



The paper explores how through prayers and vows people hoped to get blessed with children, the means through which they tackled the supernatural spirits which caused hindrance in conception, notions like chastity of the mother, which they believed ensured better chances for the survival of the foetus and the newborn, and finally about the use of enchanted food by expectant mothers to ensure the baby of desired gender and disposition.

### THE VOWS AND PRAYERS: THE BURNING DESIRE FOR AN OFFSPRING

The intensity of the burning desire people had for an offspring was so great that they left no stone unturned in the process. They approached deities took vows, diligently observed charities and embraced austerities. A snapshot of this filial yearning and desire is procured from the thirteenth-century *Maṅḍiravālam* poem *Ananthapuravarnanam*. Couples desiring to conceive are showering filial upon *Tiruvambāṭi*, the deity baby Krishna found inside the Padmanabhaswami temple, Thiruvananthapuram. Seeing *Kriṣṇa*, as the little toddler of the *ambāṭi*, some people are urging to carry him in their arms, others keep him in their laps, few others are enjoying the sight of him playing by throwing his hands and legs in the air, and some women are cuddling the baby in their arms. The deity in the form of a young toddler is kept in a cradle in the temple to which couples desiring to be parents pray to bless them with offsprings in cases of difficulties in conception (K. Ratnamma, 1997).

The overwhelming desire to conceive experienced by the parents to be is well demonstrated above, to show it further let's move to the sixteenth-century *Candrōtsavam*. The sorrow of the childless mother has hit the physical and emotional well being of the young woman. She hopes and believes that appeasing everything sacred around her, like deities, forces of nature, or even animal and providing food to the holy men and the destitute will ensure her a child.

The grief of childlessness, especially about the lack of a daughter has made the lady protagonist akin to a banana tree hit by a hurricane. She left no stone unturned to ensure that she shall have a child. The grief made the lady gasp sorrowfully and startle intermittently throughout the day. She has been so lethargic that she stretches her body and then bows again pleading out to the gods closing her eyes slowly. The agrarian fields which she owned that are full of crops about to be harvested was given to the deities to make them be pleased upon her. She regularly paid obeisance to her *gurus* and even made a secret payment to perform *sarpabali*. She spent her nights at the abode of *Caṅṭika* or *Durga* which was perfumed from the fumes emitting from the performance of *Bali*, *pūja*, *hōmam*, and *tarpaṇam* (Ilamkulam Kunjan Pillai, 1962).

Her pain gradually transforms into desperation as one can see that she diversifies her appeasement of the deities. She started offering *Bali* to famous rivers, weapons, birds, powerful serpents, crows and foxes with extreme devotion. The author had to resort to hyperbole to express the limits to which the lady went from saying that she performed everything with an utmost devotion which anyone suggested to her which will ensure an offspring. She has a vision where god *Kāma* recommended his appeasement with *pāyasam* made of sugar. She started appeasing *Kāma* with sandalwood paste and the prescribed sweet dish. When the world fell asleep, she stayed awake and only closed her eyes out of exhaustion. Finally. In her sleep, the god *Kāma* promises her a daughter (Ilamkulam Kunjan Pillai, 1962).

The pain and grief of childlessness could be solved through keeping vows and serving the right food, mostly *pañjasara-pāyasam* to the right sections. During the time period of *TalakaḷatūrGovinda Bhaṭṭatiri* in A.D. 1238, one can see reference to this. The *ōtikōn* or the teacher of the young *Nambūtiri* was grief-stricken due to childlessness.

When his teacher had gone out, the young *GovindaBhaṭṭatiri* was playing with his classmates by using small stones as *cowrie* shells. A classmate asked *Talakaḷatūr* to find out using the *praśna* why their *ōtikōn* is childless. *Talakaḷatūr* playfully says after rearranging the stones as the cowries in *praśna*, it is because of *bālaśāpam*, as he used to excessively cane his students. To redeem him their *ōtikōn* should regularly feed all his students with *pañjasara-pāyasam* and restrain from caning them. Overhearing the game and the conversation, to try his luck *ōtikōn* followed the instruction of *Talakaḷatūr* for one entire year at the end of which he was blessed with an *uṇṇi* or a son (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009). Pre-modern folks as seen from the above instances diligently performed all the prescribed and non-prescribed rituals, prayed to every deity and natural force, fed the poor, young children and the Brahmanas, and observed every austerity to be blessed with children in cases of delayed conception.

### **GANDHARVA: THE CELESTIAL LOVER AND THE OBSTRUCTOR OF CONCEPTION**

The pre-modern folks believed that it is through the appeasement of the supernatural or through the exorcism of the unfavorable spirits like that of *gandharvan* one could conceive. Whenever women had difficulty in conception, it was believed that it is because their body was haunted by the celestial male spirit called *Gandharvas*. The *gandharvas* were in love with the woman, which made it impossible for her husband to impregnate her. This implies the notion that in spite of all the types of polygamous relationships, like that of *sambhandham*, prevalent in the society, there also existed strong rules regarding the paternity of the children a woman could conceive. It is believed that a lady who is possessed by a *Gandharvas* could not conceive from her husband as the *Gandharvas* not willing to share her body with anyone else. ensure the paternity of the child and the non-hypogamous nature of the alliance among *Nair* women, who kept multiple sexual partners, the possible father of the child made gifts to his wife and the midwife to ascertain the paternity immediately after the birth of the child. These gifts were ceremonial tokens with utmost significance than economic value. He gifted two *muṇṭu* to his wife and paddy to the *Nair* barber woman who attends the delivery of the child. If the newborn child remained unclaimed by any husband then the mother would be excommunicated from the community (Kathleen Gough, 1961).

*Pallibāṇa Perumal* of *Cēra* royal family could not have an heir as his wife underwent multiple miscarriages. It was ascertained that it because of a *Gandharva* who lived in her body. The queen was an exquisite beauty and the *gandharvan* was in love with her. *Sūrya Kālaṭi*, a renowned exorcist from Kumaranellur had to be summoned. He performed many rituals which were not normally practiced by *Brahmanas*, as they involved multiple animal sacrifices. Finally, the *gandharvan* agreed to leave the lady very reluctantly. Before leaving, he cursed *Sūrya KālaṭiBhaṭṭatiri* that he will die of urinary tract obstruction in his oldage. After the *Gandharvan* left her, the queen was able to conceive and give birth to an heir (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

Even as late as AD. 1725 people staunchly believed that miscarriages are due to the possession of body by *Gandharvas*. *Yōgīśvaran Rāman Piḷḷa*, an accountant at the temples of Mavelikkara and Thiruvalla experienced difficulty in having a child, as his wife had multiple miscarriages after four or five months of her pregnancy. The clueless husband resorts to the renown astrologer of *Paḷūr* to find out the reason through a *praśna*. The *praśna* reveals about the *gandharvan* who possessed her body. The *gandharvan* was so much in love with her that he did not want her to get impregnated by anyone else. The husband spent a fortune to exorcise this adamant supernatural spirit. As a last resort before turning sixty, in the hopes of having an heir, he brings *Tēvalaśseri*, an exorcist from Chengannur of *ambalavāsi* caste.

The rituals began after the sunset. *Tēvalaśśeri* made a pattern with ash and made *Umayammā|Pārvati*, the lady who was possessed sit in it. He had to put up a huge struggle to exorcise the spirit out of her (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

Though the medium of sorcery and control over the infesting supernatural spirits is used, it has been implied throughout the tellings that chastity of the woman and the paternity of the heir was a concern of anxiety. Irrespective of the number of licit partners allowed for a lady, none of her relationships should be of hypergamous, and the paternity of the child had to be claimed. Thus the society believed that the survival of a fetus or a newborn depended upon the chaste nature of the mother. Here chastity has a complicated meaning as the women of sections like *Nairs* and *Ēlavas* were allowed to have multiple partners through an arrangement called *sambhandham*, but only from a stipulated group of men and the relationship should not be clandestine in nature.

The third case is a woman from the vicinity of *MaṅṅāṭikāvilBhagavati* temple, near Kannadi, who had many spirits possessed on her body. She could not conceive due to this condition. *Kampiṭṭan*, the oracle of the temple aided the woman to get rid of all the spirits except one of a *Gandharva*. The folks who had authority over supernatural beings too had an area of jurisdiction. A *kampiṭṭanis* in charge of a fixed area, if another conjurer needs to practice it the area under a *kampiṭṭan*, first needs to receive permission from the respective *kampiṭṭan*. The *kampiṭṭan* gives *Tēvalaśśeri* permission to practice. He drew a circle with ash outside the *pūja* room and made the possessed lady sit inside the circle. He went inside the *pūja* room to pray. After the prayers, he opened the door and threw a few flowers at the woman whereby she showed signs of possession by *tullal*. Meanwhile, the *kampiṭṭan* too reached there in possession. The evil spirit possessed the lady decided to leave her after testing the knowledge of *Tēvalaśśeri*.<sup>1</sup> *Tēvalaśśeri* Namibia has been a specialist in helping women who are infertile or extremely old to conceive under his treatment and sorcery (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

From the folk genre of *Vaṭakkan pāṭṭu*, we come across a lady named *Cirutai Kuñṅiyamma*. She tells us that the death of all her newborns within few weeks they were born is her reason to stop being adulterous as she too realizes the connection between having healthy surviving babies and being faithful in a marriage (Payannur Balakrishnan, 2008). Some element of purity in relationships had to be ensured for the survival of the heir. If the chastity of the women is controlled by restraining their human and nonhuman lovers in the pre-modern period, the men of Nambūtiri fold legibly enjoyed the right to keep many wives. But then again, when it came to the question of the heir, the husband had to impregnate not any woman, but his *aṅtarjanam* whom he married according to the societal norms. Even when the *Valiyatampurān* of Edapalli had a mistress and maybe children in that alliance, the lack of an heir in his *aṅtarjanam* who lived at Edapalli was the concern of his subjects. The *Valiyatampurān* of Edapalli without even consummating his wedding to his longterm wife, an *aṅtarjanam* was reluctantly willing to take another *aṅtarjanam* as his new wife. This was on the grounds that his subjects assumed that the kingdom lacked an heir due to the *aṅtarjanam*'s inability to conceive. The *aṅtarjanam* resorts to sarcasm to deny him permission for a new wife by saying that it is only through magic one can expect to conceive an heir when the *Valiyatampurān* has not even put an effort to consummate their wedding (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

The women who failed to conceive or conceived very late, underwent exorcism to ensure the successful pregnancy and ease childbirth. The notion that the body of the woman who expects to conceive should not be in the possession of anyone, including supernatural spirits are well played out through the folk narratives in the pre-modern period. This ensured the begetting of the legitimate heir with clear paternity.

### **ENCHANTED BUTTER: THE PROMISER OF A VIRTUOUS SON**

All normative households of pre-modern Kerala yearned for sons more than daughters even in matrilineal *Nair* families. The only instance where the daughter is shown as the preferred gender is in the *maṇipravāḷam* poem *Candrōtsavam*, where the expectant mother is a courtesan and lives in a non-normative matrilineal-matrilocal household. People believed that observance of vows and intake of magical potions can ensure the preferred gender of the fetus or it can change the gender of the conceived fetus from one sex to another.

*Japicca neyyu* or enchanted butter is a great remedy for the pre-modern period to get the progeny of the desired sex. At Piravam in Muvattupuzha, when the wife of *Puḷimārattu Nambūtiri* got pregnant, the *kaṇiyān* or astrologer of *Paḷūr*, who is also the son of *Talakaḷatūr Bhaṭṭatiri* from an anuloma marriage, made the horoscope of the child predicting the sex of the child as the female. Likewise, the *Puḷimārattu Nambūtiri* had nine daughters which caused him huge grief. When his wife was pregnant the tenth time, the *kaṇiyān* soothsayer said that it will be a girl child again. But *Taikāṭṭu Nambūtiri* from the renowned medical partitioner, family of *Taikāṭṭuśśēri* happened to be at the home of the *Puḷimārattu Nambūtiri*. He helped the Brahmana who already had nine daughters and no son in having a son by altering the sex of the fetus by making the expectant *aṅtarjanam* consume enchanted butter for forty days. In this legend *Talakaḷatūr Govinda Bhaṭṭatiri* himself is clarifying to his *kaṇiyān* son that in the first trimester of any pregnancy a Brahmana from his knowledge of the *vēda* has the power to alter the sex of the fetus. Hence, any astrologer should not write the horoscope of the fetus in the first trimester of pregnancy (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009). More than astrologers here it is a physician who is prescribing the enchanted butter for the *aṅtarjanam* for the desired child. This is a society where separating medicine for magic was impossible. The head of the household is ready to go to any depths to ensure the birth of a son. The epitome of this is seen in the undying hopes of sixty-five-year-old *Pullāṅgōṭṭu Nambūtiri* of *Eithiyamāla*. It is at this ripe age, his *aṅtarjanam* finally conceives. He made his *aṅtarjanam* ingest enchanted butter to ensure the birth of a virtuous boy (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

The effect of the enchanted butter expands from determining the gender of the fetus to even ensuring specific caste based dispositions and skill sets of the fetus. The echoes resonating from the legend about the birth of *Kapḷiṅgāṭṭu Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri* born around AD. 1740 at Cheruthuruthi in Talappilli taluk proves this further (Bonnie C. Wade, 1983). At Cheruthuruthi, the wife of *Kapḷiṅgāṭṭu Nambūtiri* was expecting. The husband requested to *Karippālaswamiyār* and mendicant sage who was staying at the nearby temple to give her enchanted butter to ensure a son of the wisdom. The wife of the temple *śānti* too was expecting. The swami daily made two different batches of spell-bound butter and entrusted it in the hands of the *śānti* to hand over to *śānti's* wife and *Nambūtiri's* wife. *Nambūtiri* being the higher caste and considered by better virtue, *śānti* switched the two enchanted butter by giving the one of *śānti's* wife to the *Nambūtiri* and *Nambūtiri's* wife to the *śānti's* wife. Both women gave birth to sons, but the *Nambūtiri* son had the disposition of an *ambalavāsi* as he got interested in crafts, art and music, the son of *śānti* became an exponent in Sanskrit grammar and texts (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

If enchanted butter was a means to ensure the birth of a male progeny, then another means was to live a life full of virtues which ensured male progeny and the nonextinction of the family name. The origin legend of *KuñcanNambiār*, AD. 1700-1770<sup>2</sup> tells us that in the *Kalakkatt* family of the *ambalavāsi* fold for a prolonged period there were no sons (Ayyappapanikkar, 1999). A poor Brahmana from *Vannēri* was on a spree to many affluent houses to collect money to get his daughters married off. While he was at *Kiḷḷikuriśśimangalam* he misplaced his purse on the bank of the pond, which caused his great sorrow. The heartbroken *Nambūtiri* informed the matter to the *śānti*. After many years the same *Nambūtiri* came again to the temple at *Kiḷḷikuriśśimangalam*, on his second jaunt to collect money to get his many daughters married off. The *śānti* invited the *Nambūtiri* to stay the night at *Kalakkatt*, an *ambalavāsi* household where the former had an alliance. After the dinner, the men sat down and shared their everyday troubles. The sorrows, they shared were about the lack of sons and the burden of getting their daughters married off. The *ambalavāsi* wife of the *śānti* overhearing the story returned the money purse she had found on the bank of the pond back to the *Nambūtiri*. *Nambūtiri* blessed the wife of the *śānti* with a virtuous son by next year. This legend behind the birth of *KuñcanNambiār*, renown poet, satirist and performer attest the belief people had in the fact that a life lived with accomplishing virtues will be definitely rewarded by the birth of a male heir (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009).

Likewise, if a family happens to commit sin with or without their knowledge, then all the virtues they have amassed will be revoked, and they will have to perform an atonement to ensure the birth of male progeny. The family of *Ālvāncēri Tamprākkaḷ*, dated to c.1725-1800AD too had a long spell devoid of sons (K.V. Sarma, 1972). A *praśna* revealed that it is due to the indirect sin of *gōhatya*, as an employee of the family killed few cows owned by the family. As atonement, they had to grow pulses in seven of their fields, and when they started bearing peas, the cows were brought to feed on them after doing this for three years a son was born there (Kottarathil Sankunni, 2009). This society, which saw the necessity of son to ensure the upkeep of the family name and a male heir to perform the death rituals to ensure a smooth afterlife resorted to hook or crook to have a son. By performing virtuous deeds, donations, rearranging the asterisk in the sky or even by ingesting special enchanted food they accomplished the task.

## CONCLUSIONS

The anxiety regarding childbirth and the postchildbirth complications of the infant is a topic about which the folks of the pre modern Kerala were very anxious about. The couples who yearned to conceive diligently prayed to all deities practiced deeds of virtue and even exorcised the spirits that were creating impediments to conception. Many rituals imply that successful conceptions are possible through cohabitations approved by the society as the adulterous women find it hard to give birth to healthy newborns. The patrilineal society favored the birth of the son to ensure which they amassed virtues and consumed specific magical foods. These magical food items could not just guarantee the sex of the fetus, it could even alter the sex of the fetus to the desired one if consumed in the first trimester of pregnancy. It is also believed that if a family commits a crime of heinous nature all their amassed virtues for which they were blessed in return as sons would vanish and they will have to perform atonements to ensure the birth of sons in the family. The fear and anxiety experienced by the folks of pre-modern Kerala are tackled through vows, exorcisms, and magic.



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