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The Trial of the “Thing”: Inside the Feudal Inquisition of the Malabar Brahmans

For an orthodox Nambudiri woman in nineteenth-century Kerala, the descent into civic non-existence began with a sudden grammatical demotion.

The moment a whisper of sexual impropriety was raised against an Antharjanam—literally, an “indoor person,” whose secluded life was spent entirely behind the high gables of her family illam—her given name was struck from the household vocabulary. She ceased to be a daughter, a mother, or a wife. In the official records of the caste council, and in the conversation of her own relatives, she was designated simply as the sadhanam: “the thing.”

What followed was the Smartha Vicharam, an ecclesiastical trial whose combination of bureaucratic pedantry and psychological cruelty might have given Torquemada pause.

The sadhanam was immediately locked away in the anjampura, a dark, detached outhouse. Her family, terrified of contagion, ceased all ancestor rites and faced total social boycott until the matter was settled. Soon after, the local Raja would dispatch an official tribunal headed by the Smartha—a hereditary inquisitor versed in the sacred codes—accompanied by a clutch of Vedic jurists and a royal bailiff who stood near the veranda, drawn sword in hand, to ensure proper decorum.

The procedural etiquette of the bench was surreal. Because an accused woman remained strictly gosha (veiled from male gaze), the Smartha was

forbidden from addressing her directly. He would sit in an outer room, clearing his throat, and direct his inquiries to the woman's maidservant (vrshali). The maid trotted back to the doorway of the inner chamber; the sadhanam, hiding behind an immense palmyra-leaf umbrella, whispered her reply into the maid's ear; and the maid dutifully marched back across the veranda to repeat the answer aloud to the assembled jurists.

In feigned astonishment, the Smartha would begin by asking why on earth a respectable Brahman lady was sitting in an outhouse. The accused had to be coaxed, bullied, and nudged until she uttered the critical legal formula: she admitted there was a charge against her.

Only then could the real cross-examination begin.

The enquiry was leisurely in the extreme. It could drag on for months—and occasionally for several years—turning into an absolute financial catastrophe for the woman's family. Under customary law, the girl's relatives were legally obligated to feed, house, and sumptuously entertain the entire bench, their attendants, and any wandering Nambudiri who chose to turn up and watch the proceedings. A protracted trial could easily run to twelve thousand rupees, gutting ancestral estates and mortgaging coconut groves merely to keep the judges supplied with clarified butter and beaten rice.

When the woman finally broke and offered a confession, she was summoned to step out from behind her screen and confront her interrogators. She was offered betel and nut—her last taste of hospitality. She was then subjected to a relentless inquisitorial cross-examination to extract the names of every man who had shared her guilt.

For the men implicated, the system offered little mercy. Accused lovers were granted no presumption of innocence, no right to call witnesses, and no opportunity to cross-examine their accuser. A co-defendant had precisely one path of judicial appeal: he was granted a royal writ (pampu) permitting him to march down to the temple of Suchindram in southern Travancore, where he was required to plunge his bare forearm into a cauldron of boiling ghee. If his flesh emerged clean and unblistered three

days later, his reputation was restored; if it was scarred, his life was forfeit to exile.

Once the Raja ratified the verdict, the closing act unfolded at night. In the flickering glare of coconut-oil torches, the names of the guilty men were shouted into the dark by an East Coast Pattar clerk.

Then came the Keikkottal—the rhythmic hand-clapping.

Before the gathering, a low-caste attendant stepped forward and snatched the palmyra umbrella from the woman's hands, tearing away the outward symbol of her modesty. To a deafening, rhythmic volley of hand-claps from the assembled crowd, she was hounded out of the compound and expelled into the night. Her relatives immediately poured libations of water and performed her udakakriya—her full funeral obsequies. To her family, she was ritually dead; if she were to perish in the road that very midnight, her corpse would have been ignored as that of a ghost.

The feudal institution finally collapsed under its own weight in 1905, during an enquiry that scandalised southern India. A young woman named Kuriyedathu Thathri, subjected to the tribunal, displayed an uncanny, photographic recall of every assignation. Instead of a tearful breakdown, she methodically reeled off the names of sixty-five prominent lovers—detailing dates, rooms, and intimate physical marks. Her catalogue did not spare the elite: it dragged down high priests, wealthy landlords, famous Kathakali performers, and members of the judging panels themselves.

Faced with the spectacle of half the ecclesiastical aristocracy of Cochin being excommunicated in a single afternoon, the authorities quietly realised that the sadhanam had weaponised the court against the very patriarchy that devised it, bringing down the curtain on Malabar's ancient trial by shame.