FactsDid you know

The Smartha-Vicharam tribunal in traditional Kerala

In traditional Kerala, an elaborate caste tribunal called Smartha-Vicharam looked into charges of sexual misconduct against Namboodiri Brahmin women. When a woman fell under suspicion, they placed her in strict confinement in an out-house known as the anjampura. They stripped her of her name. People called her solely a sadhanam, which means a “thing” or “article”.

Under royal warrant, a Smartha (a Brahmin judge versed in the Smritis) headed the tribunal at the woman’s house. Mimamsakas (legal scholars) helped. Namboodiri women lived in strict seclusion (gosha), so the Smartha could not address her directly. Behind a large palmyra-leaf umbrella or curtain, she whispered her answers to her maidservant (dasi), who repeated them to the assembly. Customary law said she had to give her own free confession before a guilty verdict. If the tribunal believed she was innocent, the judges performed kshama-namaskaram (they bowed low before her and begged her forgiveness). They restored her with honour.

If she confessed, she had to name every accomplice. Each accomplice was excommunicated on her sole testimony unless he passed the trial by boiling oil at the Suchindram temple. At the Keikkottal (hand-clapping) ceremony, her palmyra “mask umbrella”, the traditional symbol of caste chastity and seclusion, was snatched from her hand. The assembly clapped in condemnation, and her family performed her funeral rites (udakakriya). This treated her as if she were physically dead and expelled her from the community permanently.