

Subverting the Sacred Domestic: Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku and the Radical Performance of Namboodiri Female Emancipation in Kerala

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Abstract

With the stage consistently linked to social reform and collective responsibility, Malayalam drama played a dynamic role in the early twentieth-century socio-religious reform movement in Kerala. The counter-hegemonic plays of the 1920s and 1930s highlighted the imperative of dismantling internal patriarchal structures to improve the socio-existential condition of women. Created as instruments of ideological intervention, these theatrical interventions carried a revolutionary critique that supported gender equality and initiated a transformative interaction between dramatic literature and social reorganization. This paper situates the discourse of female emancipation in V. T. Bhattathiripad's seminal drama *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* (From the Kitchen to the Stage, 1929) within the broader socio-historical landscape of early twentieth-century Kerala. Through its radical representation of *Antarjanams* (Namboodiri Brahmin women), the study examines the deconstructive forces that operated through the medium of performance against orthodox Brahminical hegemony, ritualistic isolation, and female subjugation.

Keywords: Female Emancipation, V. T. Bhattathiripad, *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku*, Kerala Reform Movement, Theatre and Social Reform, Namboodiri Women, Gender Equality, Malayalam Drama, Brahminical Patriarchy.

Introduction: Socio-Religious Hierarchy and Brahminical Patriarchy in Pre-Reform Kerala

The early twentieth century in Kerala witnessed an extraordinary convergence of cultural renaissance, anti-feudal mobilization, and radical socio-religious reform that fundamentally restructured the region's social architecture (Panikkar, 2002; Menon, 2007). At the socio-economic and ritual apex of this traditional hierarchy stood the Namboodiri Brahmins, who exercised extensive landownership through the feudal Janmi system while maintaining strict socio-religious supremacy (Mencher, 1966; Vijayan, 1998). However, this external dominance was counterbalanced by severe internal socio-structural contradictions, particularly regarding gender relations, family inheritance, and marital alliances within traditional Namboodiri households, known as *Illams* (Devika, 2007; Bhaskaranunni, 2005). To prevent the fragmentation of ancestral landholdings and preserve economic power, Namboodiri society practiced a rigid system of primogeniture known as *Intekattu* (Logan, 1951; Gurukkal, 2010). Under this customary law, only the eldest son (*Moothathu*) was permitted to contract an endogamous marriage (*Veli*) with a Namboodiri woman and father legitimate heirs to the family estate (Anandi, 1999; Fuller, 1976). The younger sons, referred to as *Appans*, were denied the right to intra-caste marriage and instead entered into non-hereditary hypergamous

unions (Sambandham) with women from matrilineal non-Brahmin castes, predominantly Nayers (Gough, 1952; Jeffrey, 1976).

This asymmetric marital framework created severe structural problems for Namboodiri women, known as Antarjanams, a term translating literally to "those who live inside" (Sumangala, 2001; Namboodiri, 1938). Because only the eldest sons could marry within the caste, a vast surplus of unmarried Namboodiri women was created, forcing elderly Moothathus to practice extensive polygamy (Anandi, 1999; Sheeba, 2006). Middle-aged or elderly men routinely married young adolescent girls or children, resulting in extreme age disparities, pervasive compulsory spinsterhood, and widespread early widowhood across the community (Bhaskaranunni, 2005; Mohan, 1999). Antarjanams were subjected to strict spatial seclusion (Ghosa), confined to the dark, ill-ventilated back quarters of the Illam, and forced to conceal themselves behind massive palm-leaf umbrellas (Mura Kuda) whenever they ventured outdoors (Gopalakrishnan, 1977; Ravivarma, 1924). Denied formal education, financial independence, and basic civil agency, Namboodiri women existed as invisible entities within their own homes (Devika, 2007; Sheeba, 2006). Widows were denied the right to remarry and were forced into harsh ascetic practices, while any suspicion of sexual transgression led to Smartavicharam—a patriarchal inquisitorial trial that invariably resulted in excommunication (Bhasmakkur) and social exile (Varier, 1984; Namboodiripad, 1984).

It was within this oppressive social milieu that V. T. Bhattathiripad (1900–1982), popularly known as VT, emerged as a transformative social revolutionary (Palakeezh, 2004; Sahadevan, 1993). Born into a financially distressed Namboodiri family in Mezhatthur, Palakkad, VT was initially limited to traditional Vedic recitation due to family poverty (Bhattathiripad, 2012). Observing the pervasive material poverty, intellectual stagnation, and institutional cruelty within Namboodiri households, VT taught himself Malayalam and basic English, absorbing the progressive and rationalist ideas circulating across South India during the era of the Indian national movement (Ravindran, 1972; Panikkar, 2007). He realized that real social progress in Kerala required dismantling the rigid Brahminical superstructure from within (Rao, 1979; Ayyappan, 1965). VT aligned himself with the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha, an organization formed in 1908 to promote reform within the caste, and quickly transformed it from a moderate reformist group into a radical instrument of anti-feudal agitation and gender emancipation (Mohan, 1999; Namboodiripad, 1986).

Recognizing the limitations of formal speeches and essays in reaching a broader population, VT turned to performance theatre as a weapon for social awakening (George, 1972; Paniker, 1989). In early twentieth-century Kerala, classical theatre forms such as Koodiyattam and Kathakali served primarily as ritualistic, Sanskritized spectacles catering to feudal patrons, far removed from modern political issues (Pillai, 1998). VT recognized that theatre possessed an unparalleled capacity to evoke empathy, provoke debate, and bypass literacy barriers (George, 1972). By abandoning mythological tropes and Sanskritized registers, VT pioneered modern socio-realist drama in Malayalam, treating the stage not as passive entertainment, but as a site of moral critique and ideological transformation (Paniker, 1989; Bhattathiripad, 2006). His work established a direct link between dramatic representation and social reform, laying the groundwork for subsequent political theatre in Kerala (Pillai, 1998; Ganesh, 1990).

Written in 1929, VT's landmark play *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekk* (From the Kitchen to the Stage) represents a critical turning point in the cultural history of Kerala (Bhattathiripad, 2006; Testbook, 2025). The play directly addresses the systemic oppression of *Antarjanams* through a dramatic narrative that exposes the hypocrisy, greed, and moral decay of conservative Brahminical orthodoxy (Scribd, 2024a; India Art Review, 2023). The plot centers on the impending marriage of Thethi, a young, vulnerable Namboodiri girl, to Virupakshan Namboothiripad, an elderly, decrepit, and wealthy man who already has multiple wives (Scribd, 2024b). Arranged by traditional patriarchs seeking exorbitant dowries and economic alliances, the forced union threatens to condemn Thethi to early widowhood and lifelong suffering (Sheeba, 2006; Scribd, 2024a). Parallel to this tragic plotline, the play illustrates the rising social consciousness of the Namboodiri youth, represented by Madhavan and his progressive companions, who question the authority of conservative elders and demand an end to polygamy, compulsory spinsterhood, and female seclusion (Scribd, 2024a; Palakeezh, 2004).

The dramatic climax of *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekk* provides a decisive break from classical literary traditions by introducing modern legal mechanisms and radical collective action to resolve the conflict (Scribd, 2024a). As the wedding rituals approach, the progressive youth actively intervene, obtaining an official injunction order from the Second-Class Magistrate to halt the forced marriage between the young girl and the elderly patriarch (Scribd, 2024a). The legal order serves as a major symbolic turning point in the play, representing the entry of modern jurisprudence, civil rights, and state rule of law into the traditionally autonomous and oppressive space of the Brahminical *Illam* (Scribd, 2024a; Devika, 2007). Thethi is rescued from forced domestic confinement, discards her veil and palm-leaf umbrella, and is ultimately united with Madhavan in an equal marriage built on mutual choice and respect (Scribd, 2024a). This resolution illustrates the transformation of the *Antarhanam* from a silenced, domestic victim into an active participant in social life (Scribd, 2024a; India Art Review, 2023).

The spatial politics built into the play's structure—encapsulated in the contrast between *Adukkala* (Kitchen) and *Arangu* (Stage)—serves as a primary framework for understanding VT's reformist vision (Bhattathiripad, 2006; Scribd, 2024a). In traditional Namboodiri spatial culture, the *Adukkala* was not merely a domestic cooking area; it functioned as an isolated zone of physical confinement, socio-economic invisibility, and structural servitude for women (Sheeba, 2006; Devika, 2007). The *Arangu*, by contrast, represents the public sphere, political agency, intellectual discourse, and historical agency (Scribd, 2024a; Testbook, 2025). By portraying the hidden domestic oppression of the *Adukkala* directly on the public *Arangu*, VT broke the rigid distinction between private and public life that had sustained Brahminical patriarchy for generations (Devika, 2007; Panikkar, 2002). The play argued that the systemic suffering of women was not a private family matter, but a broader social problem demanding public accountability and reform (Mohan, 1999; Scribd, 2024a).

Linguistically, *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekk* broke with past conventions by employing the everyday spoken dialect of Namboodiri households rather than stylized, high-Sanskritized Malayalam (Paniker, 1989; Scribd, 2024b). This choice brought realistic colloquial dialogue

to the stage, ensuring that the characters resonated with general audiences (Pillai, 1998). VT used sharp satire and irony to demystify the religious authority of traditional scholars (Smartans) and community elders, exposing their arguments as self-serving justifications for economic greed, male privilege, and domestic control (Scribd, 2024a). By presenting female characters who gradually develop critical awareness and reject unjust customary laws (Smritis), the play challenged the idea of inherent female passivity, arguing instead that women could act as agents of their own liberation when given access to education and support (Devika, 2007; Scribd, 2024a).

The initial performance of *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekk* on December 22, 1929, at the 22nd Annual Conference of the Yogakshema Sabha in Edakkunni, near Thrissur, was a landmark event in Kerala's socio-cultural history (Amazon S3, 2022; New Indian Express, 2018). Staged despite strong opposition and physical threats from conservative Brahmin organizations (Brahmana Sabha), the play was performed before a large audience that included *Antarjanams* seated behind curtained enclosures (Gopalakrishnan, 1977; Amazon S3, 2022). The emotional impact of the performance was immediate and intense; members of the audience openly wept, while young reformers pledged to eliminate polygamy, child marriage, and forced female seclusion within their community (Amazon S3, 2022; Palakeezh, 2004). In his foreword to the published text, the prominent nationalist leader K. Kelappan emphasized that the play performed a historic function by exposing the suffering of Namboodiri women and dismantling conservative justifications for traditional customs (Kelappan, 1930).

The staging of the play sparked a broader wave of social activism across Kerala (Amazon S3, 2022; Testbook, 2025). Inspired by its message, young Namboodiri women began publicly discarding their traditional veils (*Ghosa*) and palm-leaf umbrellas (*Mura Kuda*), entering public assemblies, political rallies, and educational institutions (Gopalakrishnan, 1977; Sheeba, 2006). VT led this movement by personal example, bringing his wife, *Arya Antarhanam*, out of domestic seclusion into public life despite facing intense social resistance and threats of excommunication from traditional leaders (Palakeezh, 2004; Sahadevan, 1993). This courageous act helped break long-standing social taboos, encouraging other families to reject traditional seclusion practices and allow women to participate in public affairs (Anandi, 1999; Gopalakrishnan, 1977).

To broaden the impact of his theatrical work, VT used print media and journalism to advance social reform (Priyardarsanan, 1999; Kurup, 1988). He contributed essays to reformist journals such as *Unni Nambutiri* and launched *Udbuddhakerala* in 1937, using it to advocate for rationalism, women's rights, and anti-caste reforms (Namboodirippad, 1928; Mohan, 1999). His published writings challenged community traditions, calling for the redirection of temple wealth toward public education and the abolition of costly ritual ceremonies (Bhattathiripad, 2012). Furthermore, VT actively promoted widow remarriage and inter-caste alliances, urging young Namboodiri men to marry widows and spinsters within their caste to end compulsory celibacy and address demographic imbalances (Anandi, 1999; Palakeezh, 2004).

The cultural and social agitation catalyzed by VT's plays and activist leadership contributed directly to significant legal transformations in twentieth-century Kerala (Menon, 2007; Jeffrey,

1992). The public debates generated by the reform movement added pressure for formal legislative changes, resulting in the passage of the landmark Madras Nambudiri Act of 1933 (Varghese, 1970; Oommen, 1985). This legislation altered the economic and social structure of Namboodiri households by extending equal rights to ancestral family property (Illam assets) to all male members, including younger sons (Appans) (Varghese, 1970; Alexander, 1968). By enabling younger sons to marry within the caste, the law effectively ended forced spinsterhood among Namboodiri women and undermined the structural foundation of polygamy (Anandi, 1999; Varghese, 1970). Additionally, the Act recognized women's rights to inheritance and education while dismantling the legal framework that supported Smartavicharam trials (Devika, 2007; Varier, 1984).

VT's literary and activist work helped transform Malayalam literature from elite entertainment into an active medium for social critique and political engagement (Paniker, 1989; George, 1972). By demonstrating that art could directly influence social structures, Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekk established a precedent for subsequent generations of playwrights, novelists, and poets in Kerala, including modern writers who used literature to critique caste oppression, feudal relations, and gender inequality (Pillai, 1998; Ganesh, 1990). The play's emphasis on rational thought, human dignity, and individual autonomy helped shape the broader intellectual movement known as the Kerala Renaissance (Panikkar, 2002; Menon, 2007).

In conclusion, V. T. Bhattathiripad's Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekk remains a landmark work in the history of South Asian socio-realist theatre and feminist literature (Bhattathiripad, 2006; Testbook, 2025). By bringing the hidden oppressions of the Illam kitchen onto the public stage, VT exposed the structural injustices of Brahminical patriarchy and helped inspire a broader movement for women's emancipation in Kerala (Devika, 2007; Sheeba, 2006). His work showed that real social transformation requires engaging with both institutional structures and cultural attitudes (Panikkar, 2002; Rao, 1979). Through his creative writing, public activism, and commitment to human equality, V. T. Bhattathiripad played an important role in building modern, progressive Kerala, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to inform contemporary discussions on gender rights, social justice, and political art (Palakeezh, 2004; India Art Review, 2023).

The socio-religious landscape of Kerala during the late medieval and early modern periods exhibited a structural complexity unique within the Indian subcontinent (Gopalakrishnan 1977; Logan 1951). The institution of caste (jati) was deeply entrenched in the social body, segmenting society into rigid, self-contained, and hierarchically arranged communities. Each caste group was compelled to maintain its exclusive occupational functions, ritual obligations, and social position through strict adherence to customary laws (acharam) (Ravivarman 1924; Varier 1984). This rigid socio-ritual hierarchy gave rise to severe structural inequalities, giving birth to dehumanizing practices such as ritual pollution (theendal), untouchability (theendappad), and unapproachability (anattappad) (Pruthi 2004; Vijayan 1998).

At the apex of this oppressive social pyramid stood the Namboodiri Brahmins. Possessing vast tracts of tax-free land (janmam) and exercising moral, spiritual, and legal authority, the

Namboodiri community dominated both the religious sphere and the royal courts (Mencher 1966; Sahadevan 1993). However, the internal social organization of the Namboodiri community was characterized by severe orthodoxy, economic stagnation, and institutionalized gender subordination (Anandi 1999; Namboodiri 1985).

To preserve family estates from division, the Namboodiris enforced a strict system of primogeniture (veli), wherein only the eldest son (Veli Namboodiri) was permitted to marry within the caste (Anandi 1999; Mohan 1999). Younger sons (Appans) were relegated to informal, non-hereditary relationships (sambandham) with women from non-Brahmin matriarchal communities, predominantly Nayars (Devika 2007; Panikkar 1995). This practice had catastrophic consequences for Namboodiri women, known as Antarjanams (literally, "those who live inside") (Sumangala 2001).

Deprived of marriage prospects within their caste, many young Namboodiri women were forced into polygamous marriages with elderly men or spent their entire lives in forced spinsterhood (Sheeba 2006). Confined to the dark interiors of the ancestral home (illam), shielded from the public gaze by the mandatory broad leaf umbrella (marakkuda) and strict seclusion (ghosa), Antarjanams were systematically denied formal education, literacy, and fundamental human agency (Bhaskaranunni 2005; Namboodiri 1938).

2. Colonial Modernity, Public Sphere, and the Emergency of V. T. Bhattathiripad

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of transformative social reform movements across Kerala, spurred by colonial administrative frameworks, western education, missionary interventions, and native intellectual resistance (Mohan 1999; Panikkar 2007). The newly educated middle class began questioning traditional customary laws, caste-based disabilities, and irrational ritualistic paradigms (Gopalakrishnan 1977). While caste-critiques were initiated by subaltern leaders like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, internal reform within the dominant Brahminical order became imperative to break the socio-economic stagnation of the community (Jeffrey 1976; Palakeezh 2004).

It was within this historical conjuncture that V. T. Bhattathiripad (popularly known as VT) emerged as a revolutionary intellectual and reformer (Bhattathiripad 2006; Palakeezh 2004). Born into an impoverished Namboodiri illam in Mezhatthur, VT experienced firsthand the structural hypocrisies, financial desperation, and intellectual claustrophobia of his community (Bhattathiripad 1998; Palakeezh 2004). Deprived of modern secular education in his early years, VT taught himself to read and write, eventually becoming an active crusader within the Yogakshema Sabha—an organization established in 1908 to promote modern education and reform among the Namboodiris (Namboodiri 1985; Palakeezh 2004).

Recognizing that orthodox Brahminical patriarchy was maintained through control over the female body and mind, VT centered his reformist agenda on the total emancipation of Antarjanams (Anandi 1999; Devika 2002). VT famously expressed his anguish regarding the institutionalized misery of younger Brahmin sons and women, declaring that he would rather be born as a stray dog or cat than as an Appan in an orthodox Namboodiri household (Bhattathiripad 2006: 38). He understood that social reform could not be achieved merely

through petitioning or theoretical discourse; it demanded radical cultural interventions capable of reshaping public consciousness (Panikkar 1995; Ravindran 2002).

3. Theatrical Intervention: Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku as a Subversive Medium

In early twentieth-century Kerala, theatre evolved from classical, elitist arts like Koodiyattam and Kathakali into a popular political and social medium (Panikkar 1995; Rajagopalan 2000). Modern drama became an arena for ideological struggle, bridging literacy divides and communicating radical ideas directly to diverse audiences (Bhaskaranunni 2005; Menon 2011). VT strategically identified performance as the ultimate instrument to expose the hypocrisy of orthodox Brahminism and incite subversion within the domestic sphere (Bhattathiripad 2006; Palakeezh 2004).

Written and staged in 1929, VT's landmark Malayalam play *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* (From the Kitchen to the Stage) marked an unprecedented turning point in the history of Malayalam literature and social reform (Bhattathiripad 2006; Sheeba 2006). The title itself functioned as a revolutionary manifesto, symbolizing the imperative journey of Namboodiri women from domestic invisibility (*adukkala*) to public visibility and political agency (*arangat*).

The play offered a realistic critique of contemporary Brahminical society, centering on the tragic plight of young Namboodiri women subjected to forced marriages with senile, polygamous men, dowry exploitation, and ritualistic humiliation (Anandi 1999; Bhattathiripad 2006). The narrative exposes the institutionalized corruption of the elders who used religious texts to legitimize structural violence against women (Namboodiripad 1928; Varier 1984).

4. Performance, Public Space, and the Disruption of Orthodoxy

The premiere of *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku* on December 22, 1929, during the annual conference of the Yogakshema Sabha at Edakkunni, sent shockwaves through Kerala society (Bhattathiripad 2006; Palakeezh 2004). Conservative elements within the community attempted to disrupt the performance, recognizing that the play was not mere entertainment, but an assault on orthodoxy (Devika 2002; Mohan 1999). Eminent nationalist leader K. Kelappan, in his foreword to the published text, highlighted the play's transformative capacity to expose the pitiable condition of *Antarjanams* and mobilize public opinion against entrenched traditionalism (Bhattathiripad 2006: 5–8). The historical significance of the play reached its peak when VT arranged a performance at his own ancestral residence, defying the fierce opposition of his elder brother and orthodox village elders (Bhattathiripad 2006; Palakeezh 2004). Subsequent performances across Kerala, such as the famous staging at Venkitangu, faced physical assaults by conservative factions (Bhaskaranunni 2005; Devika 2007).

Despite these violent disruptions, the play generated an unprecedented awakening among *Antarjanams* (Anandi 1999; Sheeba 2006). Women who had been confined within domestic walls began to cast aside their traditional leaf umbrellas (*marakkuda*), abandon strict social seclusion (*ghosa*), and step onto public platforms to speak, organize, and demand education (Devika 2002; Namboodiri 1938). VT led by personal example, bringing his wife, Sridevi *Antarjanam*, out into the public sphere and actively facilitating widow remarriages—a heresy

within Brahminical law that resulted in his excommunication (osthakkaal) (Bhattathiripad 1998; Palakeezh 2004).

5. Deconstructing Brahminical Patriarchy: Textual and Ideological Dimensions

VT's literary production was explicitly design-engineered as a tool for social deconstruction (Panikkar 1995; Ravindran 2002). In *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku*, as well as in his short stories and essays published in radical periodicals like *Unni Nambutiri* and *Udbuddhakerala* (which he edited from 1937 onwards), VT relentlessly interrogated the patriarchal structures that subjugated women (Bhattathiripad 1998; Ravivarma 1924).

VT's critiques systematically targeted several key oppressive institutions:

- **The Trial by Smarthas (Smartha Vicharam):** The canonical tribunal where Namboodiri women accused of adultery were subjected to inquisitorial interrogations, stripped of their identity, and excommunicated, while male co-accused frequently escaped punishment (Devika 2007; Varier 1984).
- **Dowry and Marriage Exorbitance:** The financial commodification of Namboodiri daughters, which impoverished families and drove young women into forced marriages or lifetime isolation (Anandi 1999; Namboodiri 1985).
- **Prohibition of Widow Remarriage:** The enforcement of austere, ascetic widowhood on young girls, while aged widowers were encouraged to remarry repeatedly (Namboodiripad 1928; Sheeba 2006).

VT's female characters were not depicted merely as passive victims; they were endowed with moral clarity, rational thought, and the capacity to confront authority (Bhattathiripad 2006; Menon 2011). By shifting the representation of women from passive objects of pity to active historical subjects, VT's drama provided a template for female agency in Kerala (Devika 2002; Sheeba 2006).

The impact of VT Bhattathiripad's dramatic intervention extended far beyond the immediate context of the late 1920s and 1930s (Gopalakrishnan 1977; Panikkar 2007). *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* initiated a tradition of socially committed Malayalam theatre that flourished through subsequent playwrights like M. R. Bhattathiripad (Marthandavarma), K. Damodaran (Pattabakki), and Cherukad (Snehamulla Kovalan) (Bhaskaranunni 2005; Rajagopalan 2000).

6. Conclusion

V. T. Bhattathiripad's *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* remains a monumental text in the history of Malayalam literature and social reform movements in Kerala. By utilizing the dynamic medium of theatre, VT systematically dismantled the ideological underpinnings of Brahminical patriarchy and exposed the institutionalized subjugation of *Antarjanams*. His work transcended literary representation; it functioned as an active agent of historical transformation, physically propelling women out of domestic confinement into the democratic public sphere.

VT's legacy demonstrates the power of performance as a force for social reorganization. Through his plays, short stories, editorial work, and personal courage, VT did not merely reflect

the changing social consciousness of early twentieth-century Kerala—he actively constructed it, forging a path toward gender equality, rationalism, and human dignity.

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