

RETHINKING MODERNITY
AN ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFT
IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSE OF KERALA

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled RETHINKING MODERNITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFT IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSE OF KERALA is a bonafide record of research carried out by Dileep.R under my supervision and guidance and the thesis has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this university or any other university/institution for the award of any degree, diploma, title or recognition.

University of Calicut

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DECLARATION

I, Dileep.R, hereby declare that this thesis entitled RETHINKING MODERNITY:AN ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFT IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSE OF KERALA is an original research work carried out by me in the Department of Philosophy, University of Calicut under the guidance and supervision of Dr. P.V. Unnikrishnan. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this university or any other university/institution for the award of any degree, diploma, title or recognition.

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TOWARDS A HISTORICAL ONTOLOGY

Methodological Slumber/Self-forgetfulness

Generally, the studies about Kerala's pasts are oblivious of the self-image generated through the modernizing period (which subsequently fashioned the socio political present). While looking back, one is quite often looking back as a 'modern' subject into a past that attempted to envisage and create this notion of 'modern'. The prominent methodology have always been to look at the past from/through this self-image and narrate the story by saying that there was 'renaissance', there was 'reform' etc without problematising the very assumptions about modernity underlying such story telling. Udaya Kumar captures this perceptively:

A sense of its modernity is prominent in contemporary Kerala's self-consciousness. This often finds expression in exceptionalist claims about the region's progressive polity, social development, cultural superiority, and cosmopolitanism in ideas and art. Social reform, lower-caste movements, democratic political mobilisation, and egalitarian left politics are frequently cited in this narrative of Kerala's life. The nineteenth century features in this story as the critical watershed, and as the horizon of

contemporary Kerala's historical imagination. The all-too-frequent valorisation of social reform in Kerala is often also a suppression of the memory of norms and practices of earlier times, a refusal to recognise their continued existence.

(Kumar, 2017:18)

In fact we still have not developed the tools to study this self-image. A paradigm shift in understanding Kerala's past might result from such a critical self understanding, which includes a thorough rethinking of developmental, political and cultural orientations. The questions to be focused are: How did Kerala negotiate and deal with its encounter with modernity? What is the significance of this self-understanding for the future of Kerala society? How do we capture the philosophical utterances, literary expressions and life practices in and through which these self-images are articulated and negotiated? What are the discursive events that restructured our relationship with traditions? How does caste, gender, religion, sexuality and other power vectors mediate these processes?

The discussions in this thesis aim at such a redirection of enquiries. It will critically look at the methodology of existing studies and will take interest in empirical issues not yet tackled albeit tangentially. Kerala Studies as it exists today is not an integrated domain. Nor is it limited to historiography. The very notion of Kerala was a product of Kerala nationality. In order to capture the socio-political environment of Kerala, one has to go

beyond the hackneyed dichotomy of tradition/modernity. The new information brought out by advanced and reliable research on Kerala undertaken by scholars in varied disciplines like history, cultural studies, literature and social sciences in conjunction with the debates triggered by the activist interventions for last three decades is accepted as the baseline of this thesis. Few conceptual concerns invoked by such debates are taken up for a meta discussion. This is supplemented with close and abrupt readings of certain marginal texts (memoirs, short stories, films). A comprehensive review of the existing studies on Kerala's modernity is not attempted as the aim is to follow the ideational leads thrown open by them. Nor is it possible as there exist a vast cluster of writings in that domain which is growing substantially.

Perhaps one need to begin from the beginning by asking why write in English at all? Whom am I addressing? Is it for knowing ourselves or for Europe's understanding? How far one could rely on the particular templates, methods and writing styles provided by the modern educational institutions of humanities and how far is it a hindrance in this endeavour? Shouldn't rethinking of modernity start by rethinking the very form and vocabulary from within which this project is undertaken? There are no definite answers to these questions in this thesis. I might be speaking in many tongues in different chapters. That exactly epitomises the plight of a researcher in our part of the world: speak in many

tongues including the language demanded by the other. Perhaps it is not restricted to language alone. Resistance to colonial modernity is constitutively intertwined with this predicament of being forced to inhabit and share the very same terms of the other.

D.R. Nagaraj points at this constitutive contradiction while writing an introduction to Ashish Nandy omnibus. Nandy, the foremost critic of modernity forges all his arms and ammunition from the workshop of modernity, observes Nagaraj (2012:323). He points out that cultural studies, political psychology and future studies are all specific forms of self understanding of modernity. While looking at this intimate enmity of Ashis Nandy with modernity, Nagaraj narrates an interesting anecdote.

Once in 1994 I did suggest to Nandy that he ought to go beyond the parameters of modernist disciplines and forms of reasoning. I argued that what had given him significant intellectual presence could also restrict the reaches of his critical imagination. In a moment of intellectual rashness, partly inspired by a generous supply of Scotch whisky at his austere home in a part of Raj Delhi—yet another lovely source of his vulnerability with regard to the West—I even insisted that he should seriously consider the possibility of writing in the mode of parables, *drushtanthas*. It is the only authentic *desi* mode of reasoning. He closed his eyes for a while and said

‘extremely interesting , interesting’...Only much later did I learn that in his private dictionary the word ‘interesting’ signifies something totally impractical, and worse, anti-political. (Nagaraj, 2012:324)

Nagaraj was demanding Nandy to offer a critique of modernity from the vantage point of intellectual, emotional and semiotic structures existing beyond its reaches¹. But Nandy prefers modes of resistance from within. Nagaraj names it the mode of vaccination. In it, resistance and remedial action are built out of the very body of disease. (Nagaraj, 2012:325)

Vismrithi/Amnesia

D R Nagaraj whom we have already mentioned is one thinker who rethought the legacy of modernity exclusively based on the modern West. He proposed an alternate framework to analyse Indian past by offering the notion of *vismrithi* (amnesia)². Nagaraj says:

¹ Rustom Bharucha’s remark about the unique style in which Ram Manohar Lohya wrote could be read in conjunction with this: "Lohia uses the eminently flexible and provisional mode of the essays to develop his ideas , apart from situating writing within an "interval during politics". The word interval suggests a respite from a certain kind of activity, but it also implies a 'break', a conscious interruption in which one can anticipate and prepare for the tensions in which one is thrust and yet, temporarily suspended. Lohia’s thought is situated in this rupture between philosophy and action, praxis and theory"(Bharucha,1993)

² Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi, in his editor’s note to *Listening to the Loom:Essays on Literature, Politics, and Violence* emphasises how Nagaraj provided a new intellectual agenda to overcome *vismrithi*. According to him, Nagaraj argued that *vismruthi* caused by colonialism established that non-Brahmin *avaidika*(non-Vedic) communities do not have a long term cultural memory. Consequently the *avaidika* communities had lost the legitimacy and authoritativeness of their cultural power.(Nagaraj, 2012 :12-13)

A strange kind of forgetfulness envelops societies. Indeed it is a big tragedy to forget the ways in which a society thought, responded, and felt. Now this kind of amnesia has enveloped post colonial Indian society. Since we have forgotten those diverse intellectual structures that had been integrated in our society, the methods of thinking available to us now have turned completely westwards. It has not been possible through these methods to understand the crises that haunt us.

(Nagaraj, 2012: 12)

When Advaita Vedanta was upheld as India's major civilisational heritage³, many alternate modes of thought were discarded. Nagaraj's project through the concept of *vismrithi* was to reinvent lifeworlds and thinking traditions. Another thinker from India, G.N.Devy also wrote about this cultural amnesia which makes it impossible for Indian intellectuals to trace their tradition backwards beyond the mid-nineteenth century. Colonialism creates a sense of shame in the minds of the colonised about their own history and traditions (Devy,1995: 10).Colonial epistemology has stratified

³ This contingent status of hegemony enjoyed by Advaita during nationalist resistance has been pointed out by other thinkers as well. M.Muralidharan for instance deconstructs the writings on Indian philosophy by exposing the oppositions from within which it operated, fundamental to which is the one between east and west. Orient has undergone othering by establishing an epistemic threshold that was difficult for individual thinkers to cross. East had to be the other of west. As a consequence it became impossible to imagine Indian philosophies in the plural.(Muralidharan,2003:27-28)

knowledge into superior (Western) and inferior (Indian) categories.

M.Muralidharan further complicates this picture by showing how Orientalist, Nationalist and even Marxist studies on Indian philosophy maintained an ahistorical stress on continuity and emphasised changelessness ignoring sharp ruptures in Indian intellectual history(Muralidharan,2003:272). Advaita achieved full scale hegemony in 19th century because it was created on the basis of a peculiar selection from the tradition. Different thinking traditions were homogenised into a single system that became a sacred object to be gazed at from outside and commented upon. 'Asceticism and spirituality were eagerly accepted as the distinctive marks of the Indian tradition irrespective of regional variations or temporal changes' (Muralidharan,2003 : 273). In this way the efforts at confronting colonialism acquired an essentially religious character. We could see this subtle hierarchy working in anti-colonial discourse. Spiritual, with a Hindu root is taken as genuine sign of Indian-ness which allows nationalism to acquire Hindu markers. To the extent the colonial intelligentsia was in love with Indian philosophy, they were outside it. This resulted in reducing philosophy to a mere attribute of India instead of a rigorous critical activity. Certain critiques of Eurocentrism easily fall into this trap even today. Take the case of S.N.Balagangadgara for instance. For him critiquing Orientalism is coterminous with the

task of creating alternate theories in the different domains of the humanities and social sciences (Balagangadhara, 2012:9). He argues that social sciences and Orientalism constrain each other. But when he takes up the issue of caste system, the limits of his critique is immediately exposed. He argues that the phenomenon of discrimination exists in different ways in different parts of the world. So is poverty and humiliation. Therefore such phenomena could not provide evidence for the presence of a specific social structure. (Balagangadhara, 2012: 231). What is surprising about this argument is not the merit of it per se, but the ignorance it displays as to the rich debates in the thinking traditions of India around this seemingly 'novel' problem. For instance B.R. Ambedkar had taken up this particular argument specifically in his masterpiece, *The Annihilation of Caste*. Balagangadhara, even while stressing the need for an "Indian Studies" is either unwilling to engage or totally ignorant of such brilliant thinkers in that tradition.

Muralidharan's critique of Orientalist discourse on Indian philosophy is of supreme importance for our present enquiry as it points at the way in which a cultural habitus⁴ was constructed by the pre-colonial intellectual

⁴ Habitus, a concept proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, could be defined as a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures. It is a result of long inculcation beginning in early childhood. (Bourdieu, 1980) Drawing on this concept, Muralidharan argues that the project of reviving the old was in effect, the creation of a new habitus, a dream masquerading as a memory.

elite by homogenising the thinking traditions. Tradition/modernity was one constitutive binary in that habitus. It in effect allowed the emergence of a Hindu identity in the image of Christian identity. As sites of colonial habitus the binaries tradition/modernity, faith/reason and indigenous/foreign became constitutive of colonial self. If we are unwilling to question and problematise this self, there is every chance that we will end up narrating our history as a linear movement between the binaries.⁵

Can we continue to take modernity as a viable project? Is it an unfinished project waiting for full realisation? As mentioned above, a group of thinkers including Nandy takes it as a problem, not solution. M.T. Ansari calls this as 'valorised nativism'. Another group of thinkers like Partha Chatterjee, instead of rejecting modernity altogether tend to reject the modernist reading of modernity. (Ansari, 2016:xix) Partha Chatterjee observes:

For him, life world and habitus are not the equivalent of tradition and modernity. Both tradition and modernity are part of the colonial habitus. Tradition also, in this sense, is worked. For example, cricket for a third-generation urban youngster is part of his tradition and by extension, its language is part of his habitus. Muralidharan separates it from 'lifeworld' which is different because it is that segment of the past that is with us and cannot be changed. If it is changed, it simply ceases to exist. He points out caste, *jati*, as an example. If *jati* becomes a matter of choice, some segment of the lifeworld would have been just erased (Muralidharan, 1996)

⁵ There are attempts at thinking from the South, a project "that aims to study the world with the intellectual inheritance of the world and not merely one part of it. It aims to displace a practice that has studied Asian/African/Caribbean experience almost exclusively through the lens of European theory. As the migrants at the gates of Europe remind us, the world needs a rethinking of ways of living and thinking together." (Menon, 2017)

...true modernity consists in determining the particular forms of modernity that are suitable in particular circumstances; that is, applying the methods of reason to identify or invent the specific technologies of modernity that are appropriate for our purposes. Or, to put this another way, if there is any universally acceptable definition of modernity, it is this: that by teaching us to employ the methods of reason, universal modernity enables us to identify the forms of our own particular modernity.”(Chatterjee, 1997: 8-9)

Chatterjee is distancing himself from the chimera of universal modernity to clear up a space where we could be the creators of our own modernity. He distances this approach from the cultural project of nationalism to produce a distinctly national modernity as well (Chatterjee, 1997: 18). Modernity has generally been understood as something that arose in Europe. In this view, modernity is constructed on the principle that human beings, individually and collectively make their own history. However, from that point on, reason is combined with emancipation under modernity, thus opening the way to individualism and democracy. The latter implies secularism. Thus individual, science, reason, secularism and democracy come as a package.

While thinking of emancipating our thinking frames from the clutches of hegemonic epistemological boundaries set by west, certain questions become pertinent: have we

been producers of modernity, as opposed to being merely its consumers? Or to put it differently, would we have had a modernity in India, had no colonization taken place? Or, are there paradigms of modernity in India that are not impinged upon by the structures of colonial modernity?⁶

Javeed Alam identifies three forms of reaction to modernity within the social sciences in contemporary India.

1. A sharp attack on modernity as a phenomenon imposed on the third world countries.
2. An attack on some of the values (like universalism, equality, rights, secularism) central to the post enlightenment thought.
3. Rejection of inherent conceptions (like progress) of modernity.

Alam says: “Modernity, as constituted in its initial phases, is historically not realisable without some notion

⁶ I am indebted to Dr.M.V.Narayanan who brought clarity in articulating these questions in a conversation. He mentioned *Nalacharitam Attakkatha* in particular which was authored by Unnayi Variyar during the first half of the 18th century or earlier, much before the structures of western modernity entered the public sphere of Kerala through the agency of colonialism. Dr.Narayanan reads *Nalacharitam* as giving the impression of apparent continuity with the traditional structures of the *attakkatha* in the external form, but maintaining a radically divergent latent form. If earlier *attakkathas* were to do with Gods or semi-divine heroes who were greater than ordinary human beings, *Nalacharitam* is about human beings. He also looks at it as the first text to present the idea of love between individuals – not as conventionalized *sringara* but as the representation of an individual emotion, *anuraga*, premam, relationship between man and woman. Drawing on David Arnold and Start Blackburn, Udaya Kumar (2014:315), while analysing autobiographical narratives, also points at the existence of notions of individual found in medieval India.

of the Other' understood as the 'non-modern' "(Ansari, 2016:58) . Ansari criticises Alam for being nonself reflexive even while making this observation which results in retaining modernity as an overarching concept that sets the terms of the debate while remaining above the debate(ibid,58).

Ontology preceding Epistemology?

In 1991, the movie *Njan Gandharvan*, directed by a famous malayalam film director, Padmarajan, was released in Kerala. It is about the love affair between Bhama, a college student and Devan, a *gandharvan*. *Gandharvas*, according to mythology, are celestial musicians and dancers who entertain devas and gods who live in *Devalokam*. They are also the persons who create the celestial wine, *somarasam*. *Gandharvas* are supposed to be born from the sweat of Lord Brahma. They are immortals with the ability to change their form and have the power to appear anywhere at will. When they violate the rules of *Devalokam*, they are banished from the company of the Gods and are destined to roam the earth, seducing earthly bound mortal women and then abandoning them and returning back to *Devalokam* when their term in earth is over. There are a lot of references about such interspecies love affairs in popular myths. But they are not just stories. Incidents of women being possessed by *gandharvas* have often been reported. It is told that even *manthravatham* (a sort of shamanic rite) is not enough to end such love affairs. Once a woman becomes possessed

by *gandharvan* she is unable to return fully to the normal everyday life. This ontological possibility of an interspecies love affair or the existence of *gandharvas* is denied by the analytical stream opened up by modern psychiatric practices. Psychiatry considers this as a symptom of one of the many disorders. When gay and lesbian movements emerged in Kerala, and when the existence of lesbians erupted into the popular imagination, the academic enquiries inspired by the queer politics started to interpret the phenomenon of women who were in love with *gandharvas* as closeted lesbians and *gandharvabadha* (getting possessed by *gandharvas*) as a cultural representation of lesbianism. It is analogous to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation (Sedgwick,2008) about 'the bachelor' of Victorian England becoming 'the male homosexual' under a different diagnostic system.

Another interesting aspect in the story is that *Gandharvan* had to be banished from his own community to fall in love with a person of another species. In that sense he is a 'diasporic spirit', who imaginatively encounters and negotiates other beings and other desires and other perspectives. It is also interesting that the same director, Padmarajan, in an earlier film, *Deshadanakili Karayarilla*, (Migratory Birds Don't Cry) looks into the close relationship between two girls who had to run away together. Though the word lesbian was never once mentioned in the movie, the close friendship that existed

between them; their decision to commit suicide when the situations threatened their separation; their declaration that they can never live apart from each other; were all taken up as signs of a lesbian desire within the interpretative perspective put forth by the lesbian movement in Kerala.

How do we look into these different dimensions of desire? Are these different cultural interpretations of the same natural phenomena? Did the women who were in love with other women come into being only with the emergence of LGBT movements in Kerala? Is *gandharvabadha* and 'lesbianism' just the same thing that becomes visible as different under different classificatory systems through which a society views the same natural phenomenon? Or are they different 'natures' that produces different perspectives at different levels of interaction? These narratives turn our attention towards a number of such epistemological and ontological questions. Certain positions, like perspectivism in anthropology in particular, might point at the difference between humans looking at *gandharvas* and *gandharvas* looking at humans.

The term "non-normative sexual identities" could be considered as a theoretical construct emerging from certain ontological commitments. It is of relatively recent origin. Finding criteria to decide what all phenomena will get picked out by that term and arriving at an

appropriate methodology to work with that phrase will exactly be the challenge before every other enquiry undertaken in that terrain. Nothing should restrain a researcher from gathering concepts, schemes, methods and insights from different disciplines if they are appropriate to that domain. In this particular sense of domain specific inter disciplinarily, it is not important from where one draw concepts as long as the domain requires that. Further, it entered our vocabulary as a result of political interventions which refused to accept a given social ontology legitimized through certain power relations. Thus, these shifts in methodology are impact of the world out there on academics and theory. When such new domains are invented, new objects emerge in the world where none was visible earlier.

Ontological Turn

“A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxen monosyllables: “What is there?” It can be answered, moreover, in a word- “Everything”- and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is. There remains room for disagreement over cases; and so the issue has stayed alive down the centuries”-- (W.V.Quine,1948)

Being an empiricist and naturalist, Quine held that “knowledge, mind and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural

science" (Quine,1968). Broadly we could identify two strong traditions of thinking in ontological matters; those who take the question "What is" as central and those who think more about "What could be". Martin Heidegger distinguished ontic from ontological. Ontic concerns objects existing as such in the world. Ontological refers to the sense of being or experience of being. This tradition triggered hermeneutics and post structural thinkers like Derrida, following Heidegger, took language as the mediating reality. Another line of thinking draws more on Merleau Ponty who brought ontology closer to body in an irreducible manner. He replaced intentionality (defined by Husserl as body's readiness to receive as content what its attention directs at) by body schema, which to him is pre-cognitive, pre-conceptual motor intentionality. This helps in blurring the distinction between the mental and the physical to a great extent.

I would be relying on two terms coined by Nizar Ahmed(2016) viz: ex-ontological and auto-ontological to bring out the difference between two prominent ways of thinking about ontology. Ex-ontological (roughly, captured in the expression ontic) implies a commitment to the existence of an entity externally. When an entity is auto-ontological its existence is revealed to itself; whether it exists or not is not a question of external determination.

Bruno Latour, whom we could place in the school of auto-ontology, following Ahmed's schema, sees body as

follows: "what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of."(Latour, 2004). He says, by focusing on the body, one is immediately or rather, mediately directed to what the body has become aware of. In short, to be a body is 'learning to be affected' and become sensitive to the differences in the world. This implies that body is not given before it has learned to get 'affected'. In this way Latour underlines the auto-ontological status of the body. The body, for him is not defined by external references. For body to exist is to be bodily self-aware. Ahmed summarises this as follows: "The question, what is it for something to be a body is adequately answered when one answers the question what is it for a body to exist" (Ahmed,2016:16). For Latour, body is acquired, not just given. It is open to possibilities. That is, in order to acquire itself, body has to engage with the world and get affected.

A recent paper written by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro lays out the central concerns of the ontological turn in Anthropology. In it he looks into Levi- Strauss's argument that ethnocentrism is not confined to the West but is a natural ideological attitude shared by collective human life all over the world. To demonstrate his position, Levi-Strauss uses the example from the time of the Spanish invasion of America's. He said that while the Spanish invaders were debating whether savages have soul, the natives were busy drowning white people

whom they had captured in order to find if these corpses would decay or not, i.e., if they were subject to putrefaction (De Castro, 1998: 475). The conclusion of the debate was that “savages do have souls.”

Levi-Strauss used this example to say that barbarians are also humans who believed in barbarism. De Castro argues that the strategy through which Levi-Strauss conferred humanity to the ‘savages’ is by showing that savages also made the same distinctions that the Spanish invaders did, which is how they distinguished nature from culture. According to this distinction every group considered themselves to be the true humans and nature was always the others. So the universality of the cultural distinction between nature and culture also proves the universality of culture as human nature.

But here De Castro inserts a major distinction. He says that for the Europeans the marker of difference was the soul and the dichotomy that they worked was whether the Indians were humans or animals; whereas for the Indians it is the body that was problematic and they wanted to make sure if Europeans were humans or spirits. The Europeans never doubted that the Indians had bodies, but the issue was to decide whether others also possessed a soul; the Indians never doubted that the Europeans had souls because all ‘persons’ in their cosmology, like animals and spirits had souls. What the Indians wanted to know was whether the bodies of those

'souls' were capable of the same affects as their own- whether they had the bodies of humans or the bodies of spirits, non-putrescible and protean, the aim was to find out what kind of body the others had. In sum: European ethnocentrism consisted in doubting whether other bodies have the same souls as they themselves; Amerindian ethnocentrism in doubting whether other souls had the same bodies (De Castro 1998: 479).

De Castro was opening up an ontological critique in anthropology which asserted the reality of worlds as people understand them. The natives still saw the world as natives, but what was important to see was that anthropologists were natives too and their judgment about what is "real" or "natural" involves their own ontological categorizations. Debates on the concept of 'ontology' have a rather long tradition in Anthropology which has intensified within the last two decades. This ongoing dialogue has resulted in both those who argue for an 'ontological turn' in anthropology and the critics of such a turn.

Both the advocates and critics of ontological turn agree on the central principle that instead of thinking about difference with our own set of concepts and queries, anthropology should think firmly within the bounded terrain of the other. The ontological turn attempts to perceive and accept difference by recognizing alterity .Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) traces the

emergence of the modern ontology which makes a clear separation between persons and things, nature and society. This separation, however, does not prevent the proliferation of hybrids, which cross categories and act in the world. Modernity then rests on two pillars, purification (or categorical separation) and translation or mediation (wherein these categories are breached). The ontological turn in anthropology tries to get out of this binary of purification and translation by saying that people may hold different ontologies .

Such debates, first and foremost, question the classic distinction between Nature and Culture as opposing to each other. This, they argue, is intrinsic to Western thought following enlightenment rationality. And this is inadequate to describe domains internal to non-western cosmologies. Naturalism posits the existence of a determining, pre-existing, and largely ahistorical biological “nature,” while social-constructivist approaches portray cultural ideas as separate from nature.

De Castro proposes the expression multi naturalism as against multi culturalism in his article “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” by way of an ethnography based reshuffling of conceptual schemes(nature/culture,universal/particular,objective/subjective,physical/social,fact/value,necessary/spontaneity, body/mind,animality/humanity etc). De Castro develops

Descola's description of three modes of objectifying nature (Totemism, Animism and Naturalism) by focusing on the tensions between Animism and Naturalism. The latter views human society as one natural phenomenon amongst others and sticks to the dichotomous combine of nature and culture. Animism, on the other hand assumes an ontology which postulates social character of relations between humans and non-humans. In the Animic mode the distinction 'nature/culture' is internal to the social world, humans and animals being immersed in the same socio-cosmic medium, whereas in naturalist ontology, the distinction 'nature/culture' is internal to the nature. Animism has 'society' as the unmarked pole, naturalism has 'nature': these poles function, respectively and contrastively, as the universal dimension of each mode. De Castro does consider both animism and naturalism as the hierarchical and metonymical structures.

When coming to the debates regarding 'subject', De Castro says that "whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view. Thus, every being to whom a point of view is attributed would be a subject; or better, wherever there is a point of view there is a subject position." (De Castro, 1998). According to Amerindian ontological perspectivism, point of view creates the subject; whatever is activated or 'agented' by the point of view will be subject. To say, then, that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons, and to attribute to non-

humans the capacity of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. He further elaborates that there is a difference between perspective (point of view) and representation because representations are a property of the mind, whereas the point of view is located in the body. The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul. Since soul is formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere- the difference is given in the specificity of bodies. The body in this view is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; it is an assemblage of effects or ways of being that constitute a habitus. Between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms there is an intermediate plane which is occupied by the body as a bundle of affects and capacities and which is the origin of perspectives (De Castro, 1998).

The difference between bodies, however, is only apprehendable from an exterior viewpoint, by another, since, for itself, every type of being has the same form: bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such. Thus, if 'culture' is a reflexive perspective of the subject, objectified through the concept of soul, it can be said that 'nature' is the viewpoint which the subject takes of other body-effects.

This raises the possibility of a post humanist anthropology, anthropology that is concerned not just with the humans. The ontological turn stresses that the discipline's merit lies not in engaging the details of the present problems but in depicting their alternatives. So the politics of writing ontologies breaks out of the constraints imposed by the questions about 'what there is', and instead questions about 'what could be' gets prominence.⁷ In the traditional philosophical concept of ontology "politics" takes the implicit form of an injunction to discover and disseminate absolute truth about how things are, which leads to "essentialisms" regarding how things are, which, in skeptically debunking all ontological projects to reveal their insidiously political nature ends up affirming the critical politics of debunking as its own version of how things should be. The anthropological concept of ontology as the multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices, where politics becomes the non-skeptical elicitation of this manifold of potentials for how things

⁷ Dilip M. Menon expresses discomfort with the idea of Sanskritisation and describes it as a model of a deferred ideal of perfect mimesis, wherein subordinated castes, given time shall become behaviorally more and more like those above them in the hierarchy [Menon,2006:xi]. His quarrel with the model focuses on the implied assumption that creativity of the subordinated castes lies in replication, not in innovation. M. S. S Pandian reveals how this process forces the subordinated castes into silence and self-hate. " Sanskritisation, stripped down to its basics, claims that the lower castes sanskritise and the upper castes westernize...the teleology here moves from lower caste practices to sanskritisation to westernization. This very teleology sets caste as the other of the modern."(Pandian,2002)

could be- what Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) calls the “otherwise.” The politics of ontology for Povinelli is the ontology of politics as decolonization of all thought in the face of other thought- to think of thought itself as “always-already” in relation to the thought of others.

So from the above discussions we can see that the major difference between the rather complicated and very long debates about ontology in anthropology is the refusal to take into account the connectedness and interrelations that underlie any ontological understanding. Instead the anthropologists like Holbraad talks of a radical alterity which in a way reminds of the deterministic categorizations that were part of the descriptive or the material ontology. Even when De Castro talks about how nonhumans have the capacity of conscious intentionality and agency which makes them into subject he is silent on the disciplining process that happens prior to becoming subject or rather he dismisses them as apolitical. The ontological anthropologists ignores such historical power imbalances that are implied in the creation of subjects.

Let us go back to the discussions in philosophy regarding ontology after the detour through anthropological debates. As we have seen, according to Ahmed, the question, what is it for something to be a body is adequately answered when one answers the question what it is for a body to exist. For answering the latter, we need to find out an explicit set of procedures by which

we can demonstrate both the auto ontological and ex-ontological accounts of body in one go. This seems to be an impossibility. While the auto-ontological account is inherently insufficient for being extended to instances of the body given extensionally, the ex-ontological stops at representing the objectifiable features of the body. This is because what it is for something to be a body, auto – ontologically given is incompatible with what ex-ontologically mean to be a body. (Ahmed,2016)

Our discussion shows that these tensions regarding coming into being, or the auto ontological dimension of being when it get caught in the disciplining process is missing in the current ontological turn in anthropology as detailed by De Castro, Holbraad, Pederson and others. The ex-ontological determinism of the body and tensions of the unbounded possibilities of auto-ontological understanding is missing.

This leads to the related issue of methodology. It leaves us with a difficulty in grasping the radical, post humanist notion of otherness. Exposing and critiquing the limits of epistemic boundaries of modernity invariably leads us to capturing the ontological unfolding of new political subjectivities. As Foucault insightfully observed: “The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in

which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault, 1984:50). "Lived experience", says Sundar Sarukai, "should be seen as the experience of *being* a subject and not an experience by a subject or about a subject." (Guru, Gopal and Sarukkai ,2012: 36).

What is significant in this ontological turn is that in place of an epistemological model in which a knowing subject confronts a countervailing world, we could call into question that very division between subject and world that conditions the questions characteristic of the epistemological enterprise. Subject-object distinction is presupposed by the epistemological tradition. It ontologically separates them. The danger involved in it is that, as Judith Butler warns while appreciating Merleau - Ponty's position, we might have to cancel out alterity as such. (Butler,2015:157). 'For Merleau-Ponty, ...to be implicated in the world of flesh of which he is a part is to realize precisely that he cannot disavow such a world without disavowing himself, that he is abandoned to a world that is not his to own. Similarly, if the "other" is so fundamentally and ontologically foreign, then the ethical relation must be one of sanctimonious apprehension from a distance.' (ibid, 168).

Chapter1

PRIDE AND SHAME MODERNITY, TRADITION, COMMUNITY

I need not specify where I met Seetha for the first time. When we got acquainted there wasn't anything interesting about me. In spite of being a postgraduate student my personality remained drab and lacklustre. I usually went around in a single dhoti and a black pinstriped red terry cotton shirt. No footwear; lack of sleep clearly reflected on my face beneath the sheen of oil. It wore an eternal bewildered expression of someone who had alighted at the wrong station. I wasn't totally clueless on how you and your kind might have viewed a person like me.

(From the Malayalam short story, 'I Expect A Reply' by C. Ayyappan (Ayyappan, 2008:41)

If lived experience is to be the final validation for theory, argues Sundar Sarukkai, we will have to look at autobiographies and fiction as epistemologically

legitimate in a fundamental sense⁸. Fiction based on lived experiences could actually be seen as a legitimate mode of theorising (Guru, Gopal and Sundar Sarukkai,2012: 37). Milind Wakankar provides a minimal definition of subaltern as the lack of access to mobility. He qualifies it further: ' Subalternity is historically a form of protest and force, but it is grounded in an unprecedented affectiveness, a transcendental capacity to be affected. (Wakankar, 2017:23)

No choice of example is innocent. The fact that one selected one particular example singles it out for special attention (Miller, 1995:162). Hillis Miller is speaking about parable, an exemplary little story functioning to make some conceptual points clear. Historically the conceptual point tends to become so tied to the little story that they form an inescapable couple (ibid, 163). Parables are in fact not illustrating conceptual arguments, but bringing the argument to a stop by disrupting the cognitive clarity of the argument it was meant to clarify. This is similar to what is said of the role of anecdotes by Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher in writing history. They argue that some anecdotes compel us with a cluster of individuating details that may not fit into the

⁸ Sarukkai also argues that to be a Dalit is not to share all they have but to share what they cannot have. Lived experience is not about freedom of experience but about the lack of freedom in an experience(Guru, Gopal and Sundar Sarukkai,2012: 36).

frame of the larger narrative within which they appear (Kumar, 2017:274).They stresses the vehement particularity that would make one pause on the threshold of history and its ability not to allow history to stabilise texts(Greenblatt and Gallahar,2000:51).

Extracts, metaphors, quotes and examples in philosophy are not accidental in philosophy. Nor is it resorted to for illustration purposes. Look at the paragraph above extracted from a short story written by C. Ayyappan, most significant dalit fiction writer in Malayalam. In the posthumous first person narration of the protagonist, the lived dilemmas of dalit middle class men who have 'arrived' in modernity is captured in one single image: "I usually went around in a single dhoti and black pinstriped red terry cotton shirt. No footwear; lack of sleep clearly reflected on my face beneath the sheen of oil. It wore an eternal bewildered expression of someone who had alighted at the wrong station." This bewilderment and embarrassment is formed in the field of vision where the other's gaze is set on you. "I wasn't totally clueless how you and your kind might have viewed a person like me." This is not about the gaze of a

stranger, but a person with whom he had intimate relationship. Self-image, as psychoanalytical tradition holds, is the impact of the gaze you imagine from the vantage point of the other. To be ashamed, observes Agamben, means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed. The paradigmatic instance of such humiliation is perhaps found in stripping or forced nudity, which places the subject in a situation where it is unable to inhabit its body or escape from it (Kumar.2017:17). It is this impossibility of inhabitation which is expressed in the extract from Ayyappan's story. Agamben was drawing on Emmanuel Levinas' characterisation of shame as 'the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself' (ibid, 17). It could be seen that the intensity of the affect incited by Ayyappan's short stories in general arises from its ability to capture the phenomenology of humiliation. Historically also, fiction and imagination played a crucial role (against 'history') in creating a community out of the affect produced by the songs and other discursive articulations. Poykayil

Yohannan, for instance lamented the lack of written history ('no alphabet in sight') for the slave castes in Kerala whom he referred to as the original inhabitants of the land. He viewed it as the most crucial cause of the estrangement of slave castes (Mohan, 2015:320). Rekha Raj finds the roots of dehumanizing of body in Kerala in slave system. Unlike Europe or America, here the slavery system was based on caste. Slavery in Kerala was deep rooted in caste system and existed here even before colonial invasion. Ninety percent of slaves were so by birth and belonged to Pulaya, Paraya, Cherumar, and Kuravar castes. It is because of these historical facts that Poykayil Appachan called his followers '*adima santhathikal*' or slaves. (Raj, 2015: 62)

Sanal Mohan concludes his discussion of PRDS movement by pointing at the constitutive role imagination plays in community formation: 'Through the performative rendering of the past, the border line between fact and fiction ceases to exist and an alternative rendering of history is made possible.' (Mohan, 2015:320). Similar doubt about the limits of certain genres to capture certain life-worlds was raised by D.R.Nagaraj as well. He doubts that there is an implicit world view

behind the stylistic device of realism which is essentially a monolithic one and it does not accept the legitimacy of other modes of being. It can at best accommodate the rationalist worldview of the modern middle class, he fears (Nagaraj, 1993). The conclusion he arrives at from this premise is that lower caste cosmologies do not make a modern novel possible. Novel being the quintessential genre announcing the arrival of modernity, there are many scholarly studies about Kerala's modernity, many of which are nuanced and sophisticated, drawing on early Malayalam novels. Nagaraj perhaps was indirectly hinting at the limits of such an enterprise through the observation mentioned above. It is almost impossible to recuperate dalit agency through such readings. Sanal Mohan turns to other sources to accommodate the experience of slavery in Kerala's pasts. No wonder that Poykayil Yohannan made the bold anti-realist move of transforming fiction into history. This underscores the multiplicity in the ways in which lower castes negotiated modernity.

Colonial Modernity

Sanal Mohan and many other scholars prefer the term colonial modernity to capture the pasts of Kerala in an intimate manner. To him, the very notion of colonial modernity articulates the fact that non-European societies had experienced a comparable cultural and social transformation that European societies had undergone, although they may differ substantially (Mohan, 2015:8).

The most significant effect of colonialism on the slave castes had been the transformation of their slave status. Missionary activities exposed slave castes to colonial modernity. 'They came to have a different perception of the idea of the good life. This new perception was itself contingent upon new ideas of work, time, leisure, thrift, family life, and the adoption of new practices in food, clothing, and housing. Many of these new ideas were central to the notion of 'cleanliness' that the missionaries introduced. The ideas of freedom and equality were central to missionaries. The effect of such ideas was evident in the desire of the slave castes to reorganise their everyday lives right from the mid-nineteenth century.'"(Mohan, 2015: 317). Sanal Mohan successfully exposes the limitation of Marxist historians' engagement with the question of caste slavery when they were confronted with the rise of modern plantations. They formulated a reductionist interpretation that abolition of slavery was necessary for making the free-wage labour for the capitalist relations of production in the plantations. They disregarded the fact that the colonies in Atlantic world depended on slave labour. More importantly; they failed in understanding slavery as a social experience (Mohan, 2015: 314). In his path breaking book on Kerala's past, Sanal Mohan studies how this experience underwent radical transformations under colonial modernity. He shows how lower castes articulated a new self and how modernity facilitated the activation of an alternate temporality. Institutions like

schools, hospitals, printing, courts etc disseminated knowledge which crafted subjects under colonialism.

What do we gain from using the term colonial modernity? It already presupposes a colonial subject. Methodologically it becomes effective since the researcher is already converted to its ideology. There is no going out of that mentality. What constitutes colonial modernity and the studying of it are entrapped within the enclosure of colonial modernity (Ahmed, 2005). It is out of the ambivalence and ambiguity between modernity and tradition that colonial modernity emerged. It is not a clear and distinct negation or rupture with tradition.

M.T. Ansari shows the way in which a non-modern Islamic other was constructed through colonial procedures and how that figure continues to live in various discourses. He argues that such a figure is inevitable for secular-modern times. Drawing on Derrida, Ansari shows how fanaticism became the only 'identifiable recurrence of a common trait' in William Logan's teleological ordering of history (Ansari, 2016:76). He foregrounds the failure in comprehending the religious aspect of the subaltern mappila in historical and fictional accounts of 1921 Malabar rebellion. The very use of words like 'uprisings', 'outbreaks' and 'outrages' makes it possible to ascribe them to the 'fanatical' character of mappila community. (Ansari, 2016:74). The fanatic is defined as a person who is excessively religious.

The figure of the fanatic looks backwards to the 'heathen' or the 'pagan' and also looks forward to the 'fundamentalist' or the 'terrorist'. S/he can only be confined or killed. Ansari insightfully captures a metonymic displacement within the metaphoric through which the 'heathen' and the 'pagan' dissolves and the image of 'terrorist' is brought to relief. (Ansari, 2016:74)

The studies of both Sanal Mohan and Ansari are of central importance in reorienting discussions on Kerala modernity as they have provoked a shift in the dominant paradigm which valorises the moments of Hindu social reform explicitly or indirectly. There is an intimate connection between Kerala nationality and Hindu community formation which sometimes even the critical studies tend to reinforce though unwittingly. Sanal Mohan shows the interface of Christianity and colonialism through his analysis of PRDS(Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha founded by Poykayil Yohannan). PRDS created new myths of the divine and a new ritual language. It stretched the Christian religious notions to its limits. "With the emergence of the discourse of slavery as the foundationalist category of the movement, there developed several new categories through which the collective experience of slavery was evoked. This process of collective ritual remembrance of slave experience led to the essentialisation of the slave castes in Kerala, which has parallels in other parts of the world." (Mohan, 2015:320).

Modernity is a dominant mentality which defines itself by differentiating from what it is not (Ahmed,2005). Thus creation of a traditional (religious) other in the defensive could be viewed as a natural corollary to that process.

Dilip.M.Menon qualifies the ambiguity in using the category 'colonial modernity' in recent studies as a "delightful vagueness"; it is not clear whether it is a spatial or temporal term. According to him, it is the specific contradiction between a rhetoric of universal modernity and a practice of accommodation within existing faultlines of power, tradition and custom what characterises colonial modernity (Menon,2006:76).

The formation of a Hindu community through reform discourses has been studied by M.Muralidharan in detail. He shows how the ideational thrust of social reform movements functioned as a site for affirming the Hindu community. It was not by drawing on any humanist ideals that caste was opposed during temple entry movement of the 1920s, but through an appeal to common ownership of a religion (Muralidharan, 1996:255). "The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), in a unanimous resolution in 1936, decided to renounce Hinduism as the ezhavas were barred from entering temples. C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer responded immediately to the threat of the ezhavas leaving the religion *en masse*. Both positions share the

premise that the ezhavas were part of the Hindu community. The temple entry proclamations point to the paradox of people making a community by threatening to abandon it" (Muralidharan, 1996:255). He also looks at community as the product of colonial modernity and warns of the danger in extending such notions about religious community to pre-modern past. He identifies the administrative writings by the British, missionary writings and social reform as three key sites of discourse which made the Hindu a community. (Muralidharan, 1996:151).

When we look at this intermeshing of colonialism, modernity and tradition, what become conspicuous is that just like colonialism, the 'tradition' that it encountered here was equally a dominant mentality. Nizar Ahmed proposes such an interrelated frame of reference to capture the circle of representation between the triad, community, modernity and tradition. Viewed thus, the impulse to re-form arises from the very modern desire to represent tradition. Modernity's perception of community influences community's perception of its own tradition. Also, community's perception of tradition influences its perception of modernity. In this triadic model of relationship, neither community, nor tradition, nor modernity remains in an authentic, originary form. (Ahmed, 2005)

Unlike in Bengal, reform movements here were initiated and spearheaded by subaltern castes. (Kapikkad, 2017: 216). It was a reform from the below. Thus it had to simultaneously confront tradition which was oppressive as well as colonial oppression. Access to resources was not equally distributed in the castiest tradition. As Sanal Mohan stressed, colonial modernity came with the promise of equality. But the transformations that ensued were distinct in each domain (like dress, literature, architecture etc). Most of the time those at the lower rung of the hierarchy had to acquire the standards of the tradition in order to confront and negotiate modernity. The case of Sreenarayana Guru is a good example which we will be exploring in detail in the next chapter. Dilip M. Menon puts it as follows: “Tradition for them [subordinated classes] is, otherwise, not only a scarce resource but an inaccessible one” (Menon, 2006: 112).

Another important site of intersection between tradition and modernity was the (re)construction of the relationship between community and individual (Ahmed, 2005). The question of identity became relevant. J.Devika argues that the very engendering of individuals was a gendered process⁹. She emphasizes the role of

⁹ In her reading of the novel *Saraswathivijayam*, Devika observes that the displacements in the novel – from high to low, low to high – are fuelled by the internalities of the characters. Privileging of such internality is presented as liberation. A new form of regulation- self regulation – is inevitable for such liberation. Though the ability for self-regulation is necessary for both the ideal Man and Woman, they are found to occupy

gender in individualization: “The individual is thus envisaged to be both ‘free’ and simultaneously implicated in new institutions. To be thus implicated was also a way towards commanding authority. Gender strongly mediates this implication determining whether the individual is to be implicated in the public or the domestic domain” (Devika, 2007: 54).

Debate around Matriliney

Janaki Nair has pointed out the status of Kerala as ‘historically the most ‘sexualized’ region of the colonial period, attracting more than its fair share of attention for its unusual matrilineal family forms and modes of attire’ (Nair,2006:330).A late eighteenth-century author, Pattacharya , notes that Kerala was known for its ‘strange customs of the wicked people of Malabar amongst whom the sister’s son is the heir’¹⁰.

This specific focus on Kerala had been due in part to the matrilineal form of family followed by different religious sections. Matriliney was prevalent among a number of castes, tribes and groups belonging to different religions. But there was differing customs and practices of matriliney even within the same caste. Saradamony (1999)

different domains; the public and the domestic. This assigns different kinds of authority, not equal opportunity for entry to them(Devika,2007:39-40)

¹⁰ Quoted from Janaki Nair (2006:330)

shows how matriliney¹¹ was practiced within various Christian and Muslim groups in different forms. An ideal monogamous conjugal patrifocal unit was unfamiliar to many other groups as well. Brahmins of Kerala (Namboothiris) practiced strict primogeniture and only the eldest son was permitted to marry within the caste while others were to have liaisons with matrilineal women (Devika, 2005; 464). That was also the period when many of the lowest castes were bound in forms of slavery, which made their family forms dependent on the whims of landlords. A stable family structure was not available to the slave castes. There were instances when landlords forcefully separated women from their husbands and compelled to accept men chosen by them as husbands. One of the positive developments claimed in missionary documents is the new significance the family as an institution came to achieve among the slave castes that joined missions (Mohan, 2015:143).

It was into such an unfamiliar terrain of social relations that the colonial state intervened. Categorizations of Indian women based upon their social status and conjugal roles were fraught with ambiguity for the colonial imaginations. Often colonial accounts tended to conflate divisions between 'wife', 'concubine', 'prostitute'

¹¹ There are a number of studies regarding the dissolution of matriliney in Kerala and how this contributed to the process of 'engendering' within a modern Kerala. See for example Saradhamoni, G. Arunima, Janaki Nair, J. Devika, Praveena Kodoth, Meera Velayudhan .

and 'devadasi'. These frenzied debates around such divisions played a major role in shaping the understandings of those categories. Gender was crucial to the process of making individuals governable. As all these categories also came wrapped in layers of other entanglements related to rights, health, sexuality, aesthetics etc there was great upheaval about how they were intertwined with each other and became the constitutive components of such figures. This might also help us understand the emergence of Kerala from a 'sexualized' space to a space of womanly power and then to the recent 're-sexualisation' (J. Nair, 2006, 331).

European travelers and colonial administrators who came to Kerala found it difficult to come to terms with the matrilineal conjugal arrangements of a number of castes. Their perplexities at this non-adherence to the monogamous patriarchal domestic arrangements were reflected in their travelogues. Durate Barbosa, the Portuguese traveler who was also an officer and translator in Portuguese India Company stationed in a factory in Kerala during the sixteenth century, writes about the customs and practices of one such caste; Nair.

"These women do no work except to prepare their own food, and to earn their living with their bodies, for in addition to the three or four lovers, whom every woman has, they never refuse themselves to any Bramene or Nayre who gives

them money. These women are very clean, and fare very well, and they consider it a matter of great honour and gallantry and pride themselves greatly therein, to be able to give pleasure to men.”(Barbosa: 54)

“Their nephews are their heirs; they are married but their sons do not inherit because their women openly earn their living with their bodies, and refuse themselves to no one save to foreigners; their husbands are privy to this and give them opportunity so to act.” (Barbosa:60) ¹²

These sentiments found its way into the perception of Christian missionaries as well. The ‘sexual promiscuity’ of the women in matrilineal families was understood from within the binary good/evil.

What were the main concerns in such accounts? The inheritance and property and if the sons (sic) can indeed be allowed property as proper fatherhood is difficult to establish. What seemed as unrestricted access to sexual relations by women was seen as totally opposing the notions of ‘proper parenting’.

Another theme is the cleanliness of the women and their proficiency in giving pleasure to men. The colonial law

¹² *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, completed about the year 1518 AD, Asian Educational Services 1989, Madras. First published 1812 AD by Royal Academy of Sciences.

making processes later took up those concerns expressed in early travelogues. But then they also gave each concern its proper subjects. The issues of cleanliness were highlighted in laws relating to Contagious Diseases and hence to prostitutes.¹³ Issues of chastity, divorce and property went with the marriage laws and regulations. Women's access to property came under a different set of norms and regulations connected with how entrenched she was within heterogeneous monogamous family relations.

Foucault considers sexual discourse as a "dense transfer point" of power, charged with "instrumentality". For him racial discourse was part of the technologies of sex that arose in eighteenth century to control sexual conduct and by which populations could be expanded and controlled. "Biopower" is identified as having two distinct forms: one concerned with the life of the individual, the other with that of species. It is the micromanagement of the individual body and the macro surveillance of the body politic - and the circuits of control between them - that linked these two (Foucault, 1990). It is a disciplinary power targeting the individual within a state power targeting the social body. During the colonial period as well as in the contemporary period, these circuits of power with their intention for management were

¹³ we will be looking into that process in much detail in the third chapter.

confounded at certain blind spots. These spots were embedded in the daily life practices of the concerned groups.

The notion of a state taking active interest in its citizen's sexual behavior was linked to the social presupposition that rational sexual relations were produced by the civil state's intervention. It had its ideological underpinnings in political-economic models positing the progressivity of social forms. This spells out that all societies, although at different rates, progressed through defined stages of economic and civil order, sexual order being a linchpin of civil order. This theory provided colonial governments with a rationale for intervening in indigenous practices. Because the end result was supposedly a more advanced civil, economic, and political form, the state argued that it had a legitimate right to intervene in "irregular" (informal) hetero-sexual marriage practices and these legal interventions would have an "even relationship" to socioeconomic practices (See Hall,1992). Colonial government's legitimate and mandatory role to intervene in another society to "uplift" it was sanctioned under this theory. In the process, the state gained international legitimacy by showing it could produce order from cross-cultural social disorder. (Stoler, 2002)

Matrilinal marital relations and property rights were interpreted as permitting a mode of sexuality that was

clearly unacceptable within the moral-ideological framework of the colonial state (Praveena Kodoth, 2001; 367) . Nair women and the marital relationships that they formed did not conform to the dominant conception of sexuality held together by male dominance and female subjection. Praveena argues that the lack of usual restraint upon women, especially an absence of enforceable restraint upon women for terminating an earlier 'sexual connection' as well as a right to form another were deplored by colonial authorities. She quotes from a widely cited judgment of the High Court given in 1869¹⁴, which held *sambandham*¹⁵ to be,

in truth not marriage, but a state of concubinage into which a woman enters of her own choice and is at liberty to change when and as often as she pleases. From its very nature, then it might be inferred as probable that the woman remained with her family and was visited by the man of her choice.

According to this discourse *sambandham* did not conform to the norms of marriage. Hence the new marriage laws 'tied marriage to provisions that would facilitate and recognize a new form of family/household centered

¹⁴ Ibid, quoted from , Lewis Moore, Malabar law and Customs, Higginbothams, Madras, 1905

¹⁵ *Sambandham* is the term used for the heterosexual alliances formed within a matrilineal kinship groups in Keralam. Usually, but not in all cases, the women stays with her own family and the man usually comes to her house and stays there during the night, leaving in morning to his own family which constitutes of his mother and her siblings and his siblings and their children.

importantly around conjugality' (Praveena, 2001; 356). This required a radical reconstitution of inner domain of family in Malabar which involved recasting women as monogamous, chaste, and dependent on husband and father.

Very generally at that time, small-family based patriliney was identified as a key factor in individual enterprise, turning the moral criticism against matriliney into an economic rationale. The matrilineal joint family was seen as flouting 'man's' 'natural' instincts towards his wife and children, thus curbing incentive for enterprise. In the early twentieth century, a series of regional laws gave recognition to patrilineal inheritance among the matrilineal social groups, both Hindu and Muslim, eventually abolishing Hindu matriliney in 1976 (Jeffrey, 1992).

The association of success in the economic sphere with patrilineal institutions meant that women's interests were anchored to marriage. A gender-based separation of space between man as the legal-economic protector of his wife and children and his wife as responsible for caring labour but his legal dependent was at the core of the new family (Kodoth 2004b).

Around this time, along with the above elaborated process of crafting of 'wife', there was a reformulation of laws of inheritance for the benefit of the wife. The colonial state bestowed rights on women within the framework of patriarchal household. In Malabar province of British Madras presidency the inheritance laws and marriage laws were reformulated and the matrilineal communities where the inheritance happens through female line were changed. This happened through a series of laws. In 1896, The Malabar marriage act was passed and this ordered the voluntary registration of *sambhandham*. It also included the clause to protect the right of men to will half their acquired property to their wives and children. The 1912, Travancore Marumakkathayam Act also had the clause that half of intestate male's self-acquired property could be gifted to wife and children. These laws also made the dissolution for the marriage more difficult for women involving legal procedures. The Travancore Nair regulation Act of 1912 also had the clause that the wife shall not be entitled to maintenance if she lives in adultery, or refuses to live with the husband without just cause, or has renounced Hinduism. As can be seen this conformed to the conjugal roles of the husband within a modern family, who is supposed to act as the provider of wife and children under him. Whereas in a matrilineal family, even when the individual members might add to the wealth of the household, *tharavad* or the household was in the role of the provider and it was through the female members of

the household and their children that the household property passed to the next generation. Progeny of the men were similarly taken care of by their mother's *tharavad*. This was just as a general frame work; for there are instances where men acquired property for their favorite wife or children and female members with their offspring might leave the *tharavad* to set up another household by themselves.

This call to facilitate a new form of family was taken up by other castes as well. Meera Velayudhan's (1989; 2481) study of Ezhava reform movement's efforts to reform the marriage customs gives us an insight into the concerns of the period. It must also be noted that there was no uniform law or custom as to marriage, family, inheritance or living arrangements that was adhered to by all members of the same caste within Kerala. Meera Velayudhan shows how gender and marriage practices become crucial in the efforts of social reform organisations to form a caste community which would adequately represent different subcastes. Ezhava reform movements which began as a resistance to caste inequalities and caste based untouchability, soon started to reform the caste from within so that it can withstand the demands made by modernity. This effort to project the caste into the institutions of modernity necessitated a thorough reformulation of the family. The debates around Ezhava Reform Bill illustrates the dilemmas of

the period. There was an effort to show that the caste is already and always modern by illustrating how closely it adhered to the modern familial values. Kumaran Asan (an important poet and reformer of the period) noted in 1904, that 'in generality of cases ezhava wife lives with her husband and under his protection' (Velayudhan, 1984; 1482) .He also added that the reform was required 'to protect the dignity of the community which gets eroded and become an object of ridicule...' (ibid; 1482) Elaborating its ideal of a patriarchal monogamous marriage, the committee stated: "the ezhavas maintain a high standard of conjugal fidelity and that they are keenly alive to the sacredness of the marital tie are clear alike from the undivided opinion of the community in favor of a law adjoining strict monogamy in future and from the rarity of instances of divorce" (ibid; 1482). Meera Velayudhan also says that this undivided opinion of the community chose to disregard the testimony of the few women, who were largely in favor of the divorce clause that already existed within the community practices. Modernizing the community thus took great effort in creating an institution of marriage that was more in tune with the western notions of marriage and family and also with the brahmanical scriptural codes. It is interesting to note how the reform efforts which began as an effort to overthrow those very scriptures, invokes them.

Modernity for Whom?

Such critical research conducted from the vantage point of identity standpoints problematises the progressive picture of history in which modernity appears as a higher stage in the evolution of society. Foucauldian discourse analysis and post structuralist styles of thinking informs their studies. They deeply questioned the uncritically accepted assumption that modernity is liberative for everybody. It also problematises the belief that modernity involves retreat of religion into private sphere and birth of an economic and rational individual (Vadakkiniyil, 2015:5). Drawing on the use of categories like value, hierarchy and ontology by Louis Dumont and Bruce Kapferer, Dinesan Vadakkiniyil argues that there are significant continuities in modernity which does not allow a clear delinking of fact and value. In the concept of hierarchy, difference, not similarity is the principle of relational unity. Contrary to the modern atomistic/individualistic thought where the part is valued over the whole, the concept of hierarchy gives primacy to the whole over the part. Vadakkiniyil shows that it is hierarchy which remain as the ontological principle in contemporary Malabar. Both Kapferer and Dumont takes ontology as an emergent through historical practices. Individual is the key value concept in modernity as it breaks with pre-modern value where faith (not reason or science) and collective action (not individual will) are important.

The linear progressive picture about modernity has been critiqued by subaltern studies collective as well. They argued for alternate modernities. Dalit thinkers have criticised both Eurocentric and *desi* (alternate) versions of modernity (Guru,2015).

Literary Field

The recent debates on '*dalitavadam*' in mainstream Malayalam literary journals extracted violent responses of self avowedly secular critics. Anand, eminent literary figure in Malayalam, was eloquent in expressing his displeasure on witnessing the 'return' of caste in public debates: '... the practice of individuals being identified in terms of caste, and the practice of asking caste ... had become obsolete even in my childhood. It is as if the revolutions through which we passed were futile' (Thomas,2006:51)

Anand is absolutely convinced that caste markers do not belong to him while talking about 'my' childhood and the revolutions 'we' came through. V.C Sreejan, another radical critic was more fierce and explicit in his response:

'...if a dalit can proclaim loudly that 'I am a dalit', a nair too should have the freedom and right to say 'I am a nair'
(Thomas,2006:62)

Both Anand and Sreejan rejects discourses speaking caste as caste and deny them recognition as 'literature', 'criticism' etc. Yet they have no qualms in qualifying their opponents as 'dalit critics': 'Though dalit critics are writing profusely, no body 'minds' it.' (Thomas,2006:65). Through such attacks and disavowals, these so-called secular writers are, *de facto*, compelled to acknowledge the entry of dalit intellectuals into the sacrosanct Malayalam literary field, albeit as opponents. It has been an exclusive field denying access to those who do not rightfully belong to Kerala's homogeneous culture.

Historiography is one terrain, which allows upper caste elites to speak caste through other means in Kerala. It always projected their role in struggles against colonialism and erased internal social contradictions .Marxist discourses in particular tried to convert dalits to visions of equality and liberation and internalized

developmentalism uncritically. Thus , in present day Kerala, history of slavery is not taken as the common heritage but specifically assigned to dalits.

Dilip M.Menon exposes the logic behind the normalizing process through which what the upper cast imagines as Kerala's history gets encoded as exactly that. E.M.S inaugurated the deployment of two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste in Malayali public sphere. One talks of caste by other terms and the other talks of caste in its 'own terms' (Pandian,2002). Dilip critically analyses the evolutionary paradigm followed by Malayali Marxist theoreticians and the way in which it enabled them in consigning caste to the distant past and in creating a new usable past through such transcending. It is also a reminder of the fact that what looks like unmarked modern/ public sphere here is deeply inscribed with upper caste cultural values (Menon,2006).

Rekharaj also exposes how in the discourse of the left the dalit were considered as lower class. She observes that speaking about caste has now become a sign of “non-progressiveness,” and as a consequence caste came to be subsumed under the category of class. So, through the left discourses ‘caste’ was conceived as a “private matter” or pre modern matter which needed to be understood in terms of the ritualistic life of people, she argues. Taking cue from Pandian’s position, she exposes how in modernist practices the upper castes retained the caste privileges by talking about caste by other means. (Raj,2015,9) .

Land as Resource and Metaphor

Adivasis in Kerala have often refused to be the passive beneficiaries of government projects, and have carried out active struggles that asserted their status as citizens. It need not be said how the public conscience in Kerala operates even after such successful struggles. This was once again revealed when Madhu, an adivasi youth was lynched to death recently.

As per 2011 census, adivasi population in Kerala is 1.14% of the Kerala population and 92.36% of them live in about 4645 colonies (one cent two cent ghetto like housing arrangement). They lost their land through internal and external migrations/encroachments of other communities. Adivasi and dalit struggles for land in Kerala have exposed that the government does have cultivable land at their disposal. Yet their demands for land are never met. Adivasis in Kerala have been raising the right to forest act and implementation of Panchayati Raj Extension to the Scheduled Areas(PESA) for quite some time now.

Recently, M.R.Renukumar, my poet friend, wrote on his face book wall as follows: 'Those who own land could speak about everything under the sun. But the landless could only speak about the land'. I think his poetic expression was an indirect response to an ongoing debate among dalit intellectuals. Those who understand intellectual and cultural assertion as crucial critiques the mobilisation around land as a renewed version of vulgar Marxist politics. Renukumar was indicating that land is

not just an economic resource, but a source of identity,
citizenship and a pre-condition for equality.

ARIVU:

POLITICS OF SREENARAYANA GURU

Discourses on saints, sages and other holy men traditionally and commonly take the form “the life and works of ----”. It quite often tries to find the contradiction between these two seemingly conflicting aspects of a holy life, discrediting one side, hymning the saintly personae. According to the hierarchy of priorities hidden in the writings on Sreenarayana Guru¹⁶, the social and economic themes are generally seen to be privileged. I would, however, contend that his greatest work [*oeuvre*] is his life itself. Perhaps this could be named as integrity borrowing a concept used by Akeel Bilgrami while writing about Gandhi. (Bilgrami,2013). Bilgrami was pointing at the way in which Gandhi’s political strategies in specific contexts flowed from ideas very remote from politics. Here, we are looking at how knowledge, actions and ethics coalesce in an integral manner when the incessant existential/ ontological awakening of Guru flows effortlessly into political interventions.

Actually, the difficult task of self articulation is the point of origin of modernity itself. Modernity does not involve

¹⁶ Sri Narayana Guru (1856 -1928) is, considered as the founder of Kerala modernity. He is credited with having inaugurating the social reforms. He authored works in Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit.

accepting the self as it is in fleeting moments. On the one hand, it is predicated on the difficult transformation the self has to subject itself to [in order to be...]. For Sreenarayana, asceticism was transforming his existence, behaviours, emotions and body into a work of art. *Sanyasam* was not self realization or knowing the self but self expression and engendering the self to him. It could be construed as an aesthetic process. Foucault stresses that modernity shouldn't be taken as an epoch which is preceded by a naive premodernity and followed by an enigmatic postmodernity. It is less a period in history than an attitude. By 'attitude' he meant a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a way of thinking and feeling; a way too of acting and belonging. Thus since its formation, modernity struggles not with 'premodern' or 'postmodern' but with attitudes of 'countermodernity' (Foucault, 1984:39)

It is strange that the Guru who did not know English became the inaugurator of modernity in Kerala. He lived the life as of a 'modern' despite the enabling thinking traditions on which his originality drew were non-modern. Guru's effort was to 'make another world possible'. In it was embedded the task of imagining the present differently and transforming it without destructions, violence or oppositions. We need to analyse the integrity of his thoughts and deeds in order to make sense of this unique groundless politics without antagonisms. It would be particularly interesting against

the backdrop of political theories which take antagonism as the inevitable pre-condition of any politics.

Asceticism as Art and Way of Life¹⁷

Guru's particular mentality towards oneself and the present¹⁸, mentioned above, following Michel Foucault, we can call Baudelairean modernity¹⁹. It involves vigilance towards the existing state of affairs, to engage in practices to modify that and constantly stick to both tasks simultaneously. The high value of present is

¹⁷ Unlike European philosophical schools of thinking which are well established as systems of thought, Indian thinking traditions seldom take up concerns of existence and ontology. In Guru, we see the precedence of existential stance over metaphysical issues, which is an exception. As shown in following analysis, Guru brought three features of modern attitude identified by Baudelaire (the ironic heroisation of the present, transfiguring play of freedom with reality and ascetic elaboration of the self), to which Baudelaire gave place in art, not in body politic, to the realm of politics. Perhaps, for Guru, body itself was the medium for expression.

¹⁸ Pierre Hadot critically evaluates Foucault's consideration of such practices on oneself as 'arts of existence' and 'techniques of the self' by pointing at another movement toward exterior involved in it. Hadot views it as a new way of being-in-the-world which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature.(Hadot, 2008:211).Interiorisation to Hadot is a going beyond. It is universalisation. This appears to be an insightful way to look at ascetic practices in Indian subaltern *sanyasi* traditions. Hadot's reservation regarding Foucault's model which to him appears as too aesthetic, deserve sympathetic attention. What I find in tune with the key argument in this essay is his observation that the same spiritual exercise could be justified by extremely diverse philosophical discourses. The latter "are nothing but clumsy attempts, coming after the fact, to describe and justify inner experiences whose existential density is not, in the last analysis, susceptible to any attempt at theorisation or systematisation"(Ibid, 212).Hadot slightly twists Foucault's emphasis on present instance as fleeting by arguing that even within this flash, as Seneca says, we can proclaim along with the God:' all this belongs to me'.(Ibid,p229)."The instant is our only point of contact with reality, yet it offers us the whole of reality"(Ibid,229)

¹⁹ Baudelaire defined modernity as "the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent". It is characterised in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the present moment. The difficult attitude with respect to the movement consists in recapturing something eternal that is beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it (Foucault, 1984:39).

indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it by grasping it in what it is. Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to “heroise” the present. This heroisation is ironical. The attitude of modernity does not treat the passing moment as sacred in order to perpetuate it. This is counterposed with the attitude of *flaneur*, the idle, strolling spectator, who is satisfied to keep his eyes open, to pay attention and to build up a storehouse of memories. (Foucault, 1984:40).

It was not the study of philosophy, but this sentiment and peculiar attitude that led Guru to *sanyasa*²⁰. P.K.Balakrishnan points out that Sree Narayana had not formally accepted *sanyasa*. “His white mundu, his white torso-covering cloth, and his shaving regimen- thus he lived till advanced old age. Waiting at Mandapam railway station, ready to go to Ceylon the second time in 1924, Swamy’s disciples got him dyed yellow robes to wear. They also removed all his white robes with the determined stubbornness to convert Swami into a *sanyasi*. ‘Should I wear it?’ he asked that characteristic question

²⁰ It is curious that Foucault while elaborating Baudelaire’s idea of modernity uses the exact word ‘asceticism’. “...modernity for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism...it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration.” (Foucault, 1984: 41). Such asceticism makes of one’s body, behavior, feelings, passions and very existence, a work of art. Thus no self discovery of hidden truth to modern man; only inventing oneself (42).

in his characteristic way, as he donned the robes.”
(Balakrishnan, 2006:135)

Narayana Guru who wrote philosophical prose in the beginning, was frustrated because there was no academic atmosphere in Kerala. (See his dialogue with Vagbhatananda quoted later in this chapter). Dr. Nizar Ahmed proposes a surmise regarding the way Guru stayed back in Kerala pursuing his cognitive explorations in a unique mode: “Sree Narayana did not discover Advaita through metaphysics or epistemology like Sankara. He reached there through *bhakti* or practice on self. His writings are not theoretical treatises but songs of experience [*Svanubhavageethi*]²¹”. As Pierre Hadot puts it:” ...it is one’s choice of life which precedes metaphysical theories, and that we can make our choice of life, whether or not we justify it by improved or entirely new arguments” (Hadot,1995:283) Thus philosophical justifications are found retrospectively and are accidental. There is no necessary, linear causal connection between them. Here we find ethics taking precedence over metaphysics. Choosing the good is not the consequence of philosophical positions, but vice versa. This primacy of ethics is further seen to collapse with politics in case of Sreenarayana. He was neither following a mode where he addressed the state nor speaking in the language of rights for rearrangements in

²¹ Shared in personal conversation

existing state of affairs. He operated exclusively in the sphere of civil society, never resorting to violence of any sort, and questioned the then existing social arrangements including caste hierarchies. For him caste was unacceptable from the existential intensity he naturally maintained. We may call it an advaitic position on reality, but such a justification is not necessary for Guru. As V.Sanil identified, the route is not from the sociological knowledge about caste to knowledge, but the exact opposite in Guru's case. i.e.:- from knowledge, which for him was real in itself, to the repudiation of caste system.(Sanil, 2018:49) Guru never took knowledge as academic²² and thus could never imagine an instrumental or pragmatic relationship with it. Actually he had taken *arivu* or knowledge as the central notion in his writings. There is one exclusive poem written by him titled "Arivu". In his masterpiece *Atmopadesa Satakam* or 'One Hundred Verses in Self Instruction', which inaugurates a unique genre in the philosophical writings of the world, he never uses the word *Brahmam* which will be surprising for those who take him for a hardcore advaitin. What we find instead is *arivu*(knowledge). Dr.T.Bhaskaran argues that this is not an accidental absence. Guru did use words like *mahesan* in it and this,

²² Sankara left Kerala to argue and win whereas Narayana Guru did not keep a distance between knowing and doing. There existed no unethical path towards knowledge in his non- scientific reasoning. The instrumental rationality that he himself was responsible in creating in modern Kerala contradicts this founding wisdom.

according to Dr.Bhaskaran evidences the positive influence of *Saiva Sidhantha* in Guru. (Bhaskaran, 2017:40).Ahmed calls the politics espoused in it (which comes directly out of ethics) as a politics without grounds. He explains how *advaita* enabled Guru in this as follows:

Guru, in his version of Advaita, conceives of an identical imagination (*samabhaavana*) that characterises the context of disentangled embodied awakening. In the light of awakening one realizes that the happiness of the other is one's own happiness. The content of the relation is to be indicated by the question whether it brings happiness to the other. This mutual care on the part of the actors is *samabhaavana*. But the outcome is indeterminate or at least not pre-determined. That is, out of mutual caring will emerge an unscripted situation. This could be seen as a politics without grounds (Ahmed, 2017)

A recent book on the thought of Sreenarayana which is written by an anonymous writer, viz: *Guruchinthana:Oru Mukhavura*,²³ elaborates the significance of this notion, *samabhavana* in Guru's life and works as follows:

²³ *Guruchinthana :Oru Mukhavura* problematises all readings which try to paint a clear picture of Sreenarayana. They being constructs, argues anonymous author, they are subject to hindrances that all constructs face. They are epistemological difficulties. In fact such issues are analogical to the problem of under-determination of theory by evidence in philosophy of science. People trying to claim Sreenarayana to be Buddhist, Saivist or

How may someone who remains in a state of ascetic rejection of the world stay concerned about the lives of other people? What is the ontological (existential) justification for paying attention to the lives of others? This is not, clearly, to attain one's own ends; for someone who has totally reduced his ends, there is not much to attend to. When someone prepares to pay attention towards the well-being of others, what inner mode inspires him/her? When the attention of a person who is marked by *nirbaadhyata*, who has given up both 'I' and 'mine' turns towards others, we must take care to present that moment clearly, that is, in an unblemished way. We must specify that which made this moment uniquely distinct from others. This moment may be considered to be one that happens only from an ontologically upraised plane. To denote it we have a word that has been

Advaitin (or even 'Hindu' in recent times) are found to rely on the same set of evidences. Then the book proceeds to problematise the *pramanas* (criteria) of knowledge, perception(*prathyaksha*), testimony(*Saba*) and inference(*anumana*). Thus direct engagement, hearing from the authoritative source or reaching at a new idea from the data that is available could not accord any authority to the readings of Guru's life or works. They are not free from pre-judgments. One cannot escape the mediation of *samskara* or mental conformation which shapes the result of such seeing/listening/deducing. Drawing on Nagarjuna, author defines *samskara*, culture, as whatever that stands between the knower and what there is. Whatever is acquired brings about a gap between the perceiver and the perceived. When we follow this line of argument, all readings about Guru attempted till now are construed as constructs shaped by the *samskaras* of the respective interpreters. Then what is possible is to attempt to arrive at the self perception of Guru without making any claim as to the truthfulness of it. *Guruchinthana* attempts exactly that without making any claim about the 'real' Narayana Guru.

sadly robbed of meaning from overuse: *karuna*. *Karuna*(compassion), in this way, is an extremely rare ontological state. *Karuna* is that state in which the sense of 'I' has been entirely discarded, and one is prepared for a surrender of oneself in which one's attention is fully oriented towards actions meant to enhance the betterment of others. We may say that what the Guru did was to harmonize his acts compassionately to the deeds of others. People carried out their deeds, reformed or transformed themselves, made advances, and reaped the gains and the losses to themselves. (Anonymous,2017:131)

From such a perspective, the complex relationship between Guru's actions and the transformations within Kerala's social realm could be explained in a different light. We could account for the silent political transformations triggered by Guru's minor interventions in everyday life without ascribing the whole agency of such reforms/renaissance/ modernising to Guru the person. His own self-consciousness remained unaffected by such happenings around him. He never assumed any agency too²⁴. A sufi is not supposed to indulge in actions

²⁴ Foucault's review of "What is Enlightenment" was reflexive of the factor that Kant's little text was located in a sense at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history. Foucault took it as a reflection by Kant on the contemporary status of his own enterprise. For Foucault it was significant not because it was the first time a philosopher was giving his reasons for undertaking his work at a particular moment, but that being the first time a philosopher has connected in such intimate and close way

in everyday world. Guru, even after experiencing the bliss indulged in *samsaric* life out of compassion which was not vertical but horizontal ²⁵(Kumar, 2017). Thus *karuna* or compassion encapsulates the essence of his politics and life. One cannot teach others to be compassionate. Compassion erupts into existence when one acts compassionately. This is the intimate way in which knowledge and action, philosophy and ethics, merged in Guru's approach. Ahmed draws the conclusion that Sree Narayana was not a doctrinaire advaitin, because,

“advaitic teaching should begin with self-transformation. Once you are transformed, advaita is of no use to you. By the same token one cannot teach the other advaita. As an emancipatory idea advaita can only be self-instructed. The traditional role of the teacher here is to ensure that the

from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he was writing and because of which he was writing. (Foucault, 1984:38)Udaya Kumar has explored in detail how the relationship with history was one of non-reliance. This contrasted with the discourse of several important Ezhava intellectuals who were his friends. They invoked history, especially a Buddhist past as the principal ground for community's political ideals. “Sree Narayanan's discursive innovations did not draw on the resources of historical narration; they worked, rather, through their deliberate avoidance, and through a carefully set up assemblage of the primordial and the contemporary. Historically momentous innovations introduced by Sreenarayanan had , as their discursive ground, not historicist narratives of a glorious past or a redeemable future, but the creaturely human subject in its worldly contemporaneity. In this one may find a conception of human history that is not narrativizable in the idioms of recovery or progress” (Kumar,2017:85)

²⁵ Udaya Kumar in a review article shows how *karuna* complicates our modern understandings of democracy and equality. It is not an affect showed by somebody who is high in the hierarchy toward the other who is at the bottom. The urge to experience together arises by lowering oneself. (Kumar,2017:84)

student makes his own effort and realizes the truth. This might put in a nutshell what the guru thought to be the purpose and significance of the teaching of advaita. Preaching it as a doctrine is therefore against its spirit." (Ahmed, 2017)

Guru himself was aware of it. That is why he asks this in the context of C.V.Kunhuraman's interview:

Religions are only pointers towards deep enquiry of the quintessential truth. Even those who know that essence might not have religion as authority. On the contrary, they are the authority for religion. Did the Budha teach *nirvanamarga* after studying Buddhism? Budha enquired the path of *nirvana* and then preached that way. That later became Buddhism. Is Buddhism of any use to the Budha?"(Balakrishnan, 2015:80)

There is no wonder that Guru wrote *Atmopadesa Satakam*. He was aware that one cannot instruct others. The politics arising out of this attitude retains an openness regarding future as the outcome of compassionate actions is indeterminate. It goes against all politics which instructs well scripted action plans resulting from totalising and closing of options.

Queer Temporality

Let us now take a detour through some of the arguments made in the initial section of this chapter, on the

emphasis on fleeting moments in particular²⁶. Sara Ahmed for instance gives us an entirely novel perspective to approach it. She says: 'It is because this world is already in place that queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our responses need not be to search for permanence but to listen to the sound of the "what" that fleets' (Ahmed 2006:565)

Foucault made an important point while saying that 'homosexuality threatens people as a "way of life" rather than as a way of having sex' (Foucault 1997, 310). This menace, he observes, arises at relations of time and space that maps the particularity of relationships like queer friendships, queer networks, and queer economic transactions. This is called 'queer temporality'. (Bharadwaj, 2015)

Judith Halberstam elaborates this notion and says that 'queer time is about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family and which is imagined outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (Halberstam 2005:1). What is demanded is a reorientation of our 'modes of understanding' away from a 'normal heteronormative temporality', (Halberstam 2005: 152). Now combine this with the features we have already noticed about Sreenarayana's friendship circles, his reluctance to stay at one place for more than three

²⁶ About such sudden shifts in views, this is what Mario Perniola has to say: 'The simplest and clearest example is provided by a design which according to the way we look at it, is now the head of a hare and now the head of a duck...all works of art, such as musical pieces that we now listen to in one way, now in another, or buildings, sculptures and paintings from which we now receive one emotion now another...Even the most familiar places can seem suddenly uncanny. The room where I have lived for years suddenly appears to me under a different guise.' (Perniola, 2017:123)

days and the institutions including ashrams he had built. The founder of modernity silently inaugurated a counter culture where somebody, a bachelor, could create institutional spaces to live a quality life in the heteronormative modern Kerala. Look at this description of a friendly chat between Sreenarayana and Dr.Palpu at his asrama. 'Dr.Palpu sat on leopard skin mat and said: " If the leopard was alive, human beings would be afraid to stand not just '42' feet but even 84 feet away.But as now it is no more alive , it became a comfortable mat. Same is the case with caste." Swami: " When the leopard perishes, the skin is left behind.But when the caste perishes, nothing remains" Doctor: *Kushumbu* (grudging envy) remains. And it lasts longer than this skin" (Achuthan,2000:33).

Not disregarding the significance of the content of their dialogue, the mere material and physical fact that two men could leisurely sit and chat on matters of mutual interest evidences the quality of the time they spend together as friends. Guru had such friendships with all the major male intellectuals of his time. This not a small achievement though he was not intentionally carving out such a space. That was not a space devoid of pleasure though the pleasure remained within the strict homosocial boundaries. . Drawing on Susan Winnett J.Devika identifies such homoaesthetic circles across successive generations of Malayali intellectuals and argues that these involve a certain form of male bonding linked to a masculinist mode of critical pleasure, one

which is also relentlessly heteronormative. The firend circles around Kesari A. Balakrishna Pillai, M. Govindan and the radical left critics of later period are pointed out by her(Devika, 2013:10). She either spared or missed the circle around Guru which is evidence enough of Guru's guerrilla subjectivity.

Perhaps Devika spared him because her focus was on the troubled relationship women had with these literary circles. She defines 'homoaesthetic circles' thus: 'informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication in which (almost exclusively) male critics, authors, readers, publishers and others participate (Devika, 2013:9). Having drawing the contours of Guru's spaces of inhabitation, let us revisit that typical institution he had built, asramam, through a queer path.

What sort of a home is Gurukulam?

Sannyasam(renunciation)itself being a form of non-attachment, the author of *Guruchinthana* claims that it could be said that the Guru institutionalized non-attachment(Anonymous,2017).Mystics being drop outs, They do not belong to the community in any definite sense, says Muralidharan (1996:240). 'However withdrawal confers 'power' that makes return effective. Mysitic mendicancy is of this type and here, world-negation affirms the world at a deeper semiotic level'(ibid,240). In both Vaikunda Swami and Narayana Guru a

painful phase of withdrawal is conspicuous; Swami to a hole on earth and Guru to a hilltop. Despite their intentions this phase created an aura around them and that made their social interventions smooth and effective.

But in asrams people live together. Our modern universities are not much different from asrams in terms of the intellectual space they are providing, complain some women who inhabit that space. While extending Devika's argument regarding the homosocial nature of radical and progressive counter cultures in Kerala to the domains of knowledge production, it appears to be a valid criticism. It was the reading of a recent 'minor' text, written by Sugatha Pramod that I came to the realisation that women are present, but not quite at home in such alternate institutions. A paradoxical situation to which feminist thinkers like Le Doeff have sought our attention. We must pay serious attention to paradoxes. Let me quote an experience narrated by Sugatha Pramod in the book. She was a disciple of Nitya Chaithanya Yati, *sanyasin*/ intellectual who was the disciple of Nataraja Guru, who in turn was Sreenarayana's favourite disciple. Sugatha left home in her teenage, 'withdrawing' to Gurukula at Ootti and became one of Yati's favourite disciples. Now read the rough translation below:

...one day, as I went to the kitchen to drink some water, I saw one of the inhabitants there, smoking a beedi. I threatened him, " I will inform Guru." In a flash he approached me and kissed on my cheek,

and retorted "anyhow you have decided to complaint about me to Guru, now add this too to your list of complaints." In a rage I ran to Guru. Guru welcomed me asking, "Why are you panting my child? I guessettan kissed u, right?"

I was startled. Did guru see it? I posed a foolish question. Guru pointed at his other pair of spectacles and said, " See, I use this to see what's happening in the kitchen'. I didn't know this fact. I didn't notice that guru had two pairs of glasses. Like a fool, I picked up the glasses, wore it, and glanced in the direction of the kitchen. I couldn't see anything.

I had thought that Guru had not paid much attention to this incident. But I was wrong. The prayer session in the night was a terrible experience. Normally guru turns up after every one had arrived in the hall. But he had arrived early that night. Without taking notice of the others, Guru started to recite *Daivadasakam* aloud. Recital of *Janani Navaratnamanjari* followed. Though all of us recited along with him, we were puzzled. Usually he used to begin the classes once he had finished reciting *Daivadasakam*.

Guru spoke in a strange manner that night. His speech lacked continuity and by the time guru had finished his talk, food was cold in the kitchen. Never again did I witness such a prayer session (Pramod,2016:31)

This is the way in which Yati acted as a single member 'complaints committee' at that quasi private/ quasi public space meant for knowledge production and dissemination. Much better than the complaints committees operating in our own locations indeed! But the way his concern develops require closer scrutiny to read certain continuities between Gurukulas and Universities.

Though women from within and out of India stayed at Yati's Gurukula at different periods Sugatha was the only female inhabitant in the ashram at that point of time. She narrates that she was well aware that Guru was quite disturbed by this:

That day, all the while I took care of his daily needs he kept staring at me as if in wonder. "What happened? Why look at me this way?" I asked.

I noticed that he was absorbed in thought. He spoke as if in a trance, in a tired voice, "Nataraja Guru was right. Women need a separate ashram. They are to be protected. You too need it, my dear." (Pramod, 2016: 47)

In the end Yati weds her off to an artist who stayed at Gurukula to do a commissioned work. Logical climax to any fatherly affection (actually though her biological father was present, Yati played the parental role of father in the marriage function and gifted her a gold chain- *ibid*, 83) in an Indian context. But why didn't Yati who otherwise is more radical and feminist in his approach

and acts than any other intellectual of his time²⁷ (on page 34 , Sugatha shares her experience of being gifted a jeans by Guru when he returned from Singapore) never dreamt of her as his heir? A Gurukula where the majority of inmates are female?

This brings us squarely back to the question of 'knowing subject'. There are historical and discursive limits which excludes certain bodies from occupying that subject position. Knowledge production is not a disembodied enterprise. Nor is it devoid of power or pleasure. Women were perceived as other distracting the autonomous knowing subjects (distant and distinct from corporeal body) if not in defined domestic roles in all institutions of knowledge production. They could distract tapas by the mere bodily presence in an asram! Even today the presence of a knowledge seeking body, just like so many others destabilises the whole 'ontology' of the Gurukula. Let me pause this discussion which requires much more nuanced meta discussions with an evocative quote from Iris Marion Young that hints at the logic through which women as other becomes linked to what is out of control:

First is the experience of knowing oneself as shameful, as an abject existence that is messy and disgusting. Women as menstruators live through a

²⁷ I must confess that this is only an instrumental reading suiting my present concern that I am presenting here. This text could have alternate readings prying many feminist layers open. For instance, right from the opening page to the photographs printed at the final part you will come across the defining role 'touch' plays in their interpersonal relationship.

split subjectivity insofar as we can claim the public face of normalcy and a fear of exposure of the private fluidity of our flesh. Given the dominant disembodied norms of clean and proper, it is difficult for me not to experience my being as defiled and out of control' (Young, 2005:109)

Perhaps the link here might be shame again, as the textual as well as institutional discourses forces women to feel ashamed not for something they have done, but just for what they are (ibid,112). When we rewind the scene back to Narayana Guru, the amount of abjection toward female body aroused through textual strategies are even starker and obvious. In the 69th sloka of *Siva Sataka* Guru asks Siva to keep him off the trails of the sensuous lot of women who have set out to mesmerise him with their enchanting bodies and voluptuous bodies. Commentators who traces the genealogy of Guru's ascetic practice to the Sidha tradition for historical and textual reasons argues that this is a feature common to that tradition. 'Kaya sadhana' is practiced by Sidhas with a view of making the body perfect. Ganapathi(1993:116) observes that some Sidhas like Pattinattar have developed a negative attitude towards the body. Pambatti Cittar has written ten verses describing the filthy nature of human body. Sreenarayana might have followed this tradition. What is to be explored is the effects of such a bodily practice on one's own body and the bodies that were excluded from a knowing and

practicing subject position due to the textual limits perpetuated through such traditions.

Devika did find creative interventions by writers like Madhavikkutty as successful in bringing back the de-eroticised female body in dominant reform moves back into the revision of the 'womanly'. This is achieved by revaluing touch as the fundamental affect blurring the boundaries between individuals. Devika also unravels the striking abjection of sexuality in the developmental discourse. The ideal woman is expected to remain strictly domestic and maternal.'...the body is treated as if lacking in agency, a mere vehicle of the mind, a shell that holds the capacity for rationality, predisposed towards the domestic domain' (Devika,2009:24) In a critical reading K.K.Baburaj considers the abjection of Vasavadatha's body in Kumaran Asan's 'Karuna' as more an expression of the emergent patriarchal power structure embodied in Upaguptan than a continuation of Buddhist subaltern tradition(Baburaj,2008).

Amanda Weidman looks at Gurukulavasa in a different context and shows how that is considered as something technology cannot replace. She raises and pursues the question whether Gurukula is a home or a public institution for education. She unearthes the connection between Gurukulavasa (sishya living with the Guru as a member of his household) and classical music. 'Too rigorous Gurukulavasa is invoked as the reason for

musician's greatness' (Weidman, 2006:246). It is assumed that without Gurukula system no truly 'Indian' music can exist. This is a subtle process which connects Gurukula with something pre-modern. Weidman points at the desire for tradition produced by the new technologies (ibid, 247). The accumulation of time spent with Guru is considered as valuable in itself.

The task perhaps is to read Sreenarayana as simultaneously embedded in history as to the impact of his actions and gestures and non indebted to tradition as to the existential freedom enjoyed by the actor.

In-between

Why did Guru establish temples when he did not believe in caste or religion? One of the historically available ways to gain self-respect for the Ezhava community who were caught in an 'in-between' status at that historic juncture was through attaining the standards of the tradition. Sheeju NV, while analysing Shanar revolts between 1822 and 1899, points at the in-between status of Shanar/Nadar caste and foregrounds its similarity with liminality of ezhava/thiyya caste. (Sheeju, 2015). They are highest among the lowest and the lowest among the highest²⁸. The accidental fact (as all births are!) that Guru

²⁸ It is not totally fortuitous either. Sree Narayana was born in 1856, when the Shanar revolts were at its most agitated phase. It provided the background for his interventions. (Jose, 2014 and Pandian, 1992) Vaikunda Swamikal (1809-1851) took the Vaishnava route and Sree Narayana took the Saiva route, but both of them tried to purify community of 'backward'

was born into ezhava caste, and he didn't remain one is crucial in capturing the actual impacts of his acts against the background of the inter-community dynamics of Kerala society. This peculiar location in the middle simultaneously triggered efforts for gaining upward mobility through acquiring equality in terms of savarna lifestyles and symbols and combating graded caste structure by eschewing privileges. Narayanaguru's life-text had been read as a chapter in sanskritisation process by many critics. While looking at the afterlife of many of his reforms one could not reject such criticisms easily. But his life-text had travelled in the opposite direction of sanskritisation too. P.K.Balakrishnan had perceptively seen that: "The essence of Guru's social thinking was moving down. It is not that Ezhavas must struggle to become Nairs; They should overcome antagonisms within and become Pulaya"(Balakrishnan,2006,249). Sahodaran Ayyappan, one of the major disciples of Guru, who was also a rationalist emphasised the importance of moving down in annihilating caste consciousness. Though born into an ezhava family, he was abusively called 'Pulayan Ayyappan' by his community members

rituals and deities. Both of them were deeply influenced by Sidha tradition too. Inadvertently, both of them provided spiritual alternatives from within Hinduism to the subaltern which functioned as a deterrent to widespread conversions. Vaikunda Swami movement, which opposed the British and upper caste rulers simultaneously is yet to receive decent recognition in the academic and popular imaginations. *Samathva Sangham*- Collective for Equality- founded by him 65 years before the formation of SNDP (Sreenarayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam), coalesced spiritual and civil rights discourses in imaginative ways. He is the only social reformer who was incarcerated by the rulers for 'instigating' untouchables to break caste restrictions.

subsequent to his courageous moves at inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. In an interview given to P.K.Balakrishnan, Sahodaran (literally meaning 'brother') quotes Guru to have said that 'the attempt of the communities which suffer caste oppression should not be to demonstrate equality with those above them but the effort should be to demonstrate equality to those below them. With regard to untouchability swami had said that giving way to upper caste and pushing away the lower caste are two different articulations of the same power. Whereas those who does not push away those below them in the caste hierarchy from public roads will also have the heart ,strength, and courage not to give way when they come across those above them'(Ayyappan,2010: 585)

The example of another historic figure, a social reformer and philosopher, may help illustrate this point further. Vagbhadananda, born in 1887 in Malabar, also belonged to the Thiyya community and he stood against caste and idol worship. The word 'Vagbhada' indicates skill in argumentation and he was well known for rigorous philosophical arguments. Because of his strict adherence to a strong Advaita philosophy and the fierce opposition to conservative ritualistic practices, he was forgotten in history despite the strength of his philosophical positions. He met Sreenarayana while touring Travancore and had a brief dialogue on Advaita and idol worship.

Vagbhada: I wanted to visit you, as you are an Advaitin ... You are founding temples and supporting idol worship. How do such practices and Advaita go together?

(Silence)

Sreenarayana: People won't spare me otherwise. They want temples. I too thought that it would ensure some sort of cleanliness among them, at the least.

Vagbhada: You being an acharya, shouldn't you be able to bring people around to your theory?

Sreenarayana: Earlier, I did call them. But nobody came heeding the call.

Vagbhada: Since it is impossible to coalesce Advaita philosophy with belief in temples, we strongly oppose idol worship.

Sreenarayana: That is good. I too stand with you
(Bhaskaran,2017:90-91)

Against the backdrop of the above discussion, let me list few observations abruptly:

It was quite accidental that Advaita attained central place in Indian philosophy during nationalist period.²⁹

²⁹ 'Atman', for the lower castes was a constant which made community unification possible. They realized that they also have an 'atman' to realize! It was a universal with Hindu roots. Thus caste destruction led not to the construction of 'Human' but 'Hindu' community. As M.Muralidharan observes:"The Atman became the most powerful discovery that propelled up the least powerful of modern identities: the colonial subject"(Muralidharan, 1994)The Buddhist thinking traditions which problematized 'Atman' were not attractive in the colonial context. Atman

Equally accidental was the hold Advaita had in Narayana Guru's life and works.

Guru's accidental allegiance with Advaita turned out to be quite productive for Kerala's modernity.

Colonialism provided the context for these accidents.

Guru knew this intuitively. While First World War was going on, he told one of his disciples:

"We should be praying for the victory of British. They are the Gurus who gifted *Sanyasa* to us."

Disciple: "Usually the procedure is to initiate one by teaching hymns and giving saffron cloths. I am afraid I can't grasp the meaning of it"

Swami: "Even in the time of Sreerama, sudras were not allowed to become *sanyasi*. Doesn't Hindus rule by following *Sruthis*?" (Balakrishnan, 2015:66)

was an invention which empowered the colonial subject. A constant among the variables. We have discussed this in detail in the introduction.

Chapter3

from DEVADASI *to* PROSTITUTE ARCHIVES OF THE 'HOMELESS'

"Can an empty archive also be full?"

(Arondekar, 2010: 1)

Since archive is one site of enquiries into past, spending some time contemplating on it won't be completely out of order. We could no more believe that chronological or historical analysis will provide any 'true' insight into a contemporary situation. But if contemporary is embedded in an interlinked network (of situations, processes, groups, ideologies etc) then accounts of past including history becomes one link in that network which in turn is meshed with many other links. The enquiry into history highlights certain aspects of the contemporary situation. But more importantly it raises many questions which illuminate the conditions which makes such networks possible.

Studies evidences that colonial and post-colonial archives are filled with selective representations of 'prostitutes'. Most of the material is connected with

efforts taken by governments and social reformers to abolish devadasi custom or to put an end to system of state controlled prostitution and trafficking in general. They also allow us a glimpse of letters and petitions presented by women so named as 'prostitutes' or 'devadasis'. Otherwise they are largely absent from these archives. But the archives also reveal the process through which the colonial and reformist efforts tend to reify certain practices and subjectivities into categories that reveal more about the conceptions and discourses about female sexuality and the measures taken to regulate it. One example is illustrated in Veena Oldeberg's (1990) ethnography on courtesans in Lucknow. She stumbled upon their presence during her archival fieldwork when her attention was caught at the presence of women among highest taxpayers in the city, as well as a conspicuous later absence. Her ethnographic fieldwork then takes us through the narrative of how colonial interventions reduce these women who were considered to be epitome of elite culture and trained dancers and musicians into prostitutes. So even by their absence archives tell us the mentalities and circumstances that play a part in the processes of subjectification. The following passage is taken from the autobiography of Nalini Jameela, who was the president of Sex Workers Forum of Kerala from

2002 to 2004, about her experience of speaking at a conference on 'AIDS and the Role of Men'.

"This was in 1999...I was asked to speak on 'The social position of Devadasis'. I looked up many books on this topic. In many of the accounts of travelers who'd visited Kerala long ago, there are descriptions of 'Ammachiveedukal'³⁰ they had seen here. I included all this in my paper. My idea was that in a symposium you talk, looking at a paper... I spoke of two devadasi families, which existed long ago at Muvattupuzha and Thrissur. In those days, they weren't referred to as devadasis, but as 'koothichi' and 'tevidishi', which of course are favorite words, dirty names hurled at us. This speech was conducted in the hall of a high school. We had a mike. When such choice words as 'koothichi' and 'Tevidishi' began to float out of the mike, a crowd gathered quickly. The hall was full. With this, I abandoned all that was written in the paper. I began to compare these days and

³⁰'Ammachiveedukal' literally means a matrilineal household, usually from particular Hindu upper castes, but it also indicates the status a particular matrilineal household have attained by forging a relation between a local king or ruler with a woman of that household.

those, and talk about today.”(Nalini Jameela ,2007)

Why did Nalini feel the need to legitimize the demands put forth by ‘sex workers’ of contemporary Kerala by referring to a group of women, devadasis³¹ , from the past? What are the mediations which facilitated such a confrontation with past? Within the span of that speech, she also decided to abandon the attempt to find legitimacy in history and talk about the present. But she prompts us to turn our attention to present articulations that may not be repetition, rejection or even a direct outcome of what happened at a point in history, but rather how certain historical debates got reworked within contemporary contexts. This is an indication of how different modalities of power leads to submersion of certain identities, even while creating opportunities for the emergence of certain other identities. Understanding of the complex historical processes will give more insight into the present categories.

³¹Devadasis are the women who are dedicated to the temples, to become servants of the God. They participate in a number of activities in the temples from cleaning the temple to performing dance and music as part of the temple rituals. Devadasis also had to perform sexual services to the patrons of the temple and even to other members of the local community. Devadasi tradition continues to exist in other parts of South India, though they have completely disappeared from Kerala. There are a number of studies which highlight the contributions made by devadasis towards nurturing Indian classical art forms, also how they were denied their earlier collaborations with those art forms as part of the cleansing of classical art that happened along with the reform and revival projects of early twentieth century. See for example, (Srinivasan ,1985)

This short piece of reminiscence by Nalini, which she felt was important enough to be included in her autobiography, leads us to multiple directions. Both '*koothichi*' and '*thevidishi*' in its contemporary usage are synonyms for 'prostitute' and can be hurled at any women whose moral character is under dispute. There have been some historical studies which show that the term '*koothithi*', from which the term '*koothichi*', evolved, were used in historical inscriptions from 13th century AD to mean a dancing girl. Similarly *Tevitici* (tevaratiyastri) means 'the hand maid at the feet of the God'³². History tells us that these terms were used to denote 'devadasis' of Kerala. But history does not help us understand if insult and stigma were also intended in their usage in those 13th century inscriptions from where they were uncovered.

What happened to that paper which Nalini had written through such painstaking efforts? She said that it was later published in a periodical brought out by the NGO which conducted the seminar. In 1999, she had just been introduced to an NGO working to prevent the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Association for Care and Support. They had organized the seminar and the paper was later published in their newsletter and the original copy kept in the office. But over years both the published and

³²See for example Elamkulam (1968); Ramachandran (1979)

unpublished versions got lost. This inability of Nalini to keep the document also raises some questions about the 'archive', 'memory' and 'history'. How do we conceive of an archive of 'homeless women'? Where do we find the archive for a politics that they are attempting, very tentatively, to build up? And does that politics require a history of past glory?

Anjali Arondaker reviews the archival turn of the recent social science/anthropological works and shows how that has resulted in a shift from 'savage to salvage', which sees itself as a "vexed, theoretical antidote to earlier models of a flawed, colonial geography of perversions" (Arondaker, 2009: 9).

Let us enquire further how 'homelessness' is connected with our present concerns. Derrida points to the patriarchic functions of domiciliation or the house arrest that makes archive possible, which he describes as toponomological, as an intersection of the place and the law. The archontic principle of consignment not just assign or entrust a document or memory in a place of residence, but it is also a gathering of signs into a single corpus, along with the powers of unification, of identification and classification so that it 'coordinates in a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration' (Derrida, 1996; 2-3).

One implication of this is that archive and memory connected with the archive is not spontaneous or natural but rather a work of institutional forces of repression and suppression. This also points to it as the possibility of future, as a process and repetitive attempt at creating archives (Derrida, 1996; 19). Moreover, the engendering of 'modern women' in Kerala had caused erasing of many cultural materials that might have given us glimpses of another possibility, though at imaginative levels. The reform movements that happened in almost all castes took upon itself the task of sanitizing women's cultural forms of expression. This relation between archive and place and power often leads to the dialectics of absence and powerlessness.

S.Raju, while analysing 'archivalisation' in connection with about three million *cadjan* (palm)leaf records preserved in the archives of Kerala (these were records maintained by the Padmanabhaswamy temple of Travancore since 1336 CE) describes archivalisation as another *acharam* (custom) in the field of *acharam*. Those documents were not preserved to be passive, but recalled quite often to reason and substantiate decisions in the present till the first half of nineteenth century. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a generalized text replaced the complex archivalisation, leaving the archive a frozen storehouse of mute-leaves bearing relics of effective documents. (Raju, 2016: 194-95). Raju exposes

the link between power and practices of documenting. As he puts it: '...each of the documentation of the present anticipates/expects its recall in the future and thus its entry into power relations' (ibid, 168-69). Through tracing the shifts in genealogy of documentation, he explains the historical movement from *swroopam*³³ (with its palm leaves) to kingdom (with its 'files of reality'). (ibid, 195).

Archive did possess a lot of materials related to the ways of life appropriate for 'women'. They reflect the discourses around life style, property relations, health facilities, notions of family etc. These discourses also reflect notions about female sexuality and gender. Thus while resorting to archival research, one may consciously try to adopt a guerilla strategy in order to get the picture of 'other' women lying hidden in the depictions around 'women', 'nation' etc.

The Politics of Knowledge Production

This brings us to one of the central questions debated in this thesis, viz: the status of the knowing subject. The guerilla strategy hinted at above, and adopted successfully by many feminist scholars recently underlines the absence of an 'objective observer' and 'neutral knowledge'.

³³ Form of rule in pre-Kingdom Travancore

Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick argues that any knowledge production enterprise is to be placed in a context of social relations, i.e., 'the questions of who's speaking, to whom? Who wants to know, and what for? What do these answers do?' (Sedgwick, 2008:xv). The questions about knowledge production do not start from the moment we enter the 'field'. It is invariably connected with the history of the discipline/s, contemporary hegemonies and assumptions embedded in it, and the process of collecting, organizing and presenting findings.

One way out of this problem, as pointed out by many thinkers is to contextualize the conditions of production of knowledge itself. Pierre Bourdieu (2003) puts this as participant objectivation, i.e., objectivation of the subject of objectivation and the act of objectivation. This involves a process of self-reflection and analysis of the pre-notions. This would include biases embedded in the organizational structure of the discipline, and all the unconscious pre-suppositions built into the categories of scholarly understanding.

Identity, Disease, Panic

Language and representations are crucial in both identity formation processes and contestations over justice. Identity cannot be approached as something that is out there that need only be recognized and adorned. It

requires a reworking of the existing epistemological and ontological frameworks on reality, the notion of 'human', citizen' etc. This is a thoroughly political affair as naming is a fiercely contested process. Multiple authorships and mutual scrutiny is required in this process.

As the existing archival materials relating to 'prostitutes' were built around the attempts to regulate and control 'prostitution' the prominent voices emerging from the archives were those of the state and of the reformers. From the latter half of nineteenth century, discourses on sexually transmitted contagious disease became a major trope for the colonial government in creating a series of laws regulating sexuality, gender, family and property relations in India. Similarly, later half of twentieth century also saw emergence of another set of equally powerful discourses around AIDS panic in India. Both these moments were and are characterized by massive state intervention into sexual behavior of its subjects for the improvement of 'national' health. These two moments in history also saw emergence of multiple voices, from different locations – dissenting, acquiescing, or stretching the prevailing discourses to altogether different directions. They saw the emergence of a number of social movements. Western and Indian feminists, British and Indian Nationalists, Devadasis and sex workers were few of the active agents in these movements. By looking at how global and local

interacted ostensibly in an attempt to control and modify diseases, triggering different sets of political articulations from different social locations, we will also get a sense of how 'devadasis' became erased from public imagination and 'prostitutes' irrupted into existence.

Both these diseases created uproar as it was believed to give insight into the moral and social universe of the diseased. And they also offered perfect ways of altering those social and moral universes. As Stroler says, "The quest to define moral predicates and invisible essences tied the bourgeois discourses of sexuality, racism, and nationalism in fundamental ways. Nationalist discourse staked out those sexual practices that were nation building and race affirming." (Stroler, 2002: 154)

These interventions by the state and the oppositions to those interventions that directly or indirectly target people's sexual life also have specific moral objectives and in turn they attempt to create a universal "normal" sexuality. (Vincent Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg, 2005)

The question of archive and the question of how certain terms appear and disappear from local vocabulary or acquire different meanings over time is also part of these attempts to create a universal "normal" sexuality. Within Kerala there were crucial differences as to the social locations of the women targeted at these two different

periods. While the upper caste Hindu women, both as wives and as devadasis³⁴, endured the disciplining thrust of the political and reform activities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, AIDS intervention projects during the early twenty first century turned its intense targeted intervention almost exclusively on the gay and transgendered people and street sex workers, both male and female, who were predominantly from lower caste and lower class backgrounds.

As I will elaborate, 'prostitution' was a trope through which Colonial imagination encountered women in Kerala. Civilizing mission of colonial processes worked towards producing autonomous female subjects through eradicating any trace of such a moral or social inclination. Nationalist and reform movements of the period intervened through multiple strategies in differing sites. On the one hand, they resisted the colonial vision of Kerala women as 'whores'³⁵ (Saradamoni, 1999). On the other hand, they vigorously entered into the process of transforming the socio-cultural specificities that must

³⁴ The work of Sreenivasan (1985) relates the misuse of the term 'caste' in relation to devadasis in colonial literature. She argues how loosely formed communities around temple occupations attempted to attain caste title after the reform of devadasi system.

³⁵ Saradamony describes how men with new education and exposure to Western ideas and values become embarrassed about such portrayal of women of their castes. It also conflicted with the emerging notions of masculinity and made them feel inferior.

have given rise to such thinking and thereby creating a more patriarchal domestic arrangement with its ensuing social arrangements within the model of more nationalized savarna hindu wife and European enlightened woman (Devika, 2007). There was also a vigorous process of forgetting and remaking of history. The resulting figure, autonomous female subject, who was usually upper caste, was normalized and any political intervention that tried to problematize and debunk such a figure was seen with suspicion. While the uppercaste housewife was created as the ideal and model for all future state interventions, lower caste and marginalized women's most important task got defined as aspiring to that ideal. It is against this background that the reactions that the sex workers' articulations elicited from the political circles of Keralam could be understood.

Creating Absence

References of women consorting with travelers and merchants and kings and making a living out of it is described in an old poem, *Vyshikathanthram*³⁶. *Vyshikathanthram* is referred to by historians to argue that

³⁶ Though neither the date nor the author of Vaishikathanthram is known, it is assumed to have been written some time during during tenth or eleventh century AD. For instance, few lines from Vaishikithanthram does appear in another text 'Manthrankam' written in 11th century AD. There is an argument that Vaishikathanthram need not be a complete text written entirely during one period by one single author. Reasons given were that - language used shows much finesse that is quite extraordinary for such an old text, the repetitions and contradictions seen throughout the text etc. See Dilip Kumar K V (2010)

devadasis did exist in Kerala (Elamkulam, 1970). The opening lines from the poem is in the form of advices passed on from an older *veshya* (courtesan) to her granddaughter, Anaghasena who is about to become a *veshya*. The word 'Vyishikathanthram' can be translated as the 'strategies of courtesan'. Like the terms *koothichi* and *tevidichi* mentioned before, the term *veshya* is also considered to be a synonym of 'prostitute' and hence considered to be a 'dirty' word which was absent previously. J.Devika points out that female personal names prevalent in the early twentieth century Kerala like 'Vesukutty', 'Veshamani' etc hints at a cultural scheme where the moral stigma attached to *veshya* might have been much lesser (Devika, 2005: 481). The ancient text of state craft, *Arthasastra*, provides a typology of women – *Kulina*, *Vesya* and *Bhrtya* – in which while *Kulina* was to bear heirs and perpetuate traditional norms and values, *Vesya* was the provider of pleasure – and that too pleasure in exchange for money and/or gifts, and *bhrtya* – the lowest of all – was the service provider. *Arthasasthra* list the skills of an ideal *veshya*, which included 'singing, playing instruments, recitation, dancing, acting, writing, painting, making fragrances, and the art of knowing the minds of others, dress and decoration, massaging and seduction' (ibid., 481). Gail Omvedt cautions that this apparently greater sexual freedom available for courtesans in texts like *Arthashastra* need to be read as a system of graded and controlled patriarchy which was a unique feature of Brahminism. In *Arthashasthra*

prostitution is managed as a 'state enterprise'. Brothels are under the supervision of the state, and so is the responsibility for training courtesans, dancers and singers and their jewellery and costumes (Omvedt, 2000: 188). Also relevant in this context is the point raised by Mary John and Janaki Nair that it is important to acknowledge that "wife/non-wife are constituted by the same patriarchal authorities, so that they are structurally yoked in fundamental ways, making the securities and pleasures of one domain unavailable to the other" (John & Janaki, 2004;12) But such a reading does leave us unsatisfied as to how women living under differing structural and ideological regimes might have conducted their lives and thoughts rather than being submissive recipients or victims of the systems.

To return to *Vaisikatanthram*, it is written in the literary genre , 'manipravalam'³⁷ . Manipravalam contains a number of poetic texts in which the narration revolves around devadasis. This constant allusion to devadasis in manipravalam poetry is attributed to the fact that most of those poems were commissioned either by devadasis or their paramours³⁸ . Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai (1968)

³⁷ The term manipravalam is an indication of the intermingled usage of the Malayalam (mani i.e., beads) and Sanskrit (pravalm i.e., pearl) words. Interestingly, Udaya Kumar observes that *Vaisikathanthram* itself is a genre (Kumar, 2017: 89)

³⁸ Devadasis also had quite a number of poets as their lovers if we can allow ourselves to go by the poems. In another poem, *Chandrolsavam*, there is a description of the entry of devadasis to the moon festival. Most famous among them came accompanied by poets who were eulogizing

argues that “the only educated persons of that period were usually the upper caste elites like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, temple castes, Nayars belonging to the land owning groups and the prostitutes. The writers and poets would have found it extremely difficult to ignore the inclinations of the educated readers”.

The poem opens by hinting the generation of mastery and training involved in becoming a devadasis.

“My great grandmother, her great grandmother, and the great grandmother three generations before her, from her time onwards we have been following these ancestral practices taught personally by great great grandmother to my grandmother and by her to my mother, and now that ability as I learned from my mother, I will impart to thee.”

The poem goes on to praise being a *veshya* as the greatest of all professions and as the only means of earning available for women; ‘unless a woman knows this, she may not be able to earn even a ‘small measure of bran’. Though these lines seem to be adhering to a very limited understanding of the women’s economic role in a feudal agrarian society, the poems contain thick descriptions of

their patrons, ie. The devadasi who commissioned them. Palakatt Unniyachi, is described to have arrived carried on the shoulders of a young poet. It is also interesting to note that though authors of some of those poems referring to devadasis are unknown and though poems like *Vyshikathanthram* were written in a format of narrations by women addressing women, the authorship was never ascribed to women.

a community of women networking, planning festivals and rituals, doing sexual favors, obtaining and keeping lovers, entering into negotiations with wealthy and powerful who are quite capable of considering their own pleasures and desires, though at the same time being aware of the complications attached to it. '*Chandrolsavam*' (Festival of Moon), another *manipravalam* poem also argues along similar vein: 'this divine profession is flourishing in Kerala (stanza 76). And also, 'this is a great fortune that can be attained only after committing innumerable good deeds'. Poem compares the vocation of a king and that of a *veshya*. The first functions among a community of local chieftains, bureaucrats, ministers, heads of merchant guilds and professional guilds etc. The second one also functions among a community, but a community of sisters, mothers, relatives, husbands, elders, messengers, great poets, Kings etc. Both require the support of wealthy entrepreneurs. But it also cautions that the love of the King can indeed be a misfortune and often acts like an axe in the throat for the charms of any reputed *veshya* (Stanza 78).

This display of volition by women to deal with their own interests imaginatively elaborated in these poems is quite alien to the contemporary understanding of sex workers. Though there is no comparison between the social status of the devadasis posited in those poems and the contemporary street sex workers, what can be compared

is the enthusiasm displayed by the critics in both these cases to deny any sort of involvement of the women concerned in entering or remaining in any job involving monetary exchange for sexual services.

This depiction of devadasi community in 11th century poem and the picture constructed out of documents about their plight at the end of 19th century holds much in common. After a ritual marriage dedicating a young devadasi to the temple, she is committed to rigorous emotional and physical training in classical art forms, like dance and music. Though she is not permitted to marry, she is not prevented from leading a life involving economic activity including having property in her name, sex and child bearing (Srinivasan, 1985).

Dr. Rajan Gurikkal says that the first known epigraphic reference to a devadasi in Kerala was in an inscription at Cokkur ascribed to AD 898 which mentions a gift of land by Cirrarayil Nannaiyar to the temple. Records at Nedumpuram Tali mentions Merralipurathu Sankara Nannacci and Sridhara Nannacci (She also had an aristocratic title of Tribhuvana Mahadevi.) The same temple records also mentions about different divisions among the dancing girls referred to as *Uthama* (Superior), *Madhyama* (middle) and *Adhama* (Lower). Tiruvalla plates mentions *teviticcikal* in connection with the celebration of the festival of onam. Thiruvalla plates and records from

Suchindram also mention husking of paddy for temple food preparations as one of the jobs given to devadasis. Another division was based on their duties related to the temple; *murakkudi* , who did the daily routine work; and *cirappukudi*, who served on the festive occasions (Ramachandran, 1979: 343-344) .

Most of the records related to Devadasis are from the erstwhile Travancore Kingdom. Elamkulam(1970) and P. Ramachandran (1979) argues that the temple records at Suchindram temple mentions the presence of seventy two devadasis, some of whom were very proficient in dancing and singing (Pillai, 1953: 253). Perumal Rayar, a devadasi from this temple was so eminent that she was entrusted with the lands of the temple to be used for the various rituals connected with the temple. When Cokkatandal, wife of Veerapandya made a gift of two hundred gold coins to the temple it was entrusted to a devadasi.

Elamkulam mentions about a temple inscription dated Medam 8, 398 Malayalam era/ April 1, 1222 AD, about a very pious devadasi in the temple of Kandiyur who was even consulted by Iravi Kerala Varma of Venad and Iraman Kothavarma for instituting various ceremonies in the temple. She donated the entire money for the construction of Subrahminya Svami Koyil in the temple of Succindram. When the Colapuram temple was rebuilt

in 1253 A.D, two posts of devadasis were created. One post was given to a wealthy lady Sengodan-Puvandi and another to one Komalavalli. Cooked food of four measure of rice was given as daily remuneration to Komalavalli (Ramachandran, 1979:399).

There were instances in Kerala history when Kings conferred titles of honor to devadasis, and also married them. Vira Kerala Varma who ruled Venad around 1225 A.D married Kandiyur Tevadicii Unnikalathram. Another King Iravi Kerala Varma (1365 A.D) of Odannad married Cerukara Kuttathi, who is described as first among dancing girls (Elamkulam,1970:278; Ramachandran,1979: 402).

As the newly emerged state started creating its history the absence and presence of devadasis became a point of contention among historians, politicians, poets, activists and general public. Though poems describing devadasis/*veshyas* were just a few among the texts in manipravalam, the whole literary genre was defamed as prostitution literature. These poems were derided as the progeny of a period of wealthy landlordism combined with immoral and licentious sexual practices. Dileep Kumar (2010) argues that this was because most of the studies of manipravalam poetry were coterminous with the first decades of twentieth century when the idea of a modern nation state was also emerging. Sexuality was

considered as anathema to this idea of nation, he argues. Manipravalam poetry got branded as 'prostitution poetry' (Kumar, 2010: 21). Udaya Kumar, through a nuanced reading of these texts argues to the contrary. The women in Venmani's poetic universe lack agency, he says. They are accorded a pseudo-subjectivity, a simulated space from which they can incite the initiatives of the male subject (Kumar, 2017:91). Udaya Kumar's reading is emphatic: 'there is space only for two entities in Venmani's erotic theatre—an erotically charged male subject and a female addressee described largely in terms of her seductive body' (Kumar,2017: 90). This in fact is a preface to his reading of Kumaran Asan's poems in which female characters are argued to be having much more individuated though ambiguous subjectivity in contra distinction to Venamni poems. Despite the strength of the argument and beauty of textual reading undertaken by Udaya Kumar, a crude and relatively simplistic re-reading of those texts might not be completely out of place in this perusal.

In most of the criticisms that arose about the devadasi system from outside the community of devadasis was about their involvement in sexual services. The major argument was that the institution of devadasi that began with good intention and which contributed a lot to the dance and music practices got deteriorated when sexual labour was incorporated into it.

Since its discovery in early twentieth century *Vaisikathanthram* had a public life of readership that is very illustrative. Its literary merit in terms of the usage of language and the symbolisms etc were considered to be quite extraordinary for the period considered. But at the same time it was derided for its theme, viz: devadasis. Three different entities - a genre of poetry, a contemporary movement and group of women in the past - evoked an immediate response of rejection. The discourses around the poetry, devadasi and sex worker conjured up the image of impurity that is to be eradicated. This impurity being all the more difficult and persistent as it was here and not here. It invoked an allusion to a culture that is not 'ours'. The appreciation of poems like *Vaisikathanthram* was compared to the "the approval that pornographic literature enjoys today in America" (Elamkulam, 1970). The historical debates around devadasi system are still unsure as to whether devadasis did exist in Kerala or not.

Elamkulam argues that during twelfth and thirteenth centuries Namboothiris became rich landlords as they were responsible for handling contributions that people made to the temple towards temple rituals, and for the running of cultural and philanthropic institutions attached to the temples. They degenerated into a community that led life trespassing all boundaries of

morality in the name of '*shisttacharam*'. (a literal translation would be correct/good regulations). This refers to the norms that extolled Namboothiri way of life, including their arrangement of sexual relations. This gave them the right to have sexual relations with women from lower castes even in a caste society which did not permit sexual relations outside the partners' castes. This consolidation of wealth in temples and in the hands of namboothiris led to the moral degeneration that led to the downfall of the devadasis into 'prostitutes'. The argument goes.

Both those who writes about the presence of devadasis in Kerala's past as well as those who deny such a presence concurs that devadasis, or an evocation of that idea in literature, represent a phase in the historical past of Kerala that was morally corrupt under the medieval feudal oppression of the Brahmin landlords. Thus devadasis becomes the figures embodying economic exploitation, moral degeneration and brahmin supremacy.

'Prostitute' as the Other

These debates should also be situated within the early twentieth century radical reform discourses on modern marriage and nuclear family in Kerala. Many of the reforms were not introduced by force by the colonial government. The massive economic changes of the

period also made the institution of matrilineal joint families unviable and nuclear families a more appealing option (Devika, 2005). Colonial government versus 'natives' was not the spirit of the times. Reform movements floated an idea of a liberal society of equal individuals. This individual was to be identified by their 'inherent, internal' qualities and not by what they inherited. (Devika, 2005; 462) Udaya Kumar takes the figure of the body as a strategic point of departure to track the emergence of a discursive space in Malayalam writing within which subject of new bodily practices could appear with a new relationship to itself. Sreenarayana Guru, while denuding the body of caste markers and producing it as the site of the degree zero of difference between human beings, a new discursivity around the body begins to emerge, he argues. (Kumar, 2017:33). If Sreenarayana's work involved cleansing the body of caste semiology, Kumaran Asan's poetry created a clearing in language whereby gender difference found articulation as inner experience, marking the subject's relationship to desire and speech. (ibid,34).

This brings us to the crucial place given to romantic love (*premam*) in reform movements' discourses around gender and family. *Premam*, often ideologised as a social necessity, was differentiated from bodily lust (*kamam*). *Premam* was also seen as the 'force emanating from full-fledged individuals that ensured the stability of modern

family' (Devika, 2007: 214). Devika shows how in the language of early 20th century reformisms in Kerala, the female body was either rejected or made non-threatening. This was done by the consecration of 'culturing the mind' in the construction of modern womanhood. Only educated women capable of conforming to bourgeois sexual morality were seen as proper subjects for this process of 'culturing the mind'. Indeed, the term *swatantryam* itself, she argues, which signified 'possessing self-means for survival' and called for the enhancement of capacities for regulation that were internal rather than externally imposed, was conceptually transformed to become an equivalent of 'freedom'. With enduring historical consequences that characterize the space of Kerala to the present day, womanliness became associated with a 'specific non-coercive power', and permitted the entry of women into, and their hyper visibility in, certain professions and roles, and notably not others. (Devika, 2007: 210) Udaya Kumar identifies the presence of *anthakaranam* or self reflexivity/interiority in women subjects in Asan's poems as the source of their individuality, though it is construed as unstable in contrast to the stability of the enlightened male subject (Kumar, 2017:115). Kumaran Asan, writing in the early twentieth century, foregrounded senses as interiorizing the erotic without drowning in it, to achieve an intensified experience of the soul, 'irreducibly individual in its task of self-articulation and in its self-affirmation as desire'(Kumar, 1997).

By making the female the bearer of inner agency in his poetry, in contrast to the 'male subject's immutable spirituality', Asan makes a richly ambiguous move that simultaneously claims and disavows female agency. So in one of his poems, we see the Devadasi, Vasavadetta, actively trying to win the premam of the Buddhist ascetic, and she was able to attain at least a glimpse of him only when she was lying in the cremation Ghats, with all the organs of senses chopped away (Asan, 1981).

So within this gendering process of radical reformism devadasis personified everything that stood opposite to an envisioned 'modern female subjecthood'. They were seen to be synonymous with tradition, lust and unregulated body and hence uncultured mind. These debates and the legal procedures and administrative interventions that occurred along with them provided the complex milieu in which devadasis 'disappeared' from Kerala paving the way for the emergence of 'prostitutes'. When we follow these debates closely, we could discern that elements from those very debates went into the formation of the stereotypes around 'prostitute': a woman outside the control of husband and monogamous family; woman whose sensibilities does not include an 'interiority' that enables her to have proper control over her senses/ body; a woman whose notion of parenting is not proper; a woman who indulge in multiple sexual

partners and also gets monetary benefit out of it. As the upper caste housewife was purged of these taints, they were conveniently delegated to the body and person of (mostly) lower caste 'prostitute'. As we will see in the coming section, danger of disease and impurity were also added to this well entrenched stereotype at around the same period.

Social and Moral Purity

Debates about family, marriage relations and sexuality happening in Kerala should also be read within larger global debates. As said earlier disease and public health were some of the concerns through which Colonial governments tried to alter the social world in India. Feminist and reform movements of the period were active in these debates. I will quote from a letter written by Josephine Butler, who was the Honorary Secretary of the British, Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution, which was formed in 1880. From 1840s onwards concern about prostitution in the United Kingdom took on frantic dimensions. After the 1857 Royal Commission report on the health of the army, and a follow-up report on the level of venereal disease in the military five years later, the question became fused with contemporary concerns over public health. This resulted in three successive decrees in 1864, 1866 and 1869 known as the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts. By these, in certain towns containing

military bases, any woman suspected of being a prostitute could be stopped and forced to undergo a genital inspection to discover if she had a venereal disease. If she did not submit willingly, she could be arrested and brought before a magistrate. If she was found to be infected, she could be effectively imprisoned in a 'lock' hospital. Contagious diseases acts were later brought into British overseas colonies as well. At a medical Conference in Vienna in 1874, the principle of state regulation of prostitution which the CD Acts embodied was accepted as a valuable contribution to promoting public health and it was proposed that a worldwide league led by Great Britain should be created to achieve this end. This was met with stiff resistance in Britain and in colonies. The Federation was formed to spearhead this opposition. This association later came to be known as the International Abolitionist Federation. Abolitionists are still very crucial in the international effort to stop sex trafficking and prostitution all over the world. Around the same time there were also a number of other organizations working all over the western world with similar objectives. 'Association for Moral and Social hygiene', 'American Moral purity Association' were some of them³⁹.

³⁹ To understand more on the workings of CD Acts and the organisations opposing them see, David J. Pivar (1981), Philippa Levine (1996)

Discursive Continuities

“I received yesterday, sent from India, two of the most terrible documents in print, in English and Hindostanee. Your hearts would be torn and filled with burning indignation if you read them. They are most tyrannous and cruel directions to the poor women who are enslaved by thousands; - and a printed document is coming to Mr. Stuart in which some of the officers and Medical Men of the Cantonments in Northern India advise the government to appoint “recruiting sergeants” to scour the country in search of young and “attractive” women to be dragged into the chuklas, i.e, the camps of vice, in which they are held as complete slaves. They advise also that the Government should pay 3 rupees a head for every girl so captured and brought in.

Has anything ever been recorded worse of slave hunting in Africa?

Mr. Dyer saw something of the brutalizing effect of this woman slavery on the young soldiers. One poor girl had had her eye knocked out by a soldier; another showed burns all over her, through a soldier setting fire to her clothes, and yet being made in this way a living sacrifice to the god of lust, does not exempt the maimed and wounded creatures from continuing to “serve” the British army!

It seems to me that our poor Indian sisters claim our sympathy even more than our own country women who were subjected to the C.D. Acts; for not only are they women oppressed by men, who are stronger than they, but they are the women of a conquered race oppressed by their conquerors. Their hope of deliverance must seem to them so very far off".

(Extracts from a letter by Mrs. Josephine Butler⁴⁰ dated Winchester, 16 March 1888)

This letter encapsulates the tone of all debates, colonial as well as contemporary, around the women engaged in prostitution. As is evident in the document, the abolitionist position draws on the radical feminist analysis of sex work viewing it as an institution of coercion, discrimination and inequality. Sex workers are viewed as victims and the emphasis is on the role of the criminal law given its assumed unidirectional effect in repressing sex markets (Kotiswaran, 2011: xv). As the acts raised public wrath, they were later withdrawn. But in Colonial India, CD Acts continued to function in the guise of Cantonment Act of 1864. The cantonment act states that within the enclosed area of cantonments there would be no public soliciting on the threat of arrest. Cantonment act categorized prostitutes who were frequented by Europeans and who had to undergo

⁴⁰ 3AMS/A/08/185, From the Women's Library Archives. I thank Reshma Bharadwaj for allowing the use of material in her collection.

registration (regulation 3), with the non-registered prostitute being expelled (regulation 5) from the cantonment or from any prohibited part of cantonment. And the abolitionists turned their attention to the colonies to end this "State regulated vice."

The British social elite's discussions of class and sexuality were concentrated on theorizing and institutionalizing capitally productive "marriage relations" among the emerging social classes. The role and social duty of the emerging social elite was to suppress the degeneracy of the rabble and increasing and rationalizing their economic efficiency through strategic interventions in heterosexual marriage arrangements. British social elite, knowingly or not, bridged the political-economic needs of home country and colonial holdings, both of which had interests in intervening and transforming indigenous social practices (Stoler 2002).

Both colonial administrators in India and the abolitionists used statistics liberally to stress their position. While the groups opposing CD Acts said that regulating and registering prostitution has proved inefficient to curb the spread of venereal diseases, government and other groups supporting laid down contrary claims. Both resorted to the argument of how this disease was going to affect the health of the nation (Britain) and its economy and the necessity of curbing the disease. Abolitionists

were of the view that it should be done through educating young men in moral order that helps them curb their desires. They also put forth the idea of love and marriage, modern romantic ideals of heterogeneous conjugality, as proper foundations on which nation is to be built. Abolitionists' movements also were committed to the philosophy of social engineering, even while trying to counter the exploitative policies of the government.

Both the colonial government and abolitionist movements used particularizing and universalizing discourses simultaneously to validate their interventions. The potential transgressions and alliances of the overseas British army was the major fear of British authorities. The colonial debates were informed by the argument of insatiable sexual urge of men, the belief that men cannot control their sexual urges. Soldiers being recruited from poor working class backgrounds, another attendant argument that, poor are lascivious and immoral ensued. Given those two premises colonial administration came up with the conclusion that soldiers would turn to "Oriental vices" either in the form of "buggery" or to alliances with native women leading to contagious diseases and general immorality and weakening of army. So the particular sexual behavior of Indians, the specific geographical and climatic conditions of India was referred to while stressing the requirement of 'disciplined and supervised' sexual intercourse for British soldiers.

CD Acts were created to accommodate these complicit discourses, i.e., the specifically essential Indian conditions and an equally essential and universal law of sexual appetite of men and immorality of poor.

Many stories and facts circulated to illustrate the gravity of the situation. There were stories, even while being dismissed as 'story' in public debates, which held a strange fascination in the debates around CD Acts that showed how dangerous the disregard for the specific conditions in India could be for British nation. One such story was about a Countess being sexually approached by a soldier and even though she eventually escaped the fate of being forced to have sex with the soldier, she was touched by the circumstances which led to such a dangerous encounter. But more than that she was shaken about how close she came to destruction, and how close all other British women were. This story is taken from the book 'The Queen's daughters' which was a compilation of fact finding reports done by two women Elizabeth Bushnell and Andrew, who toured various parts of northern India visiting Cantonments and Lal Bazars to see if state regulated prostitution was still in existence. Though they do dismiss the implicit class basis of the story and of using poorer Indian women to quell the fears of the upper echelons of British society, that British women were facing such a danger was stressed by Abolitionist campaign, not by the discontinuation of the

act but through the sanction it accorded to the soldiers to have sex outside the 'safety' of monogamous heterosexual marriage. That soldiers coming back would bring back the diseases with them and give it to their wives and then to children thereby creating an enfeebled future British Nation was a constantly used argument point by abolitionists.

But facts were equally fascinating and fantastic. I will quote at length from an army dispatch to His Majesty's Secretary of State for India, No.100, dated 8th September 1910 By His Excellency General Viscount Kitchener of Khartoum, Commander-in-Chief in India. Lord Kitchner felt sure that new arrivals in India and even those with more experience, frequently suffer from want of knowledge of how to protect themselves from the dangers to which they are exposed in a strange country. In the dispatch he gives somewhat graphic representation of the horrors and tries to outline of the means by which they can 'best preserve their health and render themselves a credit to their corps.'

"The climate and conditions of life in India are unfortunately, such as to create temptations greater than those which exist in countries outside the tropics. The absence of home associations throws men more on their own resources and deprives them of many of those helps towards resisting temptations which surround them in England. During the cold weather there may perhaps be

enough work, healthy exercise and amusement to keep men occupied, mentally and physically; but throughout the long months of great heat in the plains, time often hangs heavily on their hands and, with want of occupation, comes the temptation to excessive indulgence... The common women as well as the regular prostitutes in India are almost all more or less infected with disease. It is rife in the country and in the villages as well as in the towns, and it is only by avoiding altogether the many facilities for indulgence which India affords that men can be sure of remaining safe from infection. The danger is not merely limited to the venereal diseases, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chancre. Numbers of cases have occurred in which soldiers have died of plague and small-pox contracted from native women. Such diseases when contracted by Europeans from natives of Asia and Africa are almost invariably fatal, for diseases passed on from one race of men to another always increase in severity. Similarly, syphilis, contracted by Europeans from Asiatic women is much more severe than that contracted in England. It assumes a horrible, loathsome and often fatal form through which in time, as years pass on the sufferer finds his hair falling off, his skin and the flesh of his body rot, and are eaten away by slow cankerous and stinking ulcerations; his nose first falls at the bridge and then rots and falls off; his sight gradually fails and he eventually becomes blind; his voice first becomes husky and then fades to a hoarse whisper as his throat is eaten away by foetid ulcerations which cause

his breath to stink. In the hospitals, and among suicides, many such examples are to be found.”

The horrible mutation that the disease might undergo in its interracial journey resonated the racial anxiety underlining the public health policy. British Colonial administration had by then actively began the policy of discouraging interracial marriages. And the ideal marriage did not include marriage between colonial subjects and colonizers. Many historical narratives have argued that the openness in accepting Indian customs and traditions and in forming interracial relations, characteristic of the earlier phase of colonialism in India gradually gave way to a sterner policy of racial segregation after mid-1780s⁴¹. Prohibitions on admitting mixed race subjects to the civil service and to the Military was brought into effect by Cornwallis in 1791. These and similar prohibitions brought anxieties about interracial sexual relations into the forefront of colonial policies. As Durba Ghosh (2006) argues even with an intention of providing for the Indian family, many parents were left with not much choice as often these marriages were not recognized or legal.

⁴¹ William Dalrymple (2002) depicts a very detailed account of the gradual impact of segregation policy on the relations between many Europeans and Indians.

In both these letters, there can be seen peculiar perplexity as to how to distinguish between 'common women' and prostitutes. Both are portrayed as sexualized bodies which could either be 'abject victim subject' or promiscuous, exotically erotic body to be civilized and controlled (Kempadoo, 1990; Kapoor, 2001). The "poor Indian women" were already slaves to the indigenous patriarchy and thus had to be rescued. This willing or unwilling 'lack of control' over the passage of disease, love, intimacy and fluids from the body became the criteria by which a 'modern autonomous female subject' began to be imagined. The body and its passages and pores were to be kept secured and disciplined. Body was the nation state whose boundaries are to be patrolled. It is not the violation of the female body that violated the colonial authority or destroyed the imagined nation of Indian nationalist. Rather the possibility of willing reciprocity became problematic. This was the ultimate betrayal and 'prostitution'.

The movement that started against 'state regulation of prostitution' soon turned its attention to regulating other 'vices' in the Indian society. Women who offered sexual services but at the same time enjoyed considerable social and economic privileges were posited as very particular to Indian customs and manner of living. This was seen as an example of Indian decadence and hence to be obliterated. But the universalizing tendency within the

conceptual move that made this possible was by making devadasi equal to the familiar European figure of prostitute. Thus this double move also created a hierarchized dichotomy between 'ordinary' Indian women who were by then very well stereotyped for their chastity and passivity and suffering under the double exploitation of Indian patriarchy and Colonial exploitation on one hand and the licentious and unmanageable 'prostitute' on the other hand.

The thrust of the emerging Indian Nationalism and Women's Movement resented such a coalescence of all Indian women and when they entered into these debates one of the objective was to correct this image and make clear the difference between 'Indian women' and 'women of depraved character'. In India the moral and sexual worries of the British and the aspiring indigenous middle classes, coupled with coercive and symbolic regulation of women, helped replenishing colonial authority, updating indigenous patriarchy, and proclaiming collective national identity (Chatterjee, 1989; Gupta, 2002; Chakraborty, 1997). The resistance to colonial intrusion into the private domain was articulated as resistance to colonialism itself.

Chatterjee (1989) argues that the fashioning of 'new women' occurred by contrasting them from 'common women' who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome,

devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. But the processes by which such respectability was gained in different parts of India varied radically. Whereas in Colonial west Bengal and in northern parts of India this was attained by the preservation of an ideal of 'Indian woman hood', and preventing the intrusion into the private domain, in Kerala the women had to be trained and coerced into attaining that 'ideal womanhood' before preserving it. The upper caste Hindu ideals of wife and ideal woman came to be aspired as the national ideal of women hood.

End of Devadasi System

Parallel to the consecration of this ideal/'wife', devadasis were being eradicated just like the diseases with which they were identified. That devadasis and courtesans had considerable economic power and was allowed political and cultural stake within the independent Indian Kingdoms were seen as lack of state craft and backwardness by Colonial authorities (Nair, 1994). Janaki Nair in her account of the prostitution and devadasi custom in the princely state of Mysore, further describes how they enjoyed enviable property rights within the Hindu Laws of inheritance. But within the colonial legal processes, in order to hypostatize Hindu law as one which excluded all forms of female inheritance, and thus cast it in a form more familiar to European patriarchy

those spheres of female economic power were recast as aberrations, inconsistent with the body of Hindu Law. Having selectively grafted as 'Hindu Law' a set of practices which were far from universal, colonial authorities effaced the historical processes by which such a grafting occurred. Thus by the late 19th century, the existence of women with property rights was posed as a 'problem' (Nair, 1994). After the enactment of 'Devadasi Abolition Bills' in all the provinces, most of their property was confiscated either by the government or by other local institutions.

When the agitation for abolition was going on, the devadasis of Suchindram were regularly petitioning the Travancore administrators. One instance was in 1906, when they appealed to the temple authorities for an increase in their pay connected to their temple duties. When this was refused they had a strike and refused to go to Trivandrum for the festivals and rituals connected to the Padmanabhaswami temple. For this they were punished by the Tahsildar in the form of suspension for three months. Pakyam Sivakami and other devadasis of the temple petitioned directly to the Tahsildhar saying that their travel allowances were extremely insufficient

and the then Dewan Peshkar in the end increased their travel allowance.⁴²

By that period the thrust of anti-abolition movement to suppress immorality have turned their attention to the protection of young girls. "In fact what is required is not punitive but also preventive action. In order to secure these objects power must be given to take away minor girls from the custody not only of strangers but of guardians and even of parents who are bringing them up in a life of immorality"⁴³. Age of consent Bill was being debated, and one of the main clauses of Devadasi Abolition Bill was against the early dedication of young girls into this custom. In Kerala, *Talikettu* was the ritual whereby a girl got dedicated to the devadasi system. *Talikettu* was also a major coming of age ritual for girls among many castes. This ritual announced the sexual maturity of the girls, thereby allowing them to have sexual relations. It was being criticized by all reform movements of the period, arguing that it was a ritual invented by a social structure based on Brahminical caste hierarchy and that it allowed unrestricted sexual access for Brahmins to lower caste women. The fact that the modern notion of a heterosexual monogamous marriage

⁴²Devaswom Dept Records, File No 353/1911, dated 1906 AD, quoted from Ramachandran, 1979: 420)

⁴³ The Gazette of India, September 28, 1912, Protection of women and children, Reply of Sir Reginald. In the debate to raise the 'Age of Consent'. Women's Library archives.

came under threat with the continued existence of such a prior ritual might also have triggered opposition.

Across India, it was also the period, when sentiments against child marriage, early widowhood etc were vehemently opposed. The intervention by women from a marginal location into that debate still remain unnoticed. Devadasis raised many points while petitioning for the continuation of the *talikettu* ritual. They were given replies too. While the Travancore administration and colonial administration defined devadasis as prostitutes or as leading to prostitution, devadasis in Travancore contested that definition and emphasised the distinction between themselves and prostitutes.

In his letter dated 10 April 1866 M E, Dewan Peiskar writes that “though the object of Talikettu ceremony is for the service of dancing in temples, the result of Talikettu is that the girls before and after attaining their maturity are found to lead the bad life of Devadasis, that these minor girls have to quit the control of their gaurdians and obey the orders of the Devasom officers, paricharakars (cooks) and others, that these girls are likely to become bad in course of time, and that as there is the knowledge of these girls becoming bad in this way, the Talikettu ceremony will be treated as an offence punishable under the penal code.”

In a petition submitted to the palace, Anticci and others raised arguments against this by saying that “the order of Mr. Raghavachariar will apply only to cases where a girl is brought or sold for prostitution, that the *talikettu* ceremony is conducted from immemorial times according to the custom prevalent in temples,that the sections 372& 373 of the penal Code will not at all apply to the dancing girls attached to the temples.”⁴⁴ They further stated that “in accordance with the present order there will not be any dancing girls in the course of time for the performance of certain services in temples, and that therefore sanction maybe given for performing the Talikettu ceremony of their girls as per the royal proclamation and the practice of the temples.” Devadasis are using the arguments of tradition and ritual requirement but also they were including arguments that were more in tune of the debates of the period like female education and training and having a livelihood. While the state was attempting to reduce the system to sexual practices, devadasis were arguing that the abolition of this system will lead them into prostitution. In a letter dated October 1915 they contended that, “a departure from the old custom involves much hardships on them, as the girls can be trained to their profession only after talikettu ceremony, and that when it is deferred, there is every likelihood of the girls taking to the bad ways.”

⁴⁴ Devaswom Dept Records, File No. 997/1915, letter dated 12 September 1910)

(p.52) So while devadasis were attempting to become workers in the temple, artistes, and custodians of tradition, they were portrayed 'benevolently' in the beginning as women exploited by the system and pressed into prostitution and by the end as the corruptors of young women.

Though the reason attributed to the 'down fall' of the devadasi system continued, i.e. Consolidation of wealth in temples under the supervision of Brahmins, Devadasi Abolition Bill was passed by the princely states of Travancore and Cochin (1931, on a Bill submitted by Mrs. Gauri Pavithran in the Legislative Assembly)⁴⁵ and in British Madras presidency. Mrs. Gauri Pavithran said that it 'has been a practice in Hindu temples to dedicate girls below 12 years of age to become devadasis. Since they are denied the right to get married once they are married she succumbs to immoral activities. As this leads to prostitution which is an insult to women hood it should stopped'⁴⁶. Travancore allowed the existing devadasis to continue to receive their monthly wages until their death. Of all functions performed by devadasis in the temple, those which were considered to be undesirable by a modern belief system were stopped and for other functions essential for the temple rituals appointments were made from other temple castes and

⁴⁵ Malayala Manorama, 1931 February 19.

⁴⁶ Malayala Manorama 1931 February 20

most of these posts went to men⁴⁷. So in effect it was not just the prostitution connected to devadasi system that was stopped. But devadasi's connection to the temple and any income that they might have from it was prevented. Since these Acts were applauded by almost all sections of the society within Kerala, the voices of devadasis are difficult to get at. Most of the articulations said to be of devadasi community are by the men in the community. There is a paper report of a meeting held in Kochi in 1938 July 14, in which an association was formed to intervene on behalf of the community. Meeting also decided that, as the women in the community no longer perform dance and music after the passing of Devadasi Abolition Bill, there is no point in being known by the name Devadasi and hence the committee was to be known by the name 'Cochin Saraswatha Association'⁴⁸. And unlike the petitions submitted by women earlier the petitions that came out later were stressing the right to marry within the community. So effectively there is a transition from worker to the respectability of a married woman.

These attempts to abolish devadasi system and prostitution show us glimpses of life world of women who surrounded themselves within a network of interactions within the community. Sexual services were

⁴⁷ Malayala Manorama 1931 Sep 30

⁴⁸ Malayala manorama 1938 Jul 15

just one among a number of jobs or duties that they had. It seems that they ignored the advice of the old *veshya* in *vaishikathanthram*. Prostitution was not the only means that they used to amass wealth, but like her they knew that it is extremely difficult to isolate one job from another. Most of the underprivileged women who work as wage labourers, street vendors and house maids in Kerala has often complained about the sexual services demanded from them to get the job in the first place and then to continue to be in the job. What was accomplished after all the abolition attempts was to create a category of prostitutes who could be identified solely on the basis of her labour in the heterosexual sex market. So yes, the advice of the old teacher did become true. But sex workers in Kerala had always resisted this effort to strip them of the multiple layers of identity. But I will deal with it length in the coming chapters.

By 1935 when the debates were almost nearing an end, we can see that the abject object of exploitation has become a problem figure for both the government and reformers. Both of them were perplexed by the figure of prostitutes who were outside the cantonment brothels, and who refused to go away. Janaki Nair has shown how by the end of nineteenth century, repeated famines and the undermining of the rural economy by colonial policies of taxation and destruction of indigenous enterprises have led to a large scale migration of rural

women to urban centers where many of them found employment in prostitution. So there happened a 'proletarianisation' of prostitutes around that time. In his Medical Report for 1827, Dr. Burke, then Principal Medical officer in Bengal, that in both Bengal (after 1837) and in Madras (during the famine in 1876-7) there was increase in the recorded cases of venereal diseases which the author attributed due to an increase in prostitution in these places due to the scarcity of food as a consequence of which women, who would otherwise have continued to be employed in the fields, were driven by force of want to a life of prostitution in cantonment. But it should not be correct to see this purely in terms of economic situation. Even in a period of considerable economic change and disenfranchisement, according to Banerjee, sex workers' response defied the 'unidirectional postulate that poverty alone drove them to choose the profession', or that they had no rational control over their lives entering the profession reluctantly or by force. Instead, women from all strata of society were more likely to enter sex work as an escape from kulin polygamy, oppressive marriages and low -paid labour which involved sexual harassment (Banerjee, 2000:80-1).

The report by Mrs. E. Narayanaikutti Amma, in the Regional Conference on Traffic of women and Children (Madras, November 11th, 1935), spoke on the question of starting rescue homes for women and children

throughout the presidency, especially in Malabar. She said that it would not serve their purpose if the Brothels Act was brought into force here and there; it should be brought into force throughout the presidency. When the Act was brought into force in Calicut they found that the inmates of Calicut brothels took shelter in places where the Act was not in force. This persistence of prostitutes to continue their employment while at the same time resisting all kinds of government regulations was perceived as an undermining factor even while the CD acts were in force. Surgeon-General C. A. Gordon, Hon. Physician to Her Majesty the Queen, narrates his anxieties in a medical journal⁴⁹, “. ...attempts at registration scatter the women all over the country; that consequently registered women have decreased in number, while those who are unregistered have learnt to evade the law. In his remarks for that year(1871), the Sanitary Commissioner for India observed that it is not in the lock hospitals, but in general administration of the rules that the difficulty of diminishing the amount of venereal diseases among the soldiers really lies. The real obstacle lies in the fact that the women who infect the soldiers are in the greater number of cases not on the registration at all, but pursue their trade nominally as sellers of milk, vegetables, & c., in cantonments without any surveillance whatever; also that at some stations

⁴⁹ C. A. Gordon: Notes on the Early History of Contagious Diseases Acts in India, The Medical Press and Circular, Vol. C., No.18, Wednesday, April 30, 1890, P 445

measures for the repression of venereal diseases have only existed in name.... that soldiers while on march were exposed to disease from women who were altogether beyond the scope of the act.”

As part of the anti-abolitionist campaign, the M.P, Mr. H. J Wilson who was a campaigner himself put forth certain suggestions regarding the Cantonment code. The main points were to prohibit the existence of any brothel or the residence of any prostitute within the cantonment limits and the strengthening of the general law in India to enforce prohibition “in all neighborhoods” of cantonments. At that point of time the military authority found these suggestions highly unpractical not just because the logistics involved in “It may be further pointed out that even if all brothels were closed in cantonments, and towns and villages in the circumjacent areas placed out of bounds for the troops, it would not stop the trade of prostitution nor prevent soldiers from consorting with women. The professional prostitutes, who belong practically to a caste in this country, and have no other means of livelihood, would be turned loose to lurk around barracks, rifle ranges, and the roads frequented by soldiers in their walks abroad. The result, in our opinion, would be not beneficial, but positively dangerous to the physical and moral welfare of the soldier. Under present condition if he desires to indulge his sexual propensities a soldier has deliberately to seek

these women, and take the risk which he knows that he is incurring of being infected with a dangerous disease. Under the condition which Mr. Wilson seeks to bring about, the decent, clean-minded, soldier would have temptation thrust upon him. So far therefore from the measures advocated being a discouragement, their tendency would be to promote the spread of immorality”.

So in the end prostitute became a figure refusing to stick within the parameters of easily identifiable 'victim'. She blurs the easy categorizations and becomes the 'victim' and 'evil' at the same time. She became the temptresses. In this resultant hybrid figure it was the potential ideal of rescuability that caught the imagination of reformers and oppressors alike. This rescuing mission was taken up with a zeal by the colonial actors like state, missionaries etc. The same rescue and reform ideal is pursued by the post colonial state and many egos working in this area.

KANNUR: MODERNITY OF VIOLENCE

Kannur, a northern district in Kerala has become notorious by now due to the continuing political clashes between two political forces, CPI (M) and RSS. The 'party villages' here have their own strategies to handle non-conformists and doubters. A friend of mine, George, who hails from Kannur, has some arguments in this regard. According to him the dominant caste in Kannur is of 'locals', and they mostly comprise of Thiyyas. The intermeshing of horizontal identity of caste and the vertical party affiliations in Kannur calls for in depth studies. Thiyyas top the list of victims of CPI(M)-RSS political clashes. Historically, SNDP was organisationally absent in Malabar during Sreenarayana Guru's time though Guru himself did intervene and consecrate temples in Kannur and Tellicherry. Equality for Thiyyas were imagined more in terms of going up and emulating the life styles of savarna castes. The hindu common sense in Malabar got constructed with a strong unconscious othering of Muslim community for several cultural reasons.



P.C:- Ramu Aravindan

My friend George's second argument goes like this :What Kannur witnesses today is not an outcome of mere hooliganism and anti-social mentality of the party workers as it is made out to be in campaigns outside Kerala , but the implementation of 'party rights' or partisan good. Good and evil is defined in terms of party interests, particularly in the case of left ideology. For instance in the routine violence, women aren't ever the victims of any political attacks here. This reflects their 'moral conscience'. George's argument holds good regarding the tradition of partisan killings repeating through serial attacks. Generally in the public sphere of Kannur the public are not reluctant to intervene and take sides when there erupt spontaneous arguments and clashes in the street, political or otherwise. This is significant compared to southern Kerala where there is a general lack of interest. At the quotidian everyday level, such sense of belonging empowers them and George would joke about the inability of Kannurians to be self-

reflexive and crack jokes about themselves and their region. To quote Baudelaire:

The scene of the comic, the ability to laugh, is in him who laughs, and not at all in the object which excites his laughter. It is not the victim of a fall who laughs at his own misfortunes, unless, that is, he happen to be a philosopher, in other words, a being who, as the result of long habit, has acquired the power rapidly to become two persons at one and the same time, and can bring to bear on what happens to himself the disinterested curiosity of a spectator" (quoted in Gelley, 1995:272-73).

Baudelaire observes that the primitive races had no conception of comedy. The sacred books never indulge in laughter.

But an insistence on the 'primitive' incapacity of self reflexive disinterest should be made with extreme caution in connection with happenings in Kannur. In fact the very objective of this chapter is to counter one dominant explanation given to the recurring political killings which are described as 'barbaric', 'pre-modern' etc in terms of the outbreaks of uncontrollable 'primitive passion' and 'primordial' emotion of masses which is out of the control of even the respective leaderships of the political leaderships (CPI-M and RSS in most of the cases) involved. This is a totally erroneous argument erasing the banality and modernity of violence in contemporary life.

Modernity and Violence

The tendency to link violence with pre-modern passion than with modern rationalities is one prevalent habit in both commonsensical and social scientific understandings of violence, riots etc. Talal Asad for instance (2007;1993) had exposed how this allows one to relegate religion to a pre-modern temporality and deny legitimate existence in the contemporary. One of the key factors in defining democracy is cognitive justice, viz:- coexistence of differing temporalities according to many political thinkers. In the conclusion, I will be discussing this in connection with two related notions (cognitive genocide coined by Akeel Bilgrami and cognitive justice coined by Shiv Viswanathan) in detail.

Let me state my argument in this regard bluntly: despite the use of 'primitive' weapons and 'brutal and barbaric' methods (hacked to death by a hatchet) resorted to, the violence in Kannur is the result of actions undertaken by modern subjects.

As a native of Kannur, who has lived there for quite some time, how do I approach this issue? As is evident by now, the auto-ethnographical first person voice is coming to the fore disregarding the 'objective' and 'impartial' social science subject presupposed in theoretical writings. This is a conscious methodological stand in continuation with the 'perspectivism' mentioned in the introduction. The

knowing subject is not at all an objective observer standing at a distance and looking at other subjects. When subjects try to understand about other subjects, subjectivity and reflexivity about one's own location is not an impediment but an enabling advantage than the 'objective' distance presupposed taking methods in natural sciences as the model.

Being a native, this city unfolded before me always like one of the never-ending stories of *Kathasarithsagaram*. Sometimes I entered into it following one plot, and found myself wondering into a labyrinth of other stories.

Through the years, memory, imagination, affection, repulsion, and other happenings in everyday life had become so tightly woven together that disentangling those strands become difficult. I have travelled away from Kannur and then back to it and then away yet again many times. Since I have been living away from *nadu* (village and native place), often people ask: "Aren't you going to *nadu*?" This question seems to imply that *nadu* can only be a village and whatever is not your *nadu* has to be a city. Maybe this coming and going, this ebb and tide of fortunes and intentions, this never-ending rhythm of travels was the way with Kannur. This *naduvidal* (moving away from your native place) is a crucial existential experience for many connected with Kannur. Perhaps, *nattukaran* (native) and *varathan* (outsider) are crucial existential terms defining the contours of the self and

other in Kannur villages. Recently, in the environmental struggle at Keezhattoor, the major allegation made against a meet wherein thousands of concerned citizens gathered from all over Kerala was that it comprised of 'outsiders', as if the village was a pure uncontaminated forte . Kannur thus is deployed somewhere between a sense of belonging and losing that sense of belonging.

Coming back to the central argument regarding modernity of violence, what we tend to forget quite often is that identities naturalised toady starting from 'party workers', 'hindus', 'muslims', 'working class', 'women', through 'thiyya' to 'pulaya', are one and all modern identities that were historically constructed. These identities were rendered and reinforced as part of numerous lived experiences and conscious internalisations. Limiting oneself to the rigid framework of an identity is typical of the logic of modernity, than of the 'primitive mindset' of Kannur or a putative barbaric 'pre-modern' tradition. This misrecognition of something quite modern as something deeply traditional is surprising and misleading.

Enumerating and classifying bodies become operative when it is perceived from outside as entities that can be determined and understood thus. Truths are built upon it by converting and transforming such data/research

statistics into reality. This is a well established point in social theory as demonstrated by several studies showing the constitutive role census plays in the construction of religious identities.

To cite an example, the 'tradition' that the Hindutva politics boasts of in Kerala could at best claim 40 or 50 years' life. It is only in the recent past that the Hindutva organisations had tried to bring the middle class and the lower castes under their ideology through varying political strategies. The logic of political clashes in Kannur had benefited them in significant ways as that helped project a feigned 'equality' in strength in terms of the killings. Actually settling scores here is literal, implying if you are left behind on the score board, your strength will appear to diminish; thus the urge to bring the scoreboard back to 'deuce' through series of killings.

Communist party also have a specific genealogy and history with origins in the modern period. But everybody boasts about their long history and heritage as if they existed from time immemorial. It has to be reminded that these ideologies and traditions are constructs that modernity has made possible. They get naturalised as 'primordial' as they are made to appear to be. Neither do they make visible any 'essential nature' of the place called Kannur.

Since the political clashes in Kannur district is the consequence of such intentional, planned and conscious interventions, it could easily be curbed as well if the political leaderships so decides. There is no pre-modern urge lurking behind rational beings which 'forces' agents to outburst in certain ways at certain moments. Agents themselves are responsible for the violence. It is not something happening through them quite unaware of. In effect all arguments against party violence in Kannur drawing on the assumptions of a pre-modern emotional and uncontrollable self ends up in relieving the culprits of any responsibility in it. The impression created is that some uncontrollable and unconscious emotions are conquering people and making them commit cruelties despite their rational intentions to the contrary! Most of the time the situation will be as simple as a mere committee decision in Delhi could automatically stop violence in Kannur. Because, this is a modern form of violence. Despite the entrenched beliefs to the contrary, violence and modernity are not opposed in principle.

The peculiar Kannur logic, which unfailingly denies recognition to differing individuals, groups, cultures, lifestyles, and organizations require close examinations. As mentioned, in popular parlance it is dubbed as 'party village' culture.

...The familiar pictures of Marx, Lenin and Stalin in party families and small haircutting saloons filled

– *Luciad* – Portuguese epic that celebrates
the voyage to India, VII.32

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it was Sreenarayana Guru who inaugurated consecrating idols in Tellicherry and Kannur. The two temples established by him in Tellicherry and Kannur played a crucial role in the growth of those cities. In fact, construction of forts, temples, and other religious centers like mosques can be seen as the major milestones in the development of cities in this region. The cities that emerged along with the growth of trade and commerce and the establishment and development of European economic and political power, moved forward through the construction of such religious institutions. It was in 1908 that Narayana Guru laid the foundation of the Jagannatha temple at Tellicherry. The Thiyya elite succeeded in creating a unified community around it, their conflicts and competition with Mappilas determining the dynamics of the city space.

A section of the Tiyyas in Tellicherry stood against allowing temple entry to lower caste pulayas. Prominent among those who supported the pulayas' temple entry was Murkkoth Kumaran, a famous literary personality. He vehemently argued for it in a conciliation meeting in the presence of Guru. Finally, when Guru gave the verdict that "Pulayas may enter," he fell down at the feet of Guru. It was Kumaran himself who was instrumental



P.C:- Ramu Aravindan

in constructing a metal statue of Sri Narayana Guru in the Jagannatha temple while Guru was alive.

Every monument is an attempt to mark history, embodying history and invariably masking history in that attempt. Monuments can also be painful. For, they might come attached with traumatic memories. Most of the time clashes are triggered by incidents of violence over conflicts around territorial dominance . There are clearly demarcated boundaries along party lines in most of the villages, often marked by political parties' names painted on the electric posts. Encroachments by way of "erasing" and "overwriting" such marks by rival parties in established territories often spark off violent clashes in which dozens of youth get killed.

Let us focus on the case of one such "party village", Patyam, which is the birthplace of Vagbhadananda as

well. We could define “party village” by what it does. What it does is to politically demarcate those who have rights from those who do not, defining who is an alien and who is an insider. Most of the time there are only two referents in the Kannur context to “party” in “party village”: CPI(M) and RSS. There is party villages dominated by other parties like Indian National Congress, Indian Union Muslim League and CPI as well. But through strategic discourses CPI(M) and RSS have succeeded in becoming hegemonic in the district. One of them usually enjoys total command over civil, cultural, and political institutions in the village.

Let us come back to the story of Patyam. Konkachi, the adjacent village to Patyam is an RSS village surrounded by CPI(M) villages. There are four sacred groves (*kavu*) in Konkachi, each of them attached to a *tharavadu*. The Konkachi Bhagavati temple is of recent origin. “Konkachi” means *ottamulachi*, or the Goddess with a single breast. For a long time, the temple grounds were in a neglected condition, taken over by undergrowth, resembling a tiny forest. Its owner was a Singapore-returned person, Chathukutty. When he started clearing up the compound, it is said that problems started arising in his personal life, and he left for Chennai. Around 12 years ago, a woman in a possessed state pointed out this ground and after a lot of deliberation, the place was cleared up and lamps were lighted in the evenings. That

was how the Devi temple originated. There is a 101-member committee to look into the affairs of the temple and this committee is completely under the control of the RSS. The rise of the Konkachi Devi temple and the emergence of the RSS party village were simultaneous processes(Pradeepkumar, 2002).

Its repercussions were felt in cultural institutions of the neighboring villages as well. Gurudeva Vilasam Vayanasala, a library established in 1936 by the followers of Vagbhadananda Guru, was very well known in Patyam and its neighbouring areas. Over a period, it acquired A-grade status and became one of the most important libraries in Kerala. In 1956, when the first radio in the area was brought to the library, people used to throng there from far and near to hear the news. The annual day celebrations of the library used to be a grand affair and everyone without any sectarianism participated in these. By 1988, political sectarianism began to interfere in the running of the library and now it is fully under RSS control. Barely one kilometre away from the Konkachi library is Pathipalam, a CPI(M) village. Since the youth there can no longer use Gurudeva Vilasam Library, they have started another library in their village.(Pradeepkumar, 2002).

The phenomenon “party village” could be described phenomenologically if we attempt a thought experiment. Let us imagine that we are drawing a graph of the

emotional “upheavals” experienced by party workers while travelling along the route connecting adjacent party villages in a bus. As each kilometre passes by – as the bus enters and exits each party village – their heartbeats quicken and slacken in turn. Most of the time spontaneous retaliation to the killing of a party worker takes the mode of blocking buses and killing the first person identified in it who belong to other party. What matters in this number game is to level the score card immediately.

The killing of Jayakrishnan Master – a political killing that led to uproar all over Kerala – occurred in the village Pathippalam. Jayakrishnan – a BJP activist – was killed while he was teaching primary school students. The five accused who are CPI(M) members were given death sentences by the High Court. (The Supreme Court later on revoked the death sentences of all the accused.) A *Collection* of their prison experiences was published. A glance through the lines written by the main accused, A. Pradeepan, CPI(M) Pathipalam local secretary, gives an insight into the psychology of those living in party villages.

We know that nothing is gained through attacks. But what else can we do when we are constantly under attack? Mothers had lost their children! Women had become widows! All because of these clashes! This must be stopped. If we are outside now, we may lose our life at any moment. After a

very long time, ever since becoming a political activist, I could enjoy deep, peaceful sleep only after coming into this prison. (Pradeepan, A and K.E.N, 2006:72).

It was for 'illustrative purpose' that I requested Ramu Aravindan, well known photographer and friend for couple of photographs taken while we were travelling together in Kannur a decade ago for a similar writing project. But when I look at those images I am once again reminded of the fact that visual and literary materials are not mere illustrations of what we have already learned by other means. I am humbled that art, visual material in materiality constitute a primary form of knowledge. Recently there have been studies taking photography as one of the thresholds to enter into colonial modernity of Kerala. Ramu Aravindan's interpretation of the real through photographs might help more in coming to grip with the reality in Kannur than my textual interpretations.

Conclusion

BEYOND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Antagonistic Indebtedness to Modernity⁵⁰

C.Ayyappan has written a story, *Bhranth* (Madness), which portrays the 'bewilderment' and dilemmas of dalit men who succeeded in accessing a middle class life but could not belong there due to conflicts between community and modernity. Krishnan Kutti, the protagonist pretends to see his sister when local well-wishers brought her to him and sought his support in taking her to the mental hospital. The story unfolds as a 'rational' explanation (or a mimicry of it, rather) of Krishnan Kutti. He cannot risk his respectability in the housing colony by associating with his poor family members coming from rural area. He provides one reason after another (each as convincing and effective as any other such 'rational' narratives) in logical

⁵⁰ I am borrowing a term used by Paul Gilroy in the context of Black politics from M.S.S.Pandian's monograph. Pandian describes the lower castes' relation to modernity as 'antagonistic indebtedness', implying the need to reject the civilizational claims of modernity and to reclaim what has been stigmatized. That alone would end the self-hate of lower castes and would allow them to claim a space for their politics, he argues(Pandian,2002)

progression. 'Everyone would agree that when my sister is ill and has been admitted to a hospital so close by, my wife should visit her. I think so too. But to state it simply, my wife happens to hate every single one of her husband's relatives, with no exception...her reaction is genuine and quite understandable. Neither her skin color, nor her looks would ever betray her lowly origins.' (Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu,2011:365). In other stories as well we could see mother and wife signifying values of tradition and modernity for the dalit male, middle class protagonist (Ayyappan,2008:159).

The narrative style of *Bhranth* effectively deconstructs the absolute exclusivity presupposed between emotion and reason. While pointing out the theoretical difference of a category like humiliation as against the Marxist conception of alienation, Gopal Guru argues for the autonomy of humiliation as a category(Guru,2009:x). For him this is part of an exercise to forge a new vocabulary going beyond secular, democratic, rational 'final' vocabulary(ibid,xi).He also foregrounds the ambiguity of dalit response to modernity:' The emergence of the

modern self with an intellectual capacity to control, combined with the confidence to conquer vast areas of knowledge, can also produce a tendency to despise those who lack the same capacity for knowledge. thus, the emergence of modern society is both enabling and constraining at the same time.' (Guru,2009:1-2).

"Human"

Article 377 of Indian Penal Code of 1860 was enacted by the British colonial regime to criminalize 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature.' This law clearly demonstrates the need to come up with different understandings of nature. While arguing for the need to 'queering the nature', Karen Barad says that often, nature is represented as "the victim, the victimized, the wronged. At the same time, humans who commit "acts against nature" are said to be acting like animals. In other words, the "perpetrator" is seen as damaging nature from outside, yet at the same time is reviled for becoming part of nature" (2011: 121). People from non-normative sexual identities are considered to be perverse, unnatural, while heterosexuality is seen as the 'natural' orientation of the nature. This process of dehumanization will create possibilities for setting apart any group as enemies or outsiders and also to exterminate them with easy conscience. So here the matter cannot be delegated to the

sphere of representations or to cultural distinctions alone. A prior notion of the “human”/ “nature” itself should be challenged. In this sense the insistence and acceptance of ontological standpoint that many natures exist holds radical connotations.

Resistance to owing allegiance to many of the existing ontological possibilities is also one of the ways in which politics is practiced by different groups of people. The frontiers between the cultural and natural are continuously redrawn by political agents. Instead of adopting one position regarding it, effort should be taken to follow such shifting contours in every other happening.

Is there a radical alterity in the lives and practices of people belonging to non normative sexual identities? Yes, there is. And there is also a sense of incommensurability with the liberal public sphere’s understanding of who are humans. The burden of making themselves and their lives commensurable should not always fall on the shoulders of the people who are lying outside the shared understanding of what is ‘normal’, or ‘natural’ etc.

Though the title of this thesis stresses epistemological shift, the attempt made was to trace the emergence of new political subjects who were denied visibility and legitimacy within the dominant discourses. For the

marginalized among marginalised, one necessary precondition for this ontological insurrection is to make a claim to the 'human' status which determines the right to have rights⁵¹. As Judith Butler puts it: "The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths" (Butler,2004:xx-xxi) Epistemic limits operate as an instrument of censorship by circumscribing what is speakable and what is livable. Public sphere, as Butler pointed out, is constituted in part by what cannot be said. Only certain kinds of agents enjoy the luxury of appearing as viable and legitimate actors. Therefore the new social movements in Kerala for last two or three decades, from different locations like adivasi, dalit, sexual minorities to prisoners and sex workers were struggling to establish their citizenship by claiming right to protest. The violence against them is most of the time invisible, failing to invoke any significant response from the (graded) moral conscience of the civil society.

⁵¹ See, for instance, M.T.Ansari's observation by way of concluding his reading of *Chemmeen*, a popular Malayalam film/novel: "It is as if Kerala modernity is declaring: it is either Chembankunju or Pareekkutty, but never the twain together! It is as if the author/director were telling/showing us that Pareekkutty, being all-too-human, was actually in-human! We wish he could have transacted like an ordinary human, translated himself into a man, with normal considerations of life in his dealings with the people around him, including his beloved, rather than embodying an absolute otherness which resists translation. We, of course, pity him and wish that he were human enough, but, alas! he is a Muslim!", (Ansari,2016:167)

Silencing is done by denying the identity as rightful citizens through assigning stigma. This is an effect of the peculiar way in which Malayali identity was historically constructed. Thus rethinking such historical constructions and assumptions of Kerala modernity was triggered by the eruption into existence of multiple little selves in contemporary society.

Akeel Bilgrami, in one of his you tube speeches coins the word, "cognitive genocide". He was responding to a remark by Amartya Sen on Nandigram which pointed at the inevitability of 'progress'. Bilgrami observes that such developmental discourses deny people living in different temporalities any space in future. They are being killed not physically, but in detached manner. Shiv Viswanathan envisages a cognitive justice by way of the coexistence of different temporalities and debates the violence of the word 'progress' in opposition to its mirror opposite, museumisation. He quotes Ananda Coomaraswami: ' Our way of life preserves the folk song while simultaneously destroying the folksinger' (Visanathan:161). As mentioned above, to Shiv Viswanathan, the idea of museum embodies the concept

of progress. This idea is woven deep into the idea of development. 'Imagine that we are the modern West. Within the developmental framework, today's tribal is the past we have lived out. In turn, we believe that we are the grammar of progress that allows us to intrude, intervene, and drag her into modernity.' (Viswanathan:161). It is in order to pluralise the linear time of progress that he talks of the variety of time. When experts uses the abstract notions like 'development' and 'progress', it is the tribals, peasants and slum dwellers who suffer. His idea of cognitive justice visualises a 'polity in which there is a relation between science and the life chances of a people. It holds that knowledge or traditional knowledge, is a repertoire of skills and a cosmology that must be treated fairly in the new projects of technological development. Cognitive justice posits the idea of a plurality of fairness and dialogue among different knowledge systems to prevent marginalisation or museumization of any of them' (Viswanathan:165).

Both Bilgrami and Viswanathan effectively exposes the intimate link between science and majoritarianism and

the way in which that combine threatens the marginals and minorities. At another place Bilgrami observes: 'More recently Foucault, among others, responded by pre-empting the strategy and declaring that the irrational one was, in any case, the only defence for those who suffered under the comprehensive cognitive grip of the discursive power unleashed by modernity in the name of rationality' (Bilgrami, 2006).

In short, cognitive justice recognises the right of different forms of knowledge to coexist. As Chantal Mouffe puts it: 'what is important is to broaden our perspective so that a plurality of legitimate answers to the question of what is the just political order would be accommodated' (Mouffe, 2005:62). Modernity suggests that there can be only one universal answer to it, like constitutional democracy. Wherever human dignity is questioned, attempts at regaining dignity could be attempted drawing on multiple sources irrespective of their origin in western or non western locations.

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