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by

Annie George

For Saramma George, Elizabeth George and Prithviraj Chattopadhyay, with gratitude

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Abstract

**Ruptured Identities, Divided Loyalties: Never-married Women Negotiating "Family" in Kerala, India**

As in the rest of India, mature, never-married women are considered problematic within the Kerala social order which values heterosexual familialism. Historical, socio-economic, and demographic changes sweeping through Kerala have forced women and men in different social positions to respond differently to traditional gendered life-choices. In this changing context, definitions and representations of unmarried Kerala women are complicated, and challenge received ideas of ideal Indian womanhood.

Using in-depth interviews, I study the work performed by fifty-one never-married Kerala women, their families, and social institutions to continually negotiate and make meaning of the presence of large numbers of never-married women in Kerala society. Framing my research questions and analysis within theories of family, regimes of familialism, and marginalities, I examine the subject positions that discourses of family, religion/caste purity, and gendered identities create for Kerala women. I also examine the ways in which the material positions and lived experiences of never-married women converge and diverge from these discursive constructs. These theoretical frames foreground the politics and processes of whom and what conditions get defined how, and societal and personal implications for those who are fall outside such definitions.

Through historical processes, a culture of familialism developed in modern Kerala which defined family as a conjugal, heterosexual unit and placed women in positions of

dependence on males and families. This definition of family had no clearly demarcated space for never-married women. Some never-married women supported their birth families for decades yet found only contingent familial support in their attempts at developing autonomous identities. Others rejected or were rejected by families for crossing boundaries such as caste, heterosexuality, and religious affiliation that families considered essential to their identities. Such women created alternate families including homoerotic, single person, and non-related group families.

This dissertation contributes to the sociology of women, gender and families in India, and to a nuanced understanding of ways in which the cultural logics of marriage, family, kinship and sexuality are renegotiated within a rapidly changing socio-economic and cultural context.

Richard Clarke, Chair

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.....i

Copyright Page.....ii

Dedication.....iii

Acknowledgements.....iv

Abstract.....vii

Table of Contents.....ix

**CHAPTER 1: SITUATING NEVER-MARRIED KERALA WOMEN ... ... ... ....1**

Introduction.....1

And so, the numbers of never-married women of Kerala.....7

The situation of never-married women of Kerala.....9

Research Questions.....11

Positioning the Study.....13

Significance of research on never-married women.....14

A BRIEF NOTE ON METHODS.....15

Sources of Data.....15

A. The women, the Interviews.....16

B. Families, friends of never-married women and other social actors.....22

METHODOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES.....23

A. Experience and Memory.....23

B. Field work and the "Outsider".....25

Overview of the Dissertation.....26

**CHAPTER 2: MARRIAGE AND FAMILIES IN KERALA: FROM COLONIAL RUPTURES TO NEGOTIATIONS WITH GLOBALIZATION ..... ... ... .....29**

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF KERALA.....31

Caste hierarchy in Travancore.....32

Social Movements.....37

Post-Independence Kerala: Radical policies, fiscal crises.....42

THE CENTRALITY OF MARRIAGE IN KERALA ... ..... ... ..... ..... ... ....46

A Brief History of Changes in Marriage and Family.....47

Patrilineal Christian laws and practices.....49

Matrilineal Groups, Family Structures and Practices, and Property Relations.....53

The "Problem" of Sambandham marriage.....57

Reform through Legislation.....61

Changing Marriage and Family Practices.....62

Conclusions.....64

**CHAPTER 3: MAPPING DISCOURSES ON FAMILIES ... ... ... ... ... .... . ...66**

Introduction.....66

Families and the culture of familialism.....66

Reviewing Indian Families.....68

B. Culture of Familialism as Regime of Family.....74

C. Marginality, Places and Identities.....79

D. Gender and Gender Regimes.....83

Patriarchy, gender regimes and gender bargains.....85

Narratives as performance.....89

NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN'S DISCOURSES ON MARRIAGE ... ... ... ... .....92

Companionate Marriages... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... .....93

Claiming Individual Accountability..... ... ....97

Claiming Personal Freedom..... ... ... ... ... ... 100

Making Sense of Singlehood through their Mothers' Stories..... ... ...104

Conclusion: Risks of marriage and Singlehood ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 112

**CHAPTER 4: NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES: BINDING TIES, FLEEING BINDS ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...**115

Introduction.....115

Never-married women and their families: occupying a range of positions.....117

MUTUALITY OF FAMILY OBLIGATIONS ACROSS GENERATIONS ... .....122

Re-examining mutual obligations..... ... ...128

ABSENT FATHERS AND DEPENDENTMOTHERS ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... .130

Suja Lukose: Duty and Loss.....131

Shiney Joseph: Family Dependence Restricts her chances.....136

Absent fathers, dependent mothers: what costs for never-married women?.....140

WEAK BROTHERS STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S FAMILIAL POSITION ... ... ...144

Kamala Vijayan: Balancing autonomy and obedience to family.....144

Ponnamma Anthony: Poverty, family obligations and securing a sense of place ... ...149

Weak Brothers: What gains and costs to never-married women?.....153

Conclusion.....154

**CHAPTER 5: TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES, DIVIDED LOYALTIES, ALTERNATIVE FAMILIES ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...158**

Introduction.....158

Challenging patriarchal family authority, reworking loyalty: Janakiamma ... . ... ... ..160

Challenging "normative biography," maintaining family peace: Rebecca Alphonse ..168

Transgressing caste-religious boundaries: Kalyani.....172

Creating pragmatic households: Saraswati and Padmaja.....179

Traversing "marriage" space, creating alternate families.....186

Conclusions.....191

**CHAPTER 6: POSITIONING GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH SEXUALITY NARRATIVES ... ... ... ... .... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... .. ...194**

Introduction.....194

Bodies, boundaries, locations, and respectability.....196

End-of-interview narratives as sexuality narratives.....200

Positioning my own singlehood in Kerala ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...206

Homosocial, homoerotic respectability ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ..210

Lalitha Asokan: fracturing respectability.... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...213

Srilatha Chandran: widening the terms of discourse .....222

Conclusion: the work of sexuality narratives and stories .....229

**CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS ..... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... .....233**

REFERENCES .....239

Appendix 1: Socio-demographic Profile of Fifty-One Women Participants.....258

Appendix 2: Methodological and Analytic strategies .....260

Appendix 3: Consent To Be a Research Subject .....265

Appendix 4: Interview guide for never-married Women .....268

Appendix 5: Kerala Women: A review of their situation .....270



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# CHAPTER 1: SITUATING NEVER-MARRIED KERALA WOMEN

## Introduction

My thesis in this dissertation is that their marital status shapes the lives of never-married women. In the same way that men's and women's lives are shaped by their gender, class, caste and race, and people's sexualities mark their experience in the world, never-married women's lives are structured by and constituted through their singlehood. Any system of differentiation shapes those on whom it bestows privileges as well as those it oppresses. In this dissertation I argue that for never-married women of Kerala, India, singlehood is a structural location which brings advantages and disadvantages, a "standpoint," a place from which never-married women both view and (re)invent themselves, others and at society at large, and a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. My goal here is to explore and examine the terrain of adult, female, never-married singlehood in Kerala.[1]

Pervasive divisions across Kerala society along lines of caste, class, gender, religion and politics through the centuries have been documented and interpreted, quashing false universalisms and homogenizing ideas about Kerala and Indian society.[2] Yet one such division – that of marriage, has received far less attention. Even in the face of widespread economic, legal and social changes, begun in colonial times and continuing through the present, which offer men and women multiple opportunities to order their lives differently, the prevailing assumption is that adult Keralites will marry.

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[1]Kerala is a state on the south-west coast of India. It is particularly well-known because it has made more progress on standard development indicators than most other Indian states. For more details about Kerala history, see Chapter Two. For a review of the situation of Kerala women, see Appendix 5.
[2] For details of these studies, see the references cited in Chapter Two and Appendix 5.



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Indeed, heteronormativity,[3] in the form of heterosexuality, marriage and, through both, the reproduction of Kerala society and its culture of familism,[4] are assumed for all Kerala people, even as these notions are taking new forms. Devika (2002) argues that emergent since the 19th century and steadily inching towards hegemonic status is a sexual morality which relied on heterosexuality as the major mode of regulating desire, and on patriarchy as the major mode of organizing power relations between the sexes. The modern nuclear family now houses this emergent sexuality/conjugality. Yet, not all Kerala adults marry, and the category of never-married women decenters assumptions not only about sexuality, marriage and familism, but also about gender and modernity.

A Kerala woman's primary adult social status customarily is that of wife and mother.[5] An unmarried woman is structurally interstitial because she is neither a child nor is she assigned full adult status. She simply does not fit into accepted social categories. As unmarried women are not expected to have experienced the rites of passage – sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood– which allegedly

[3] Heteronormativity denotes the equation of humanity with heterosexuality and describes the formal and informal social organization of sexuality in Western societies (Seidman, 1997). Sexuality is understood as an organizing principle of social life that upholds a homosexual/ heterosexual division in which only sex linked to long-term intimacy through marriage, with its associated form of reproduction and family, remain "pure." All other forms of sex and family relationships are marginalized. More recent understanding, primarily but not exclusively emanating from Western sources is that it is no longer the hetero/homo binary that signals "purity" and "contamination," but is instead social practices of normativity that do so. For instance, in the U.S., gay and lesbian identities are legitimated as long as other aspects of the self conform to "normal" "typical" social practices (Seidman, 1997). Throughout this dissertation I explore the constructedness of heteronormativity and theorize never-married women as challenging and accommodating selected normative ideals. I recognize the problems of transposing the concept of heteronormativity as developed specifically with respect to western societies onto another cultural system. Yet, I do so, because there are many parallels between the structures and practices of families in contemporary Kerala and western societies.

[4] The term "culture of familism" is defined and discussed in depth in Chapter Three.

[5] Exceptions to this arrangement were Nambudiri Brahmin women of old, many of whom had to remain unmarried because of their practice of allowing only the eldest Nambudiri son to marry. Other exceptions were women who joined Christian and Hindu religious orders. Christian orders have been documented as early as the 1830s in Kerala, and Hindu temples always had spaces for women devotees.



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transform girls into women, they occupy a liminal social place. Notions of honor are central to concerns about allegedly uncontrolled female sexuality, and hence crucial in defining the positions of unmarried women.[6] Yet definitions and representations of unmarried Kerala women are complicated. Some of them may be conventionally dependent on their families. But others, through their economic independence and financial support of families, migration to distant places for work, social mobility, care of elderly family members (commonly understood as the responsibility of sons), and/or sexual freedom, challenge received ideas of "ideal Indian womanhood."

Marital status shapes the lives of never-married women because of the ways in which Kerala social life has been and continues to be structured. Marriage is the career for which all women are trained right from childhood and is the normative biography[7] for all Indian women. The social structural positions recognized for all women are those of daughter, wife, mother, and widow. Women's expected life course moves them from the control of their fathers, to that of their husbands, and on to that of their sons.[8] The position of daughters in their birth families is assumed to be transitory, only until marriage.

Unmarried adult women had no place in this structural positioning schema. Unmarried women are not the only persons who live outside acceptable family spaces in Keralan and Indian society. Typically other single women, most prominently widows, but also women religious and "dishonorable" women such as prostitutes, have also

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[6] I will discuss the connections between honor and female, adult singlehood in Chapter 7.
[7] The concept of normative biography is defined and discussed in detail in Chapter Three.
[8] This was not the case for matrilineal women. In Chapter Two I will detail the social changes that occurred to change a large section of Kerala from matrilineal and matrifocal communities to patrifocal communities.



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typically had liminal status vis-à-vis the family. Certain categories of women in these structural positions, for instance widows and prostitutes, have been the focus of research and analysis.[9] Perhaps unmarried women have been rendered invisible because of both the numerical *and* ideological ubiquitousness of marriage and married, or formerly married women. For instance, the structural counterpart of the *sumangali*, the auspicious married woman is not the unmarried woman (an oxymoron in Indian thinking) but the widow.

Writing about widows, Chakravarti and Gill (2000) note, "however much one tries to erase the figure of the widow, she is very much there especially in the social memory as well as in individual memories of most households – an aunt, a sister, a grandmother, or a distant family member who came to live with the family and provided most of the labor in the kitchen…" The authors argue that widows are among the most vulnerable categories of Indian women, a vulnerability that is shared with other single women, but is also unique to them. They note that the quiet and less dramatic deprivations of widows include their difficulties in accessing their share of property or their assets, cramped living space, restrictions on movement and on participation in employment of productive labor expect under terms set by the in-laws, and the lack of social support. And yet, despite being both economically and physically vulnerable, widows, the authors argue, have rarely figured in public policy. They are subject to the arbitrary will of other members of the household and are seen as lacking agency and autonomy – the very capacity to make decisions for themselves. The cycle of oppressive

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[9] For writings on widows, see Chakravarti, U., & Gill, P. (2000) and Chen, M., & Dreze, J. (1995). For studies on prostitutes and other marginal women, see respectively Harlan, L., & Courtright, P. B. (1995) and Oldenberg Talwar, V. (1990).



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practices, dependency, and physical vulnerability exists within a set of social relations upheld by the patriarchal family and a patriarchal community which reinforces family control over the widow. The material dimensions of widowhood, the economic deprivations and social ostracism have continued to govern the lives of widows who have limited family, community or state support.

Chakravarti and Gill's (2000) observations can be seen to apply as well to never-married and all single women in India. But unlike widows of India who have been kept alive in the public consciousness, never-married adult women[10] of India and Kerala have not captured the public imagination or become the foci of policy and program concerns. Nor have they been the subjects of academic inquiry as frequently as married women, widows, and prostitutes. They are not protagonists of novels, plays or films. Although they exist, never-married women appear to be covered by a shroud of public silence. The questions of material existence that apply to widows apply equally to never-married women, namely questions of property-rights, rights to residence, and often unwanted economic dependence on male kin. In addition, existential issues of psychological vulnerability, and suppressed anger against the very people on whom they may be dependent are also ignored.

I argue that the over determination of marriage and motherhood for Indian women marks the difference in the situation of widows and never-married women. If a widow had children, and particularly, it is alleged, sons, then the question of her security is assumed to be much less problematic. It is expected that children, and particularly sons,

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[10] I am not referring to never-married young women, usually in their twenties and early thirties, who are waiting for marriage. These women are usually protagonists of popular films and novels.



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will take care of their widowed mothers in old age. Never-married women are expected to be celibate; with the possibility of having children negatively sanctioned, they do not have the socially approved in-built security of care in later life that children reportedly provide. Moreover, children and parents constitute family, which can continue to provide emotional support for widowed women. With the recent but long-term changes in Kerala family formation, from large joint extended families to nuclear families as households, life-long membership in a family is no longer guaranteed to never-married women. As in the case of widows and other single women, material and ideological structures have shaped both law and custom governing the lives of never-married women.

Indian scholarship on married women, widows, prostitutes and devadasis,[11] with the near absence of attention to other adult women, raises the question of whether there are social-structural and discursive spaces for never-married women. People in Kerala were bewildered by the topic of my research. "Why unmarried women, why not study widows?" was one common reaction. Others asked, "Why not study divorced women? Divorces are increasing in all the communities in Kerala." I was repeatedly told that unmarried women are "not a problem. Families look after their unmarried women." I would also be informed that there were very few unmarried women while the numbers of widows was greater.

Widows have been the focus of scholarly attention because, through their large numbers and their particular social vulnerability, they are considered a "social problem." Historically, the British colonial attention focused critically on the practice of sati and

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[11] Devdasis are women who are dedicated to goddesses. There is a long history of devdasis in India, for details see: Margolin, F.



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brought international attention to the situation of widows in India (Butalia 2000; Mani 1989; Mani 1989a; Menon and Bhasin 1998). The 1991 census reveals that there are at least 33 million widows in India today (Chen and Dreze 1995). Arguments for attention to widows follows from assumptions society has a debt and responsibility to provide them services and care which, at the societal level, can be done most efficiently if they are categorized as "social problems." The puzzle is that widows *and* unmarried women, and indeed, all adult women who are not socially/ structurally associated with a man, share similar social positions and constructions. Never-married women *and* widows could be poor and dependent on family, or financially self-sufficient. Adult single women could be welcomed or rejected by their families. They can possibly face the social stigma and "inauspiciousness" associated with their particular marital status (unmarried, divorced, deserted, and widowed). Unlike widows or prostitutes (who evoke strong public emotion and are considered social problems) and workers (who articulate demands on the state or their employers through their labor unions), never-married women neither evoke public attention nor are they organized to make demands on society. Hence, they are not perceived to be a "social problem." They are numerically insignificant compared to currently married women and widows. Nevertheless, never-married women must negotiate their positions within their families, families which are still generally considered to be private and unproblematic spaces.

**And, so, the numbers of never-married women**

There are large numbers of never-married Kerala women. The 1991 Census shows that while 79.5 per cent of all Indian women aged 15 to 44 were married, only 64 per cent



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Kerala women aged 15 to 44 were.[12] While a considerable number of these non-married women may have been formerly married, the category also includes never-married women. Kerala State data indicate that by age 30, 80 per cent of all Kerala women are married, leaving the possibility that some of the remaining 20 per cent may continue to be never married. Billig (1992) cites Goyal's estimate that in 1981, 3.54 per cent of Kerala women, compared to 0.64 per cent for all India, were never married at age 35-40. This represented only a small increase from 3.23 per cent since 1961. Observing that Kerala already has the highest incidence of never-married adult women in India, Billig predicted that there would be an increase in never-married women Kerala women in the 1991 Census. He noted that Kerala may become the first Indian state where a substantial proportion (6 or 7 per cent) of women never marry, as many of the women who delayed marriage in the 1980s opt to remain single. While this proportion would be unprecedented for modern India, it would still be lower than that of most Western nations.

My review of the census data for 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991 (2001 census data tables were not available at the time of my study) showed that Kerala has had between three and five times as many never-married women aged 30 and older as the rest of India. For instance, in 1991, there were 1,598,896 never-married women aged 30 and over in India. They formed 0.71 per cent of the total number of Indian women aged 30 and over. That same year, 1991, Kerala had 231,345 never-married women aged 30 and above,

[12] Government of India (1991). Census of India 1..Kanitkar and Mistry (2000) used the 1992-'93 National Family Health Survey and found that in rural areas, for India as a whole, the median age at first marriage was 16.5 years, below the legal minimum marriage age of 18 years. Kerala had the highest median age at marriage for rural women, at 20.4 years. In urban areas, the median age at marriage for India was 19.7 years, and for urban Kerala it was 21.2 years



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constituting 2.39 per cent of the total population of Kerala women aged 30 and over. In contrast, in 1991, 26,205,118 or 6.5 per cent and 1,289,059 or 8.77 per cent women (aged 18 and over) of India and Kerala respectively were widows.

***The Situations of Never-married Women of Kerala***

Kerala draws considerable attention among scholars because of the preoccupation with its unique political and socio-cultural history (Fuller 1976; Fuller 1996; Gough 1959; Lemercinier 1981; Lemercinier 1984; Mencher 1965), the "Kerala model of development," (Franke and Chasin 1994; Franke and Chasin 2000; Ratcliffe 1978; United Nations 1975) and the so-called "high status" of Kerala women (Alexander 2000; Eapen and Kodoth 2001b; Ramachandran 1996; Saradamoni 1994).[13] Kerala women are considered to enjoy a higher status than other Indian women because they have higher sex ratios, higher rates of literacy and life expectancy, and lower rates of fertility and mortality. Anthropological studies conclude that the patterns of development in south India are more "women friendly" (Karve 1953). Yet these aggregate figures reveal only a partial picture and mask the heterogeneity and divisions among Kerala women along categories of caste, class, religion, party and non-party political affiliations, age, sexual orientation, marital status, motherhood and migration history. These divisions, and the differentiated social history of the state, mark Kerala women differently.

Since Kerala women have been among the most literate as compared to women of other Indian states, much has been written about the "high status" of women in Kerala, and their central role, historically, in the state's social development (Jeffrey 1992).

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[13] See Appendix 5 for details and references to the "Kerala phenomenon" especially as it impacts Kerala women.



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However, Kerala scholars have been revising their assessments of Kerala's social development outcomes, especially with the rising visibility of gender based violence (Devika and Kodoth 2001; Vijayan and Sandhya 2000), increasing mental health problems that are most frequently manifested in increasing suicides (Halliburton 1998), and the spread of dowry and related crimes[14] (den Uyl 1995; Lindberg 2001).

Scholars have rightly attempted to locate the contradictions in Kerala's social development by locating these contradictions in the interstices of relations of power between men and women, commonly played out in families (Eapen and Kodoth 2001a). Eapen and Kodoth (2001a) argue that changes in the structure and practices of family in Kerala in the past century, themselves shaped by wider social processes, had far-reaching implications for gender relations. They argue that the dominant persuasion of families today, particularly in terms of their role in regulating access to material and social resources is patrifocal. The authors cite Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994) who used the term "patrifocal" to understand a family that is in important aspects focused on the interests of men and boys. These male oriented structures and beliefs, argue Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, constitute a socio-cultural complex that profoundly affects women's lives. The structural features of patrifocal families include patrifocal residence, patrilineal descent, and patrilineal inheritance and succession, all of which emphasize the centrality of males to the continuity and well-being of families.

Eapen and Kodoth (2002) argue that on the one hand, changes in marriage, inheritance and succession practices, particularly in the former matrilineal groups, have

[14] Since 1961 when the Dowry Prohibition Act was enacted, it is a criminal act to receive or give dowry.



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weakened women's access to and control over inherited resources. On the other hand, changing levels of female employment and the persistence of a gendered work structure have limited their access to "self-acquired" sources of wealth. At the same time, they note, it is in the norms of masculinity and femininity that are taking shape in the context of emerging consumer practices[15] that the details of a patrifocal ideology are being consolidated and reinforced. I consider this analysis to be correct, and I argue that this consolidation of patrifocal ideology is a conservative change that invests men with greater control over material and symbolic resources and over women and women's sexualities and identities. It is in the context of this entrenched patrifocal culture that I locate and attempt to understand the seeming incongruity of never-married women.

***Research Questions***

Through focused attention on never-married women in Kerala, my goal is to understand and explain the apparently contradictory situations of contemporary women in Kerala when the usual portrayal of them is as perhaps the best situated of all Indian women. More specifically, I explore the places that never-married women occupy in the discourses on modern Indian/ Kerala womanhood. I examine the processes by which interlocking markers of identity shape, expand, limit, disrupt, and work the lives of never-married women. Through women's narratives I offer analyses of the consequences for women's material situations and their identities of their negotiations of positions as never-married women with their families.

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[15] For discussions of consumerism in Kerala, see Kurien, A. (2002). *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity. International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, Osella, F., & Osella, C. (1999). From transience to immanence: consumption, life-cycle and social mobility in Kerala, South India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 989-1020.



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Marriage patterns and customs of different social and caste groups in Kerala have been studied extensively from a cultural differences perspective (den Uyl 1995; Fuller 1976; Gough 1959; Gough 1961), but critical assessments of marital status as a divisive marker of difference have been limited. Even the literatures that critically assess Kerala's changes from matriliny to patriliny assume that marriages will continue, although in different forms and with differing gains to the persons concerned. Works on Indian women on the "margins" of marriage (Harlan and Courtright 1995) and Indian widows (Chakravarti and Gill 2001; Chen and Dreze 1995) have critiqued marriage and brought attention to women who fall in the margins or outside marriage: their economic plight, social isolation, and cultural "inauspiciousness."[16] But, again, these women are defined in relation to marriage. An implicit assumption is that such women are "deserving" of understanding and attention because of having been formerly married and contributed to social reproduction through their work as mothers, and through participating in, and so legitimizing and normalizing, the processes of marriage, heterosexuality and the regime of family.

In sharp contrast, my attention is on women who, having never married, do not participate in the "marriage enterprise."[17] I want to examine how the fact of their singleness works for never-married women in different situations in their family lives; most often, they do not engage in biological reproduction/ reproduction of the labor force. How then are never married women implicated in the ideological reproduction of

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[16] AG: Have here a discussion of auspicious/ inauspicious; pure, impure, and perhaps say that never-married women are a kind of social pariah. (although that is too strong for my analysis).

[17] I use the term marriage enterprise in a narrow sense of a project that endorses heterosexuality, heteronormativity, motherhood, an through participation in this process, normalizing it.



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community? My argument risks being considered as essentializing of marital status. I do not wish to assert positionality as a kind of privileged rubric in anti-hegemonic representations of difference. I will argue that "never-married women" are multiply inscribed subjects who cannot be contained by essentialized terms and who, being simultaneously shaped by multiple discursive constructions, cannot be "determined" by any single one. In studying never-married Kerala women, I seek to elucidate the diverse ways in which these women experience their singleness[18] and the different forms of accommodation, resistance, silence and distance they may seek and negotiate within Kerala society and their cultural backgrounds. Concurrently, I seek to study the diverse ways in which the "fact" of never-married women is challenging, reworking and reinventing contemporary Kerala ideas and practices relating to gender differences, heterosexual familism, and modern Kerala subjectivitivities.

***Positioning the study***

Writing about never-married women requires choosing perspectives and selecting particular lenses through which to analyze and present their lives, since I reject selecting a neutral or all-encompassing perspective. This is a study in the sociology of gender and family. The perspectives of this study come "from below," giving voice to women who rarely if ever articulate their personal experiences and views in formal or theoretical

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[18] Single women could be celibate religious women, prostitutes, or in-between these two positions. They could be formerly married or never-married. The concept "never-married" women is slippery. Some "unmarried" women may live in sexual, marriage-like relationships with male and/ or female partners without the legal ties of marriage. Other "married" women may never have "lived with" (i.e., have had sexual relations) with their husbands; this was frequently the case with child widows see Visweswaran, K. (1997). Betrayal: An analysis in three acts. In C. Kaplan (Ed.), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (pp. 90-109). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



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spaces. My effort is to analyze multiple dimensions of female singlehood in Kerala, although many aspects must go unobserved and uncommented. My approach inevitably requires an inter-disciplinary point of departure, while trying also to maintain a long-term/ historical perspective, and to focus on different aspects of the lives of never-married Kerala women.

I have been conceptualizing, actualizing and writing this study during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a time when postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism have deeply challenged earlier theories, methodologies and epistemologies. Although not rooted in the postmodern tradition, theory and method in this project have not remained unaffected by the "cultural and linguistic turn." This study situates itself in the crossroads of sociology of families, gender studies, south Asia studies, and social anthropology, and is influenced by feminist theories and postmodern criticism. Research projects and subjects that occupy multiple, hybrid spaces must contend with differing and sometimes contradictory claims of theories of location, and postmodern and postcolonial theories. These theories provide the primary frameworks for this project, although I freely borrow constructs from other theories as well.

***Significance of research on never-married women of Kerala***

The importance of research on never-married women in Kerala is not only because of their numbers, but because the material and ideological positions and constructions of such women tell us about the situation of all Kerala women and Kerala society in general. Although there now are some reflexive attempts questioning the gains of the Kerala model (Tharamangalam 1998; Tharamangalam 1999), with a few exceptions, these have not extended to a critical review of gains for Kerala women from such social engineering.



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Until recently, it was assumed that what was good for Kerala was also good for Kerala women. However, there are now a few voices pointing to the differences among Kerala women, and questioning the premises of "development" projects that do not consider consequences for women (Eapen and Kodoth 2001b; Eapen and Kodoth 2002). Class and caste differences in Kerala also translate into differences in the lives of differently situated Kerala women. The experiences of being a never-married educated, professional, middle or upper class Hindu Kerala woman are quite different than those of a never-married Kerala woman who has a different profile.

This project contributes to the sociology of gender and gender politics in India, specifically in South India, especially within the categories of marital status as these are encoded within other markers of identity. It is a step in filling the gap in scholarship which has by and large ignored never-married women as an emergent category and subject position in postcolonial India. It offers a detailed examination and analysis of the lived experiences of never-married Kerala women, their experiences of marginality, and processes of negotiation that they and their families have engaged. This project contributes to a nuanced understanding of ways in which the cultural logics of "family" are renegotiated within postcolonial contexts. Most importantly, this work extends feminist analyses of difference.

## A Brief Note on Methods

### Sources of Data

I used four sources of data for this study: never-married women of Kerala who were living in Kerala during my field work period; family and friends of never-married women; other social actors; and secondary sources of data about Kerala and Kerala



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women. My primary source of data, however, was detailed interviews with never-married women Kerala women.

***A. The women, the interviews***

Between September 2001 and May 2002, I conducted in-depth interviews with fifty-one self-identified never-married Kerala women, thirty years and older, who ranged in age, social class, religion, caste, able-bodied/ disabled status, health status, sexual orientation, family situations, migratory status, and political orientations. They were all women who were born and spent the first sixteen years of their lives in the south Indian state of Kerala and whose family self-identified as Malayalees (people of Kerala who speak the Malayalam language). During the field work period, I lived in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, and contacted social organizations and persons in Trivandrum, Kollam, Allepy, Pathanamthitta and Kottayam Districts of Kerala state to locate never-married women. Although the women were living in one of these districts at the time I met them, their "origins" were from other parts of Kerala as well. The interviews were long; I usually spent between three and five hours with each woman, usually over two sessions. In each instance, the goal of our discussion was to situate the woman's singlehood in the context of her life. The women and I communicated in English and/ or Malayalam.

It is difficult to categorize definitively in any standardized fashion the class and economic backgrounds of these women. First, given differences of generation, region in Kerala, caste and class background, rural or urban upbringing meant different things in different contexts. For instance, the caste and class privileges in Kerala before and after independence had different meanings in differing social-political contexts. Similarly



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ideas of "independent women" had different meanings for women who came of age during the independence struggle of the 1930s and '40s, and those who were born later. For a profile of the women as a whole, see Appendix 1.

I interviewed women from a range of socio-economic statuses: upper middle, middle class and working class. The professionally employed, educated women constitute my upper middle class. The middle class are the government employees at a clerical level, as well as women employed in non-governmental organizations (NGOs); the working classes are women working as home nurses, self-employed, teachers in small schools, as well as those women who are completely bereft of any source of financial support. However, these categories are rather slippery. If socio-economic status is a composite of education and employment levels and annual income, I did not collect the annual incomes of any of these women. I interviewed a number of well-off women most of whom were professional women, highly educated, and who were or had been employed in professional capacities. These include a number of college professors, nurses and medical doctors. I met women from "old families" which had once had social standing and wealth, and which may or may not have had it when I met the particular women from that family. I also met women whose families had no particular eminence in their social circle, but the women, through their work, had carved out a social space and name for themselves. But I also came across a number of women who were highly educated as medical doctors, lawyers and professors but who did not have incomes commensurate with their educational levels. I met a number of women who had no sources of income and depended completely on their brothers. There are also women with very limited education but who are comparatively well-off because they were



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supported by family members. So, there is tremendous diversity in the socio-economic situations of the unmarried women I met.

The women ranged in age from thirty to ninety-four years. Fifteen women in their 30s, eleven were in their 40s, nine were in their 50s, eight were in their 60s, and eight women aged 70 years and over. In the women's childhoods their fathers had been, among other things civil engineers, priest, mid-level landowner, wealthy landlord, civil servant, cook, fisherman, landless agricultural laborer, butcher, and agricultural laborer with a small plot of land. The women's mothers had all been full-time home-makers except for almost a third who had been agricultural workers or domestic helpers.

The women were all Hindus and Christians. Despite my best efforts, including spending time with women active in Muslim women's organizations, I was unable to meet a single Kerala Muslim woman who was over thirty and never-married. I identified only one unmarried Muslim woman, but as she was only twenty-three years old, although a rare feat for a Kerala Muslim woman, I did not include her in the study. Christian women represented the wide range of Christian groups that exist in Kerala. Syrian Christians were of Jacobite, Marthoma and Church of South India affiliations. Some were Roman Catholics, others were Latin Catholics, and two belonged to Pentecostal groups. Hindu women were of the Nambudiri Brahmin, Nair, Ezhava and Vishvakarma castes. A large number of Hindu women did not reveal their caste status to me, despite my statements that I sought the information to understand their situation and not to discriminate.

The category "unmarried" women appears to be unambiguous, but it is not. All the women I interviewed, except two, self-identified as never-married women. The



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exceptions were a married woman who was publicly passing as never-married, and a never-married woman who was publicly passing as a widow. I also interviewed a number of women, living in long-term heterosexual relationships. They were publicly assumed to be "married," and it was only on close questioning that the fact of their non-marriage arose. I met a number of women who lived their adult lives assuming they were married, and when they had a legal problem, discovered that by legal definitions, they were unmarried. As adults, the women were diverse but they were not proportionately representative of the Kerala female population as a whole. One woman had adopted a child, and one other had given birth to and was raising two children. Four women were physically handicapped, and one had acquired a life-threatening illness before she reached a "marriageable age."

Four women had homo-erotic relationships. Two of the women actively denied their "lesbian" sexual orientation to me, but in their narratives told me that they loved women. The woman who put me in touch with these two women told me that they were known in certain social groups as "lesbian". A third woman did not call herself lesbian either, but in her narrative and details of her emotional life, she told me that she loved a woman. The fourth was retired, well over 70 years of age, and most of her adult life had been lived with a woman companion. The couple had spent their working years outside Kerala, with frequent visits back home, and had then spent all their retired lives in the family home of the woman I interviewed. I assume that the rest of the women were heterosexual although one of these women told me that she thought she was bi-sexual but that she had not yet "implemented" it.



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The group was more educated than an average group: twenty-one women had postgraduate degrees, and at the other end of the scale four had not completed high school. Two women self-identified as illiterate. The women's status in the workforce was extremely varied. Seventeen were not in the paid work force. Of these, eleven were retired after a life-time of wage work.

As I progressed with the interviews, I realized that these women could be categorized broadly into three categories: women for whom religion was a central part of their lives; women who self-identified as feminist; and women who claimed to be not strongly influenced by any ideology. During the eight month research period, I consciously monitored the diversity of the group on these as well as other markers of difference. In constructing the group, I intentionally "over-represented" women involved in women's movements and women involved in religion. I wanted to "over-represent" lesbian and bi-sexual women and unmarried mothers because I felt their voices needed to be heard, but the conservative social climate of Kerala made it extremely difficult for me to meet women in these categories who were willing to speak to me. My goal in constructing this sample was to scan as broad a range of possibilities of ways of living female singlehood in Kerala within my financial and time constraints as a graduate student.

The way the women chose to interpret my research goals, their interest or lack of it to participate, the words they used to tell their stories, their joy, anger, anxiety and disinterest at different points in our conversations all expressed a great deal about the many ways in which singlehood is lived and perceived in Kerala. Given the flexibility of an interview, there was room for diverse interpretation of the issues at hand. Thus, some



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women took my interest in "unmarried women of Kerala" as an invitation to talk about their history of being in the "marriage market" and the processes they and their families had undergone to find themselves a partner. Others talked about political influences in their formative years which had influenced them to focus on career and either to reject marriage outright or to not put it at the forefront of their future plans. Others took it as an opportunity to advise me to get married, cautioning me to avoid the problems of elder singlehood. Yet others felt that if they had not had any "affairs" or an "interesting history" they were not "qualified" to be interviewed.

I encouraged women to interpret broadly my invitation to "tell me about your life as an unmarried Kerala women" in order to place singlehood in the context of their own particular concerns and interests. Descriptions of sexual harassment, problems at work, social interactions with neighbors and landlords, and involvement in political parties all provided me with clues about what might make a difference to never-married women's consciousness about singlehood. Their narratives continually reminded me that all women experience a complex interweaving of privileges and oppressions, constraints and opportunities, sorrows and joys.

I gained access to these women through personal networks, as well as through contacts with social service organizations. This snowball method of sampling was best suited to my purpose because I was less interested in characterizing a "typical" unmarried Kerala woman or typical answers to questions about singlehood in Kerala. Instead, I sought to unravel the discourses that shape women's narratives in singlehood, family, heterosexuality, and social life in Kerala. Friends and relatives helped me get in touch with women, who then often recommended friends or acquaintances. This created small



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clusters of women in the sample who had recommended friends or acquaintances. The largest such cluster is five women, out of this "sample" of fifty-one women. The limitations of this sampling approach is that of not having a more diverse range of women – Muslim women, women from the lowest caste groups, women who had migrated to other parts of India and overseas, and women living in old-age homes.

The interviews occurred at the women's choice of sites. Most frequently, we met at their homes. A few women preferred to come to my house, while in some cases we met in a private room in an NGO's office complex, or at the woman's work place. Four women expressed discomfort with the conversations being tape-recorded, in these cases I took detailed notes. In twenty-eight cases we met twice, the other narratives are based on single interviews, typically lasting between two and three hours. Most interviews were conducted either in English or Malayalam. Which ever the language used, in most cases, women's narratives were liberally interspersed with phrases and sentences from the other language as well. Since their language is a crucial aspect of the interview and analysis, I cite their words as accurately as I can, making changes only for purposes of clarity for a wide audience.

***B. Family, Friends of Never-Married Women, and other Social Actors,***

I had planned to interview family members of unmarried Kerala women. Interestingly, despite serious efforts, most family members refused to talk to me about their unmarried adult daughters. I suspect that the stigma of having an unmarried daughter was the primary reason for all refusals. I spoke with three family members and one friend. I also interviewed a number of lawyers, media persons, social activists, and religious leaders about their views on the situation of unmarried Kerala women. I do not quote these



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sources extensively, mainly because they essentially said that unmarried adult women were "not a problem" and were not distinctive. However, these interviews and views provide contextual information about the social construction of adult female singlehood in contemporary Kerala.

**Methodological and Epistemological Issues**

***A. Experience and Memory***

Ethnographic truths are inherently partial, committed and incomplete (Clifford 1986). An interview narrative is not, in any simple sense, the telling of a life so much as it is a story in the making, angled towards my questions, and an occasion for each woman to articulate her ever-changing sense of self and her place in a changing world. At many moments, I experienced glimpses of what was not being expressed. For example when I called to schedule an interview with Sukanya Gopal[19] and said that I wanted to talk to her about unmarried Kerala women, she said that she would have a lot to tell me because she felt like a "freak." Yet, when we met in person, she did not use that phrase or any similar phrase while narrating her experiences. In other example, in my several extended interactions with Suja Lukose and Shiney Joseph, they alluded to their sexual experiences, but they chose not to elaborate. Many older women spent less time talking about the processes by which they evaded or actively rejected marriage and more about their present living situations. In these ways, I saw the eruption of memories and the suppressing of experiences during the interviews.

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19 All names and some other defining characteristics have been changed to preserve anonymity.



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What is remembered or forgotten, what is voiced or remains unvoiced constitute the landscape of narrative interviews. The women were multiply positioned in relation to these life narratives. Further, they and I were co-producers of these narratives. But they were also observing and reflecting on themselves and the social world in which they lived. In other words, they were the text, and they were also makers and evaluators of the text. And, I too am a co-producer of these narratives, observing the lives described and the mode of telling them. In a wider sense, these narratives intersect with other local and global histories of Kerala, and Kerala women.

As I analyzed the interviews, I took the approach that these are narratives about women's lives, about what matters to them, about living a single life in Kerala, and aspects of family, autonomy, and identity. Interviews have inherent limitations because they are manipulated conversations, by both researcher and person interviewed. I considered these interviews as an opportunity for unmarried women to generate accounts of their lives and their selves that they considered appropriate to the situation. Their narratives are what women chose to represent as experience in the context of the interview. However, given that our experiences are not simply static events of the past that are easily accessed through memory, what women express through interviews are not mere recollections of past experiences. Instead they are ever-changing accounts of the past that are told through the lens of the present. I understand these narratives as stories of experiences, filtered through experiences, and told in the present. I attend to women's subjectivities and lived experience, not unproblematically, but always mindful that experience is always already interpreted (Scott 1992) and that knowledge is always multiple, partial, and situated (Haraway 1991). I am not concerned with whether the

women are telling "the truth" about their lives or remembering their past experiences as it happened. Rather, I see these narratives as providing the women at the time of telling, and me both then and at the time of analysis and writing, important clues about fundamental frames of meaning that continually shape their perceptions of experience.

Taken collectively, these interviews are not without contradictions, whether within an interview or across all interviews. Frequently women gave different accounts about various aspects of their lives. To that extent, there is no singular overarching narrative of singlehood, family and gender identities that emerges. Instead, these narratives shed crucial light on the tensions and contradictions of female singlehood that shape and constrain single women in the context of post-colonial Kerala. Underneath the differences among the narratives, the more fundamental themes that shape women's language on matters of gender, singlehood, family and sexuality provide important indications about the impacts of post-colonial, highly developed Kerala in their day to day lives.

### *B. Field work and the "Outsider"*

The representation of any social experience includes the social location of the researcher as well as those being researched. As the researcher, I am an active participant in shaping the phenomena I sought to study. While I have never married, am of Malayalee cultural heritage, professionally educated and middle-aged, these are mere markers of my multiple and fragmented social positions. More accurately, I occupy multiple, shifting social positions that are inherently blurred, and my fuzzy positionality shaped the questions asked, the process of field work, and my interpretations of the meanings of women's experiences of singlehood. In other words, as a never-married Kerala woman

and also a sociologist and researcher, I was not merely a conduit for the "truth" of female singlehood in Kerala; I actively participated in a particular construction of knowledge about this phenomenon. Who are the outsiders in lived experiences of adult female singlehood in contemporary Kerala? Married women? Men? Non-Malayalees? In that case, how do we define who is a Malayalee? Anyone who interprets other people's lives is an outsider, more or less, depending of age, gender, ethnicity, class, religion or family background, to which we can all also add ideology, worldly experience and sympathetic understanding.

The concept of "situated knowledges," or contextual knowledges in contrast with universal knowledges, is useful in insider/outsider discussions (Haraway 1991). Haraway's perspective argues that our position with regard to how we see things, depending on our political standpoints, family traditions, personalities, and so on are more important than factors such as essential categorizes. Situated knowledge is not universal or total, it is partial and specific to given contexts. It highlights power relations between researchers and researched and I have tried to reveal these relations in the chapters that follow.

***Overview of the Dissertation***

Chapter One discusses the problem of marital status as a structuring device in Kerala and its consequences on the lives of never-married Kerala women, and the reasons for selecting this problem for study. This chapter has a methods section with information about the women and the interviews, and also a section of my own situatedness. In Chapter Two I first present a historical overview of Kerala and a brief history of the changes in family laws and custom that, in turn, brought about changes in marriages in

the Kerala Hindu community. I also present a brief history of Syrian Christian marriages in Kerala.

Chapter Three begins with a discussion of the major theoretical lenses that have framed this project. These include problematizing the concept of family; the ideology and culture of familism; regimes of family; marginalities and outsider-within locations; and performance and performativity. I then offer unmarried women's discursive constructions of marriage and the counter-discourses they use to talk on occasion about their own unmarried state as better than marriage, in terms of the impermanence of marriages, the unfaithfulness of children, security in old age and the troubles of living in marriages. I analyze these discourses in terms of the risks of marriage and singlehood for never-married women and their families.

Chapter Four examines at the ways in which families and unmarried women come to terms with the fact of an adult unmarried woman. I present an array of family types that vary in their responses to never-married women as well as a range of never-married women whose responses to family situations vary. I then show how women and families, bound to each other through ideas of familial obligation and reciprocity, negotiate social places for themselves. Through these presentations I analyze the ways in which thse women and their families accommodate to the presence of never-married adult daughters.

Chapter Five pursues the stories of never-married women who broke away from their families. I examine the processes of defining boundaries of social propriety and place marking, and the transgressions that "forced" some women to sever connections with their families, and the consequences for women of this severance. I present a section on women's processes of creating alternate families; the meanings such families

have for them, and the ways in which alternate families shape women's choices and subjectivities. In Chapter Six, I present and analyze the ways in which Kerala women used narrative to maintain family and personal honor, even when they challenged and reworked these very concepts.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Seven summarizes the arguments of the dissertation and links them to wider discussions on subjectivities, differences, inclusion/ exclusion, hierarchies and their webs of power and their consequences for differently positioned people.

## CHAPTER 2: MARRIAGE AND FAMILIES IN KERALA: FROM COLONIAL RUPTURES TO NEGOTIATIONS WITH GLOB ALIZING

This research is an outcome and a process of trying to understand why Kerala is simultaneously one of the well-developed states of India, and where the situation for women is incommensurate with the status of most-developed state. In the 1970s, the concept of "the Kerala Model" emerged in development literature. This model showed that achievements had taken place in Kerala despite a lower GNP per capita than in other parts of India, and in the absence of industrialization. The conclusions of the researchers studying this phenomenon was that the Kerala experience had lessons for similar societies seeking social and economic advancement, particularly in the area of health and education (United Nations 1975). Since those times, Kerala's positive achievements in human development have been well documented. Social indicators for Kerala have been compared with India, with other countries in the poorer parts of the world, and with the so-called rich world. On development indicators such as literacy, infant mortality, life expectancy and birth rate, Kerala is far above low-income countries and can even be compared favorably with some countries in the West (Franke and Chasin 1994; Ramachandran 1996b; Sen 2000). The status of Kerala women as measured by literacy, health, and demographic indicators is far more favorable than the rest of India (Ramachandran 1996a). Kerala is the only state in India where the sex ratio (the proportion of females to males) is favorable to women.

Scholars point to the particular history of the region, dating back to the nineteenth century, and to a leftist policy with a radical strategy of redistribution to explain Kerala's

development (Jeffrey 1992; Tharakan 1985). In the late 1980s, Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin described Kerala as follows:

> Kerala is more than a tiny subtropical segment of the world's second most populous country. It is a region in which radical reform over the past several decades have brought some of the world's highest levels of health, education, and social justice. Kerala is an experiment in radical reform as a modern development strategy (Franke and Chasin 1994: 24).

The "Kerala model" is articulated as a model for social development and achievement of demographic goals, yet there is increasing reflexivity concerning the gains of this model.[20] In a rejoinder to critiques of his lead article, Tharamangalam (1998b) noted that the Kerala model, which had encouraged labor strong unionization as "evidence" of participatory democracy, had many linkages that encapsulated Kerala within larger regional, Indian and world system, and that these linkages were constitutive of Kerala's political economy and of the Kerala model itself. He presented examples of Kerala's agricultural, construction, domestic labor, and educational sectors where Kerala was presently dependent on other Indian states, and foreign countries for agricultural produce, products, labor, employment opportunities and services that were readily available in Kerala before Kerala became a "model. Present day Kerala is crucially dependent on wider economic worlds for rice, jobs, labor, higher education, consumer products and so on. His argument was that Kerala would scarcely be able to support its populist welfare-state model with high social indicators in the absence of economic development (Tharamangalam 1998a).

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[20] See for instance, articles in the special Kerala-focused volume of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 39, 1998.

**A brief historical overview of Kerala**

Located in the southwest of the Indian subcontinent, Travancore was never part of British India, but had always remained an independent, so called "princely" state. It was created in the eighteenth century when seven small kingdoms were annexed by the king, Martanda Varma, after a war. In 1949, the state of Cochin was integrated in its administrative territory, and the region was then named the state of Travancore-Cochin (Lindberg 2001: 12-13). The present state, Kerala, was formed on linguistic grounds in 1956, as part of an all-India policy of organizing people with a common language in the same state. A region of the old Madras presidency was added to the state, and another part, Kanyakumari, in the south, where people spoke Tamil, was transferred from Travancore to Tamil Nadu (Mathew 1989).

The British took control of Travancore state's economy in the early eighteenth century and since then they were the de facto rulers, although Travancore had its own monarchy. They gained political control of Travancore state by engaging into various treaties with local rulers, the first of which was signed in 1723. From that time onward until Indian independence in 1947, all decisions had to be approved by the British, and Travancore state had to acknowledge its colonial overlords, effectively losing its sovereignty.

One of the most decisive changes during the British period, starting from the mid-nineteenth century was the thorough transformation of the country into a capitalist cash economy (Jeffrey 1976; Jeffrey 1992; Kannan 1988). The economy was increasingly monetized: land was commodified and converted into plantations which grew crops

commercially; large-scale agri-processing industries began to appear; foreign trade grew dramatically; and state infrastructure was modernized to adapt to the expanding trade (Kannan 1988). Social changes in the society led to the creation of a rural proletariat (Kannan 1988). Agricultural laborers, who had formerly lived and worked on their landlords fields, faced widespread unemployment during the late 1920s and 1930s, and as a result, some began to work in newly-established agri-business factories.

***Caste hierarchy in Travancore***

The caste hierarchy in Travancore was more rigid and inhumane that in the rest of India and penetrated all aspects of life (Jeffrey 1992). In Sanskrit literature, the term varna, literally color, is associated with particular social occupations. The four varnas, hierarchically arranged, are the Brahmins (priests and religious teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (peasants and servants). The arrangement was based on the dichotomy of ritual purity and pollution, whereby the Brahmins, in their own view, were considered the purest (Quiley 1994). Some communities were considered below the varna system. They were seen as especially polluted because they performed "dirty work" such as removing dead animals or cleaning excreta. People of higher castes had to undergo ritual cleansing after coming in contact with "untouchable" persons and their belongings. Some scholars have pointed out that the varna system has never been a social reality and should be considered the construct of an "ideal" society (Pannikar 1956). Nevertheless, the notion of varna is widespread throughout India.

The tradition of four-fold division of society was not applicable to Travancore. Lindberg (2001) notes that in 1931, the census officer of Travancore asserted that the system of four varnas had never existed in Travancore and that the large majority were "stamped as Shudras".[21] The Kshatriyas were represented only by a minor group and the Vaishyas did not exist at all in Travancore. Foreign traders, such as Jews, Muslims, Brahmins from Madras Presidency, and Christians performed the functions of the Vaishyas, namely trade.

Caste necessarily ascribed occupations to its members. The hierarchy of caste was also the hierarchy of class. The "clean" (i.e., ritually non-polluting) or *savarna* castes were in order of social rank the Nambudiri Brahmins, Nairs, Syrian Christians, and the upper strata of Muslims (who were traders). The "unclean" caste consisted of the Ezhavas, who were just outside the boundary of the savarna castes. They were primarily engaged in manual occupations as field laborers, coconut tree climbers, toddy tappers, and some were peasant proprietors, and tenants. At the bottom of the social order were the "untouchable" and "unseebale" castes – Pulayas, Parayas, and Cherumars – who performed the "unclean" work of agricultural labor either as attached labor (attached to a specific landlord) or as slaves. The Ezhavas were treated by caste Hindus as untouchables, and they in turn considered caste groups below them as polluted. Thus, although their shared material wretchedness would eventually provide a common base for

[21] Govt. of India, Census of 1931, Vol. XXVII, Travancore, Part I, Report, p. 364., cited in Lindberg, A. (2001). *Experience and Identity. A Historical Account of Class, Caste, and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala, 1930-2000.* Lund: Department of History at Lund University.

mobilization among the lower castes, the social closure intrinsic to caste identities mitigated against any spontaneous solidarity.

In 1936, the British included all "untouchable" communities in an official list of so-called Scheduled Castes,[22] a quasi-legal concept which served to identify unprivileged groups that were entitled to certain quotas in parliament, education, and employment. In Travancore, all former slave-castes were placed among the Scheduled Castes, whereas Ezhavas were considered to be too privileged to be placed on this list, despite having been treated as strict untouchables in the past.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Brahmins constituted less than two per cent of the total population of Travancore, but they had the economic and spiritual power and occupied the uppermost social rank. The Brahmins were, however, divided into many sub-castes; the most influential Brahmins were the Nambudiris, who controlled the bulk of the land. The Nambudiris were the highest authorities in religious matters and, in the 19th century, were generally considered to be conservative and resistant to the influences of "western civilization."[23] Their system of kinship and inheritance was strictly patriarchal, and Brahmin women were held in strict seclusion. Men of Brahmin families customarily had alliances with Nair women, and this arrangement encouraged the matrilineal system of the Nairs. To keep family property undivided, only the eldest son

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[22] The term 'untouchable' is highly derogatory, which is why Mahatma Gandhi introduced a new term in 1993, Harijans, which is translated as 'people of god'. But this term is contested as well, and for many people it stands as an acknowledgement of the caste system, an therefore denotes a non-radical policy. The 'untouchables' themselves use the term 'Dalit' to indicate a radical break from the past and a new definition of themselves via-a-vis majoritarian society.

[23] Govt. of India, Census of India 1901, Vol. XXVI, Travancore, Part 1, Report p. 364 cited in Lindberg, A. (2001). *Experience and Identity. A Historical Account of Class, Caste, and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala, 1930-2000.* Lund: Department of History at Lund University.

of a Nambudiri family was permitted to marry a Brahmin woman, and so receive his inheritance. The acceptance of the matrilineal family system among the Nairs provided a means for a sexual life for younger Brahmin sons, who were not held responsible for their biological children. Thus, the caste system and its marriage rules supported the class hierarchy and maintained the social structure with regard to landowning.

The Nairs, like the Ezhavas, were a fairly large group and represented almost 20 per cent of the population of Travancore in the early 20th century; they were an influential caste of landowners and tenants who held slaves. Despite their power, they were regarded as Shudras by the Brahmins.[24] All the groups below the Nairs were considered to be outcastes. The Ezhavas were placed between the former slaves, Pulayas and Parayas, and the *savarnas*[25] in the caste hierarchy. The position of the Ezhavas was quite unclear at this time, and their community which comprised 17 per cent of the population, was not homogenous.[26] Traditionally, the Ezhavas had been engaged in occupations linked to the processing and trading of coconut products, but in the early 20th century they were divided into classes with differing economic status. They were no longer simply a groups of agricultural workers, but for some time as well had been well-organized, had run their own newspapers and educational institutions, and had led the struggle against caste discrimination (Jacob 1995; Lindberg 2001).

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[24] Lindberg (2002) notes that in the Census of 1901, Nairs were classified as Shudras. However, she further notes, this classification was declared erroneous by the census officer in 1931, who maintained that there was no evidence of the Nairs ever having been Shudras. Lindberg refers interested readers to see Govt. of India, Census of India 1931, Vol. XXVIII, Travancore, part 1, report, 376-377.

[25] Savarnas are castes who were considered twice-born, namely, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. In Kerala, this was effectively only the Nambudiris.

[26] Govt. of India, Census of India 1901, Vol. XXVI, Travancore, Part I, Report, pp 279ff, cited in Lindberg, A. (2001). *Experience and Identity. A Historical Account of Class, Caste, and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala, 1930-2000.* Lund: Department of History at Lund University.

Inter-caste codes of conduct, speech, dress and ritualized deference were strictly enforced, and so pervasive that they extended to the Christian and Muslim communities as well. These caste rules were not merely status markers; they codified a division of labor, property and even space. The hierarchy and rigid caste rules of Travancore can be illustrated by the so-called "distance" regulations that existed between different castes. Distinct rules existed regarding the degree to which proximity to different castes polluted a Brahmin. A Nair could approach a Brahmin but not touch him; an Ezhava could not come closer than twenty-four feet, and a Pulaya had to remain at a distance of seventy-two feet (Fuller 1976; Lemercinier 1984; Mencher 1965).

In addition to the rigid rules of distance, several other rules reminded the lowest castes of their "pollution" and eliminated the possibility of upward mobility. Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas, and Cherumars, among other "polluted" castes were forbidden to enter temples, public markets, and roads near the temples. They were denied the rights to own property and hold public office. They faced restrictions on clothes, hairstyles, ornaments and other externals adornments on their persons, and their property, for instance the design and decoration of their houses. They were forbidden to wear clean clothes and had to speak about themselves and their belongings in a most degrading manner, (Fuller 1976; Mathew 1986; Mencher 1980; Saradamoni 1980). Thus, the notion of ritual pollution was extended to include material and linguistic "uncleanness", which further demeaned their self-identity. Connected to the concept of pollution was a strict rule

prohibiting inter-caste dining and all inter-caste marriages except those between Brahmin men and Nair women.[27]

Although Hindus comprised 60 per cent of the population, with the rest being equally divided among Christians and Muslims, all groups were implicated in the stratified hierarchy of the caste system. In Travancore, the status of women was tied to their caste and class positions. But regardless of position, all women faced specific disabilities. Many Nambudiri Brahmin women remained unmarried in accordance with that caste's particular wealth maintenance strategies, and lived under severe physical and social restrictions. Nair and Ezhava (Hindu) women and some communities of Muslim women enjoyed the privileges of a matrilineal system that gave them sexual and physical freedom, and ensured them lifelong maintenance through joint ownership of the matrilineal household and its properties. Pulayas and Parayas were treated as slaves and such women enjoyed no dignity (Saradamoni 1980). Christians and some Muslim communities followed the patrilineal system, and their women faced the strictures of a patriarchal social order (Chandy 1995; Gulati et al. 1996; Lemercinier 1984).

***Social Movements***

The first challenges to the traditional social order in Travancore and Cochin came in the form of socio-religious reform movements (Jeffrey 1992; Tharakan 1998). The commercialization of the economy, mainly through the development of plantations, had created prosperous segments within higher caste Hindus and Muslims and Christians

[27] Marriage between Brahmin men and Nair women were common, although the husband had to undergo ritual purification after the couple had sexual relations and they could not dine together.

(Baak 1997). These elites formed associations dedicated to the social reform and uplift of their communities (Jeffrey 1976; Thomas Isaac and Tharakan). By the 1890s, Nairs, Ezhavas, and Christians were petitioning the government for access to government jobs,[28] which until then were held primarily by Nambudiri Brahmins, and the opening of more schools (Lemercinier 1984). Through these social movements, even the status of Pulayas as slaves had been revoked in 1855, and they, too, organized for the right to travel on public roads (Saradamoni 1980). By the 1920s, "Brahmanical authority was under fire, and an increasingly pluralistic and politically competitive public arena had spawned the emergence of an educated, articulate, and sophisticated group of political entrepreneurs" (Heller 1999: 60).

In Travancore, mobilization occurred primarily along caste and religious community lines. Effective social movements, namely collective action based on religion, caste and/or class, initially led by religious leaders, promoted mass education, the abandonment of untouchability, the dismantling of the hierarchical social order, and an end to *marumakkathayam* or matriliny (Menon 1996; Menon 1997). The first community to start a caste-based emancipatory association was the Ezhavas, whose leader, Sree Narayana Guru, formed a powerful movement in 1903. One goal of the struggle focused on securing for Ezhavas the legal right to enter any temple and street, to worship Brahmin deities, to have access to proper education, and to secure employment in the state administration. Their strength in numbers, their education, and their

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[28] Nair petitions for government jobs had also to do with the dismantling of matriliny, which I will discuss later.

the Ezhavas an influential community – particularly after their uggle for the right to enter all temples and roads (Menon 1996). ce the legal abolition of untouchability. Another goal of Ezhava mprove the life circumstances of their own community members. eled on the Brahmins with regard to religious rituals and the hol (Jacob 1995). Srinivas (1966) introduced the term ocess of trying to raise the status of a caste through the imitating sidered higher in the social hierarchy.

g the Ezhavas, the Pulaya leader Ayyankali formed an with the primary goals of abolishing caste restrictions, ending the practice of matriliny (Menon 1996: 22). Higher nd Brahmins also formed caste-based organizations in the early d to delegitimize matriliny. The Brahmins too, focused on ms. They organized for the right of younger Nambudiri men to ithin their own caste and not be compelled to seek brides among caste-based organizations strongly promoted nuclear families e marumakkathayam system of inheritance.

ravancore occurred along community lines and, because of the ate, took the form of constitutional agitations. Travancore State ly conservative. It was a theological state governed by nemselves as guardians of Hindu orthodoxy and the caste order. osed early on to the world economy as an exporter of cash crops,

it had early success in centralizing powers against rulers of smaller states into that of Travancore, and it had a semiautonomous status vis-à-vis the colonial rulers. Heller (Heller 1999) argues that these conditions produced "modernizing impulses" that paved the way for social reform movements to take off in Travancore.

Heller (1999) notes further that having undergone a process of administrative rationalization under pressure from the British in the 1850s, and enjoying a significant degree of autonomy from landed elites, the paternalistic Travancore state became what the British secretary of state of India in 1867 called a "model native state." In its efforts to promote public health and education, as well as mange food distribution in times of shortages, the state of Travancore significantly outperformed colonial India and other princely states (Tharakan 1998). Yet, the Maharajah's state perfectly replicated Travancore's caste structure. "The upper ranks of the government were exclusively reserved for Brahmins, and Nairs populated the lowest levels of administration. Syrian Christians and "polluting castes" were excluded from government employment" (Jeffrey 1976: 9). In 1941, Travancore and Cochin together had 85,000 public officials, compared to only four or five thousand in Malabar (Jeffrey 1992: 82).

That the princely state had expanded its scope of activities beyond the law-and-order and revenue-collection functions of its Malabar counterpart explains why organized mobilization first took the form of entitlement agitations that focused on enlarging the role of the state and increasing access to state jobs. And it was because the state played such a direct and visible role in reproducing caste inequalities and exclusions that demands would be organized around discrete communities (Heller 1999: 61).

The impact of these reforms was profound. Identities that had been the basis of hierarchy and acquiescence were politicized, creating the first breach in the cultural and ideological hegemony of the Brahminical order. Movements for lower caste advancement, like that of Sree Narayana Guru, which organized around the slogan, "one caste, one god, one religion for all mankind" promoted dignity and self-respect (Saradamoni 1980; Thomas Isaac and Tharakan). In so doing, these movements forged new solidarities and created new bases of collective action that could sustain social movements. Caste based associations of the Ezhavas, Pulayas and Nairs developed community resources by funding schools, hospitals, and pioneering the basic organizational practices of registering members, collecting funds, and holding public meetings. They sponsored cultural and social activities such as reading rooms and community newspapers that would later become the basis of communist party organizing. They developed new protest tactics like presenting mass petitions to the government and holding mass meetings. By the 1930s, social boycotts, picketing of government offices and protest marches (*jathas*) were standard movement practices (Mathew 1989).

Jeffrey notes that the *jatha* was a symbolically powerful form of protest as it "implicitly attacked many of the principles of deference and acceptance which were long established in old Kerala. Walking from place to place constituted an assault in the discrete localities which helped to maintain the old social system" (Jeffrey 1992:121). Jathas challenged the practice of hierarchical spaces, and the restriction of public spaces beyond the reach of avarna groups.

Very soon the struggle for social reform was complemented by opposition to the rule of the dewan,[29] and directed against the British. These struggles were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress party of India (Menon 1997). Such social movements, originally taking issue with religion and caste, were the beginning of the strong civil society, mainly based on political parties, that has characterized Kerala for the last four or five decades of the twentieth century (Tornquist 2000). The struggle for the abolition of caste rules became a class struggle. Since the 1930s, there was a correlation between economic hierarchy [class] and ritual hierarchy [caste], although they were never totally in accord with each other (Sadasivan 1979).

As noted earlier, the first challenges to the traditional social order of old Kerala came in the form of socio-religious reform movements (Jeffrey 1992; Tharakan 1998). However, these reforms did not focus specifically on improving the situation of Kerala women. Instead, in the period between 1850 and 1910, revolutionary changes such as lower caste struggle for entry into Hindu temples (Mathew 1986) and the Malabar peasant revolt (Menon 1994) transformed and redefined social conventions and family life and had profound and long lasting adverse effects on women's autonomy. Perhaps the most significant of these was the disbanding of matriliny, which I will discuss in details, later in this chapter.

***Post-independence Kerala: Radical policies, fiscal crises***

Since its formation as a state in 1956, communist led coalition governments have either formed the government, or been the main opposition party. This coalition politics has

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[29] The Dewan was the chief minister, the next-in-command after the Raja, the king of the princely states.

created, through (populist) legislation, a welfare state that serves the interests of the working classes/ lower castes. Land reforms and redistribution, high minimum wages for agricultural workers, job security and pensions for agricultural and other workers in the informal sectors of economy, universal health and educational coverage, provision of housing for the poor, and the availability of basic food grains at government controlled prices are some of the many measures initiated and implemented by these governments (Varkey 1984).

Post-independence Kerala's political landscape has been characterized by coalitions between parties on the left, although there have been fierce conflicts and rivalries between the two main communist parties, Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM). In spite of a political position in which nearly every second government has been led by non-leftist politicians, the political climate may be described as radical. Kerala has also been depicted as being a welfare state, having a strong civil society, with a high degree of political participation by Keralites (Heller 1999; Tornquist 2000). Since the 1960s, the political arena has been dominated by different parities in two coalitions: the United Democratic Front (UDF) under the leadership of the Congress party (a centrist political party), and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led by the CPM. The two coalitions included different parties at different times and alternated to keep the majority in the State Assembly (Pillai 1999).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the state underwent a severe crisis involving economic stagnation and extreme unemployment (Prakash 1994). The policy of creating a public industrial sector was not been successful, as many companies ran at a loss (Pillai

1994). Kerala had also not managed to retain investment of private capital. Capital went instead to neighboring states, allegedly because of aggressive labor unions, in Kerala (Tharamangalam 1999).

Over the past few decades, employment opportunities in Kerala's agricultural areas have decreased and opportunities in the industrial and service sector have not kept pace with demands for work (Chasin 1990; Gulati et al. 1997; Kumar 1994). Unemployment in Kerala has led many Keralites to migrate to other parts of India and abroad, notably to the Persian Gulf countries, and this trend has intensified since the 1970s (Sekhar 1994). Remittances from these workers have grown to be the biggest source of Kerala's foreign currency, mounting to between 25 and 40 per cent of the state domestic product (Parameswaran 1998). This makes Kerala's economy extremely vulnerable, as was experienced during the 1997 war in Kuwait when thousands of Malayalees had to return home. In 1994, around 30 per cent of Kerala's gross domestic product was estimated to be based on remittances from its workers abroad, primarily from the Gulf states (Tharamangalam 1999). One result is that families with workers in the Gulf have more money to spend at home in Kerala, and consumerism has become a new measure of social status (Osella and Osella 1999; Sooryamoorthy 1997).

Women have been a marginal part of the migration trend as migrants, but migration has had strong consequences for them none the less (Gulati 1993; Gulati 1997; Warrier 2000). On the one hand, the cycle of unemployment and migration, along with the dismantling of Kerala's matrilineal traditions (Saradamoni 1999) and the transformation of dowry into a de facto groom price have created situations where

women become commodified. Specifically, whereas women in matrilineal communities were always assured access to family property, including a home, with the dismantling of matriliny, the practice of dowry has crept into these groups. Within patrilineal communities such as Christians, the existing practice of dowry, or pre-mortem payment of women's inheritance, has mutated into a form of groom price (Billig 1992a). Marriageable women who have family members working in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere thus become "cash cows" for grooms' families. They are valued for their asset-bringing potential through the system of dowry or groom price. The practices of the well-off who can pay large dowries have percolated through to all segments of Kerala society (Billig 1992a; Billig 1992b; Chandy 1995; den Uyl 1995; Velayudhan 1998) and working class families could face financial ruin through the marriage of their daughters.

There is a consensus that Kerala faces a crisis at present, although different scholars give different explanations for this. The most negative voices assert that crisis is in- built into the Kerala Model with its priority on social development and redistribution, and with economic growth only as a second goal (Tharamangalam 1998a). Others are more inclined to seek an explanation in Kerala's dependence on a global capitalist system, structural adjustment programs, and a new liberal economic order, and a growing culture of consumerism (Franke and Chasin 2000; Sooryamoorthy 1997). In the 1990s, Kerala has emerged on the world map once again, this time because of a serious attempt by the ruling left parties to decentralize power an strengthen civil society (Tornquist 2000). In spite of the crisis, there is no doubt that people in Kerala live closer to a welfare state than in other parts of India, and they are more engaged in political processes. With regard to the participation of women in social and political movements,

a leading female politician has stated that in Kerala, one sees working women, not intellectual feminists, in the public arena (Jeffrey 1992).

**The Centrality of Marriage in Kerala**

During the course of field work in Kerala, long-time acquaintances and people I met for the first time never failed to ask me, "Settle *aiyo*?" or "*Evedeya* settle *cheydede*?" translated respectively as "Are you settled yet?" or "Where have you settled?" referring to my marital status. There was something "unsettling" for ordinary Kerala persons about unmarried women, even those in their forties like I am, regardless of women's personal preference about their marital status and/or their capacity for self-sufficiency. In Kerala, the term "settle" is used to talk about easing oneself into the social space where one is socially expected to be. All Kerala women were expected to "settle" into marriage. Of course, these expectations implicitly assumed that all women were heterosexual and wanted marriage and motherhood, in other words, the assumption of heteronormativity.[30] Some women of the middle and upper classes were also raised to have careers and professions, and lower class women knew they would have to work for wages. But, with the exception of religious lives,[31] marriage was the major expected career for all Kerala women and unmarried women were looked at suspiciously unless

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[30] For a definition and discussion of heteronormativity, see Chapter 1, footnote #3.

[31] There were exceptions to this universal expectation of marriage. In the nineteenth century and earlier, unmarried and even married Hindu women could opt for a life of bhakti (devotion), which was a socially recognized and respected outlet from marriage. Unlike the case of Christians, Hindus had no institution for women to live celibate lives, until Ramakrishna (1836-1886) started his sect in the mid nineteenth century. A convent-like situation, or as close to it as one could get in the Hindu tradition before Ramakrishna, was that of '*bhajanakari*' (one who sings bhajans, religious songs) in temples. These were usually poor, devout women, of all Kerala Hindu castes, who spent their lives in the temples singing songs to the deities. They could avoid starvation because there was always food in the temple kitchens. Unmarried Catholic women could opt to join religious orders, which existed in some parts of Kerala in the 1830s, and other Christian groups had spaces for religiously inclined unmarried women.

the "reason" for their singlehood "made sense" in local cultural frameworks. Reasons that resonated with Kerala people for a woman's singlehood included, among others, physical or mental handicap or illness or problems with a woman's reproductive capacity; familial inability to raise an "adequate" dowry; "unlucky" horoscope (*jadaga dosham*); and responsibility for care of the family and siblings, which often resulted in a woman being "too old to marry" once her family responsibilities were over. It was not surprising therefore that marriage was the ubiquitous condition against which never-married Kerala women experienced their singlehood.

The (his)story of present-day never-married women of Kerala is enmeshed within a larger story of marriage, kinship and family-life in Kerala as these have changed over time and circumstance. In this section I trace a brief history of marriage and changes in family structure and practices[32] in Kerala from the mid-nineteenth century to the present because this history informed the background for never-married women's discourses of marriage and singlehood.

### *A Brief History of Changes in Marriage and Family*

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the structures and practices of Kerala families underwent significant social reforms, which have been consequential for gender relations. The project of social reform carried forward the aspirations of a generation of matrilineal Kerala men who were acutely uneasy with matriliny – *marumakkatayam* as it

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[32] By family structure I refer to patriliny and matriliny, and joint and nuclear families. By family practices I refer to practices specific to inheritance, marriage, and divorce. I define patriliny as descent traced through male forbears, matriliny as descent traced through female forebears. For a definition of patrilineal joint family, see footnote 31 in this chapter. I understand nuclear family as husband and wife, and their children.

was known in Kerala – in its material and symbolic dimensions. Recent scholarship has rightly argued that these reforms played a crucial role in advocating for and achieving changes in family laws and caste practices. Kodoth (2001a) argues that these reforms worked towards an "appropriate" form of family, namely patrilineal, patrifocal,[33] conjugal families, among conventionally matrilineal groups. Specifically, the reforms sought to define anew familial relations by centering conjugality, placing the wife and children under the guardianship of the husband and father respectively, and establishing legal guarantees for marriage, through encumbered divorce.[34] Eapen and Kodoth (2001) observe that women in matrilineal households were not positioned in relationships of dependence on men in the sense of kinship identity, lineage, and inheritance, even if households were defined by patriarchy, as in colonial constructions of *taravad* (corporate matrilineal family).[35] In the patrilineal joint family,[36] a woman's identity was incorporated in that of her husband's family, and was only transitorily in her birth family. In sharp contrast, the rights of matrilineal women as members of a taravad were ascribed at birth.

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[33] For a definition of patrifocality, see Chapter One, page 10.
[34] By encumbered divorces I mean divorces that are difficult to obtain because of legal requirements.
[35] For details of the working of this patriarchy see Kodoth, P. (2001a). Courting legitimacy or delegitimizing custom? Sexuality, sambandham, and marriage reform in late nineteenth-century Malabar. *Modern Asian Studies*, 35, 349-84, — (2001b). Was matriliny ever any different? Resisting the powerful binary -- powerful karnavan/dependent women. *Samyukta*, 1, 28-44.
[36] Uberoi, P. (1994). Family, Kinship and Marriage in India. Delhi: Oxford University Press., delineates two different understandings of the joint family. The first is an Indological concept of joint family, derived from Hindu legal texts and is concerned with defining coparcenary property relations and regulating matters of ritual, marriage and inheritance. This Indological joint family need not include even a single married couple. It might comprise a widow and her son, a set of unmarried brothers, etc., and members of the joint-family so defined need not be co-resident. In contrast the sociological definition of 'joint family' is a household composed of two or more married couples and their children. (p. 384).

In contrast to matrilineal communities, Kerala's patrilineal communities of Christian, Muslim, and some Hindu castes experienced continuity in and reinforcement of family structures and practices, from the early twentieth century onwards. The exceptions were the patrilineal Nambudiri Brahmins,[37] who through social reforms of the matrilineal groups, with whom they were structurally bound through marriage, altered their practices of primogeniture and restrictive marriage practices, and facilitated partitioning the joint family. Let me present context and history to support these arguments.

***Patrilineal Christian Laws and Practices***

Patriliny and patriarchy have long been the norm among the Christians of Kerala. Patrilineal families trace lineage through the oldest male. In discussions of patriarchy, I use Walby's (1990) definition of it as " a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." She tried to avoid the charge of universalism and essentialism by breaking patriarchy into six component structures: paid employment, household production, state, violence, sexuality and culture. She argued that the variable combinations of these structures give her version of patriarchy the flexibility it requires. Pateman (1988) argues that traditional patriarchy was succeeded by fraternal patriarchy in which men as men entered the notorious social contract in which they gained rights as citizens which women (and others) were denied. Women then were deemed, implicitly, to have placed themselves under the authority of their husbands on entering the prior sexual contract, which, for Pateman is founded on rape or

[37] In terms of caste hierarchy in Kerala, the Nambudiri were on the top, followed by the Nairs and Ezhavas. Christians were incorporated into the caste framework and were placed on par with Nairs.

its threat. Rubin (1975) developed this latter theory. She argued against "patriarchy" favoring the more neutral term "sex-gender system," which need not necessarily be hierarchical systems of male-female domination.

Family laws relating to Kerala Christians were characterized by inheritance rights that favored men as sons and husbands over women as daughters and wives/ widows. Descent of property was strictly through males such that on the death of a husband, a wife's relationship of dependence was merely transferred to her son (Jeffrey 1992). At the time of Indian independence in 1947, descent of property among Christians in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar (the princely states that merged to form Kerala state) was governed by separate legislations namely the Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916; the Cochin Christian Succession Act, 1921; and the Indian Succession Act, 1925 respectively. Of these, only the Indian Succession Act, 1925, did not discriminate between sons and daughters in the matter of inheritance. It provided the widow and children of a man who died intestate[38] with his property: the widow got one third, and the children took equal shares of the remainder. If the man had no children, the widow was eligible to inherit half his estate, with the remainder going to his lineal descendants. In contrast, the states of Travancore and Cochin, where the greater proportion of Christians resided, had more gender discriminatory succession laws. Under the Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916, a daughter was entitled to receive *stridhanam*[39] at the time of her marriage, to the extent of one fourth of the value of the son's share or Rs. 5000, *whichever was less*. The Travancore legislation comprised different patterns of

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[38] Dying intestate means dying without writing a will, a written will.
[39] Dowry, a woman's share of her father's property.

inheritance for different sects. Unlike among the Syrian Christians, where daughters were denied any share in their father's estate (apart from their dowry), unless he made a will expressly granting them a share, Latin Catholics and Protestant women retained a right to a share of the father's property in addition to a dowry (Jeffrey 1992). Widows were granted a life interest in their husbands' estate, which they forfeited on remarriage.

Legislation pertaining to Kerala Christians has been described as outcomes of the expression of fear and anxiety in the 1910s through the 1920s by the Christian community over certain decisions by the courts in Travancore applying British Indian laws for Christians to adjudicate the rights of widows. Such a trend was seen as a deviation from custom, according to which unmarried daughters and widows were entitled to maintenance only and daughters were entitled to dowry at the time of marriage. The decisions of the court to apply British Indian laws led to unrest and agitations and the appointment of a Christian Committee. Denials of women's rights to property rested on "fears" of domestic disharmony and ruin arising from frequent litigation and fragmentation of property (Tharakan 1997 cited in Eapen and Kodoth 2001). The Travancore Christian Succession Act and its Cochin counterpart, both expressions of patrilineal and patriarchal interests, granted very little to women, and yet they were opposed by an influential section of Syrian Christian men who felt these legislations conceded too much to women (Jeffrey 1992). These gender oppressive laws

remained in effect until 1986, when it was repealed with retrospective effect from 1951, and replaced by the terms of the less restrictive Indian Succession Act, 1952.[40]

Among the Syrian Christians of Kerala, a marriage agreement was reached between the fathers of the bride and groom and *stridhanam* changed hands typically from the father of the bride to the father of the groom at a formal ceremony that was held before the marriage itself. By custom, stridhanam was understood to be a woman's share of her father's property, but it was critically also understood as a symbolic process of disinheritance of women in patrilineal societies (Visvanathan 1999). Visvanathan (1999) argues that from the mid-twentieth century, stridhanam transformed pre-mortem inheritance to a form of groom price, and families with marriageable daughters used money to contract marriages with desirable families. She argued that *stridhanam* became a *de facto* groom price, the basis of the agreement to a marriage, over which a woman had no control as it was controlled by her father, her prospective husband and or his kin.[41] Consequently, a married woman had a right only to maintenance in her conjugal home. Visvanathan noted that stridhanam was determined according to the "going rate" of eligible grooms, and differed according to social class and secular trends. Lower and middle class families often had to sell property or take loans to get a daughter married. However, in the case of wealthier families, a stridhanam usually was less than what the

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[40]For details of history of changes in Christian Laws, see Chandy, A. (1995). *A Community in Peril! Christian Women's Struggle for Equal Inheritance Rights in Kerala*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
[41] For other views of groom price in Kerala and south India, see Billig, M. S. (1992a). The marriage squeeze and the rise of groomprice in India's Kerala State. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 23, 197-216, Caplan, K. (1984). Bridegroom price in urban India: Class, caste and "dowry evil" among Christians in Madras. In P. Uberoi (Ed.), *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, Carroll, L. (1991). Daughter's right of inheritance in India: A perspective on the problem of dowry. *Modern Asian Studies*, 25, 791-809.

sons received on the death of the father. Visvanathan used the idioms of divided loyalties and fractured identities to capture the situation of married Christian women in their birth and conjugal homes and in their relationship to their church.[42] She noted that a Syrian Christian woman was considered burdensome by her birth family because of the problems associated with groom price; in conjugal families, a woman's position was strengthened only after she had given birth to a first child, and then, to sons. Eapen and Kodoth (2001) rightly conclude that for Christian women divided loyalties arose because a son was always already affiliated to his natal family while a daughter was not fully incorporated to either her natal or conjugal families. In patrilineal societies a female's position was undermined and a male's affirmed from birth.

***Matrilineal Groups, Family Structures and Practices, and Property Relations***

Marumakkatayam (matriliny) as practiced in Kerala by Nairs and Ezhavas primarily was defined by the *taravad*, or matrilineal household, and *sambandham* or marriage. Gough defined matriliny as system of descent theory where taravad is a genealogical matrilineage whose solidarity is based on feelings of descendedness from a common ancestress (Gough, 1961: 323) and whose developmental cycle follows a genealogical logic (Gough, 1961: 343). Taravad was also viewed as a corporate structure, with a corresponding property-group model derived from Western ideology that viewed taravad as property that could be legislated and redefined out of existence (Jeffrey 1976). Taravad was defined by collective rights and taravad property, administered by a

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[42] Women may be married to a denomination or sub-group different from that of her birth family.

*karnavan* [the oldest male member of the taravad], could not be sold without the consent of all the members.

Kerala's matrilineal communities were in sharp contrast to the patrilineal model precisely because they afforded an unusual degree of sexual freedom to women (Fuller 1976). Sambandham signified a heterosexual relationship approved by a woman's family.[43] Neither the polyandrous or polygynous forms of sambandham nor the facility of easy divorce destroyed its nature as a locally accepted valid marriage. A woman could have several sambandham partners concurrently, although this is now denied by Malayalee social historians (Puthenkalam 1977).

Sambandham occurred among members of the same caste, and across castes between Nair women and Nambudiri men. The latter form of sambandham has been described as a support structure of a Nambudiri-dominated value system (Pannikar 1997). Some argued that sambandham was related to a network of exploitative land relations between Nambudiris as landlords and Nairs as tenants. Serving to facilitate sexual access for the Nambudiri male to Nair women, sambandham highlighted the exploitative edge of hierarchal land relations (Pannikar 1997). Others assert that sambandham with a Nambudiri was the preferred form of marriage for Nair women because of the wealth and prestige it could bring her taravad (Puthenkalam 1977).

The British colonial legal definition of sambandham as concubinage (Kodoth 2001a) was based on an understanding of sambandham as a marriage practice that was

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[43] Sambandham is the generic term for marriage, which has local varieties and varying incidents. See Puthenkalam, J. (1977). *Marriage and the Family in Kerala with special reference to matrilineal castes.* Calgary: Department of Sociology, The University of Calgary.

remarkably different from Western modes of regulating women's sexuality through marriage. It appears the sexual "freedoms" Nair and other matrilineal women customarily enjoyed were that they had a greater space for making decisions on marriage and sexual relations. Evidence indicates that women were able to terminate marriages "at will", though evidence also suggests that they were pressured to maintain marriages if the sambandham connections were profitable to their taravads (Fuller 1976; Gough 1959; Gough 1961; Puthenkalam 1977). Women's ability to terminate marriages was based on their permanent and uncontested right to subsistence in their taravads. Additionally, women could re-marry on termination of a prior relationship, or on the death of their husband. Importantly, in comparison to patrilineal groups in India, the oppressive edge of widowhood was absent. And, in further contrast to patrifocal, patrilineal situations, where girl children were considered a burden, and hence received fewer familial resources, in Kerala's matrilineal families, girl children were welcomed and did not face material discrimination.[44]

Inheritance and lineage practices, which were through women, reinforced matrilineal women's importance to their families. Women were members of their property group by survivorship. Maintenance and residence rights in their natal home, for themselves and their children, were achieved at birth; these rights were not mediated by marriage nor derived from their husbands. These rights marked a sense of continuity and security with their families and kin, rather than a sense of rupture and vulnerability.

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[44] However, with the decline in female sex ratios in the 0 to 5 year age group, Kerala's historic advantage is no longer secure. For details, see Rajan, S. I. (2000). Fertility decline and worsening gender bias in India: Is Kerala no longer an exception? *Development and Change*, 31, 1085-92.

Older women played important roles in making and or influencing decisions relating to household and property matters (Gough 1961). Furthermore, *neither* women *nor* men were required to change their familial identity consequent to marriage.

In contrast, in patrilineal societies, like the Nambudiris and Christians of Kerala, the control and passing on of property was seen to necessitate control of female sexuality. This need was manifest in severe restrictions on women, particularly through laws relating to marriage and inheritance, but also in customs of marriage, mobility and clothing (Agarwal 1994; Chowdhry 1989). Nambudiri women were protected through lives of strict seclusion from other castes and groups. Nambudiri women lived, by and large, in polygamous households with rigid rules of female chastity. They had no right to property and were restricted to a single marriage, if at all it was possible. In order to keep their vast estates and tracts of land intact, Nambudiris practiced primogeniture. The remaining Nambudiri men were denied the right to marry and establish a Nambudiri family; instead they could have sambandham with Nair women. The option for Nambudiri women was to be married as one of many wives of a Nambudiri man or, if this was not possible, they led a cloistered, celibate life in their estates.[45] These restrictions necessarily controlled women's expression of their sexuality, and their restricted property rights necessarily weakened Nambudiri women's bargaining position in gendered power relations within families.

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[45]Numerically, Nambudiris constituted only one per cent of the region's population and the problems of their women affected a tiny minority. However, it is important to note that this small minority belonged to the caste that enjoyed the highest social and religious status in the region.

### *The "Problem" of Sambandham Marriage*

By the end of the 1800s, a segment of Nairs had moved away, both physically and ideologically, from their taravads. Their associations with the institutions of the colonial state, through education and employment, and the influence upon them of a set of ideas and morality were instrumental in shaping their particular response to marumakkathayam (matriliny).[46] When the colonial state became the biggest employer in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, the princely states that would become Kerala state, Nairs were absorbed in large numbers in government service. Under these circumstances, taravad solidarity, born of common living and economic interests, was severely affected. Members of taravads employed far away from home took their wives and children with them and set up separate homes. Their self-acquired income (salary) was not available to the taravad that had educated them. Serious dissensions between those who stayed at home and managed the taravad and those who were employed in cities became frequent (Puthenkalam 1977).

Men following the marumakkatayam system faced two main concerns relating to families and management of property. First, a crisis of legitimacy emerged from the lack of legal status for sambandham. Second, the growing prominence of ideas of self-acquired or separate property sharpened the divide between taravad and self-acquired property. I deal with each of these in turn, although both are inter-related because of the linkages between marriage, inheritance and property rights.

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[46] For more details see Fuller, C. J. (1976). *The Nayars Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Jeffrey, R. (1976). *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*. Delhi: Vikas Publishers.

Sambandham marriages were deemed a problem by matrilineal men *and* by the colonial state on several counts. Kodoth (2001a) argues that colonial interpretation of land relations, where the Nambudiri *janmis*[47] were defined as landlords, and of marumakkatayam where sambandham was held to constitute concubinage came to a head when sections of tenant Nairs contested the legally imputed rights of janmis. In the process, the question of sambandham also became legally contested. She argues that sambandham was constructed as concubinage in official discourse precisely because of a dominant conception of sexuality which, following MacKinnon (1989), Kodoth defined as "social construct of male power" such that dominant or "confirmative" sexuality corresponds to "the sexuality of (male) dominance and (female) submission, such as was embodied in a conception of "marriage as contract" (Kodoth 2001a).

Colonial understanding of marriage as contract, Kodoth argues, fell short of a "true" contractual relation and women were incorporated into the marriage contract as "natural subordinates." The marriage contract, according to this understanding, entailed a specific exchange: the husband offering protection to the wife, and the wife offering her service to the husband. The colonial judicial dismissal of sambandham as marriage was precisely because it did not conform to this idea of a marriage contract. In sambandham, women had the right to terminate the marriage at will, and the right to form another connection. This mode of female authority over her own life was unacceptable to the moral-ideological framework of the colonial state.

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[47] Janmis are Hindu landlords. Many janmis were Brahmins because they controlled familial and temple properties.

Using the example of the Malabar Marriage Act, 1896, which was applicable to Hindu matrilineal castes, Kodoth argues that social reformers sought to introduce a new form of marriage which would deny the legitimacy of sambandham. The marriage laws that were suggested[48] tied marriage to provisions that would facilitate and recognize a new form of family/household centered importantly on conjugality. Women were to form the terrain of this reconstitution. To establish the primacy of conjugality to any form of marriage, women had to be marked differently or recast – as monogamous, "chaste" and dependent upon husband and father, both of whom were, in the official colonial discourse on marumakkatayam, legal nonentities. At the core of the marriage reforms were control of women by men within the conjugal family including sexuality, and the production of the conjugal family as the "property space" by defining property relations within it.

***Reform through legislation***

As many as twenty pieces of marital and familial legislations were enacted between 1896 and 1976, gradually revoking the legal framework for matriliny. In 1912, the state of Travancore enacted the Travancore Marumakkathayam Act which recognized the sambandham as a legal form of marriage and permitted half the property of a man dying without a will to devolve to his wife and children. The 1925 Travancore Nayar Regulation took this position one step further: it entitled the wife and children to inherit the entire property of a Nair man dying without a will, and crucially permitted individual

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[48] For details of the various laws enacted in the process of dismantling matriliny see Saradamoni, K. (1999). *Matriliny Transformed. Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

rights to seek and obtain partition of the joint family (Jeffrey 1992; Saradamoni 1999). By 1932 similar legislations achieved these rights for other matrilineal castes in Travancore. The state of Cochin followed a slightly different pattern of legislations, but by 1948, all matrilineal castes had individual rights to partitioning of the matrilineal taravad.[49] Similar reforms were being pushed forward by matrilineal Ezahavas (Velayudhan 1998).

This legislation facilitated the emergence of the patrilineal, patriarchal, patrifocal, conjugal family among people who had been matrilineal. It created progressively greater spaces for patrilineal rights to inheritance of property. They defined a relationship of exchange of protection and dependence between husband and wife respectively through the introduction of guardianship and maintenance clauses. The vestiges of matriliny that remained, such as the rights of men and women to taravad property, were wiped out by amendments by the state legislature and by the implications of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, the provisions of which were applicable to all matrilineal castes. As a result, the heirs of a man dying intestate from a matrilineal caste were held on par with heirs in the patrilineal tradition. Specifically, the children and widows of a predeceased son figure to the exclusion of a predeceased daughter (Agarwal, 1994). The right of women to property by birth or survivorship was replaced first by right of succession in a system

[49] For similar legislative reform in the Malabar region, see Eapen, M., & Kodoth, P. (2001). Demystifying the "High Status" of Women in Kerala. An attempt to understand the Contradictions in Social Development (pp. 3-89). Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies. p. 21-22

where women had a right by birth only to a coparcenary;[50] this was abolished in 1976 through the enactment of the Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act.

The Madras Nambudiri Act, 1933 made polygamy punishable, and provided the right of every member to marry within the caste. In 1957, a Kerala amendment to the Madras Nambudiri Act gave women equal right with their husbands to the property of their marital estates and a restricted share comprising stridhanam from their natal estates. (Kodoth 1998, cited in Eapen and Kodoth 2001).

These measures, applicable across Kerala's matrilineal groups and patrilineal Nambudiris, recognized the patrilineal, conjugal family and defined relations of protection and dependences that facilitated the emergence of patrifocal families. Through reforms, women had individual rights over their share of taravad property, but this right was achieved within a legal framework of dependence on men as husbands rather than on the taravad itself. Men as husbands and fathers gained access to and control over women in ways that they did not have earlier. Importantly these were achieved as civil rights that were advocated and struggled for by male reformers by weakening the position of women. By the 1960s, almost all taravads were partitioned or were in the courts for a plea for partitioning (Agarwal 1994: 174). Matrilineal women's vulnerability in the face of these changes reportedly arose from their pre-existing dependence in the taravad for maintenance, their circumstantial inability to manage and cultivate land themselves (they had to hire cultivators), their pervasive lack of information about the changes occurring

[50] Coparcenary is a right to a joint property, in this case the taravad or household which was jointly owned by all members of a matrilineal household.

around them, and their dependence on close male kin in negotiating legal procedures (Saradamoni 1983).

***Changing Marriage and Family Practices***

During the post-independence period since 1947, there have been some indications of the direction of changes in the structures and practices of family in formerly matrilineal communities. Cross-cousin marriages were traditionally preferred among some groups because they reduced family conflict and offered the woman continued access to and maintenance rights in their father's/ husband's taravad, which could be one and the same. Yet Puthenkalam (1977) records that the custom is seldom practiced by the Nairs. A study of economic behavior of migrants to the Middle East documents that in a predominantly Ezhava village, a good proportion of Persian "Gulf money"[51] was spent on weddings of sisters, daughters, and close relatives of migrants, and that these ceremonies were more elaborate than was customary, and several new rituals of gift-giving had been introduced, and dowry rates had risen sharply due to the new affluence (Kurien 2002). And Osella and Osella (2000) recorded that for Ezhavas in a central Travancore village "marriages were occasions for dramatic staging of public performances of family wealth, status and style... they were also occasions when consumer goods change hands." They, and Kurien (2002) note a trend of disdain for village endogamy and an increasing preference for marriage with a family outside the village. Kurien (2002) explains this preference through the social symbolism of marriage. When marriage alliances are formed between families of unequal status, and

[51] Money remitted by Keralites working in the Persian Gulf states. Estimates are that xxx to xxx per cent of adult Kerala people work in these Gulf States.

who are not related, it results in a large and continuing flow of gifts from the lower- to the higher-status family. These gifts could be understood as the continual "price" lower-status families paid for "buying" a higher social status for their daughter through marriage. Hypergamous marriages[52] were responsible for the new culture of gift-giving.

Marriage practices among Christian groups are also changing. Kurien (2002) found that in a predominantly Syrian Christian village in central Kerala, a minimum dowry of Rs. 100,000 had to be given among "average folks." Middle-class families had generally to provide a dowry of Rs. 300,000 to 500,000, and among the wealthy, the dowry went as high as two million rupees. Even poor families had to provide a dowry of Rs. 10,000 to 15,000. These amounts excluded the exchange of gold that was given to a woman at the time of marriage. These ethnographic accounts indicate that in the post-colonial period, patrilineal marriages have become consumer oriented, and brides have been commodified.

Eapen and Kodoth (2001) argue that in the last decades of the twentieth century, there has been a gradual, concerted shift in the understanding of women's property rights in Kerala. The shift, which involves all the major social groups in Kerala (matrilineal and patrilineal) converges towards an understanding of property practices typically associated with patrilineal families. Conventionally, women's property rights in patrilineal societies were usually organized around marriage, in a range of practices including the transfer of women and change in their kin identity and residence, dowry, and exchange of gifts and obligations. This framework in practice denied inheritance

[52] Hypergamous marriages are marriages that occur across unequal groups, for instance between families of different castes, or different class status.

rights for women. There was also a trend to transfer to women moveable (cash, gold) rather than immoveable property (land, houses). These emerging patrilineal practices were in sharp contrast to women's property rights in matrilineal societies in Kerala, which were historically delinked from marriage, and understood instead as a birth right. Using the example of dowry, Eapen and Kodoth (2001) note that the convergence on a set of practices usually associated with patrilineal groups has involved changes in women's property rights among dominant patrilineal groups as well. They argue that dowry has changed its character since the mid-twentieth century from social approval and regulation to that of an unregulated groom price.

**Conclusions**

The history of marriage and family in Kerala clearly shows that marriage and property relations were sites for the re-ordering of power relations within matrilineal families and the consolidation of such relations within patrilineal families. These changes forged new identities for men and for women. The implication for women in terms of interests and identities in patrilineal kinship groups was that gender identity became subservient to kinship. Matrilineal women, as custodians of descent/ lineage, had a genealogy for their gender that arose from their complete and continuous identification with matrilineal families. Yet kinship and marriage became consequential in shaping women's fractured identities within a patrilineal marriage and kinship, and imposing male dependency and a conservative sexuality on them. These changes rested uneasily on some women, including some of the never-married women I interviewed. I will show in the next

chapter that they made sense of their singlehood against the foils of the nuclear, conjugal, monogamous, patrilineal families that have become the norm in Kerala.

## CHAPTER 3: MAPPING DISCOURSES ON FAMILIES

### Introduction

I have two purposes in this chapter. The first is to map, examine and problematize three sets of theoretical concepts that position the particular ways in which I view the lived experiences of never-married women and the processes by which they negotiate family spaces. These three sets of related concepts are that of the culture of familism, the regime of family, and marginality – place making and its relations to identity. Two other concepts that pervade this dissertation are that of gender regimes and narratives and performativity. Next I discuss each of these concepts. The second purpose is to present ways in which never-married women used these concepts, their personal history of marriage and family, and the idealized masculinities and femininities that followed, to both question the alleged securities of marriage and to make sense of their own singlehood.

### A. Families and the culture of familism

The concept of "family," formerly assumed to be universal in form and functions, is slippery precisely because it assumes notions of protection, co-operation, nurturance and belonging while at the same time masks differences among family members in power, status, goals and interests. Feminist scholars (Collier et al. 1992; Thorne 1992; Thorne and Yalom 1992) note that the language to refer to kinship, intimacy, and domestic sharing is monolithic, and appears to make family an insular, unchanging entity, similar in structure and practices in all societies. Instead, they argue, "the family" is a distorting ideological construct that "maps the functions of specific persons associated with specific

spaces and specific affective bonds" (Collier et al. 1992). They point out that the family is not a "natural" universal given. It is a historically and socially constructed product of a set of ideas and policies by the state that arose, in Western societies, out of the historical development of the separation of private and public life. Collier and colleagues argue that family refers less to certain activities than to beliefs people have about them. The term "family" has more ideological tenor than the term kinship. Family is more than bearing and raising children, it is a moral and ideological unit, a sphere of human relationships. In late twentieth century Western middle-classes, family was constructed in terms of nurturance, affection, cooperation, enduring and non-contingent, and this was in sharp distinction to relationships of capitalism. These ideas of family also circulate in present-day Kerala. I use the term "family" in the many complexities and ambiguities of the term.

Thorne (1992) argues that the ideology of the family reinforces the exploitation of all women and extends beyond conjugal, nuclear families of that specific type to infuse general understandings of women's "proper place." Beliefs that most people live in nuclear families, that most adult women have husbands to support them, and that motherhood is women's central vocation have long been used to legitimate the subordination of women in the economic realm and in social policies.

This line of analysis shifted, however, when feminists examined women's resistances to and negotiations of the structures that subordinate them. For example, Kandiyoti (1988) compares the "patriarchal bargains" that men and women have negotiated in different economic and cultural contexts. She shows how, within the patriarchal bargain in traditional nuclear families, women seek men's economic support

and protection in return for domestic services and subordination. Relatedly, families have been theorized as a site of "co-operative conflict" (Sen 1994) to attend to the paradox of families which are at once a co-operative and an institution which, legitimated by local cultural significance of gender, age, and perceived "value" to the family, differentially entitle members to its resources.

Feminist scholars have also paid attention to the differentiation of family experiences (George 2001; Stacey 1990; Stacey 1996; Stack 1975). Because particular families and households take shape around structures of gender and age, which are inflected by other lines of differences like social class and ethnicity, women, and men, married and unmarried, young and old, do not have the same experiences of family. These scholars reveal the fiction of "harmony of interests" among all family members in making "family" decisions, in access to family resources to pursue health and education, and in terms of entitlements to the emotional and symbolic capital of families. Families, instead of being the idealized domestic haven, are at the same time sources of affection, domination, belonging, marginalization, nurturance, violence and restraint. Such familial ties are complicated, corrupted and obstructed by webs of unequal power. Patriarchy, defined as the domination of family relationships by gender and age, as also each member's economic contribution and perceived "belongingness" shapes the ties of power and affection within families.

***Re-viewing Indian Families***

Families mirror social stratification patterns of economic and social class, power and status. Commenting on the status of Indian families, Uberoi (1994) notes, "...even now , despite the prominence of the idea of "love marriages" marital choice is seldom "free";

divorce and remarriage are still rare; elderly parents very often reside with their married sons; and dowry, far from diminishing, is actually on the increase. In fact, one critical project of family is social and status placement, namely embedding family members' positions in society. In the past, Beteille (1994) argues, wealth and caste were important mechanisms of social placement and control in India. Now these, he argues, are relatively residual and passive, and it is family that transmits social status from one generation through the next through strategic deployment of wealth, social and cultural capital. Uberoi (1994) observes that parental investment in maximizing their child's potential, typically through education, is complemented and reinforced through well-considered strategies of matrimonial match-making. As a social placement strategy, marriages deploy material (cash and gold), social (personal social contacts) and cultural (cultural resources of the home environment) capital to maximize the life-chances of the parents' investment in their children. These observations were equally valid for the modern Malayalee family.

I argued in Chapter Two that the modern Malayalee family came to be understood as patrifocal, patrilineal, conjugal and nuclear. As discussed in Chapter One, in using the term patrifocal I borrow the definition of Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994) who understand family as focused in important aspects on the interests of men and boys. These male oriented structures and beliefs, argue Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, constitute a socio-cultural complex that profoundly affects women's lives. The structural features of patrifocal families include patrifocal residence, patrilineal descent, and patrilineal inheritance and succession, all of which emphasize the centrality of males to the continuity and well-being of families.

This particular construction of the modern Malayalee family worked as a localized "ideology of familism" (Barrett 1988), in as far as it was central to defining ideal family structures and practices, gendered identities, sexual partnerships, and family obligations. The term "familism" is used by these authors to refer to "the propagation of politically pro-family ideas" while familisation refers to "the strengthening of families themselves" (Barret 1988: 26). Familism, based on biological essentialism and appeals to nature, that is to inequality and difference as natural therefore inevitable, is they argue, an ideology which seeks to justify and legitimate social and gender inequalities.

Barrett and McIntosh (1982) defined the term 'family-household system' as one in which households are assumed to be centered on the male bread winner, an economically dependent female and their dependent children. This concept of family has ideological and material dimensions. Barrett's ideology of familism plays a key role in defining ideal family structures, gender roles and sexual partnerships, marginalizing people who live outside conventional families from socially acknowledged adulthood. On the material dimension, the family-household system is the site in which women undertake unpaid labor for family members, thereby limiting their participation in paid labor.

These theoretical positions about the modern Malayalee family, and its deconstruction by feminist scholars[53] assume that the places adult women occupy within families are as wives or former wives. Marriage and wifehood are placement strategies – ways of locating women in Keralan social order. Precisely because never-married

[53] Not all studies of families are of conjugal, patrifocal families. For the work done by unmarried mothers and their social networks in raising children, see Stack, C. B. (1975). *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row.

women had no clearly articulated place in this conjugal, nuclear family centered social order, the narratives of the never-married women I studied indicate that family emerged as the key site where women struggled to maintain their social adulthood. The ideology of familism marginalized people who existed outside these structures from having a socially acknowledged adulthood (Barrett and McIntosh 1982). This ideology of familism reinforced the notion of heterosexuality, marriage, and childbearing and rearing all within a monogamous conjugal unit, as a form of status passage and public recognition of social adulthood.

This ideology of familism was reinforced by the notion of "normative biographies" briefly mentioned by Reissman (2000) when studying infertile Kerala women. By normative biography, she referred to the structured social positions corresponding to a series of life events that women were expected to pass through, if they were to be considered "normal." including marriage, conception, childbirth and motherhood. For women these include schooling, college education if a family can afford it, marriage, childbearing, motherhood, perhaps work, being a mother-in-law and grandmother. These points on the normative biography locate and define a person both in relation to what are considered culturally significant life events and to the institutions around and through which these life events are played out. The normative biography is an ideal, and works as a regulatory mechanism, a construct against which people define, locate, measure, or distance themselves. Because of their marital status, or lack of it, never-married women do not fit into this normative biography, and they becomes "marginal" to it, and to the institutions in which it is involved, chiefly that of marriage and family life. But this very concept becomes a regulating tool which works to

normalize the ideology of familism, and also to define and marginalize women who order their lives differently.

The crystallization of certain life-options, Devika (2002b) argues, which began in the mid to late 19th century, would increasingly draw Malayalees into the ideology of the modern family which revolves around two sets of primary relationships: husband-wife and parent-child. The husband-wife relationship would be constituted through the marital contract – a set of mutual obligations – where the husband would provide for his wife and children and the wife would function as the home-maker. The parent child relationship would be constituted through parental obligations and responsibilities to focus their energies on maximizing the potential of their children through intense focus in child-rearing. The concept of normative biography assumes certain conditions that are the social co-ordinates which position people in the Keralan social order. These assumed conditions include (1) heterosexuality (2) marriage and motherhood (3) a particular definition of family as conjugal, parental, and nuclear, and (4) patrifocality. There is nothing "natural" about a normative biography. It is one of several constructs that are in place in Kerala cultural life to maintain a Kerala ideology of familism.

Articulating the modern Malayalee family along these lines was consequential for both men and women. One such consequences was that it reinforced sexual division of labor in ways that kept women subordinated to men. Devika (2002a; 2002b) argues that the notion of the modern Malayalee family envisioned a society of "equals," erasing the hierarchies of caste, family prestige and social class prevalent in the established Keralan social order, which privileged differences by birth. In this new, more egalitarian society, where individual qualities gave value to individuals, gender alone appeared to be

"naturally" given. This construction of the modern Malayalee family grounded in differences in gender and reinforced through enduring social divisions based on the culture of familism that existed in Kerala.

Another consequence of the particular shaping of the modern Malayalee family was the reshaping and re-inscription of Malayalee notions of masculinity and femininity. The ideal man was one who was a responsible householder, providing for his wife and children from his self-acquired income. And the ideal woman was one who ruled the household armed with scientific knowledge about child-rearing/home-management, but who also made an active economic contribution to the household, if necessary for the maintenance of the increasing consumption needs of the self-supporting nuclear family (Devika 2002a; Devika 2002b). These notions of ideal gendered identities shaped a certain habitus in which people as agents were predisposed to make certain choices. These choices included providing for the family, accepting the newly revised gendered authority structure of the family, and maintaining respectability. Furthermore, such habitus took for granted the associations between the modern Malayalee family and these qualities.

Yet another consequence of articulating the modern Malayalee family along the lines just discussed related to the distribution of familial resources, and the question of entitlements, rights, and needs. Family-embedded identities were created and legitimated as primarily conjugal or parental. These identities worked across three generations: parents and dependent child, and adult children and their elderly parents. The perceived legitimacy of claims to entitlements of familial resources was constructed through an understanding of family, familial obligations and "normalized" and "naturalized"

gendered social and economic arrangements. The perceived legitimacy of claims to entitlements was also contingent upon understandings of the social order, and local ideas about the appropriate places of women and men in them. In this framework, never-married women had lower claims than the conjugal or parental relationships.

The question then arises: who constitutes the family of adult never-married women? What does family mean for never-married women? They can be said to "belong" to their birth families as long as their parents, and more particularly their fathers, are alive. Upon the death of their fathers, and if the woman has married brothers who take care of their widowed mother, the woman and her mother may move in with the brother, who usually is assumed to be the new head of household. But on the death of their mothers, never-married women are left with the unsettling question of who is their family. These questions becomes pressing because current understandings and practices of families currently typically imply that of husband, wife, their children and husband's parents. Marriage ties are currently considered more binding than those between siblings. This was always true for Christian communities in Kerala, and became true also for formerly matrilineal communities who adopted a patrilineal model of family life. I do not mean to say that other combinations and types of families do not exist in Kerala. But the culture of familism positions never-married women as outsiders who have to negotiate their inclusion, entitlements, and obligations within families.

**B. Culture of Familism as Regime of Family**

The concept of "regime of family" is useful to delineate the structures and practices of family that centrally constituted family identity. These included family authority which is characterized by gender (male) and age (older) hierarchies, compulsory marriage,

assumed heterosexuality, fatherhood, motherhood, and maintenance of "caste/religion" purity. These structures and practices, mutually imbricated and reinforced through repeated practice, are rendered normal, and together they constitute and legitimate the regime of family. They worked as the spaces and the boundary markers of family identity.

Foucault (1980) uses the term "regimes" to refer to power/knowledge schemes that seek to normalize power relations. By appealing to the particular "truths" that have developed about science, culture, and social life, such systems of power/knowledge define and regulate subjects and normalize their attitudes and practices. The regime that I consider is that of Kerala family, which provides the institutional contexts and webs of power within which Keralan never-married women must (re)locate and (re)align themselves as they traverse contentious social spaces. Regimes require that persons be locatable and confinable to specific spaces and relations defined by various regimes such as family, gender and the kinship networks.

Foucauldian disciplining and technologies of the self are at play in theorizing regimes of family. Disciplining and surveillance are related to the locations, characteristics, and workings of power, which Foucault formulated, is contested, often paradoxical and contradictory, and there may be seeming contradictions in the ways in which it is exercised (Foucault 1980). The link between power and surveillance is identifiable in Foucault's analysis of the panopticon. The goal of discipline and punishment is self-regulated behavior. Bodies are ordered through punishment (or the threat of). Foucault uses Bentham's architectural model of the panopticon to demonstrate

control of bodies through surveillance. With panopticism, power is always subtly present; it is both visible and unverifiable.

Two technologies used by the disciplining regimes of family are the panoptic gaze and normalizing judgments. The panoptic gaze is the technique of having "eyes that see without being seen" (Foucault 1995). This type of observation is found in institutions like military camps, hospitals, prisons, and also in families. Surveillance is an effective disciplinary instrument because it provides *all* members of the community with the knowledge that they are always being watched and judged by others and that they could be punished for "unacceptable" actions at any time. This observation is unceasing and is permanent, making it an effective instrument towards achieving order. The power of surveillance is that it is an inspecting gaze which each individual interiorizes to the point that she is her own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, herself (Foucault 1995:155). From a family regime perspective, families and neighborhoods work as panopticons, exercising their minute, relentless and scrupulous familial and neighborhood gaze on never-married women and on their families. It is worthwhile to emphasize that the power of the gaze is exacerbated by the inclusion of never-married women's families.

Another instrument used to achieve discipline is the normalizing judgment. Instead of punishing offenders for alleged transgressions, heads of families attempt to normalize "problem" individuals and make them functional. In families, non-conforming individuals are induced towards conformity through promises of care, nurturance and belonging. Inducements give individuals goals to strive towards and create incentives for being disciplined. Those who reject such disciplining are cast out.

The outsider-within locations of many never-married women denote the localizing strategy they use to evade, deflect, and take advantage of particular conditions in their families and wider social spaces. I borrow here from Collins (2000) who defined outsider-within locations as "social locations or border spaces marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power. Individuals acquire identities as 'outsiders within' by their placement in these social locations." The regime of family has multiple, often unexpected consequences. One expected consequence, however, is that it creates particular kinds of masculinities and femininities, gender identities that disposed or disciplined subjects to sustain the regime of family as it operates in Kerala.

I consider the normative practices of regulating healthy, productive bodies within the family and their deployment for the marriage market and the enterprise of modern Malayalee family (maintaining family honor) as regime of family. Everyday norms and practices whereby Kerala women are disciplined to place family interests above their individual, and sometimes even social concerns are constitutive of the regime of family. In addition to acquiring the habitus of continual striving on behalf of the family, daughters are expected to collect symbolic capital in the form of educational qualifications and self-restraint that will not compromise their honorability, such that these conditions will place them at an advantage when families work for the marriage alliance that will best consolidate or raise its family class position and prestige. Women's choice of educational achievements characterizes them as highly educated individuals but is also shaped by considerations of this regime of family. Focus is on how to maximize their ability to attract the most suitable husband while concurrently *not*

using their higher education to enter non-traditionally feminine occupations, but rather to channel it to raise healthy, productive children.

The regime of family is, however, always also conditioned by wider political-economic circumstances. Economic interdependency is the structuring principle that mobilizes the immediate family and relatives in common interest. But the symbolic and moral capital of a family are also important structuring principles for the modern Malayalee family. An individual's sense of moral worth is based on endurance and diligence in income-making activities, compliance with parental/familial authority, making personal sacrifices and deferral of personal gratification, especially and routinely on the part of women and children. Daughters are instilled with a sense of loyalty/obligation to their families which they demonstrate by supporting their families, even their wayward brothers. While these strategies of familial regulation can be seen as shaping modern Kerala subjectivities, these also ignore the effects of state discipline and a highly competitive marketplace which has actually restricted women's access to employment and self-acquired income.[54]

Yet, apparent boundedness and coherence of the Kerala family and its structures and practices, or the culture of familism, are also fiction. Instead, the boundaries are quite porous, and partial and emergent Keralan family structures and practices are worked and reworked through power relations that permeate all levels of society, with fields of resistances and modes of negotiation that are coextensive in them all. Families are always constellated via-a-vis boundaries of caste, class, gender, gender hierarchies,

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[54] See Appendix 5 for details of Kerala women's labor force participation rates.

and modes of social reproduction and control. Thus, regimes of familism are specific cultural constellations of reproducing specific masculinities and femininities and what counts or does not count as "family." Through this analysis, I stress the active practices of never-married women who do not only enact, but rather (re)interpret and (re)appropriate "family" in their own ways.[55] Rather than a domain of solely sharing and commonality, "family" also becomes a site of differences, negotiations, and contestations.[56]

### C. Marginality, Places and Identities

Marginalization, defined as the complex and contentious process by which certain people and ideas are privileged over others at particular times and in particular places, is a central theme of this dissertation. In classical sociology, marginality involved the study of "strangers" (Schutz 1994; Simmel 1950). The stranger is so because she "does not share the basic assumption of the group. He [sic] becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group...to him the cultural patterns of the approached group do not have the authority of a tested system...because he does not partake in the vivid historical tradition by which it has been formed" (Schutz 1994). In Kerala families, never-married

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[55] For theorists who hold this position of culture, see Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, de Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press. Strauss, A. (1993). *Continual Permutations of Action.* New York: Adeline de Gruyter.

[56] For analysis of the partial and always incomplete nature of hegemony, with culture always contested and contingent, see Gramsci Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* New York: International Publishers. Raymond Williams Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. and Stuart Hall Hall, S. (1986). Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, 5-27.

women are "strangers" when their families perceive them as simultaneously essential *and* expendable. They are marginal to married women, to families, and to society at large.

A question therefore arises about the meanings of marginality. In the case of never-married women, marginalization could be a process of managing "deviant" women and the social positions of autonomous *swatantrayam*-seeking women[57] whose challenge could upset the carefully ordered social structures. The culture of familism and regime of family define the standards from which specific others can appear to deviate. And while the myth of familism is perpetuated by those whose interests it serves, it can also be internalized, challenged, and revealed for its mythic qualities by those it oppresses. By rejecting these ideologies, creating and standing on their own ground, never-married women challenge both dominant assumptions and the power to define, and therefore to grant positions of centrality or marginality.

Never-married women occupy the borderlands of families. "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (Anzaldua 1987). Borderlands have been understood in many different ways: as difference, as multiple membership, as deviance, as "outsiderness." Strangers inhabit

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[57] Devika defines swatantrayam, not as 'freedom from all constraint' but as 'self-means for survival, and against tantonnittam (doing as one feels). Many women I interviewed used the word "swatantrayam" as a condition they were seeking. They spoke of being labeled by their families and others as "tantedi," a pejorative term implying a self-willed person who does what she feels. These women took on with pride the label of *tantedi* and noted that what they were seeking through their actions and choices was a means of material, social and existential survival, which they saw as being outside the culture of familism that operates in Kerala. This is why Devika's definition of swatantrayam as "self-means for survival" resonates with the way in which it was used by my informants.

such borderlands – they are those who "come and stay a while" (Simmel 1950). Borderlands resonate with motion and emotion. Contrary to demands that a person be "pure," those occupying borderlands have responded variously by passing as members of the dominant group, forming social movements, and resisting pressures to conform to dominant social expectations.

Disrupting stable notions of "home," hooks (1990) writes that at times home is no longer one place, it is locations. Home can become that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. In Kerala, the very presence of never-married women is a disruption, a potential threat to the culture of familism. Families then work to silence, co-opt, or undermine those who are different. Hooks argues that being in the margin opens a space of "radical openness." By this she means that those on the margins look both from the outside in and from the inside out, and see things whole. This sense of wholeness, which is impressed on people in the margin by the structures of their daily lives, can provide them with oppositional world-views. Marginality, from this perspective becomes more than a site of deprivation; it transforms into a site of radical possibilities, a space of potential resistances. Hooks (1990) names such marginality as the central position for the production of counter-hegemonic discourses that are found not merely in words but in habits of being and ways of living. For her, spaces can be real and imagined; they can be interrupted, appropriated and transformed through lived practices.

The processes of redefining family and renegotiating claims and boundaries can create tensions between never-married women and their families. By boundaries I mean

the marking off of a delimited social space and also, following feminist discourses, as a metaphor for going beyond or exceeding identities of various kinds. Through boundary crossing, there are further possibilities of exploring and contesting boundaries between self and others, between and within genders, and between other markers of identity. The framework of marginality includes concepts and processes such as passing, insiders and outsiders, centers and margins, borders and boundaries, social placement. These concepts become the workings of power as seen in social placement, normalizing or marginalizing identities, and through processes like accommodations, resistances, negotiations, and investments in these processes of marginality.

The question of social placement and place-making, as they are moved through power relations and formed through actual practices, are tied to questions of identities. Identities – gendered subjectivities – emerge through engaging, contesting, challenging, accommodating and reforming, regimes of family. Hall (1995) conceives of identity as a series of 'meeting points' that constitute and re-form the subject so as to enable him/her to act. Identities are not always rooted in communities, but instead are "...mobile and often unstable relations of difference. Identity and alterity are therefore produced simultaneously in the formation of 'locality' and 'community.' 'Community' is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity, but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness" (Gupta and Fergusson 1997: 13). These authors argue that it is through the processes of exclusion and othering that both collective and individual subjects are formed. They, and Moore (1994), rightly assert that identities and place-making are relations of difference.

To be part of a family which is located in a specific time and place is to be positioned as a particular kind of subject, similar to others within that family and extended kinship network in some crucial aspects and different from those who are excluded there from. Through their insistence that these identities are not freely chosen, but are overdetermined by structural location and that their durability and stability should not be taken-for-granted but are open to contestation and reformulation, Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 17-18) draw attention to the role played by resistance in subject formation. They define resistance as experiences that construct and reconstruct the identity of subjects. Resistance can exist only in relation to a 'strategy of power' and such strategies themselves are shifting, mobile and multiple. The form of experience may be profoundly transformative, or it may maintain status quo. In either case, resistance produces a formative experience for and in the resisting subject. While it may appear puzzling to conceive of identities as both determined by structural locations and constructed through resistance, this appears to be the case in some specific contexts of caste and class, as the discussions to follow will make clear.

**D. Gender and Gender Regimes**

The concept of gender and gender regimes are central to my project. Moore argued that the scope of feminist scholarship included the analysis of "what it is to be a woman, how cultural understandings of the category 'woman' vary through time and space, and how these understandings relate to the position of women in different societies" (Moore 1988:12). Gender, she argued, may be seen from two perspectives: "either as a symbolic construction or as a social relationship" (Moore 1988:12). These two aspects – gender as a set of material social relations and as symbolic meaning – cannot really be separated.

In defining gender, it is clear that social practices, including the wide range of social interactions at a variety of places and times, and ways of thinking about and representing place and gender are interconnected and mutually constituted.

The term "gender" is now used in two different yet interconnected ways. First, it is used in contrast with the term sex. Sex is understood to depict biological differences and gender describes socially constructed characteristics. Simone de Beauvior (1972: 295) argued that that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. Her ideas about the social construction of femininity were developed to theorize the concept of "gender" to refer to the ways in which women were "made. The concept of gender demonstrated that the sexual differences were not immutable and "natural." By differentiating gender from sex, gender could be theorized as the cultural or social elaboration of sex and hence, amenable to change. Gayle Rubin (1975:159) developed the term "sex/gender system" to show how the processes of sex and gender were interrelated. She argued that a sex/gender system is a "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied." Through this transformation and regulation sex becomes gender. Other theorists recognized that gendered characteristics vary not only between countries and over historical time but also in everyday space and interactions.

In the second usage of the term, however, gender is not seen as distinguishable from sex. Rather, sex is subsumed in gender. Nicholson (1995) draws from and cites Joan Scott's explanation of this second way of understanding gender:

> It follows then that gender is the social organization of sexual difference. But this does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men; rather gender is the

> knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily difference... We cannot see sexual differences expect as a function of our knowledge about the body and that knowledge is nor pure, it cannot be isolated from its implications in a board range of discursive contexts (Scott: 1988: 67)

This view of gender challenges the biological foundations of the first perspective on gender differences, and the attributes of sexual differences as having universal applicability.

***Patriarchy, gender regimes and gender bargains***

When gender was understood as the cultural making of sex, the emphasis was on uncovering variations in the ways in which material social practices resulted in inequitable gender relations. In this work, patriarchy was an important concept which was useful in both connecting gender to class and in theorizing the reasons for women's oppression in a range of societies. McDowell (1999) noted that in its general usage within feminist scholarship, patriarchy refers to the social control that men as husbands and fathers hold over their wives and daughters. In a more specific usage, patriarchy is the system in which men as a group are constructed as superior to women as a group and so assumed to have authority over them.

Walby (1990) suggested that patriarchal relations in advanced industrialized societies are constructed and maintained by six sets of analytically separable structures – household production, waged work, state, male violence against women, sexuality and culture – in which men dominate and exploit women. Despite these specificities, this concept of patriarchy was still criticized for being overarching, ethnocentric, and ignoring the intersections between gender relations and ethnicity, age and sexual orientations. Walby (1997) revised her theorizing to suggest that these structures or sets of relations are connected in different ways in particular circumstances and places. In place of

"patriarchy" she used the term "gender regime," also constituted by the same six sets of relations. Walby distinguished two main regimes in advanced industrialized societies: a domestic regime distinguished by private patriarchy and a public regime dominated by public patriarchal relations. Although Walby conceived these regimes as analytically distinct, she also recognized that they often coexist and that women are differently involved in each structure.

I find the concept of different regimes composed of separate but interconnected structures a useful analytic way to distinguish changing gender relations, especially as they include class and other differences. Walby's concept of "gender regimes" resonates with Connell's concept of "gender order" (Connell 1995). Walby had an overarching theorization of a dominant male oppression; Connell explores forms of cultural consent and pleasure and the ways in which gender relations are constructed and maintained. Connell argues that different societies are characterized by a dominant or hegemonic gender regime which is relatively stable over time, and a range of oppositional regimes which may co-exist with the dominant one, challenging its assumptions about sexuality and gender that maintain it, and that this may lead to change. Connell argues that notions about sexuality and gendered positions are not only enforced by power and oppression but that people take pleasure in their subject positions in particular gender regimes.

Connell (1995) theorizes that gender regimes consist of three sets of structures which he distinguishes as relations of power ("overall subordination of women and the dominance of men....which exists despite many local reversals and resistance of many kinds"), production ("gender division of labor....[the consequences of which are] unequal wages and also a gendered accumulation process...") and cathexis (emotional

attachment: "practices that shape and realize desire are aspects of the gender order...") (Connell 1995). The strength of Connell's position is that it explains why people are bound into, and even enjoy, their position in patriarchal relations.

A limitation of Walby's analysis is that she does not explain the reason for women's attachment to individual men or to particular gender order or gender regimes. Connell, through his emphasis on emotional attachment, does this, but his conceptualization underplays other ways in which women may feel they have no option but to buy into the dominant gender order. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of patriarchal bargain closes this gap. Drawn from patriarchal structures in Africa an Asia, and exploring why women on the whole chose to accept rather than rebel against patriarchal structures, Kandiyoti draws attention to different family structures and the ways in which wives and widows are dependent on particular structures of patriarchal kinship relations. She argues that it is in women's self-interest to support a system that was essential for their long-term survival and living standards while it also was oppressing them and their female kin. Kandiyoti privileges women's agency, arguing that women may be subordinate but not subservient to patriarchy. Women are able to work within and also to some extent subvert patriarchal relations, and so gender regimes may change. All three authors insist on complexity and variety in the ways in which gender elations result in unequal relations between men and women and in the scope and reasons for change. They also all insist on the interconnections between gender, class position and ethnic origin. In the coming pages in draw on this nuanced concept f gender regimes and gender relations, as also on the flexible and interconnected patriarchies developed by Connell and Walby.

McDowell (1999) rightly argues the point raised by deconstructive and postmodern arguments about the impermanence of the category 'woman' and 'man' and the impossibility of understanding difference and diversity through grand theories and master narratives. She holds, like Walby, that it is not necessary to give up wide-ranging notions of structured relationships in order to theorize complexity. All three theorists whose work I draw upon recognize the complexity of the ways in which gender intersects class, age, ethnicity, sexuality and other conditions. Yet, in conditions where women as a group are clearly subordinate to, unequal with and dominated by men as a group, it is imperative that we hold on to theories which recognize structured inequities between social groups.

A South Asian approach to gender relations developed by Agarwal (1994: 51-60) considers gender relations from a bargaining perspective. She defined gender relations as

> the relations of power between women and men which are revealed in a range of practices, ideas and representations, including the division of labour, roles, and resources, between women and men, and the ascribing to them of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavioural patterns, and so on.. Gender relations are both as constituted by and help constitute practices and ideologies in interaction with other structures of social hierarchy such as class, caste and race. (Agarwal 1994: 51).

Agarwal noted that gender hierarchies influenced and structured relations between men and women and also individuals of the same sex. Following Sen's (1994) framework of families as sites of cooperative conflict, Agarwal used a bargaining approach to conceptualize gender relations in families, where the outcome of negotiations was crucially determined by a person's "fallback position," which she defined as "the outside options which determine how well off he or she would be if cooperation ceased," and the

extent to which her claim was seen as socially and legally legitimate. Agarwal defined social legitimacy as tat which was accepted and enforce as legitimate by the community (identified by kinship, caste, religion or location) of which the family is a part, and legal legitimacy as that which was established by law. She noted that the two need not coincide. Agarwal rightly argues that women's long-term self-interests are generally tied to that of their families, and so she calls for strengthening women's bargaining power within families by improving their fall-back positions and from strengthening the legitimacy of their claims to family resources as perceived by others. She argues for the removal of external constraints that induce women to act against their self-interest, and to comply with practices that disadvantage them and resort to covert forms of resistances to gender inequities. Agarwal's theories of gender relations are a useful lens through which to understand the situation of never-married women of Kerala.

**E. Narratives as Performance**

In this project, never-married women narrated their life stories to me. Narratives can be considered as performance:[58] an "act" and an enactment, a doing and a representation of the doing. As an enactment, a representation of a doing, narrative performance refers to the enhancement of experience, how the narrative is carried out "above and beyond its referential content" (Bauman 1977, 1986 cited in Langellier 2001). Enhancement is augmented through performance features that intensify the experience, among them narrative detail, reported speech, appeals to the audience, paralinguistic features and gestures (Bauman 1977; Fine 1984). The enhancement of experience in storytelling

[58] Narratives can also be analyzed as text or product, where focus is on the content of the text rather than the performative aspects.

reveals the radical interdependence of the narrated event and the narrative event. In this radical interdependence, the narrator takes an experience and makes it the experience of those listening to the story (the narrative event) in the enactment of performance (Langellier 2001).

As an act, a doing, performance also refers to the constitutive nature of narrative, how it is formative of reality and identity. In this second sense of performance, or more specifically, performativity, narrative names a site where the social is articulated, structured and struggled over (Butler 1990). Reality, "what happened to me (or to others I know)" is both constituted and contested because telling a particular story in a particular way unavoidably privileges certain interests, experiences and meanings, realities and identities over other ways. Through narratives, narrator and listener are themselves constituted as participants whose subjectivities are constructed by a symbiosis of the performed story and the social relations in which it is performed. That is, relations of gender, class, race, sexuality, geography, religion and other expressions of identity interpenetrate the experience and interpretation of the narrated story and the narrative experience as listener and narrator. Narrative performance gives shape to these social relations. Yet because such relations are multiple, complexly interrelated, and sometimes contradictory, they can only influence social relations in contingent and destabilizing ways.

The two-way narrative interplay between narrator and listener may be cooperative and or combative. Such interplay or struggle adheres not only to the individual teller and listener alone, but to the play of collective and institutional forces of discourse as well. Minister (1991 cited in Langellier 2001)) reminds us that an interview narrative is always

a performance for "ghostly audiences" exceeding the interviewer. For the women I interviewed, the "ghostly audiences" included other never-married women, families of never-married women, other Keralites, and academic audiences who would read my work. These multiple audiences constructed in the narrative contract – the self, the interviewer, and absent others –all participate in the discursive struggle over the meanings of singlehood and respectability in Kerala.

Narrative performance thus refers to a site of struggle over personal and social identity rather than to the acts of a self with a fixed, unified, stable or final essence which serves as the origin or accomplishment of experience. From the perspective of performance and performativity, the analysis is not only semantic, engaging the interplay of meanings, but must also be pragmatic. It thus analyzes the struggle over meanings and the conditions and consequences of telling a story in a particular way. Performativity contextualizes narratives within institutionalized networks of power relations that operate in and through family, media, law, sexuality, and traditions. Narrative as a situated performance event is particularly embodied and material – a story of a body told through the body which makes cultural conflicts concrete (Langellier 1999). Identity is a performative struggle, and it is this struggle over the meanings of an unmarried body, sexuality, and respectability that I analyze as performance act and performance enactment.

With these theoretical frameworks, next I offer an analysis of the processes by which never-married women made sense of their singlehood.

**Never-married Women's Discourses on Marriage**

Patrilineal, conjugal marriage was the foil against which contemporary never-married Kerala women experienced their singlehood. All the women I interviewed, regardless of their social differences, were raised to anticipate marriage. These familial expectations implicitly assumed that the women were heterosexual and desired marriage and motherhood. Marriage was a given; it was every person's expected place in society. When never-married women spoke to me of their experiences of singlehood, social positions as single women, and marriage as it exists in Kerala today, it was against the backdrop of ideas of gender relations, marriage, and structures and practices of family as these had evolved historically into the forms which prevail in Kerala today.

The never-married women I interviewed articulated one of three positions about marriage. Some women did not challenge existing dominant ideas of patrilineal marriage as an alliance between two families, with exchange of wealth and status, and where the bride and groom were given social sanction to start their own family life. The families of never-married women, who held this position on marriage as an expected social and personal milestone in adult female biography simply did not have the economic resources to get them married. I do not discuss this position any further.

Second, some other women rejected traditional marriage arrangements, advocating companionate marriages instead. These women opposed particular forms of marriage and marriage practices; they did not reject marriage per se. Yet other women, some of whom had sexual relationships and children despite their singlehood, questioned the need for marriage at all, articulating the third position. These marriage challengers were influenced by modern ideas such as socialism, liberalism, and feminism. Each

woman's particular opposition to marriage stemmed from her understanding of these ideologies. Together, they questioned the institutionalization of marriage, its expectations of monogamy and compulsory heterosexuality, its expected versions of male-dependent femininity, and the conjugal patriarchal form of marriage that has become common for present-day Kerala marriages – both family- and self-arranged. Yet some women were not opposed to living in a long-term partnership with men, bearing and raising children and, in some cases, having multiple sexual partnerships or alternative forms of sexuality. They made the point that single women could live on their own standing, and without the support of male kin. Said differently, women who questioned marriage were pushing for recognition for unmarried female singlehood, arguing that a woman does not only have a life and social identity if she is married. I next present each of these positions more fully.

***Companionate Marriages***

A number of women argued against family arranged, *penne kannal*[59] mandated, dowry exchanged marriages. They wanted companionate marriages[60] instead. A typical example of this perspective was Kamala Vijayan, a highly educated woman in her early 30s from the Ezhava caste. She had several siblings, all of whom were married. In college Kamala was part of the Communist Party, and at the time we met, she was active in a local women's movement and a rationalist movement.[61] Kamala was still in the

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[59] *Penne kannal* or 'viewing of the woman' occurs once families screen acceptable candidates; then a prospective groom and bride have a chance to meet and decide whether they are personally compatible.
[60] Women advocating companionate marriages expected to find their partner themselves, not through family or other networks.
[61] Rationalist movements sought to debunk people's "blind faith" in miracles and other "performances" or religion.

"marriage market" when we met; family and others were still bringing marriage proposals for her consideration. Her father was dead, her mother was not a "strong personality" and other family members were not interested in arranging her marriage, particularly because she had laid down many conditions about the person she would marry and the kind of marriage transactions and ceremonies she would permit.

Kamala said that she was not against marriage *per se*, but she was against the kind of marriage that operated in her community. She said that even though she was extremely highly qualified professionally -- as lawyer, chartered accountant and company secretary -- potential grooms still expected a huge dowry and a lavish wedding party, to be paid by her family. Kamala said that she was not willing to be bargained for "like cattle" and she had no desire to squander her parents' money on a feast; she preferred to use it for something useful like the down payment for a house. She said that when she or her family placed a matrimonial advertisement in the local newspaper, mentioning only her age, qualifications and details of her complexion[62] and family background, she got over 200 responses. But, she liked none of those responses and she and the family put a fresh advertisement in the newspaper, this time calling only for men who were not interested in an *arpatam* marriage, which is a marriage that did not ask for a dowry and did not have a lavish, conspicuous expenditure on the marriage ceremonies. When this condition was stated, there were less than ten responses to her matrimonial advertisement. Kamala Vijayan narrates this incident with the wry observation that this response was

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[62] People, and particularly women, with lighter complexions are considered more beautiful and are more valued than people/ women with darker skin tones.

amazing in light of Ezhava social reformer Narayana Guru's teachings promoting simple marriages.

Ashwati, a lower caste Hindu women, (she did not mention her caste to me, but I figured through out conversation that she was from the Dalit community[63]) has another view of marriage and single life. She was the older of two children. Thirty year old Ashwati worked as a home nurse, which was a live-in position where she provided care-giving services to an elderly invalid person. Ashwati's family was poor; her mother and she worked as live-in help at different homes, and her sister was in training as a nurse in a residential institution. All members of her family had chosen live-in jobs so that they could rent out their small house as an additional source of income. Ashwati's family did not have the means to raise a dowry for her and her sister. Her mother's employer agreed to contribute some money towards the dowry of one daughter, and Ashwati felt that her sister should be the beneficiary of this offer. Ashwati came in contact with a women's group which supports working women. Through this contact, her ideas about women's position in society, and her opposition to traditional Kerala arranged marriages strengthened. About her singlehood, she said,

> Marriage was just not an issue for me. I did think about it some times, but I do not think that marriage is an absolute necessity in my life. I want to be involved/ responsible for my own life. So I [want as a marriage partner] somebody who knows about me, who understands me, [she pauses] a person I like. I mean, I do not desire to get married [through a process] where a man and his maternal uncles come, see and approve of me and arrange the marriage. A person who can accept my perspective, allow me to participate in women's issues and who acts knowing my likes and dislikes is the kind of a person is I want to marry. He should understand

[63] In caste hierarchy, Dalits are positioned below the Ezhavas. Essentially, they were the former 'outcastes.'

> me, and I too should be able to understand him. When marriage proposals would come, I would say, "Why bother? Why pay the brokers, and then they simply come see the girl and go back. Or they will not come if they know that the dowry is only [a small] amount." So I refused. Now since I joined [local women's group] my decision has become even stronger. I mean, what is life? Do we not have the right to live if we do not get married? If somebody likes me and come forward, then I will get married or else I will not get married. I will move forward. There are so many things that I can do.

Kamala Vijayan and Ashwati offer two faces of women who are not against marriage but who do reject "tradition." They refuse to be commodified through practices like groom-price and penne kannal. Instead, they want to be married for their own worth, as individuals. But they are not willing to push their challenges of existing social practices in Kerala beyond their refusal to marry in a traditional manner. They did not question the restrictive nature of existing marriages in terms of restrictive sexual practices, family-related laws that were not sensitive to women's situations, and dependence on men. Although both said that they were the "men" in their family, doing things that are usually done by men, neither voiced claiming "male" privileges in terms of a more gender equitable relationship than patrilineal marriages. Ashwati articulated a position outside of marriage when she argued that single women had "the right to live." Through this articulation, she was challenging not the structures and practices of family, but dominant notions of acceptable adult female marital status itself (married/ never-married). Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the following pages, some never-married women who challenged marriage saw their option not as reform of the patrilineal, patriarchal marriage but as a place outside marriage itself. They were articulating a position for autonomous female singlehood, in its many variations.

The women who advocated companionate marriages wanted to be considered (and married) for their particular, individual qualities. So did the women who questioned

the need for marriage. They wanted to develop their own identities and autonomy, and accountability, and not to have these qualities tied to their association with male kin.

***Claiming Individual Accountability***

Professionally educated, 40-year old Jamuna and her professionally educated long-term male partner were self-defined social activists, and the parents of two children. Jamuna probably belonged to the Nair or Ezhava caste (as a point of her stance that caste does not matter, she refused to tell me her caste status but she did say that she was from an "ordinary" caste by which I assumed she is Nair or Ezhava) both of which had matrilineal histories, and both of which were upwardly mobile castes. She could be considered middle class. Speaking exclusively in English, Jamuna said she rejected marriage because,

> Just being a wife and a mother will not give any satisfaction to my life. It will be bondage because we have to obey the unwritten rules of society. In fact marriage is happening not between two individuals, it happens between two families. So when we get married, we'll be obeying the all the rituals and all the nonsenses (sic) that the society has made. And I won't be having any freedom for myself. I had to search for myself and for my identity. I couldn't follow what the society has imposed upon a woman. So I told them that it's an individual decision for living together or for partnership, it is the individuals who are very important rather than the family.

Here Jamuna was rejecting the "rules of society" – one of which was patrilineal marriage – which, from her perspective, characterized marriage as "bondage." Against existing ideas of individual identity as primarily socially embedded in marriage, she was claiming individual identity and freedom, which she saw as coming through a rejection of marriage. She rejected the authority of families to determine the lives of individual members, and specifically so in the instance of marriage. She was claiming an agentic

position, which she could find only outside marriage. So Jamuna started confronting society. She continued, explaining why she rejected marriage:

> So when we get married we'll be obeying the all the rituals and all the nonsenses (sic) society has made. And I won't be having any freedom of myself. If I want to study more, or I want to travel, everything will be controlled by the society. So, confronting the society (by rejecting marriage and moving in with a man) was a starting point for me. When I started opposing the society's values and norms, the society also started questioning me. *I had to make my own ground for myself to stand.* So, I thought that I couldn't follow what the society has imposed upon a woman. Like everybody will be asking once you have got married, "Have you conceived so far?" It is usual. We may not want (to conceive) at that time but the society won't allow. So each and every aspect of a woman is scrutinized, policed by the society which I didn't want.

Jamuna specifically rejected gendered expectations about marriage and its consequences like mandated motherhood. She was not objecting to caste or class restrictions in this interview and this excerpt, only to restrictions based on gender. She privileged her individual responsibility towards herself – to "make my own ground to stand in" – before and above responsibility towards family and, particularly for women, in decisions relating to marriage and childbearing. This was a departure from current expectations of appropriate womanly action in Kerala even though, ironically as we read in the previous section, a century ago social conditions had pushed matrilineal people to think about self first instead of matrilineal joint family. Jamuna and her partner had taken on the task of educating people about their so-called radical actions. They talked to their families about their decisions, and over the course of two decades their families were living with the knowledge of this difference. Some family members were able to accept/ live with this challenge to cultural expectations more than others. Jamuna further articulated her rejection of marriage discourse she talked about the way her family dealt with her defiance of normative expectations.

They are finding it difficult to adjust to our ideas. They get convinced [about her positions against marriage] when we talk to them. Because they don't have any answer. The dowry problem is there. They know that there is disharmony in all the families and nobody is having a good relationship even after (arranged) marriage and these ceremonies. But people are afraid of the rest of the society, that's why people are not [changing existing ways of marriage and family life]. Not because they are happy with the marriage...I think that marriage is the biggest risk for a woman.

For Jamuna, marriage was a "risk," and non-marriage was less so. Families and the people who are getting married took this risk, from her perspective, because they were unwilling to question society. She challenged existing practices, and cited problems arising within arranged marriages, with dowries and all the traditional ceremonies. But what she was rejecting was marriage in a formal sense, not companionship, heterosexual sexuality, and motherhood. For her the difference was that when these conditions were outside of marriage, the security of marriage did not exist, and she was accountable for herself – to "make [her] own ground for [her] to stand on." This was what she considered freeing – being in charge of herself. In contrast, the risks of marriage were that of "loosing or not finding one's identity," not being able to be accountable for oneself, and other more evident problems like domestic violence, marital strife and incompatibility between spouses. I do not know if Jamuna would have found another system of marriage, say matriliny, more liberatory than the patrilineal "marriage" she opposed. Her preferred position of heterosexuality, motherhood and domestic partnership outside the framework of marriage was a statement of her version of her preference.

### *Claiming Personal Freedom*

Srilata Chandran was 32 years old, a journalist, an Ezhava by caste. She moved to a city after living most of her life in a small village in north Kerala. She was one of seven children of a working-class family and experienced many material deprivations in childhood. Srilata equated marriage with family and she was strongly against family. Her comments were embedded in a discourse of belonging to a family with many siblings, poverty, and great anger against a father who spent money on alcohol rather than on the needs of his children. When I asked her why she did not get married, she replied in Malayalam (speaking only the underlined words in English),

> I don't have a great interest in marriage. Marriage, as far as I have seen it, is a luxury for a short while only. Then it is a great reality. For one, poverty is a real thing. Then, how long will we be with one person? After a while you get bored with each other. It is very scary to stay with one person... I see marriage as a social license for ordinary people to have a sexual relationship. I know very well now that there is no need to have a license to have that kind of a relationship. [She pauses] I don't think that marriage is a must. And I have great anger to this thing called family, to the family set-up.

Srilata held the view that poverty was an impediment to marriage; marriage was a luxury afforded by the rich. She argued social conformers – "ordinary people" – needed societal approval for sexual activity, whereas she did not, because unlike them she did not conflate sexual activity and marriage. She questioned whether monogamy was possible, and even desirable, for all. Srilata left home several years before our meeting, and she had not returned since. She concluded that she had "nothing like a home" and that consequently she was the most "independent" of all her friends. I asked what she meant. She replied, (again speaking only the underlined words in English),

> Firstly, I have no family to compel me to do anything. Then, there is nobody to interfere with my decisions. There is nobody to make decisions

> for me and dump them on my head. Then, I work, I rent a house on my own. I don't depend on anybody and nobody depends on me. That is why I say I am the most independent. I am not answerable to anybody. People get married for social security, and for care. There are many problems that you have to experience personally, when you are alone [she lists the problem of renting a house as an example]. If you have a husband then things are much better. If I want to travel on a bus at night, I have stood at the bus stop and fought with people [men who harass her], got on the bus and fought with people, and then walked from the bus stop facing all kinds of people to get home. Now if you are with a man, you don't experience these issues. Social security is one reason what frightens people in Kerala into getting married. The other is morality. Every one is very moral [she said this sarcastically]. If a person's morality is slightly compromised, he will have many problems from many fronts. Everybody has the desire to ignore morality and to establish (sexual) relationships [outside marriage]...But everybody is concerned about security, whether man or woman. Security is why people get married. I don't want that kind of security. If I want to have sex, I can find somebody to have sex with. I have no compulsion that I should have only one person [as sex partner]. What troubles the people here is that I have sex with one person for some time, then I move on to another person. I don't have the desire that one relationship should be lifelong. This is the topic with which I fight with people. Whether they are feminists or whatever, basically they are all seeking security. And they are ready to be with one person for that.

Within this brief statement, Srilata articulated a position that was against marriage *and* family. She saw both as one entity which, for her, signaled the end of personal autonomy. Through a listing of her areas of independence – supporting herself, paying her rent, making her own decisions – she showed how, within marriage, the same actions could be seen as dependency. She delinked marriage, and a monogamous sexuality, and in the processes challenging one conventional understanding of the purpose of marriage. She correctly argued that marriage generated dependence on men, and made women accountable to them. This dependency was the price married women paid for a questionable security, and Srilata was unwilling to make this particular trade-off. Then, Srilata also challenged prevailing ideas of sexual morality, which was premised on being within marriage and monogamous. By acting agentially in her sexual life, Srilata

indicated that she rejected conventional standards of morality, which she linked with a regulated married life. She continued her attack on marriage,

> There is no need for a husband and children! People say, "If you don't get married who will look after you? Who will turn around and give you a second thought if you are not married?" I say, "Go and have a look at old age homes and homes for destitute. Those people there have children and families and now there is nobody for them." Then why should I marry just for this? There is no guarantee that if I get married and have children, that they will take care of me. In this age, there is no surety about who will take care of whom. Nowadays, no relationship is steady [secure] for anything. Each for him/herself and money is what makes all this run smoothly, is what I know.

Here Srilata debunked the most frequently-heard argument presented for marriage and dependency: security in old age. Her comments about "each one for oneself and money" bring to mind the security that formerly matrilineal women have forfeited to present-day family arrangements. In matrilineal times, reportedly, women were concerned neither about having personal finances nor one's own children to be assured of security in old age as membership in a taravad was always already given at birth. Srilata ended with her final salvo against family/ marriage.

> But women don't have their own career. They don't make their own money. And then they marry a man. The family gives some dowry and they marry and depend on him. So their needs, a house or anything ... we don't need to beg for these are things, we have to make them in our life. But nobody is willing to take a risk. The quickest short-cut is to get married. So if we want to sit on a vehicle, we will make sure that the person we marry has a bike, and we will sit behind him. But we won't learn to ride a bike ourselves. These are all easy short-cut measures that the people of Kerala, especially women, use. And for a man, what he gets is that from a family he will have a woman to fuck, he will have his meals prepared, and she will wash his clothes, great comfort. He will have a lot of caring at home. A man without a wife will not get such caring at home. And this man will have as many relationships with women outside. So, this family life is a demand of a man and a woman. Family is the thing that helps a man and a woman to be secure. A person who fights for freedom from this family, she finds when she comes out that family life is

very difficult, that there is no security. That is why the family does not decline in Kerala. It continues to grow.

Here, Srilata focused her critique on the "marriage contract" which predicated on men providing security and women providing their services. Chandrika observed that women put up with unequal gendered expectations and division of household labor to gain what she saw as a highly uncertain security. She blamed parents for encouraging dependency, instead of encouraging daughters to prepare for careers. Srilata chastised Kerala women (and their families) for being unwilling to fight societal expectations and regulations and be independent and take the risk of being responsible for their own lives. What have been the gains for Srilata, who came from a formerly matrilineal tradition, from the new structures and practices of family? First, because her parents died, and her brother became the head of household, her choice was either to follow his dictate or to leave the house. Under a matrilineal system, this would not have been the case. She would have had the security and knowledge that she could never be dislodged from the family home. Second, the new model of family mandated monogamous heterosexual marriages, but Srilata was not interested in marriage (or motherhood), and since that was the only socially accepted means of sexual gratification, she became "outside" or in the "margins" of hegemonic expectations and practice. Under the matrilineal system, Srilata may have had greater freedom to choose from a variety of marital/ sexual partners. Also marriages then were easier to terminate than at present. Most importantly, she would not have been constructed as a social deviant, or stigmatized for her preferences.

Although Srilata suffered these losses of dismantled matriliny, she gained in terms of personal autonomy. Under a matrilineal system, the possibility for individual development would have been narrower as group/ collective betterment or consciousness

would always have been on the forefront. Like Jamuna, Srilata Chandran deliberately positioned herself outside the frame of patriarchal, patrilineal marriage; her life was another version "doing" autonomous womanhood.

***Making Sense of Singlehood through their Mothers' Stories***

Several women spoke about their mothers' lives as serious influences on their views about marriage and gender relations, and on their own career choices. Ashwati, whom we met earlier in this chapter, related the story of her mother's marriage as reason why she wanted only a companionate marriage or none at all. She said,

> When I turned eighteen, Amma said, "You have the freedom to accept the person you like." Because, Amma liked somebody but her maternal uncles did not arrange her marriage with the person she loved. Instead, she was made to marry a person [Ashwati's father] who was much older than she. And because she had to marry that older person, she had a lot of [negative] experiences. That itself is a lesson for me. I mean, I am an eyewitness to it. Now Achan[64] (she hesitates) was unable to satisfy Amma. If you ask me how I got to know of it, I just did. We children were born. That must have been in the early years [of the marriage]. Then, you can say that Achan did not have the capacity for [sexual intercourse]. In those days I did not understand all that because I was young. I am uncomfortable to even talk about it. I mean to say that a child should not get involved in the sexual life of a father and mother. I mean, when Amma had the need, Achan was just not able. I did not know it then. Amma and Achan would sleep in separate rooms. We children would sleep in the same room with Achan. So when it would be night, and when Amma would feel the need, and she would come to Achan, he was just not able. Then Achan would call out to me. Once I was awake, Amma had no option but to go and sleep.[65] You understand what I am saying? And I thought, if I can stand on my own feet, then why shouldn't I? Now Amma, she could only say that she had a man. That's all. I mean Achan was a presence. What is the use of that? Then it is better to live alone, isn't it?

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[64] "Achan" is a customary way Hindus addressed their fathers. "Amma" is one way mothers are addressed by all Kerala communities.

[65] What Ashwati means is that to get out of the situation of satisfying his wife sexually, her father would awaken the daughters, so that it would then be inappropriate for his wife to continue insisting that she be satisfied by making an issue of it in front of their daughters.

Ashwati framed her mother's story through her opening sentence by juxtaposing the "freedom" her mother granted her against the bondage she experienced. The tensions in her mother's story are that of personal choice, love, and a young woman aligned against family authority, forced marriage, and a much older groom. There is also the sad irony of marriage, which was not really a marriage because it was without sexual satisfaction and companionship as "Achan was (merely) a presence". And, it was not based on financial security, as Ashwati's mother, an unskilled worker, was the sole wage earner for her family. And, so it made sense to Ashwati that "if I can stand on my own feet, then why shouldn't I?" Elsewhere in her interview, she described her father as "deadweight" her mother carried, and that was why she felt it was better to live alone than with a "presence."

Suja Lukose also pointed to her mother's marriage when she was making sense of her singlehood. She said,

> In my teenage years I had dreams about marriage and having a dozen children. But my life experiences have made me think differently. My ideas changed...if I don't marry a man who understands me, [long pause] I cannot live like that. My Amma's life is the best example. Then what is protection/security? [long pause] the protection of living like slave, and having no freedom for anything? What is the need for a husband like that? There is no need to get married to give birth. If I feel that I must have a child, I can have sexual relations with a man. [pause] I do not believe that I will get protection/ security through marriage.

Suja's mother's was married to an alcoholic who fathered eight daughters with her. He never gave her enough money to make ends meet, and the mother had to ask some daughters to go work with her instead of going to school. She never had the "security" and "protection" of being free from the interests of other men because her husband was usually drunk at night and slept away from the home, and she had to keep

guard at night to protect herself and her daughters. She never had a partner with whom to share her life burdens. Instead, she had the questionable protection, offered to a "slave" whose master/ husband gave her no "freedom for anything." Suja dismissed hegemonic ideas of Kerala of marriage, sexuality and procreation as necessarily linked.

Never-married women told these and other stories about their mothers to make the point that their mothers did not get any "benefits" of security, companionship, or sexual satisfaction from their husbands. In fact their mothers though married, did not benefit even from the oppressive "marriage contract"; instead, they had to shoulder "double shift"[66] and take responsibility to earn money and keep the family provided with food, shelter and their necessary needs. Also, strict divorce laws and societal expectations compounded their meager material circumstances, forcing women to remain with their husbands whom they probably experienced as "dead weight." Their daughters do not want for themselves marital situations like those of their mothers, which simultaneously demanded women to be both dependent on their husbands and responsible for their families.

I heard a different, more layered story from Chandrika, who pointed not to her mother's marriage, but that of an older woman in her neighborhood, as one of many reasons why she was content being single. Chandrika was 35 years old Nair, the youngest of four children. Her siblings were married and live nearby; her father was dead. Chandrika and her mother live in their taravad. The family property was divided

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[66] Hoschild, A. 1983. The second shift: working parents and the revolution at home. New York: Viking.

among the children and Chandrika has inherited 30 cents[67] of garden land and she would inherit the taravad house after her mother's death. Chandrika studied till class 10, but she failed the SSLC[68] exam. She completed a short tailoring course, and she was working as a tailoring teacher in a local social service organization. I asked Chandrika why she was not married, and, she gave a lengthy, considered response.

> Firstly, here there are cases of people getting married and then ending it. It is a big problem. Then, my supervisor at work is living without getting married. Can't I live like her? So many proposals have come....I have not felt that I should get married. I have a skill that will let me live. ... now if I [marry], there will be nobody to look after Amma. If somebody comes to marry me, they will say, "You have to live in my house." That will be difficult ... Then because I live in the taravad,[69] every body comes visiting. So I have not yet felt the difficulty of not getting married...If there are troubles at home then it is difficult to stay there and [a person] feels that I should get married and go. But it is not the case for me. If I get married, I worry that [husband] may drink. What if after marriage, he drinks and beats me? I have those fears. At home, nobody says anything to me [meaning nobody abuses her].

Chandrika did not have the traditional reasons like *jadaga dosham* (inauspicious horoscope), ill health, or lack of dowry as reasons for not getting married. Her reasons to remain single dealt with other concerns. Chandrika did not want the risks of a family arranged stranger marriage like spousal abuse and divorce.[70] Her advantageous material circumstances reinforced Chandrika's decision to remain unmarried. Chandrika's supervisor at work, a never-married woman whom she admired, provided her a model for a life without marriage. For Chandrika the alleged disadvantages of being single

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[67] One hundred cents of land makes one acre.
[68] Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC), given to candidates who successfully complete the examination for Grade 10. The SSLC is the lowest formal academic degree of the Indian educational system.
[69] Here, Chandrika uses the term 'taravad' to mean the home that belongs to her parents. She does not use it to signify taravad in a matrilineal system.
[70] Although I do not have the statistics, family-court affiliated counselors, lawyers and judges told me that divorces were increasing in Kerala.

outweighed the risks of marriage. Chandrika ended her response for her decisions to remain single with the story of a woman of her caste who lived in her village. This story, from Chandrika's perspective, encapsulated the wisdom of her decision to remain single.

> There is a person in my village, let us call her Thanka Chetathi. Now she is forty-seven years old. She got married when she was forty-five. Earlier, her marriage had been fixed when she was eighteen years old. But [her fiancé] died in an accident and she stayed single. Then, because of the problems at home, she has sisters-in-law, she told me, "My dear, if we don't get married we won't have a *sthanam*, [literally place, also refers to social status] at home. When sisters-in-law come, we won't have a place. So, what ever happens, my dear, you must get married. You should not remain unmarried." She got married. After her marriage, I asked her, "How is it Thanka Chetathi, after marriage?" "Not bad, he does not come often." She was there [at her husband's house] only a few days. Then she returned home. He had been married earlier, and had left his wife. He married Thanka Chetathi the second time around. His Chetathi Amma (older brother's wife) was good company with him from earlier [the implication is that they had strong emotional and or sexual bonds]. So, he does not consider what Thanka Chetathi says. He listens only to what Chetathi Amma says. So, Thanka Chetathi does not live there, she lives here. See, she thought that if she married, she would have a way out. And she got married and she experienced this *gethiked* [helplessness].

Chandrika set up the story to indicate that Thanka Chetathi had the normative biography of a woman of her caste and age until the unfortunate demise of her fiancé. When a sister-in-law came into Thanka Chetathi's family, there were tensions between the two women. Here we see the tensions between vestiges of matriliny and patrilineal, conjugal families. In the patrilineal system, an unmarried sister has no place and status in her parental house (which now the brother inherits, and to which the sister has no birth assured claim). So, Thanka Chetathi opted for the currently established way in which women can acquire status, namely, through patrilineal, patrilocal marriage.

But, the way Chandrika told the story, she made a parody of the marriage. Thanka Chetathi said the marriage was "not bad" because the husband "does not come

[home] often." And while patrilocal marriages meant a woman transferred to her husband's house, here, Thanka Chetathi, a married woman, was back in her brother's home a few days after marriage. As Chandrika saw it, the "helplessness" Thanka Chetathi was trying to escape as an unmarried woman, that is, the inability for sisters-in-law living in the same household to get along was exactly the same condition she faced as a married woman. Instead of marriage being a "way out" of a problem situation, it reinforced her dependency and her fractured identity: neither fully incorporated into her husband's family nor into that of her own.

I heard discourses about the "uselessness" and the "risk" of marriage from several formerly married and currently single Nair women in their 60s and 70s. These women were not widows, but had been deserted by their husbands after several decades of marriage when they (the women) were in their sixties. One such woman, Parvathi Amma, lived in my neighborhood.

Parvathi Amma asked me about my family situation and when I said that I was unmarried, this woman said that it was better that way. She opined that those who were unmarried were so by choice and that they had seen the sorry state of marriages and decided not to marry. These are women, in Parvathi Amma's estimation, with *chengootam* (literally a strong heart, here she implies that such women have courage and determination). When she learned that my married sister had no children, she opined that it was better not to have children these days because there was not guarantee that the children would take care of the parents when the parents grew old. "What is the use of marriage for women?" Parvathi Amma asked. She continued,

> Men marry and get into debt, and women have to deal with the debt by selling the family property. And, men are not faithful. One woman is not enough for a man; they have other women outside the house. Men take no responsibility for households, whereas women have to handle the cooking, cleaning, children, their homework, and all the services for men. If all this is not ready when the man comes home, there are fights and a woman can be beaten. So what is the use of marriage for women?"

I understood her comments better when I learned that Parvathi Amma was one of several daughters of a locally prominent, wealthy, formerly matrilineal family. This 60-year old woman's husband was employed in a private sector firm, and had a steady job and income. But he got into debt and he asked his wife to sell her land, her inheritance from her father, to repay his debts. She refused and said that he could leave her if he wanted. He left. He lived elsewhere in the city with another "wife" and children from that relationship, although he never formally divorced Parvathi Amma. But her husband's creditors came to her to pay off his debt, and her children, all well-placed adults, refused to help their mother.

Parvathi Amma, like Srilata Chandran, articulated a damning critique of patrilineal (and patriarchal) marriages. She questioned the security that marriage, husbands and children were alleged to provide. Indeed, her case provides a particularly interesting situation because she was raised in the matrilineal tradition, and lived in a patrilineal marriage. She railed against the patrilineal marriage contract which was oppressive to woman: providing services, and even paying the debts of husbands and sanctioning sexual double standards which favored men, only to be deserted by husband and children in old age. Her narrative showed the contentious nature of families, which are usually assumed to have shared interests. Stories of husbands leaving long-standing marriages were no longer the exceptions. I heard this theme several times during my

fieldwork, and it pointed to me the risks that all women without male support can face when they were isolated and marginalized by their families.

Talking about "third-world" feminists, Narayan (Narayan 1997) notes that mothers and mother-cultures raise daughters with contradictory messages, but they often seem unaware of these contradictions. They voice their difficulties and hardships of being women, teaching daughters the miseries of the routine fates that await them as women, while also resisting daughters' attempts to deviate from these cultural scripts. They fail to see how much of what feminist daughters are is precisely in response to the very things they have taught them: how much their daughters have become the daughters' mothers have shaped them into becoming. Narayan says that feminist daughters who argue against marriage show that

> "...motherlands are spaces where fathers still have most of the privileges and power, and that mothers and mother-cultures relate differently to their daughters than to their sons, imposing different demands and expecting different forms of conformity...Just as daughters seldom tell their mothers' stories in the same terms as their mothers, feminist daughters often have accounts of their mother-culture that differ in significant ways from its own account of itself. Retelling the story of a mother-culture in feminist terms is a *political* enterprise – an attempt to, publicly and in concert with others, challenge and redo dominant accounts that distort, misrepresent, and often intentionally fail to account for the interests and contributions of many inhabitants of the context." (Narayan 1997)

Telling stories about their mothers' marriages, (or marriages, as in the case of separated women) as a way of making sense of their singlehood, is, as Narayan notes, a political enterprise, a way of reframing "personal troubles" in terms of contemporary social and historical processes and beliefs about gender relations, marriages and family life (Mills 1959). By developing a perspective on the situations of women in families, these women were challenging and redoing accounts of the ways conjugal, patrilineal,

patrifocal families worked for women, and revealing the ways in which these families worked primarily for the interests of men.

**Conclusion: Risks of Marriage and Singlehood**

From the perspectives of unmarried women I interviewed, marriage and family were characterized by risk. Risk can be understood as the mobilizing dynamic of a society that wants to determine its own future rather than leaving it to religion or tradition (Giddens 1991). Attempts to control risk can be considered ways of regulating the future, of normalizing it and bringing it under individual control. In Kerala, marriage, and family life are "manufactured risks" which, following Giddens, are created by the impact of our knowledge and ideas upon the world. When matrilineal systems of marriage dissolved, it changed the institution of marriage and family, even as it was replaced with another familiar form of marriage. In the process of change, marriage and family were and continue to be the site and metaphor for struggle between tradition and modernity, and never-married and other single women have started thinking of these in terms of risk. They have to confront personal futures that are much more open to possibilities than in the past, with all the opportunities and hazards this brings.

Never-married women said that the risks of traditional family arranged stranger-marriage, which is now patrilineal, patriarchal, patrilocal and patrifocal, included the possibility that families would be forced to pay a greater dowry than they were able to afford. Other possibilities such as deceit in terms of a bridegroom's family status, employment, and wealth were also risks if the person was not known to the family. In these cases, the bride's and her family's social mobility strategies would be nullified. There was the risk of whether the man would be an adequate provider, or whether he

would be "deadweight" (*bharam*) the woman would have to bear. In addition, women expressed concerns about whether the man would be violent or addicted to alcohol. They also said that there was no "security" that husbands or children would take care of them in old age. Women would have to conform to gendered expectations of married women: be respectful of husbands, behind the scenes, a "good" mother, and self-sacrificing. And many women spoke of the loss of personal autonomy and dependence on a man as serious risks of marriage.

What their families, and Kerala society considered the risks of singlehood, namely, lack of security particularly in old age, the absence of affective and emotional ties, non-fulfillment of motherhood desires, and the stigma of being different were conditions that never-married women took in their stride, sometimes as a badge of their "chengootam" (courage/ determination) and found ways to address. From their perspectives, the risks and challenges of singlehood were those of taking responsibility for themselves and being independent women.

Never-married women's questioning of the necessity of marriage have interesting parallels with arguments made by matrilineal men at the turn of the twentieth century when they organized to dismantle matriliny. Matrilineal men historically and contemporary never-married women who question marriage were/are expanding boundaries, meanings and understandings of the social spaces of adult Keralites. Matrilineal men successfully agitated for family structures and practices that promoted conjugal, monogamous, patrilineal marriages and families; never-married women today are arguing for recognition of individual worth and merit for women in Kerala society without being boxed into the social space of marriage.

Colonial rule brought about change of social circumstances that allowed men to be educated, earn their own incomes and be independent. Present day circumstances allow many Kerala women to be similarly placed, although unemployment is a real problem.[71] They are calling for more space for personal autonomy and responsibility outside the position of dependence as either wife or daughter or sister. These arguments point to one of the main observations I made earlier, in the preface, namely that while earlier Kerala history was one of changes in the material circumstance and consciousness of caste and class, there has been no similar social reform movement for change in gender relations. Indeed, social reformers in the twentieth century privileged patriarchal, patrifocal kinship structures over options of autonomous female identity. The lives of some contemporary never-married women are in movement toward reversing that trend. In the next chapter, I show how structures and practices of patrilineal conjugal families offered limited spaces for never-married women, thereby continuing their experience of fractured identities and uncertain loyalties.

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[71] In 1988, the female unemployment level in rural Kerala at 25.0 per cent was nearly seven times the level in rural India and the corresponding level in urban Kerala at 34.0 per cent was nearly four times greater. See Gulati, L., Ramalingam, & Gulati, I. S. (1996). Kerala's Women A Profile. New Delhi: Royal Netherlands Embassy. P. 39.

## CHAPTER 4: NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES: BINDING TIES, FLEEING BINDS

### Introduction

"Respectable"[72] adult unmarried women do not have a clearly articulated, socially recognized structural position in Indian society. I argued in Chapter One that the social structural positions traditionally available to Indian women were the transitional one of daughter-waiting-to-be-married, wife (and mother), and widow. These positions, embedded within family, coincide with traditional ideas of the life course available to so-called respectable women. In Chapter 2, I showed the historical process by which conjugal, patrilineal families became the dominant family formation in Kerala since the 1950s. In the next two chapters, I offer an analysis of the ways in which women who do not transition to expected social positions instead live lives of adult singlehood in a heteropatriarchal, class and caste-inflected, homosocial society. Through never-married women's stories, I present ways in which families are implicated in, deal with, and distance themselves from single women's apparent aberration from an expected life-trajectories. It is important to grasp how families respond, since in Kerala a woman's marital status is consequential for herself *and* her family.

In this chapter, I offered an analysis of families who lived with their never-married women, families who made a space, howsoever liminal and equivocal, for their never-married daughters/sisters, and women who negotiated spaces for themselves within their families. I present three types of families in which the never-married women I interviewed found themselves and the ways in which these women and their families

[72] In contrast, there has always been a structural position for "disrespectable" women like prostitutes and courtesans in the sense that they were outside the framework of marriage. They, along with widows were the "other" to married women.

dealt with the "fact" of an unmarried adult woman as a member of the family. Through the chapter I show the range of situations in which never-married women find themselves, the "choices" which shaped their efforts to claim a place for themselves in their families, and the interplay of discourses and daily life experiences which mediated women's subjectivities.

Never-married Kerala women have simultaneously and continually to balance and negotiate several social processes in adulthood, the two central foci being establishment of personal autonomy and maintenance of personal and family honor. They have to work to position themselves in Kerala society in ways that are acceptable both to themselves and to others. Family is the key arena in which never-married women perform this balancing act. In some instances, what is acceptable to them and to their families coincides; but in many instances, women have to continually negotiate positions that are acceptable to themselves while not also causing outrage that requires them to leave the family.

To claim the right to membership in a family and entitlement to its economic, affective and symbolic resources, women's choices fell along a continuum which had two extremes. On the one hand, if they submitted to a patriarchal, authoritarian family structure, and were "loyal" to its goals and maintained the public reputation of the family, then the family would usually provide such never-married women with the security of entitlement to live in the family home, and access to its material, social and symbolic resources. On the other hand, if women challenged the authority of the family in terms of respect and obedience to the authority of family elders, and older males, and if women pursued their own interests and life choices which differed from what families expected

of them, then women appeared to have no choice but to eventually leave the family and fend for themselves. I deal with this issue in Chapter Five. The women I studied did not always face such extreme choices, and they negotiated their positions on a situation-by-situation basis with their families. There were as many women who straddled a middle position as there were women who positioned themselves closer to one or the other end of the continuum.

**Never-married women and their families: occupying a range of positions**

From women's narratives about their choices and actions and their families responses, women and families find themselves in a range of situations to which they respond variously. From the perspective of never-married women, families' responses could be characterized as more or less supportive or restrictive. No position, taken either by a family or a woman, was fixed. Shifting positions paralleled shifting economic fortunes, migratory potentials, biographic events such as ill health or a romance, and the social conditions prevailing in Kerala at any given time. Some families, at some time periods and not others, accepted the fact of an unmarried adult female and provided a place in their homes for her to stay for life. Signifying more than a physical safe place, such membership indicated to the world that the woman had her family's emotional and material support, regardless of their actual situation. If families were particularly supportive, they "allowed" never-married women to follow their own path in terms of moving away from home for education or a career. They did not continually coerce marriage on never-married daughters nor penalize them in any way for refusing it. Such families did not highlight the difference of marital status in a stigmatizing manner. They

did not challenge never-married women's sense of belonging and identity and continuity within the family.

In contrast, other families at varying time periods did not provide material and emotional shelter for their never-married woman relatives. They influenced family situations such that a never-married woman felt she could not return to the family home or the brother's home to stay for life. Such families obstructed never-married women from following their own choices and paths. They penalized them in different ways for refusing marriage, for instance by not providing never-married women their proper share of family inheritance. Some of these families considered never-married women as important sources of financial support, yet they could not/ did not accept or deal with the "stigma" of having a family member who never married.

Never-married women I met varied in their desires, ambitions, capabilities, interests, and attitudes towards authority, and these variations played out differently in different families. In fact, the same family could be both supportive *and* restrictive of a woman. Never-married women, during some times in their life, conformed to the expectations of their families and acquiesced to dominant ideologies about women's place in society and social decorum. They did not act in ways that were considered to ruin family and personal honor; they fulfilled familial and social expectations about never-married female sexuality and respectability. If they had differences with family expectations, they did not challenge these expectations in public in ways that shamed the family. Where needed and possible, they supported their families monetarily, through work or through bequests they made after death. They gave their labor to the family for household and care giving work. In some cases never-married women supported their

families emotionally. Some never-married women did not challenge family arrangements in terms of hierarchies of age and gender. They accepted the authority of their brother(s). And, when needed, and if they were capable of it, some never-married women stepped into the male head of household role in cases where there was no adult male in the family. To summarize, a "good" woman accommodated and fashioned her desires and aspirations to that of family expectations and circumstance.

At other times in their lives, the same never-married women challenged key bases of Kerala family life. Pursuing personal goals and living a life that was consistent with beliefs about personal autonomy were more important to these women than submitting to gendered expectations that women acquiesce to tradition, male, generational, and family authorities. Many women specifically stated that they were associated with women's consciousness-raising and women's activist-type organizations, although some of them shunned the label "feminist." Several were involved in political party activities at some time in their lives. Women who challenged gendered family authority and tradition usually situated the position of Kerala women in terms of a gender discourse. That is, the social difference that most engaged their thoughts and action was that of gender, and not caste, class or religion. Their position could be said to be "feminist" to the extent that these women challenged certain aspects of existing Kerala gender order. For instance, they rejected traditional ideas of marriage, arranged marriage and the commodification of women through marriage.

Some never-married women acted in ways that might well dishonor family and themselves. They challenged family and marriage as institutions, and did not submit to established social hierarchies. They gave expression to their sexualities instead of

curbing them, as tradition expected. They practiced ambiguous or alternate sexualities. Some, through their sexual orientation and practices, challenged established sexual models of monogamy and heterosexuality. Others, through their celibacy, challenged ideas about the necessity of sexual activity as a pre-requisite of mature adult life. In their inter-personal relationships, some women chose sexual partners of a caste higher and or lower than theirs. Self-expression and self-development were more important for these "transgressive" women than concerns about family honor and tradition. Such women questioned and often rejected their family's religious identity and practices. The key concerns of these women were establishing economic and personal autonomy; and challenging family control of women's sexuality via assumptions of monogamy and heterosexuality.

It can be argued that the situations of married women were similar to never-married women in that they too lived in more or less supportive marital families and faced similar decisions whether or not to submit to authorities of gender, generation and tradition. At the risk of essentializing, I emphasize marital status as a central difference in women's experience of patrilineal, patriarchal family precisely because I consider it central to understanding the structural position of Indian women. Married women had a socially accepted structural position, despite the variations in their temperaments and the orientations of their marital families. Regardless of the compatibility between a married women and her marital family, a married woman's place was with her married family. Marriage, with its inherent responsibilities, obligations and rewards, made and ensured a place for a woman and offered her a social position and a physical space she could rightfully claim as long as the marriage existed. Husbands and wives were bound

together in marriage. Never-married women had no comparable, socially sanctioned institutional binds. Married women belonged in their marital families in a way that unmarried women did not belong in birth families, because with the passage of time, birth families evolved and dissolved: typically parents aged and died, and siblings aged, married and set up their own families. Never-married women who are caught amidst these changing families continually had to assess for themselves who constituted family and the strength of family ties. They had to determine what claims they could make on families, what they owed their families and what their families owed them. They had to figure ways to achieve personal goals without/ before families felt that never-married women were (dispensable) challenges to their authority.

The women I interviewed, and their families, almost all of whom declined to be interviewed by me, dealt with the "fact" of never-married women in different ways. In the following pages I present three types of family situations in which the women found themselves (1) families that practiced mutual reciprocity; (2) families where one daughter was forced into family headship and usually remained unmarried as a consequence and (3) families where dependent brothers made it easier than in other situations for never-married women to continue living in "the family." In each of these family situations, I show how women dealt with the tensions of autonomy and self-fulfillment versus dependence on family, the conditional nature of family support and security, and the consequences for never-married women in investing in the identities they chose for themselves. The presentation is complicated because, over time and in differing circumstances, the same family could be considered supportive *and* restrictive of a never-

married woman. And, over time and in differing circumstances, the same woman could also be considered accommodating and transgressive.

**Mutuality of family obligations across generations**

I interviewed a number of never-married women, aged 70 years and older, all of whom were living in what appeared to be supportive family situations. Though they came from large families of seven and eight children, these women were well-educated – beyond graduate education, usually professionally trained as nurses, doctors, and college professors – whose families seized all available opportunities to advance the learning and careers of their sons and daughters. These women had remained unmarried not because of their families' inability to provide them a dowry, but because they chose a "modern" life with a career and autonomy, and not the life of a married woman living in Kerala in the late 1930s, '40s and '50s. All these women had migrated for work to cities in India, Europe, and North America and had returned home to retire. In 2001 and 2002, my fieldwork time, they were in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. Most of these women were living with families and were engaged in long-term webs of family obligations/ duty and its resultant family arrangements.

Soshamma Kurien was a typical example of one never-married woman in such family ties. On my third visit with this 94-year old woman I asked her how she happened to live with her unmarried 86 year-old sister in their youngest brother's house. Ms. Kurien's brother and sister-in-law were dead; their two children lived close by and came in each day to check on their elderly aunts. Ms. Kurien, a university professor who had worked in a metropolitan city in India, returned to Kerala on retirement. In our earlier meeting she told me that she owned two plots of land in two towns in Kerala, and she and

her younger unmarried sister had inherited their parental home in a rural area of Kerala. When she returned to Kerala, Ms. Kurien planned to live with her unmarried sister either in her parental home in the village or build a small house on one of her landed properties. However, she was diagnosed with intestinal cancer, and underwent surgery. She came for medical treatment to the town where her brother and sister-in-law lived because they insisted that she live with them during her convalescence. She, and her family, did not expect she would live more than thirty years after this diagnosis. With the diagnosis of cancer, Ms. Kurien gave up the idea of building her own house and returning to the village to her parental home to live. When her younger unmarried sister retired from her position as a teacher in a school in north India, the brother and his wife invited her to join Ms. Kurien and live with them. Upon the death of her brother and sister-in-law, their children told the two older women that they could continue living at the brother's house. The nephew assured the sisters about the family's continual support. I commented then that she had a "very supportive family" and Ms. Kurien immediately replied,

> And in fact I have also supported them in turn; not these nieces and nephews but my brothers. I have given full support in their need. It works both ways; give and take. You give help and you are helped. It may not be this specific nephew I have helped but you know, as a family we have helped each other.

And, she had. Over our three meetings, Ms. Kurien narrated many instances of her help to her family. She had spent a year nursing one of her sisters while she was dying. She had managed and supervised the household of her brother and sister-in-law when they accepted a two-year contract to work in a Middle Eastern country. She had taken care of a nephew's infant while the nephew's wife went back to complete her graduate education. She sold one of her plots of land to pay for the travel and initial expenses for two nephews to enable them to attend graduate school in the United States.

She had provided generous gifts of cash when many nieces had got married. She said, "Nobody told me to do this, but when the occasion came, I helped them."

Ms. Kurien was the seventh of ten children. Her father was a priest of a Syrian Christian denomination, and although they were not wealthy, her father had a regular salary from the church, as well as a house and a half-acre of garden land. Besides, they had access to the resources of the church in terms of education and health facilities. Ms. Kurien and all her siblings attended a church-run college in Madras state. In 1922, she completed her undergraduate studies and found work as a teacher at a church-run school in Madras state. When Ms. Kurien started working, she told her father that she did not want to marry. Her father did not object to her plan because an older sister had already presented their father with a similar life choice. Ms. Kurien said that she wanted to be like her older working sisters, who lived outside of Kerala, had their own incomes and careers, and appeared to her to lead exciting lives. She did not want to be like her mother and other women who got married and had many children. Ms. Kurien felt that her father consented to her plan because she got a job as a teacher in a church-run school. In those days Christian missions were setting up many schools and there was a demand for school teachers. After a number of years as a school teacher, Ms. Kurien returned to university and graduated in 1939 with a Master's degree in chemistry after which she was hired as a teacher in a women-only college managed by a Christian organization in a south Indian city. The college provided accommodation on campus, and Ms. Kurien stayed in that position for nearly 30 years. Towards the end of her tenure at this college, she left to work in North America; she taught three years at a high school in New York City, during

which time she secured a green card that gave her permanent residence rights in that country.

While in the United States Ms. Kurien had repeated stomach complaints, and she returned to India for medical care. Her parents had died before she left for the U.S. Her younger brother and his wife, a professor of medicine at a teaching college in Kerala, invited her to come and stay with them while she had tests to diagnose her illness. The prognosis was declared to be poor. So her brother and sister-in-law told her to stay with them, as all expectations were that she would die soon. So, although she had the money to build her own house and be independent, and also had the option to return to the United States, Ms. Kurien did not exercise these options. Instead, a few years after her surgery, after she had cared for her sister who died and taken care of her nephew and niece when their parents were abroad, Ms. Kurien offered her services as the administrator of a church-run institution for women. The job would provide accommodation and a small salary. Ms. Kurien had her own pension and savings and would not want for money. And, additionally she felt that she would be doing good work for the church and the community at large. Ms. Kurien worked at this organization for thirteen years.

In the late 1980s Ms. Kurien and her younger unmarried sister, who had retired and returned to Kerala to live with their youngest married brother and his wife, sold their village home and land which their father had left for his unmarried daughters. Land prices had appreciated in the late 1980s, and they gained a considerable sum from the sale which, coupled with their retirement pensions and savings, left them in a comfortable situation. After the death of their brother and sister-in-law, their nephew, who was in

the U.S., returned to Kerala with his family and he asked his aunts to continue living in his parental house; and he and his wife rented a house nearby. It was in this situation that I met with Ms. Kurien and her sister. They lived with two full-time servants in their brother's home. Family members of different generations called them daily. As these members of the younger generation were well educated and connected, the old women had assured access to medical care and other services. The nephews and nieces offered their cars and drivers to the older women to take them to church and for family social occasions. In fact, Ms. Kurien had a busy social life attending marriages, baptisms, funerals, family reunions and church-related occasions, and each time we met it was after numerous rearrangements of her schedule. Ms. Kurien said that the "backing" of her nieces and nephews gave the sisters "confidence" to live without fear in their old age. I remarked then that she had a supportive family, and that was when Ms. Kurien let me know that it was a mutual relationship.

But not all women who shared the social and economic background that these women had benefited from had helpful, generous families. Next is the story of an exception to this pattern that I met.

Grace Mammen's family – wealthy land-owners, Syrian Christians, well-educated and financially well-settled –had not, from her perspective, fulfilled traditional expectations of care of an older never-married relative. She remarked about her family, "I helped them so much and they are not here to help me." She said that through her earnings she supported the education of her youngest brother and sister. That brother was currently a university professor in the U.S. and the sister was a retired medical doctor. Her major contribution to each of their lives was paying for or arranging their school and

college education. So, she felt entitled to lay some claim on them and their resources, while at the same time, she prided herself for not "depending" on anybody. Ms. Mammen's married sister was probably repaying her debt to her sister by having Ms. Mammen live with her, her husband, their married son, daughter-in-law and two grand daughters. But, in her claim for independence Ms. Mammen pointed out that she was not a financial burden on her sister, in fact they benefited from her. I observed that her sister was "helping" her. She replied,

> GM: But that is different.
>
> AG: Why is that different?
>
> GM: That may be because I only educated her. She told me when she was to get married she told her husband, "We must look after her". But it never happened. If I talk about myself, nobody has helped me. Those who help me are others. Others. So many people have seen my difficulties and come and helped me, not our own people.
>
> AG: Yes, but now your sister is helping you.
>
> GM: She is not helping me as such. Help yes, because I am staying with them. (She whispers) But I give them money. (Voice reverts to low tones, not whisper). I supply money for food and everything. And I have kept a lot of money in her name. So naturally they need not help me with their own money. As long as I am alive, it is good for them, understand?
>
> AG: I understand. Financially you may be independent, but do you feel that your sister and all give you some moral support? Emotional support?
>
> GM: There is nothing like that. As far as I can see, there is nothing like that.

Ms. Mammen said that she felt more secure living with her sister at this age than she would have felt living all alone in her family house with hired servants, which would have been her other option. Clearly, Ms. Mammen had unresolved and contradictory feelings about her present situation; she had been independent for all of her adult life, till four years ago at the age of 82 when she moved in with her sister.

Ms. Mammen's married sister gave her a place in her family. But what did it mean to Ms. Mammen and to her sister? Remember that Ms. Mammen had lived independently till the age of 82, when her health began deteriorating. One important sub-text in these stories of mutual obligation was that of family honor. It would not be "honorable" for families to send one of their older members to a home for the aged, the usual connotation being that people were in homes for the aged because they had nobody to care for them. Living in an institution is considered a sign of total rejection by the family. Certainly it signaled that the person was alone, possibly abandoned.[73]

***Re-examining mutual obligations***

The stories just presented are examples of the webs of family obligation that endured over time and generation. Five Syrian Christian and two Brahmin women I met found themselves in such situations. In each case, when these women came home on retirement, they lived in the parental house or sold it and supported themselves thereby. The birth families of these never-married women supported them in their quest for a professional education, which had required the women to leave Kerala at a young age, disregarding traditional concerns for female safety and security in favor of education and career. Their parents continued to show support by accepting the women's choices to follow a career instead of marriage. And, they willed land and a house for their never-married daughters. Through migration for work, usually spanning three decades at least, these never-married women escaped the daily brush with patriarchal, male, generation and family authority. Through the move away from home, the development of careers,

[73] A distant family member of mine, an elderly, retired never-married woman lived in a home for aged people. She refused to meet me because of the 'shame' she felt about her situation. She expressed this sentiment to the family member we have in common, and whom I had approached to for an introduction.

and social positions that reflected their professional and financial status, these women had successfully positioned themselves as independent women. When they returned "home" on retirement, they were already positioned, for many years, as independent, socially respectable individuals.

From their narratives, I surmise that their primary challenge to family was that of rejecting marriage in favor of a "feminine" career – teaching or health care, usually. They brought honor to the family through their work, which mirrored ideals of service. They supported their parents and siblings in myriad ways. As Mary Thomas, one of the women I met said, it was a "family value" that families take care of each other. Perhaps it was the financial independence of these women, who told me that they willed all their wealth to family, *and* the financial independence of their families, that fostered the mutual ties of affection and obligation across generations. Perhaps it was anticipation and or obligation of being heirs of these women, or concern about family honor, that made family members care for these older never-married women.

The intersection of advanced age, which traditionally was respected in Kerala, economic independence and high social class provided these older women the bases to engage in equitable relationships with their families. Their healthy mental and physical status[74] also worked to decrease their dependence on family. Families' scope for domination in the case of the older never-married women I met was, therefore, limited and these women could live in a family-like situation, usually in close physical proximity to family where they enjoyed, to a lesser or greater extent, emotional support and a sense of belonging. However, there were also situations, like that of Ms. Mammen, where

[74] Many older women I met had chronic health problems, such as diabetes or hypertension, which were medically controlled. One older woman participant was physically disabled.

never-married women experienced alienation and isolation despite living with family. These stories underscore that for never-married women, a sense of belonging in a family was shaped by family history as well. Financial autonomy, high social standing, and/ or honorable conduct did not necessarily engender a sense of belonging. The stories also disrupt the myth of the unitary modern Malayalee family, showing instead that other models of family also exist in practice in present-day Kerala. Interestingly, the intersection of advanced age, financial independence, and established authority made the lives of these older never-married women vividly less conflict-driven than those of younger never-married women who also lived with their families. I explore their situations next.

**Absent fathers and dependent mothers**

Not all families had a sense of mutual obligation to their members. Some families – where fathers were absent either physically or because they failed to act in responsible fatherly ways, and where mothers were not capable of taking on the responsibility of being both father and mother – expected a daughter to take on the work that a father did, and to bear a disproportionate responsibility for the household. Such women almost inevitably did not marry. The stories which follow attest that women who were in such family situations contributed immensely to their families, yet they also had to struggle to "fit" into the modern Malayalee family. They had to struggle against "family authority" and other socially sanctioned hierarchies within families. I present two differing stories that are typical of this genre.

### *Suja Lukose: duty and loss*

Suja Lukose never intended to trouble her family with her unconventional lifestyle and ideas. She felt she did everything to keep her family going, in the absence of a responsible father and strong, decisive mother, and in the presence of glaring poverty and a family of eight daughters. Yet, having "done well" by her family and in her work, Ms. Lukose now felt alone, misunderstood by her family, abandoned by her colleagues, and out-of-sync in a world that was radically different from the one she had worked to sustain. She was upset at being overworked, underappreciated and misunderstood by the people who mattered to her, and by society at large. She told me that although her actions were guided by a desire for *swatantrayam* she was labeled *tantedi* [75] by her supporters and family and "prostitute" by her detractors. When we met, Ms. Lukose was working for a non-government organization that provided her a subsistence wage, but she stayed because the work was congruent with her beliefs about working for women's empowerment. But, Ms. Lukose told me, she would not be able to care for herself in old age as she had no savings, no property or home, and no marketable skills. She stated matter-of-factly that she planned to kill herself when she felt she could no longer continue to live with dignity and on her own terms.[76]

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[75] Tantedi in its pejorative sense is understood as is a self-serving woman. The word is related to *tantonnittam* (doing as one feels). "Tantedi" is now sometimes appropriated by transgressive women, several of whom used this or other similar pejoratives to describe themselves. Devika (2002) notes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social reformist thinking in Kerala defined *swatantrayam* not as 'freedom from all constraint' but as 'self-means for survival.' Swatantrayam was specifically not the opposite of *tantonnittam* (doing as one feels). Devika, J. (2002). Family Planning as 'Liberation': The Ambiguities of 'Emancipation from Biology' in Keralam. Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies.

[76] According to an NGO working for mental health and suicide prevention in Kerala, the suicide rate in Kerala, 29 per 100,000 in 1999 is almost five times higher than the national average of 6 per 100,000. (Source: www.thrani.org, accessed on February 1, 2003)

Ms. Lukose, the second of eight daughters of poor, devout Latin Catholic parents, had the confidence which her mother and older sister lacked to deal with the world. Her father was a daily wage laborer who worked on the farms and fields of wealthier neighbors. He spent most of his evenings and wages at the neighborhood bar, leaving Ms. Lukose's mother to spend the nights worrying about the safety of herself and her eight young daughters. Her mother worked as a kitchen helper for a number of families, and when Ms. Lukose was old enough, she accompanied her mother to these homes. Growing up, Ms. Lukose said she had two main concerns about her family. First was to show the world that a family of daughters was not a certain recipe for family doom. Her mother had always been taunted by her husband's family members for not having borne sons, and Ms. Lukose grew up with the determination to prove people wrong about the disadvantrages of daughters. Second, the overwhelming concern was how a poor family would raise dowries and find suitable husbands for eight daughters and Ms. Lukose spent much of her young adulthood working to raise money for her sisters' modest dowries, and helping her mother find suitable husbands for them. Thanks to her efforts, and because she pooled her wages and took loans from her friends and employers, all the sisters were married. One of the ways in which the family could raise dowries for seven daughters was by selling the land and house on which they lived. Ms. Lukose said that in the 1980s, she and mother had difficulty saving for even a modest dowry of Rs. 5000.[77] Now, her parents, both in their seventies, lived by turns at different daughters' homes because none of the daughters was wealthy enough to support two parents.

[77] To give the reader a sense of what money was worth to these families, I could give the equivalent of the Rupee amount in U.S. dollars. But it would not give you the sense that a person living in Kerala would experience if she had to raise Rs. 5,000 when she earned Rs.250 per month, on which she supported eight people, and probably had a saving rate of less than 5 per cent of her salary.

Ms. Lukose started her working life during the days of the Emergency[78] (1977-1978), and was influenced by various social-political movements of the time, including socialism, Marxism, liberation theology, and feminism. She worked with various "people's movements" as a community organizer and educator with a vision of social justice. She believed in a future where the social movements would take care of its workers. But that was not to be the case. Now in her fifties, Ms. Lukose had no home, did not want to be dependent on her married sisters, and had no savings to pay her way into an old age home.[79] I asked her how she visualized her future. This is an extract from her long rumination.

> I do not want to depend on anybody, my parents or my relatives, saying that when I become ill you must take care of me, that you must protect me. I don't like that kind of an expectation because I don't have the right to claim that right. I simply don't have that right. They are ordinary people, they have responsibilities, children to care for. .....My roots are still with the (social) movement. I have been associated with them for many years. At one time my family asked, "If you go like this, what will your future be? Who will take care of you?" And I said, "I have the movement. When the movement decides to end, then so be it. But till then I will be with them."....Now my younger sister asks me, "Now that there are splits in the movement, what do you think now?" I said, "I have not changed my position. But I will not bother any of you. You need not worry about that." I am not interested in bothering others. What right do I have to say that she must support me in my old age or when I am not well, simply because she is my sister? (She pauses for a short while.) These expectations (about family support) are things that people have created. But I have told my people that I will commit suicide. I will not live by hiding or out of fear. Why should I experience hell if I become bedridden? Why bother them and myself? If it is only for a day, I could accept it happily. I have not made any arrangements for myself (she means in terms of savings for the future). And I don't have the desire to make such arrangements.

[78] In 1977, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democracy and all civil rights for a period of about eighteen months. Indians refer to this period as the Emergency.
[79] AG: have statistic on prevalence of old age homes (see article by Gulati et al.)

In Ms. Lukose's story, we see the tensions between family obligations, tradition, independence and self-determination. Ms. Lukose helped get her sisters married; she took on the responsibility of being a strong support for her mother in the absence of her father who abdicated his responsibility as "head of household". Even when we met, she continued to give her parents a part of her wages as they, like many of the poorest people in Kerala, cannot survive on the meager social security benefits provided by the state. Yet in old age, Ms. Lukose did not want to "cash in" on her sacrifices for her family; she rejected such action as a basis for claims on family. Like other women from low-income families, Ms. Lukose had no specific marketable skills; the organization for which worked was slowly disbanding because of a combination of conditions including disillusionment, lack of a support base for financial and other resources, and the changing socio-political climate in Kerala today which no longer readily supports all kinds of people's movements. She could expect no future support from them. And, as she did not want to depend on her married sisters for care during her old age, Ms. Lukose planned to commit suicide. She claimed the autonomy to decide about herself till her end, including the right to decide about her death.

Ms. Lukose's work required her to travel all over the state, often with just one male colleague – a married man with whom she had a long-term relationship, and who was unwilling to leave his family – and to spend many nights away from home, also with unrelated men and women colleagues. She was considered a prostitute and a loose woman by many people in the neighborhood where the NGO is located. Her family had also heard about these labels. Ms. Lukose had never hidden the nature of her work from her parents and sisters, and she felt this open communication enabled her family's

unwavering public support. She said that in anger and frustration, and when he was drunk, even her father has sometimes called her these names and asked her to quit her work. But her mother and sisters were her strong support. Ms. Lukose said that when people made comments to her mother about the reputation her daughter had developed, traveling all over Kerala with men who were not related to her, her mother defend her by responding that if Ms. Lukose had a man with her, it was time she had a man, and that the family was happy about it. But in private, her mother would ask her whether she needed to work at a job that had such requirements. Ms. Lukose characterized her mother is an "ordinary woman" who held the traditional belief that the future of daughters was secured only if they were married. But, Ms. Lukose added, her mother knew that she had depended heavily on Ms. Lukose to manage their family affairs and arrange the marriages of the younger girls, and that while Ms. Lukose had cared for all the sisters, there was nobody to arrange a marriage for her. Ms. Lukose stated that her mother now blamed herself for having depended on her so much that she blocked Ms. Lukose's own opportunities for marriage. Her mother also knew that, at present, none of her married daughters and their husbands were financially secure and they did not want the responsibility of caring for Ms. Lukose in old age.

I spoke with Ms. Lukose's younger sister, at whose house Ms. Lukose stayed when she was not traveling, about what she and her sisters thought about Ms. Lukose's views of life and plans for her future. She said that the sisters would never forget all the sacrifices Ms. Lukose had made for them, and they would always look after her. But she also felt that Ms. Lukose was self-centered and bossy, and it would be difficult to live

with her on a long-term basis. She added that Ms. Lukose was healthy and could work for a long time to come.

Ms. Lukose and her family had to work through existing gendered expectations for women. Through a process that remains unclear to me, she was designated the family authority figure, along with her mother. Ms. Lukose claimed autonomy to live her life, even within the constraints of family, social and gendered expectations and responsibilities. Yet this very independence, decisiveness, and disregard for societal expectations seem to have rendered her an outsider and cost her a place in her "family" which, over time, had evolved. Family now meant the families of her married sisters, where even her parents were dependents of their adult children. Her parents' poverty meant that they could leave her no assets with which to support herself. Her own ideas of autonomy made dependence unacceptable to Ms. Lukose. When I met them, this "family" lived with the uneasy awareness of, and differing ideas about, mutual obligations, loyalty and commitment to the family.

***Shiney Joseph: family dependence restricts her chances***

Shiney Joseph was 35 years old, the oldest of four children: two younger sisters and one younger brother. When I met her, Ms. Joseph was working as a teacher in a college as a temporary employee, and earning a monthly salary of Rs. 3000. She was never sure when she would be relieved of her job. She lived in a village which was approximately 20 kilometers away from her place of work. In the village, Ms. Joseph lived on a 16 cents plot of land, which had a house and a small garden on which her mother occasionally grew a few vegetables. Ms. Joseph's deceased father had owned a small store that sold textiles and hand-woven sheets and towels. She remembered him as

kindhearted, generous, a devout church-goer, and a drunk who picked quarrels with his wife and children. Ms. Joseph told me with a wry smile that all her life she and her siblings were known as "children of a drunk". They never had enough money for a comfortable life, but they were never in dire poverty. Her mother made ends meet by working as a domestic servant in neighboring houses. Ms. Joseph grew up with the desire to learn, and paid her way through college and a teacher's training degree by teaching children in her neighborhood. Her siblings were not as ambitious as she was. Her brother scraped through school, apprenticed himself to a tailor, and eventually began his own tailoring shop. Her two younger sisters had no interest in outside employment; they helped with the housework and waited to get married.

Since completing a teacher's training program, Ms. Joseph has worked continuously as a teacher, always in temporary positions. She was also involved with a local non-profit organization that worked for women's issues. She said that in her twenties she consistently rejected marriage proposals brought by her parents and others as she was disenchanted with the marriages she saw around her. Her father was usually drunk, so he did not take a serious interest in getting her married. When she was twenty-six years old, and her sisters a few years younger, her father died. He left behind innumerable debts which the family repaid by selling his business. To address their dire financial circumstances, her brother found work as a tailor in a Persian Gulf country and, with his earnings, the family was able to offer modest dowries for her two sisters. Ms. Joseph set about getting proposals for them and arranging their marriages.

Ms. Joseph's brother did not have a well-paying job in the Persian Gulf. For the first sister's dowry, Ms. Joseph and her brother took a loan of Rs. 200,000, half from

relatives and savings from her brother and the other half from a "blade" (private lending agency with a high rate of interest). Because he was repaying the loan, Ms. Joseph had to support herself, her mother, and her youngest sister for a number of years. Her mother worked as a servant, earning about Rs. 250 per month. Shortly after the marriage of her sister, there was a vacancy for a teacher in a school. Ms. Joseph applied and was selected for the position. In Kerala a prospective teacher had to give a "donation" to secure employment. The school where Ms. Joseph had applied for a position asked for a Rs. 350,000 donation. She would have earned a salary of Rs. 6000 per month at that job. But she did not have money for the donation, and she was reluctant to ask her brother for another loan, as they were already paying the loan for the sister's marriage. Her mother would not consider sale of a portion of the land to raise money for the donation; in any event, the sale of Ms. Joseph's share of the land would not net the amount needed for the donation. She lost that job.

About a year later, a suitable marriage proposal came for her youngest sister. Ms. Joseph and her brother took another loan of Rs. 250,000 to pay for her dowry. The understanding among the family and siblings was that now the house and land on which it stands would go equally to Ms. Joseph and her brother. But Ms. Joseph expressed doubt whether she would, indeed, claim her inheritance. Moreover, as there was no legally valid record of the money given to her sisters as dowry, they were eligible to claim a share of their father's property under the revised inheritance laws for Kerala's Christians. Ms. Joseph said that she did not expect her married sisters would step forward to make a claim, nor did she think that her brother would not share the property with her. But she added that you never know what will happen, especially if the spouses

of her siblings got involved. Meanwhile she was burdened with the care of her mother who had developed arthritis and hypertension and stopped working a few months after the second wedding. Ms. Joseph continued to support her mother and herself. She was no longer adamant about refusing marriage but she did not want her brother to take yet another loan to pay for her own dowry. She had an unsuccessful relationship with a Hindu man (Ms. Joseph is a Latin Catholic), much to the relief of her mother, who wanted her to marry within their faith community.

Ms. Joseph said that her mother could not bear to live without her, but she wanted her autonomy and occasionally spent the night with friends, as a reprieve from her mother and the family conditions. But her mother did not approve of her staying away from home at nights, fearing, Ms. Joseph said, that she was involved in another "unsuitable" affair. Ms. Joseph observed that so far, her brother had been responsible by paying the dowries to get her sisters married. Ms. Joseph continued to work in low-paying temporary teaching jobs. And, because of her mother's ill-health and dependence on her, Ms. Joseph could not think of leaving home to find work. Ms. Joseph said that when her brother married, she did not know what her own situation would be, or how she would get along with her sister-in-law. She did not want to stay in the house of her married brother, but she did not have enough money to rent her own house. Ms. Joseph said her future was uncertain. She felt it was unlikely that she would get married, or that she would ever get a well-paid job. She was planning to continue her present lifestyle as long as she was able. She added that she would most likely kill herself when she could no longer take care of herself; she was not counting on her brother or sisters to take care of her.

***Absent fathers, dependent mothers: what costs for never-married women?***

Suja Lukose and Shiney Joseph share similar life situations, along with seven other women I interviewed. They were separated by age, class, caste, religion and educational attainment, which, ironically, did not make a difference in their abilities to forge financial autonomy. In each of these families, through paternal neglect or incompetence and maternal and sibling dependency, one of the older children, in these cases a daughter, was pushed into a position of family authority, along with the mother. (In the next chapter, I will discuss sons who assumed family responsibility and the consequences for some of their sisters who remained unmarried.) Dependent mothers', as well as the women themselves who were familiar with, and sometimes shared the same cultural notions of family, honor, duty and obligation, shaped these women's senses of affection, duty, loyalty, responsibility, and family honor to work towards supporting the family on a daily basis *and* raising dowries for their siblings and arranging their marriages. Yet, probably because of their own financial dependency on their children, and lacking leadership qualities, these mothers and fathers were not able to secure an unquestioned, unequivocal position for their never-married daughters in their families. Within the patrilineal framework of the modern Malayalee family, women like Ms. Lukose who had no brothers, *and* those like Ms. Joseph, who did, apparently still had no "family" where they could find lifelong support. As their parents aged and died, and they continued to remain unmarried, such women found themselves on the borderlands[80] of family, strangers

[80] Anzaldua [Anzaldua, G. (1987). *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/ Aunt Lute Book Co.] coined the term to describe the multiple and marginal positions of Chicana women in the US, but it is used more broadly, particularly by third world women, to describe their multiple locations.

within.[81] They neither completely belong to the changing configuration of their birth family (parents likely dead, siblings married) nor are they completely outside the family circle. Once the women had worked to get their families to a certain stage of stability, through the marriages of daughters, education of siblings and their children, and care of parents, they were uncertain what place they would occupy within the newly emerging family scenario. This uncertainty was further layered by others elements: never-married women's own aging brought on physical, emotional and financial dependencies on their families. Such dependencies clashed with the values of independence, decision-making, and leadership that these women had cultivated over many years.

Some never-married women like Ms. Lukose and Ms. Joseph challenged tradition by engaging in sexual relationships across religious and marital boundaries, thereby earning family and social disapproval, and closing their chances for a conventional family-arranged marriage. Never-married women who were caught in the fault-lines of personal autonomy and family dependency seemed to consider family before themselves. Their families' vulnerable class positions and their shared beliefs in the need to maintain family honor by getting most of the daughters married over-determined the life choices of the women who were designated to assume family leadership. But contradictorily, assuming decision-making for family members and sacrificing personal goals did not strengthen women's sense of belonging and entitlements in family. Instead, once their work for the family, in terms of care-giving and financial support was considered complete, such women were left with a sense of insecurity, uncertainty and instability.

[81] Collins (2000) defines outsider-within locations as "social locations or border spaces marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power. Individuals acquire identities as "outsiders within" by their placement in these social locations."

Because they were unmarried, they would not have the so-called security enjoyed by their sisters'-in-law of a husband's home, and claims to protection, care and maintenance that a wife/ mother could make on a husband/child. Through the selling of the family home in Ms. Lukose's case, and fears about losing the family home in Ms. Joseph's, they have no assurance about shelter in old age. Infused through their education and involvement with women's movements with "modern" ideas about autonomy, and with uncertainty about their places in the families of their siblings, both women planned to end their lives rather than be dependent on anybody. Three other women also expressed to me their plan to end their lives if they found themselves in a situation of helplessness and dependency. This extreme view is perhaps a generational consideration, as none of the older unmarried women expressed suicide as an option to dependence on siblings; even Ms. Mammen, who felt uncomfortable living with her married sister, did not express that she preferred death. Notions of family and people's "legitimate" positions within them are continually shrinking so that younger women I interviewed were more inclined to talk about autonomy and suicide as a way out of dependency, whereas older women spoke invoked the mutuality of obligations to support their claim within their families.

Yet, by not outrightly rejecting these women from the family home as yet, these families demonstrated a measured support of their never-married women relatives. Perhaps this support was grounded in the realization that families like those of Ms. Lukose and Ms. Joseph, who were mired in poverty, could not live the modern Malayalee family ideal of man-the-breadwinner supporting his wife and children. These families exposed the fault-lines of contemporary Malayalee families who were not supported only

by a man and wife, but instead also and primarily by never-married adult sisters. And perhaps the women's challenges to normative expectations by being major providers for their families emboldened them to challenge other social hierarchies and thus make spaces for them in the Keralan familial and social order, however uneasy.

Uma Narayan argues that women's relationships with their mothers resemble their relationships to the motherlands of the cultures in which they were raised. She says,

> Both our mothers and our mother-cultures give us all sorts of contradictory messages, encouraging their daughters to be confident, impudent, self-assertive and achieving, even as they attempt to instill conformity, decorum and silence, seemingly oblivious to these contradictions. ....They (mothers) give voice to the hardships and difficulties of being a woman that have marked their lives, teaching us the limitations and miseries of the routine fates that await us as women, whole also resisting our attempts to deviate from these cultural scripts. And so, they regard their feminist daughters as symptoms of their failure to raise us with respect for "our" traditions, as daughters who had rejected the lessons they were taught by their mothers and mother-cultures. In seeing us in this mode, they fail to see how much what we are is precisely a response to the very things they have taught us, how much we have become the daughters they have shaped us into becoming." (Narayan 1997:399).

Women like Suja Lukose and Shiney Joseph and six others I interviewed, some of whom will feature in the following section, who had to be the primary financial and emotional supports for their mothers, and in effect, heads of their households, were so precisely because of their rejection of their mothers' lives and their attempts to carve out for themselves a different kind of life. And yet, in so doing, they were chastised by their mothers and mother-cultures for lacking the compliance, deference and submissiveness that was deemed essential in good women and good wives.

**Weak brothers strengthen women's familial position**

In the previous section, I showed how absent fathers and weak mothers made extraordinary demands on their never-married daughters, rendering their life situations uncertain and unstable. Weak brothers did the same in different ways. Family transitions and changes in family authority usually moved from fathers and mothers who enjoyed age hierarchy and status as *de jure* heads of family, to sons who were the de facto new financial authority. Sons could claim superiority in gender hierarchy and make never-married women uncertain of inclusion in their brothers' families. Moments of transition in the family and its authority meant that the long-term positions of strong, never-married women who had exercised family authority for a while had to be worked out yet again. Having weak brothers made it easier, but never guaranteed, never-married women the ability to claim a space, for a time, in their families. Women whose brothers lacked self-confidence and social skills and or financial means to provide for the family were often obliged to take charge as the head of the family. But, this position of authority and responsibility did not necessarily ensure a long-term position in the family, as the two cases which follow next, demonstrate.

***Kamala Vijayan: balancing autonomy and obedience to family***

Kamala Vijayan was an overachiever. At thirty-one years old, she had already earned credentials as a lawyer and financial analyst, and she worked for a private company which used both skills. She also had degrees in journalism, sociology and an ancient Indian language, all of which she studied simply because of interest. Ms. Vijayan was active in the local communist party branch during her college years, until she became disillusioned with its caste and gender biases. When we met, Ms. Vijayan was active in

the local women's movement. Participation in the women's movement was a difficult and daring move for her because, in her village and neighborhood, being associated with a women's group was considered declaring oneself to be a breaker of family and tradition, a 'modern" woman with all the negative connotations of modern womanhood. Ms. Vijayan was a rationalist,[82] which was contrary to Kerala practices where even committed Marxists are also devout religious followers.

Ms. Vijayan' political stances paralleled the beliefs of her parents. Her father was a full-time worker of the communist party and, after his death, her mother continued to support party activities. Her mother supported Ms. Vijayan's political activities, yet she was also concerned that Ms. Vijayan not transgress the boundaries of social propriety. Ms. Vijayan lived in her parental home with her mother, her married brother, his wife and their two children. She had an older married sister who, lived in a town around 50 kilometers away. Ms. Vijayan's mother owned land and other productive assets from which she earned an income that provided for the shared expenses of the family. Her married brother ran a small business which was a financial failure, and her sister-in-law was a full-time home maker. Ms. Vijayan commuted daily from her village to work in a large town, around 20 kilometers away.

As a young woman influenced by ideas of feminism, Marxism, rationalism, and the world of law and finances, Ms. Vijayan carved a position for herself which did not resonate with her family's expectations of her. Three areas where she had to fight battles were in the area of work, freedom of movement, and marriage. Ms. Vijayan chose to

[82] The mission of rationalist movements in India is to remove the superstitious attitudes of the people and to replace it with scientific thinking. Some rationalist movements, like the one Ms. Vijayan is involved in, promote atheism.

work at the intersection of two professions, in both of which it was difficult for women to advance unless they made many sacrifices. The work required periodic travel out of town, usually with male colleagues, long hours, and returning home late at night, much later than standard nine-to-five jobs. Ms. Vijayan said that most of the women who were successful in these professions were unmarried or their marriages and family lives were broken. Ms. Vijayan said that her mother and brother did not like her coming home late every night. They would rather that she was less ambitious professionally and that she adhered to more conventional work hours. They also did not like her spending her time working on women's issues, organizing public meetings and protests and sit-ins, and devoting some of her professional time to helping women in need. But she fought and worked out a compromise – that she would be home by ten every night she was in town. This was a major concession on the part of the family, as they would constantly have to "explain" to neighbors and other family members why they "allowed" Ms. Vijayan to have her way on this point. However, because of her professional and political life, Ms. Vijayan's neighbors and people at large had sought her help and advice and she had successfully helped them. She was a regular invited speaker at public meetings; she was interviewed by the media for her professional and political activities. And her association with the women's movement enabled her to help women in distress. The women's movement itself had slowly gained limited public support when they successfully campaigned to expose corrupt politicians who exploited women. Through all these developments, Ms. Vijayan's family and the people who knew her came to accept that she had a social standing and was recognized for her worth by organizations and people beyond their social sphere, and so they were proud of her. Ms. Vijayan supposed that

when people saw her returning home late at night, they did not say anything offensive to her or her family because they knew that they might need her help one day.

I asked Ms. Vijayan what she felt was the cost to her of adherence to her beliefs, which were at variance with that of her family. This is what she had to say:

> They (her family) think that I have done some something awful on two issues. One is rationalism. I stopped going to all temples. And the second is being a feminist. Both were big problem at home and outside as well. My relatives would not talk to me. But people have assigned value to my education. They think that as an educated person I have accepted these two things, so, perhaps there must be something to it. Then, I am not doing anything immoral. People read about the Women's Commission and the women's movement; awareness is being created even if they are opposed to feminism. So, people are changing, and that makes it easier for them to accept me. But when questions about marriage arise, it is difficult for a person without any idea (about her beliefs) to accept me. They probably wonder whether I will be able to care for the house and family matters.
>
> Although I am all that I have just said, my family does not have any objections to me. I am the one who takes care of all the household responsibilities. I do not provide financially. But there are other problems at home and I am the one who takes care of all the things that have to be done outside the house. For example when Achan died, we had to get Achan's death certificate from an office. There will always be things like this. Official things. Things pertaining to the house, but official things nonetheless. Then, I give them advice on how to do things strategically. I am a support to them. They need me. So, whatever I am, because I am the way I am, I am able to do these things. They are aware of that. When I help people, they return and say, "Your daughter is so capable, smart, efficient," and now [her family] they have a pride about it now. But to create this pride, I personally had to suffer. They are unhappy that I am a rationalist feminist. They are unhappy when I say that I want to go for a meeting. I do not leave the house hearing them say "go and come back." I go because I insist. And I feel guilty that I am upsetting them. Now some of that has changed. Earlier, they were concerned because when a young woman from the village goes out like this, they have to face pressures from other people. That is the main problem. It is not a big problem for them now.

Here Ms. Vijayan was expressing the uneasy compromises that she and her family had made which, although facilitated by societal changes, brought troubling adjustments to

both. She was perusing her goals, but without what she perceived was genuine support of her family. And, because she pursued her goals and was able to help her family and neighbors, she gained acceptance for herself, a woman who was different from most other women in her neighborhood, and for families like hers. With slow social changes in perspectives about never-married women, families like that of Ms. Vijayan, were not as severely censured for the activities of their daughters, as they would have been before the reluctant acceptance of never-married women. Ms. Vijayan said that she stayed with her family, although it meant less freedom for her, because she had a sense of responsibility and attachment towards her family. She added,

> My brother is not very able. I think that is because from childhood I was made to do the things that boys do. And so, I grew up as a boy should and he did not. This brother is four or five years older than I. I got an opportunity and I developed. He did not develop. So, even now he finds it difficult to go out and do things. He just does not have the confidence. There is no use in saying that he is a man. He lost a lot of things in his development. And I got opportunity and I developed. (She pauses for a long time).

Perhaps because of her confidence, her independence, and their need for her, as well as the moderating support of her mother, Ms. Vijayan managed to balance the demands of her family and negotiate a space within it, while still pursuing her own professional and personal beliefs and interests. This was a supportive family in that they had come to terms with having an unmarried woman as an immediate family member, and they had not thwarted the woman's choices in her work and personal development. Women have had to fight their battles with such families, but they also felt accepted enough that they did not felt the need to leave the house. Yet, family dependence also played on sense of responsibility, loyalty, and obligation and shaped the choices and identities they could claim.

***Ponnamma Anthony: poverty, family obligations and securing a sense of place***

Poverty strains the "goodness" and family obligations of some families. The story I present next is that of a "good" woman and a "good" family, good because each of them tried to do the best, within their limitations, chiefly but not only financial, for the other. Ponnamma Anthony, at age 54, accepted her life situation and had few dreams about a life beyond what was expected for women like her. Her family, primarily her brother, never denied her a place in his home. Yet the very notions of "home" and "family" were never a certainty for Ms. Anthony.

For the past six years, Ms. Anthony worked as a home-nurse, a job which came with a live-in position. The on-the-job housing worked well for Ms. Anthony because in between jobs, she made her "home" with her married brother, sister-in-law, their four children, and her mother. Ms. Anthony's father was a fisherman who had earned just enough to keep the family alive; he died when she was twenty years old, and her younger brother and sister were in their teens. After her father's death, Ms. Anthony and her mother did odd jobs around their village like carrying head loads and making coir (rope). Her brother left school and started going on the fishing boats in place of his father. The family had no savings to get the daughters married, and none of her father's family came forward with monetary help to get the two young women married. Ms. Anthony noted that her father, who was the oldest son of his widowed mother, had taken the responsibility to arrange the marriage of his sister, after which he planned to arrange the marriage of one of his daughters. But he incurred a huge debt after the marriage of his sister, and he had to delay the marriage of his daughter. Ten months after the marriage of his sister, Ms. Anthony's father died. As Ms. Anthony said, "There was no use in saying

that we want to get married when there was no wealth (for the dowry). We just had to bear with it." Ms. Anthony's father owned 10 cents[83] of land, which he got through a government scheme for poor fishermen. He built a small two-room hut with a coconut-thatched roof on this land, which was where Ms. Anthony, her mother, her brother and his family continued to live.

Ms. Anthony was determined not to have a "blot on the family name" by having her sister remain unmarried. She worked, saved money, bought some gold with the savings, and convinced her brother to sell a portion of the 10-cents of land to raise a small dowry for her sister. Through these efforts, Ms. Anthony found a man who was willing to marry the younger sister. But although Ms. Anthony worked hard to get her sister married so that she could "have a life", she did not do the same thing for herself. I asked why, and this was her response, her reasoning:

> Everybody scolds me and says, "Don't you want to get married? Why did you not look out for your own life? Couldn't you some gold and get married? You got your younger sister married, why couldn't you do it for yourself?" But I decided that I don't want marriage because there was nobody to arrange it for me. If I sit there saying I want to get married, a man will not simply appear and take me by the hand. We have to give something (as dowry). And there has to be somebody to take the responsibility to arrange the marriage. There was nobody for that. Father was dead. Mother was an innocent, and father's younger brother would always threaten, "There is no money for marriage. You should just remain quiet."

In Ms. Anthony's worldview, and that of those around her, a woman did not find her own marriage partner; that was her family's responsibility. So women who did not have fathers and whose extended family members did not take interest in getting her married remained unmarried. In fact, four other women I interviewed, including Shiney

[83] One hundred cents make one acre.

Joseph and Suja Lukose, whom we met earlier, were older sisters in families where the father was dead or not acting "responsibly" when the daughters reached marriageable age. These women all arranged the marriages of their younger sisters and they themselves remained unmarried. Family members were more likely to be interested in arranging a marriage if the woman without a father had a dowry, as was the case with Ms. Vijayan. But when there was no dowry, family members were less interested in enduring the travails of arranging a marriage.[84]

Ms. Anthony's brother's first wife died when his youngest son was ten days old. Ms. Anthony and her mother raised the three boys. Times were tough and Ms. Anthony's brother found work only one or two days a week. The situation had not changed for fishermen when I met Ms. Anthony. Her oldest nephew was now 20 years old, and Ms. Anthony found him some work in a weaving company, where workers went on strike, soon after he joined work. So to support the family, which was literally starving, Ms. Anthony started work as a home nurse, a contractual job, some six years back. She said that she had work almost continuously. She used her entire earnings for the family and has no personal savings. She observed that when they were all starving, she could not think of keeping money aside for herself. At the same time, she expressed uncertainty over whether her nephews would care for her in her old age. She did not get along with her second sister-in-law, and blamed herself and her sister-in-law for the situation. Ms.

[84] Arranging the marriage, particularly of a daughter, is considered an anxiety-filled chore, even in the best of circumstances. Families had to search for a suitable groom through word of mouth, family networks and matrimonial advertisements in newspapers. Then, they had to screen the proposals they considered suitable, at first cut. This was done through the exchange of letters or through social networks. If the proposal was still satisfactory, the parents, first, and then the potential bride and groom met personally. Somewhere along this process, suitability also implied that the families were able to negotiate a mutually agreeable dowry amount, as well as other items, usually gold and marriage ceremony expenses. These negotiations could occur anywhere from the span of a few weeks to a few years. Negotiations could break down at any point, and the process of searching for a fresh proposal would have to start again.

Anthony was concerned that her nephews not be affected by the fights, and that strengthened her resolve to seek work outside the house. Yet, she was uncertain whether her practice of putting family first would secure her a care-free old age. I asked whether Ms. Anthony felt her brother would take care of her in old age. She replied,

> The times are constantly changing, so whom can we trust? I always say and the people in the neighborhood also always say, "You raised (her three nephews), they will never desert you." They know that I raised them with a lot of trouble. They have a father but I am the one who raised them. I experienced a lot of sorrow to raise them... these are times when children do not inquire after their parents. I have never thought even in my dreams that these children will inquire about their father's sister. Who am I? The relationship is that I am their father's sister. No matter how much work I do, I have given them a lot from the money I earned doing this work, but I have never once thought that they will take care of me. I don't have the right to think that, isn't it? Is there any reason to think that they will care for me? If god gives them the awareness that they should care for me, then that is my good luck.

Poverty, mutual obligations and care bound this family together. Ms. Anthony had no home other than her "brother's house." She believed that as long as her mother was alive, her brother would "support" both their mother and her. But she was uncertain about her circumstances later in life. She had no means of supporting herself in old age, yet she felt she did not have the "right" to expect her nephews to care for her. She claimed that she is merely their father's sister, although earlier in the interview she said that she was like a mother to them, and she referred to them as her sons. Ms. Anthony and her family have acted respectably within culturally expected frameworks of family reciprocity. And yet she had a sense of not belonging, of uncertainty of her place in the family and of her future, even though she had contributed her financial, emotional and physical labor to the household for decades. When I asked about her future, Ms. Anthony replied:

> I think about the future. But if I keep thinking about it, I will only end up a wreck. What is my life? Who will protect me in the time to come? I have a great deal of pain about my situation. I have no land-wealth or savings or gold or inheritance from parents, nothing! I am a lone being. Tomorrow if I am bedridden, who will inquire about me? What is there for me? There is always a silence in the depths of my being ...I have concern about my future because there is nobody, neither children nor husband, nor anybody else.

Here, Ms. Anthony expressed the logic that was typical of "traditional" views of Kerala, namely that without marriage, husband and children – the ties of family – and without any form of capital by which she could secure her future, she was doomed. She claimed not to have land-wealth, when legally she had a claim to her "brother's house" which was their legacy from their father. Ms. Anthony believed that because the ties of a brother to a sister or a nephew to an aunt were considered tenuous they could not be assumed, they could not be bought. And so, although she and her family had "done right" by each other so far, there was no surety about her future because she could not make claims on a brother or a nephew in the way that a married woman, or a parent could make on a husband or on children.

***Weak brothers: what gains and costs to never-married women?***

When brothers would/could not assume authority over family on the death of their father, their unmarried sisters stepped in to take on the role. Regardless of their birth order, social class, economic capacity, and even financial contribution to the household, the position of authority and family responsibility that never-married women had to assume in the presence of weak brothers opened up a space for them in the family. In contrast to the situation of dependent parents, where never-married women felt they had no place in the family once their "use" to it was over, here women were continually of use to their (brother's) family and this condition worked to strengthen their place and claim in the

family, even when both parents were dead. Possible disruptions of this arrangement could occur if brothers' wives come into conflict with the never-married woman, as was the case with Ms. Anthony.

Yet, combined with a weak brother, her contribution to the brother's family over the years gave her a standing of authority within the family and a position where she lives her life however uneasily, with her family. She did not mention suicide as a way out for herself, although she feared dependency. Yet, women who assumed headship of families usually had to forgo development of their own interests or downsize their career ambitions, as in the case of Ms. Vijayan. Family responsibility also kept women tied to families, restricting even the possibility of thinking of moving away and living other lifestyles. And, in the long-term, family responsibility was not a guarantor of their families' reciprocal care and concern for never-married women.

**Conclusions**

I started this chapter by arguing that never-married women did not have a structural position in Kerala society. Through this chapter I have substantiated that argument and shown the ways in which families and never-married women have negotiated. In the process, I have made clear one set of cultural logics that operate in Kerala with regard to never-married women. A place in family was never assured for never-married women. Over time, and with transitions, families themselves evolved, dissolved and changed members. A place in the family was not assured for women, even after years of assuming authority and responsibility for their mothers and younger siblings. Indeed, and ironically, authority did not always translate to power, except sometimes in the case of women with timid brothers. Place in the family was not assured by acting honorably.

Some women had to assume the responsibility, over a period of years, of the role that fathers and brother would take, and support the family financially, make decisions, represent the family in the public sphere, including finding marriage partners and raising dowries for unmarried sisters, and brothers. Doing these jobs was assumed by family to be the woman's duty or obligation to her family, particularly to maintain family honor. Yet, contradictorily, maintaining family honor did not reciprocally assure never-married women a place in their family homes. In other families, brothers and fathers, who did the work that these never-married women did, had no doubt about their place in their families and family homes, especially as family configurations changed. Similarly, sisters-in-law – married women – did not face the same dilemmas as never-married women with respect to a sense of belonging to a family, and claims to their material, affective and symbolic resources. In the process of assuming family responsibility, never-married women experienced various forms of loss: birth family, marital opportunities, and opportunities to work and financially secure their futures. As compared to the sisters whose marriages they arranged, never-married women were left with a sense of insecurity.

Families worked to avert or deal with all kinds of dishonors; having a never-married woman is just one of these. In the stories I presented, families with more than one daughter tried to arrange the marriages of most of them, so that they would end up with only one unmarried daughter. The never-married woman, who conducted the marriages of her sisters and brothers, could then claim to be a responsible, loyal family member. It was not only the never-married woman who was working to save family honor. In many instances, brothers helped by leaving home to earn money so that it could be literally transferred to another family, that of his sisters' marital family. But in

the process, they were also accruing personal honor. Committing suicide would trigger a potential loss of family honor. Yet several women stated they planned to do so and put themselves before family, because for them, the thought of dependency on family was less acceptable than such a blot on family honor.

Families provide a sense of identity by providing people a name, history and a sense of belonging, continuity and connectedness with the world. Other institutions – social and religious organizations for instance – also do some of the work that families do, but typically families are sources for emotional fulfillment in ways that other institutions are not. Emotional fulfillment, intimacy and sense of belonging allegedly come with shared goals, values and commitments as well as a sense of a shared future. Family members may have conflicting interests and loyalties. Gender, age hierarchies, economic contribution, as well as less categorical, measurable or tangible conditions like the presence or absence of charisma, leadership qualities, and morality can divide families. In this chapter, I examined the processes by which never-married women and their families had to work to find ways to accommodate themselves into family formations that highlight shared values and goals and underplayed differences. Yet these efforts worked differently in securing never-married women's place in their families. To be part of a family (and so, a community) was to be positioned as a particular kind of subject, similar to others within the community in some crucial aspects and different from those who were excluded. Never-married women occupied the borderlands of family life, what Hill Collins (2000) calls "outsider-within" locations. Their identities were not always freely chosen, but were over determined by structural location; durability and

stability of identities were not taken-for-granted, but were open to contestation and reformulation.

While place, identity, sense of belonging, and emotional commitment were all contingent on various conditions, what was less contingent was the losses that never-married women faced, although not all women experienced all these losses. These included losses of family, physical and material security, and opportunities to create their own alternate lives, careers, and families. Unlike never-married women who severed all connections with their families (whom I discuss in the next chapter), those who stayed at home and or maintained connections with their families, however defined, had to fashion themselves within the constraints and opportunities of their particular situations, which featured family obligations and reciprocity. By being outsiders within their families, these women found themselves bound by family ties; yet by asserting their own will and ideas, and challenging their families and cultural expectations, they were also fleeing the very same familial binds.

In this chapter, I offered an analysis of families who lived with their never-married women, families who made a space, howsoever liminal and equivocal, for their never-married daughters/sisters, and women who negotiated spaces for themselves within their families. In the next chapter, I present stories of women and families who did not work out negotiated accommodations and the consequences of such family processes for never-married women.

# CHAPTER 5: TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES, DIVIDED LOYALTIES, ALTERNATIVE FAMILIES

## Introduction

In this chapter, I re-examine the terrain of family, authority, resistances and other negotiations from the points of view of never-married women who more or less severed ties with their birth families and, in some cases, developed alternate ones. Their stories provide a different perspective on the discourse of family, both underscoring its impacts on never-married women's experiences and further revealing the complexities of never-married women's relationships to it. These stories also foreground elements that become more visible because of their "outsider" perspectives, the mestiza consciousness of the borderlands.

In Chapter Four I presented the situations of women who lived with or were closely tied to their families, while also trying to carve out lives for themselves, with varied degrees of success. But not all never-married women and their families chose to make the accommodations that were necessary for communal living. In some cases, often where the "transgressions" of never-married women were deemed unbearable and a disgrace to family name, families chose to shut out their never-married women members such that women "chose" to leave families. In other cases, where never-married women themselves deemed the disciplinary actions of their families unbearable, they chose to leave families. In both situations, what was deemed a "transgression" against or a breaking from accepted boundaries of "the family" led to choices about re-constituting one's place and identity in relation to the family and its members. Disagreements about the structures and practices of patriarchal family authority, marriage, caste-religion, and

(hetero) sexuality – structures and practices that were central to the constitution of family identity and which families protected by rules and boundaries – were the stuff of family tensions and break-up. These break-ups then were consequential for never-married women in far-reaching ways.

I have two aims in this chapter. First, through the presentation of a range of situations which never-married women and their families deemed intolerable, I offer an analysis of structures and practices of family that were considered central to constituting family identity and "doing family." Stated differently, I use concepts connected with familial strategies of regulation or the "regime of family" –supported by the ideology of familism, which I discussed in the previous chapter – to analyze the webs of power through which families and never-married women struggle to continually shape, form, construct and maintain their personal and family identities. I demonstrate how crossing those boundaries, which I consider as one of several forms of resistance women used to challenge hegemonic constructs of family and family regimes, was consequential for never-married women in terms of re-structuring their lives, including the processes of creating alternative families.

The boundaries that were most contested by women and their families, as these emerged in the narratives of never-married women, were those of patrifocality, marital conjugality, patriarchal authority, heterosexuality and caste/religious purity. Taken together, these ideologies and the practices that work to maintain them mark off a distinct, delimited social and discursive space in Kerala which marks familial identity, social and legal legitimacy, entitlements and obligations, respectability and dishonor. These boundaries define who belongs to the place of "family" and who may be excluded;

they also define "family" as the location or site of the experience and practices of these ideologies (McDowell 1999).

Families are discursive as well as physical and material spaces with clearly defined cultures, expectations, roles and boundaries. The culture of familism that exists in contemporary Kerala, as I demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, is that of the patriarchal, patrilineal model where a man is either in reality or nominally the head of the household. The gender-regime or gender-relations within the this kind of family requires that women subordinate their interests to those of men, that family and kinship are superordinated to gender and to the particular needs of individual members. Also, nuclearization of families has increased the possibility of "othering" family members who may not have the normative biographies of adult men and women. This is particularly true for never-married women who may have ideas of autonomy and independence which are in conflict with the male-dominant model of patriarchal families. Thus, the culture of familism acts as a normalizing and a regulatory process. Never-married women are expected to "tow the line" of the family culture or to fend for themselves.

**Challenging patriarchal family authority, reworking loyalty: Jamakiamma**

Never-married women challenged the regime of family in heterogeneous ways in their attempts to forge autonomy and move away from what they perceived was the oppressive authority of older, male kin. Their attempts to forge *swatantrayam*[85] were considered by their families to challenge the very authority of family, and the hegemonic constructions

[85] Devika (2002) notes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social reformist thinking in Kerala defined *swatantrayam* not as 'freedom from all constraint' but as 'self-means for survival.' Swatantrayam was specifically not the opposite of *tantonnittam* (doing as one feels)

of femininities and masculinities. In the following section, I present and analyze the stories of two women to show the diverse ways in which the regime of family operated, and women's resistances to them. When I met them, these women had very limited or no contact with their families. Yet, their sense of loyalty to their birth family, which had developed over many years, made them also act in ways that were detrimental to themselves and supportive of critical family interests.

When I first met Janakiamma at an ashram for deserted and elderly women, she told me that she had long ago severed all ties with her family. The ashram was over a hundred kilometers from her home town, and Janakiamma informed me that she had only one friend, a retired colleague who lived in this town and who had helped her locate and move into this ashram. During our initial chat, Janakiamma told me that she had diabetes, hypertension and a "mild heart condition." She was waiting for her blood-pressure to be under control so that she could have a cataract operation on her left eye. She joked that she was fifty-eight years old, and if her family history was any indicator, she would die of a heart attack before long, and her "problems" would end. I asked about these "problems" and over two long visits and several phone conversations, she revealed her family situation.

Janakiamma is the youngest child of, as she describes it, "a somewhat decent" Nair family. Her father was a businessman whose business interests included a gold shop, a private transport company, and two other shops. In addition, he had eight acres of garden land.[86] Janakiamma remembers her childhood as one of joyful abundance. Janakiamma's older sister trained to be a classical music teacher, she herself trained to be

[86] Garden land is different from paddy fields which are water logged as is required for rice cultivation. Garden lands are used to grow coconuts, banana, tapioca, vegetables, pepper, nutmeg and other spices.

an ayurvedic physician, and her three older brothers all trained in various technical skills and trades. She set herself up as having a "normal" Nair family background, and that she and her family anticipated that she would have a "normal" life trajectory, a normative biography, for a Nair woman.

On graduation, Janakiamma found no work commensurate with her training. There was an opening for fully-paid training for nurses, and Janakiamma joined that course, much against the desire of her father, who held the belief, prevalent in Kerala, that nursing was "dirty work," work that impugns the identity of the doer and, in this instance, also that of their family (Hughes 1984). So while structural conditions – unemployment for ayurvedic physicians – circumscribed her choices, her decision to train as a nurse was prompted from a desire for *swatantrayam* and being financially independent from her family. Meanwhile, when she and her sister were in their twenties, her father suffered various business setbacks, and he could not offer them dowries commensurate with their previous social level. He arranged the marriage of his oldest daughter to a person from a family ranked socially below their family. Janakiamma, however, "was not ready to marry a person who had a lower social standing than I. I cannot even imagine it." Here again, structural conditions (changed class position) as well as her own choices (her inability to consider marriage to a person of a lower caste) shaped her positioning in Kerala society.

Janakiamma work eleven years as a nurse in north India. Then she returned to work with the Kerala government's health department until her retirement at age fifty-five. She moved back to Kerala to be close to her aging parents, although she lived on hospital premises. During this time, she had cordial relationships with her parents and

siblings, visiting them on her annual vacations. One of her brothers married, the other two were single. She said that her younger brothers found it difficult to find marriage partners, as people would assume that there was something wrong with the family for having an unmarried adult woman. Also people are less willing to marry into a family where a woman is a nurse. All the brothers were working. Janakiamma felt responsible for her brothers' situation because of their singlehood,[87] alcoholism, and her mother's designation of her as the guardian of her brothers' well-being.

Shortly before her mother died some ten years earlier (her father had died a few months before that), she transferred the family lands into Janakiamma's name and made her responsible to divide it among her siblings. Each of the siblings was to get approximately 1.5 acres each. Janakiamma handed over to her married siblings their share of land. Her unmarried brothers constantly nagged her to hand over their share. She gave them small pieces of land, which they immediately sold or put on loan for money for drink. So she stopped the practice of handing over even small portions of land in their name, and continued to administer the property from a distance, much to the anger of her brothers. I asked why she did not live at home. She replied,

> I think that this is best for me. Perhaps if I were a man it would have been comfortable to stay in the family house. But since it is me, I have to cook for them all, and wash their clothes. Now even if one person comes as a guest, we have to give them a sheet to spread on the bed, and a sheet to cover themselves. Then, there is nobody to wash the clothes, just myself. If the guest stays for three or four days, people will come to meet them. But I cannot manage this. I don't have any reluctance to work, and I am a good cook. But I cannot do much work now. And then, I have limited money. What can I tell you when I say that I have five thousand rupees

[87] Today with an increasing number of nurses working in Persian Gulf countries and North America, the meaning of nursing is changing, but still remains stigmatized. For details of the stigmatizing view of nursing, see George, S. M. (2001). *When Women Come First: Gender and Class and Transnational Ties among Indian Immigrants in the United States*, University of California, Berkeley.

> (per month) and it is still not enough? When everybody comes, I have to buy provisions accordingly. I cannot tell them to buy the groceries. When a guest comes to our house, it is shameful if we ask them to buy the groceries. So, then I will have to find somebody to do the shopping for me. I will have to pay them ten rupees for their service. Like this, expenses pile up. So being here (in the institution) is so much more comfortable than all that. I don't have to be concerned about anything. I don't have to ask anyone's permission. Because my brothers are older than I, because they are men, I have to ask their permission before I go outside the house. The younger one has no problem if I go anywhere. But the oldest one, the ex-military, he is a *Taliban*.[88] He feels that women are a class apart. He believes that women should have no freedom. So, I cannot even argue with a person like that. And I have lived independently (swatantrayam) for a long time now, which is another consideration. It is very difficult to change my ways. I cannot. But it will change by itself if I become bedridden. Then I will have to listen to them.

"Family" and "home" were sites of contestation for Janakiamma and her brothers. Her brothers claimed the authority of "head-of-family" by virtue of their gender and age, and their right to discipline her and circumscribe her actions. By so doing, they were attempting to place her within parameters of expected masculinities and femininities. Yet their actions were uneasy for her brothers because they themselves had been placed by their mother in a position of financial dependence on their younger sister. It was equally uneasy for Janakiamma, who over many years of independent living outside and within Kerala, has developed her own *swatantrayam*, an alternative gendered identity which she was unwilling to surrender.

While Janakiamma therefore "chose" to sever household ties with her family, she also articulated a form of loyalty towards them. Janakiamma chose not live at home because of the restrictions she would face in terms of gendered expectations to provide household management and hospitality on a limited budget. "Home" for her was a place where she would have "no rest", spend her limited income to support her extended

[88] She is referring to the restrictions the Taliban in Afghanistan placed on Afghani women and that Taliban-oriented men, namely men who oppressed women, may place on women anywhere.

family, have to conform to her brothers' authority, follow gendered expectations, face restrictions on her movements and activities, and yet be resented because she had the authority of controlling the family purse. It was this complicated web of power relations that she chose to avoid. These were compounded by her feelings, also shared locally by Keralan culture, that it was her singleness that led to her brothers remaining single. Her singleness, which cast doubts of personal and family reputation, made her brothers unlikely marriage candidates. The institution where she stayed, in contrast represented "freedom" for her. As a mature woman who had lived independently since long, she was reluctant to follow the strict, regulated, 'Taliban-like' patriarchal authority of her brothers. What was ironic was the ways in which "freedom" was operationalized at different sites. While Janakiamma found the institution gave her more freedom than home, she appeared not to question the restrictions placed on her by that institution. For instance, I wanted her to accompany me on my interviews, and when I raised the issue, she informed me, without making any critical comments, that she and I would have to seek the permission of the institution and her "local guardians." She also asked me why I did not stay with a family or in a hostel instead of living in a house by myself. These questions and comments made me realize that single women balanced questions of "freedom" with those of "security" when deciding about living arrangements. The salience of this observation will recur in other women's stories about women's choices in forging alternative families and living situations.

For her future, Janakiamma planned to continue living in institutions. She did not want to live with her married siblings, and neither had invited her to live with them. The institution where she lived when I met her catered exclusively to the able-bodied elderly.

Janakiamma was certain that with all her health problems she would need assistance as she aged. She planned to relocate to an institution where she could pay monthly fees and a lump sum of about Rs. 200,000 which the institution could keep in return for care for the rest of her life. Her pension was inadequate for her to hire even a part-time personal helper or home nurse. I asked why she did not sell some of her property and make her life more comfortable in old age. Janakiamma replied that she wanted to leave much of her parental property to her two unmarried brothers and the children of her married siblings. She had made a will to specify that her two unmarried brothers would not be allowed to sell the property; they would receive a regular income from it for life after which it would be divided equally between the two sons of her married siblings. Her unmarried brothers were unhappy with the will because they did not have the right to sell their inheritance. The tensions between her brothers and Janakiamma, as well as the shame she feels of being associated with the town's drunks, kept her away from her them and from her parental home except for emergencies. Meanwhile, she chose to live in the institution, with few friends and comforts, far away from her family and her home.

Nearing her sixth decade, Janakiamma's single marital status was now apparently a lesser cause for family dishonor than the drunkenness of her brothers. She observed that it was her former colleague and only friend in town, and the ashram's inmates, who had helped her during times of illness and two episodes of hospitalization. Her needs for care, companionship and empathy were being fulfilled by those who were not her "family." Yet she intended to leave her wealth to her siblings and their children. Janakiamma was fleeing her brothers by choosing to live far away from them, and yet she felt bound to them and responsible for them even after her death. Janakiamma has been

abandoned by her family, in many ways. Migration, economic self-sufficiency and honorable conduct had not brought her an assured place in her family of unmarried brothers, perhaps because of the power struggle that was being played out between them. Because of this struggle, Janakiamma had chosen to position herself outside her family.

Yet her positioning of herself "outside" started from early on when she, unlike her sister, rejected any proposal from a family that was a lower social rank (caste/class) than hers. Many years later, when we met, she was still convinced about the rightness of her decision when she said she "could not even imagine" marriage to somebody "lower" than herself. "Pure" caste and class identities were spaces that she could not then and still cannot bear to cross. But, in favoring one set of identities in terms of its purity, she transgressed another space, that of marital status, and that had consequences for her ever after. She also refused to substitute the authority of "family" and her brothers for what she had avoided through singlehood. Instead, she chose to step completely outside the family circle in terms of her daily living. If she had lived with her brothers in her village, they would be "doing family" in a different way than the conjugal family, but they would still be "family" in the conventional sense that kinship, and property, ties held them together. Instead, by removing herself miles away from her birth family, but continuing to be loyal to them in terms of inheritance practices, Janakiamma created yet another version of "family" – a single person family, even if that is an oxymoron to Kerala cultural logic. The places she rejected and the identities she formed were made through inclusions and exclusions in various structural locations and constructed through resistances to webs of power operating in those spaces.

***Challenging "normative biography," Maintaining family peace: Rebecca Alphonse***

I next present one more story of a woman who challenged family authority, "chose" to sever ties with them and yet, in her inheritance and property practices, demonstrated loyalty to the interests of family, perhaps to her own detriment. Like Janakiamma, she too formed an alternative "family" which provided her some sense of security, caring, and sense of belonging. Rebecca Alphonse's tale shows the rigidity of expectations of trajectories/ normative biographies, and being in culturally expected spaces. It is a typical example of the way in which families discipline "wayward" members who choose to be different, and the ways in which regimes of family and their structures of maintaining family honor work to support the patrifocal character of families.

I met 48-year old Rebecca Alphonse at her rented cottage, in a small town in Kerala. She told me that she put aside marriage in her early twenties; instead she trained as a medical doctor and focused single-mindedly on working for social justice with a non-profit organization based in north Kerala. Rebecca's defiance of her parents' wishes that she marry and "settle down" caused them great unhappiness. They were a locally prominent Catholic family and they had hoped to consolidate their family prestige through strategic marriage alliances, but after a while they came to accept her decision. At the age of thirty-five, exhausted and burnt out from work for social change, she decided to start anew. She had a career but not much else with which to start her new life. By then, both her parents were dead and her family of seven sisters and three brothers were all married and had their own children.

Rebecca asked her siblings for a share of her parental inheritance, just as they had received something from their father: the women as dowries and the men as land and

house. This request brought to the forefront the divisions in the family. None of the family expected that Rebecca would return to their kind of life. And when she did return, they tried to talk her into marriage, although they did not address how they would raise the dowry. As Rebecca saw it, the "problem" was that since all her sisters had already got their share as dowries, they were not keen to get involved in this family dispute. And her brothers had assumed that the land would be divided three ways. It had not been formally partitioned at that time and they did not want to give up land for Rebecca. Finally, one of her sisters' husbands convinced the brother who was managing that property to arrange to hand over a piece of land or its equivalent value in cash to Rebecca. In 1987, that property would have fetched Rs. 300,000, a large amount for that time, enough for Rebecca to establish herself and have a comfortable life. Rebecca said she agreed to this arrangement, as she felt it was fair. But for many months after that family meeting, the brother did nothing. One time when Rebecca's reminded him to hand over the deed or the money, she said he retorted angrily that she should not have returned home from her social activism. After that reply, Rebecca said she never again asked him for the property.

A year after that conversation her brother died, leaving behind a wife and two daughters. This brother had no wage-earning skills and depended on the family land for his income. When he died, family sympathy went to his young wife and daughters. If ever Rebecca's mentioned her inheritance, she was told, "You have a profession, and you are single, you don't need it." Yet, ironically, when the land was to be re-written in the name of the sister-in-law, Rebecca's sisters, who had never actively supported her when their brother was alive, were upset that the land was "leaving the family" and they urged

her to contest the process. Her two brothers also asked her to contest the land going to their deceased brother's family, as he had no sons. Rebecca said that she could retain a lawyer and pursue a legal option to her problem.[89] She decided, however, that going to court was not worth the fight for what she would eventually receive, as the number of her parents' inheritors had increased in the interim, with their children and grandchildren, now deemed legal claimants, through newly revised Christian inheritance laws. Her friends and family advised her to consider her family name and honor and keep it out of the courts. Rebecca said that her "sense of loyalty to (her) family" prevented her from (independently or by joining forces with the widowed sister-in-law) filing a lawsuit against her brothers. Rebecca said she felt cheated from her inheritance and alienated from her family. She stopped visiting her siblings. In the thirteen years since she had moved to the small town where she worked at a small Catholic hospital, Rebecca had moved house eight times. Many of those times she rented a room in the home of a family. In her last move, Rebecca decided to live alone, as she found it difficult to be autonomous and "obey" the rules of her landlord's family. But locally, it was considered a risk for a single woman to live alone in a house, and Rebecca spent the night at a local convent, where the nuns allowed her to sleep within their walls "for security." For support in other areas of life, Rebecca said that she aligned herself with the local women's movement, and she expected that they would come to her help, if she ever had the need. She maintained infrequent contact with her siblings, but she had not returned to spend even one night in any of their homes. Rebecca refused to answer questions about

[89] In 1986, the Kerala Supreme court had ruled in favor of Christian women receiving equal shares of inherited property as their brothers. Yet, one survey of Kerala women found that very few women took recourse to this legislation for considerations of 'family honor.' For details see Chandy, A. (1995). *A Community in Peril! Christian Women's Struggle for Equal Inheritance Rights in Kerala*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.

her future, saying she would "go mad" thinking about it, and would deal with it when it happened.

Rebecca Alphonse's story shows the workings of a patrilineal, patrifocal regime of familism which preserved the "rights" of the conjugal, patrilineal family and highlights the treatment of this family towards two single kinswomen: a never-married woman and a widowed sister-in-law with daughters. This story thus shows the divisions among women: Rebecca's married sisters did not support her claim to a share of their parental property, although their marital status had enabled them to receive a portion of family property conditional to marriage. Later these same sisters sought to align themselves with Rebecca as members of a family in distinction to their sister-in-law and her daughters. Still later, Rebecca refused to align herself with her sister-in-law, choosing instead, through non-action, to maintain family honor. This story shows the fluidity and complexity of "family" and the fiction of family unity. In this story, "family" for her brothers and sisters, was bounded by who, from their patrifocal perspective, had legitimate claims to family property. Neither their never-married woman nor their widowed sister-in-law and nieces qualified as they were women and could not continue the family line. Rebecca was also considered by them as not qualifying for a share of family property because she had not married "at the right time." As a consequence, she had to fend for herself and develop and cultivate her own network of social ties to develop a sense of security, connectivity and belonging.

In sum, stories of Janakiamma and Rebecca Alphonse show the workings of families to protect their patrifocal/male authority structure and inheritance practices. These two family practices were discursive and ideological spaces, and the women who

challenged them found they had no place within the family. It is interesting to note that both Janakiamma and Rebecca chose to recreate support structures with communities of religious women of their own faith tradition. Yet some never-married women also contested the space of caste/religion[90] (and class) which were considered foundational to family identity. They did this in different ways, and I next provide brief accounts to show the range of variation. Sometimes women challenged their families' religious *and* caste orthodoxy through marriage; others challenged by conversion, either to another religion, or to another, usually less prestigious, sect of their faith tradition. In all these cases, the women "chose" to leave their families because crossing religious boundaries was unbearable to families.

**Transgressing caste-religious boundaries: Kalyani**

In the first case, the women transgressed the boundaries of marriage *and* religion and caste. Typically families arranged marriages *within* caste and religious groupings and *within* their social class or higher. Marriages were occasions and processes by which families consolidated their status and identities. Marriages were still considered to be alliances between families, and while self-arranged marriages did occur, families typically considered the arranging of marriages their prerogative. Hence, some families found it intolerable that a woman exercise her own choice of marriage partner, disregarding caste, religion and class considerations. I present the case of Kalyani who challenged her family doubly: by arranging her own marriage, and to a man who was from a different caste, religion and class status than that of her family.

[90] By caste I refer to divisions along lines of Brahmin/ Nair/ Ezhava. The religious divisions I refer to are Christian, Hindu. See Chapter Two for greater elaboration.

When I met 32-year old Kalyani, she was working as a live-in domestic servant with a family who knew her history and encouraged her to pass as an unmarried woman. Her employer was looking out for a suitable marriage partner for her. Kalyani was a young Hindu Nair woman, from a working class family that lived in a small town in Kerala. Her father was a *coolie* (head load) worker, and her mother was a full-time homemaker. She has an older sister and a younger brother. Her father spent most of his income on drink, so there was no dowry for Kalyani's marriage. Her father's employer had paid the dowry for her older sister, perhaps as a gesture of goodwill towards an employee. Her desire for *swatantrayam* and to contribute to the family led Kalyani to a small-scale industry where she found work packing finished products into cardboard cartons. Kalyani worked at this position for seven years, earning around one thousand five hundred rupees per month by the end of her term there.

During the course of her employment at the factory, its Christian owner and Kalyani fell in love and wanted to get married. However, both families were against the marriage because of the differences of religious affiliation and social status. Her family started to pressure her to consent to a family-arranged marriage as a way to deflect her attention from her Christian lover. She narrated,

> My father's brother came and said we must arrange a marriage. I said, "I don't want any marriage other than this one. Either I or you, one of us will not be here if you arrange another marriage. I will not agree to a marriage I do not like. You can do whatever you like, bring any marriage proposal, but I will not agree to it." Everybody in the family opposed [my choice]. Everybody. They said, "You dare not go to work." I said "I am (contributing money to) the household." "That does not matter" they said, and [younger brother] beat me a lot. They said, "We no longer care about you; whatever happens from now, we will not look after you." I replied, "I am now 29 years old, I can stand on my feet."

Unable to bear the family pressures, Kalyani persuaded her lover that they should marry and make public their marriage. He agreed. They got married at a Hindu temple, without the knowledge or consent of their families. On the way to his house after the marriage ceremony, a truck crashed headlong into the motorcycle which they were riding. Kalyani's husband died on the spot. She was hospitalized. When she returned home, she found the atmosphere unbearable: the silent reproach of her mother, anger of her uncles, contempt of her brother, and rejection of her husband's family. She was chastised for ruining the honor of all the people involved: hers, her family, and that of her husband.

Kalyani wanted to move away from the town where these events occurred and her family supported her decision. She also wanted to swatantrayam. She enrolled in a free, month-long home-nursing course, after which she found employment with an elderly, bedridden woman, who lived in a town around one hundred and fifty kilometers away from her home town. In this town, Kalyani passes as unmarried. Her employer knew Kalyani's "real" story and was sympathetic to her. But most people who meet Kalyani in the new town assume that she is unmarried because her family was too poor to raise a dowry that would get her a husband. Kalyani's employer, with the approval of her mother and brother, perpetuated that myth by searching for a suitable husband for her employee. Kalyani said that she felt she had no other choice, and had reluctantly agreed to let her employer arrange a suitable marriage for her. She was depressed after the death of her husband and the events that followed. Her employer had taken her to a psychiatrist who said that a new marriage would be a cure for Kalyani's depression. Her mother and brother also want her to get married, as is expected of all Kerala women. So, Kalyani is

reluctantly in the marriage market again, a woman who was a bride-in-secret is now a bride-in-waiting, waiting to get married again, for the first time.

She says that she moved away from her house, because neither she nor her family could tolerate each other. Her family continues to express that they do not want her as part of the family. But she still feels tied to her mother and her brother, and continues to send home money for their needs. When her father retired from his union job, and her brother decided that he did not want to "inherit" the father's job, the family decided to "sell" the father's job. They got a lump sum with which they bought 4 cents of land in Kalyani's name, as a "share" of her father's asset, and as an inducement for prospective grooms. But her older, married sister and her younger brother are angry that Kalyani got a share of familial property, and they received nothing. The older daughter was married and received a dowry, thanks to the support of her father's employer. Now with Kalyani's "transgression" and her brother not taking financial responsibility, and nobody to support her brother and mother, Kalyani, although banished, feels responsible to support the family although she is no longer welcome there. She applied to a scheme run by a religious NGO which paid for the construction of houses, provided the low-income applicant had land. Through her efforts, her mother and brother now live in a two-room structure on the piece of land that belongs to her. With her efforts and work, she saved enough to get a well dug on the land, and to have an outhouse/ toilet constructed.

I asked her if she could reclaim the house/ land, or whether it was lost to her because she no longer was in/on it. She replied that her brother "needs a place to lay his head" and so she would leave it for him. This raises the question of entitlement: what she feels she is entitled to because of her transgressions, and what her brother feels he is

entitled to because of the sister's transgression. This is a story of familial governmentality in action, where expectations of daughters maintaining the honor of their families, and of having to be responsible even if, and especially when, brothers are not. It is the enactment of gendered expectations of femininity which accepts such suffering for the sake of the family, even when the family has rejected her for her transgressions.

The most striking feature about this tragic story is the workings of power in the family, how both Kalyani and her family tried to resist the power of the other. Kalyani expressed her power through her autonomy of choice, exercising her choice of marriage partner. Her family resisted her actions and worked the power of family membership, honor, and discipline, first to try to arrange a marriage, and then to cast her out when her 'transgression' became public. Kalyani's family responded to her challenge to their authority through silence, thereby making it appear that if something is not mentioned, it is assumed not to exist.

In fact, supporting Kalyani's move away from home can be seen as the family's attempt to erase her very existence, and to discipline her. Challenge to the authority of family and tradition are met with a kind of annihilation. Her well-meaning employer invoked the authority to tradition to get Kalyani married. In this process, if the employer says that Kalyani is unmarried, then she is. Naming and labeling make things real and silences become a disciplinary measure to deal with challenges and re-arrange reality in a manner that is acceptable to the parties whose authority has been challenged. Kalyani agrees reluctantly to the demands of her family to stay away and to get married because she knows of no other way to plan for a future. While the particulars of this story were dramatic, the consequences for selecting one's own marriage partner, if considered

unsuitable by the family, were typical. Families tried to deny such marriages, as was the case with Kalyani, and to pass the woman as unmarried, until they arranged a suitable marriage.

The second story of transgressing the religious affiliation of the family is that of 69-year old Annamma who was a religious entrepreneur. By this I mean that she used religion, specifically her version of Christianity, as the main tool by which she earned her living. She had built a reputation as a woman of prayer and people invited her to their houses, workplaces, bedsides at homes and hospitals or anywhere they wanted her powerful prayers to be said. She was paid in cash and kind for her prayers. I was introduced to her and to her "daughter" by one of her neighbors, and as we spoke, she narrated her story of challenging the religious orthodoxy of her family, leaving home, and creating an alternate family. Annamma's parents were daily wage laborers who eked out a living for their family of three sons and three daughters. I asked how she got into Christian work. She said that when she was in the fifth grade, she fell ill and no amount of treatment with the regular medical practitioners helped her to recover. Then a pastor, known locally as a miracle worker, came to her house and prayed over her. Her parents were orthodox Syrian Christians and did not approve of Pentecostal denominations, but at that point, their desire to try all remedies outweighed their reservations. The pastor fasted and prayed for forty days. On the forty-first day, the pastor prayed over her again, and she was completely healed. Her parents had promised the pastor that if she recovered, they should dedicate her to god, and specifically to the Pentecostal community. Annamma recalled that she recovered on a Friday. On Sunday, against the will of her parents, she went to the Pentecostal Hall and, while she was there, she said she felt god

give her his spirit. The pastor put his hands on her head and prayed for her and she dedicated herself to god at that moment.

When she returned home, her parents beat her saying that she was not to go to the Pentecostal prayer hall, as it was not appropriate to their status and dignity as orthodox Syrian Christians to have their daughter go to a Pentecostal service. But Annamma had felt the sprit and she went. So, for the five years that followed, she stayed with her parents and bore their maltreatment. She said that they would beat her, deny her food, keep her from school, and keep her outside the house at night, all because she had affiliated herself with the Pentecostal church. During this time Annamma claimed she grew in spirituality and developed some special powers. Her father could not tolerate her attachment to the Pentecostal church so he gave her an ultimatum that she had to choose between the Pentecostal church and home. That very day, she said, she left home with only the clothes she was wearing and has never returned. She went to the Pastor's house and stayed there for a while until a friend sent her a ticket to come to Bombay. There she started proselytizing. Since that time her family has never contacted her.

Annamma has worked in many places in Kerala and beyond with many different non-mainstream Christian groups.[91] I asked how she had met Rani, her "daughter." Annamma said that when she was in a costal area working among the fishermen, Rani was brought to her for healing because she was considered to have an evil spirit within her. Annamma prayed for her and she was healed. Rani's drunkard father converted to Christianity and became sober during the time that Annamma worked in the coastal village. One day, she was invited for a prayer at a distant village, and she asked Rani if

[91] These included the Church of God, Indian Pentecostal Church, Ceylon Pentecostal Church, and the Sharon Group.

she would come along with her. Rani and her parents said yes. Since that time, close to twenty years, Rani and she have been together and Annamma considers Rani as her daughter. In fact, Rani calls Annamma 'Amma' (mother). Occasionally Rani goes home to visit her parents, but most of the time she is with Annamma, doing the housework and generally taking care of her.

On the one hand, this relationship can be considered a form of free labor and companionship and "security" for both Annamma and Rani. Her religious persona and the presence of a child worked to preserve Annamma's (sexual) respectability. On the other, it can also be seen as a mother-child relationship, a mentoring process, a means for Rani to learn some skills in life, and to earn her own keep and thus to be less of an economic burden on her own family of birth. Annamma's challenge was to the religious orthodoxy of her family; she was not allowed to choose her own religious belief, and so she was forced to leave home. Over the years, Annamma successfully worked the figure of mother *and* religious, celibate woman, both culturally revered icons in Kerala. Through these choices, she minimized the relentless panoptic gaze on differently-situated women and carved an honorable space for herself and her daughter in the heterosexualized, conjugal, family space of Kerala. She worked out her "self means for survival" or *swatantrayam*, in ways that simultaneously challenged the ideology and regime of family and embraced alternate ways of doing motherhood and family.

**Creating pragmatic households: Saraswati and Padmaja**

Although I focus here on sexuality, this story is about the crossing of several borders: patriarchal, authoritarian families; marriages; heterosexuality; and the regime of

family/the culture of familism. It is also a story about building structures, which these women chose to call "pragmatism" rather than alternative families.

Saraswati was 42 years old, a Nambudiri Brahmin; she had doctorate in chemistry and taught at a local college. Saraswati had two brothers and a sister, all married, and older than she is. Her father, since dead, was a chartered accountant and made a good living. Her friend Padmaja, a thirty-five year old Ezhava, was a trained free-lance journalist. She also has two brothers and a sister. Her parents and siblings, all married, live in a small town in Kerala. Saraswati, speaking entirely in English, described her birth family as "upper-class, very conservative."

> It is a very conservative community, Nambudiri Brahmins. There was a little freedom in the house because my father was progressive, the rest of the people are very conservative. The house to which my sister was married – we marry into a house – was a very conservative place and she had a lot of adjustment problems. We girls were not allowed to go out on our own. We were free to learn and read. We were not forced to do household chores. But we were not allowed to move freely outside.

Saraswati did not want to be a participant and continue the family as she had experienced it. Here is how she described marriage and family life for women in her family, the path she did not want to follow:

> My father was a patriarch, even though he showed concern in my case... Marriage tends to make the person, even the most liberal of men, the worst kind of patriarchal tyrant. Take my brother. He was a very liberal person in college days ...he used to discuss with me about women's emancipation. Now when you visit his house you find his wife, who is an engineer like him, taking care of the family, doing all household chores like cooking and washing and cleaning. He hardly does anything around the house. I have (men) cousins, and you find that however qualified their wives may be, she will be in the back spaces of the house. A woman is supposed to manage everything using her femininity, like being very soft to her husband, protecting him, nourishing him and then getting her way. She is expected to play that role and I didn't want to assume it. I used to have arguments equally with my father and brothers. I used to talk back to them. It was not something which was accepted. And intellectually also I used to match them. It was not expected. A woman was to dress nicely

> and light the lamp in the *pooja* (prayer) room. I never used to do that. So, maybe I was rebelling against that.

In this atmosphere, where educated, professional women still shouldered a "double shift" (Hochschild 1989), and their husbands reinforced this sexual division of labor through their inaction, Saraswati developed definite ideas about the kind of womanhood she rejected. At the same time, she also slowly realized that she was "not heterosexual." But, following her family traditions, she would get married as soon as she completed her college education. She then decided not to finish school as her form of resistance against "the inevitable." She said,

> My sister was married when she was in (Class 12). As soon as I finished (Class 10) they just wanted to prepare for my marriage. So after graduation it almost was concluded that I should be married off and it was in opposition to that that I refused. I wanted to study. But there was a pressure on getting married. My father said you can study, so I joined the University. While I was doing that I dropped out, I did not do the exam because I know that after graduating again this problem (of marriage) will come and I rebelled against that. So I discontinued my studies, I did not go anywhere, I did not take up a job. I just sat at home. It was a sort of rebellion.

Sitting at home for four years, Saraswati took stock of her situation. She would have to make decisions about her life, or else her family would get her married. Her older brother and other relatives wanted to get her married. But her father stood firm and said it was for her to take a decision. He was a "patriarch," so nobody could go against his decisions. Saraswati then decided to graduate and continue for a doctoral degree. She applied for and was awarded a fellowship which enabled her to "break away from the family" and start living independently. Over the years, she got her degree, and since then has worked at various colleges, on temporary positions. Because she spent four years protesting marriage, she was "too old" when she received her doctoral degree to apply for tenured university teaching positions, for which, typically there are age limitations. She

also did not have the money to pay the "donations" expected by private colleges to secure a job. So, she has always had irregular employment, working as a temporary (casual hire) lecturer. Meanwhile Saraswati formed a close relationship with a woman, Padmaja. They live together, they pool their financial resources. They are emotionally close; they share their lives and encourage each other. They discussed and rejected the option to bear and raise a child together. Now they plan to buy a piece of land and build a house together. In the future they plan to travel together and to continue together. But, Saraswati said, this relationship is not like that of an "ordinary family." Saraswati's family knows that since the past few years she is living with a woman, and they have differing reactions to this situation. Saraswati herself denies that she has anything but a platonic relationship with this woman (although she did say in covert ways that she was involved in a homoerotic relationship with this woman). Her mother is relieved that she lives with somebody because she feels that "after all I have somebody to look after me if I fall ill." Her brothers are glad that she is not living alone, but "my brother's family is orthodox and her being a non-Brahmin is a problem for them." When Saraswati and her friend announced to her family that they wanted to buy a piece of land and build a home together, her family did not oppose this plan. Saraswati feels this is so because they think that once she was old she would have nobody to look after her. If she were homeless they would be responsible for her.

By specifically refusing marriage, and then living with a woman, Saraswati's family has cast her out on her own, in the sense that they have let her to her own devices without offering any material or emotional support, and she has chosen not to ask anything from them. Saraswati said that her family just does not talk about her sexuality

or her living situation and seem to remove themselves from close involvement with her. She is almost like a stranger in her family. They are "slowly accepting" her decision to remain unmarried, but they are not overtly involved in her life, and she is no longer an integral part of their circle. She describes her family's reaction to her life choices as follows: "Nothing is said overtly, nothing is discussed. Nobody questions me because I don't go to them for any favors. I just visit them and it is a cordial visit, and I come back."

If Saraswati married, she would have received money and gold as a "share" of her father's wealth, but as she remained unmarried, she has received nothing. And, she has decided that she will not ask her family for money. So, from Saraswati's perspective it is her family's interest to be blind to the "true" nature of her relationship with her friend and see that she has her own place to stay so that in old age they will not have to care for her.

Saraswati clearly attributes her life decisions to her rejection of marriage. It was a combination of rejecting marriage, patriarchy, and hegemonic constructions of masculinities and femininities, and her homosexual inclinations that led her to choose the life she did. She said,

> I was not interested in any sexual relation with a man; that is a fact. But it is not the *only* fact. Once you start living with a man you will be pushed into a role. Whether you are living within or without a marriage, you will be pushed into that role of cooking and doing the dishes and washing and all that which I did not want.

I spent time trying to find out what the nature of their partnership was, whether it was different from conventional families. Saraswati and Padmaja said that they were not trying to establish a "family." They claimed not to be motivated by any ideology, but rather that it was pragmatic concerns that made them lead the life they do. Talking about

her life with her friend, she said that both of them rejected the "family" model. Instead, they want to "take advantage of (their) singleness."

> Just living like this in a house, cooking, going for a job and coming back. I mean it is simply like a family. This is what happens in a family. So as a single woman we should take advantage of our singleness. There is no point in staying like this, like a family. We are just two women living together, but we are doing everything that a family does. Getting up in the morning, cooking, cleaning the house. One of us will be going out to earn money and come back. So that is how we came to this idea of pooling our resources and buying our land and a house.

Saraswati acknowledged that she and her friend were "doing family": they were just like any heterosexual couple, doing all the things they needed to maintain themselves. So, the way they could "take advantage" of their singlehood was by pooling resources and to do things that they could do less easily as individuals: travel, do things which would "make a difference." And, she said, it was practical considerations, not ideology that guided their decisions. But the difference between her friend and her, and other "families" was the nature of their partnership.

> We have not kept it as a lifelong thing. At any point we can break away. It is mutual. I do not have experience of other types of relationships, but this sort of relationship gives us a lot of freedom. We are not committed to a lifelong relationship. Even when you loose the love you have between two people you are supposed to live together. But no such thing is compelling us. We are free. She is free to have her own friends. I am free to have my own friends. But since for the time being we have a good communication, we are together.

Unlike conventional relationships like marriage, Saraswati and Padmaja were together because they wanted to be together, there was no compulsion or lifelong commitment. They were creating a partnership where both people started with the assumption of "freedom" to do what they want, and the freedom to terminate the relationship. Saraswati underplayed the emotional context of the relationship although elsewhere in the interview she acknowledged that "emotional attachment is there" in her

relationship. Saraswati was adamant that it was not ideological leanings about feminism or alternative families, but pragmatism that made her choose her lifestyle of "pooling resources" and living with a woman.

> I wouldn't call this a family because (the term) has a bad connotation from the past. A family had always been a place where only one person had control of others. Others were just living there under his authority. So I prefer not to use the word family. Certainly we are pooling our resources together because it is as much our need, we wish to be free of this burden (of uncertainty living as single women). Then, family is a factor. Whenever I go to [her brothers'] house there are some undercurrents, unspoken words. They are afraid. Will I come back? Recently I lost my job. So they fear that finally I'm going to come back to them. And they are well settled, and have a lot of money. They do not want me to return. So, I am giving them an assurance of sorts. Even more than what I want, I am doing this (living separately, pooling resources, buying a piece of land) as an assurance for them also. See, even though I may be jobless, they don't have to worry on and on that I'll come back. I'll never do that in my life. So you can say that my resolve to [buy property jointly with Padmaja] has to do with family considerations. And of course there is a practical thing. We have to live, we have to come back. We will get old and need some place to stay. So, as far as I see it, it is only necessity that is making us want to put our resources together, in one place. Because I am consciously not trying to build up a family or something. You may study like that. But as far as I am concerned, we do it more out of necessity. Practical consideration. Because what should we do otherwise? That's our question.

In this long extract, Saraswati says that it is her family's selfishness and self-centeredness that also shaped her decision to pool resources and live with a woman. And it was her loyalty or sense of obligation to her family not to trouble them because she had already damaged the family reputation through all her points of difference with them. Ultimately, never-married women need a place literally and metaphorically. Since family did not give them that place, they had to find or make it for themselves. Planning to buy a small piece of land and build a low-cost house on it was their way of making a place for themselves. It was not ideology or the desire to create family, a term which she rejected, that led the couple to embark on this rather unusual decision. It was practical

considerations, or else, as she asked pointedly, what could they do otherwise? They wanted to take charge of their lives and not merely react to circumstances.

**Traversing "Marriage" space, creating alternate families**

In Chapter Four, I presented the narratives of some older Syrian Christian women who, although unmarried, found places in the homes of their families. These women had independent incomes, and had a kind of dependence-independence relationship with their families. But there were other Syrian Christian women of the same generation and social class background whose families had never reconciled to their decision to remain unmarried. Those women found that rejecting the normative biography for women marked them as different and, once their parents were dead, they were rejected by their families. In some cases, the rejection was prefaced by protracted fights about giving the never-married woman a share of the parental property; in other cases, married siblings simply stopped communication with their unmarried sisters. What was interesting for this analysis is that such women actively sought other means, once they retired, to create family. They were reluctant to speak in depth about their differences with and separation from their family members. I next present a composite of three such cases.

My elderly aunt referred me to a home that housed a number of single women and which was located on the outskirts of the small town where she lived. Mary Thomas, one of the women who lived there, was a distant cousin of my aunt's husband. One day my aunt took me to meet her friends and, along the way, we stopped at another house where she introduced me to another set of her friends, Rachel and Thankamma.

Rachel Philip, 71 years old, confined to a wheel-chair, received us in the wide verandah of her house. Fourteen years before we met, she had returned to India, and ten

years ago, she returned to Kerala to live with and care for her ageing parents. Rachel Philip was a successful physician, who worked in hospitals in India and Kuwait. When she was training to be a physician, she fell in love with a Hindu colleague from another Indian state; as her parents were against the marriage, and she felt constrained to marry only with parental consent, she refused to marry anybody else. She continued working in India, and later worked a dozen years in Kuwait until her late 50s and return to Kerala. She has two brothers, both professionally successful, who married professionally qualified, lower caste Hindu women. These actions enraged her father so much that he refused to have anything further to do with them.

Shortly after Rachel Philip returned to India, she had to have a surgery, and she needed help during the post-surgery period. She called upon her social networks, through which she located Thankamma John, an unmarried woman from a lower class Christian family. Thankamma had worked as a servant in many homes prior to her work with Rachel. Initially, Rachel hired Thankamma for two months, but somehow she has continued to be with her fourteen years. Over time, Rachel's parents died leaving her their house. They had been reconciled with one of their sons, and left him the rest of their landed property. Over time, Rachel's condition deteriorated and when I met her she was confined to a wheelchair. Thankamma was Rachel's care-taker, but she was in her early 60s, and Rachel was concerned that with age, Thankamma herself should not be burdened with the demands of caring for her. Rachel referred to Thankamma as her "daughter" and told me that she was confident Thankamma would be with her till her (Rachel's) end. She added that she had made financial provisions for Thankamma's future, although she had willed the house to her brothers' children. Thankamma told me

that Rachel was like an "older sister" to her. Thankamma had family; her parents were dead and her siblings were married and living with their own families. Thankamma had occasional contact with them. But her main concern was to make Rachel's life comfortable and organized. She said that they were close, "just like family." Both women recounted a situation, about a month before I went to meet them, when Rachel had an emergency surgery. They had to pack up and leave their village, and go to a hospital in Tamil Nadu, where Rachel worked. There was no time to inform Rachel's brothers; instead, Thankamma said, she and Rachel both signed the form at the hospital consenting to the surgery and to its consequences. Thankamma said this was just one of many ways in which she considered herself now as Rachel's "closely related."

Rachel knew the single women who shared a house and who lived in the same town. Rachel said that they were a source of support for them, and she was assured that after her end, Thankamma would have a place where she could stay with them. Here two women were living together. Although Thankamma was financially dependent on Rachel, and Rachel was physically dependent on Thankamma, both depended on the other for day-to-day companionship. They were a family of sorts. Living together provided them with a measure of physical "security." Living in Rachel's house allowed her, and Thankamma, a degree of autonomy that would not be available if they moved into an institution. They depended on the staff of the nearby home for the aged who brought them their meals, provided them with services like shopping for food, or a ride to church.

The other two women who lived together nearby were Mary and Mercy. Mercy was in her 70s when I met her. She had started worked as a teacher in north India and

retired as the administrator of a very prestigious private school, when she returned to Kerala in her mid-50s. Mercy said that she did not want to marry when she was a young woman. She had "ambition" and wanted to be a "modern" woman, with a profession and her own income. Her parents were upset with her decision, mainly because they worried that she would have nobody to care for her later in life. She had one unmarried sister with whom she had shared their parental property and house until that sister died. Then, Mercy did not want to live alone and, while she was figuring out what to do, she decided to invite a few other single women to share her large house with her. Of the three acres that her parents had left her and her unmarried sister, she has left half to her nephews. On the other half, where her parental house was located, she had invited other never-married women to share the living space with her. On payment of a fee they were provided a room, and simple food. Altogether there were five spaces in Mercy's home, and they had between them two Hindu and three Christian single women living together. This form of communal living of unrelated persons, who are not regulated by institutional rules, as in the case of convents, for instance, is extremely unconventional in Kerala.

Mercy wanted to ensure that even after her death, the house continued her vision as a place for elderly women and she was investigating the processes required to realize this goal. One of the women, the only other never-married woman who lived in Mercy's house, was Mary, my aunt's distant relation-by-marriage, and a retired professor, whose Syrian Christian family also lived in the locality. Mary never married, much to her parents' dismay. Instead, she pursued an academic career in another part of India, and returned to Kerala on retirement. Now sixty-eight years old, she said that she had no inheritance from her parents, and lived on her pension. She had no "home" to go to in

Kerala, as her parents willed their home to her youngest brother. While she was on a visit to her brother, she heard about Mercy's house, and eventually moved in there. Mary had been living at Mercy's house for nine years, and has come to share her vision of a home for aged women. Mary told me that she considered Mercy and the others who lived in the house as her close support, although she had some nephews in the area.

Mercy has recruited Mary to continue the legacy of the house after Mercy's death. Both women have willed their property – all in the case of Mary, and a part, in Mercy's case – to continue this home for elderly women. They spoke about the difficulty of continuing a home without a large infusion of cash, but they also did not want to give up their vision for the house. The women in the household were a family of sorts, they shared meals, they were each other's social and emotional support, celebrated their birthdays, and looked out for each other. Mercy and Mary said that they wanted to maintain the relatively secular nature of the house.

As I left this house, I observed a woman squatting on the verandah. Mary told me her story. The woman, Kochu Maria, apparently in her sixties, was a scheduled caste person whose family converted to the Christianity many years earlier. Her father lived and worked in the area and she and her six siblings were born and raised in this village. Now she was the only one alive, and had no home or money. She had always worked as a daily wage earner, whenever work was available. Kochu Maria said that the local families took care of her needs because they knew her parents and had seen her from childhood. People of the locality gave her food and old clothes and let her sleep in their verandahs because, as she put it, "I belong to this place"; in return, she swept their courtyards, picked up after the chickens and other house animals; washed dishes, and did

small gardening chores. But of all the places, she preferred to spend the night on Mercy's verandah. Mercy allowed Kochu Maria to store her meager belongings in an outhouse on the property and to sleep on the verandah and offered her a meal whenever she wants one. In return, Kochu Maria did odd jobs around the house and property. Kochu Maria told me that sometimes when she got work in the garden lands, she earned Rs. 60 for a day's work. She said that recently, she was sick and one of her nephews spent a few days with her in hospital, and later, it was Mercy and Mary who brought her food to the hospital. She cried while she spoke with me, and I sensed hopelessness; yet she told me that having the house (of Mercy and Mary) was a "support/ refuge" for her.

These stories suggest that never-married women who find no place in their birth families develop "fictive" kin relations and live in family-like situations where they experience caring, companionship, security, and sense of belonging, functions that families are alleged to provide. In fact, these non-kin fictive relationships point to the fiction of family as a refuge for never-married women.

**Conclusions**

The stories presented in this chapter offer an analysis of structures and practices of family that were considered central to constituting family identity and "doing family." Through the ideology of the culture of familism that operates in Kerala today, certain structures and practices are considered central to constituting family identity. Among them include marriage and heterosexuality, patriarchal family authority, caste and religious "purity." Challenging one or more of these markers of family identity, as these stories demonstrated is perceived by family members as a repudiation of family. One consequence to never-married women is that they are then rejected from family, and they

have to work to develop other identities and alternative families. I demonstrated how crossing boundaries deemed central to family identity, which I consider as one of several forms of resistance women used to challenge hegemonic constructs of family and family regimes, was consequential for never-married women in terms of re-structuring their lives, including the processes of creating alternative families.

Through both these analytics: crossing boundaries of propriety and creating alternative families (which was also a crossing of boundaries of sorts), I show that never-married were challenging the structuring and experience of family life in Kerala along lines of conjugality, patriarchy, heterosexuality and caste/ religious purity. That is, through their lives and practices never-married women showed that neither marriage, nor compulsory heterosexuality, nor childbearing, nor patriarchal authority, nor any form of "pure" marker of identity need be the only ways of creating a sense of family and continuity. And, through their challenge to these conditions, and their living in other social forms, they were living proof that structure or conditions were not immutable.

I showed that panopticism was not massively pervaded by prevailing discourses that left no recourse to subjectivity. Instead, women's narratives suggest that panopticism operates in relation to the particular. Although the familial gaze is relentless, panopticism deploys local knowledge and power and there is space for alternative self-constructions that are sited in the production of subjectivities that are informed by local power/knowledge matrices and discourses. Thus, while the local Kerala cultural context appears, and is, oppressive to never-married women and their opportunities for self-construction are limited, I demonstrated in this chapter how some never-married women actually are able to navigate and create selves that allow them to

express their differences in terms of sexual morality, sexual orientation, and marriage and at the same time to appear to conform to many other aspects of local culture as well. It is the flexibility and multiple possibilities of their posturing that allow never-married women to "live" in Kerala without seriously threatening the culture of familism.

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# CHAPTER 6: POSITIONING GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH SEXUALITY NARRATIVES

## Introduction

Engendered, embodied honorability has long been a cultural expectation in India. That is, Indian discourses on respectability and honor hold women's bodies and actions, as the *primary* markers of honor (Dube 1986; Gold 1994; Jefferey et al. 1989; Kumar 1994; Ram 1991; Sharma and Vanjare 1993). These discourses constitute honor to mean being considered worthy of respect and public esteem. Honor is considered to be relational and personal and familial honor are based primarily on the reputations of women. Therefore women are subjected to greater control over their sexuality than men and never-married women are subjected to still greater controls and a greater burden of appearing honorable than married women. This is because, I argue, marriage is commonly understood to confer status and respect to women. Respectability is a "privilege" of marriage and married women are always already respectable until they violate that trust. In contrast, because their sexuality is not regulated in culturally expected ways, never-married women are not ever always already respectable. They have continually to prove their reputation and show that they have integrity and are worthy of public esteem. It is this tension between respectability and marital status that never-married women sought to diffuse through sexuality narratives.

Since never-married women were the subjects of my research, I assumed that issues of sexuality would not surface in their narratives. That is, appearing to be worthy of merit through an untarnished reputation is so strong in Kerala culture that I expected never-married women would remain silent on this issue precisely because they were supposed to be asexual or celibate. To my great surprise, the women I interviewed

repeatedly commented on sexuality and recounted sexuality narratives and stories. I use the term "narratives" and "stories" in particular ways in this chapter. By narratives I refer to the entire interview or to segments of talk that were not clearly stories. By stories I refer to specific portions of text which had clear beginnings, plots and resolutions. Women embedded stories within their narratives. Women used sexuality stories and narratives to comment directly or indirectly on sexual events or gendered practices to make a point about sexual respectability. Through the process of analysis, I realized that they used these narratives and stories as sites to constitute, perform, challenge, resist, transform, dislocate, fracture and make meaning of their gendered, casted, and classed sexualized identities. It was precisely by dealing with sexuality head on and not burying it with silence that they were establishing their respectability and thereby claiming a place for themselves in their social landscape.

In this chapter, I use narrative analysis[92] and concepts of gendered embodiment and space/positionality to explore how never-married women constituted their identities in and through spoken discourse. When women told me their sexuality stories, they were interpreting their pasts to establish their respectability. At the same time, through the very act of telling their stories, they were also performing their respectability. Narratives and narrative analysis offer a window into these processes of identity development.

[92] For an overview and details of narrative analysis see Cortazzi, M. (2001). Narrative Analysis in Ethnography. In P. Atkinson (Ed.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 384-394). London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Josselson, R., & Leiblich, A. (1993). The Narrative Study of Lives. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Reissman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, — (2002). Analysis of Personal Narratives. In J. A. Holstein (Ed.), *Handbook of Interview Research. Context & Method* (pp. 695-710). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications..

***Bodies, boundaries, locations, and respectability***

Central to the framing of this chapter are three inter-related concepts: positionality/space, spatiality; bodies and embodiment; and gendered honorability. Places – social, discursive, material, and geographic – are made through power relations which construct the rules that define boundaries, which themselves are social and spatial. Commenting on the difference between "space" and "place" Gupta and Ferguson (1997) state, "Spaces are not places, they are made into places through the configurations of power." Boundaries define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience of inclusion or exclusion (McDowell 1999). Feminist scholars with a relational understanding of space conceptualize it as structured by social, economic, political and cultural aspects of social relations (Laurie et al. 1999; Massey 1994; McDowell 1999). Such feminist analyses suggest that spaces are made materially *and* maintained by ideas about appropriate gendered behaviors and values. Places are constructed through sets of complex, intersecting social relationships that operate at a variety of levels and which are affected by beliefs and attitudes, images and symbols that are themselves increasingly variable and complex.

Implicitly, then, these arguments about boundaries and spaces also refer to the notion of place as constructed by "maps of meanings" (Laurie et al. 1999). Meaningful boundaries – who is defined as respectable, when and where – work to define some people and practices as being "in bounds" and others as located "out of bounds." Boundaries, in other words, are tools of surveillance and entail relations of power, resistance and struggle among those with conflicting perspectives. Through their narrative performances, never-married women were stretching the boundaries of

respectability as they were defined through the practices of patriarchal families' beliefs of Kerala. By so doing they were performing alternate versions of respectability. From this perspective, their sexuality stories can be seen as performances of ruptures and resistances to the existing maps of meanings about respectability and women's places, spaces and social positionings in Kerala society. Never-married women, through their storied performances, simultaneously challenged, transformed, and extended patriarchy's heterosexualized spaces as the only respectable spaces for women in Kerala.

The salience of ideas about women's social positioning is related to the idea of women's bodies as the markers of family and community identity.[93] At the most fundamental level, the body is the boundary between self and others, but the meanings of this boundary are created through social practices and local webs of meanings. "The identity of a community is constructed on the bodies of its women" is a position frequently asserted in Indian scholarship.[94] Notions of honor and shame are very pronounced in Indian communities, and these very notions are typically both engendered[95] and embodied[96]: honor resides primarily, but not exclusively, in the bodies

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[93] The body has regained centrality in recent social theory. For instance, see Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, Turner, B. S. (1984). *Body and Society. Explorations in Social Theory*. New York: Basil Blackwell. This change has occurred in part as consequences of the profound material changes that have taken place in the late twentieth-century in advanced industrial countries. Rapid economic change has transformed the nature of work and leisure and placed the body at the center of concern for individuals and for society. Particularly in the service sector, the body has become a product for exchange (see McDowell 1977a). While some of these notions about the changing place of bodies also operate in India, bodies there also continue to be caught up in, and challenged, in a framework where bodies, sexuality, fertility, property and ownership are connected in particular ways.

[94] For instance, see Butalia, U. (2000). *The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India*. Durham: Duke University Press, Mani, L. (1989). Contentious traditions: the debate on sati in colonial India. In S. Vaid (Ed.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders & Boundaries. Women in India's partition*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

[95] Engendered, meaning practices are socially and historically defined, and take place within a set of power relationships, in this case within hetero-patriarchy where women's sexuality, their bodies and they themselves are controlled by men. This does not mean that men are outside of gender power structures or gender regimes; they are implicated within in. Engendering means that both men and women are

of women and is maintained through female chastity, virtue, and subdued body language, dress and demeanor (Dube 1986). This form of gendered, embodied honor was foregrounded during times of inter-community tensions like the Partition (Butalia 2000; Menon and Bhasin 1998), the nationalist period (Mani 1989), and during colonial times in Kerala.[97] But, gendered, embodied notions of honor are also imbricated in mundane daily interactions and everyday life in rural and urban areas, and in most parts of the country.[98] "Woman" marks the boundaries and contours of national,

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implicated differently within gender regimes. For three views of gender regimes see, Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2, 274-290, Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

[96] Embodiment, or the notion of the sense of fluidity, becoming and performance, captures the plastic, malleable relationship between anatomy and social identity.

[97] Till the 19th century, women of different caste groups had to follow caste decreed dress restrictions. One of those restrictions was that all women had to go without an upper garment before their superiors, and lower caste women had to go bare breasted before everyone. During the first half of the 19th century, from 1813-1858, the privilege of women to cover their breasts with an upper cloth became a volatile issue in Kerala, involving all castes and communities. The debate over this issue symbolized the extreme discontent that various segments of society felt with the many social humiliations heaped upon them, and the right of women to cover their breasts became an issue of status, not of decency (Mathew, 1989). Within this controversy, Christian missionaries got involved with their position that at least women who became Christians should be "decently" covered. In 1813, these missionaries won from the British Resident attached to the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the right for native Christian women to cover their breasts. High caste Hindu women reacted violently to this violation of caste strictures, often tearing off the blouses of the low-caste Christian women, leading to riots, arson and murders. Some time later, the lower caste Hindu group, the Nadars, a large number of whom had converted to Christianity, organized the Breast Cloth Revolt with the help of the Church and the British representatives. Ultimately, the rulers of Travancore and Cochin granted the right to cover their breasts first to Christian women and them to women of all caste groups by 1859 (Lemercenier, 1984; Mathew, 1989; Menon, 1979). Putting the Upper Cloth Movement in context, it must be noted that at that time, even Nambudiri women went bare breasted in the privacy of their homes and before temple deities. Nair women had to uncover themselves before temple deities and upper caste superiors. And lower caste women had to go bare breasted at all times. The breast cloth movement and the ensuing struggles are considered the starting point of low caste assertiveness for broader social reform in Kerala.

[98] For instance Oldenberg Talwar (Oldenberg Talwar, V. (1990). Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies*, 16, 259-87.) examined the contrast between courtesans and housewives of north India in terms of their modesty, virtue, and personal/ sexual accomplishments. In Kerala, 'successful' men were expected to flaunt their maleness on their person through their consumption practices (Osella, F., & Osella, C. (2000). Migration, money and masculinity in Kerala. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6 (N.S.), 117-133.) Fishing communities in south India believed that the safety and well-being on fishermen out at sea was causally related to the chastity of their womenfolk (Ram, K. (1991). *Mukkuvar Women. Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community*. London: Zed Press.) These sets of literatures indicate that for Indian women sexual and non-sexual components of honor primarily include chastity, virtuosity in all actions, obedience and loyalty to the marital family, and the bearing of sons.

ethnic/religious/caste and familial identities and provide access to the ultimate "truth" about family, caste, and ultimately nation. These borders and alleged truths then work to constrain and regulate the activities of women, and particularly those women who do not follow the normative expectations the community has for them.

With their bodies as boundary markers and signifiers of identities, and so regulated by discourses, and surveilled by the community and familial gazes of both, women's bodies were not always their own. Thapan (1997) developed the concept of "body-for-self/others" to handle the contradictions women experienced with their bodies. She argues that in traditional Indian cultural expectations, a woman was allowed little or no space for an independent self-perceived articulation, definition or expression of her sexuality. Her body became an instrument and a symbol of the family's and community's expression of caste, class and communal honor, in effect a body-for-others.[99] But when a woman used her body, either to conform to cultural expectations or to contest them, her body also became a body-for-self (Thapan 1997).[100]

Engendered, embodied respectability, then, can be considered a performance, a "doing." While social constructionists (Fenstermaker and West 2002; Goffman 1958) have recognized the performative nature of "doing" gender, difference, and other categories of identity, Butler's concept of "performative gender" is most instructive for

[99] This perspective can be used to argue that even in matrilineal societies of Kerala where women had a great degree of sexual freedom, women's bodies were a body-for-others when matrilineal alliances were formed with economic and social advancement of the taravads in mind.

[100] Thapan (1997a:173-174) uses psychoanalytic theory to argue that the 'internalization of representations of the female body appears to be fundamental to the formation of feminine identity... in women's narratives (the) body is continuously perceived as both defining and limiting a woman's identity by both the perpetrators of violence and by women themselves.' She suggests a duality in feminine consciousness, an internalization of the gaze of the other to turn inward and become a gaze on the self. Thapan argues that when women conform to cultural expectations about them, the body-for-others has 'overtaken' the body-for-self. The body-for-self is seen as the signified for an ideal femininity when it fact it has been subsumed within an overwhelming didactic 'body-for-other' (Thapan, 1997b:178-82).

this discussion. Butler (1990a) argues that gender identities are performances, constituted by the "stylized repetition of acts" in a regime that attempts to enforce compulsory heterosexuality. She argues that what is assumed to be "natural" about gender identity is almost non-existent, and therefore gender identities are highly vulnerable and may be disrupted or overturned by transgressive acts that reveal "the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler 1990b). Butler argues that gender is a persistent impersonation that passes as real. Being female is a "cultural performance," the aim of which is to produce a coherent identity which for the majority of people is based on a heterosexual regulatory fiction. This definition of gender as a construct that is congruent with the dominant discourses and practices of a particular location prises open a space to examine not only the ways in which a particular performance of identity (married, heterosexual, motherhood) becomes hegemonic, but also the modes of resistance to it. Narratives about identity become one such performative site of resistance.

With these understandings of positionality, engendered, embodied respectability and narrative as performance, I next present the sexuality narratives and sexuality stories through which never-married Kerala women enacted their respectability.

***End-of-interview narratives as sexuality narratives***

In Kerala, it is assumed that Keralites manage their sexuality through marriage and that those who do not get married simply suppress their sexual desires. People know that this view is idealized and that there are exceptions wherein sex occurs before and outside of

marriage, and same sex partnerships also exist.[101] But, the "burden" for unmarried women appears to be that of *maintaining a façade* that they are sexually abstinent heterosexuals, and to defend that position. I had not realized women carried this burden until I started seeing a repeated pattern during my interviews.

The issue of sexual respectability first caught my attention when a number of women, without prompting on my part, talked about sexual respectability when I indicated through my comments that I was nearly at the end of the interview. In retrospect, I realize that because sexuality and respectability were so closely tied, the women had anticipated a question in this regard and, when it did not come, they let me know implicitly or explicitly that they were "good women." That is, they appeared to have prepared themselves for such a question and gave a "response" even when the question remained unasked, tucking it at the end of the interview. My non-recognition of their burden clearly was a case of "when gender (and limited shared cultural background) is not enough" (Reissman 1987), as I had, at first, failed to understand the salience of respectability for never-married Kerala women.

For example, towards the end of our meeting, Chandrika told me several times that I could ask anything I wanted; she was not reluctant to answer any question. Earlier in the interview, we had not discussed her sexual or romantic life.[102] So, when I said that

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[101] See Kamala Das's, My story as told by Rosemary George in Rajan, R. S. (1999). Signposts. Gender Issues in Post-Independence India. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

[102] Although it may surprise some readers that I chose not to raise the topic of sexuality in this study, my reason was that I did not want to place never-married women in an awkward situation, one which they could interpret as disrespect and suspicion about their honorability by raising questions about their sexuality, the normative expectation of which was that never-married women had no sexual life. I knew that this idea was not uniformly true, but I did not want to put them in a position of having to deny this aspect of their lives. My strategy was that if women mentioned issues of sexuality, which I would consider as permission to explore that area, then I would follow their lead. Two out of three women referred to sexuality issues overtly or covertly. The women obviously did not know before hand the broad areas of questions I would ask them. In anticipation of being asked similar questions by them, I had the advantage

I had nothing more to ask, she was surprised. Just before I ended the interview, she said twice that I could ask anything. And while she did not proceed to tell me that she had a "good name," upon reflection, I had the impression that by telling me repeatedly that she "had no hesitation to talk," she was indicating her open character and sexual respectability.

The topic of sexuality came up in a veiled way with Sheelamol, an Ezhava woman in her mid-thirties, who taught at a school in a town close to her village, where she lived with her widowed mother. On reviewing the transcript, I realize that perhaps Sheelamol interpreted the question, which I present below, as my veiled attempt to ask about her sexual respectability. But at that time, I did not have her sexuality, sexual life or sexual character as a clear focus of my question. We spoke in Malayalam, and I asked, as follows:

> AG: Do people say anything because you are unmarried?
>
> SHM: No. I have a good position (*nalla sthanam*) in society. That's what I get from my neighborhood and the neighbors. I don't have a bad name because I behave accordingly. I have not created that kind of situation. I am doing my own work. When day breaks, I do my work...Then the evening [comes] and the next day dawns. Other than that [she does nothing else, so] I have not yet had that kind of difficulty [of having a "bad" name/reputation].

Here in response to a very broad, question Sheelamol positioned herself – her gendered, sexual identity – within a relational, social framework ("I have a good position in society...neighborhood and neighbors"). She reported that she practiced self-surveillance and accounted for her time so that she could avoid a "bad name." Because she shaped her actions according to cultural expectations of never-married women, and fashioned her

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of having a prepared story. Being a never-married woman like them, and like them living (temporarily) in Kerala, I felt pressured to conform to and perform normative ideas about respectability while in Kerala. What the women taught me was that they too had anticipated sexuality questions and had come to our encounter having given thought to how they wanted to present themselves.

body for others, she did not have "difficulties" relating to her sexual respectability. So, she replied that she had a good position which came from her helpful nature, and doing what society expected of her, namely going about her work. Through repeated use of the word "I" she showed that she was active in positioning herself in the narrated events (the story), and in their narration, as respectable.

Chandrika and Sheelamol lived in rural areas of Kerala and were not educated beyond high school. That never-married women living in towns and cities[103] experienced a similar burden of respectability as these rural women was confirmed through interviews with urban, educated women. Radha Devi, a retired Nambudiri Brahmin professor who lived in the capital city, told me this at the end of a response to a question on whether in retrospect she had any regrets about not getting married:

> I have none, expect now that my mother is [dead], sometimes I think it would be good to have somebody to do things with, or do to things for me. But on the whole I do not regret it, and I am a very independent person. I feel I made the right decision. [She then adds without my asking] I have never gone after men. In the university department, I was the only woman among many men but I always kept my distance.

Here a specific question about her marital status prompted a defense of her sexual respectability. She let me know that though she had opportunities to meet and socialize with men, and though after her mother's death she sometimes longed for companionship, she refrained from interactions with men. She had "never gone after men" and "kept her distance" from them as was expected of never-married women, and even married women, in Kerala's homosocial culture. In this cultural context, Radha Devi's embodied, engendered conformity with cultural expectations was "the right decision" for her.

[103] Unlike in other states of India, the rural-urban divide is not as sharp in Kerala as in other parts of India. Most rural areas in Kerala have many of the amenities like telephones, banks, colleges, hospitals, and libraries that are available in Kerala cities. Rural Kerala residents generally are as "sophisticated" as their city counterparts.

I saw this same pattern again when I interviewed another city-dweller, Ammini, a physically handicapped Hindu Nair woman in her late fifties who lived in an institution for the aged with her elderly active mother. Although Ammini never attended college, she was extremely well-read. Her mother, Vijayamma was a career bureaucrat who had held a senior position in the government services. They were city people with the experience and sophistication of city life. I suspect that Ammini also anticipated that I would ask some question relating to her sexuality/ sexual feelings because right at the outset she said, "I am not a good candidate for this interview" indicating that she had "nothing" to contribute because of the restrictions imposed by her handicapped life. Vijayamma followed that comment with a statement that she was willing to leave the room if there was anything I would ask which required privacy. Ammini immediately said there was no need for her mother to go outside. I felt obliged to agree with Ammini that her mother stay for several reasons: I wanted to respect Ammini's stated wishes; I assumed that she wanted a supportive presence in this our first, and only, encounter; I wanted her to feel comfortable during the interview, and if that meant having her mother present, then I was willing to go along with that. Ammini's request to have her mother stay for the interview can be read in a number of ways. Perhaps Ammini's choice to have her mother present was her way of ensuring that I did not ask any "uncomfortable" questions. She had already indicated some discomfort by saying that she had "nothing" to say in an interview. And, also, perhaps she was indicating to her mother that she had nothing to hide, by asking her to stay for the interview. What remains certain is that her mother's presence shaped the nature of our interactions.

The issue of sexual respectability appeared towards the end of our meeting. After I had put away the tape recorder in preparation to leave, Vijayamma said,

> I should tell you, because you are asking about unmarried women, that my daughter is a good person. She has not done anything wrong; she was always in the house. We would go (to work) in the mornings and return in the evening, and then she would be with us all the time. She was always well behaved; she never had any thoughts about other things.[104]

I interpreted this comment as an allusion to sex and sexuality. Vijayamma specifically referred to Ammini's marital status as the reason for her spontaneous defense of her daughter's sexual respectability.[105] Ammini was silent while her mother defended her respectability by stating that she was "always in the house," "well-behaved," with no thoughts about "other things" and her time and movements always accounted for leaving no possibility or opportunity for her to be other than well-behaved.

These end-of-interview excerpts about respectability are instructive on several counts. Across social class, caste and geographic locations, accounting for time and space were narrative devices women used to support claims of personal and family respectability. Women's bodies – how they used time and occupied space – were seen as key to constructing women's and their family's and community identities, becoming bodies-for-others, and preserving their respectability. Their bodies had to always be visible to respectable others. I interpret women's deliberately positioning comments about their sexual respectability during our meeting as their performance of "identity management" (Goffman 1958). Narratives are performances, "doings," performative

[104] I made notes of this visit within a few hours of its occurrence, including the end-of-interview interactions which were not tape recorded.
[105] Married women are, of course, also very concerned about sexual respectability. But this remark makes me wonder whether married women are called on as frequently to defend it, as unmarried women are.

struggles over meanings of an unmarried female body, positioned in diverse material and discursive spaces that had particular expectations about such bodies.

***Positioning my own singlehood in Kerala***

Women's concerns about the public presentation of their sexual character mirrored my own reactions about their perceptions about my respectability. Since the moment I noticed the repeated pattern of defending sexual honor, I wondered what these women and other people I met thought about my own sexual respectability. As an unmarried, middle class woman of a Syrian Christian family that migrated out of Kerala, did my sexual respectability, whatever women made it to be, "confirm" their stereotypes of Syrian Christians (opportunists at the cost of social propriety), and migrant single women (sexually suspect, relatively free from familial control and with time and opportunity for "illicit" sex)? Or did my wealth and education as compared to theirs "protect" my respectability and conform to stereotypes that it was primarily poor, uneducated people who were without honor? Some women asked me the usual identity questions of caste and religious affiliation, place of family origin in Kerala, and family history. Moreover, their questions about my living arrangements (living alone, unchaparoned, in Thiruvananthapuram, lived alone in the US and in Bombay and other cities) were probably their way of getting answers about my respectability.

On a visit to a local NGO, the director, who promised to introduce me to elderly never-married women living in homes for elderly, kept me in her office for an extended talk. For about ten minutes, she expressed what I considered extremely conservative stereotypical ideas about the situation of unmarried women such as that they were not able to "keep their character," and that "family has no value" for them. Then, she asked

about my marital status and when she leant that I was single, she said, "It must be different, coming from the United States." I was wondering exactly what she meant by that statement, when she asked me for the "reasons why you are unmarried." As I started to reply, and as she, a young woman of approximately my age, stared intently at me, I began to feel the stigma of being an unmarried woman in Kerala. If I ignored her question she would see that as a confirmation about my not being able to "keep character." On the other hand, no matter what I replied, she already viewed me as sexually suspect, and particularly since I was "came from" a Western place. As I narrated a brief reply about being more interested in career than marriage, her look of skepticism conveyed that she considered my reply a tale. This exchange was just one example of my own shifting positionality during the research period. In this case, the woman saw me less as person with origins in Kerala and more as somebody coming from a place that she considered sexually unregulated. She assigned to me the unregulated sexuality allegedly characteristic of the places in which she located me: singlehood and "the West." I began to realize that in a pro-marriage culture, nobody was expected to explain their reasons for getting married, whereas those who were not married had to constantly explain their situations and choices.

My unease about perceptions of my sexual respectability was strengthened during a conversation I had with Janakiamma, a Hindu Nair and retired nurse,[106] who lived in an

[106] In Kerala and India, as also historically in Western countries, nurses wrongfully had the reputation of being easy targets for sexual exploitation based on the assumption, historically correct, that it was mostly women of lower-income families who trained as nurses. People tended to conflate lower caste and class status with easy sexual accessibility and 'loose' character of women of lower status. For a historical overview of Kerala nurses migration to the US and the stigma attached to nurses and their families, see George, S. M. (2001). *When Women Come First: Gender and Class and Transnational Ties among Indian Immigrants in the United States*, University of California, Berkeley. However, today this is no longer the case, and women of all class backgrounds train as nurses. However, women with financial means tend to

institution for elderly people. The conversation was about sexual respectability, and Janakiamma was recounting her experiences of sexual harassment when she was employed. She remarked that although she would assert, when asked, that she had no sexual or romantic attachments, people did not believe her. She said that it was as if being single meant that you were either sexually active or inviting sexual attention, and so you were judged adversely about your moral character.

Janakiamma turned the conversations to me and said, "Now madam (referring to me) herself will say, 'I did not have an affair' or 'I did not do this or that.' But nobody will believe it. They may say yes, yes [pretend to believe what you say] in front of you, but when you move away, definitely they will say things behind your back!" Here Janakiamma pointed to the double-bind in which unmarried Kerala women find themselves. Adult female sexuality is highly problematic if it is not managed in socially acceptable ways like marriage. Unmarried women are expected to be celibate, but people *also* expect that to be unlikely. So, regardless of sexual activity or abstinence, adult unmarried women are sexually suspect and that suspicion marks their character and personal honor. Janakiamma came up with different ways to resist suspect assumptions of her sexual-moral-character as an unmarried nurse. She explained one of her more creative strategies in this regard.

> If anybody says anything to me, I give them a proper piece of my mind. Some people, ask, "How do you manage to stay like this (unmarried/ sexually inactive?)?" One day I asked, "At what age did you get married?" S/he[107] replied, "When I was twenty-six." "And, at what age did you mature?" "That was when I was sixteen" s/he replied. "So from the age of

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train as B.Sc and M.Sc nurses, whereas those with limited means train for a one or two-year nursing diploma.

[107] I could not determine the gender of the person who asked this question because Janakiamma uses the pronoun 'tan' which does not indicate the gender of the person, like the English 'you'.)

> sixteen to the age of twenty-six, were you going with somebody? You are saying that you need this (sex) when you mature. So for ten years how did you live? What did you do?" S/he did not say a word. People live according to their circumstances, as good person and as bad person. Nobody in this world wants to be bad. Every body wants to live in a good way...but people reach different places because of fate, or because people get them there. If I speak of myself, I did not say that I will not get married, or that I do not want to get married. I had none of those conditions. It just happened.

In this narrative Janakiamma demonstrated that sexual respectability was contingent on one's particular situatedness when she said that if women do not "live in a good way" it was because "people get them there." She rejected assigning blame solely to women, implying instead that sexual respectability was mutable, contingent and socially constructed. Through enacted dialogue, Janakiamma ruptured common ideas about ever-single women's sexuality and morality. Enacting this mode of resistance, Janakiamma forced her questioner to realize that issues of sexual respectability are applicable to all regardless of marital status. By involving me explicitly in the narrative through an example about me, she made it appear that we share similar views as far as this situation is concerned. And, by talking about this openly to me, she signaled that she had nothing to hide, and that she was respectable.

End-of-interview positionings discussed earlier offered one distinctive way of performing gendered identities. Women used the interview process to make sure that, along with all the "data" I took away, I also took away their perspectives about their respectability. These, however, were not the only strategies or places women used to do their "identity work." More often, women used stories to enact more complex, nuanced and often-times unstable subject positionings. In the sections that follow, I present three women's complicated, seemingly irresolvable, fractured positionings of themselves, their

bodies and their respectability. It is for these very contradictions, multiple readings, and absence of easy closures that I chose to present these women's stories.

***Homosocial, homoerotic respectability***

We met Ashwati in Chapter Three, where she articulated her position about wanting a companionate marriage or no marriage at all. In that same chapter, I suggested that Ashwati's views about marriage were shaped by her mother's sexless, companionless, burdensome marriage. In the same interview, Ashwati also positioned herself as a "[normal] woman." Let me demonstrate how Ashwati performed these multiple positionings.

Ashwati spoke about having sexual desires when she was younger. Immediately preceding the narrative that follows, Ashwati recalled her mother's unfulfilled sexual life. Then I asked,

> AG: Like your mother felt sexual desire, do you have that feeling?
>
> Ashwati: I felt it. Not that I didn't. I am a woman (she laughs). Sexual desires, I don't have them now. In my teenage years, in adolescence, I have felt it. In those days, my imagination was that I would get married, have children and raise them. And that is what our society shows us. So I have felt these feelings. In some situations we have need of a man. I mean a marital desire (she is referring to sexual desire). Only a man can fulfill that. I had the feelings that I want that. But I can live without it, I have that awareness now. People need that. It [sex] is a small part of life, several things are greater than it, is what I believe. I can live without it; I can only talk about myself.

In the context of talk about women's sexual desires, Ashwati positioned herself as a woman first suggesting that being a woman meant having sexual desires, and having sexual desires confirmed that she – unmarried and reportedly asexual/ celibate – was a woman. She acknowledged the social construction for sexual desire and it being regulated through marriage and motherhood: "this is what society shows us."

Ashwati was introduced to me as one who had no hope of getting married because neither she nor her family could raise a dowry. Perhaps her knowledge that marriage and married motherhood were not real options for her contributed to her statements about being able to live without sex and of it being a "small part of life." Elsewhere in our interview, Ashwati had narrated her experiences of sexual molestation by older men, her knowledge of her parents' unsatisfactory sexual life, and her involvement in feminist groups. All of these as well may have shaped her views that "there are other things that are greater than sex." Then, Ashwati located herself in time and as different from other people, indicating that she had controlled or overcome sexual desire. In this section of the narrative, by presenting hers as a body-for-others, Ashwati claimed for herself a position of respect. But then, in a later part of the interview, Ashwati positioned herself differently.

Through her work situation, Ashwati developed a friendship with a young woman who was in a situation similar to hers: lower caste, lower class, and no possibility for the family to raise a dowry. This was how Ashwati presented her relationship with her friend. We were talking in Malayalam about her friendships before and after she started working as a home nurse.[108]

> Ashwati: This (friendship) is not like (earlier friendships). Now I am sitting here. If I have some pain, or there is some discomfort in my body or some discomfort in my mind, then, even if (her friend) is far away, she knows it. That kind of relationship is something indeed. I wonder if you will understand if I say it in Malayalam.
>
> AG: Say it in Malayalam.

[108] A home nurse is a person, usually a woman, who provides care-giving services to homebound patients. The work could include basic nursing skills, helping the patient with personal self-care, preparing food for and feeding the patient, and laundering and ironing their clothes. Usually, home-nursing is a live-in position and hone nurses are expected to be on-call all the time.

> Ashwati: *Nirvahikanpattate bendham* [an "unfulfillable relationship"]. So, when she sees me the next time, she asks, "*Chechi* (older sister) were you not well that day?" And I ask her, "On this day, I note down the date, did you have some discomfort or uneasiness?" She replies that she had, even without even checking the date. So, I wonder, what this closeness, this *sneham* (love) is. This love is very this [she does not specify what]. So my loneliness goes away when I come here and she talks with me, and I hear the songs she sings. I now think, truly, she/ it [she uses the word *atha* which could be used in either sense] is my life. I am not able to forget that kind of friendship. So, when she has a problem, I help her, when I have some trouble she helps me. I have a position like a *Chechi* and like a mother. And sometimes when we go to sleep, [she is] like a daughter to me. I have the habit of writing poetry, and when I do, I feel like a mother to her. And that she is my daughter.

Ashwati characterized the relationship as "closeness" and "love" which "moves away loneliness," thus letting me know that because of her friend, she had a "life" contrary to stereotypical ideas in Kerala about never-married women.

Ashwati described what she and her friend did together. They wrote each other notes in their diaries and exchanged these diaries when they met. They sang together and shared poetry. They shared intimacy and mutual help. Yet she described this relationship as "unfulfillable." She left ambiguous what (sexual desire? public recognition and sanction?) and whom (her? her friend?) the relationship did not fulfill. She named the relationship in socially acceptable ways such as mother/ daughter and older/younger sister. Being a lover did not figure in her list of relationship.[109] Perhaps this new relationship, which had shades of being a lover, companion, sister, friend and mother, was unfulfillable because it was unnamable. Yet this apparently asexual, homoerotic relationship could continue in Kerala's homosocial environment because it

[109] I spent two week-ends with this group of women. We shared a dormitory at night, six women to a room. I noticed on both occasions that Ashwati and her friend slept next to each other, and shared physical intimacy, something that I did not observe among the other women in the room.

was more easily acceptable and respectable in the cultural logics of Kerala than a relationship between an unrelated young woman and man.

I read Ashwati's performance from yet another perspective. Perhaps the differences between us, in social class, religion/community, generation, and so the different positions that bolstered our claims of being more or less respectable, goaded her to enact respectability to me, as a way of bridging the differences. Her comment at the outset of this story that I may not understand a phrase in Malayalam was one signal of the differences she recognized between us. So perhaps, Ashwati showed her respectability in both narratives and presented herself in a "good" way in order to gloss over our differences,[110] and specifically to fracture the stereotype that lower-class, less educated women are more likely to be dishonorable. Had we been positioned differently, or met under different circumstances, or if Ashwati were interviewed by another person, she may likely have performed her respectability differently. We were both implicated in this mutual co-construction and performance of her gendered, embodied respectability.

***Lalitha Asokan: fracturing respectability***

In contrast to the context in which Ashwati and I met and, which I argue, may have compelled her to perform this particular version of respectability, I was presented to Lalitha more as a social equal, and that, I argue, freed her to perform a more complex gendered identity of respectability "lost" and "found" in the interview.

Lalitha Asokan, a Hindu, Nair, aged fifty-five, had worked many years as a nurse in Calcutta, where she adopted a daughter. About a year before we met, Lalitha returned

[110] Had she chosen to work our similarities of gender and "spoilt identity" [Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma. Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.] as never-married women, she could have performed yet other versions of respectability.

to Kerala to seek ayurvedic treatment for her daughter, who was suffering from rheumatism. Lalitha said she realized that having a career and a family were incompatible, and so, because she wanted to succeed in her career, she decided not to marry. She was satisfied with her decision until her body began to change. At this point Lalitha asked me to switch off the tape recorder and I did. Then she narrated a story about sexual desire in a mix of English and Malayalam. I have broken her story (and the sexuality stories which follow), which she narrated in a continuous flow, into segments and given them subheads to facilitate reading and analysis.

> (Context)
>
> My brother, with whom I shared a very close relationship, left for the US in 1988. I was around 45 (years of age) at that time and was going through a menopausal period.
>
> (She paused for a full minute).
>
> He was worried about leaving me alone. So he put a matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper. Many proposals came but not a single one was to my liking. My brother left for the US, and I continued working.
>
> (Catalyst)
>
> I felt very lonely as a single woman. I could not find myself a good match. I'm not anti-marriage. I wanted a person of my taste, a good companion. My periods stopped and I became frustrated, lonely, and insecure. Can I ask you a question? During the post-menopausal time do the physical needs become stronger? I think this is the case. Up till this time physical need was not interference. This period I really needed a man. Not like a father or a brother. I needed a man like a husband. I didn't know what to do; I would go through the matrimonial columns.
>
> (She paused for a full minute, and then continued.)
>
> (Dramatic Event)
>
> There was a friend of a friend. He's a doctor. He speaks of high things, surveys, and help for needy children. He is the caretaker of a female child. It impressed me very much that he is looking after a girl child. We became very close for a short time. We were adjusting to live together; everybody was very happy, his friends, my friends.
>
> (She pauses for a while.)

(Evaluation)

Then I came to know that he is selfish, only thinking about his own needs. I felt very frustrated and guilty. I wanted to hide my face. I did not want to meet anybody. I felt as if I had done a crime. It killed me very badly.

Locating the key segments of her story between long pauses, Lalitha used these pauses to signal the difficulty she had in telling me the story, because at the time of telling, she knew that the story reiterated a double loss of respectability for her. First, she narrated a story of the loss of respect in the past, and second, she was losing respectability again through recounting the story. Lalitha set up her story as occurring between moments of great change: the departure of her brother, menopause, and uncertainty of whether a marriage would work out for her. She and her brother tried to make arrangements for her need via marriage, but nothing came of it.

Next Lalitha moved on to the immediate catalyst for her affair, namely the "post-menopausal time" when physical needs became "interference." But with the bodily changes, Lalitha presented herself as "frustrated, lonely and insecure." Through her question to me she attempted to involve me as a sympathetic to her perspective, and then narrated her affair. Talking about her affair, Lalitha emphasized its public nature. Perhaps she wanted to signal that it was respectable because it was publicly known and sanctioned. She shifted focus from her sexual needs to that of companionship. She enacted her discernment in meeting her sexual needs and respectability through her "[good] taste [in her] good companion," and she was impressed by his qualities of caring.

But, she ended her tale saying she felt "frustrated and guilty" indicating that she had crossed the bounds of propriety. This was possibly because she had violated the gendered expectation for respectable women, or because the relationship did not lead to what she had been looking for when she set up the story, namely marriage, which would

have been a respectable outcome of the affair. She had turned the body-for-others, which, following cultural expectations, was "in control," into a body-for-self so as to fulfill her sexual desires. Through her story she suggests that it was her desiring, out-of-control body that betrayed her, ending in a loss of respectability.

During the conversation, when I asked her to give me an example of the difficulties she encountered living as a single woman in Kerala, Lalitha narrated another story which more clearly signaled her respectability. To complicate the performance, in Kerala Lalitha was publicly denying her singlehood by passing as a widow-with-daughter because she believed that Keralites were less likely to believe that a single woman would adopt a child, and more likely to believe that she had given birth to the child outside of marriage. So a "double consciousness" weaves through her narration. Again, we spoke in English with some Malayalam words.

> AG: Tell me some of the difficulties you encountered living as a single woman.
>
> (Setting up the story)
>
> LA: I can tell you a very recent thing. I'm living in a very lower middle class level lifestyle. (She pauses) The landlord, he's nearing his 60s or so. There is a reason for saying that. (Long pause) You know how it is in Kerala. Kerala women, once they have reached 35 years or 40 years, they say, "Now what relationship will I have with a man? The children have grown up; they have married and gone. Now I want only to focus on god." So what happens there, do you know? Sex frustration, because this happens only on one side. The man is always frustrated.
>
> This man, I don't know what he thinks of me. On the whole men have a belief that a single woman means it is easy to make her crooked. Or else, how can they (women) manage without (fulfilling) their physical needs? (Pause) "If we go in our crooked ways, they (women) will fall." This is the belief of cheap men. Educated person will not have this belief because they know we (single women) have our self-respect.
>
> This man is very close to my daughter. I don't mind because I consider him as a brother. We should be good neighbors, and get along with everybody. But I don't believe this man has fatherly love towards my

child because this is not the custom of Kerala. In Calcutta if anybody comes and says, "Hello baby" and gives her a hug I don't mind it. But here that is not the case. Here sex comes in between male and female. It does not matter whether you are the man's daughter or his sister. Sex is what he sees standing before him. So I was uneasy and I was always careful.

(Drama)

What happened one day was that it was night. Eight o'clock. My daughter eats her food. Then she wants that I should lie with her. We have only one bed . So, I switched off the light in that room, I came and lay next to her, and we were playing. I was teasing her. She called out to this man for protection. She calls him "ammava."[111] So she called out loudly, "Ammava, ammava." (Pause, sighs, pauses again)

How can I say it? You know what he did? He came directly into the bedroom (pause). That it happened is something intolerable. He came into the bedroom and he stayed there. I jumped up quickly. He came and asked the child, "What happened?" and he placed his hand on my thigh. I was shocked you know. Really shocked. And I don't know how to handle that situation. Because my present situation is like this, I can't react to anyone. I can't make a scene, I can't shout. It is a situation like this. Or else, I could (have said) "Get out." I do not have the guts to say that now because I same going through such circumstances (pause).

I was in shock. (Pause) He was still standing there. I said, "We are going to sleep. We were playing." Somehow I made him leave. (Pause) But I was thinking that I was a fool. Why I did not close the front door? Isn't it? He must have thought that I got the child to call him for me. Whatever the case, a gentleman will not come that way. I am a simpleton. I did not think that the situation would go so far.

(Resolution)

After that, I don't talk with him. He must have thought I am next door. His wife must be saying that she does not want her husband (for sex), and there is a woman (referring to herself) close by. Whatever her age may be, it doesn't matter, she is a woman. There is another door, he can open it and come if he wants (pause).

(Evaluation)

Just imagine! I'm fifty-four, with gray hair, no make-up, nothing. If there is anything attractive about me, it is this body. (Pause) Isn't it? So that is the situation of a single woman living in this place. Earlier I could have tackled this situation because I was having the guts, I was having the courage, I was having the power and I was having the support and everything. Now I am supportless, courageousless, everything is less

[111] Ammava, or ammavan is the Malayalam kinship term for mother's brother.

(pause). So even at this age a person is expecting (sex) from a single woman, then how will society look at a woman who's staying single? (Pause)

Lalitha set up the story to situate herself in the sexualized, gendered, classed context of Kerala. She blamed her class status for placing herself and her daughter at risk of a landlord. She blamed married Kerala women who had lost interest in sex for creating a situation of "sex frustration" for their husbands. Simultaneously, she blamed lower-class Kerala men, like her landlord, for acting on their stereotypes about single women.

Lalitha asked rhetorical question and drew me into the story. Performance is intensified when the norms of evaluative interpretation are presumed to be shared. Lalitha and I shared several attributes including sex, marital status, ethnicity, educational status and experience living outside Kerala. Lalitha structured the narrative in ways that insured her attribution would be shared by the listener/ reader. In the dialogic process, she placed the audience – me—in a dual position: a sympathetic woman listener, who empathized with the problems of single women in Kerala, but also as an outsider who may not fully understand Kerala's sexual culture,[112] which was why she gave lengthy commentary about it to set up her story.

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[112] Kerala has a particular sexual and sexualized public culture. Segregation by sex is common place in Kerala and can be observed right from kindergarten to university classrooms, and also in public transport, churches, and in separate "ladies" lines for purchase of cinema tickets or to make train reservations, and sex-segregated dormitories in universities and in-patient wards in public hospitals. At the same time, reported crime against Kerala women is high. The National Crime Records Bureau data showed that, in ascending order of crime, of the 30-odd Indian states and union territories, Kerala ranked twenty-fifth in frequency of sexual molestation and eighteenth in sexual harassment (Mukherjee et al, 1999 cited in Devika, J., & Kodoth, P. (2001). Sexual violence and predicament of feminist politics in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 18, 1-13.. Also, Kerala is reported to have a thriving pornographic film industry, and video and cable television networks that screen pornographic films throughout the state Vijayan, A., & Sandhya, J. (2000). Violence against women, the case of Kerala. *Violence Update*, 1, 10-16.: 1-12. These authors note with alarm that the flesh trade is flourishing in the state, and that linkages between the state's politicians, civil servants, police officers and pornographic film producers, underworld businessmen and international smugglers makes it difficult to apprehend and prosecute perpetrators of

With cultural context and alliance between teller and audience established, Lalitha commenced the narrative plot in earnest in the drama section of the story. Time shifted from the general to the particular night in question when the landlord entered her bedroom and placed his hand on her thigh. She did not blame her daughter for calling out to the man; she blamed him. She distanced herself from her landlord because although they shared similar economic class positions, she wanted to highlight their social class differences. And she continued to align herself closer to me, her audience, by saying that "educated persons" like herself and I knew that "we" (could mean single women in general or she and I in particular) had "self-respect."

Lalitha took responsibility for the situation, her absence of care, and her naiveté: "I was a fool...should have closed the front door...I am a simpleton." She demonstrated reflexivity for what she imputed her landlord might have thought, namely that she wanted his attention, and had used her daughter as a ploy. At the same time, she blamed both their positions which facilitated this incident and her, from her perspective, insufficient response to it. Her social location of lower-class woman depending on the male house-owner (it is extremely difficult for single women in Kerala to rent houses), she felt, constrained her from having the "guts" to fight him. And, he, because of his position as landlord, was able to exploit the situation of a lower-class single woman with her daughter. Her caution to disclose that she was never-married women and with a daughter seems to have borne out in that the landlord to whom she was known as a widow, arguably a more respectable state than singlehood because of her prior implication in

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sexual violence. Lawrence Cohen pointed out that in other parts of India stereotypes about particular groups of Kerala women are that they are sexually promiscuous.

marriage, had attempted to sexually molest her. If she had presented herself as single-with-child, she may have been read as more "sexually available" than as a widow.

Lalitha ended the story at the place where she started it: her vulnerability as a woman, a single woman, as a member of the "lower middle class" who had no choice but to put up with the house owner's oppression. This vulnerability was specific to Kerala sexual culture where married women did not want sex after a certain stage of life, and men saw women simply as sexual objects such that her landlord could see as her one more thing he controlled like his house "another door he can open and come in [whenever] he wants." But the vulnerability was also specific to her situation. Because of the absence of family, specifically male kin which she had "earlier", she did not have the "courage...power...and support" to confront her molester. Her comments about her "attractive body" and her "grey hairs and (no) make-up" indicate her awareness of her sexuality and her underplaying of it through her words and comportment,[113] as a way of preventing herself from being cast as a sexual object.

Looking at both stories together is instructive in seeing the complicated way Lalitha chose to position herself through narrative. Both stories are about "sex frustration": in the first she seeks a solution to her sexual frustration, and in the second, her landlord allegedly does the same for his. But both stories have markedly different outcomes and consequences, as they occur in varying geographic and socio-cultural locations, and with actors who occupy different positions. The first story occurred in a cultural space which was different from the stereotype of Kerala where men "see sex

[113] Indeed, every time I saw Lalitha, she was dressed in dull grays, browns, dark blue not the bright colors Indian women usually wear. However, unlike other Kerala women her age who wore saris, she wore salwar kameez and so marked herself as different, perhaps more "modern" and so, sexually available. She also wore no jewelry and did nothing to enhance her appearance.

standing before them when [ever] they saw a woman." In contrast, the second story occurred in sexualized Kerala culture where men did not respect women. Perhaps the very differences in the geographic and sexual-cultural spatialities of the two stories enabled different readings of "respectability" in what, from local cultural perspectives, were transgressive situations by differing traditional and modern perspectives.

Looking at the work the never-married woman's body did in both stories and the agential capacities of the never-married women is also instructive. In the first story, Lalitha took a risk, and placed her body as that for self. In the second story, without her volition, but because of cultural conditions, her body was marked as literally "for others" and she had to work to reclaim it "for herself." Through both stories she performed the contradictory, changing and unstable ways in which never-married women and others contested the markings on the bodies of never-married women sometimes and not other times as sites of desire, sometimes and not other times as bodies-for-self, some times and not other times as within-bounds. Never-married women's bodies, and the meanings attached to them, were known and marked differently as they moved along various social locations.

In both stories, too, we see the instability of the meaning of respectability. In the first story Lalitha claimed respectability through her knowledge about "right" and "wrong" while at the same time her "transgression" showed that she challenged that very rigid either/or construction of respectability. In the second Lalitha claimed respectability through her defense of herself, but it was a very questionable respectability because through the very attempt to molest her, her landlord was indicating that publicly, as a widow-with-child, as a woman-without-a-man, she had very limited respectability.

Through the narration of the second story, too, she was turning engendered understanding of respectability on its head by suggesting that it was the elderly, married, male who was dishonorable.

Lalitha's narratives taken together opened up the meanings of respectability for never-married women, showing that they held multiple, often contradictory positions. The story that follows also shows the complicated, seemingly irresolvable, fractured positionings of herself, her body and her respectability by a self-defined feminist never-married woman. She presented two seemingly contradictory sexuality narratives, with multiple readings and absence of easy closures; yet on closer analysis, her narrative performance, like Lalitha's, challenged established notions of respectability, and widened the terms of discourse of engendered, embodied respectability.

***Srilatha Chandran: widening the terms of discourse***

We met Srilata Chandran in Chapter Three where she clearly proclaimed her reasons for being against marriage and family life. In this section, I want to present and analyze two specific narrative events of sexual harassment to show how, through her narratives, Srilata performed respectability to me and challenged and widened discourses about engendered respectability. Taking these two performances, as well as the entire interview as one, we can see the shifting, multiple positionings Srilata claimed through a single interview, showing the partial, unstable nature of identities and performances.

The first story arose when I ask whether she had any fears for her security as she was living alone. She replied, mostly in Malayalam with a smattering of English, as follows:

(Setting the scene)

SLT: I have not had such problems so far. When we walk on the roads, one of the issues is that men make comments. Now, it is one year that I am living in my present house. Suma and her husband live with me. He had a fall, and sprained his leg. It was tied in a bandage.

(Scene 1)

When Suma and he would walk home at night, people ask, "Why is his in leg in a bandage?" Suma replied, "It is because he fell and hurt his leg." They said, "No, he has *madile chadiyede.*[114] It means that he has come to our house stealthily, that he is chasing women. That was the intention with which they used this phrase. They think that the two of them are not married. Actually they have registered their marriage under the Special Marriages Act. She does not wear a *thali*, or *sindoor* [symbols of marriage]. So people do not know that they are husband and wife. It became a great problem that he was chasing after Suma. That may be why the men harassed them, called them bad names.

(Scene 2)

The next night, I was walking home alone. One of the men said, "Darling, darling." Normally, I just move along, ignoring it. There is no use in starting a fight. I passed them, but I turned back and went to them. They were four of them. I went back and shouted abuses. They were absolutely stunned. They did not expect this. I am a woman after all. They did not think that I would come and call them names like this. I went home after threatening "If you continue like this, I will deal with you."

(Scene 3)

When I reached home, Suma was crying. I asked her why she was crying. She said, "He called me '*charake*' (slut). I asked, "What did you say?" "I said nothing," she replied.

(Scene 4)

The next day I went to the local people. I had seen the person who had called names. I asked for his name. They asked, "Why do you want his name." I said, "To make a complaint. We have been living here since a while. Now we are hearing comments being made at us. We want to live here live in peace. We are working for our food and not to hear bad names." They said, "Don't rush to make a complaint." I said, "I have a lot of contacts. If anything happens, I have people who will support me on this issue."

(Scene 5: resolution)

[114] Literally means "jumped the wall" but it also means a man who chases women.

> The next day the man apologized to me. "I made a mistake, please forgive me. The person who lives in the house above yours said that a man who runs after women was a visitor to your house. We thought he was this man, and that is why we spoke in that way." We have never had a situation like that since. That is why I dealt with the people like I did. That is why people also see us as respectable people.

In this narrative Srilata emplotted a sequences of events related to sexual harassment, which she situated in time and place, and she provided a commentary on their meanings with respect to her respectability. This story was rich with people – male harassers, Suma, her husband, the neighborhood people – and the ways in which she positioned herself in relation to them as defender of her friend and herself, an independent woman and a peace-loving neighbor who wanted no trouble. Through my question about her living situation as a single woman, I was trying to situate Srilata in the world of fear. In reply, Srilata positioned herself in a world of courage and action, and highlighted this fact by contrasting her actions and reactions with that of her friends.

In Scene 1 Srilata juxtaposed herself with her married friend Suma. She explained that the couple faced harassment because the woman did not use body symbolism to indicate her marital status. The challenges to social norms by rejecting these symbols of marriage became a threat to the couple's safety. The other point of this narrative is what it tells us about local attitudes towards sexuality. Heterosexual couples who walked together at night and who did not appear to be married were fair game to local bullies. This attitude was considered to be particularly justified if the woman was considered to be of loose character, as was seen to be the case here because she chose not to inscribe her marital status on her body, *and* she was out at night with a man who allegedly chases women, giving the impression that she was willingly out with him.

Having set up her response to my questions about her security by starting with the story of Suma and husband, Srilata then placed herself in the story in the next scene, Scene 2, and started to make contrasts between herself and them. Srilata *and* her friends were abused at night, but Srilata was alone, whereas Suma was with her husband. The other difference was that she challenged her abusers and they were "stunned" at her unfeminine behavior. Through this telling, Srilata positioned herself, once again, as challenging gender scripts in multiple ways: she was out alone at night, she used foul language and shouted at men. The men had expected a woman to quietly take the abuse, as Suma and her husband had done. Srilata was raising questions about the so called masculinity and femininity of those who challenged their harassers: a man who took abuse quietly "like a woman," and a woman who fought abuse "like a man." Srilata continued to juxtapose the contrast between herself and her married friend in scene 3. Here Srilata returned home, successfully having dealt with her harassers, while Suma, the married woman, who supposedly had the protection of her husband and her marital status, was crying because she had been harassed again.

Srilata carried out her agenda the next day, in scene 4. She made a "personal" issue public by bringing it to the notice of the local people. She named the harassers, who therefore could not hide in anonymity. She claimed status as a local, peace-loving, hard-working resident, one who had social contacts to support her in her fight against neighborhood bullies. Here she positioned herself not as an isolated single woman without family or social support but as one who was embedded in a wide community network. In scene 5, Srilata presented the resolution to the situation when the aggressor apologized. His "mistake" was he thought he could harass Suma and Srilata because they

were "loose" women who were living with the man who allegedly chased women. Through her action, she established a safe situation for herself and her friends, and established their respectability.

Through the use of narrative detail and elaboration of meanings of situations which could have been seen otherwise, the many people in her story, her choice of active verbs, use of active voice in language, and by giving herself and other speaking roles, Srilata cast herself as agentic, performing gender and respectability. This is a story of transgressions and dislocations: never-married women coming home late at night, placing themselves "at risk"; married women not claiming their marital status; single-women publicly defending the honor of themselves and of their menfolk. Through the story and its' telling Srilata was widening the physical and discursive spaces for never-married women by suggesting that it was the male aggressors who embodied dishonor. Yet, this performance of a strong gender identity, and respectability is turned on its head in the second of Srilata's story.

Srilata narrated the second story when we were talking about her work place experiences, where, she said, women were exploited. I asked her to give me an example of what she meant. She paused for half a minute before replying.

> (Prelude)
>
> I don't know what motivations exist. (Long pause)
>
> (Setting the scene)
>
> In Kerala politics there is a popular and powerful legislator (gives his name). I had covered his election campaign. I respected him a lot. I had only seen him at a distance, so it was a big opportunity for me to interview him in person.
>
> (Scene 1)

One time he called me at work. He said, "My daughter has come, do you want to meet her?" So I went, I thought his daughter will be there. None of his children were there. Only one woman was there. She saw me and she went outside. Then he and I were alone. He started saying very sexual things to me. "I like you a lot. I will do this for you, do that for you." He told me, "Go to the bathroom, clean yourself and come." I asked, "Why should I go to the bathroom? I am going home." I understood what this man is thinking.

(Scene 2)

The woman returned. The phone rang and he went to answer it. She told me, "Listen to what he says, he will do whatever you want for you. He will do this and that." I was just sitting still where I was, not moving. I was very scared. That place was a flat. The ground floor was three floors below. The woman left the room.

(Scene 3)

He returned and said to me, "I like oral sex the best. Go to the bathroom and clean yourself. You will have no problems." Then the phone rang again. The phone's range was not clear in that room. So, he went with his cell phone to the kitchen area. The woman went behind him. "What did she say?" she asked him.

(Scene 4)

I took my bag. I went outside and ran. Till that time, the door was locked. When this woman came, she opened it and the key was in the door. When I descended the steps, I thought it is not correct to go without saying anything. Let me go and take leave and come. I went back into the house. I opened the door, I saw the man talking on the phone. Then I thought I will just be making a danger to myself. I turned around and ran out. He called, but I did not go. (Long pause)

(Postlude)

Nobody would believe my experience. They would say, he's quite old, isn't he?

In contrast to the earlier narrative, this story was characterized by much less assertiveness on Srilata's part. The first story is richly peopled; the second is not. Srilata gave herself only one speaking voice in this narrative "Why should I go to the bathroom, I am going home" in contrast to her many speaking voices in the first story

In the prelude, Srilata set the tone for the indeterminacy of her positionality, when she referred to the motivation not being clear: she did not know what led her to embark

on this chain of events. That it is her own motivation which she does not fully understand is perhaps strengthened in the postlude, when she said that nobody would believe that she got into this typical work-related harassment situation. Srilata presented herself as agentic – *she* chose to go meet the politician, although she learnt on reaching his flat that he had lured there under false pretexts. She averted the potentially dangerous situation through her escape. But, before the escape, she returned to take leave from the aggressor, perhaps because he had the power to adversely affect her employment. It is perhaps this action to which she states not to know the motivation.

Through this narrative of her own folly, she was also saying that she caught herself quickly enough, and so through that escape, she was claiming respectability. In contrast to her position of respectability, Srilata positions her aggressor as dishonorable. When setting the scene, she said that she "respected him a lot." Yet, as she continued with her story, she used the phrase "do this and that" (for her), said once by the politician and once by the other woman in the flat, which I read as her way of belittling the man in retrospect, and normatively dislocating his respectability. I also read it as her way, in retrospect, of resisting a person who had the power to affect her fate in her workplace. By condensing what he promised to do for her if she had sex with him to "this and that" she showed that she found him dishonorable. Her final statement, in the postlude, that nobody would believe her experience because the politician was "quite old" was yet another way of her positioning him as dishonorable. Age in Kerala was typically associated with generational authority, wisdom and respectability. Through his actions, the aged male had cast the meaning of age in a different, less respectable light.

Looking at both stories together, Srilata performed two contrasting images of an unmarried woman, and raised the possibility that it was predatory men, and not women, who were sometimes out of bounds. She challenged the idea of "purity" of discursive spaces by showing that neither any specific time – night in the first story and day in the second – or place – public street and private house – was intrinsically safe or dangerous for women. Rather the inter-personal relations that operated in time and space engendered respectability or its absence. In both situations, as a woman she was in a lower social positioning than her aggressors, but perhaps the relatively anonymous and public nature of the first situation allowed her to challenge her aggressor which the familiar, private nature of the second did not. In the second story, she had more to loose, as she was dealing with a powerful man who could harm her employability. Like Lalitha Ashokan, she closed her narrative with a depiction of her naiveté: "I was a fool" perhaps as a way of making sense of her contradictory positionings.

***Conclusions: The work of sexuality narratives and stories***

Engendered, embodied respectability was multiply presented by a range of women. Through the end-of-interview performances, respectability appeared to be fixed and stable, conforming to hegemonic expectations. Here women used the interview opportunity to position themselves as honorable. Many, but not all, of those women and I met only once. Consequently, the differences between us were likely to appear strong enough to foreclose all but performances of respectability. In contrast, in situations where we met several times, women performed more complex, unstable, discrepant respectability. I suggest that through the time and space of more than one meetings, intervals that gave women opportunities to reflect on the interviewer and the interviewing

situation, the similarities between us, and specifically the condition of sharing a "spoiled identity," (Goffman 1963) because we shared the condition of being never-married women, opened up a discursive space where they could present a "spoiled identity" *and* claim "respectability," howsoever tenuous.

Reissman (2001) discusses levels of positioning that were of use to my analysis of these sexuality stories. The narratives are positioned in a broader cultural discourse about women's proper place in modern Kerala and India, where new spaces and opportunities for women are developing. The women I interviewed worked in offices, private homes, universities and hospitals. They traveled and/or interacted with those who traveled. Through print and broadcast media, they, like other Keralites, were well aware of worlds outside of Kerala where life conditions for women are different. These new spaces and opportunities translated into occasions to redefine embodied, gendered discourses on honor. Women also position themselves in accommodating and challenging powerful cultural gendered expectations about women and vis-à-vis powerful family members in their stories. Taken together, the angles of vision of positioning in these narratives provide lenses through which to explore how never-married women construct positive identities in their particular social situation.

Adult identity for Kerala women is normatively organized around milestones of marriage and motherhood. Although currents of change like economic liberalization are influencing ideas about marriage and reconfiguring family forms, nonetheless marriage continues to be the dominant form of adult female identity. Never-married women had to construct gender identities around principles other than marriage and heteronormative patriarchy. They presented themselves as celibate and sexually active, single and

partnered, honorable and dishonorable, sometimes more and other times less agentic, socially aware and reflexive, naïve and savvy. These sexuality narratives and stories suggest diverse possibilities for subject-making for never-married women Kerala women. I examined the identity work women did in the interviews to communicate how they want to be known – as agents of lives that had accommodated singlehood.

The performance approach to narrative asserts that every performance is unique, and therefore every narrative identity multiple, fragmentary, and unfinished. Identity is a performative struggle, always destabilized and deferred. Embodied, gender identity in particular is accomplished interactionally, continuously negotiated in linguistic exchanges and social performances. Narratives developed during the research interview process provide windows into the process. When women tell stories about events in their lives, they interpret the past to perform their various identities, sometimes privileging unambiguous respectability; other times subverting established ideas about it.

Narrative performances about respectability are more than self-expression; a change in consciousness prompts cultural critique. A never-married woman's body is the performative boundary between inner and outer, self and world. These narratives of respectability constitute not only personal statements of identities but also transgressive and cultural critiques. These narrative performances are transgressive to the extent that they break the silence about never-married women's bodies, desires, sexualities and respectabilities, bringing them into the realm of discourse and troubling dominant, stigmatizing meanings about female singlehood.

The narrative performances are cultural critique to the extent that they challenged inscriptions of their experiences within existing structures of domination. Through the

telling, the women were dislocating set parameters about engendered, embodied respectability and opening new spaces to read actions differently. As cultural critique, women represented the struggle over meanings not as internal to themselves, but as a series of social interactions with others who had to rework their assumptions of never-married women. Sexual abusers encountered resistance; suitors experienced desiring women who then rejected them; harassers experienced defiance. The struggles over meanings of respectability were localized to particular places with their geographies of power and webs of meanings. This opens the possibilities that these same practices can be read differently in other places and spaces. In other words, narrative performances of identity are addressed neither to self nor to the interviewer alone, but also to "ghostly audiences" located in diverse social and geographic spaces and webs of meanings who can read these performances differently.

Women's, and never-married women's, bodies do not settle within the borders of culturally expected identities. Identities and positionalities are relations of difference. Never-married women showed through these narratives that their bodies were the sites of conformative *and* subversive performances. Through multiple, contradictory positionings of embodied, engendered respectabilities, never-married women were challenging and so, imagining, new possibilities in social positions for themselves.

# CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation is a sociological analysis of the relationships of gender, generation and singlehood within contemporary Malayalee families. I have examined the social processes in which a range of families engage as they accommodate, discipline, negotiate with, embrace and reject adult never-married women. My goal has been to provide a sociological portrait which captures the fundamental aspects of female adult singlehood as it operates in Kerala families today.

The analytic perspective of this dissertation is based on the concepts of gender relations, culture of familism, regimes of family, and marginalities as they applied to the complicated, liminal situation of never-married Kerala women. My focus was on the sociology of gender and families with emphasis on the ways in which never-married women negotiate and accommodate the uncertain terrain of family life when the very definition and understanding of family is itself being worked out. Economic autonomy, care-giving to older family members, being sexually active or celibate, professional achievements, out-migration, financial support to family members, assuming the work typically done by fathers and brothers, as well as the social history of Kerala and its economic and political climates were all contextual conditions that shaped and impinged upon the experience of being never-married in the heterosexual familial culture of Kerala.

It should now be clear that status of singlehood profoundly shapes the lives of never-married women. Successive chapters of this dissertation have traversed the terrains of marital status and women's places in families as material, cultural and subjective locations, exploring ways never-married women make sense of singlehood, inclusions and exclusions from families, kinship relationships, alternative families, and

discourses about respectability. Through this process, I have rendered the meanings of adult female singlehood in contemporary Kerala more explicit and complex.

Women's social/structural positions and the salience of marital status change over time and space and it in no way a transhistorical essence. Rather, as I have argued, it is a complexly constructed product of local, colonial relations, past and present, and today also of postcolonial and global. Consequently, possible ways of living singlehood, for an individual never-married woman in particular times and places are delimited by the culture of familism at that moment and in that place.

The history of marriage and family in Kerala clearly shows that marriage and property relations were sites for the re-ordering of power relations within matrilineal families and the consolidation of such relations within patrilineal families. These changes forged new identities for both men and women. The implication for women in terms of interests and identities in patrilineal kinship groups was that gender identity became subservient to kinship. Matrilineal women, as custodians of descent/ lineage, had had a genealogy for their gender that arose from their complete and continuous identification with matrilineal families. But with the adoption of patrilineal, conjugal families as the ideal modern Malayalee family, matrilineal women lost their birth-right as full incorporated in their birth families. Kinship and marriage then became consequential in new ways in shaping women's fractured identities within a patrilineal marriage and kinship, and in imposing male dependency and a conservative sexuality on them. These changes rested uneasily, and have profoundly influenced never-married women's membership in families, and their lived experiences of singlehood in Kerala.

I began this dissertation arguing that never-married women do not have a clearly articulated and socially recognized structural position in Kerala society. Through detailed examination of their lived experiences I have substantiated that argument and shown the ways in which some families and never-married women have negotiated mutually workable positions for themselves. In these situations, never-married women occupy marginal positions, neither fully incorporated within the family nor fully excluded from it. In other cases, when never-married women are unwilling to submit to the authority of family or to accept the structures and practices that mark the space and constitute the identity of family, families and women work through a process of separation, rejection, abandonment, and marginalization. Further, some never-married women, form their own families, either as single-person families, or in arrangements with others who are not related to then through kinship ties. Never-married women's bargaining positions – the extent to which they could challenge or deviate from gendered expectations and regimes of family – clearly depended on the strength of their fall-back positions and the perceived legitimacy of their claims.

Specifically, I have examined the ways in which caste, religion, class, and generation, and migratory experience divide the terrain of lived experience of singlehood. I have also indicated in some preliminary ways how gender and sexuality interact with singlehood, powerfully shaping women's practices of defining honorability. I have argued that women actively negotiated their single status with their families and others, and have explored in detail the forms and content of negotiation process.

The practices of never-married women and their families show that the very notion of family for never-married women is unstable. Neither is the "space" of family

nor its entitlements and nurturance assumed for never-married women. Instead, particular structures and practices of family as normalized through the regime of family operate as disciplining mechanisms to maintain the very ideology and practices of familism as they operate in Kerala today. I have shown that family was a contingent, fragmentary, unstable experience for never-married women. Family members had conflicting interests and loyalties. Gender, age hierarchies, economic contribution, as well as less categorical, measurable or tangible conditions (such as the presence or absence of charisma, leadership qualities, and morality) divided families. I elucidated the processes by which some never-married women and their families negotiated to accommodate themselves into family formations that highlight shared values and goals and underplay differences. In that process, never-married women's experiences of family were seen as that of ruptured identities and divided loyalties. They occupied the borderlands of families, neither fully incorporated into nor fully rejected by them.

While place, identity, sense of belonging, and emotional commitment were all contingent on various conditions, what was less contingent were the losses that never-married women faced, although not all women experienced all these losses. These included losses of family, physical and material security, and opportunities to create their own alternate lives, careers, and families. Unlike never-married women who severed all connections with their families, those who stayed at home and or maintained connections with their families, however defined, had to fashion themselves within the constraints and opportunities of their particular situations, which commonly involved family obligations and reciprocity. By being outsiders within their families, these women found themselves

bound by family ties; yet by asserting their own will and ideas, and challenging their families and cultural expectations, they were also fleeing the very same familial binds.

Through their conformity to and challenge of expectations of embodied, engendered honorability and stereotypes of female singlehood, never-married women both complicated and challenged traditional understandings of honor. In so doing, they suggest that Kerala women might find other ways of interpreting singlehood and identity construction. Through their practices, women were claiming and creating spaces for themselves, spaces which reworked notions of respectable female singlehood, while simultaneously maintaining hetero-patriarchal familial spaces to make spaces for themselves.

The ideology and culture of familism that operates in Kerala today resulted for some women in rejection by family. They then sought to develop other identities and alternative families. Crossing boundaries deemed central to family identity, a form of resistance women used to challenge hegemonic constructs of family and family regimes, was consequential for never-married women in terms of re-structuring their lives, including the processes of creating alternative families. Crossing boundaries of propriety and creating alternative families (which was also a crossing of boundaries of sorts), I suggest that never-married were challenging the structuring and experience of family life in Kerala along lines of conjugality, patriarchy, heterosexuality and caste/ religious purity. That is, through their lives and practices never-married women demonstrated that neither marriage, nor compulsory heterosexuality, nor childbearing, nor patriarchal authority, nor any form of "pure" marker of identity need be the only ways of creating a sense of family and continuity. And, through their challenge to these conditions, and

their living in other social forms, they were living proof that structures and conditions were not immutable. Structures can be traversed; identities and positionalities as relations of difference that can be negotiated, challenged rejected or re-worked; new possibilities of social positioning for never-married women can be imagined and realized in Kerala. And through these ways, never-married women can open the possibilities to imagine more equitable, autonomous lives for all Kerala women.

This project contributes to the sociology of family, gender and gender politics in India, specifically in South India, especially within the categories of marital status as these are encoded within other markers of identity. It is a step in filling the gap in scholarship which has by and large ignored never-married women as an emergent cultural formation and subject position in postcolonial India. It offers a detailed examination and analysis of the lived experiences of never-married Kerala women, their experiences of marginality, and processes of negotiation that they and their families have engaged. This project contributes to a nuanced understanding of ways in which the cultural logics of "family" are renegotiated within postcolonial contexts. Most importantly, this work extends feminist analyses of difference.

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## Appendix 1: Socio-demographic Profile of Fifty-One Women Participants

| | |
|---|---|
| **RELIGION** | |
| *Hindu* | *24* |
| Brahmin | 4 |
| Nair | 10 |
| Ezhava | 8 |
| Unstated | 2 |
| *Christian* | *27* |
| Syrian | 12 |
| Catholic | 10 |
| Pentecost | 5 |
| **AGE** | |
| 30-40 | 15 |
| 41-50 | 11 |
| 51-60 | 9 |
| 61-70 | 8 |
| 71-80 | 5 |
| 81+ | 3 |
| **EMPLOYMENT STATUS** | |
| Working | 34 |
| Retired | 11 |
| Unemployed | 2 |
| Never-employed | 4 |

**EDUCATION**

| | |
|---|---|
| Post-graduate | 21 |
| Graduate | 5 |
| Nursing Diploma | 4 |
| Completed High School | 14 |
| School drop-out | 4 |
| Illiterate | 2 |

**LIVING SITUATION**

| | |
|---|---|
| In own house (with live-in companions) | 11 |
| In family house | 25 |
| Rented house (with live-in companions) | 3 |
| Employer's house | 8 |
| Home for aged, destitute women | 4 |

**MIGRATORY STATUS**

| | |
|---|---|
| Always lived in Kerala | 34 |
| Returned to Kerala on retirement | 7 |
| Lived in Kerala and outside | 10 |

## Appendix 2: Methodological and Analytic Strategies

### *A. Coding and Memoing*

Data were coded and analyzed using the general principles of grounded theory (Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998) in its constructivist version (Charmaz 2000). Grounded theory focuses on uncovering the social processes and conditions that lie behind the phenomena being studied and follow their consequences and effects for the people involved. Grounded theory is an analytic methodology that is particularly suited to an exploratory study of the kind conducted here, where the general phenomenon and its processes have not been fully articulated, and constant comparison between the major categories of interest, for instance between singlehood and marriage, being within a family and outside it, honor and dishonor, are central to the analysis. Grounded theory offers a systematic process that moves beyond description into analysis, and through which theories can be developed inductively. Moreover, constructivist grounded theory "celebrates firsthand knowledge of empirical worlds, ... assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretative understanding of subjects' meanings" (Charmaz 2000). The processes of coding, memoing, constant comparison and theoretical sampling were the specific analytic techniques of grounded theory that I used in this study.

I started analyzing the data concurrently with the conduct and transcription of interviews and writing of field notes. I coded by hand only, and started with open coding and memoing, where concepts are labeled and grouped into categories, and those categories are developed in terms of its properties and dimensions through the writing of

memos. I developed codes and categories around the phenomena of interest, specifically, the formation of definitions and conceptualizations of singlehood, honorability, social space, marriage and how these conceptualizations shape and are shaped by understanding of the lived experience of adult female singlehood in the particularities of Kerala's social landscapes. It could be argued that my analysis started even before I had "data" in terms of the ways I conceptualized this study and framed the questions on the interview guides. But once I started fieldwork, I began the formal process of analysis by reading through transcripts of interviews with never-married women and field notes from these interviews as well as field notes of my own daily experience living as a single woman in Kerala. I labeled the phenomena of honorability, defining and locating social spaces, family and family boundaries as various constructions of "doing difference." Once I had a set of codes, I moved to the next stage of analysis, namely axial coding, where I labeled and explicated the connections between codes, and eventually formed the basis for constructing major categories and determining the conditions and the contexts within which phenomena unfolded in different ways.

In coding and memoing, I paid particular attention to the specific content of the definitions and how the conceptualizations prevalent in lay understanding differed from or were similar to that used in sociological understanding. Codes and categories were used to highlight the range of consequences that conventional concepts of family, belonging, entitlement, honorability and family authority have for a sociological understanding of the "problem" of never-married women in families. I used the same codes to analyze the interviews of women as well as the few family members and other social others, and my own experience of living in Kerala. By developing and using the

same codes across different types of interview data and field notes, I could examine the differences in meanings of these concepts across different sources of data. This cross-data analysis facilitated the explication of categories, and served as a kind of triangulation.

The process of triangulated analyses and memo writing moved me from the process of identifying and explicating descriptive codes to that of formulating analytic codes and categories, and moved my analysis to a more conceptual level. Here I expanded social processes and considerations involved in the formation of family life, and the lived experience of adult female singlehood. I reworked some of the simple descriptive codes into analytic codes; I also created new analytic codes to account for previously unobserved phenomena, or to cluster a group of related codes.

Codes and categories always emerged from the data, and allowed for the inductive building of concepts and arguments. For instance, I started field work by observing that there were broadly two kinds of women, and I named and described them as "religiously oriented" and "politically-oriented" women. I defined the specifics of each category. On re-reading the transcripts, I paid particular attention to the families of each of these categories of women, especially because family members declined to participate in my study. In this re-reading, I discovered that both categories of women had more and less supportive family members and family environments, and that what facilitated or obstructed never-married women's life choices was the particular combination of their generational placement (their age, and the social history around their age), and the combination of social class of the family, and the nature of the male members of the family. From this insight, I developed the analytic codes of liminal

membership within families, rejection, and developing of alternative families, with specific categories within each of these types of families.

I began to notice the gendered dimensions of honor, family membership, entitlements that were being deployed in family interactions. I initially labeled these descriptively but after writing memos about their frequent presence in the data, I realized that they reflected an underlying social process at work. By noticing that never-married women both gained and suffered whether they assumed family headship or not, I began to see that definitions of social boundaries and of family governmentality were at play. From these observations, analyses and memos emerged providing the foundations of Chapters Four and Five where I argue that a central role in the reproduction of family inequality is that of family governmentality.

***B. Comparisons and Theoretical Sampling***

Throughout the field work processes, I followed the principles of theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), and as my understanding of the social processes and phenomena changed and moved in different directions, I changed my research questions to reflect these new understandings. After my access to the field was over (May 2002), I re-read, recoded and reanalyzed entire transcripts to make sense of and allow new understanding to be fully developed. The principle of theoretical sampling posits that data collection should be "driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concepts of "making comparisons" whose purpose is to go to places, people or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 201). This injunction was particularly useful for the exploration of the

phenomena of female singlehood as it allowed me to choose the avenues of sampling, for example women in different familial situations, that offered the greatest potential for theoretical returns.

As I reached theoretical saturation on some questions, I shifted my sampling and data collection strategies to pursue newly articulated and redefined questions based on a different perspective or experience raised in an interview. I made such decisions to gather sufficient data on the range of positions and perspectives on female singlehood, family responses, and range in family class positions. For example, after interviewing several older women who lived with their families, I realized that I needed to interview women who did not live with families, and those who were institutionalized. This strategy allowed me to see how "family" works in quite different situations. Through such sampling decisions, I came to realize the contingent, uneasy, and often contested nature of never-married women's social placement in families.

## Appendix 3: Consent To Be a Research Subject

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Adele Clarke, Ph.D., and Annie George, M.A., M.P.H in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco are conducting a research study to help understand the life experiences of single women of Kerala. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a single woman.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study you will be interviewed one or more times by Annie George. The interview will be audiotaped, or if you decline to have it audiotaped, Ms. George will take notes during the interview. The interviews will be done in your work place, home or place of your choice, and will take from 30 minutes to two hours.

C. RISKS/ DISCOMFORTS

1. Some of the questions may produce sadness or unhappy feelings, but you are free to decline answers to any questions you do not wish to answer.

2. Confidentiality: Participation in research will involve a loss of privacy. However, the information you provide will be handled as confidentially as possible. Your information will not be shared with the family member or friend you introduce to participate in the study. Only Dr. Clarke, Ms. George and their assistant will have access to your audiotapes. After your interview has been transcribed from the tapes, the tapes will be destroyed. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

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D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may help people of Kerala to better appreciate the situation of single Kerala women.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study. Ms. George will come to a place of your choice for the interview, or she will arrange to have you transported to a place of your choice to participate in the interviews.

F. PAYMENT

You will receive no payment for your participation in this study.

G. You have talked to Annie George about this study and have had your questions answered. If you have any further questions, you may write to her at 6A Mar Ivanios Nagar, Kesavadasapuram, Trivandrum 689 004.

If you have any comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researchers. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Committee on Human Research, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the committee office between 8:00 and 5:00 Monday through Friday, or by calling 001-415 476 1814, or by writing: Committee on Human Research, Box 0962, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA 94143, U.S.A.

H. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

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PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point.

If you agree, you should sign below.

Signature:

Date:

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## Appendix 4: Interview guide for never-married women

Tell me about how you came to be a never-married woman?

Tell me about your childhood (family members, type of family: nuclear, extended, joint, place of residence: village, town, city,)

Tell me what expectations did your family have about your future, as an adult woman? (Education, work, marriage, children, relationship with family)

Tell me what your own expectations were about your future as an adult woman?

Tell me about your early adulthood? (Experience of arranging marriage, education, work, and migration)

Tell me about your life as a single woman now (experiences of arranging marriage,

Where she lives and with whom

Education,

Work/ career,

Migration,

Relationships with family – does she take care of parents, -- and siblings: her expectations of them, their expectations of her

Relationships with men: did she have opportunities to arrange her own marriage? What happened?

Security in terms of money, home, and inheritance....

Participation in public life: membership in political or social groups

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Experiences with organized religion, health care services (gynecological, mental), law, labor union, and media

What do you feel about being a single woman?

Gains: personal, financial autonomy, education, work and migration,

Concerns/ Losses: connection with family, children, companionship/ partnership with man, loneliness in old age, care in old age, financial concerns.

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## APPENDIX 5

### KERALA WOMEN: A REVIEW OF THEIR SITUATION

The purpose of this appendix is to review the situation of the women of Kerala state in south India. The materials are divided into four sections. In section one, I explain the distinctive cultural claims about the situations of women in Kerala; section two provides a brief historical background through which the narratives of section three, the current situation of Kerala women, can be assessed. Finally in section four, I summarize my arguments and highlight the areas where further research might be profitable. I take the indicators of women's status as a starting point and argue that these indicators are inadequate measures that cannot capture the myriad complexities that shape the situation of Kerala women, as in-depth studies indicate. I question why Kerala women are apparently lagging behind on the road towards "modernity" even as certain institutions and social groups have made great strides in that direction. If we consider that these indicators and the body of research cited in this review are discourses produced within disciplinary areas, then we can analyze how these indicators and research simultaneously constitute and mask multiple, contradictory images of Kerala women. To anticipate my conclusion, these discourses say as much about Kerala society and its contradictions as it does about the situation of Kerala women.

### 1. "KERALA WOMEN HAVE IT GOOD"

The widespread image of Kerala women is that of all Indian women, the situation of Kerala women is perhaps the most enviable. Located on the south-west coast along the Arabian sea, the Indian state of Kerala is perhaps best known internationally for

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radical changes in health and quality of life indicators through the "Kerala model" of democratic reform (Franke and Chasin 1994; Ratcliffe 1978; Sen 2000). For instance, Kerala ranks first or among the top three of all Indian states on the following indicators: life expectancy for men and women; literacy rate; sex ratio; and low infant mortality rate. These achievements are truly remarkable considering that Kerala is one of the poorest and most densely populated of India's 27 states.

Partial credit for the state's achievements is usually attributed to the position or status of Kerala women (Joseph 1997; Krishnan 1976; Radha Devi 1993), which is allegedly "better" than that of other Indian women. Indicators cited to support this claim are usually the ones presented in the table below.

***Status of Women:Kerala and India, Male and Female 1991.***

| Indicators | India | | Kerala | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Sex Ratio | N.A. | 929 | N.A. | 1036 |
| Literacy | 64.13 | 39.29 | 93.62 | 86.17 |
| Life expectancy | 59.10 | 58.10 | 69.00 | 72.00 |
| Work participation | 51.61 | 22.26 | 47.58 | 15.85 |

[Source: Molly Joseph (Joseph 1997, p. 106). Her source: State Planning Board, Economic Review, Government of Kerala, TVM, and various issues.]

These figures represent some truth, but they also mask the heterogeneity of Kerala women. This review will indicate that Kerala is deeply divided along the established lines of categories of caste and class, as well as along newer categories of party and non-party political affiliations, age, religion, and marital, motherhood and migration status. These divisions cut across gender and mark Kerala women differently from women elsewhere in India. To understand and appreciate their situation today, I first present a brief summary of Kerala women's history.

## 2. Caste, Class And Gender In Kerala, Historically

In old Kerala,[1] caste played a prominent role in the organization and cohesion of social life. More than in other parts of India, the caste system in Kerala reportedly had elaborate rules of visual and physical (contact) defilement, purity and pollution. Although Hindus comprised 60 per cent of the population, with the rest being equally divided among Christians and Muslims, all groups were implicated in the stratified hierarchy of the caste system. At the top of the hierarchy were the Namboodiri and other Brahmins, followed by the Nayars, a warrior group. Christians and Muslims reportedly had the same social rank as the Nayars. Below them was the lower Hindu caste of Ezhavas, and at the bottom were the outcastes, the Paryas and Pulaya castes. In this traditional social order, caste and class were mutable. The Namboodiris and Nayars were the landlords, and Christians and Muslims engaged in commerce. The propertyless laborers formed the largest section of the social order. In old Kerala the status of women was tied to their caste and class position, but regardless of this position, all women faced specific disabilities.

Of all its features *marumakkathayam,* usually translated as matriliny, most distinguished old Kerala and its women from the rest of India (Gough 1959; Jeffrey 1978; Mencher 1965; Moore 1985; Saradamoni 1999). The matrilineal system practiced in Kerala was defined by the *taravad*, or matrilineal household, which consisted of all descendents of a common female ancestor. The *taravad* was jointly owned property which could not be divided without the consent of all household members. Women had did not have rights to manage the *taravad*, but they had the right to lifelong maintenance by it.

The matrilineal system had its particular system of family relationships which gave women greater influence over their own lives, as compared to women in the rest of India. Marriage, called *sambandham*, signified a heterosexual relationship approved by a girl's family and lasted only as long as both partners wanted it (Puthenkalam 1977). A woman could have several *sambandham* partners concurrently. *Sambandham* type marriage provided several advantages for women. Under *marumakkathayam*, a married woman never left her natal home, consequently the traumatic experience of brides in the rest of India of leaving the parental home and painstakingly rebuilding her status in a new home was non-existent. *Sambandham* marriages did not involve dowry transfers and economic hardships to a bride's parents, as was the case in other parts of India. Children belonged to the woman's family and identified with their matrilineal lineage. Female children were welcome and desired to keep the family line going. More importantly, women did not have to abdicate their rights to the natal home and property upon marriage as they had a lifetime right to inherit their ancestral property, and this right was passed

[1] By "old Kerala" I refer to Kerala before the British colonization in 1748.

through them to their female descendents only. Female mobility and visibility were allegedly not constrained. Finally, the trauma of widowhood was avoided in this system, and remarriage carried no stigma for widows (Gulati et al. 1996).

Not all groups of Hindus in Kerala followed *marumakkathayam*. The social organization of the Namboodiri Brahmins was vastly different from the *marumakkathayam* of the Nayars. The Namboodiris, considered the purest Brahmins in all of India, organized social relations to protect their allegedly superior and pure position. The Namboodiri caste was patrilineal, and its women were protected through strict seclusion from other castes and groups. The marriage system of the Namboodiris was very different from other castes in Kerala and from Brahmins in the rest of India. In order to keep their vast estates and tracts of land intact, the oldest Namboodiri son was allowed to marry up to four wives. The rest of the Namboodiri men were denied the right to family property and to marry and establish a Namboodiri family. They could have *sambandham* with Nayar women, but were not responsible for children from such relationships. The options for Namboodiri women were to be married as one of many wives to a Namboodiri man or to lead a cloistered, celibate life. Numerically, Namboodiris constituted only one per cent of the region's population and the problems of their women affected a very small minority. However, this small minority belonged to the caste that enjoyed the highest social and religious status in the region. So, it is interesting to note that both younger Namboodiri men and Namboodiri women joined forces to fight against this system as it is affected them, and won equal rights to marry within their caste in 1930 (Saradamoni 1999).

Ezhavas were another major caste group, apart from the Nayars and the Namboodiri. Numerically, they were the largest of the lower caste groups. Ezhava men and women formed the majority of agricultural and industrial workers who were involved in traditional industries. Unlike other lower caste groups, few Ezhavas converted to Christianity. Ezhavas organized their kinship variously along matrilineal and non-matrilineal lines, and Ezahava women experienced the advantages and disabilities of the kinship patterns practiced by their particular family. As a group, however, Ezhavas like other lower castes were subject to numerous caste-related disabilities, including restrictions to the right to worship and access to temples (Jacob 1995)

Women from the lower caste Pulayas and Parayas communities suffered severe social disabilities. These two groups were known as slave castes, until the abolition of slavery in 1843 (Saradamoni 1980). Together, they constituted approximately 10 per cent of the population of the state. The Pulayas and Parayas were not only untouchables, but also "unseeables": they had to adhere to strict pollution rules to prevent polluting the upper castes with their touch and sight. Social distances were also expressed by variations in costume, especially in the case of women, by the wearing of clothing or baring of the breast. The ensemble of these regulations was legally enforced by a series of penalties which could go as far as death itself (Lemercinier 1984): 158-60. Pulaya and Paraya women were primarily agricultural laborers, engaged in the paddy cultivation and other agriculture-related work. Saradamoni (Saradamoni 1980) notes that the social reforms that swept through Kerala from the 1840s through the 1950s did not make much of a dent on Pulaya life because they had neither land nor wealth to be inherited, nor education.

Muslims in Kerala followed *marumakkathayam* and patriliny, while Christians were almost exclusively patrilineal. Reports about contemporary Christian women's struggles to change inheritance laws (Chaitanya 1972; Chandy 1995; Visvanathan 1989) suggest that Christian women's lives in old Kerala were shaped by patriliny and patriarchy, and they probably suffered the limitations of their religion/ class positions. In summary, we see that caste and community affiliations shaped the situation of women in old Kerala. The paradox of the tremendous freedoms of the matrilineal Nayar women and the immense restrictions placed on Namboodiri women show the diverse social conditions within which Kerala women lived. On one hand Nayar women enjoyed great personal, sexual, and financial autonomy; on the other, Namboodiri women faced severe restrictions, and women of the lower castes which practiced both matriliny and patriliny faced the restrictions and advantages of both systems.

## SOCIAL REFORMS AND CHANGES IN THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

The social organization of old Kerala continued without significant changes right through the early period of colonial rule, even as the economy and polity were changing rapidly (Baak 1997; Jeffrey 1976).[2] The first challenges to the traditional social order in Travancore and Cochin[3] came in the form of socio-religious reform movements (Jeffrey 1992; Tharakan 1998; Thomas Isaac and Tharakan). The start for social reform was made with protest against rules and regulations that imposed prohibitions on women,[4] but the reforms did not specifically focus on improving female autonomy. Instead, in the period between 1850 to 1910, revolutionary changes like lower caste struggle for entry into

[2] Social reforms in the forms of tenancy and land reform agitations started in the 1820s in Malabar,
[3] The kingdoms of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar became, in 1956, the state of Kerala.
[4] See Lemercinier 1994 for details of the Upper Cloth Revolt of 1859.

Hindu temples (Mathew 1989), and Malabar peasant revolt (Menon 1994) transformed and redefined social conventions and family life and had profound and long lasting adverse effects on women's autonomy. Most significant of these was the decline of *marumakkathayam*.

Jeffrey (Jeffrey 1976) theorizes that matriliny declined for a set of historical reasons. Once the British disarmed the Nayars throughout Kerala in the 1810s, the peace deprived young Nayar men of their main occupation as soldiers. In old Kerala, if a family became too large, it simply divided itself as land was plenty. But with the advent of the British, and their process of codification of laws, "the powerful began to discover how the law and the police could be used against ones enemies and underlings. From the 1820s, the great Malabar landlords gratefully wielded the system against their tenants. Matrilineal disputes also began to find their way into the courts" (Jeffrey 1976: 38). The British ruled that, as per local custom, matrilineal properties were divisible only with the unanimous consent of all adult members. Thus, it became difficult for families to legally divide or sell their property. During the 19th century, pressures of increasing monetization of the economy through the introduction of cash crops, government taxes being paid through cash, and paying for schooling, which was needed for jobs in the administration, made people think about themselves before their families. The curriculum and the experienced of schooling fostered a sense of individualism that was at odds with the values of the matrilineal joint family.

As well, Nayar men had to deal with the ridicule and slurs of caste Hindus from other regions, as matriliny did not fit any pan-Indian Hindu model (Saradamoni 1999). These reasons alone were not enough to see the decline of matriliny, because the Nayars

lived among patrilineal people like Christians and Brahmins, and the lowest castes who, owing to their poverty, had little stake in the corporate institution of matriliny. Matriliny's decline was hastened because lower caste Ezhavas and Christians were able to seize economic possibilities whereas the Nayars could not, prevented as they were by caste based notions of pollution, laws from using family assets for individual enterprises, and from the ethics of high-caste Malayali life which frowned upon money-grubbing (Jeffrey 1976).

At the end of the 19th century, there existed a sizeable group of Western educated Kerala men who became members of the new elite. Among them were Nair and Ezhava men, inculcated with the Western morality of that era, who occupied posts in government administration. Several aspects of the prevailing matrilineal system embarrassed them, for instance the marginal roles men of matrilineal families had in their family life as compared to men from other regions. They formed an alliance with Christian missionaries and the colonial administration to reorganize family life and inheritance on patrilineal lines as existed elsewhere. Their main agenda was to introduce in place of *sambandham* a revised concept of marriage that promoted monogamy and patriliny (Jeffrey 1976; Velayudhan 1998).

From the 1890s, these men began legislative attempts to reform matriliny, and within 30 years the Travancore, Cochin and Malabar regions of Kerala had legislation permitting inheritance through fathers. Legislation regarding marriage was also introduced. These legislation recognized *sambandham* as marriage, but also permitted a man to will half (later amended to all) his self-acquired property (but not his share in his matrilineal joint family) to his wife and children. Previously, his own property passed

into the collective property of his matrilineal joint family. Polygamy was outlawed and family branches were permitted to divide. While first legislation covered only Nayars, subsequent legislation on the subject extended the provisions to other groups and communities. Additionally, first branches of families, and later individual members were given the right to demand division of joint family assets. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which applied to all of India, specifically gave the right to demand per capita division to members of matrilineal families as well. The final legislation was the 1976 Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act that decreed that all surviving matrilineal joint-families were to be divided on a per capital basis. Jeffrey argues "economic and social consequences drew in an increasing proportion of matrilineal people towards political activity that aimed at resolving keenly felt problems of the uncertainties of family related norms" (Jeffrey 1976: 49). The collapse of matriliny set the ground where thousands of caste Hindus were forced to rethink the nature of the society in which they lived, and the type of changes they wanted.

With matriliny legally abolished, the security *marumakkathayam* women enjoyed as a birthright was substituted by protection by husbands (Saradamoni 1999; (Puthenkalam 1977). As a result of the shift to patriliny, *marumakkathayam* women lost the certainty of the *taravad* of which they were an unquestionable part, and where they were entitled to live all their lives. They lost the right to divorce, and the right to access to the matrilineal home, even when a woman became a widow; the new system instituted monogamous patrilineal marriages and widowhood. Leela Gulati notes, however, "Very few women in Kerala really look back on matriliny with nostalgia. The crushing self-image of the Kerala men and women was so omnipotent that even to this day one cannot

say if they have completely recovered and realized what they have lost. On the contrary women seem convinced that monogamy and the institution of patrilineal marriages give them more security. More importantly, they feel that these new practices conform to the norms of men and women in the rest of India and the majority of the world cultures and that they do not want to be different" (Gulati 1996: 9). Further women of the present generation feel that they have access to both the immovable property of their natal homes and legal claims to their husbands' property. "A new synthesis is believed to have evolved of the old and new which means that women have improved their material position even further. At the same time, what they have lost in terms of sexual freedom and security of the natal home is considered to have been amply compensated by emotional security that living with the husband is supposed to lend" (Gulati 1996: 9).

To summarize, the modernizing impulses Kerala society felt in the early 20th century with respect to the place of Hindu men primarily in institutions of family and marriage resulted in conscious attempts by them to dismantle matriliny, resulting, for matrilineal women, in a severe loss of autonomy and questionable gains, and for patrilineal men and women a reaffirmation of patriliny. Social reforms continued after the formation of Kerala state, but these too have brought questionable gains for women.

### 3. SITUATION OF KERALA WOMEN IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND

While many celebrate the achievements of Kerala women, there is a group of Kerala scholars who are questioning the progress of women in the state. The most persistent voice is that of feminist demographer and social observer Saradamoni, who wrote an opinion piece of her views of the situation of women in Kerala in the 1990s (Saradamoni 1994), deconstructing the indicators of Kerala women's high status.

### *More Women Survive In Kerala*

Among the indicators of Kerala women's progress is a favorable sex ratio, meaning that whereas for every 1000 men in India there are only 929 women, in Kerala there are 1036 women. The "missing" women in India are explained by discriminations against them through fetal sex-selection, female infanticide, nutritional and health care neglect leading to premature deaths, and to other forms of violence against them throughout their lives. As the sex ratio in Kerala is favorable to women, the conclusion generally drawn is that Kerala women enjoy a better position than women in the rest of India. The question is, does better status merely mean the absence of gross, systemic violence leading to premature deaths? Saradamoni questions the singular significance placed on Kerala's sex ratio which has been favorable to women since 1901, pointing out that smaller Indian states like Goa, Manipur, Mizoran and the larger state of Orissa also had women-favorable sex-ratios from 1901 to 1961. In the state of Tamil Nadu, Kerala's neighbor to the east, the women-favorable trend in sex ratios reversed in 1951. Moreover, the sex ratio of Kerala ranked below that of several states for many years. Saradamoni noted that in Kerala, the sex ratio was favorable in the case of the three major religions of the state, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Christians are patrilineal and *marumakkathayam* is no longer legal in Kerala. Yet, she argues that the survival capacity (as gauged by the sex ratio) has not changed significantly for any of these groups of Kerala women (Saradamoni 1994): 501and she calls for a reinterpretation of the sex ratio as an indicator of women's status.

*Literacy, Longevity and Poverty*

Literacy rate is another indicator of women's status; in Kerala it may even be higher than what is indicated in the table, as the state now claims to have a 100 per cent literate population. Although the differences between men and women in education levels are very small, Saradamoni questions its effects on Kerala women. She opines that "it cannot be said that the woman is made more independent, self-confident with ideas about her place, role or responsibility in life or world at large. It may not be off the mark to say that the education system has a major role in making her conform to accepted societal norms and definitions" (Saradamoni 1994 :504). Near universal female literacy has not done much to educate Kerala women about their health. Saradamoni states that although more women are seeking health providers and hospitals for treatment, they are not more knowledgeable about their body and its functions or about diseases and their prevention. She suggests that women in Kerala are overmedicated and that knowledge about common aliments and home remedies which was known to the older generation of women is now lost. Her views are supported, in part, by a study, which found that the number of cesarean sections in Kerala is increasing without any local women organizing to increase their own and decrease medical control of their bodies. Kerala women, like women elsewhere India, tend to be defined primarily by their status as mothers, and like other Indian women without children, childless Kerala women face social opprobrium and stigma (Neff 1994; Reissman 2000a; Reissman 2000b).

The demographic revolution (decreasing birth and death rates) that was ushered in Kerala has meant that life expectancy has been increasing with each decade. The life expectancy of Kerala women is greater that that of most other Indian women, and is

claimed as another indicator of their better status. Yet, this claim, too, is now being questioned. Economist-ethnographer Leela Gulati (Gulati 1992) found that Kerala women outnumber men in the elderly (defined as 60 years and older) population. In 1986 there were 88 elderly men per 100 elderly women. Among the elderly aged 75 years and older, the sex ratio was 64 men per 100 women. Gulati predicted that this preponderance of women in the older aging population, most of them widows, will have important social and economic implications of the kind of care needed (Gulati 1992:19-22). Gulati noted that the poor performance of the state's agricultural and industrial sectors, and the persistent problems of poverty and unemployment, poses problems for the care of the elderly. The inflow of remittances from Keralites employed outside the state, which forms between 22 to 28 per cent of the state's domestic product, depends critically on the level of net migration abroad and the earnings offered there. Since the late 1980s, and more so after the 1992 Iraq-Kuwait war, the number of Kerala workers migrating to the Middle East has been decreasing (Gulati 1992: 31), affecting the well-being of family members left behind, including the elderly. The aged dependency ratio (the number of elderly people as a proportion of the number of people in the working population) will increase. Furthermore, the family's care of their elderly is a weakening socially enforced obligation, without any legal sanction. Thus, although Kerala women live longer that other Indian women, their aging years are more likely to also be beset with poverty, widowhood, and life away from their children.

Women's work participation rate is the fourth common indicator of their status, and Kerala ranks 15$^{th}$ of the 23 Indian states in descending order. Gulati and colleagues (Gulati, Rajan et al. 1996) found that during the decade of 1981-1991, women's work

participation remained more or less stagnant and that that the decrease in women workers was in the rural areas and among marginal workers. Simultaneously, the number of women who registered at employment exchanges to seek work has increased threefold during the same decade. The expansion of tertiary (service) sector jobs in urban areas was the major source of new employment for Kerala women. The areas where Kerala women traditionally found employment, namely agriculture, cashew and coir industry, and handlooms, are facing systemic decline (Gulati, Rajan et al. 1997).

***Limited Participation in Public Life***

Kerala women's participation in politics and public life has been mixed. Women have been very active in various struggles, like in the trade-union movement -- particularly women in the coir, cashew and agricultural sectors but there are very few Kerala women elected to the state legislature or to the national parliament. Women's participation in political parties and in NGOs is "within the dictates of the male leadership" (Saradamoni 1994:507). Saradamoni notes that no political party in Kerala recognizes that women form more than 50 per cent of the population and that they have an equal share in political life. Her views are supported by political scientist Manu Bhaskar's (Bhaskar 1997) study of women panchayat (the most basic level of local self-government) members of Kerala. Bhaskar (Bhaskar 1997) argues that although recent legislative measures have made possible the greater participation of women in local government, structural and other constraints keep women from actively participating in the work of panchayats. She found that while women have apparently been active in mass movements, group upsurges and political struggles, their presence was not felt to a noticeable extent in structural decision making institutional settings. Bhaskar concludes

that when an activity requires routine, continuous input, which is complicated, women find it difficult to participate due to lack of supportive structures. Bhaskar found that no political party had placed women in both party organizations and in positions of authority outside the party, for instance in government. She concludes that while political parties are critical in facilitating women's participation in politics, they see women only as "tokens." Male control of the party hierarchy severely reduces any hope of equality of status for women in all aspects of public life. Saradamoni gives two explanations for the lackluster performance of Kerala women in public life: one that educated women are a greater threat to men, who keep them out of politics, and two, that as political life has degenerated, it has kept women away from entering politics. She concludes that "women... have not developed an independent perspective or started raising issues about themselves and society, including politics. The government and hence male supported programmes meant mainly or exclusively for women prepare then to be beneficiaries and wards" (Saradamoni 1994: 507).

Women's participation in non-party political or public life in Kerala has also been disappointing. Molly Joseph found that women's participation in all forms of public life was low. Government funded welfare schemes statutorily ensured women's participation, but Joseph found the "actual degree of women's participation... to be unsatisfactory" (Joseph 1997:154). The highest participation was in the home-based production schemes e.g., animal husbandry, poultry farming, and kitchen gardening, followed by schemes for facilities at home. The nearer the program was located to a woman's home, the higher her participation. Institutional arrangements for participation at non-governmental organizations were either ineffective or not fully utilized by women, and higher

participation resulted from the influence of personal factors. Women's participation was higher in organizations exclusively meant for women than in general development organizations.

***Marriage and Dependency***

The continued and increasing dependence of Kerala women on men is one of Saradamoni's most critical observations. This dependence, she notes has come about when *marumakkathayam* was legislated out of existence in the state, and it continues through women's unfavorable property relations. The nexus between systems of marriage and inheritance keeps Kerala women dependent on men. Saradamoni notes that the centrality of marriage continues to hold in all Kerala communities. By age 30, 80 per cent of all Kerala women are married (Gulati et al. 1996): Appendix 12), almost all by family arranged stranger marriages. Saradamoni notes that the message families give their growing daughters is that "marriage is the most important and essential act in life" (Saradamoni 1994:505). She notes also that "marriage as an institution has got a new status and importance... Kerala women have started displaying symbols of marriage like taking the husband's name, putting sindhur on the forehead etc, which were not earlier practiced here" (Saradamoni 1994:505). She concludes that married women appear to be a new caste and consider themselves to be superior (to non-married women) in social status. Contrarily, this suggests that women are losing their individuality and freedom by accepting to be "protected" by men.

While marriage is considered essential for women, the number of never-married Kerala women is not insignificant, and their situation relative to property rights, similar to all other single women, is problematic. Saradamoni notes, "Kerala has a higher age

at marriage for women when compared to the all-India level (and)... that the percentage of women of the older age groups under the never married category is higher than that of comparable figures at the all-India level" (Saradamoni 1994: 505). The 1991 Census shows that 79.5 per cent of all Indian women and only 64 per cent Kerala women aged 15 to 44 were married (Government of India 1991). While a considerable number of the non-married women may have been formerly married, they also include a number of never-married women. Saradamoni questions whether never-married women have security and respectability in society. She goes on to say that there is no authentic information, but common sense and general observation say "no". These women by and large remain "invisible" and do not raise their voice to make demands to be heard. She points out that there is no information on questions like what they do and where and how they live. In this context she notes that Kerala made a relatively quick transformation from joint to nuclear families, and that "many (never married) women who could find support and living space in the matrilineal joint families as a matter of right have to fend for themselves or be at the mercy of not-so-willing siblings and relatives." A study of the social security payments to Kerala widows found that it was inadequate, it could perhaps meet the limited food requirements of aged pensioners and the underlying assumption was that widows would be living with their families so that other needs including housing would be taken of by them (Gulati and Gulati 1995).

The perceptive reader will note that after making an early argument about the differences among Kerala women, I have homogenized them as one singular entity in the preceding pages. This is because the studies I cited did not segregate women by social categories. However, because India does not have a uniform civil code, and matters of

marriage, divorced and inheritance are dependent on the religious affiliation of the people concerned, research is available on particular groups of Kerala women and their relations to property.

***Kerala Women and Property Relations***

Christian, Muslim and Hindu women's relations to property have been problematic, and even decidedly anti-women in Kerala, and particularly more so since the abolition of *marumakkathayam* (matriliny). For *marumakkathayam* women (some Hindus and Muslim communities), the gradual changes in property relations, leading to land reform in 1969 have not been advantageous.

Feminist economist Saradamoni (Saradamoni 1981; Saradamoni 1983) studied land reform in Palghat district, north Kerala, and concluded that it has not brought relief for any category of women. She studied the patterns of land ownership before 1971, when the 1969 land reforms were implemented, and the changes since 1971 in Palghat district. Saradamoni argues that the pattern of land holdings that were changed by the 1969 legislation were those that had become institutionalized with the Namboodiri settlement in Kerala in 3-4 BCE. This settlement created a caste-occupational hierarchy, and "women's place was fixed within the socio-economic order created by this land-caste hierarchy" (Saradamoni, 1983: 46). Saradamoni notes that inheritance laws and marriage patterns were linked to land holding patterns. For the bulk of Palghat Hindus, who practiced *marumakkathayam*, land was *taravad* property, usually indivisible. Women had birthright over *taravad* property for maintenance, and this right lasted throughout their life. Changes in property relations started once the British rulers began to interpret property rights using their legal norms.

Neither *marumakkathayam* nor *makkathayam* (patrilineal) women (Namboodiri and other Brahmins) had direct involvement with land. Only the laboring Pulaya and Ezhava women had direct involvement with cultivation. Saradamoni studied the different situation of these three categories of women and concluded that even before the land reform of 1969, none of the women had it good with respect to property ownership. Even the *marumakkathayam* women only had a right to maintenance, not direct, daily actual control of land. She argued that land was the central point around which complex social organizations were built and when property relations began to change, it had different consequences for men and women (Saradamoni 1983:71).

For Namboodiri women, their losses were related to Namboodiri men's struggle to be given the right to marry from within the community and to have a share in the family property. When Namboodiri men gained the right to marry from within the community, Namboodiri women's aspirations were to move from the protection of the family home to that of protection of the husband and the nuclear family home. This difference, protection of a husband in place of that of a *taravad* was more clearly manifest in the case of the *marumakkathayam* women (Nayars, other Hindus, and Malabar [north Kerala] Muslims). When marriage customs were changed during the early 1930s, the Malabar Marriage Commission/Act noted that the law gave supremacy to men and gave them the responsibility of maintaining their wives and children. The new system and laws made men responsible for maintaining the women and children, while not always giving them the resources to do so. As Nayar *taravad*s lost land through the land reform process, the *marumakkathayam* women "had not only to bear the hardships arising out of their own lack of work and income, but have also to share the frustrations and uncertainties of

unemployed male members of the family" (Saradamoni 1983:151). Women were put into extreme helplessness and misery when they did not have male support, and the situation was particularly grave for widows, with or without children.

Agricultural labor women also faced the situation of accepting that the burden of earning and maintaining the family was put on the men. Their actual involvement with land depended on various factors; one was caste (although Saradamoni notes that old time prejudices were dying out). Some women of the Nayar caste, who were from formerly well-to-do aristocratic families got involved with the management and daily supervision of the agricultural property, while their husbands earned money from non-agricultural, salaried middle class occupations. On the other hand, families with small uneconomic land holdings coupled with economic deprivations acted as disincentives for middle class women to take interest in cultivation. The Pulaya and Paraya labor class women's gains mainly rest with house site, fixed hours of work and increased wages. These gains have not freed them from want or enabled them to improve their level of living. As a result the disparity between labor and other categories of women in present well being and future opportunities is significant. On the whole, Saradamoni says that land reforms have pushed women into a state of dependence (Saradamoni 1983:155). Since women are not a separate class, unlike class groups or caste groups, their sense of identity as a group to struggle together for change that was pro-women did not come about.

Sociologist Barbara Chasin's (Chasin 1990) study of the relation between land reforms and occupational choices for women, which was limited to one village in Kerala, found a change in values and choices after land reform, and working on the land appeared

to be the least preferred job option. Chasin found that women from households that obtained land through land reform are somewhat more selective in their occupational choices. For example, in households that had half an acre or more of land, women could refuse certain arduous physical labor. The women of such households "seem to prefer unemployment to working as laborers in the fields or elsewhere" (Chasin 1990: 9). She found that women from higher castes that lost land were more motivated to seek employment in the government, teaching, health care, and other tertiary sectors.

Changes in property relations did not appear to be favorable to Ezahava women. These changes are discussed by Velayudhan's (1998) case study of the Ezhava Law Committee's attempts to enact laws of inheritance, succession and marriage. Customarily, there were many practices for marriage, succession and divorce among the Ezhavas. Some sections practiced matriliny; others practiced patriliny, and still others a mixed form called *misrathayam*. The attempt of the Ezhava reform movement was to forge a community identity by uniting all sections of the caste through a common law of inheritance. To this end, the committee supported all reforms that idealized patriarchal, monogamous marriages, calling these "natural". In succession, particularly of self-acquired property, the SNDP Yogam [the caste association of the Ezhavas] upheld the rights of the wife and children to the self-acquisition. The committee justified this move towards patriliny, which it felt was the natural way to go. The Ezhava Law committee's moves to enact a common law of succession and marriage for Ezhavas involved the strengthening of the emerging patrilineal structures as a legal and ideological construct. This construct portrayed women as dependent and subordinate members in the family and

men as heads of household, and argued that male authority derived from "natural law" and that was "the way of the civilized."

Unlike the *marumakkathayam* women, Christian women of Kerala have long lived in a patriarchal system that is sanctioned by legal and customary discourse. Vishvanathan (1989) addressed the problems of patrilinealism and the place of women in the appropriation of their father's wealth. Customarily, Christian women received *stridhaman*, which Vishwanathan problematized as having moved from the probably generous understanding of a pre-mortem inheritance to that of groom price. Only by the payment of *stridhanam* can a marriage be concluded. This process disinherited a woman, because with the payment of *stridhanam*, a woman had no further share in her father's wealth. *Stridhanam* was not traditionally controlled by the woman, but by her husband's father. Problems in inheritance norms being challenged arose with the Supreme Court ruling in 1986 on Christian inheritance (which made women equal inheritors as their brothers). Other problems arose when a man died intestate and a woman's brothers are responsible for giving her a share of the property or stridhanam, and when a woman became a widow without son, although traditionally a woman had maintenance rights by law.

A study of Syrian Christian women's struggles for securing just inheritance (Chandy 1995) notes that in 1983 Mary Roy, a woman with two children, who had left her husband, challenged the Travancore Christian Succession Act in the Supreme Court, as violating a woman's constitutional right to equality under Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution. Two other women, Aleykutty and Mariakutty Thomman became co-petitioners in the Mary Roy case. Aleykutty (in her 70s) was married and Mariakutty

(aged 65) had never married. In all three cases, these women were fighting their birth families, their brothers primarily, for an equal share of their father's property. In 1986 the Supreme Court struck down the Travancore Christian Succession Act and brought Kerala Christians under the purview of the more equitable provisions of the Indian Succession Act, 1925. Despite the 1986 verdict, none of the women, at the time of writing, had received their share. The Syrian Christian community and the Church reacted to these judgements by appealing against the verdict, and giving sermons against the verdict. Since the ruling provided for retrospective claims, the community was afraid of an outpouring of claims to inheritance from parents by Christian women In 1991, a wealthy and influential minority of Syrian Christian formed a group that submitted a memorandum to the Government of Kerala to exempt Christians governed by the Travancore Christian Succession Act from the retrospective effects of the Indian Succession Act, among other demands. In 1993, the "Forum of Christian Women for Women's Rights" was formed. They protested against the Bill brought forward by the wealthy minority in 1991. The interesting feature of the Christian women's struggles is that it shows through the case of legislation reform that Syrian Christian women are caught between community (protecting their "Syrianness"/ "Christianness") and gender (women). The Church and state wanted to assert the community aspect of their identity to maintain the old status quo, of men inheriting disproportionately more, whereas women wanted to assert their "gender" identity as well to stake a more equitable claim of an equal inheritance, which the Supreme Court granted.

Kerala women's social history shows that movements for social change engaged women's caste and class identities and loyalties – as members of particular caste or

minority religious communities fighting for the removal of caste disabilities or as members of an occupational class fighting property owners. There has been no women's movement in Kerala that engaged women's identity as women to fight the gender oppression perpetuated by caste/ religious community, class and other social institutions controlled by men.

***Questionable Gains of Low Class Ezhava and Pulaya Women***

The situation of Kerala women who are at the bottom of Kerala society by virtue of their low class, caste and gender status has questionable improvements, despite more than a century of reforms. Den Uyl's ethnography of poor, Ezhava and Pulaya women (den Uyl 1995) highlights not only the structural changes of land reforms and new labor laws that have affected women's lives, but also the forces of motherhood, sexuality and self-image. She shows that the situation of women have worsened in terms of inheritance and loss of the matrilineal system in favor of a patrilineal system. But she also shows that women have agency, howsoever limited, and that they are de facto heads of households.

Den Uyl's study focuses on the process of emancipation of a former slave castes of untouchables (Pulayas and Parayas), and its impact on women's identity. Den Uyl argues that the dismantling of *marumakkathayam* "had major social consequences for the socially dominant views on the social roles of men and women" (den Uyl 1995:107). Men were no longer seen as sons of a lineage and caste, but were rather as husband, father and breadwinner. Women lost their traditional role in access to land and their traditional place in the lineages and were allocated new social roles as mother, wife and housekeeper (den Uyl 1995:107). This process of change was characterized by increased

emphasis on individuality, the individualization of labor and sexuality. The changes were from collective land ownership to individual land ownership; from collective responsibility for the lineage to individual responsibility for work and income; and from polygamous marriage relations to nuclear families. With the rise in nuclear families, there was increased social emphasis on monogamy, virginity and greater control over female sexuality and freedom of movement. With tightening sexual control, women lost their place in the labor market and disappeared from some occupations. Den Uyl provides figures to cite that the category of female "cultivator" decreased from 127 per 1000 females in 1901 to 5 in 1981 and that all categories of women workers decreased from 32.7 per cent in 1901 to 12.8 per cent in 1981.

The paradox for these former lower caste women is that recognition as Hindus and adoption of values of higher castes -- what the former slave castes have fought for -- has entailed greater inequality in gender relations for women. Den Uly argues that this is because gender roles among the higher castes today involve lesser appreciation of women and femaleness than has been the case for centuries in Kerala. However, den Uyl qualifies this paradox. First, she argues that gender relations do not change over one generation because values and beliefs are embedded in a culture. So her comments relate more to the direction of change. What has changed are the economic, social and ritual organization of the lineages and *taravad*s, which carried positive views on women and femaleness. Second, kinship organization is not the only source of Harijan[5] women's gender identity. They are also workers. The decrease in access to work for women related primarily to women of higher castes. Harijan women have continued their

traditional work, and as trade union members, have organized for social rights. Harijan women have benefited from legislation and government protections in education, housing, and work. But, they now live in a society where the ideological position for women is as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. There is tighter control over female sexuality and a disappearance of positive views of femaleness and female capacities in the religious/ cultural symbolic order (den Uyl 1995:109-110). Den Uyl concludes that under the new gender relations unstable marriages, the gender ideology that childcare is women's work, and unstable and inadequate labor market has lead to the feminization of poverty, especially for the poorest, lowest caste of women (den Uyl 1995:161).

What does the process of change mean for the former "untouchable" castes? It has meant the abolition of slavery, elimination if illiteracy, creation of free labor relations, trade union organizations and Sanskritization. But it also means change of nuclear family, and changing roles of men as breadwinners and women as subservient housewives. It has also brought a growing emphasis on monogamy, virginity and disapproval of widow remarriage. Increasing control over women's chastity and freedom of movement and emphasis on housewifeization has meant a decrease in participation in wage labor. The marital norms now adopted by these castes means that they pay dowries to marry their daughters, and consequently there are limitations on women's access to land and property, as women loose their right to inheritance, which is replaced by dowry. Yet, den Uyl argues that the process of identification with the new values is not complete. Women don't have examples of grandmothers and mothers who were docile wives. Their participation in struggles for agricultural workers has reinforced their self-confidence. A

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[5] Term coined by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to people of former untouchable castes. The term literally means "children of god". Today, some groups of former untouchables prefer the term "Dalit" instead of

similar situation obtains for men: for various economic, social, symbolic reasons, it is hard for men to master the roles of father, husband, breadwinner and guardian. So, despite the changing trends, these Harijan women have not entirely lost their freedom of movement, access to land, and ownership of house, access to wage labor, sexual freedom and roles as mother. Den Uyl says that women's "gender identity is still largely based on a form of organization of labor and sexuality – matriliny -- which is disappearing in practice" (den Uyl 1995) 265.

Other studies of women at the bottom of Kerala's social hierarchy reaffirm the findings that social reforms have brought them mixed gains. Economist-ethnographer Leela Gulati studied Ezhava, Pulaya and Latin Catholic women in five occupational categories: agriculture, fish vending, brick making, construction and coir making (Gulati 1981). She found that even after several decades of the working of the "Kerala model," women were paid less than men for each of the occupations. In each occupational category, the least paid work was gender stereotyped as "women's work" e.g., as head load transporters, and men graduated to better paid jobs. Therefore in the five occupations studied women had no scope for improvement in pay and work status. Leela Gulati (Gulati 1984) studied changes in the work status of women in three fishing comminutes of Kerala, as a result of changes in fishing technology and changes in status / role of women as a result of changes in women's work participation. Her findings are mixed. The technological changes in fishing opened more work opportunities for women, which in the case of "successful" women gave them more authority and status in their families. However, it also reinforced some practices, which were regressive to

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the patronizing term "harijan". When discussing den Uyl's work, I retain the terminology she used.

women. For instance, dowry escalated among the Catholic community and was introduced in the case of the Arya Hindu (a caste of fishers, a low caste) community.

## MIGRATION, WOMEN AND WOMEN MIGRANTS

Much has been written about the migration from Kerala, and Kerala's dependence of remittances from its migrants for its economic stability (Gulati 1993; Osella and Osella 2000a; Sekhar 1994; Tharamangalam 1999). I have yet come across gender disagregated data on Kerala migrants. However, there is only one study of the effects of migration on Kerala women. Economist-ethnographer Leela Gulati profiled women from lower class Hindu, Muslim and Christian families whose husbands or sons had migrated to the Persian Gulf countries to work as unskilled labor, or as skilled labor like carpenters masons and in construction industry (Gulati 1993). She found that women's lives were transformed dramatically from the time the family started preparing for the man to migrate. Women did not hesitate to pawn their jewelry and raise money from their families to arrange for the man to migrate. After the migrant left, the close family guided the woman in the initial management of money, in repayment of debts incurred by him. The married women continued to live with families after the migrant leaves. Some of the women went back to their natal home (if they are new Gulf wives); others live with their in-laws. Only five of the migrants' wives were staying alone. The longer the duration of migrants' stay abroad, more women became self-reluctant and live independently. Another reason for this trend is that the concept of joint family living is also changing towards the nuclear family pattern.

Migration affected the marital life cycle. If a migrant went away within a year of his marriage, his bride may not have conceived. The situation of such women was

difficult, if they are living with their husband's family, who were virtual strangers to them. Older women with children were better equipped to cope with the problems of separation from their husbands. The situation of young wives with children was better than wives without children. Women who have children above 10 years and who were also able to live independently are in the best situation. Their age and the presence of older children gave the women confidence and support. In general, migration of men to West Asia served to break the isolation of the women of their households. They had greater mobility because of the increased responsibilities; another reason was that they have more access to funds to spend on their travel. Women from non-migrant households were not excluded from the process of increased interaction. Women from migrant households were better informed because almost all such households had radios. They were better informed about international news, particularly news of West Asia. Migration of men has improved communication between husband and wife. Women seem to be able to make a much greater impact on the husbands' thinking and decisions than before, principally because of the regular exchange of letters with the migrant (Gulati 1993:135). This study shows that by and large women whose male family members migrate to West Asia appear to have gained in various arenas of their lives.

However, a recent study of Kerala women economic migrants paints a dismal picture of low-skilled, literate young women from low-income families who migrated to work in fish processing units all along the Indian coastline (Warrier 2000). These young women migrated yearly on a ten month contract. Warrier notes that while in most regions of India it would be considered deviant behavior for a young woman to be sent away to distant places for long stretches of time, in Kerala, the saturation of employment

opportunities along with a history of migration for work has contributed to the specific situation of large scale recruitment of women to fish processing unites. Warrier argues that these women chose to migrate, "there was no patriarch controlling their exodus from the village. Rather, it was the aspiration of these young women to break free from the clutches of traditional stereotypes the provided the impetus for their migration...their transition to the status of migrant wage earner also contributes to the undermining of traditional patriarchal authority back home, though on the work front there are other structures of power and authority" (Warrier 2000: 6). Warrier explains these women's migration by the monetary benefits of work, and also the social mobility gained through employment, although she also hastens to point out that that even the most experienced workers earn less than the legalized minimum monthly wages for unskilled labor of Rs. 2000 in 1995. Warrier found that these women had no legal protection or labor rights. They suffered work related occupational health hazards. As well, these migrant women's sexual respectability was questioned by people back home as also by people in their work place. These two studies show the different effects of economic migration of low-income Keralites. Men's migration to West Asia produced more gains for women who stayed behind; whereas women's migration to other parts of India appeared to have mixed results of gains in social and economic mobility at the cost of unprotected jobs, health hazards, and aspersions cast on their sexual respectability.

I searched the internet for information about migration and Kerala women and found a report that claimed that 14 per cent of Kerala workers in Kuwait in 1990 were women maids, with all other categories of Indian workers there likely to be male workers, except for teachers, cooks, clerks and paramedics. In these categories, workers were likely to be

women as well as men. Another study found that 15 per cent of Kerala migrants within India were women, a percentage higher than Bihar (9 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (13 per cent), the two other states represented in the sample. These figures only leave us with more questions: who are these women, of what caste and class? What reasons led them to migrate? What work skills to they have? Are they protected by work benefits? What relationship to they maintain with their families? Are they the primary supporters of their families? What implications does migration have for their assertion of autonomy from their families?

## CONTRADICTIONS IN WOMEN'S SITUATION TODAY

Not entirely satisfied with these scholarly observations I turned to the internet to find out what was currently being written about Kerala women in the news media. The following is a selective reporting and interpretation of the many articles I found on Kerala women through the internet. I ignored the articles that sing the praises of Kerala development and women and focus on those that describe the problems faced by Kerala women today. These data are anecdotal, and/ but I think they point to interesting and urgent areas of research that must engage scholars of Kerala society.

The reports uniformly point to the rising problem of prostitution in the state, the ongoing violence against women, and a "general conservatism" that limits women's mobility. Women in Kerala, according to this report, like women in other parts of India, will not freely travel after dark. And yet, contrarily, Kerala women, whether married or single, are willing to travel to distant places for work. [This from the Christian Science Monitor at www.csmonitor.com/durable/1999/10/12/fpls2-csm.shtml.] The Hindustan Times [New Delhi edition, Sunday November 29, 1998] had an article on a woman

activist Ajitha who was fighting for legal justice for the women victims of a sex-racket what was being run by politicians in high places. The article did not give details of the sex scandal, but focused instead on how the government machinery was using legal and administrative maneuvers to keep the politicians, apparently from all political parties, from being prosecuted or punished in any way. Ajitha and her organization Anveshi, faced with the stonewalling of the state judiciary, had filed a case in the Supreme Court of India. This article highlighted to me the gendered nature of Kerala institutions, and the face of public patriarchy that went to great measures to protect its own. Another article on crime in Kerala [from www.kerala.org] reported that according to the Indian National Crime Records Bureau, Kerala ranks second in the crime rate nationally. Violence against women, dowry deaths and an "increase in HIV cases fuelled by a palpable rise in promiscuity" have been increasing steadily in the past five years, according to this report. Kerala, as a result, had in 1995 a crime rate of 275 per 100,000 ahead of the national average of 181.7. In that same year, the Kerala State Women's Commission registered 2,092 cases of which 300 related to dowry and 191 to dowry deaths. Rapes accounted for 128 cases, workplace harassment for 228, and "atrocities against women" for 360 cases. These numbers are underestimates; fear of social stigma leads only one in five rape victims to report the crime. The report suggests that the reasons for these crimes against women is that gender equality was never really practiced in Kerala, giving the case of the veteran Communist party leader Suseela Gopalan who lost out in the race for Chief Minister last year because of her gender. Remittances from the Persian Gulf states (referred to as "gulf money"), the report argues, has reinforced a culture of consumerism that sees women as commodities, and makes men, who are educated, ambitious, and in

some cases unemployed, marry for dowry – hitherto a north Indian tendency. Kerala men, the report alleges, see women not as partners or equals but as conduits to coveted consumer goods. At the same time, because of the centrality of marriage in Kerala, women go along with the dowry practices because they acquire an identity only after marriage. The report critically suggests that education has not made women intellectually curious or critical. They read women's magazines that have no social or intellectual messages but have a high amount of pulp fiction. These magazines carry advertisements for products like condoms and women's underwear that are sold using the visual images of women's bodies. The articles also alleges that pornographic films are easily accessible through video and cable networks, and attributes the increase in sex outside marriage to "pulp fiction and soft porn cinema" as also to the lonely wives whose husbands work in the Persian Gulf countries. The "rampant" sexual activity has lead to increasing abortions among teenagers; teenagers are the clients for 20 per cent of the 20,000 abortions performed annually, according to the Kerala Directorate of Health Services. Some of the women who do not get abortions appear to be the tribal women of Wynad District in north Kerala. These women were reported to be sexually exploited by police and other government officials who were sent to Wynad to work for the welfare of the tribals. The large-scale immigration of non-tribals to Wynad is seen as the root cause of the tribals' woes, which are inevitably linked, to their economic situation. These snapshots point again to the diversity in experiences of Kerala women, but within the shared public culture of women's subordination.

## 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

How should we assess the situation of Kerala women, based on this review? Kerala scholars Franke and Chasin state that while Kerala has made gains in the areas of female education, life expectancy, sex ratio, etc., unemployment continues to be a problem for women. They state that Kerala's transition from ancient to modern forms of society has had complex and unexpected consequences, particularly in Kerala women and property. This has been "liberating" for the Namboodiris, "negative" for the Nayars, and difficult for the Christians. They note, "In Kerala, women have not been the major focus of the many popular reform struggles...women's organizations in Kerala have far greater male leadership than would be considered acceptable by Western feminists." (Franke and Chasin 1994: (111)). Similarly, historian Robin Jeffery notes that women's organizations are fragmented, just like the political organizations in the state. Most political parties have women's wings, but women are dissuaded from taking part in elections or other forms of public politics (Jeffrey 1992). There is no powerful state-wide feminist organization. Women are divided along caste, community and other lines, keeping them pre-occupied with dilemmas particular to their own religious affiliations.

Saradamoni concludes her review of the situation of Kerala women by stating, "The Kerala woman has acquired for herself the image of a self-effasive, dependent and weak person, mainly from the media including the cinema, TV serials and the stories appearing perennially in the 'popular' journals.... There is no feminist consciousness or movement in the state..." (Saradamoni 1994:507). She says that Kerala has the necessary ingredients for women's emancipation, namely literacy and education, freedom from inhibitions against women's education and employment, right to property including

land and house and to have savings in their own name, freedom to vote and also to contest elections. But Kerala women are far from being emancipated. "The main reason for this is the way in which Kerala society is changing primarily as a result of official development policies" (Saradamoni 1994:508). She says that diversity has no place in Kerala development and uniformity is emphasized and seen as unity. She suggests that Kerala has not become a model, rather Kerala has accepted and even internalized the models of others. One reason for this, she suggests, is that equality and freedom are not used in development dialogues in Kerala with her "progressive" politics and "rational" talk and readiness to adopt change by a hierarchical ideology.

The review highlighted areas where research has yet to happen. I could not locate much work on Kerala Christian women, and none on Kerala Muslim women. There has been a tendency for social scientists to study the diverse Kerala Hindu community, but the minorities of the state have not merited as much attention, and consequently, we do not know how these communities are dealing with the ongoing social changes. Not much is written about migration effects of middle castes/ classes on the lives of women, although my observation is that since the 1980s, professionals form a growing part of the labor migration from Kerala. Not much written about women migrants: Kerala women migrate as nurses to other parts of India, to the Gulf countries, and then from there to North America. Kerala women also migrate as unskilled workers to other parts of India, as the case of women in the fish processing industry indicated. We know very little about these migrant women, their relationships with "home", and how migration shapes their identities as women. There is very little research, and more journalistic reports and speculation about the effects of migration, for instance, in changes in sexual practices

and norms, and the sexual economies of Kerala. As the reports from the internet above indicated, popular wisdom attributes the relaxation of sexual morality on the lonely gulf wives with money to spare. An ethnography by Osella and Osella (Osella and Osella 2000b) indicate that Kerala men consider gulf wives "a quick, rich fuck."

Most of the studies I reviewed focused on the poorest and lowest categories of Kerala society. This is necessary; however, as the rich Keralites are densely implicated in the lives of the poor, the absence of studies on the rich is particularly disturbing. For instance Gulati and Saradamoni, two of the most prolific Kerala women researchers have not done any work on the upper caste/ class Kerala women, a social positions that Saradamoni occupies (Gulati is not a Kerala woman). Neither is there any analysis of why there is no autonomous women's movement in Kerala, and of why a women's commission was established, and what its purpose is. There is also no analysis of the apparently small but active women's groups in Kerala (for instance the newspaper referred to Ajitha and her organization Anveshi, and to the women's commission). There is no research on never-married women, who they are, why they are never-married in a marriage oriented place, and how they constitute themselves in a pro-marriage social environment.

The apparent apathy of Kerala women, their apparent lack of intellectual curiosity, their complicity in a system that commodifies them: these areas that need investigation along with a clearer analysis of what has been referred many times to as an "increasing social conservatism." What is the nature of this social conservatism, and how does it affect the lives of Kerala women situated in different identity positions? The

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