some other historians are of the view that Brahmins were brought to Kerala by Mayuravarman, the Kadamba King of the fourth Century. The popular ‘Parasurama legend’ has been given a historical recognition in the quasi historical work Keralolpathi printed and published by Herman Gundert in 1843. According to the Parasurama Myth, the land Kerala was regained from the sea and brought Brahmins from outside and settled them in sixty four villages in Kerala and Tulu. The available inscriptive and literary evidences suggest that that the festival has been celebrated on this day for more than 2000 years.

III. THE NAMBOOTHIRIS

Namboodiri women are called, ‘Antharjanam’, which literally means, ‘People who live inside’. After the age of 6 or 7, Namboodiri women are confined indoors, and not seen even by their own fathers or brothers. Those days, it was common for only the eldest son in a family to marry within their caste. The other sons would do a ‘Sambhandam’ with Nair women, and the Nair women and their children would continue to live in their house and not in the Namboodiri illam. It was common for the eldest sons to practice polygamy for various reasons. There were instances where a man on his death-bed would marry a teenager. Illams traditionally would have unmarried girls, married women and widows of the Namboodiris.

The Namboothiris observed the custom of "Ghosha" or veil till recently. Though elsewhere the Brahmin women neither looked at nor spoke to outside males other than those of the family, among Namboothiri community, this restriction extended also to the brothers of their husbands. The seclusion of women was strictly enforced in Namboothiri
community. In comparison, women of the Nair caste, next in hierarchy, enjoyed great levels of independence. Descent was through the female line, children stayed at maternal home and an unusual practice of allowing multiple sexual partners. Although the oldest brother known as ‘karanavar’ was the head of the household, and managed the family estate, women enjoyed the right to property and therefore respect prestige and power.

The caste system in India differed from that found any other part in India. Generally the Indian caste system modeled on the four fold division of society into Brahmins, Kshathriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. In Kerala the Namboothiri Brahmins formed the priestly class and only rarely recognized anyone else as being other than sudras or untouchable. Even though the Nairs enjoyed the enviable position in the society, no Brahmin was allowed to touch even the nairs who stand next to them in social hierarchy. The taboo of untouchability is somewhat broken when the Nair and Namboothiri women join together when they go for the ritualistic bath early in the morning known as ‘thudichukuli’ during the thiruvathira festival.

IV. THE THIRUVATHIRA FESTIVAL & TOLERANCE OF NAMBOODIRI WOMEN

The Thiruvathira festival falls on the asterism ‘Thiruvathira’ in the Malayalam month of Dhanu (December-January). A week before the festival practically opens, at about 4 in the morning every young female member of the Nair/Namboothiri families, gets up and goes to take a ritualistic bath in the pond. A fairly large number of these young ladies collect themselves in the pond for the purpose. Then they plunge into the water and begin to take part in the singing. One of them then leads off with a peculiar rhythmic song chiefly pertaining to cupid. The singing is simultaneously accompanied by a curious sound produced with the hand on the water. The palm of the left hand is closed and kept immediately underneath the surface of the water. Then the palm of the other is forcibly brought in the slanting direction producing a deep loud noise. This process is continuously prolonged together with the singing. After one stanza, along with the sound, the leader stops a while, for the others to follow. This continues until the conclusion of the song. Then all of them make a long pause and then begin another. The process goes on until the peep of the dawn, when they rub themselves dry and come home to dress themselves in the neatest and grandest possible attire. Those people, who are bound to keep quiet and obedient all through their life, break the silence and willingly mingle with the nair women, forgetting the caste discrimination and untouchability by having bath together during ‘thudichukul’.

During the Thiruvathira celebration, women proceed to the enjoyment of another prominent item known as Oonjal (swing), which was again a sanctioned break of prevailing customs and manners. The social structure of Namboothiri community allowed women little opportunities for involvement. They were expected to focus on practical domestic pursuits and activities that encouraged the betterment of their families especially their husbands. Women who spoke out against the patriarchal system of gender roles ran the risk of being exiled or excommunicated. In the male dominated society sports have always been reserved
as an activity for men and indulging in individual pleasure was almost like a taboo for women. They actively participate in a game accompanied by a song, before they go for gathering flowers.

They break yet another taboo while going to the garden in the midnight to gather flowers by singing and making loud noise like “aarpo heeyo heeyo” The mobility of women was highly restricted. Even they were not permitted to go out in the day light and their travel was limited to the nearest temple or houses of the close relatives. During such journeys, they hide their face with the umbrella known as ‘marakkuda’(Umbrella).The binary of day and night is nullified on this auspicious day of thiruvathira, when the women keep themselves awake all through the night by singing and dancing. The night long music and dance is interspersed with a ceremony called Patirappoo choodal(wearing flowers at midnight). It is a ritualistic wearing of flowers at midnight singing the glory of various gods who gave them prosperity, power, long life et.c. An image of Shiva is placed in the centre of the courtyard in front of lighted brass lamp where flowers, plantains, and jaggery are offered to the deity. The women perform the dance around the image and each participant adorns a few flowers from the offering. The flowers they wear are not the usual flowers meant for pooja.They subvert the existing orders and rules by choosing ‘dasapushpas’(10 flowers) like karuka, mukkutti, mualcheviyan, thiruthali,cheruvoola,kayyonni,nilappana,poovamkurunnila Krishna kranthii and valliyuzhinja which are otherwise least noticed.

The fasting is another major feature of this festival which essentially involves abstaining from rice-based food. Being an agrarian society, The Keralites used to have rice as the major food and it was even considered to be the symbol of their wealth and prestige. For the people who are comparatively poor and belonging to the lower caste, the rice based food was unaffordable. They gathered and ate the varieties of tubers and common fruits of the season for their survival. The upper class women who observe thiruvathira ritual thus breaks the boarders of inequalities by including cooked broken wheat Ettangadi and Thiruvathira puzhukku, a delightful mix of tuber vegetables: colocasia (chembu),yam (chen), Chinese potato (koorka), sweet potato (madhurakizhangu) with long beans(vanpayar) and raw plantain fruit (ethakaya), cooked with a thick paste of freshly ground coconut. The dessert is koova payasam, a sweet dish made of arrow root powder, jaggery and coconut milk. Other items of their food include plantain fruits, tender coconuts, etc.

The first Thiruvathira coming after the marriage of a girl is known as Puthen Thiruvathira or Poothiruvathira and it is celebrated on a grand scale. Women chew betel and redden their lips. Among Namboodiris, Ambalavasis (temple-servants) and high class Nairs, there is a convention that each woman should chew 108 betels on that day.It is believed according to the Hindu mythology that Kamadeva resides in betel leaves. Chewing of betel leaves on this auspicious occasion also symbolizes the sanctioned tolerance of the society towards the sexual desires of women which was otherwise forbidden. In a society where women are not even allowed to look at their own fathers and brothers face, Women dances with the sinuous movements around a ‘nilavilakku’ (auspicious lamp) embody lasya or the
amorous charm and grace of the feminine. Unlike the nair women, who enjoyed the unrestricted freedom of decorating their body and articulating their physical needs, the Namboothiri women never taught to give eyes and ears to their body. During the Thiruvathira festival, they decorate their hair and put anjukuri on their forehead.

Namboothiri women never enjoyed the right to choose their husband and they were trained to be the submissive meek and obedient wife, never knowing the joy of freedom and self reliance. Antharjanams had very unsatisfactory lives and always went around fully escorted and shrouded. The entire Namboothiri life was patterned to ensure the virginity and fidelity of the antharjanams. The myth of the death and resurrection of Kamadeva which form the base of the Thiruvathira ritual marks a notable role shift in the status of woman from a protected dependent to a protecting and life giving companion. On the day of Thiruvathira, a wife is no longer a timid submissive weak sex, but a fair sex capable of prolonging her husband’s life and maintaining his prosperity and wealth. The theme of Thiruvathira songs are preoccupied by the celebration of womanhood and the free will of women. The songs narrating stories of Usha, the daughter of Bana who married the man of her choice, Parvathi who managed to win the heart of Lord Shiva, and Damayanthi who burnt the demon into ashes are all represented the feminine ideals that the Namboothiri women of that time never even dare to dream.

V. CONCLUSION

What necessitates the tolerance of these taboos breaking is a thought provoking and interesting question which is to be theorized in the socio cultural contrast of the Namboothiri and Nair communities of Kerala. However the entire rituals related to the Thiruvathira festival wear the mask of empowering and celebrating the womanhood. The taboo breaking is sanctioned only for a short period and before and after it, the status of women remained unchanged. The more a community is suppressed, the greater will be the resistance they are capable of. The scheme of this festival like any other rituals seems to be conspired by the powerful patriarchy to lessen the resistance that they fearfully anticipated from the oppressed women folk of Namboothiri caste.

VI. REFERENCES

To Cite This Article
